

THE MECOSTA COUNTY FAIR July 12, 2012

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THE FAIR IS THE THING

Fairgrounds can be found in cities large and small, but I like those in small cities and towns best because so much happens there. When I was a little boy and lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, my dad would take us to the fairgrounds when the Barnum & Bailey Circus came to town and performed at the fairgrounds. This was in the late 1940s. Actually, way back then the circus ended at the fairgrounds. It started at the railway station where they unloaded the animals, including dozens of elephants, who then formed their own train and marched through the city to the fairgrounds. What a sight!

In those days it was the elephants that raised the Big Top and the other circus tents, while kids like me watched with awe as these huge beasts (working with men) did the seeming impossible. What a memory that is, gazing at the long line of elephants and other animals walking to the fairgrounds to put on the circus. Watching the circus come to town was always more exciting than even the actual circus performance.

In the small city we live in now, the Mecosta County Fairgrounds is where it all happens. For much of the year the fairgrounds is more or less empty, except for a few horses that are boarded there, and the solitary harness racer running laps on the raceway oval. Often early in the mornings Margaret and I walk to the fairgrounds with our dog, and peer into darkish stables to see the horses there.

And of course around the stable, there are cats. Everyone and their uncle drops unwanted cats off at the fairgrounds, hoping their can make their way somehow around the stables. As for me, I never left a cat there, but I used to let the mice we catch around our house go at the stables. We would never use mousetraps that killed, but have what are called "Have-a-Heart" traps. I figured the mice could chance it out with the stable cats easier than dying in a trap.

Lots (and nothing) goes on at the fairgrounds. Much of the year the fairgrounds is empty, and then suddenly it is jammed with people. I can remember sitting in those old rickety wooden bleachers at the fairgrounds and hearing country-singer Merle Haggard and many others. And there were the tractor pulls and the demolition derby held each year, and I have a story for that.

When we brought our friend and Tibetan Lama Karma Drodul to visit, a monk we helped get out of Nepal years before (but that is another story), he wanted to go to the demolition derby. I may have been to one many years before, but not in the last thirty, so I took Lama Karma.

Having been to Tibet a number of times, I know how (especially) the men love rough and tumble games, like racing horses, feats of strength, and the like. And I'll be darned if Lama Karma did not sit through the entire thing, not only the demolition derby, but endless burning off of tires until the smoke filled the field, and things like that. He loved every last minute of it and we stayed until the bitter end, until every last goodbye was gone.

And there is the carnival that always accompanies the yearly county fair, with the always-too-expensive rides the kids love and the Italian sausage with green peppers and onions served on a bun that I used to long for. And there are the 4-H Club or whatever organization exhibits, the home-baked pies, cookies, and cakes, and the like.

Yet most of all I remember the animals, the cows, chickens, ducks, rabbits, cows, steers, horses, and pigs. My kids loved those animals and now my grandkids do too. The pigs were always the most exciting because it seemed that every time we would go there, some pig or other was loose and doing its best not to be caught. While the kids and I watched with rapt attention, young farm boys with what are called “pig boards” (large plywood panels) would block and shunt the pigs until they ran squealing just where there were supposed to run. Now that was fun.

This morning Margaret and I walked through the fairgrounds. It was still very early and a little cold out. People were already moving about and the animals, of course, were right there in the moment, alert and waiting to be fed and cared for. Here are a few photos.



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