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# The Pennsylvania County Fair: A Snapshot of America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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# The Pennsylvania County Fair: A Snapshot of America at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Sarah Duda

Abstract: This paper explores the controversial popularity of horse races at Pennsylvania agricultural fairs at the turn of the twentieth century. While the excitement of horse races and the gambling that surrounded them attracted large crowds to fairs, agriculturists were angered by their detraction from agricultural exhibits and moralists mortified by the gambling.

On June 11, 1900, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* printed a short story entitled “Not Much of a Lift: Story of a Fresh Young Man Who Rolled a Farmer.” The story details the interesting interaction between a city man and country man on their way home from the county fair:

“Farmers, even those who are considered “nigh” in other respects are usually quite willing to give foot passengers a “lift:” but they like to be asked for the favor politely. A native of Hillville was returning from the county fair at Brookby with an empty wagon, when he overtook a smartly dressed young man who was plodding along with the disgusted air of one unused to country roads and sand soil.

“Hullo, hayseed!” cried the foot passenger, turning round as he heard the rattle of wagon wheels, and standing still until the farmer drove up, “Can a fellow get a lift to Sconset?” and without waiting for a reply, he vaulted into the wagon. “I might as well ride with you as walk, I guess. Now, then, start up your nag.”

The farmer looked at the young man a little sharply, but said nothing beyond a “Git-up!” addressed to his horse.

After two or three miles had been traversed the young man paused for a moment in his inconsequent chatter, and remarked:

“It’s more of a distance to Sconset than I supposed.”

“It is quite a distance,” responded the farmer, in a non-committal tone.

Another- twenty minutes passed, and then the young man inquired:

“About how far is it to “Sconset?”

“Well,” replied the farmer, “keepin’ straight ahead, the way we are ‘goin’ naow, I sh’d say ‘twould be a matter o’ twenty-five thousand miles or so: but ef so be you was favorable t’ gettin’ aout o’ my wagon an’ hoodin’ it back, it ain’t much above eight miles.”

The young man got out with great celerity, and proceeded to “hoof it” in the opposite direction.”

“I cal’clate,” said the farmer telling his wife the story afterward, “I cal’clate his mode of addressin’ the next man he meets will be some different.”-- Christian Observer.”<sup>1</sup>

Though seemingly insignificant as it is packed among other articles and ads on the fifth page of the paper, this humorous anecdote highlights tensions between rural and urban peoples that come

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<sup>1</sup> "Not Much of a Lift: Story of a Fresh Young Man Who Rolled a Farmer," *Philadelphia Inquirer* 11 June 1900: 5. Newsbank Newsfile Collection, 18 Sept. 2013.

to a head in the setting of a county fair but stem from much larger issues in an era of change in America. The conflict between the two men above starts when the city man<sup>2</sup> addresses the farmer as “hayseed” when asking for a ride home. This derogatory name, used to refer to a person from the country, is synonymous with names for a country bumpkin character such as yokel, hick, or rube.<sup>3</sup> In an examination of evolving attitudes towards rural America, David Danbom argues that people from the city had long held patronizing views of their country counterparts in the past, but that these attitudes became more prominent and harsh towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> People living in the country, like the farmer in the story, would have been increasingly heard terms like “hayseed” connoting their inferiority to people from the city. For a country that had pride in its agrarian history and only recently become mostly urban, this would have been a striking change in attitudes. Thomas Jefferson held up the land-owning agricultural man as the ideal American citizen:

“Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people whose breasts He had made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue... Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Indicated by phrase that describes him as unaccustomed to the country and as looking out of place on the country road.

<sup>3</sup> "Hayseed," Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 30 Nov. 2013 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hayseed>>.

<sup>4</sup> David B. Danbom, Born in the Country: A History of Rural America, 2nd Ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 134.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (1785) as quoted in Jackson Lears, Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009) 136.

If the city man's attitude toward the farmer and resulting conflict in the story reflects the changes in rural-urban attitudes, then the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal was being challenged at the turn of the twentieth century. The appearance of rural-urban conflict in "Not Much of a Lift: Story of a Fresh Young Man Who Rolled a Farmer" reveals that the county fair was not a harmonious communal gathering of the agricultural community, but a site where the tensions between attendees turned into conflict.

As urbanization and technology was rapidly changing the landscape of America and reshaping how Americans understood themselves-- demographically, culturally, environmentally, etc.-- at the turn of the turn the twentieth century, agricultural fairs were a place where the issues of the day manifested themselves in unique ways. Being inherently rural in nature,<sup>6</sup> agricultural fairs physically represented the congregation of local farming communities and metaphorically embodied the great Jeffersonian agrarian ideal. In a time when people were moving to the cities, the agricultural fair sometimes gave the appearance that it was a nostalgic event frozen in time. The very purpose of the state fair was debated between 1880- 1910 in Pennsylvania as the State Agricultural Society faced the challenge of making the fair popular enough to financially sustain itself. Throughout their history, agricultural fairs have served the dual purpose of educating and entertaining attendees and organizers have long dealt with the problem of balancing the educational function with the entertainment value of county and state fairs.

The popularity of horse races at agricultural fairs in the late nineteenth century embodied this conflict between the educational and entertainment facets of the fair. The predominance of horse races at agricultural fairs is evident in Sherwood Anderson's less-known 1930 short story

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<sup>6</sup> Since farming requires sizable amounts of land and natural resources that are not available in urban settings.

titled *The American County Fair*.<sup>7</sup> As the title suggests, Anderson painted a picture of the typical American county fair. However, the focus of the story surprises the reader of today, who expects to find awe-inspiring descriptions of hundred-pound pumpkins and prized cattle on the pages and instead finds himself quickly turning the pages of heart-pounding horse race. The center of the county fair, turns out to be the horse race itself, which causes even the most respectable members of the community to go crazy as they cheer for their favorite horse. Even though Anderson insisted that for the owners “...there is no money to be made racing horses at the fair...” and dismayed at their attraction of gamblers to the fair, in the same breath he romanticized the relationship between man and horse while describing the crowd’s excitement.<sup>8</sup> Anderson’s focus on horse races and their effect on the crowd highlights their importance at the county fair. In fact, horse races have been at the center of American county fairs throughout their history, attracting rural as well as urban spectators and even serving as a source of revenues for some fairs<sup>9</sup>. Though a main attraction, the presence of races at the fair was a source of tension, due to their detracting from agricultural exhibits and the gambling that accompanied them. Moral opposition to gambling would grow so strong that by 1910, gambling at horse races would become prohibited at some county fairs.

While the crowds had differing motivations for attending the fairs and differing views on the races themselves, the question of how these views were divided and interacted with one another in a county fair setting has yet to be answered. What was the function of a rural fair in an increasingly urban society that was adapting to all the changes in technology, in the

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson is perhaps best recognized by his short story *Winesburg, Ohio* and for his stylistic influence of later writers such as Ernest Hemmingway and William Faulkner.

<sup>8</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *The American County Fair*, (New York: Random House, 1930).

<sup>9</sup> Mary K. Dains, "The Missouri State Fair: A Struggle to Begin," *Missouri Historical Review* 73. 1 (1978): 23- 53. In its beginnings, the Missouri State fair relied mainly on revenues from the state Horse Breeder’s Association, since the state itself did not fund the event.

workplace, and in their lifestyles at the turn of the twentieth century? How did people understand the county fair. Were their views of the fair divided along urban and rural lines? As gambling came under increasing moral scrutiny after the turn of twentieth century, how did people view the presence of the gambling that accompanied horse races at the fair? Were their views divided along urban/rural lines? What was the function of horse races at the fair? More broadly, how do we make sense of the urban/rural of the tension expressed in humorous stories such as “Not Much of a Lift: Story of a Fresh Young Man Who Rolled a Farmer” and how was this tension present at the fair? An analysis of this collection of questions lies at the intersection of a host of literature written on fairs, horse racing, gambling, and rural America which will be overviewed below. Since there is a rich archive of newspaper articles chronicling state and county fairs in Pennsylvania at the turn of the twentieth century that speak to larger changes and challenges encountered across America at the time, this paper will examine the questions above within the context of Pennsylvania agricultural fairs. This study will reveal that tensions between urban and rural, education and entertainment, and easy and hard-earned money at Pennsylvania agricultural fairs were a reflection of a set of social and cultural changes-- in demographics, entertainment, mass culture, and production-- that reshaped America at the turn of the twentieth century and that the fair was an important place where these conflicts were explored.

This argument contradicts much of the histories of state fairs that have most commonly been published in celebration of a fair, often in conjunction with a big anniversary. Due to the celebratory nature of these histories, they often lack a critical eye when encountering past conflicts at state fairs. Gerald Prescott’s article, “The California State Fair in the Gilded Age” exemplifies how problems are often glazed over by historians in order to present the fair in good

light. Although Prescott summarizes the difficulties the state had in funding the fair in its beginnings and public debate at the time over whether horse racing should take place at the fair, he does not explore either of these problems in detail. While the races were the main source of entertainment at the fair, some people were morally opposed to the gambling that occurred at the race track and many farmers were upset because they detracted from the agricultural exhibits. Without exploring these issues in any depth, Prescott concludes that the fair was "... a crackling good time for all..."<sup>10</sup> even though the main attraction at the fair, the horse races, was a divisive force in the community.

Although a number of state fair histories-- including those written by Einar O. Hanner, Dan Cupper, and Mary Kay Shanley<sup>11</sup>-- parallel Prescott and skim over historical issues, there are works that examine the history of fairs more critically. In her article "The Missouri State Fair: A Struggle To Begin," Mary K. Dains discusses how the selection of a site to build the state fair grounds put towns who wanted the economic benefit of hosting the fair in competition with each other and ultimately left them resentful when they were not selected in the end. Two issues more commonly discussed across the history of state fairs are the troubles of financing fairs and historical debate over whether the role of fairs was to educate or entertain attendees. George Fiske Johnson details how these issues characteristic to American state fairs transformed the Pennsylvania state fair into the Pennsylvania Farm Products show in his *History of the Pennsylvania Farm Products Show*.<sup>12</sup> An analysis of Pennsylvanian state fairs that builds off of

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald Prescott, "The California State Fair in the Gilded Age," *Southern California Quarterly*, Spring, 60, no. 1 (1978): 25, JSTOR 18 Sept. 2013, .

<sup>11</sup> Hanner wrote on the Wisconsin State Fair, Cupper on the Pennsylvania Farm Show (which is the PA state fair), and Shanley on the Iowa State Fair. While I have read the former two myself, I read the following review of Shanley: Rasmussen, Chris. Review of *Our State Fair: Iowa's Blue Ribbon Story*. *The Annals of Iowa* 60, no. 4 (2001): 358-61.

<sup>12</sup> George Fiske Johnson and State Farm Products Show Commission Pennsylvania, History of the Pennsylvania Farm Products Show (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania State Farm Products Show Commission, 1931).

Johnson's work in relation to county fairs will come into larger conversation with other state fair histories over the shared problems of funding and defining the purpose of agricultural fairs.

The history of world's fairs comes into conversation with the history of agricultural fairs over the shared struggle to balance the educational and entertainment functions of a fair. While writing on world fairs more broadly focuses on the imperial representation of countries at the fair and racial issues, Robert Rydell specifically addresses the tension between education and entertainment at the world fair in his discussion of the development of the midway in *All the World's a Fair*.<sup>13</sup> Rydell's analysis of the midway will inform an analysis of the entertainment qualities of the county fair. Since the midway was originally developed in world fairs that took place exclusively in cities, the adoption of the midway into agricultural fairs could also arguably represent the transfer and blending of urban values of entertainment into a rural setting.

The increasing importance of non-educational exhibits whose purpose was purely to entertain at fairs occurred within a larger rise in mass culture across America at the turn of the twentieth century. American sports history offers extensive commentary on the rise of mass culture because the development of sports during this time period was an integral part of this new phenomenon. In *A Brief History of American Sports*, Gorn and Goldstein argue that Gilded Age Era changes in production and the workplace left Americans with more disposable income leisure time that could be spent pursuing sports.<sup>14</sup> The use of time and income to pursue not only sports, but other self-gratifying leisure activities and commodities such as attending the fair or purchasing mass-produced goods marks the emergence of consumerist culture in America.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as the country became increasingly urban and production increasingly industrial,

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<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Elliott J. Gorn, Warren Goldstein, and Eric Foner, *A Brief History of American Sports*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) 106.

<sup>15</sup> Gorn and Goldstein 107.



less American men were living the ideal agrarian lifestyle that had historically played a key role in defining American manhood. Gorn and Goldstein argue that the sports arena was a critical space for men to express their masculinity. As a result, many sports-- including horse racing-- became exclusively occupied by men. In order to accurately contextualize the presence and meaning of horse races at Pennsylvania agricultural fairs, this paper draws on the understanding of mass culture and masculinity in American sports presented in Gorn and Goldstein's *A Brief History of American Sports*.

Within American sports history, a subset of horse racing histories that discuss Americans' changing moral views of horse racing give insight into how the popularity of racing at county fairs would have been seen as harmful to some fairgoers. Although authors of racing histories have typically focused on particular races such as the Kentucky Derby<sup>16</sup> or on the life of champion horses,<sup>17</sup> Marvin B. Scott and Maryjean Wall specifically address the relationship between racing and morality. In *The Racing Game*, Marvin B. Scott uses a sociological approach to explore the inter-workings of racing society from the perspective of the actors involved-- jockeys, breeders, owners, gamblers, law enforcers, etc.<sup>18</sup> By studying each actor involved in a horse race individually,<sup>19</sup> Scott is able to evaluate moral questions about the system as a whole, such as critics' speculation that races were rigged, that have been asked throughout the history of horse racing in America. When addressing the question of rigged races specifically, Scott does not deny the existence of rigging, but rather acknowledges possible rigging motivations for trainers and jockeys alongside an explanation of how their moral

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<sup>16</sup> James C. Nicholson, *The Kentucky Derby: How the run for the roses became America's premier sporting event* (Lexington: University P of Kentucky, 2012), *Ebrary Reader*, Swarthmore College, 22 Oct. 2013.

<sup>17</sup> David L. Hudson, *Horse Racing's Most Wanted: The Top 10 Book of Derby Delights, Frenetic Finishes, and Backstretch Banter* (Dulles: Potomac Books Inc., 2011), *EBL*, Swarthmore College, 22 Oct. 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Marvin B. Scott, *The Racing Game* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1968).

<sup>19</sup> This approach is praised in reviews "The Racing Game," *Amazon.com*, 22 Oct. 2013 <<http://www.amazon.com/The-Racing-Game-Marvin-Scott/dp/020230809X>>. Website features excerpts from reviews by William Bruce Cameron and Irving Kenneth Zola.

reputation is important for a successful career in racing. While critics who have historically pointed to gamblers winning large amounts of money at races as evidence of rigging, Scott explores the rationale which regular gamblers employ at the races in order to defend the skill and strategy required to regularly win small amounts of money. Employing Scott's method of breaking a horse race down into all the actors involved in that race and amplifying it to consider all the actors (not just urban and rural) of a county fair, will lead to a more thorough understanding of the interactions and involved in the fair. Furthermore, Scott's defense of gamblers will counter common views of gamblers at the turn of the twentieth century which influenced the reception and regulation of horse races at agricultural fairs.

The vast literature written on gambling and its history in America has focused on different facets of gambling, such as religious and moral opposition to gambling in the past, the openings of specific casinos, lotteries, various games, and the legal history of gambling. In *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth Century America*, Anne Fabian unpacks religious language that labeled gamblers immoral criminals and drunkards and explains that men who gained wealth through no material work of their own threatened traditional conceptions of wealth that valued hard work on the land.<sup>20</sup> In *Something For Nothing* Jackson Lears' chronicles the transformation of American social and political perceptions of luck and attitudes towards gambling. Since objections to the presence of horse races at Pennsylvania county and state fairs was tied to perceptions of gambling, Fabian's and Lears' histories of gambling will explain the rational behind eliminating horse races at the fair and reveal the legitimacy of moral stances against gambling.

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 166.

American rural histories are especially concerned with the large demographic changes effecting America at the turn of the twentieth century in which urbanization was fundamentally changing America from a mostly rural to mostly urban nation. David B. Danbom's *Born in the Country* extensively describes the physical changes in American landscape and agriculture while analyzing the changing social perspectives of rural America throughout history.<sup>21</sup> Danbom puts the age of industrialization (1870-1920) into perspective by comparing the growth of rural and urban acreage, population, and goods to one another, as well as rural and urban perspectives. Danbom writes extensively about the Country Life Movement, which was a response by urban educators to the movement of young people from the country to the city. Fearing that the rural population would eventually become too small to produce enough food to support the (urban) masses, sought to halt the exodus from rural America by improving country life and instilling a love of the county in young people. In addition to Danbom's chapter on the Country Life Movement, William L. Bowers' *The Country Life Movement In America: 1900-1920* gives the reader a deeper understanding of frustration with agricultural productivity, rural resentment of towards urban educators, and the creation of urban/rural stereotypes. Using Bowers' and Danbom's histories to compile statistical information about the changing demographic of the country and place fairs of the early twentieth century within the context of the Country Life Movement will create a richer picture of what a county fair's place was in society.

While there is substantial literature chronicling the histories of fairs, horse racing, gambling, and rural America, there has yet to be work that synthesizes all four to address the questions raised earlier dealing with the county fair at the turn of the twentieth century. This paper will begin by addressing how urbanization and increasing interconnectedness between

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<sup>21</sup> David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of rural America*, 2nd Ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

country and city created financial hardships for the agriculturist. In Pennsylvania, financial woes plagued not only individual farmers but also their institutions, as evidenced by the bankruptcy of the state fair in 1889. At the same time, a new play titled *The County Fair: A Comedie in Four Acts* that revolves around a farm family on the verge of bankruptcy was beginning to gain popularity across the country. A discussion of fictional bankruptcy in *The County Fair* as well as the real bankruptcy of the Pennsylvania state fair will highlight the extent of financial stress within the agricultural community. In the years leading up to the state fair's bankruptcy, organizers strategically hosted state fairs in conjunction with larger Pennsylvania county fairs in hopes of bolstering fair profitability and overcoming financial instability. Two posters advertising the 1889 state fair when it was held in conjunction with the Bethlehem county fair reveal that horse races were the main attraction of the fair. As spectator sports, horse races provided fairgoers with exciting mass entertainment, a new phenomenon that had originated in the city. While the massive popularity of horse races marked the increasing importance of exhibits designed to purely entertain fairgoers, it also detracted from educational exhibits that had long been the central focus of the fair. Horse races represented a the tension between education to entertainment at the county fair. As fair organizers tried to the two at agricultural fairs, a group of urban reformers also grappled with broader tensions between education and entertainment within rural life as a whole. Concerned by the mass movement of peoples from rural to urban areas, a group of urban elites came together in what is now recognized as the Country Life Movement with the goal of invigorating love of country life in rural youth by enhancing their knowledge of agriculture a through education and spiritually reconnecting them with nature. Urban educators were not well received by the rural community. A scene from *The County Fair* in which the characters offer their rural perceptions of the city reveals a suspicious,

negative view of urban people that connects with the urban-rural tension in the anecdote at the beginning of this paper. An analysis of speculation in agricultural commodities will give further insight into farmers' mistrust of city people and reveal that philosophical understandings of production, wealth, and manhood are at the core of this conflict. Tension between the hard-earned money made by farmers and the "easy" money urban spectators made through the sale of agricultural goods they did not produce fits connects to larger moral understandings of and opposition to gambling in America. After exploring moral views of gambling and the connection between gambling and speculation, the discussion will return to the county fair where spectators could gamble at horse races. The relationship between horse races and gambling gave critics of racing further reason to object to the presence of horse races at county fairs in addition to their detraction from agricultural exhibits. Ultimately, this study shows that horse races at Pennsylvania agricultural fairs came to embody the conflicts between education and entertainment, urban and rural, and moral production and immoral gambling that were representative of larger challenges and changes reshaping America at the turn of the twentieth century.

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Between 1870 and 1900, rapid expansion, industrialization, and urbanization transformed America from a mostly rural to mostly urban nation in a period now known as the Gilded Age.<sup>22</sup> Although a host of literature focuses on the developments of cities where the population tripled<sup>23</sup> during this time, David B. Danbom argues in *Born in the Country* that monumental changes

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<sup>22</sup> The origin of the phrase "The Gilded Age" was sparked by Mark Twain's book of the same name, which criticized corrupt politicians of the day in the capital.

<sup>23</sup> Danbom 133.

occurred in rural areas as well. As the rural population doubled from 1870 to 1900, farm acreage and value more than doubled from 407.735 to 841.202 million acres and \$9.4 to \$20.4 billion respectively.<sup>24</sup> Danbom attributes the expansion of American agriculture to industrialization in Europe and the United States which birthed new transportation, namely the railroad, that allowed farmers to ship their products to newly affluent consumers who lived in far-off cities.<sup>25</sup> Though the expanding market created new opportunities for agriculturists, the margin for profit shrunk as the value of land and overhead costs of farming increased. The same railroads that allowed farmers to increase their profits by widening their market also took away from their profits through manipulative rail rates and increased rural dependence on newly-accessible urban goods. For example, as new farming technologies that greatly enhanced production capabilities such as the tractor became more accessible to farmers, they raised the level of agricultural competition and became necessary tools for farmers. Though new technologies and larger markets certainly promised larger profits, they did not eliminate risks inherent to the farming business-- weather, pests, and disease.<sup>26</sup> In a comparison of manufactured and agricultural product values, Danbom puts the average farm's potential for great financial success into perspective: "While the value agricultural products a little more than doubled, the value of manufactured products quadrupled, and in 1890, for the first time in American history, the total value of manufactured goods exceeded the total value of agricultural products."<sup>27</sup> Realistically, there was much more money to be made in the manufacturing industries that were located in urbanized areas. This combined set of circumstances only increased the financial difficulty of owning and maintaining a farm, despite the new possibilities for success.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid 131,133.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 131-134.

<sup>26</sup> Danbom 134.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 133.

Pennsylvania does not currently have a state fair but rather a Farm Products Show and this is, in many ways, reflects the lasting impact of late-nineteenth-century financial challenges to agricultural fairs that ultimately re-defined their purpose. In History of the Pennsylvania Farm Products Show George Fiske Johnson argues that, “First, these events (state fairs) were the parent of the county fairs but near the end, the State fair actually became a child of the county fairs.”<sup>28</sup> His assessment of the state fair is fairly accurate. Between 1850 and 1888, the state fair travelled to cities across Pennsylvania, including Lancaster, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Wyoming, Norristown, Scranton, Erie, and Easton. With the exception of Wyoming, all of these cities are fairly large and well recognized today. Throughout this time period, the state fair had varying success but remained profitable until it hit a turbulent patch in 1889. As the society was developing a permanent location on a 30-acre plot of land outside of Philadelphia, where the fair was held between 1884-88, it found itself working under tough economic conditions while simultaneously losing financial backing from the State.<sup>29</sup> In an event that would be later referred to in the papers as “the State Fair Scandal,” the Pennsylvania State Fair committee declared bankruptcy.<sup>30</sup> The state fair’s bankruptcy in 1889, reveals the enormity of financial distress in the agricultural community. Not only were farmers threatened by bankruptcy on an individual level, but their institutions also operated under unstable financial conditions.

In 1888, a popular play titled *The County Fair: A Comedie in Four Acts* drew public attention to the financial hardships within the agricultural community with a relevant and familiar story of a New England farm family on the verge of bankruptcy that drew audiences to

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson and State Farm Products Show Commission Pennsylvania 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 18.

the theater in droves. Written by Charles Barnard<sup>31</sup> and starring comedian/ female impersonator Neil Burgess as Abigail Prue, *The County Fair* hit the stage for the first time at the Walnut Theater in Philadelphia.<sup>32</sup> Judging by a mere fifty word description of the show in the *Inquirer*<sup>33</sup> packed among other local advertisements, one would never have expected it to become a crowd favorite in the years to come. To briefly summarize the plot, *The County Fair* tells the story of a New England family who is financially struggling to keep their farm under pressure to repay interest on a loan from the previous owner. The farm is headed and owned by an older single woman named Abigail Prue (Abby) who lives on the farm with a hired hand named Joel Bartlett along with a young woman named Sally Greenway, whom she adopted as a young orphan. At the beginning of the play Abby takes in another orphan named Taggs who is from New York City and known to have a nasty habit of theft. Taggs has a friend, Tim, a former thief from New York who later acquires a place on the farm as a hired hand. Also in the picture is Otis Tucker, an older man who is a good friend of Abby's that secretly desires her hand in marriage. The play tracks the adoption of Taggs and Tim-- two young people from the big city who have shady histories-- into the farm family. Ultimately, the pair saves their new family from bankruptcy by winning first prize in the horse race at the county fair with the family's beloved horse Cold Molasses. Despite its brevity, this rough storyline touches upon several challenges to farm ownership. "Historically," Williams Bowers has argued, "renting a farm was considered only a

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<sup>31</sup> There is a bit of uncertainty as to when Barnard wrote *The County Fair* as well as Neil Burgess' involvement in writing the script. While the current copy of the script this analysis is based on was published in 1920, it references an original publication from 1889. However, the play was first performed in late 1888 and was obviously written before then. It is likely that the script was not published until after the show had already been performed and had gained some popularity. While Barnard is listed as the playwright, most ads of the show do not include his name at all and instead refer to it as "Neil Burgess' County Fair," insinuating that he was both an author and star of *The County Fair*.

<sup>32</sup> First newspaper records of the play appear in 1888 advertising the show in Philadelphia.

<sup>33</sup> "Amusements: Walnut Neil Burgess," *Philadelphia Inquirer* 8 Oct. 1888: 8, NewsBank NewsFile Collection, 30 Oct. 2013.



step in the progression toward ownership.”<sup>34</sup> Previously, an aspiring farmer of humble beginnings could have conceivably worked as a hired hand on a farm until he saved enough capital to rent a plot of land that could eventually become his own after he had paid off loans.<sup>35</sup> However, this “tenure ladder”<sup>36</sup> had begun to break down as evidenced in Abby’s inability to pay off the interest on her loan. Ultimately, this meant that the pathway to landownership was uncertain for young men like Joel Bartlett who aspired to manage their own farm in the future. The threat of bankruptcy was very real for farmers and the emergence of a play about a farm family on the verge of bankruptcy would have resonated with many audiences at the end of the nineteenth century.

During the twenty years from 1888 to 1908, *The County Fair* was performed across the country, traveling from Philadelphia to Boston and even making its way as far as Grand Forks, North Dakota.<sup>37</sup> In 1901 the *Trenton Evening Times*<sup>38</sup> predicted that based on the overwhelming popularity of the show and its “big box office receipts” that “it is likely that it will run forever...” In a sense, this ad’s prediction of long-standing popularity was true, since the play was performed until about 1908 and was later made into film in 1920<sup>39</sup> and subsequently remade in 1932 and 1937.<sup>40</sup> Since *The County Fair* was being performed in Philadelphia and across America throughout the period considered in this examination of Pennsylvania county fairs, an

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<sup>34</sup> William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974) 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>36</sup> Term borrowed from Bowers 8.

<sup>37</sup> “At the Metropolitan,” *Grand Forks Daily Herald* [Grand Forks, North Dakota] 16 Mar. 1901: 16, NewsBank NewsFile Collection, 30 Oct. 2013.

<sup>38</sup> “The Stage,” *Trenton Evening Times* 20 Jan. 1901: 11, NewsBank NewsFile Collection, 30 Oct. 2013.

<sup>39</sup> “The County Fair (1920),” *Film Indexes Online*, The American Film Institute, 30 Oct. 2013 <<http://film.chadwyck.com/cgi/htxview?template=basic.htx>>.

<sup>40</sup> “County Fair (1920),” *Rotten Tomatoes*, Flixter Inc., 30 Oct. 2013 <[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/county\\_fair/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/county_fair/)>.

analysis of its various messages is crucial to understanding various relevant turn-of-the-century issues effecting county fairs.

In an attempt to recover from “the State Fair Scandal,” the fair was held in conjunction with several county fairs across the state. Between 1889 and 1897, the fair was held alongside the York, Bethlehem, Scranton, Lancaster, Erie, Uniontown, and Johnstown county fairs.<sup>41</sup> Most likely, the reasoning behind this shift was economic in nature because of the recent bankruptcy. Co-hosting state and county fairs would’ve insured more financial stability by combining expenses and resources of the two events while potentially attracting larger crowds to the especially large event.

A close reading of two posters that were used to advertise the state fair when it was held in conjunction with the Bethlehem county fair in 1891<sup>42</sup> will give insight into how organizers wished to present the fair and what aspects of the fair were deemed most important and attractive to fair goers (appendix). If one were to gain the meaning of the poster by a quick glance, he would see the largest and most colorful words which read “FAIR/ BETHLEHEM, PA./ SEPT. 23, 24, 25, 26, ’91/ FRESH, NOVEL AND INTERESTING SIGHTS/ EXCURSION RATES ON RAILROADS.”<sup>43</sup> The center of the poster features an illustration of a chariot horse race with smaller illustrations of a tractor, cattle grazing in a field, a group of people sitting together

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid 17.

<sup>42</sup> “1891 Pennsylvania State Fair Poster 1,” Bethlehem Area Public Library, Bethlehem Area Public Library, 19 Sept. 2013 <<http://www.bapl.org/lohist/comlife/culture/statefair1.htm>>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Since the word “fair” is in a bright orange color and large font, it is likely that a reader wouldn’t even catch the smaller phrase above it that indicates that this fair is actually the state fair. In addition, the phrase below that indicates the fair is in Bethlehem might have led the reader into thinking that this was just the local Bethlehem County Fair. It is hard to say for sure if this was an intentional effect of the font and color sizes or not. If the effect was intentional though, this could mean that the organizers were trying to hide the fact that the state fair was being held in conjunction with a county fair because it was too weak to operate on its own. The recent bankruptcy scandal was undoubtedly a source of humiliation for those that had been involved in state fairs and perhaps the manipulation of font sizes so that readers wouldn’t read the first words that indicate that this was the state fair was a way of hiding the embarrassment attached to the title.

under a tree, and a harvest around it.<sup>44</sup> The bottom two corners of the poster depict a group of sheep on the left and pigs and chickens on the right. These images reflect the changing purpose of a county (or state) fair. In the past, county fairs had been a place where the local agricultural community could come together to exchange information on farming techniques and machinery, proving the superiority of their methods with the best quality products. While the images indicating these aspects of the fair are present on the poster, they are not at the center but rather used to frame the main image of the horse race. Furthermore, the movement indicated in the horse race gives the image a kind of momentum in itself so that it is not sitting in the center of the poster passively, but rather pushing the other images to the edges of the poster. The active character of the image is symbolic of the literal challenges of the county fair as an institution. Increasingly, horse races were becoming the main source of entertainment at county fairs. This is an important change that will be discussed further throughout this analysis of county fairs.

A look at the second poster in relation to the first poster reveals the importance of the horse races at the 1889 Bethlehem State Fair. This poster is entirely fixated on the horse races with two large images of racing occupying the top and bottom of the ad.<sup>45</sup> Much of the language is similar or identical to that of the first poster. One way in which the two posters overlap on the subject of horse racing is that both advertise that Nellie Burk's horses will be racing at the fair. This suggests that people might have been motivated to attend the fair just to see specific horses at the races. However, the technique that is under scrutiny here-- of emphasizing or downplaying certain aspects of the fair with font and coloring-- is also present in the second poster where it emphasizes horse racing over other aspects of the fair. Underneath the list of fair

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<sup>44</sup> Illustrations that frame center picture are described in clockwise direction starting from the bottom left corner.

<sup>45</sup> Reminder that image of poster can be found in appendix. "1891 Pennsylvania State Fair Poster 2," Bethlehem Area Public Library, Bethlehem Area Public Library, 19 Sept. 2013  
<<http://www.bapl.org/lochist/comlife/culture/statefair2.htm>>.

dates reads: “LARGEST DISPLAYS/ Of Agricultural Implements, Horticultural and Household Articles Ever Displayed/ THE BEST OF RACING.”<sup>46</sup> Although the first and third lines are in large, bold print, the second line detailing that displays are agricultural is barely legible and as a result the agricultural aspects of the fair are de-emphasized in the face of horse racing.

In December of 1900, the Pennsylvania Livestock Breeders’ Association made a push to move the state fair out of State Agricultural Society’s hands and namely into joint state-private control involving “organizations representing livestock, dairying, education and industrial interest of the State.”<sup>47</sup> An excerpt from a Philadelphia Press editorial response reveals common opinions of the matter at the time regarding this effort to remake the fair:

“The Pennsylvania Livestock Breeders’ Association is anxious to hold a big State Fair devoted to cattle exhibits with the absence of a mid-way. If the livestock breeders will take a tip from Allentown, Bethlehem and Lancaster, they will hold a State fair and assure its overwhelming success by abandoning the livestock exhibit and sticking to the mid-way exclusively.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Annual Report (1900) 98 as quoted in Johnson 21.

<sup>48</sup> National Stockman and Farmer, 20 Dec. 1900: 16 as quoted in Johnson 21.

The term mid-way used above would have referred to the section of the fair containing concessions, music, rides, games, and any other non-educational entertainments. The mid-way initially developed within the context of world fairs.<sup>49</sup> In a discussion of world's fairs held in America, Robert Rydell explains that the presence of non-educational entertainments at world's fairs was a sore spot for fair organizers because they heavily detracted from the educational purposes of the fair. However, the popularity of these entertainments made them essential to the success of the fair. The 1889 Paris exposition, for example, received over \$700,000 from the concession booths alone.<sup>50</sup> Due to the profitability of the mid-way, world fair organizers rationalized that attendees could simultaneously enjoy these entertainments while walking through the educational exhibits.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Pennsylvania state fair organizers were also attempting to juggle the entertainment and educational facets of the fair. While some organizers wanted to emphasize the educational purpose of the fair and eliminate the mid-way entirely, the public backlash in the newspaper response above shows the reality that fairgoers were there for entertainment as well and that the fair depended on the success of the mid-way. The newspaper response compiles discontent with the state fair on many levels. During this time, Pennsylvanians would have seen diminished greatness of state fairs, which had become unstable enough on their own that they had to be held in conjunction with county fairs to bolster attendance. With the bankruptcy fresh in mind and the lack of state fair success in years leading up to the turn of the twentieth century, the author was doubtful of the fair's ability to effectively manage itself. While Johnson argues that the opinion voiced in the newspaper excerpt was

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<sup>49</sup> Rydell.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid 62.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 62.

uniquely urban, it is uncertain whether this a legitimate claim. The proposition to eliminate the mid-way at the fair, would likely have upset many people no matter where they lived.

While exhibits for purely entertainment purposes, such as horse races, seemed to be the central focus at fairs, the educational and sentimental value of agricultural exhibits was also viewed as increasingly important as masses of people moved from the country to the city. Between 1900 and 1920 a group of “urban-based educators, religious leaders, social scientists, philanthropists, and (various) other public figures” became very concerned about the movement of young people from country to city.<sup>52</sup> In a movement known as “The Country Life Movement,” this group of people believed that cities offered a more engaging, exciting, and luxurious way of life and sought to reform and improve country life in order to instill a “love of country living” in young people in order to stem the tide of their exodus from rural to urban areas.<sup>53</sup> Country life reformers were often quick to blame the country church for rural people’s lack of appreciation for country life that ultimately led them to the city. Blame of the country church stemmed from a sentimental attachment to America’s agrarian history that idealized farmers’ closeness with nature which supposedly caused them to be more moral, virtuous, and religious than other Americans.<sup>54</sup> Many country life reformers believed that it was the country church’s duty to spiritually reconnect rural people to nature.<sup>55</sup> An excerpt from a speech by Kenyon L. Butterfield at a Presbyterian conference in Huntington, PA shows that this exact critique of country churches was present in Pennsylvania: “I hold that the country church is the most important element in the rural problem... that it speaks the most eloquent word in the

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<sup>52</sup> Danbom 168.

<sup>53</sup> Bowers 15.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid 35.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 47.

struggle to maintain the status of the farming class.”<sup>56</sup> Reformers also feared that the decreasing farm population would yield a future in which agricultural productivity was not large enough to support the urban masses.<sup>57</sup> As a result, reformers paired with agricultural institutions such as county fairs to increase the availability of information on new productive farming techniques. In fact, the goals of the Country Life movement were very much the same as county fairs during this time period-- to both educate agriculturists and make country life captivating. Though this movement is seldom discussed now in American history, at the time it was so large that President Theodore Roosevelt created a Country Life Commission Country Life in 1907 to address the set of country life issues that concerned reformers.

Predictably, people living in rural areas did not appreciate urban reformers who believed it their responsibility to reform and improve country life. Distrust of people from the city is evident in a scene from the first act of *The County Fair*, in which the characters have a conversation about the dangers of the city, characterizing it as a place where you can be murdered at any moment and should generally avoid visiting. Conversation about the city arises as Otis is preparing to leave for New York City in order to visit his ill brother. When Otis mentions that he hasn't been to a city since he was a child, Joel mentions that he is glad to not be going to the city himself: “Cause that's where Silas Bailey's eldest boy went more than two years ago, and we never heard a word of him since, and nobody ever did know how nor where he was murdered.”<sup>58</sup> In response, Abby drops a pan of fresh bread in shock, exclaiming “Murdered!” This prompts Taggs to give her two cents about the city which serves to scare the others further:

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<sup>56</sup> "Country Life Problems," *Patriot* [Harrisburg] 07 Dec. 1910: 8, America's Newspapers, Web. 6 Nov. 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Bowers and Danbom.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Barnard and Neil Burgess, *The County Fair; A Comedy in Four Acts*, (New York: S. French, 1922) 38.

“If you don’t get scalped in New York City, my name ain’t Taggs ‘cause I’ve been there, you bet your life... there’s lots of people that goes to New York never heard of again... Look here mister, if a man comes up to you and says he knows all your folks and all about you, you want to haul off and give him a smash right in the jaw... He’ll rob you of every cent you have got, and his name is Bunco Bill see?”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid 38-39.



This conversation seems to put country people at odds with the idea of a city, being deathly afraid of New York City even though they have never been there. The commentary on city life offered by Taggs, a city-goer herself, seems to confirm the dangers of this unknown terrain even though she may not be an entirely reliable source.<sup>60</sup> What is key to understanding how this scene would be viewed by an audience is that it takes place within a comedy. Of course it is ridiculous to think that the city is really such a dangerous place and the whole dialogue is meant to be funny; and urban audiences would have been especially amused. Additionally, Neil Burgess is at the comic center of the scene as he plays Abigail Prue, dropping a pan of bread in a fluster and undoubtedly speaking in a high-pitched voice to provoke laughter as he tries to convince Otis to not go to New York. In fact, scenes like these are undoubtedly what attracted audiences to *The County Fair* in the first place because Neil Burgess was the heart of the show. It is nearly impossible to find a single advertisement or mention of *The County Fair* without also the inclusion of Burgess' name. In this scene, Burgess would have amplified the humor in the silly conversation with his own impersonation of the old woman. Together the silly old country woman and the ridiculous rural impressions of the city would occupy the center of the joke together.

At the same time that farmers were encountering new financial difficulties in managing their farms, they were also becoming frustrated by widespread commodity speculation which they attributed to be the cause of large fluctuations in prices of their goods.<sup>61</sup> Speculation is generally defined as investing with the intention to turn profit in the near future by accurately predicting short-term changes in value of the investment while assuming the simultaneous risk of

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<sup>60</sup> Taggs is known to have a problem with stealing, even though she is a sweet, kind girl. She also lies earlier in the play, first in order to hide Tim from the others and then again to bolster his reputation in order to get him a paid position on the farm.

<sup>61</sup> Fabian 155.

losing money if the market does not work to one's favor.<sup>62</sup> In the 1870s, a standardized grading system for agricultural products came into being<sup>63</sup> which created uniform language to describe goods and ranked them on the basis of their quality.<sup>64</sup> Previously, a system of grades and standards was not needed when farmers sold their goods in person to local buyers who could see the quality of produce at the moment of exchange.<sup>65</sup> The assurance of quality provided by a grading system not only became necessary for buyers and sellers as agricultural products began to ship across the country, but also conveniently allowed them "to trade in elevator receipts."<sup>66</sup> According to Ann Fabian, however "trading in elevator receipts also made it possible to sell futures short (to contract to sell commodities one did not own for delivery at a later date) and to profit, therefore in falling as well as in rising market."<sup>67</sup> While farmers benefited by selling in futures since future contracts acted as hedge against the repercussions of a bad crop or natural disaster, they also resented the ability of speculators to profit from price fluctuations of goods they had no part in producing.

Anti-speculation commentary employed distinctly religious language that compared speculation to gambling.<sup>68</sup> In the same way that gamblers profited from no real material work of their own, so too did speculators. Farmer's outrage over speculation in agricultural commodities is representative of larger critiques of gambling at the time: "Accusations of gambling had

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<sup>62</sup> Edward Szado, "Defining Speculation: The First Step toward a Rational Dialogue" *The Journal of Alternative Investments* Summer 14.1 (2011): 75-82, *The Journal of Alternative Investments*, Institutional Investor Inc, Journals Group, 29 Nov. 2013 <<http://www.ijournals.com/doi/full/10.3905/jai.2011.14.1.075#sthash.p143mtEi.dpbs>>.

<sup>63</sup> Fabian 154.

<sup>64</sup> Daniele Giovannucci and Thomas Reardon, "Understanding Grades and Standards and How to Apply Them," *Agriculture & Rural Development*, The World Bank Group, 29 Nov. 2013 <<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTARD/0,,contentMDK:20441034~pagePK:210058~piPK:210062~theSitePK:336682,00.html>>.

<sup>65</sup> Giovannucci and Reardon.

<sup>66</sup> Fabian 154.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid 154.

<sup>68</sup> Fabian 160. Some of the angriest critics believed speculation to be so serious a moral fault that they labeled it as blasphemy, living off the powers of creation without putting in any work of their own. Critics feared a future in which nothing was produced at all in which all people traded goods they had not produced.

powerful resonance for a society whose moral basis lay, rhetorically at least, with producers, and they illustrate just how speculation (metaphysical and economic) remained a problem for a culture based on practical thought and useful production.”<sup>69</sup> The tension over speculation in agricultural commodities came to a head in 1892, when William Hatch, a Representative from Missouri, proposed a House Bill that would ban professional speculators from manipulating prices for their personal gain.<sup>70</sup> Since speculation made it possible for non-producers to participate in the sale of agricultural products, people from the city who had never worked a day in the dirt could profit from the sale of farmer’s goods and benefit from wide fluctuations in prices. Hatch’s bill, though it would not pass, would likely have been seen as a victory by farmers who loathed the city speculators who gained wealth off the backs of others’ work and manipulated prices without any remorse for their impact on producers.

The gambling that accompanied horse races at county fairs gave agriculturists more reason to despise their popularity which detracted from agricultural exhibits. There has been a long history of moral and legal opposition to gambling in America. Classic critiques of gambling were based on the juxtaposition of the ideal image of a hard-working man whose wealth is the result of his own production (of economic goods) with the gambling man who easily wins wealth through no work of his own.<sup>71</sup> To farmers whose goods produced wealth that urban outsiders could profit through speculation, gambling could easily be associated with the city. Although this might lead to an assumption that gambling was an exclusively urban phenomenon, in reality it was practiced in both rural and urban areas. Ann Fabian argues that gambling history often discusses gambling within “wild and uncertain moments in certain economies” which occurred frequently on the frontier where cowboys and gold miners took on

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid 162.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 178.

<sup>71</sup> Fabian 166.

financial risk in the hopes of gaining wealth.<sup>72</sup> In a nation that honored the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, critics of gambling feared idle men who produced nothing, but easily gained wealth and lived excessively. This is not to say that these views of gamblers were true; analysis of gambling at horse races reveals that experienced gamblers require a great deal of skill and dedication to win at the races.<sup>73</sup> A number of historians who have written about horse racing and gambling<sup>74</sup> would agree that the gambling at horse races is distinctly from other forms of gambling that are based on purely on chance.

“There seems to be far less superstition and magic connected with horse race gambling than there is associated with lotteries and with table games based on pure chance. The basic reason for this is that horse race gambling offers considerably more scope for various skills and rational forms of orientation than do pure chance gambling situations.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid 6.

<sup>73</sup> Scott.

<sup>74</sup> Statement based on reading of works by Marvin B. Scott, Anne Fabian, Elliot J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein.

<sup>75</sup> Edward C. Devereux, Jr., “Gambling and the Social Structure-- A Sociological Study of Lotteries and Horse Racing in Contemporary America,” diss., Harvard University, 1949, 662 as quoted in Scott 85.

Although gambling at horse races might have been viewed with higher regard than other gambling games more closely associated with chance and luck, this did not prevent moral critiques of gambling at races. In 1892, Reverend T.J. Leak gave a series of sermons in Harrisburg on the subject of gambling, addressing horse racing at the county fair specifically in “The Devil in Horse Racing.”<sup>76</sup> Leak took a position against the presence of horse races at the county fair mainly because of the gambling accompanying them.<sup>77</sup> He also referenced the excitement surrounding the races-- which Anderson’s describes in great detail in *The American County Fair*-- and argued that the feverishness with which the crowd is captivated by the races makes them act like fools.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Leak critiqued races as being unfair to participants: “In country fairs farmers’ boys are often present with their bright young horses, taken there for honest competition. After their entries are made some stranger appears with a horse never heard. After their entries are made some stranger appears with a horse never heard of... plays upon the ignorance of the boys...”<sup>79</sup> Though Leak’s accusation of rigged races may seem to be unfair, his suspicion of those who won large sums of money gambling was relevant within the social context of the turn of the century in which gambling was commonly perceived as an immoral activity.

Moral opposition to gambling became so strong that anti-gambling attitudes were adopted into law during this time period. Conversation surrounding a 1886 bill that would ban any kind of gambling in the form of book-making or pool selling in the District of Columbia, one of the earliest legal pushes against gambling, reveals that moral reasoning was the basis of the

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<sup>76</sup> “The Devil in Horse Racing,” *Patriot* (Harrisburg) 13 June 1892: 2, NewsBank NewsFile Collection, 30 Nov. 2013.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

legal attack on gambling.<sup>80</sup> In response to the new legislation, a popular petition crafted by The Guardian League arose requesting further legislation to prevent the corruption of youth from alcohol and associated gambling.<sup>81</sup> Citing crime statistics, the petitioners claimed: “Hundreds of the youth of the District, every year, who might otherwise grow up to be intelligent, industrious, and virtuous citizens, become vagabonds, drunkards, gamblers, harlots, and criminals...”<sup>82</sup> The grouping of gamblers among criminals and listing them as otherwise “low-life” people reflects the moral attitudes towards gamblers at the time. In the discussion of late-nineteenth century horse races in *A Brief History of American Sports*, Gorn and Goldstein point out that while horse races were accessible to people of all classes, gambling was perceived as a lower class activity.<sup>83</sup> By 1910, most states had banned gambling, including betting at horse races,<sup>84</sup> and in the case of New York, legislation went as far to ban the sport of horse racing.<sup>85</sup>

A scene from the second act of *The County Fair* highlights both the centrality of horse racing at the county fair and the opposition to gambling at county fair races. In the second act, Taggs and Tim<sup>86</sup> unveil their plan to run Cold Molasses in the county fair and discuss the difficulty in finding enough money to pay the entry fee. When Tim explains to Sally that he can win three thousand dollars in the horse race which will save the farm from bankruptcy, Sally is taken aback. The sheer size of the prize seems to scare her: “Oh, Tim, and will we get the whole

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<sup>80</sup>John J. Hemphill and United States of America, House, Book-making and Pool-selling in the District of Columbia. April 15, 1886. -- Referred to the House Calendar and Ordered to Be Printed (Washington, D.C.: 49th Congress, 1st Session, 1886), U.S. Congressional Serial Set, 4 Oct. 2013. The restrictions on gambling was quickly clarified to include any betting at horse races

<sup>81</sup>Zebulon B. Vance and United States of America Senate, In the Senate of the United States. January 6, 1887. -- Referred to the Committee on the District of Columbia and Ordered to Be Printed. Mr. Vance Presented the following Petition. (To Accompany Senate Bill No. 3084.) (Washington, D.C.: 49th Congress, 2nd Session, 1887). U.S. Congressional Serial Set, 4 Oct. 2013.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Gorn and Goldstein 109-110.

<sup>84</sup>William Norman Thompson, Legalized gambling: A Reference Handbook, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1994) 8.

<sup>85</sup>Jackson Lears, Something for Nothing: Luck in America, (New York: Viking, 2003) 195. This is particularly interesting because the state of New York was a horse racing hub, attracting horse owners and spectators from around the nation with impressive new racetracks.

<sup>86</sup>The two young people from the city who have been recently adopted into the family.

three thousand dollars?... But wouldn't it be wicked? If Miss Abby thought it was, she wouldn't touch it."<sup>87</sup> Sally's reaction is not unrealistic because during this time there were many people who had objections to horse racing because of the gambling associated with it. Actually, her objection to the possibility of Tim easily winning such a large amount of money eloquently gets at the root of anti-gambling sentiments that deemed immoral "easy money" made through gambling when others have to struggle to make enough money to sustain themselves. This stark contrast between "easy money" and hard earned money is immediately emphasized as Taggs questions Sally's objection: "Didn't Miss Abby win the prize for the best bed tick in the County Fair?"<sup>88</sup> When Sally replies yes and that Abby also won best bedquilt, Tim argues: "Well, what's the difference between a prize quilt and a prize horse? Only you get the more money with the horse."<sup>89</sup> Although Tim sees no difference between winning money from a quilt or a horse race, at a time when gamblers were being critiqued for winning wealth without working or producing anything tangible one could see a huge difference between the two. A quilt is not only the product of long, hard work, but also often the product of a whole group of people. If we return for a moment to the first poster from the 1891 Bethlehem state fair, there is an image of community that appears to the upper right of the central image of the horse race. Just as the image of the horse race is pushing the traditional images of county fairs which includes the image of community to the edges of the poster, in this scene from *The County Fair* horse racing is undermining the value of community in the form of the quilt.

In Pennsylvania, gambling at horse races at county fairs came under increasing scrutiny between 1910 and 1920. On May 7, 1910, the Harrisburg *Patriot* printed an article titled "Gambling Stopped At County Fairs" which boasted of the elimination of all horse race

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<sup>87</sup> Barnard 75.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

gambling and other non-agricultural entertainments from some Pennsylvania country fairs.<sup>90</sup> The article also writes that fairs have improved themselves by eliminating other “questionable shows” and investing in expert judges and larger prizes for agricultural competitions.<sup>91</sup> Though these improvements suggest that county fairs as institutions have returned to a purely agricultural focus, the retention of horse races reveals that by this point agricultural fairs could not simply return to an educational focus and completely ignore the crowd’s desire of entertaining exhibits. By 1916, the grudge against horse racing at Pennsylvania county fairs that had started with its detractor from agricultural exhibits had become incorporated into a larger legal push to eliminate all forms of gambling in America. A *Patriot* article titled “County Fair Gambling” speculates about the potential efficacy of a new law denying state funding to any county fair that allows gambling at horse races.<sup>92</sup> The article argues that although the law encourages county fairs to prohibit gambling in favor of state aid, the funds from gambling, the midway, and other entertainment exhibits are sufficient to operate some fairs without any state aid. Although the article acknowledges the profitability of these entertaining facets of the fair, the author does so grudgingly and laments at the loss of the true essence of the “county fair” in the midst of entertainment:

“For long years back the “county fair” has in many instances been using the worthy name of agriculture as a cloak for an exhibition that subordinates things agricultural for other purposes. The midway grew and prospered. Other concessions were granted. Horse racing here and there is giving way to automobile daredeviltry. The prize pumpkin, the pedigree cattle and the intricately embroidered sampler are difficult to find.”<sup>93</sup>

In the above critique, the author blames county fair organizers for not only allowing non-agricultural exhibits to be included in the fair but also allowing them to take over the fair

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<sup>90</sup> “Gambling Stopped At County Fairs,” *Patriot* (Harrisburg) 7 May 1910: 1, NewsBank NewsFile Collection, 30 Nov. 2013.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> “County Fair Gambling,” *Patriot* (Harrisburg) 8 Sept. 1916: 6, NewsBank NewsFile Collection, 30 Nov. 2013.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



completely. Although the author voices a classic concern of agriculturists within a long conflict between the entertainment and education facets of the county fair, he is beginning to realize that entertainment has become the focus of the county fair.

## Conclusion

In close, let us return to the posters advertising horse races at the 1891 state fair. At the heart of the races is a sense of momentum and excitement. The literal momentum of real horse races has appeared symbolically throughout this analysis as racing moved the focus of Pennsylvania agricultural fairs from education to entertainment. An examination of the influence of horse races reveals that their momentum is pushing the county fair into the future. While moralists opposed the gambling that made races exciting and agriculturists wished to pull the fair back to its original educational purpose, the races pushed the fair forward to mass entertainment that the crowds desired. Though fair organizers resented races and gambling, their profitability achieved the financial stability that had alluded agricultural fairs in the past. Similarly, horse races at county fairs were positioned to add excitement to country that urban reformers had failed to accomplish through the Country Life Movement. While country life reformers had a nostalgic view of rural life and unsuccessfully sought to push the rural population back to their “past” love of nature and country life, horse races pushed county fairs into the future of mass entertainment, making country life exciting.

This work has attempted to bring together various historical interpretations of fairs, horse racing, gambling, and rural America in order to present a detailed picture of the challenges facing Pennsylvania agricultural fairs at the turn of the twentieth century. Tension between educational and entertainment offerings of county fairs, philosophical understandings of

production, and moral critiques of gambling was at the core of the changes redefining fairs. This study shows that horse racing embodied these tensions and made county fairs not merely a place of communal merriment, but an important site of transformation in America at the turn of the twentieth century.

## Appendix

### Posters from the 1891 Bethlehem State Fair

Figure 1: (below, left) Poster 1<sup>94</sup>

Figure 2: (below, right) Poster 2<sup>95</sup>



<sup>94</sup> “1891 Pennsylvania State Fair Poster 1.”

<sup>95</sup> “1891 Pennsylvania State Fair Poster 2.”

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