

WATERFORD WORLD'S FAIR

by Jo Radner

A World's Fair? In North Waterford, Maine?

It didn't begin so grandly. Initiated in 1850 as Tom Greene's Fair — named for its founder, who traded in livestock in the village of North Waterford — its early exhibits were set up on store porches and in the schoolhouse, farmers raced their trotting horses on a straight stretch of the public road, and ox pulling competitions were held on the village's main street. A local carpenter built a merry-go-round, powered first by men, then horses, then steam. Mrs. Isabelle Rolfe, born in North Waterford in 1912, remembers that "we'd go over after school and have a ride before the fair started."

The name became "World's Fair" around 1900, no doubt inspired by the huge popularity of world's fairs in the United States following the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. The naming was a marvel of Maine irony. "Expositions," said President William McKinley at the turn of the century, "are timekeepers of progress." The world's fair movement celebrated industry, science, and technology. The Waterford World's Fair celebrated rural culture, featuring agriculture and farm work, domestic skills and textile fancywork, and (in those days) tests of strength and sideshows of freaks of nature. Mrs. Rolfe remembers "a Mr. Truman of Norway Lake" who would stand out on the porch with his boxing gloves on, challenging "anybody that would come up." "There was also quite a fat lady who sat on a couch. My mother cooked her a ten-quart pail of chicken and biscuits. When I went in to see her, she asked me to go home and get some more food!"

This tiny World's Fair is built on devoted local effort. In 2002 the entire weekend was dedicated to Isabelle Rolfe, who had helped out at the fair for 50 consecutive years. Her handwork has been part of the fair longer than that: at the age of nine she exhibited a pair of baby booties (a neighbor bought them for fifty cents), and even today, with impaired eyesight, she easily fills an exhibit booth with her fine crochet and knitting. For 40 years she has proudly organized the entire exhibition hall: "Everything that has ever come in has been good." Her cooking is also legendary. In 1952 she set up a tent and sold oyster stew; then she moved to a building, and then to the Firemen's Booth, where she served meals for almost 20 years. Her raspberry pies, she says, were "a good calling card."

In 1928 the fair was incorporated as the North Waterford World's Fair and moved to its present area on the hill above the village. Over the years it gained barns, a dance hall, an exhibition hall, and most recently, a pulling ring with a grandstand. The Saturday-night dance has always been popular, and a carnival/midway has long been an attraction. There are no more fat ladies ("Well," Mrs. Rolfe says with a chuckle, "there *are* some, but they're not going to bring them in on a couch!"). But the fair has become a magnet for those who like friendly, small, and knowledgeable audiences — the 4H steer clubs, antique tractor collectors, breeders of pulling horses and oxen.

Since 1975, the Waterford World's Fair has been held on the last weekend in July, pushed from its former late September date by competition from other agricultural fairs. Mrs. Rolfe regrets the change. In earlier years, "the weather was better. Then they had all kinds of vegetables. Now, you've got to get your garden in awfully early to have anything to amount to anything in the last of July." But others point out that this is Western Oxford County's only summertime fair — and a wonderful place to sample the simple, traditional essence of agricultural Maine.

For information about Annually Recurring Community Events, consult our data base at <http://www.westernmaineculture.org/WMCAFolk.html>