

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Canfield Fair History

Canfield Fair Board

O. H. 202

ELDEN R. GROVES

Interviewed by

Carrie A. Stanton

on

April 27, 1983

ELDEN R. GROVES

Elden R. Groves was born in Belmont County, Ohio, on September 18, 1909, the son of Lulu and Ellis Groves. He attended high school in Barnesville, Ohio and received his B.S. degree from Ohio State University in the field of agriculture. He has been the editor of Farm and Dairy magazine for 36 years and was associated with WFMJ for 26 years until his retirement in 1982.

Mr. Groves is a member of the Canfield Fair Board, the Farm Bureau, Rotory, the Grange, the Jersey Association and the Humane Society.

He and his wife, Eileen, reside at 8730 Unity Road in Salem, Ohio. They raise Jersey cattle and German Shephard dogs.

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INTERVIEWEE: ELDEN R. GROVES

INTERVIEWER: Carrie A. Stanton

SUBJECT: Canfield Fair Board; parade; pig iron  
derby; Farm and Dairy Journal, elections

DATE: April 27, 1983

S: This is an interview with Elden Groves for the Youngstown State University Canfield Fair Project by Carrie Stanton at the Canfield Fairgrounds Administration Building on April 27, 1983 at approximately 11:00 a.m.

The first thing I want to ask you about is your own family background, where you were born, your parents and family?

G: Well, I came from Belmont County and from a long line of farming ancestors. And I entered Ohio State and have a degree in agricultural in animal science. And have been a farm editor and reporter all my life. I do operate a farm of my own. And I have been associated with farm organizations all my life.

S: Where is your farm?

G: At the edge of Salem, at the east edge of Salem.

S: In your early years that you went to school, your younger years, you went to school around here?

G: Barnesville High School in Belmont County and then Ohio State University.

S: You were in the service?

G: No, I was not.

S: Do you want to tell me how you became to be associated

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with the Fair and what you do?

G: I was editor of the Farm and Dairy and was asked to fill a vacancy on the Board. I've forgotten who resigned and left the Board. And then I was a candidate for election at the next election. And I was on the Board 25 or 26 years, I don't know exactly. And then I did not run three years ago. And now I attend most of the meetings as a honorary member. But I don't have responsibilities today.

S: When you were on the Fair Board, what were your responsibilities?

G: I started out---in the early years, the evening parade was a big event and was tied in with evening entertainment...and I was the announcer and emcee for that program. And that's gradually changed over the years. And then my main responsibility was the Pig Iron Derby or the horse pulling contest. I managed that for all the years that I was on the Board.

S: That's the one that Bob Hammett has now?

G: Yes, Bob Hammett has it now.

S: Do you remember when that was?

G: Well, starting 25 or 27 or 28 years ago. I didn't look that up. I don't remember exactly. But it has been a big feature of the Canfield Fair. And this is the only fair I know of in Ohio---and incidentally, I've attended all of them except one--that charges admission to the grandstand in the morning. And this is not a large fee, but it's for the horse pulling contest. And on Monday morning, we usually have 2000 to 2300 people in the grandstand to watch that event.

S: You've gone to all the fairs but one. Which one did you miss?

G: I've missed Darke and I hope to do that this year. I have attended, of course, those in eastern Ohio through my reporting work a number of times. And I was figuring up the other day that I've judged cattle at 22 of them over the years.

S: How do you think, since you've been to all of these other fairs, how does Canfield Fair compare?

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- G: Well, you have consider that I'm prejudiced to start with. (Laughter) But, it is the largest fair in Ohio and I think, the best operated. And it's sort of remarkable because we're not as great an agricultural county as many others in Ohio. But there is just little comparison with even the state fairs. We're larger than many state fairs. And it's been a great experience to be a part of the Fair.
- S: So you did the Pig Iron. What else did you do?
- G: Those were my main jobs, public relations and announcing . And as I said, in the latter years the announcing was pretty much taken over by professional people with the shows and the great parade, which was a big thing for the Fair for a century, was given up maybe ten years ago for several reasons. One of the important ones was the crowds on the ground and the possible liability in getting machinery and cattle through the crowds into the parade area. And I've been available then to help out in anything else that was needed.
- S: It's a shame that they had to discontinue that. I remember that.
- G: Yes. It was a big thing, especially youngsters, they enjoyed it so much.
- S: What would be a typical day for you during the Fair? Was there such a thing, a typical day?
- G: That's hard to say. I have been here every day, all day for maybe thirty years at the Canfield Fair. And usually I'm here about soon after the gates open and leave sometime before midnight. I don't know of anything that's particularly typical, except that Canfield Fair in my memory has always had a program and stuck to it religiously, which is one reason for the crowds. It's dependable. If you know an event is to start at 12:00, it won't be 12:20 or 12:30, but at 12:00. And I think this is one of the features that has made this the greatest fair in Ohio. Another, I think, is that the Board members have made it a policy that no one serves as president more than two years. And every Board member knows that he's coming up in the presidency, and he feels more responsibility for that reason. It passes responsibility around and experience and I think that it's a strong feature of the Fair. It's not done in many places.

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S: This is really a special fair. Do you think that's what makes it special, one of the things?

G: That is an important part of it. And another is that we influence to some extent the people who come on the Board. Now it is an elected thing and as you know, the election is by the membership of the Board. But again, comparing it to other fairs, and as I say, I've attended many in the duties of a reporter, everybody on our Board works. And this isn't true in every fair. Sometimes it's an honorary position and you have a strong secretary or president who does most of the work. And a couple times, in my memory, we have elected people who didn't choose to work and weren't too effective and they didn't stay on the Board long. Part of this is the influence of the directors, I think, in urging friends to vote for this one or that one. So we've been somewhat selective, nothing illegal about it, but there's just good sense to get people. And most of our Board members are people who have been successful in their own business. They're accustomed to getting things done. And this is one of the biggest factors, I think, concerning this Fair.

S: This is interesting. So people are nominated perhaps by other Board members?

G: Yes. There is a state regulated system for this in which a petition is taken out. And it requires, I've forgotten the signatures, 35 perhaps, of members of the society. And then the name is printed on the ballot. And then at the annual election in November, the man is voted in or not.

S: Once a year, do you vote?

G: Once a year, secret ballot.

S: To renominate?

G: Yes. We're elected for a three year term. So each three years if the member chooses, his name can be put on the ballot to nominate again. And there's not a big turnover. Twenty years isn't unusual on this Board.

S: So it would be fairly unusual for somebody to be not renominated?

G: Yes, that's pretty much true.

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- S: That's pretty interesting. Can you tell me any news experiences that you had? There must be some.
- G: Well, I haven't done enough preparation for that.
- S: I put you on the spot. (Laughter)
- G: I can't think of anything too unusual. The Canfield Fair involves the community more than is true in most fairs, I believe. Everybody in the community is usually a part of the Canfield Fair. Many organizations take part in it. This is another reason. Then another big factor--we're back again to the size of the Fair--has been the fact that Board members have bought additional land when it was available over the years so that we have, what is it, 364 acres, which is, I think, is now the largest in Ohio. And not all of it is developed right at the moment, but it's given room to expand. Now, fairs like Dayton and Canton, just can't get too big because they're surrounded by city and there is a limit to the amount of people they can handle within a day. So that has been an important thing. And we have in the past six or eight years bought an additional 180 acres, looking to the time, we don't know if Canfield Fair will grow, but at least there will be room for it.
- S: Where would that be, to the east?
- G: That's to the east. We own land now all the way to Route 11. And there's a possibility some time in the future there might be a ramp put off Route 11 to go to the fairground. It would be a great help in handling traffic.
- S: How have you, yourself, seen the Fair grow? How big was it, say, when you...
- G: Oh, it does it gradually. There's been, at least a new building every year and sometimes two or three. The state law, of course, demands a non-profit organization. We are audited carefully and thoroughly. And we're permitted to have some reserve for operation, but it can not be money making organization under state law. Any surplus revenue must be spent on the fairgrounds.
- S: I was wondering about that. Someone said to me, 'What do they do with all the money taken in at the Fair?' And I said, "Well, I'll find out."

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- G: When you see the attendance we have and multiplied by the gate admission, it does seem like a great deal of money. And in fact, there is a great deal of money handled. But the people that work here, may not be paid as much as they do their standard job and yet everybody is paid. And there are so many people involved that this accounts for a great deal of it. For instance, there are about a hundred, youngsters for the most part, parking cars out in the lot. And they put in long days. They depend on this income, many of them, for college. This is true for most of the people who work here. Of course, it does take so many people. And they get free admission, naturally. Anyone interested in knowing where the money goes can get the state audit and get all the details.
- S: Is Mr. Bowman in charge of that, finance?
- G: No, Bob Rose is treasurer. Mr. Bowman has been in charge of the gates.
- S: Did you have anything to do with the Pioneer Village?
- G: Yes, I was here when the first building was moved in. I claim credit for finding the log cabin down in Columbiana County. And yes, I was involved in the building of the whole thing.
- S: Do you know approximately when the first building was brought in?
- G: I believe it was the Whittlesey Law Office. And no, I can not remember the date. Incidentally, it is not Pioneer Village anymore, but Western Reserve Village. You've been through that before. And actually, I resented the trouble that we had to go to. It is more of a western reserve village than it is pioneer. There's one log cabin, but most of the buildings are a little later than that. But it's an important feature of our Fair, I think.
- S: I understand that they're all original too, except was there one that wasn't?
- G: No, each building there was originally used.
- S: I'm thinking of the entrance.
- G: Yes, the entrance was new, but built of old materials.
- S: It's a marvelous place. I enjoy going there. Have you noticed a change in fairgoers and especially



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the kids? Were there any radical years, say the sixties, did they have any problems down there?

G: Oh, yes, we've had some problems. I remember one year when I was president, we had a couple minor riots. It didn't amount to much. But I remember that each year that I was president, it was after midnight when I left the ground and we were concerned about trouble. But we had no serious problems. We have a good police system. And perhaps you've learned from other folks that we have professional policemen, who take their vacations at fair time. That's one of the marvelous things about this Fair. Many of the people who work here are professional people who like the Fair and feel that they are a part of the Fair. So they take their vacation during that week in order to be a part of the Canfield Fair. This is true of many policemen. Some of them have been here for years.

S: I didn't realize that. Interesting too. Have you met any interesting personalities? You've been out here and you work on the entertainment. Somebody mentioned the Lennon Sisters.

G: Yes, I remember the Lennon Sisters quite well. They were really the national celebrities that appeared in the program here. Of course, they were very popular.

S: That's mostly handled by outside...

G: Yes, now it's done by a professional agent. At that time it was, I believe, Mr. W. H. Kilcawley was responsible for securing them. And it was a great move. We got, of course, to meet the girls and felt we got acquainted with them. And I'll always remember one thing that happened at the conclusion of the first performance in which my wife was with me in the announcer's box and Mr. Lennon, the father, came over for something and my wife said to him, "So and so, I've forgotten which girl it was, has a slip showing. Does she know about that?" He said, "Oh, it happens all the time with her. She always buys too long a slip." A little personal memory.

S: You said that this is a community thing. You never have problems with the neighbors complaining out here in Canfield?

G: Not too much. There's been some and we've made a definite attempt to listen to them and satisfy problems. For instance, we have had racing, motor events on the track, which people complained about

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from Canfield, and so a number of years ago we eliminated motor racing. And we attempt to get along with the neighbors. And I think we do a fairly good job.

S: I think it was Charlie Findley who had the races back then, didn't he?

G: Yes. Well, I was referring to fair time. Yes, Charlie Findley had very successful races here. And I don't know if there was too much criticism from the town on that. And certainly it was a good thing for the grounds, because essentially they built a new building once a year for a number of years from receipts from that.

S: Really. I didn't know that.

G: And while the enormous crowds that that descend on us that week does bother Canfield some, still I feel that most Canfield residents feel like that's part of the scene and they feel like they're a part of the Fair also.

S: I know a couple problems around here have been, well, the weather. It's always a problem. Pray for the weather to be good.

G: Yes. The two years I was president were the rainiest years in history and that's my claim to fame. (Laughter) We have less trouble incidentally, than some people in some places because we have pretty good sod over most of the parking grounds. And now if it rains enough, it can get muddy. We've had a few years when we had to have people towed out. But, we use all the manure on the grounds from the stables, out on the grounds which makes a good thick grass and a tough sod and that's been a great help.

S: Do you remember any bad storms?

G: No, I can't recall any that were serious enough to do good damage. There have been storms that have kept down the attendance for the day, considerably, but nothing that was disasterous.

S: No tents blown over?

G: Oh, occasionally a tent goes down and that's serious enough. But, I think we have fewer tents each year as more buildings are developed.

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S: Yes, that helps quite a bit. And then there's the bees.

G: Yes.

S: What do they do for the bees? Do they spray?

G: Yes. Two years ago it was particularly bad and no one knows exactly why, but they were very abundant that year. The Red Cross always had to treat a number of bee stings. Yes, the garbage cans have been sprayed regularly and that doesn't always take care of it.

S: Yes. And that would be a problem. We were talking about how many people volunteer. Do you happen to know how many there must be?

G: No. You'll have to ask Grace Williams about that. There are, of course, many people who are not on the payroll who are here regularly to help. So I haven't any idea what that would be.

S: Do you think the Fair has too much midway anymore?

G: Well, we feel that it's a thing that's demanded by the public. And if it were not patronized, it wouldn't be there. However, this Fair Board has made a definite effort to keep an agricultural flavor to the Fair. And this doesn't always happen at fairs in Ohio, especially those near cities have this problem, but we have definitely tried. We do have huge entries of cattle and horses, particularly, so that it's still an agricultural fair and part of that big midway.

S: Going back to when we were talking about the Pig Iron Derby, I didn't realize that they pay big premiums like they do. Is this normal for a fair? Do all fairs pay?

G: I think we're a little higher than most fairs, but of course, it's a hobby for those people. And if they got first prize everywhere, they still would lose money. It isn't a money making proposition. And there are fewer pulling horses all the time, some young people taking it up as a hobby, but the older people are dropping off. They get up in the seventies and eighties and they can't take it anymore. So there is a smaller group now, although it's still sizable. There's enough to take up the time. As I say, it's a pure hobby. And once in a while we get a team that

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is used commercially for logging, but at this Fair, most of them are professional. They are kept strictly for pulling and for nothing else.

S: Yes, because most people don't...

G: Not many farmers around here use horses anymore.

S: Do the Amish people come in?

G: No, the Amish don't take part in the contest. Yes, the Amish do farm with horses and there are some around in this area.

S: They wouldn't enter in any contest?

G: No. They don't.

S: Probably because it's commercial.

G: Yes.

S: So you think it's really gone down somewhat?

G: Somewhat, and not as much as I expected that it would though since there are some young people doing it. And it's popular with the crowds. I think everybody has an instinctive love of a horse. Maybe it goes back to the time when the horse was really the first vehicle for increasing man's muscle. It was the first power that he controlled. And so the horse helped settle the west and it was our transportation and work animal and everybody just instinctively likes a good horse. And so that the horse shows, where they are on exhibit, are popular as well as the pulling contests.

S: Didn't they build a couple more draft horse barns?

G: Yes, we have a large draft horse barn, overfilled, and there's usually some overflow in with some in the race barn.

S: Don't some of those horses participate in the Pig Iron Derby?

G: Not too many. Usually there's a team or so, but no, if they are here for exhibition not many of them show.

S: Not many of them are working.

G: Most of the pullers don't stay overnight. They come for the day's contest and then go away again.

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S: Where do they come from, all over?

G: Mostly from northwest Pennsylvania and northern Ohio. Well, I say, northern Ohio, but we always have contests from Zanesville and Cambridge area and Tuscarawas County. But they come from, I'd say, seventy, eighty miles each direction.

S: We were talking about Grace Williams and her role out here. She certainly has added a lot to the Fair, hasn't she?

G: She's been an excellent secretary. She thinks of the little details that most of us forget. And of course, she's been here enough years that she knows what's important and keeps record of such things, but yes, she's been a very valuable fair secretary.

S: None of the Board gets paid, do you?

G: No. We get some mileage. As I remember it amounts to \$70 to \$80 a year depending on the distance we live from the Fair. But no, there is no pay other than that amount for mileage.

G: Well, is there anything that I might have missed that you might like to add?

S: I don't think so. I think the Fair is important today because it's the only chance that many city kids have to see animals. Of course, they still eat meat and so they should be interested in hogs and cattle and so on. And you mentioned a change, I think that change hasn't been as great as the change in agriculture, because today about 3-6/10 percent of the people, population, farm and feed all the rest of the people. And this is a tremendous change in the last fifty years. It's just almost unbelievable. As a result of this we have more and more people removed, further generations from the farm. So I think it's a valuable part of the county fair that they get at least a tiny picture of agriculture today.

S: What do you think is going to happen to this country if the agriculture keeps changing like this?

G: Well, of course, the reason it's changed is because of improved production and efficiency. Many people have an idea that the small farmers have been squeezed off the farm. And that's an entirely wrong view point of the thing. The truth is that our research at our

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colleges and experiment farms has improved farming so much that today a man can farm four hundred acres of corn about as easily as his grandfather did forty. This means that fewer farmers are needed. And this is the reason for the decline rather than anybody being pushed out of the business. It's sort of a natural evolution of improved efficiency.

S: How do you think that the economic conditions around here have affected farmers? Are they losing farms?

G: This year there's been a great deal more publicity about foreclosure than the actual foreclosure. This was a bad year, and especially for the young man who had a good deal of money borrowed and often on a sliding interest scale. So it's been a real hard year and yet I don't know of a foreclosure in this county as yet. And probably they were able to survive it. The strange thing is that the problem is too much food. There's too much corn and wheat and dairy products. Warehouses are bulking. We hear so much about world hunger and yet our immediate problem is that there's too much, because a little bit of surplus depresses the price a great deal.

S: I didn't realize that. Well, if there's nothing else you'd like to add, I'd like to thank you very much.

G: Thank you. I can't think of anything else.

S: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW