

A Most Unusual Kind of Fair

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Normally, in mid July, I write a column encouraging everyone to come out to the Geary County Fairgrounds for the Geary County Free Fair. Unfortunately there is nothing normal about 2020. So instead I'm writing this column now to say thank you for NOT coming out to the Free Fair! We had a Fair, sort of. Yes it was very different but let me tell you how we got to what we had.

As the pandemic started evolving it quickly became apparent that a traditional county fair wasn't likely going to happen. Which in essence gave us the opportunity to evaluate what the core activities that we wanted to accomplish at the fair were. Over the years fair evolve and, when possible, different activities and events are added. But the history of the Geary County Free Fair has always been the 4-Hers and their 4-H projects. Everyone involved (4-Hers, 4-H parents, volunteers, Fair Board and the Extension Office) wanted to focus on that so everything else was set aside for this year.

Next we focused on determining how we could, in a safe manner, still allow the 4-Hers to receive not just a ribbon placing on their project from the judge, but do so in an efficient manner. Which meant that some projects were judged virtually over a computer and written comments provided to the 4-Her. As someone who has judged a lot of county fairs I find the time with the 4-Hers evaluating their projects to be an awesome teaching/learning opportunity. One on one is the best way to do this, but in some instances written comments will have to suffice this year. Other projects were judged in real time masked face to masked face. Judging times were spread out to keep the number of people interacting at any one time to a minimum and to allow time for cleaning commonly touched surfaces.

The hardest thing for many of us was to limit the people attending the fair to a minimum which meant excluding the public and many times even aunts, uncles and grandparents. To think of having the end of fair auction without a huge crowd at the fairgrounds was just disappointing. But we had to focus on keeping people safe so a virtual auction was initiated.

These changes also gave us the opportunity to do some things we haven't done before. There were a lot more photos posted on the Extension Office web page: https://www.geary.k-state.edu/4-h/fair_results.html and on Facebook. Look for Geary County K-State Research and Extension on Facebook. Yes, it was a lot of work but we wanted as many people to see the projects as would normally come out to the fair, or more. We streamed all the livestock shows on Facebook Live. The shows are broken up into smaller sections and are saved on our Facebook page so you can go watch them whenever it's convenient. Even when we can go back to a "normal" fair, we'll likely continue to live stream these shows because they were very popular AND provide a good learning opportunity for the 4-Hers to go back and watch themselves later!

Lastly a whole lot of thank yous. Thank you to the Geary County Health Department! They assisted us in reviewing our safety and mitigation plan and helped identify the highest risk areas to address. We started off rather aggressively so that if things got worse (and they did) we didn't have to scramble. Then thank you to all the 4-Hers, parents, volunteers and fair board. There's been a lot of differing opinions on what we should or shouldn't do in this pandemic but everyone accepted the plan, put on their face masks and made it happen. Thank you to one and all, and now we will start working on 2021 and whatever kind of fair that year gives us!