

Iowa State Fairgrounds Walking Tour 2025
State Historical Society of Iowa
August 7, 2025



View of the Grand Concourse, 1913. State Archives of Iowa.

Walking Tour Route

- I. Administration Building
- II. Varied Industries Building
- III. Department of Natural Resources Building
- IV. Grandstand
- V. Anne and Bill Riley Stage
- VI. Swine Barn
- VII. Cattle Barn
- VIII. Agriculture Building

Introduction

171 years ago, the Iowa State Fair started as a three-day event in Fairfield in October 1854. Agricultural fairs were important “institutions” throughout the United States in the 19th century, but especially so for the Midwest given the region’s sparse settlement.¹ Fairs provided an opportunity for people to share information and ideas as well as “enjoy a break from farm work and isolation” in more rural communities.²

For about three decades, the Iowa State Fair was held at different locations around the state, including Muscatine, Oskaloosa, Iowa City, Dubuque, Burlington, Clinton, Keokuk and Cedar Rapids. This rotation was implemented in an effort to give more people from different parts of the state the chance to attend the fair.³

The fair moved to its permanent home in Des Moines in 1886; not only had the city served as the state capital for almost 30 years at that point, but it was also centrally located and well-served by railroads.⁴ Since then, fairgoers have enjoyed farm machinery demonstrations, livestock shows, arts and crafts displays, all sorts of entertainment, and more on these grounds.

¹ Chris Rasmussen, “Agricultural Lag: The Iowa State Fair Art Salon, 1854-1941,” *American Studies* 36, no. 1 (1995): 7.

² Jeff Bremer, *A New History of Iowa* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2023), 161.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Administration Building

The Administration Building has been the home of the Iowa State Fair's administrative offices since it first opened in 1908. It was built in an effort to consolidate administrative employees' workspaces, which were previously "scattered over the grounds in small buildings, to the annoyance and discomfort" not only of the employees but also those fairgoers with urgent business to attend to.⁵ Its "wide verandas," praised by agricultural newspaper *Wallaces' Farmer* over one hundred years ago, are still a favorite place to take in the sights, sounds, and smells of the fair.⁶

⁵ "Another Record Breaking Fair," *Wallaces' Farmer*, Sept. 4, 1908, 4: <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=WAF19080904.2.12>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Varied Industries Building

As late as 1910, a number of exhibition halls were located where the midway is today. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Exposition Hall, a large white building off the east end of Grand Ave., served as an early version of the Varied Industries Building. Exposition Hall towered over the fairgrounds from 1886 until 1949. It was demolished in January 1950 as the wood frame building was a fire hazard.

Machinery Hall, or the building known today as the Varied Industries Building, opened for the 1911 fair. It covers roughly five acres worth of land and cost \$75,000 to build. It was intended to showcase wares from Iowa companies that would be particularly interesting (and perhaps profitable) to farm families.

At the 1917 fair, W. A. McCullough and Sons of Webster City, who modeled their livestock self-feeders alongside “their complete line of troughs and feeders,” were among the many Iowa-based exhibitors at Machinery Hall.⁷ Originally a blacksmith and farmer in Burlington, Colorado, W. A. (or William Arnold) McCullough relocated his family to Webster City after filing for and receiving his first patent for a hog feeding trough in 1909. The trough was designed to keep hogs from standing or lying down in the trough while eating, creating a more sanitary feeding environment. 11 more patents followed over the next 20-odd years, and by 1940, W. A. McCullough and Sons produced 45% of the United States’ hog self-feeders.⁸

⁷ “McCullough Self-Feeders at the Fair,” *Wallaces’ Farmer*, Aug. 17, 1917: <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=WAF19170817.2.69>.

⁸ Jennifer McCullough, *W. A. McCullough and Sons, Inc.: Celebrating 100 Years*, (Webster City: Seneca Foundry, Inc., 2009), 8, https://www.senecafoundry.com/media/cms/History_100_year_celebration_AC9D3DC0AE12D.pdf.

Department of Natural Resources Building

The Department of Natural Resources Building was originally called the Fish and Game Building when it was constructed in 1926. The building is actually two separate structures—a large, free-standing aquarium surrounded by an outer pavilion. Both the aquarium and pavilion were designed by Des Moines architectural firm Proudfoot, Rawson, and Souers.⁹ The building celebrates Iowa's conservation efforts, an important part of which was the State Board of Conservation (later renamed the Conservation Commission), established by the 37th General Assembly in 1917.

The Board of Conservation's first chairman and president, Louis Pammel, was a steward of Iowa's natural resources long before 1926. A botanist by training and profession, Pammel's personal mission was to create a state park system in Iowa. During his nine years on the Board of Conservation, 38 state parks were established, including one that bears his name just 50 miles southwest of the fairgrounds.¹⁰ The Pammel State Park dedication ceremony celebrated its namesake's tenacious spirit, as the program states:

"No group was too small for him to travel many miles to bring to them the message of saving Iowa's scientific, historic and beautiful spots; no site was too far away for him to see and appreciate. In all hours and in any kind of weather, Dr. Pammel has found time to write and lecture continually on behalf of the cause he has espoused."¹¹

Pammel's legacy extends beyond Iowa's state park system. As a professor at Iowa State College (now Iowa State University), he was impressed by his student George Washington Carver's plant collecting skills. The only Black student at Iowa State at the time, Carver earned a Master of Science degree there before moving on to teach in the Agriculture Department at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama at the personal invitation of Booker T. Washington. Louis Pammel made several trips to visit Carver at Tuskegee, where his former pupil experimented with soil conservation, crop development, and published practical newsletters for farmers hoping to improve their yields.¹²

⁹ "Fish and Game Pavilion and Aquarium, Iowa State Fairgrounds" (National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 1991), 5.

¹⁰ "Louis H. Pammel," Iowa State University Library Online Exhibits, <https://exhibits.lib.iastate.edu/iowa-state-parks/people/isu-people/louis-h-pammel>.

¹¹ "Pammel State Park Dedication Program," Louis Hermann Pammel Papers, Iowa State University Library Special Collections and University Archives.

¹² "Biography Card: Louis Pammel," George Washington Carver National Monument, https://www.nps.gov/gwca/learn/education/upload/Grade-4-Bio-Cards_Louis-Pammel.pdf.

Grandstand

A timber grandstand served fairgoers until work crews built the current steel and brick structure in 1909 to seat 10,000 and expanded it by 600 feet in 1927 to accommodate 5,000 more. At the time, it was the largest building in Iowa, and it remains one of the most recognizable structures on the fairgrounds.

While the Grandstand has played host to some of music's biggest stars in more recent years, fairgoers in 1916 were treated to Ruth Law's "flying circus." A pioneer aviator, Law traveled across the country performing exhibition shows at state and county fairs. Law's talents included looping the loop while standing on top of one her aircraft's wings, and her Iowa State Fair contract stipulated that, "not less than three loops" would be performed during each show, of which there would be two during the day and one in the evening.¹³ An advertisement in the *Leon Reporter* newspaper promised that Law would "prove the sensation of the coming fair."¹⁴

One of Ruth Law's aircraft of choice in the 1910s was the Curtiss Pusher, a small biplane with the engine and propeller located behind the pilot's seat. To get a better idea of just how wild her stunts might have been, visit the State Historical Building to see a Model D Curtiss Pusher aircraft built from a kit and flown by Arthur and Bernard Klein of rural Pottawattamie County between 1911 and 1915.¹⁵ The plane is on display in the atrium—suspended from the ceiling, of course!

¹³ "Air Thrillers on the State Fair Program," *Decorah Public Opinion* (Decorah, IA), Aug. 17, 1921, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87058235/1921-08-17/ed-1/seq-8/>.

¹⁴ "Ruth Law, Queen of Aviators," *Leon Reporter* (Leon, IA), Aug. 24, 1916, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87057096/1916-08-24/ed-1/seq-5/>.

¹⁵ "Curtiss Klein Pusher Biplane," State Historical Society of Iowa Museum Catalog: https://iowa.minisisinc.com//SCRIPTS/MWIMAIN.DLL/144/COLLECTIONS/WEB_COLLECTIONS_DETAIL_REPORT?SESSIONSEARCH&exp=sisn%2017065.

Anne and Bill Riley Stage

After emceeing Iowa State Fair variety shows on KRNT radio, Iowa Falls native Bill Riley created the Iowa State Fair Talent Search in 1959. Riley hosted talent shows across the state, where local winners would go on to compete at the Iowa State Fair. Riley hosted daily talent shows at the Fair through 1996 and became known as "Mr. Iowa State Fair." Upon his retirement, this stage was renamed in his honor.

Performance showcases have also occurred on other stages throughout the fairgrounds over the last 170 years. In 1973, a group of Meskwaki singers and dancers performed nine out of the ten days of the fair after protesting for the chance to do so. In a 4-3 decision, the Iowa State Fair board granted the Meskwaki contingent not only the opportunity to share their talents but agreed to pay up to 20 performers \$125 plus fair admission costs each day beginning August 19 through August 26.¹⁶ The Meskwaki entertainers showcased their talents at the fair's now-defunct Indian Village.

The Meskwaki people's presence in Iowa dates to the mid-1700s, when the French displaced them from their traditional homelands in what is now the Great Lakes region.¹⁷ The U.S. government again displaced the Meskwaki under federal Indian removal policy in the 1840s. However, the tribe successfully purchased back 80 acres of their territory in Iowa from the state in 1857. They continued purchasing land into the 20th century, growing their settlement in Tama County to its current size of over 8,600 acres.¹⁸

Today, the people of the Meskwaki Nation are "committed to protecting their inherent sovereignty, preserving and promoting their culture, and improving the quality of life for future generations."¹⁹ You can learn more about the Meskwaki's history and culture—including singing and dancing similar to their performance at the 1973 fair— by attending their annual powwow, which begins today and runs through Sunday, August 10.

¹⁶ "Indian Dances by Whites Halted After Iowa Protest," *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/08/19/archives/indian-dances-by-whites-halted-after-iowa-protest.html>.

¹⁷ "Unit 1: Native Iowa," State Historical Society of Iowa, <https://history.iowa.gov/learn/k-12-education/professional-learning/iowa-history-course/unit-1-native-iowa>.

¹⁸ Eric Steven Zimmer, *Red Earth Nation: A History of the Meskwaki Settlement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2024), 2.

¹⁹ "History," Meskwaki Nation: Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa, <https://www.meskwaki.org/history/>.

Swine Barn

Hog shows are a long-standing Iowa State Fair tradition; after all, pigs outnumber people in Iowa at a ratio of seven to one! Iowa has boasted so many pigs throughout its history that hopeful state fair exhibitors have been turned away due to lack of space. When the new swine judging pavilion opened in 1907, *Wallaces' Farmer* reported that the 1,154 seven-by-seven foot pens were still not enough to accommodate the sheer number of hogs farmers wanted to show that year.²⁰

Though perhaps not as famous as E. B. White's Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*, Phil Stong's Blue Boy, a Hampshire Boar owned by the Frake family, is an important pig in Iowa pop culture. Stong immortalized the Iowa State Fair in his 1932 novel, *State Fair*, which follows the Frakeses as they travel from the fictional town of Brunswick, Iowa to Des Moines, where Blue Boy lives up to his name and takes the top prize. A native of Keosauqua, Stong drew on his experience covering the fair's stock shows during his time as a Des Moines Register reporter when writing the book. The greater Stong family were no strangers at the fair, either; Phil's grandfather served as the superintendent of the swine division for several years.²¹

State Fair was a commercial success and inspired several film adaptations. Although the 1933 film featured real-life Iowa State Fair prizewinning pig Dike of Rosedale as Blue Boy, the 1945 Academy Award-winning musical with music and lyrics by Rodgers and Hammerstein is perhaps more famous. Even if you've never seen it, you probably know the opening song—"Our state fair is a great state fair; don't miss it, don't even be late!"

²⁰ "The Hog Show," *Wallaces' Farmer*, Sept. 6, 1907, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=WAF19070906>.

²¹ Robert A. McCown, "Phil Stong's *State Fair*," *Books at Iowa* 50 (1989), <https://www.lib.uiowa.edu/scua/bai/mccown2.htm>.

Cattle Barn

A new cattle barn opened to much fanfare for the 1920 fair. It cost a whopping \$200,000 (over three million dollars in today's numbers) and housed up to 1,600 cattle; its architects said it was likely the largest and most modern structure of its kind on any fairgrounds in the United States! The barn included a sale pavilion, dining rooms, offices, sleeping quarters, and lounging areas and boasted modern conveniences including electric lighting and running water.²²

However, Iowa weather took its toll and the cattle barn's roof needed repairs only a decade later. Laborers employed by the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, undertook the project in 1934. They also constructed a storm sewer underneath Dean Avenue the same year. Other WPA improvements to the fairgrounds included the construction of the Youth Inn at the intersection of Logan Avenue and East 34th Street, additional electric lighting at the Grandstand racetrack, and a 40-acre addition to the campgrounds.

A key component of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the WPA supplied paid jobs for three million unemployed men and women across the United States during the Great Depression, including nearly 40,000 Iowans. In the WPA's first year alone, Iowans completed almost two thousand public works projects, including the construction of 2,800 miles of farm-to-market roads, 200 miles of sewers and 50 miles of water mains; renovations to 40 school buildings; and improvements to 100 state and city parks.²³

²² "Cattle Show Opens in New \$200,000 Pavilion," *Audubon County Journal* (Exira, IA), July 22, 1920, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87057934/1920-07-22/ed-1/seq-8/>.

²³ L. S. Hill, "Work Pays America: The Iowa Works Progress Administration (Pamphlet, 1936), <https://n2t.net/ark:/87292/w9280551g>.

Agriculture Building

The Agriculture Building opened in time for the 1904 State Fair. The Homestead (a well-known farm newspaper of the late 1800s and early 1900s), touted it as “one of the finest structures for exhibiting products of the farm that can be found in the Central West.” The building showcased agricultural, horticultural, and dairy exhibits.

In keeping with that original purpose, the Agriculture Building is still home to one of the most beloved Iowa State Fair icons—the butter cow. Bovine butter sculpting at the fair dates to 1911, and additional butter sculptures have been featured alongside the cow in the last 114 years.

While more recent featured additions include famous Iowans like Hollywood legend John Wayne and basketball superstar Caitlin Clark, the 1916 butter sculpture display was a bit simpler. It featured a large arch made of butter blocks, each representing a principle or practice required to produce top-notch dairy products. The arch’s butter keystone was “cleanliness;” other blocks included “healthy cows,” “care on the farm,” “care in the home,” “small-top milk pails,” “prompt shipment,” “protection from flies,” “protection from heat,” “inspection,” and “a milk cooler.”²⁴

Butter sculpture is such a longstanding Iowa State Fair tradition that it’s going on tour! Starting later this month, a butter cow display crafted by Sarah Pratt will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. The display is part of a new exhibit titled *State Fairs: Growing American Craft*, which celebrates artists’ contributions to state fairs throughout the United States with more than 240 artworks dating from the mid-1800s to the present.²⁵

²⁴ “The Iowa State Fair,” *Wallaces’ Farmer*, Sept. 1, 1916, <https://idnc.library.illinois.edu/?a=d&d=WAF19160901.2.13>.

²⁵ “State Fairs: Growing American Craft,” *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/state-fairs>.

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