COUNTY FANS ENCOUNTERS

By Richard M. Voelker

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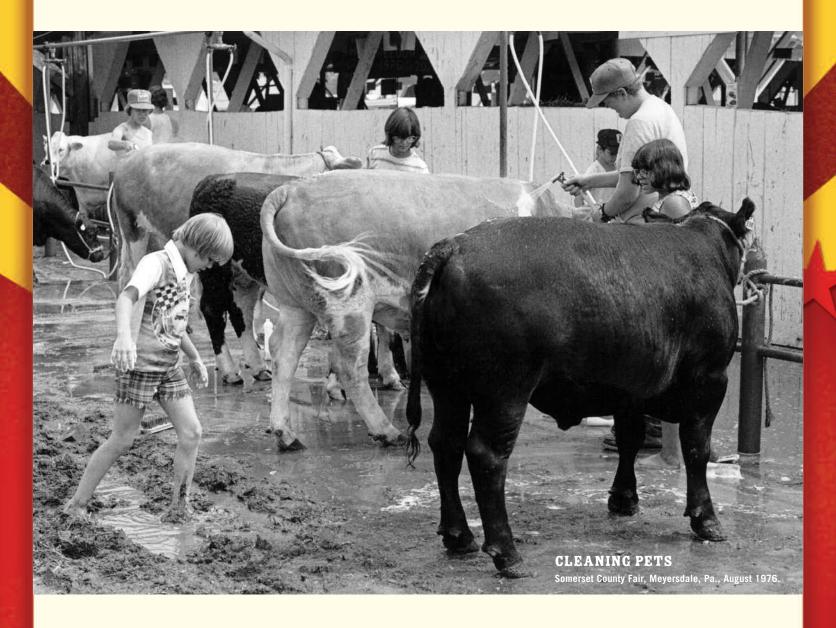
MOTEL SIX - NOT! Crawford County Fair, Meadville, Pa., August 1976.

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his collection of photographs captures a part of Western Pennsylvania's rural entertainment scene: the almost ritualistic, annual county fair. Begun originally to celebrate the end of summer's hard work and resulting harvests, by the 1970s, county fairs had evolved into a much more comprehensive and varied type of entertainment. In addition to the standard complement of 4-H animal husbandry and crop-related exhibits, county fairs included everything from the latest in kitchen gadgetry to "come-to-Jesus" gatherings and elaborate stage shows featuring national TV stars. Mixed throughout these more glittery attractions was the customary troop of

traveling carnival entrepreneurs who provided much of the edgier excitement and titillation of the midway.

All of these photos were taken during the 1970s and '80s, and are fairly representative of most southwestern Pennsylvania county fairs of that time. Fairs continued to evolve, however, so today's attendees see a different array of activities and people than those shown here. I hope you enjoy this brief glimpse of county fairs. It was indeed a much simpler era.

A City Boy and Farm Teenager

I was born during the Depression in the 1930s in Pittsburgh's East End/Friendship area. My first exposure to farm life occurred in the early 1940s when my family moved to Berkeley Hills, a suburb just north of the city. Our house was located in White Oak Heights, a brand new residential development that abutted Ross Township, a still-active farming area.

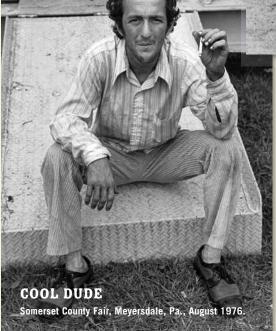
The year was 1943, and the whole country was consumed with the Second World War.

I was in second grade in a new grade school on Seibert Road, about two miles from our Lee Road address. I walked to and from school via Sangree Road, a narrow gravel roadway lined on both sides with barbed wire and cultivated farm fields. These roads passed by George and Oliver Geyer's truck farm, the Robert Schlag farm, and Majelsky's farm and dairy. A little further to the west was Schramm's truck farm, overlooking what would eventually become Ross Park Mall and McKnight Road. Each of these properties was probably in excess of 100 acres, had large wooded areas, and was intensively tilled.

In my first summer after second grade, I met "Pappy" Geyer, the gruff but kindly family elder, and asked him to hire me as a "farmhand." In those days, truck farmers employed young summer help to do much of the endless handwork required, like hoeing and weeding. The going rate for a hardworking eight-year-old was \$1 per day. After successfully bartering with my first employer, I proudly spent most of my subsequent summers weeding, hoeing, and otherwise tending huge fields of pampered vegetables. When ready for market, we also helped harvest and haul this produce to wholesale buyers in Pittsburgh's Strip District and to anxiously waiting customers in the open-air farmer's market on the city's North Side.

During this growing-up period, I became a close friend of Pappy's grandson, Roy, who was a few years younger than I. His grandfather





BEGUN ORIGINALLY TO CELEBRATE THE END OF SUMMER'S HARD WORK AND RESULTING HARVESTS, BY THE 1970S, COUNTY FAIRS HAD EVOLVED INTO A MUCH MORE COMPREHENSIVE AND VARIED TYPE OF ENTERTAINMENT.



introduced both of us to "Farm Life 101," including all the joys of making hay (baling & lifting); thrashing oats and wheat (pitchfork and shocking techniques); picking, preparing, and selling produce (a little heavy on the bending, lifting, and lugging skills); butchering hogs (not my favorite); trapping muskrats (lots of predawn violence); hunting rabbits (more to my liking); tapping sugar maples and making syrup; and felling and bucking firewood using hand-powered tools (my first introduction to hands-on forestry skills). The years passed quickly. Suddenly, I was a sophomore in West View High School, and my parents had, for whatever reason, decided to buy a 100-acre farm in Mercer County adjacent to the small town of Greenville. And guess who was "volunteered" to run it? That's right, 15-year-old me! I mean the whole shebang: milking cows, feeding chickens, slopping hogs, feeding the dogs and cats, learning why and how to operate the machinery, and how and when to plant and harvest our crops. And oh yeah, I should also mention my father's plan that included his staying in Pittsburgh, 70-some miles away, "making a living"?! There was something wrong with this "country gentleman" scenario. But with my youthful naiveté, I never gave it much thought.

THE MIGRATORY OPERATORS LIVED A VAGABOND EXISTENCE, TRAVELING BETWEEN NORTHERN VENUES IN THE SUMMER, AND REPEATING THIS ROUTINE IN THE SOUTH DURING THE WINTER.

To make a long story a bit shorter and less painful ... we gave it our best shot for about three years, but all for naught. The wheels fell off our family's delusion: after 25 years of rocky marriage my parents divorced. I went off to college with \$500 in savings, and the farm was sold. Thus ended our farm fantasy.

County Fairs Through A Lens

Despite the above disappointing beginnings, I've managed to get through the rest of my life relatively free of serious hardships. After obtaining a variety of requisite university credentials, I've spent most of my working career making a living as an open space planner and related freelance environmental consultant. Along the way, I discovered the joys of photography and an avocational interest in expressing myself visually. Drawn by my boyhood memories, I started visiting some of Western



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A FAMILY ENTERPRISE Crawford County Fair, August 1980.

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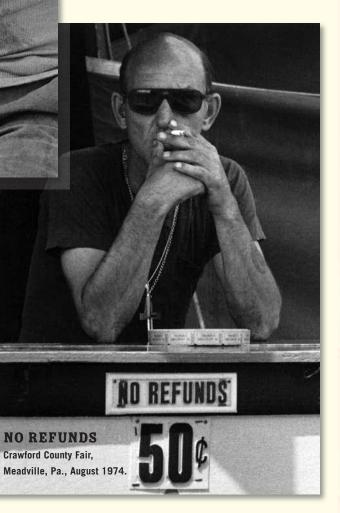
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MY PHOTOS SHOW AN ACCURATE CROSS-SECTION OF COUNTY FAIR REALITIES, BOTH GOOD AND BAD. Pennsylvania's county fairs, particularly some of the larger ones located in Mercer, Bedford, Somerset, and Crawford counties.

These visits were during the early 1970s, when taking a leisurely stroll on a midway was entertainment in-and-of itself. As a born people-watcher and evolving photographer, I quickly became hooked on the interesting social dynamic I observed at most fairs-the compelling incongruity of freshly scrubbed, relatively innocent farm kids, each with pampered 4-H animal projects contrasted with the more worldly carnies, each with their own money-making "joint," knowingly sizingup a "mark's" potential as they wandered by. All very interesting and entertaining stuff! To this day, I'm still amazed that, as far as I know, no one's ever done a serious photo essay of the hardscrabble world of carnival operators and their carny associates. By now, however, it's probably too late.



LIFE ON THE ROAD Crawford County Fair, Meadville, Pa., August 1976.

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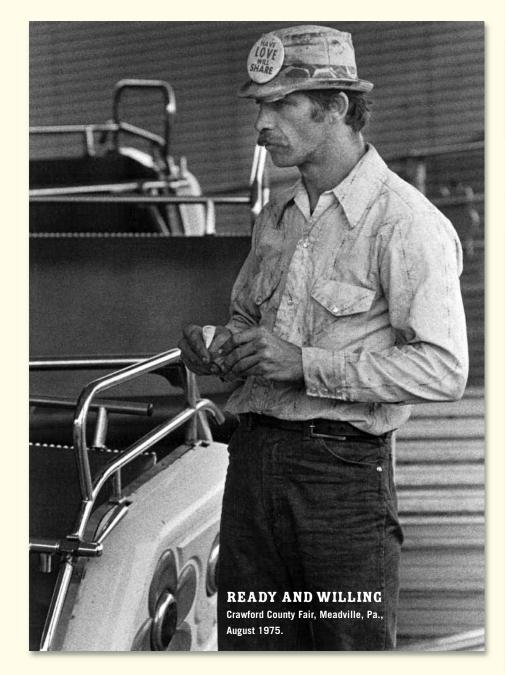
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Carnival Changes

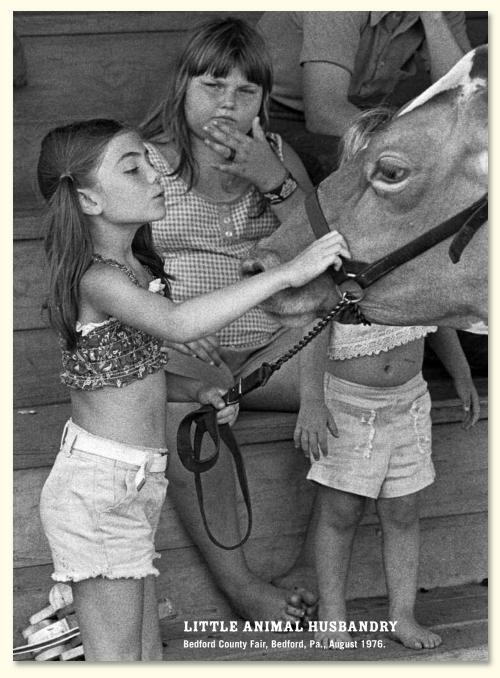
In the '70s, county fair carnivals were mostly unregulated. The migratory operators lived a vagabond existence, traveling between northern venues in the summer, and repeating this routine in the South during the winter. As a result, most carnies lived pretty chaotic lives as judged by most God-fearing, rural standards. They'd frequently arrive at distant, cross-country destinations after driving all night. If lucky, they'd catch some sleep in their vehicles. If warm enough and not raining, they'd sometimes sleep on the ground. And since access to public washrooms was often not available in the middle of the night, they'd greet many of their tomorrows overly tired, unwashed, and more than a little ticked off. Interestingly, however, this hectic lifestyle sometimes proved tempting to bored farm kids, enough so to cause local officials to breathe sighs of relief when carnivals left town without any impressionable teens on board.

With the advent of computer games, cell phones, and other electronic gadgets, people no longer appreciate the simple joys of observation. Yesterday's meaningful contemplative moments have all given way to banal cell phone babblings. Midway strolls have become inconvenient ways of getting from one location to another, while anxiously clinging, almost childlike, to their permanent phone "friend." The magic is indeed gone.

My photos show an accurate crosssection of county fair realities, both good and bad. Some, particularly those reflected in the rougher edges, are no longer part of 21stcentury operations. New regulations and frequent safety inspections have been imposed over the past three decades due largely to many equipment failures and related fatalities. And with these improvements have come new health and safety standards, and public relations changes, like employee uniforms and washroom



ALL OF THESE PHOTOS WERE TAKEN DURING THE 1970S AND '80S, AND ARE FAIRLY REPRESENTATIVE OF MOST SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA COUNTY FAIRS OF THAT TIME.



amenities. The industry has indeed changed, and in the process, much of its visual uniqueness or "seedy" ambience has been lost. From a public safety or community standards perspective, that's probably desirable. But for those craving something a little edgier, such midway "thrills" have all but disappeared. So enjoy these onetime happenings as seen through my eyes. It's probably the only way you'll ever see such images, because these carnivals all left town decades ago! ALONG THE WAY, I DISCOVERED THE JOYS OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND AN AVOCATIONAL INTEREST IN EXPRESSING MYSELF VISUALLY.

After completing most of his college education in the late 1950s (a BS in Forestry from Penn State University in 1957 and an MS in Forest Products in 1961 from Michigan State University), **Richard M. Voelker** began a varied career in open space planning and related environmental writing and consulting. The 1960s rioting in Pittsburgh (his birthplace and home) caused him to reassess his future. This new social awareness led to a 1971 MA degree in Urban Sociology from the University of Pittsburgh, an interest in documentary photography, and free-time involvement in progressive causes—particularly civil rights, anti-



war, and environmental issues. Now semiretired, he still enjoys the give-and-take of urban encounters but makes frequent escapes to more peaceful, rural environs.

All photos are from film. See more in an online exhibit at www.heinzhistorycenter.org/

A HAPPENIN' PLACE Bedford County Fair, Bedford, Pa., August 1976.