

Old-time fashions and chickens

Old World Wisconsin volunteers model at State Fair

WEST ALIS – The first Wisconsin State Fair was celebrated in Janesville on Oct. 1-2, 1851.

For an admission price of 10 cents residents could view 461 entries.

Other such details, regarding state fairs through the years, were given by Barbara Gromacki, Burlington, as she and [Bev Wassam], Delavan, presented three special programs at this year's Wisconsin State Fair Senior Citizen Day.

[Bev], director of "Another Time" fashion presentations, is a costume historian and interpreter at Old World Wisconsin, Eagle.

[Bev's] familiarity with period clothing from 1850 to 1900 added to Gramacki's fair historical knowledge to provide an unusually interesting 40-minute spell for audiences.

The programs were presented in the poultry building, for chickens played a part in Wisconsin's agricultural history and four of the breeds were highlighted for their historic importance.

Besides four Old World Interpreter models, 4-H exhibitors and their families took part in the programs. Kelly Weber, Waterford, wore a green-and-white checked cotton dress complete with pantaloons from the 1860s as she carried her white Plymouth Rock hen to the judging. Becky Moore and Sara Nelson, both from East Troy, wore fashions from 1860s and 1890s. [Bev] told the audience hoops were in during the 1860s but by the 1890s a streamlined look had arrived. The long, straight lines of the 1890s skirt made it easier to move while giving grace to the wearer.

Tom Kleist, Elkhorn, and son, Chris, were two of the male models giving a glimpse of what men were wearing. Both were garbed as farmers of the 1850-60s. An interesting note for the time, said [Bev] were the accessories. Men carried purses and women had pockets and wore their hair in a snood.



Picture 1: Models include, from left, Gail Lundell, Dousman; Judy Laufenber, Palmyra; [Bev Wassam], Delavan; Barbara Gromacki, Burlington and Linnea Loesch, East Troy.



Picture 2: Four-H'ers Becky Moore, left, and Sarah Nelson walked through the chicken barn at the Wisconsin State Fair. (Joan Holman Photo)

Gromacki said the wooden item young Kleist was carrying was a poultry crate from 1790. There are no nails used – it is all dovetailed. Other models displayed cages for transporting various breeds of poultry or eggs to market or to the fair. Like fashions, the cages seemed to vary through the years.

According to Gromacki, the site of the fairs also varied. In 1859, the exposition was in

Milwaukee, “It was a special event,” she said, “Abe Lincoln made an appearance and it was the only time he spoke on agriculture. He told the people that farmers were the backbone of the nation.” Today at 13th Street and Wisconsin Avenue, there is a plaque commemorating the event.

In 1879, another president made an appearance. It was Rutherford B. Hayes but it was his wife who caused the stir. She was well noted for her fashion and more attention was given to her dress than her husband’s words.

Donna Runge, Menomonee Falls, modeled the fashion of the time as [Bev] described the tight waist helped by stays, colored snood and cameo brooch which set off this picture of the 80s.

“In the 1890, the present fairgrounds were purchased for \$136,000,” said Gromacki, “there were 160 acres.” It seems the price of admission had gone up – it was now 50 cents.

She said birds continued to play their part. A Milwaukee newspaper at the time used carrier pigeons to bring the news flashes from the fair to be printed in the latest editions. And gate crowds in 1890 were due in part to an admission gimmick. All children under 4-foot 2-inches tall were free. Lines formed as children waited to be measured.

[Bev] spoke about the fashion Gromacki wore. It was the height for the 1890s following a trend set by Alice Blue (Alice Roosevelt). She said such dresses came in kit form. All the pieces were pre-cut, awaiting the final sewing.

An explanation was given to the problems [Bev] encounters to reproduce these fashions from “Another Time.” The color she wanted for the Alice Blue dress was closest to the liner of a Metamucil cap. She carried the cap as she compared fabric color for the final selection.

The audience applauded the result. The history of the fashions at the fair also included an explanation of the poultry breeds, which have come through the years. Gromacki's son studied poultry history as evolved from Europe. His work was complete two years ago under a grant from Yale University. Some of the results were displayed to the audience in the form of the four breeds that were in fashion.

These included the Polish hen, whose style had added to the design of ornaments and fashions; the Plymouth Rock breed, noted for meat and eggs which has been raised by Halfback farms, Waterford, since 1888. The Leghorn is best noted for egg production and the Cochin was a favorite of Queen Victoria. This buff or fawn-colored hen is included in English garden scenes.

All these varieties and some of the fashions can be seen daily during a visit to Old World Wisconsin, said [Bev], as she and three interpreters strolled about the fairground before each of the three programs.

(Joan Holman is a Mukwonago/Big Bend Life correspondent.)