

(7/3/24 District Administrator's Corner Article)

Nowhere else can you blend the smell of deep-fried cheese curds, a dairy barn, and cream puffs. Attending a county fair is one of the highlights of summer for many of us. And, even better, is being an exhibitor.

The River Valley School District has students involved in several county fairs proudly exhibiting year long projects. Rural Wisconsin has a rich tradition of celebrating youth, agriculture, and family during these fairs. Quick research can find the origin of the three that are closest to home for us all.

County fairs have existed since the 1800's in the United States, often starting as agricultural fairs or farm fairs (<https://www.arcadiapublishing.com>). Practices (such as sheep shearing) or improvement on equipment (such as plows) or feed for livestock were often displayed. These elements of a county fair are still present but often overlooked by the kids running to get to the Ferris wheel. However, the original intent of a county fair was to educate by showing examples or offering samples in a regional setting. Technology was featured and entertainment was offered. Many folks in our agricultural communities gathered to learn, share, and celebrate...some only seeing each other at this event for the year.

The 2024 Sauk County Fair will be held the week of July 8-14. Livestock and projects are shown, bands are staged, and food and drink are enjoyed. Historically, the Sauk County Agricultural Society was formed in February of 1855 with a constitution adopted with the highlighted main objective of education. The focus was to improve the condition of agriculture, horticulture, mechanical manufacturing, and household arts for the area. The first fair was held October 16, 1855. It was first held in downtown Baraboo, most likely near the circus area that was present. The fair grew into a success, and in the spring of 1870, land was purchased east of town which remains the current location of the fairgrounds. Many buildings were put up and a fence was also put up. By 1890, the grounds were growing to become some of the finest in the state of Wisconsin. In the beginning there were more classes that were geared towards livestock and horses. Now it has expanded to include breeds of chickens, ducks, turkeys, pigeons, geese, sheep, rabbits, swine, goats, exotics, cats and dogs. Families enter projects that highlight skills in photography, plant and soil science, knitting, crocheting, sewing, canning, baking, archery, or woodworking, to name a few. Originally entertainment was viewing racing (horse, vehicle, bike), pulls (horse, tractor, truck), derby, and demolitions (again, vehicles). Entertainment has also grown to include local, regional, and national music performers (www.saukcountyfair.com). Though much of our district is in southern Sauk County, families residing in the villages of Spring Green and Plain and towns of Spring Green, Bear Creek, Franklin, Troy, and Honey Creek participate in this fair.

The Iowa County Fair (a Labor Day weekend event, August 29-September 2) started in 1851 in Dodgeville, WI, and in 1856, the fair was moved to Mineral Point where the event has stayed ever since. Again, like all county fairs, it has been showcasing agricultural, educational and entertainment events to people from every town, village, and town in Iowa County. The River Valley School District includes the village of Arena and towns of Clyde, Wyoming, Ridgeway, and Arena with families exhibiting at this county fair. The Iowa County Fair has approximately 12,000 attendees for the extended weekend event. Many generations of Iowa County families have been participating in the Iowa County Fair and have made it an important part of their family traditions. This activity brings together generations with grandparents helping grandkids with their 4-H or FFA projects, just as the generations may have done before them.

Again, the objective is to educate the public by promoting agriculture and local industry. To fulfill this goal, the Iowa County Fair organizers have focused on helping 4-H groups and FFA teams be successful participants. Within 4-H and FFA, the livestock auction is where the community can support the local youth with their projects. To witness a livestock auction is truly a humbling experience. The donations and payments made to the youth of our communities helps to further their ventures and often pays for future education (www.iowacountyfair.com). One of the highlights this year will be a rodeo on Thursday night.

The Richland County Fair (September 5-8) held in Richland Center is one of the oldest county fairs in Wisconsin. The agricultural society that formed this fair originated in 1857. Since then the objective has been to highlight “the character and operation of agricultural, mechanical, and household arts.” This fair is embedded in the history of our area. Imagine the first Richland County Fair occurred when there were 31 states in our union. One of the founding exhibits was a highly attended cattle show near the courthouse with the fair being held on the lawn downtown. After the Civil War, and due to the growing numbers of exhibits and participants, the fair organizers purchased four acres, which they outgrew and moved to the current fairground location on the western edge of town. Families in the village of Lone Rock and towns of Buena Vista or Ithaca participate at this fair and have enjoyed its rich traditions and history. The mission of the Richland County Fair remains youth focused—“The enrichment of our youth is important so our ability to strengthen and promote sharing experiences and accomplishments through exhibits and demonstrations are imperative to our Community ... by bringing 4-H, FFA, youth and families from all areas of Richland County and surrounding to maintain a life-long learning for generations to come.” (<https://fair.co.richland.wi.us>).

Supporting the history and current trends of agriculture and industry has never been so fun. Good luck to all the students and families that successfully participate in these great county fairs! Enjoy a local county fair and support a River Valley School District family as you walk the exhibits. It is a labor of love to learn and show off such great work. And, if you get to have some deep-fried cheese curds while you learn, all the better.

(Watch for a future article with information on the River Valley School Fair, which will be held on Friday, September 27, in coordination with River Valley Homecoming.)

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District Administrator