

The Daily Union Article
Titled: A Family and Community **Affair**
Saturday, July 27, 2019

This past week, I was involved in the Geary County Free Fair, along with my colleagues from the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office and a few hundred, if not thousand, other people. This family-friendly, community-centered event occurs each July at the 4-H/Sr. Citizens Building in Junction City, Kansas. It showcases the work of 4-H members from five different clubs represented in the county as well as the support of parents, extended family and community. In addition, the area residents can share their talent and skills through open class exhibits. Perhaps all of this is news to you. However, the tradition of county fairs has been around for many generations.

The history of county fairs in the United States goes back to 1850. Records indicate that this form of public exhibition developed under the coordination of local Agricultural Society organizations. Typical events included livestock judging, exhibits of new equipment used in agriculture, new techniques used in farming, and competitions, such as threshing and plowing contests. Educational lectures were provided to help farmers learn about ways to adapt their practices to the weather, the market, and regional demand for their products.

The golden age of agricultural fairs ran from 1870 – 1910 when local boards sought out the acquisition of permanent land on which to hold the annual event. Although the original county fair event targeted the interests of adult men, over time activities were introduced to create opportunities for children, moms, and community members to get involved. Bicycle races, hot air balloon rides, and horse races became popular in the early 1900's. Domestic Science exhibits, the precursor of Home Economics and later Family and Consumer Science, were also added to county fairs. These additions made the county fair a truly family and community focused event.

Ellen Swallow Richards, the first woman in America to be accepted into a scientific school (the male-only Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1870, founded a field of study that evolved as a result of her work in chemistry. Richards' developed the study of eugenics, once which she defined as "the betterment of living conditions, through conscious endeavor, for the purpose of securing efficient human beings." Her foundational studies in air and water pollution led to her interest in examining the home living environment. She recognized that the way we cook, clean, organize, and parent healthy children is all rooted in science.

Joyce Miles, a well-known biographer of Ellen Swallow Richards, says this: "Her biggest contribution was quite possibly in the area of nutrition. In the late 1800s, diets were very unhealthy and there was little discussion of how what you ate contributed to your

health and longevity. She promoted nutrition education and the science behind foods and all the nutrients therein."

When you walk through the grounds of a local county fair, you can still see the influence of the county fairs from generations past. You will see the livestock on display, youth showing their skill and experience in working with their animals and other projects, educational demonstrations such as tractor safety, clothing buymanship and construction, baking projects with nutritional adaptations made for promoting better health, and yes, some friendly competitions such as the youth pedal pull or classic barnyard Olympics.

You will also find all the indications of our contemporary home and farm life. Youth projects in technology, robotics, rocketry, leadership, and environment can be seen all around. Instead of keeping a small notebook in their pocket of the day's events, individuals download the schedule and put their competition times on an electronic device. Yes, many things have changed in our county fairs over the 170+ years they have been part of our American culture. Yet, many things have stayed the same. They are still- at their heart- a family and community focused event.

The Geary County Free Fair board appreciates the many ways our community and county support this event. As a local county extension agent, I am proud to be a part of something that promotes families, provides education, and develops leaders in our youth and in our volunteers. I am honored to call Family & Consumer Sciences my profession and continue the work of Ellen Swallows Richard to promote nutrition and wellness, pursue and achieve financial security, offer learning sessions on safe housing practices and research, and implement programming to support family and child development.

As I have said so many times before, there is something for everyone at the Geary County Free Fair. I look forward to seeing you there next year! Until next time, keep living resourcefully!