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Review of *Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair* by Leslie Prosterman

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Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair.
Leslie Prosterman. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.
ix+220 pp. Photos, notes, index. \$24.95 paper (ISBN 1-56098-408-2).

Prosterman graphically describes and idealizes traditional midwestern life as it focuses and culminates in the county fair by connecting food production to the harvest bounty. Her account of these American “festivals” began as a dissertation with data gathered in 1981-82. She visited twenty-four fairs, studied six in depth and conducted more than one hundred ethnographic interviews in two states. As a cultural anthropologist, Prosterman defines the county fair and its system of thought processes as folklore intimately connected to a small group people within a community. To the student of family and community sustainability, the book supplies a rich history county fairs’ impact on community life.

Each chapter contains a vivid account of the necessary components of the county fair. Structurally, activities are based on conceptual as well as logistical reasons. Basic values conflict as the “carni” crowd comes and goes, with no continuing link to the local community. The midway carnival and the animal sections never mix because of the loudness and swift movements disrupting the livestock. Timing decisions are based on weather, schools, and other fairs; judging and exhibition take place in the early portion of the five or more fair days; early to mid-day events are geared to local community participants while mid-afternoon to evening events are aimed at the spectator public.

Prosterman provides an historical picture of fairs and describes American government efforts in mandating fairs for educational purposes. She provides a thorough explanation of the categories of the fair, including premium awards that also connote the value of the activity or item being exhibited. For example, she comments that livestock occupy the predominant position as illustrated by being first in the listings and largest in the amounts of premium paid to winners of the competitions. Prosterman analyzes the judges’ role and the rituals of evaluation and argues that these standards convey educational information to the next generation of participants. The criterion of creating symmetry and suitability for purpose by tying all the parts together in an aesthetically pleasing way describes livestock just as appropriately as needlework, cookies, or vegetables.

Prosterman connects the practical application of the standards established in the competitive show ring to the economic and social rules that govern everyday life. As criteria are established for determining the “winners” of the competitions, these same judgements influence the longer-term economic and social values of these products. Livestock must conform to the standard with changes made incrementally to uphold and enhance the breed. Participation in the fair provides exposure and advertisement of the commodity whether it is the beautifully sewn garment whose owner can become the stylist for a local store or the exquisite cake whose producer is asked to bake for the local graduation ceremony.

This book helps one reflect on the county fair’s highly positive impact on the rural community within American culture. Unfortunately, fairs are getting smaller and becoming less important. While it seems useful to understand the past role of county fairs if and how these roles are now being filled by other parts of society, a more provoking question might be whether fairs are important enough to be revitalized as a vital cultural and educational institution in the future. **Georgia L. Stevens**, *Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.