

Yes, we had a fair

by Jil McIntosh

The other night, when I was waiting in line to pay for a purchase, I overheard a conversation that sounded rather odd, given that we were in a big-box store in the middle of suburbia. A young man was complaining that the city – Oshawa, Ontario, known primarily for its General Motors plant and its proximity to Toronto – didn't have a fair.

He named several surrounding towns, all of which hold annual country fairs. "Why don't we have one?" he said. "Everybody else has one, but we don't."

He looked very surprised when I said, "There used to be one. It was just up the road from my house, every summer. But they held the last one some 12 years ago."

I could forgive him for not knowing. He wasn't all that old, and given that so many people in this area have moved in from elsewhere, he probably never lived here when the fair was in full swing. It was held in a farmer's field, and only one dilapidated building remains.

As rural communities go, I'm a relative newcomer to mine: my husband was

born here, but I've only been a resident for 20 years. I wasn't around for the earlier days of the fair, originally held closer to the middle of the city. But from the first one I attended, I was captivated.

It was actually rather low-key, as fairs go: a small round building that housed the baking and craft winners, a couple of sheds for livestock, and a midway – just a strip mowed shorter than the rest of the field – where a small traveling carnival company set up its merry-go-round, flying teacups, and a few games of chance.

But there were a lot of good old boys in the area, and the big draws were the truck pulls, demo derby, and the mud bog. The exhibition in nearby Brooklin – ironically, a much smaller town but a much bigger fair – was where the heavy horses and the professional tractors went to pull the stoneboats. The Oshawa Fair was much less formal; if you stood around watching and decided that your truck had a chance, you could just go out to the parking lot and get it, and join in the fun.

That's pretty much what happened one night when I walked up, drawn by the roar of open exhaust, to see what was going on. Although it was more for bragging rights than a substantial cash prize, there was a group of fellows who took their pulling very seriously, and had arrived with their heavy-duty rigs, ready for action. There had been quite a bit of rain all week and the pulls were shorter than expected, with the trucks bogging down in the mud once the sled weight transferred. So there was considerable laughter when one young fellow drove up in a creaky old Dodge truck, all rusted out and looking like it probably wasn't even going to get him home that night.



But he was confident, and when they hitched up the sled, he took off and didn't look back. When he passed the mark set by the leader, he just kept on going. The crowd went wild, and the announcer yelled over the loudspeaker, "Folks, he's taking that sled home with him!" He finally came to a halt, not because the truck ran out of pull, but because he'd gotten as far as the trees that marked the fairgrounds' edge.

The other great crowd-pleaser was the mud bog, a long ditch carved out with a backhoe and filled with water. The idea was to drive in at one end, and see if you could make it out on the other side. Most people didn't, and that's where the fun began: the towtruck would winch you out when you got stuck, but the towtruck driver wasn't the one who waded in to hook you up; if you couldn't finish, you had to attach the chain. Of course, none of the bog drivers went in wearing boots, which would have implied the possibility of failure, and so the most popular

participants were those who got stuck at the deepest part, while wearing the flimsiest shoes.

For several years I entered the food contests, baking bread and cakes, and taking bottles of pickles and jam. Some fairs just cut a tiny slice for testing – I even entered one where the pickle jars were untouched, returned with ribbons attached and seals intact – but the judges at our fair really got into their work, eating great slices of pie and large helpings of jam. The ribbons might not have had the prestige of, say, the huge Royal Winter Fair in Toronto, but the entrants took great pride in them: the scrutiny made people feel that the ribbons were truly earned.

As the years went on, though, there didn't seem to be much money for improvement, and the structures got shabbier. The encroaching subdivisions were first seen as a new audience, but it didn't work out that way: the Oshawa Fair was about the community participating,

instead of merely observing, and those who'd moved in from the city wanted to see animals in a petting zoo, not a judging ring. It went out with a whimper instead of a bang; one year it simply didn't open, and that was the end of it. A few years later, the field was given over to hay production, but it now bears a for-sale sign, and a notice that it will be rezoned favorably for development.

I felt much older than my years when I told the young man about the fair, and I could tell that he was someone who preferred a flashy exhibition to a quiet country gathering. Maybe one day there will be a fair in this city again, and it will be a gala affair that will draw people to its thrilling rides and elaborate displays. But yes, I told him, we did have a fair, many years ago, and it was one that celebrated the farms and the animals and the people who looked after them. And it was good.

(Jil McIntosh lives in Oshawa, Ont.) ●

Nightmare or sweet dream?



These 4-wheeler drivers aren't tearing up the countryside on a weekend romp. They're members of the Pugwash, N.S., search and rescue group taking instruction in safe handling of their rigs under the tutelage of Kirk Fraser, Springhill, N.S., an ATV trainer since 1997. This photo was taken in October on land belonging to Thornton Moore near Oxford, N.S. In time, most anyone wishing to drive an ATV in Nova Scotia will have to take a similar course. (RD photo)