



The eternal turn of the wheel

By Garrison Keillor

Every August my marriage undergoes State Fair stress, when my wife reminds me that I'm on my own. Fairwise, and please will I not feed our little daughter a Pronto Pup or cotton candy because they're terrible for her? And I try to explain why every true Minnesotan loves the Fair and honors it by ritual feasting. "But it's the same old thing, year after year," she says. She thinks it should be jazzier, exciting, not just a herd of hefty folks in shorts wandering in search of animal fats.

A certain sameness is, of course, what we Fairheads love about it. You stroll through the sheep barn and the 4-H kids showing sheep are the same ones you saw in 1954, and so are the sheep. Sheep are sheep. Pigs are pigs. It is your only chance to come into contact with large animals below us in the food chain, to look into the eyes of our entree. And to build up body fat for the winter. And to experience centrifugal force. And to walk around until your feet are sore and examine jams and quilts and art and apples and storm doors until this

year's Fair merges with all others from all times in your life and you wind up on a Ferris wheel in the dark with a powerful sense of transcendence and the durability of the human spirit that, doggone it, you just don't get at Walker Art Center, do you.

My father grew up on a farm north of Anoka, and though we lived in Brooklyn Park, on a one-acre lot, he still believed that home-raised chickens were far better than store-bought, same as with tomatoes or sweet corn, and so every few months, we'd go up to the farm and kill chickens and butcher them and wrap them up to be stored in a locker plant. I was involved in this, as a catcher, later as a plucker.

In time, Dad gave up on it and accepted Super Valu's chicken and today, I don't know of any of my cousins who slaughter chickens. I don't know that any of us would even know how. That's a huge change, from slaughtering to store-bought, a sea change. The State Fair is a

return to that old time, when we were not so far off the farm. Machinery Hill is a faint shadow of its former greatness, but nonetheless it's good to be able to walk up to a John Deere tractor and look at it.

Other changes: the girlie shows, gone from the Midway; the big freak show; the 'CCO' booth; is not a big deal anymore; auto racing has faded severely. But the smells are the same, and smell is the key to memory, and when you get a whiff of hot fat and animal manure and diesel exhaust in your nostrils all at once, you shiver down deep and feel the past put its big hairy hand on your shoulder. And are the giant overalls still there? I can't remember. Even if they're not, I still see them fluttering in the sky at the east end of the racetrack.

The DNR, I understand, was going to renovate its big log barn a few years ago and downsize the fish tanks and then came to its senses and realized that the people of Minnesota wouldn't tolerate this: You come to the fair, you get to see walleye and muskies swimming in tanks, and bullheads and crappies and carp and some eelpout. Why? Because. That's why.

Fifty years ago, when the Fairgrounds was more parklike, our family of six kids arrived early and parked the car near the Horticulture building, and we trudged around looking at educational things, and at noon

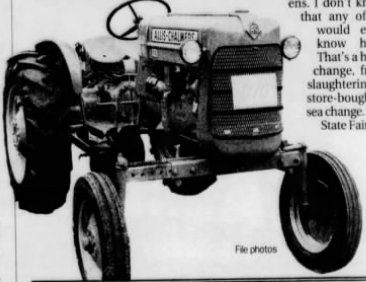
Mother spread a blanket on the grass and we ate sandwiches brought from home while listening to Cedric Adams do his noon newscast from the rotunda. We kids were each given three dollars with which to entertain ourselves, and turned straight for the freak show, to gaze at the fat lady, the midget couple, the alligator lady, the penguin boy, the tattooed sword swallower and fire-eater, and Popeye who could pop each of his eyeballs out of his head.

Eventually, I suppose, the Fair will offer less sheep judging and more cats and gerbils, the Horticulture building will be devoted more to grass and shrubs, and the racetrack will be turned into a soccer field. Machinery Hill will become Soft-ware Hill. Time moves on, the past recedes.

All the more important, then, to take my daughter and give her a Pronto Pup, maybe two, and a soft taco, and a honey sundae, and take her through Poultry, Sheep, Swine, Cattle, and Horse barns and let her touch a

shorn sheep, and a pig, and take her on the Giant Slide, and then on the Ferris wheel for the finale. The big wheel turns and you rise up into the dark and look out on the lights of St. Anthony Park and it's all times rolled into one, as long as the wheel turns, we're eternal, and then we get off and come home.

— Garrison Keillor is an author and host of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion."



File photos