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# The great irony of the county fair

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LEILA PHILIP

By **Leila Philip** | SEPTEMBER 01, 2017

By the time I arrive at the fair, the women's skillet toss is over and I've missed the first showing of Robinson's Racing Pigs, but rockabilly is booming from the grandstand, and two men are shearing sheep at the sheep barn. There's a crowd nearby watching eight kids lead their gleaming black-and-white Holstein heifers around a covered ring. It is day two

of the Brooklyn Fair in Brooklyn, Conn., the oldest continuously running state fair in the country.

I can feel the excitement as I near the Ferris wheel, there's a bustle at the food vendors, and suddenly I am walking quickly, I have so much to see — the agricultural exhibits, the rabbit and poultry barn, the cattle barn, the sheep and goats, the working steer. Before I can even reach the first exhibit I'm thrust back to mid-August, 1973. I am just 12 and have been voted the Columbia County Fair Apple Princess. Two weeks before the fair, we scouted the orchards for apples to enter on behalf of our farm. We loved going to the fair on opening night to see what prizes our fruit had won and of course ride the Ferris wheel, lose money at the games trying to win stuffed animals, then gorge on cotton candy and hideously sugared fried dough. I was too much of a tomboy to wear the crown and sash and, to my father's disappointment, only fulfilled my duties as Apple Princess by serving cider one night (rather sullenly) in the apple barn.

In the display of antique farm machinery, I watch a mechanical ax split wood, and several combustion engines pump water. There's a cornstalk cutter, a corn husker, a corn grinder, a shingle cutter, and a 1912 Hildreth engine, all chugging and whooshing in good order. It's hard to realize that these antiques are actually some of the technological advances that transformed agriculture.

Agricultural fairs like this one were founded to help modernize American agriculture by introducing new technologies and innovations. Before the telephone, before the Internet, the annual county fair was a critical platform for communication in rural America. Farmers showcased their best animals, advertising bloodlines while learning about new agricultural methods. Plows, harrows, planters, cultivators, reapers, and threshers were all invented and perfected in the 1820s and 1830s. By 1850 they were in full use and the era of scientific agriculture was well underway. It was the heyday of the county fair.

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And it's easy to forget, amid the nostalgia, the great irony of the county fair; it was founded to promote modernization, forwarding the mechanization of farming, and its success helped render that rural life it now celebrates obsolete. While agriculture was the leading industry of the 19th century, today the family farm is a struggling industry, nearly extinct.

On my way out I can't resist a stroll through the cattle barn. It's when I am almost out the far end that I see her, a young girl nestled beside a massive Brown Swiss cow. She is tucked beside the cow's wide girth, asleep, her arms around the cow's anvil head, which curves down as graceful as a swan to cover her, protecting the girl the way a mother cow would protect her calf.

I can't stop staring at this sight, transfixed by the power of what I am seeing. How I cherish this vision of complete trust between child and animal. I am back to 1973, that year's apple princess, blessedly oblivious of the hostile divide between the rural and urban that now splits our country.

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