

## WHEAT BUNDLES AND BLUE RIBBONS: SHAWNEE COUNTY COLLECTIVE AGRICULTURAL EXHIBIT, 1926-1970 by Rachel R. Vukas

"Our state fair is a great state fair, don't miss it, don't even be late!"<sup>1</sup> Americans have been enjoying state and county fairs for over 100 years. In 1807, Elkanah Watson displayed two prized Merino sheep in the town square of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and then gave a lecture on improving wool production.<sup>2</sup> Although Watson's exhibit was small, it was the beginning of the American agricultural fair.

Fairs originated in medieval times and served as a focus of trade. The European market fair, held at fixed intervals, functioned as a gathering place for buyers and sellers from distant regions becoming a primary economic institution by the eleventh century.<sup>3</sup> Often the fairs were associated with saints, and so took on a religious purpose as well. Political truces were in effect for the more important fairs, providing safe travel and encouraging attendance. As the fairs grew in popularity, entertainment became an integral part of the festivities, including strolling players, performing animals, music, dancing and gaming. During the eighteenth century, entertainment began to take prominence over the economic, religious, and political functions, and authorities began to close down fairs. As the market fairs declined they were replaced by agricultural exhibitions.<sup>4</sup>

The founder of our present-day agricultural fair is considered to be Elkanah Watson. His 1807 display of sheep was such a success that in 1810 he organized a cattle show. He was also instrumental in organizing the Berkshire County Agricultural Society in 1811, which sponsored a larger exhibition that offered premiums to exhibitors.<sup>5</sup> The primary aim

of these early societies was to educate farmers about improved agricultural techniques. They accomplished this by sponsoring agricultural exhibitions and demonstrations which evolved into agricultural fairs. The major elements of the Berkshire fair included displays of produce, animals, and domestic arts, with premiums for the best entries, educational demonstrations of new farming methods, commercial displays of new agricultural technology (machinery and implements), and entertainment such as parades, political speeches, and formal balls.<sup>6</sup> The Berkshire fair became a prototype for other county fairs and by 1820, fairs were held by agricultural societies all over New England, New York, and the South.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1840s and 1850s fairs became more numerous as greater attention was given to agricultural improvement in the United States. Many labor-saving machines such as mowers, reapers, and threshers were invented. Farmers regarded the fair as a means of learning about new agricultural practices.<sup>8</sup> As fairs grew in size and popularity, changes occurred. In the 1860s and 1870s games of chance and horse racing were included as part of the fair activities, but only after much controversy and debate.<sup>9</sup> After the turn of the century, permanent fairgrounds with exhibit halls and pavilions were constructed. The responsibility for organizing and governing fairs was later assumed by state boards of agriculture and county governments, rather than agricultural societies. Entertainment became more important as a moneymaking element of the fair.

The contemporary American county or state fair, based on the Berkshire

model, has two major functions: education and entertainment.<sup>10</sup> The educational function consists of agricultural products and technological displays, and the entertainment consists of the race track (horse and automobile) and the carnival or "midway." Although still primarily an agricultural exhibit, modern fairs have incorporated new elements to appeal to a wider audience. Commercial dealers of all kinds sell products, religious, civic and charitable organizations have fund raising exhibits, and well-known celebrities provide entertainment. There are over 40 state fairs in existence, several of which recorded their highest attendance in 1989, including the Illinois, New York, Maryland, and Tulsa state fairs.<sup>11</sup>

State and county fair attendance and participation has become an annual custom for rural America.<sup>12</sup> Fairs are popular because they fill various needs of the participants. They provide an avenue for socialization, education, healthy competition, self-satisfaction, and achievement.<sup>13</sup> Participation in fairs, and the agricultural practices and customs associated with it, can be explored by examining the Shawnee County collective exhibit as it was presented by the Indian Creek Grange for over four decades.

The county collective exhibit is an attractive and colorful display of agricultural products indigenous to the local county. It has been included in both the Kansas Free Fair (re-named Mid-America Fair in 1958, Sunflower Expo in 1977, and last held in 1983) and the Kansas State Fair since the early 1900s.<sup>14</sup> According to the 1946 Kansas Free Fair Premium Book, this exhibit "... should truly represent the practical agricultural products of the county and should be so arranged as to be a credit to the county represented and the Kansas Free Fair."<sup>15</sup>

Exhibit requirements include a specified number of varieties of grains, grasses, corn, sorghum, legumes, seeds,

vegetables, and fruits with all varieties labeled correctly. The varieties are chosen by the exhibitors but should be appropriate to the locale. Samples must be gathered from a number of farms from all parts of the county. Set up in a booth approximately ten feet by ten feet, the products are displayed on a back wall and a floor which slants upward to the wall. An early requirement to incorporate an educational theme or element was eliminated during the 1960s.

The display is a competitive exhibit and is judged on original design, artistic display, educational value, adaptability of varieties, quality of samples and the number of farms represented. Usually the exhibitors are agricultural groups or societies, although some exhibits are completed by individuals. The Shawnee County exhibit was presented by the Indian Creek Grange at both the Kansas Free Fair in Topeka and at the Kansas State Fair in Hutehinson from 1926-1970.<sup>16</sup>



*Shawnee County Display ca. 1920 or 30s*

The National Grange (properly named the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry) is a fraternal organization, established in 1867 in part to help reunite the states after the Civil War and improve devastated agricultural land by providing education concerning modern farming methods. Local Granges were organized throughout the United States and by 1876 the national membership was 858,000. After a period of decline, the organization gained new popularity in the 20th century and had over 800,000 members in the

1970s. A vital center of the rural community, the Grange provided a forum for agricultural and home economics education, social interaction, and political activity.<sup>17</sup>

Founded in 1896, Indian Creek Grange became a leading organization in northeast Shawnee County. Among other things, Indian Creek Grange built a hall which was also used as a community building, sponsored informational and educational programs open to the public, sponsored a community band, built a ball diamond and tennis courts, held dances, sponsored a baseball team, and worked on a variety of community development projects.<sup>18</sup> The Grange also sponsored a local fair, and in 1910 the members were asked to help with an agricultural display for the fair at Topeka which led to their accepting responsibility for the Shawnee County collective exhibit in 1926.<sup>19</sup> Many Grange members worked together on the exhibit, but a chairperson or committee was named to organize the work efforts and be responsible for the completion of the exhibit. Although the chair responsibilities were passed among the members, the Kimbal family held the chair for 30 of the 44 years, through three generations. W. P. Kimbal was on the committee in 1926; the exhibit responsibility was later assumed (in different years) by both of his sons, Ray and Ralph Kimbal, and Ralph's wife Ina, and then by Ralph and Ina's children, Warren Kimbal and Ruth Esther Kimbal Shorthill and her husband Verno Shorthill.<sup>20</sup>

When the Grangers began working on the exhibit they relied on their own farming knowledge to select the best items and prepare the display. Through the years, they developed certain methods and traditions, the lore of which they passed on to the younger generations. This lore consisted of when and where in the county to collect certain specimens, which farms

to contact, how best to dry and store the samples, and skills such as making a perfectly shaped wheat bundle. When the Grangers stopped putting up the exhibit, they passed on their traditional knowledge to a local Future Farmers of America chapter, who assumed responsibility for the exhibit.

Indian Creek Grange and the Kimbal family enjoyed great success with the county exhibit and managed to win first place a majority of the time. During the last ten years Indian Creek put up the exhibit, Shawnee County never failed to win first place at one of the fairs. During the years 1965-1970 they won first each year at both fairs, and in 1970 they received the Sweepstakes Award at the State Fair.<sup>21</sup> Because of this success, the Shawnee County collective exhibit was regarded as the standard in eastern Kansas and many of its display methods and designs were copied by other exhibitors.<sup>22</sup>

The collective exhibit required a summer's work. The gathering of product samples began in early June with the first alfalfa hay and early sweet clover. All through the season the best of the harvest was collected, dried and stored until September. The Grangers drove an average of 700 to 1,000 miles each year collecting samples and worked from 300 to 500 hours to prepare the display.<sup>23</sup> Twenty to thirty farms were usually represented in the Shawnee County display and all donors were prominently listed in the exhibit.

Grasses were collected early, before the farmer's first cutting, because the succeeding growths were coarser and not as native and cultivated. Some of the varieties collected included Red Clover, Brome, Orchard, Little Blue Stem, Big Blue Stem and Indian Featherhead. Higher scores were received for good feed grasses, so variety selection was based on feed value. Grasses were cut with a sickle

close to the roots to show their height. The Grangers usually cut from a corner of a farmer's field to be as unobtrusive as possible and because the sparser planting there allowed individual stalks to grow larger.<sup>24</sup> For drying, the grasses were spread out on screens which were placed on sawhorses outdoors in the shade. If dried in the sun, the grasses would lose their color. After this initial drying period, the grasses were tied in loose bundles and hung upside down so the heads would dry straight. They were stored in a Grange member's basement, garage or barn. In the final exhibit, the grasses were displayed in uniform, tight bundles.

Wheat and oats were collected next, the latter part of June or around July 4th. Again, they were gathered a little green, prior to the harvest. Six varieties of grains were required, three of wheat and three of oats, and they were displayed in bundles. One gallon seed samples of all grains were also required. After the harvest the Grangers had to collect the seed samples from the same farmers who had contributed grain samples. The seed was usually cleaned by hand, which was a tedious process. In the early years the seed was displayed in open plastic bags and then later in glass gallon jars.

Vegetables and fruits were collected as close to the fair as possible. The samples selected were typical of the varieties grown in Shawnee county. Varieties of apples exhibited included Winesap, Jonathan, York, Red and Yellow Delicious, Jonared and Rome Beauty. Other fruit included Hale peaches, Bartlett pears, Blue Damson plums and Concord grapes. Vegetables included turnips, green beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, onions, white potatoes and sweet potatoes. Sugar Pie pumpkins and Connecticut field pumpkins were both displayed along with several varieties of squash, including Cushaw squash, Crook Neck, Acorn, Butternut and White Scallop. Turnip

squash was used in the exhibit only for decoration. It was not a good variety to eat, so no points were awarded for it. The exhibitors were not allowed to wash the vegetables as they were to be displayed in a natural state. Soft brushes were used to clean off the dirt, and fruits were polished with soft, flannel cloths just prior to exhibiting.

Corn and sorghum were also picked the last week before the fair, usually on Labor Day. Exhibit requirements were ten varieties, ten ears of each corn variety and ten-head samples and five-stalk bundles of each sorghum variety.<sup>25</sup> The Grangers wrapped the sorghum bundles with leaves from the plants, an innovation later adopted by other counties.<sup>26</sup> Not only did this give the bundles a more finished look, it also displayed the quality of the forage.

A major criterion for selection of all products was that the items be true to the variety, considering size, shape, color and quality.<sup>27</sup> Some varieties of grain required loose heads, others compact heads. For corn samples, rows had to be straight with the ears filled out fully. Size had to be typical, not too large or too small, and uniformity of size among the samples was a must. The samples selected were to be the best representatives of that variety of crop.

After materials were collected, they were stored and prepared for display. One of the most time-consuming tasks was making bundles. Shawnee County exhibitors were well-known for their excellent grain bundles. Constructing the wheat and oat bundles is a skill and art which was passed down through several generations.

On communal work nights 15 to 30 Grangers would meet to work on the grain bundles. First, the wheat or oat stalks were stripped of the outside covering. Stripping the stalks was very delicate work requiring a dull knife because the stalks were easily broken.

While all members stripped the stalks, the bundles were made by two or three people who were especially skilled. The bundle-maker would carefully select the best heads, make a small core to start and then add two or three stalks at a time, starting at the center and angling down and around. Someone else would hold the bundle together as the bundle-maker would add the stalks. The finished bundle was tied with a strong cord in three places; immediately below the heads, four to five inches from the bottom, and at the center. It usually took 45 to 60 minutes to complete one bundle. Just before exhibiting, colored ribbons were placed over the cord, the placement matching exactly on all bundles. The grain bundles had to be uniform in length, size, and shape.

Physically setting up the exhibit often required 10 to 12 hours of work. Products were attached to the back wall first, usually nailing them to a wooden backboard or using pegs to hold them to a pegboard. A cloth was placed on the floor to hold the covering of corn or seed. One technique the Grangers used was to cut up small pieces of sorghum stalks, slice them in half to make a flat side and nail them to the floor as supports to hold large produce in place on the slanted floor.<sup>28</sup> Fruits and vegetables were often displayed on foil-covered plates usually stacked in a pyramid. If the corn was exceptional, the ears would be displayed in rows, side by side instead of stacked. Grain and grass bundles were attached to the wall and seed samples were displayed in glass jars.

According to John Miller, Superintendent of the Agricultural Department of the Kansas Free Fair from 1947-1972, two judges were used for the county collective exhibits; one expert in grain and one expert in vegetables and fruits. Often the judges were the state extension service agents or faculty

TABLE 1  
SCORE CARD IN JUDGING DIVISION 407

	Points
Educational Value	150
Artistic Display	150
Original Display	150
Adaptability of Varieties	50
Number of Farms Represented	60
Small Grain—Dish two kinds required, no extra credit for more	175
Wheat: One-gallon samples. Credit given for 3 varieties.	
Wheat: Three-inch bundles. Credit given for 3 varieties.	
Oats: One-gallon samples. Credit given for 3 varieties.	
Barley: One-gallon samples. Credit given for 3 varieties.	
Barley: Three-inch bundles. Credit given for 3 varieties.	
Other Grains	25
Corn and Podge—Only 3 kinds required, no extra credit for more	175
Sweet Corn: 2 varieties, 2 samples each. 1 gallon and 5-inch bundles.	
Sweet Sorghum: 3 varieties, 5 stalk bundles.	
Grain Sorghum: 3 varieties, 10 heads, 5 stalk bundles.	
Corn: 3 varieties, 10 ears.	
Cereal Forage: Cereals—Credit given for 3 varieties	25
Legumes: 3 varieties, 2 inch bundles, 1 gallon seed	50
Festuca: cultivated and native, 3 varieties, 3 inch bundles	50
Festuca: 12 specimens, 3 varieties	30
Sweet Fescue: 10 specimens, 3 varieties	32
Culinary Vegetables, 10 exhibits selected from following list only one exhibit from a variety	100
20 pickling cucumbers, 10 slicing cucumbers, 10 table beets,	
10 carrots, 10 onions, 10 ripe tomatoes, 10 string beans, 1 cabbage,	
1 pumpkin, 1 squash, 1 watermelon, 3 cantaloupes, 3 cantalower	
Fruits—ten plates, not more than one plate of a variety	50
	1200
Quality to be considered: Ten ears corn considered sample; 5 stalks be considered a pile.	
Class	
1039 For each 9 county collective exhibits accepted and entered scoring 600 points or more will be awarded an acceptance prize of	\$50.00
In addition, 15 cents per point will be paid on all above 600 points for each county collective exhibit	

members from the agricultural department of Kansas State University.<sup>29</sup> The county collective exhibits were judged on a point system. The score card from the 1946 *Kansas Free Fair Premium Book*, as shown in Table 1, illustrates the point system and lists the required products to be included in the exhibit. Using the scorecard, the judges awarded each county a total number of points, and then all exhibits were ranked from first to last and each awarded a ribbon. A monetary premium was also awarded based on the number of points, the number of entries and the amount of money available to the fair. The monetary award changed from year to year, but after expenses, Indian Creek Grange would make anywhere from \$80.00 to \$150.00.<sup>30</sup> There were usually eight to ten exhibits at the Topeka fair and fifteen at Hutchinson. The State Fair divided the state into three districts and allowed five entries per district. Each district was judged separately and ranked from first to last, then out of the three first place winners, one top sweepstakes award was chosen.

Within the framework of

requirements, a great deal of variation existed in the designs of the exhibits and in the manner in which the products were displayed. Each county developed its own style and particular habits of display which presented wonderful diversity and variety in the exhibits. The style of the booths also changed over the years. In the 1920s and 1930s the booths had elaborately decorated sides and fronts, such as latticework covered in flowers or leaves and the back wall was often covered in crepe paper. In the 1940s the front arches and side walls were removed and the back wall (wood or a peg-board) usually was not covered. The early designs often depicted flowers or scenes such as a sunset, while later designs became more abstract.



*Shawnee County Display 1970: Putting up the exhibit*

The artistic design of the booth, worth 150 points, was an important aspect of the exhibit. The Grangers were creative and used many different designs over the years. One of the early exhibits displayed the milo heads as the petals of sunflowers.<sup>31</sup> Another year the back wall was designed as a sunset with the grain bundles arranged in an arch between the sun's rays. The arch of grain bundles eventually became a trademark of the Shawnee County exhibit, as it was incorporated in many different designs. In 1952 the floor covering displayed a large sunflower of corn and milo.<sup>32</sup> Yellow corn formed petals and provided a contrast to display stacks of milo heads. That exhibit was a blue-ribbon winner at the State Fair

in Hutchinson. In 1966 the grain and grass bundles on the back wall were alternated by height, creating a zig-zag design.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes the Grangers used a color scheme throughout the exhibit for signs, ribbons, fruit plates, etc. The 1970 exhibit, Indian Creek's last one, used a red and gold color scheme, included the arch of grain bundles and was a sweepstakes winner.<sup>34</sup>



*Shawnee County Display 1970*

Why did Indian Creek Grange devote so much time and energy to this exhibit? The two major reasons were social interaction and community recognition. First of all, the Grangers enjoyed working together on the exhibit. In the 1920s and 1930s farmers were still relatively isolated and Grange activities provided a social outlet. Social activities were a large part of working on the fair exhibit. The Grangers usually had a picnic on Labor Day while collecting samples, and normally ended their bundle-making work nights with a social hour and refreshments. Working together on the fair exhibit served a function similar to a quilting bee or a barn-raising.

Attending the fair and putting up the exhibit also led to social interaction. In his study of agricultural fairs, Wayne Caldwell Neely states that "...going to the fair has been a significant recreational event in the social life of many generations."<sup>35</sup> Traditionally, the fair served as an information source, an arena for recreational and social activities, and a

means to broaden the social and cultural horizons of the participants.<sup>36</sup> Involvement in the fair fulfilled these needs for the Grangers. They had friendly rivalries with other county exhibitors which all parties enjoyed. Many friendships and acquaintances were renewed once a year at the fair. Also, the Grangers respected the fair as an institution and enjoyed being participants.

The second aspect--recognition--was also important to the Grange members. They enjoyed the competition and took great pride in their achievement. Shawnee County had developed a reputation which they strived to maintain. In discussing why Shawnee County won so many blue ribbons, John Miller stated that "they just worked harder." The Grangers were very particular about which samples were used and took care to display them well. Because they were so meticulous, they often took twice as much time as other counties to set up their booth.<sup>37</sup> They paid close attention to detail and tried to improve the exhibit each year. Receiving second place at the Kansas Free Fair in 1952, the Grangers replaced the samples which received lower scores, and the next week at the State Fair in Hutchinson they won first place and the sweepstakes award.<sup>38</sup>

Expressing achievement--individual and group--is one of the primary aspects of the fair. Neely and other researchers such as Leslie Mina Prosterman have

discussed the satisfaction and recognition received from competitive exhibition.<sup>39</sup> Neely states:

such a display not only records the accomplishments, but it signifies the social and economic importance and expresses the hopes, of the particular segment of society which it represents. . . The participant in the fair comes to a new realization of his own dignity and importance, for here are the fruits of his labors, here are the results of his intelligence, his dexterity, his ideals; and he may look upon his achievement with the satisfaction of a skilled artisan.<sup>40</sup>

Indian Creek Grange and the Kimbal family worked for 44 years on the exhibit because it was an expression of their vocation and heritage. They enjoyed the social activity and took pride in their accomplishment. The tradition of the Grange organization is for members to work together to accomplish their goals, whether they be agricultural, political, or social. It was natural for Indian Creek Grange to promote agriculture through the Shawnee County collective exhibit. It became a Grange and family tradition because the members valued it and took joy in it.

#### NOTES

1. Lyrics from the song, "State Fair," by Oscar Hammerstein, II, 1945.
2. Vernon Carstensen, "Meet Me at the Fair," *American West* 17, No. 5 (1980):1.
3. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1986 ed., S-V, "fairs and expositions."
4. Leslie Mina Prosterman, "The Aspect of the Fair: Aesthetics and Festival in Illinois County Fairs," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 14-15.

5. Carstensen, 9-11.
6. Fred Kniffen, "The American Agricultural Fair: The Pattern," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (December 1949: 267-268; and Carstensen, 11.
7. Lilia Perl, *America Goes to the Fair: All About State and County Fairs in the USA* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), 42.
8. Prosterman, 22-23.
9. Prosterman, 25.
10. Kniffen, 264.
11. Louise Zepp, "Record Run for Illinois State Fair Draws 1,061,947 Total Attendance," *Amusement Business* 2 September 1989, 22; Candice Carmel, "Record 852,482 Turnout for New York State Fair," *Amusement Business* 16 September 1989, 1; Candice Carmel, "Weather Right as Record 609,856 Turn Out for Maryland State Fair," *Amusement Business* 30 September 1989, 39; Louise Zepp, "Tulsa State Fair Has Best Run In Ten Years," *Amusement Business* 21 October 1989, 24.
12. Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (1935; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1967), 89.
13. Neely, 219; and Prosterman, 235-239.
14. The 1903 Premium List of the Kansas State Fair was one of the earliest to include this exhibit.
15. Kansas Free Fair Association, *Kansas Free Fair Premium Book*, 1946, 54.
16. The Indian Creek Grange put up the Shawnee County collective exhibit at the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson for the first time in 1930 and did not exhibit at the Kansas Free Fair in Topeka in 1944 and 1945; Indian Creek Grange Secretary's Record Books, 1930, 1944, 1945.
17. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1986 ed., S-V, "Grange." Further historical information can be found in Oliver Hudson Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry in the United States: a History from 1866 to 1873*. (Philadelphia: J. A. Wagenseller, 1875).
18. Indian Creek Grange Secretary's Record Books, 1920-1970.
19. Verno and Ruth Esther Shorthill, interview with author, Topeka, Kansas, 1 June 1989.
20. Indian Creek Grange Secretary's Record Books, 1920-1970.
21. *Ibid.*



22. John Miller (Superintendent of the Agricultural Depr., Kansas Free Fair, 1947-1972), interview with author, Topeka, Kansas, 7 June 1989.
23. Indian Creek Grange Secretary's Record Books, 1920-1970.
24. Shorthill interview. All descriptions of work on the exhibit were provided by these informants in the 1 June 1989 interview.
25. Kansas Free Fair Premium Book, 1946, 54.
26. Shorthill interview.
27. Miller interview.
28. Shorthill interview.
29. Miller interview.
30. Indian Creek Grange Secretary's Record Books, 1920-1970.
31. Shorthill interview, personal photographs of the exhibits owned by the Shorthills.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Neely, 185.
36. Neely, 216.
37. Miller interview.
38. Shorthill interview.
39. Prosterman, 236-240; Neely, 229-237.
40. Neely, 229-230; 236.