

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Canfield Fair Project

Secretary of Fair Board

O. H. 221

Grace E. Williams

Interviewed

by

Carrie A. Stanton

on

May 18, 1983

GRACE E. WILLIAMS

Grace E. Williams was born in Youngstown, Ohio on November 2, 1906, the daughter of Cora and Robert Williams. Miss Williams is single and presently lives in Brownlee Woods at 1934 Everett Avenue.

Miss Williams is the secretary of the Canfield Fair Board and has been in this position since 1925 when she was employed by the late Attorney E. R. Zieger who was, at the time of her early employment, the Fair Secretary.

She has received many awards among which are: 1963 Award of Achievement--Fair Industry IAFE; 1963 Ohio's Outstanding Lady Secretary; 1978 Carriage Museum, Western Reserve Village dedicated to her; 1978 Grace Williams Day at the Fair including awards by Mahoning County Commissioners and by Phil Richley and Francis McLaughlin, mayor and Ohio State House of Representative of Youngstown and Canfield, respectively; 1980 Fair Award for 25 years of meritorious service; and 1982 Canfield Business Woman of the Year.

Grace is a member of the United Church of Christ in Brownlee Woods, co-founder of Pine-Lee Garden Club; charter member and only life member, a charter member of GANESA II, and a member of the Canfield Business Women's Club. When she isn't busy with the fair, she enjoys reading and flower arranging.

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The Canfield Fair Project

INTERVIEWEE: GRACE E. WILLIAMS

INTERVIEWER: Carrie A. Stanton

SUBJECT: Grace Williams' role as secretary of the
Canfield Fair Board, History of the fair

DATE: May 18, 1983

S: This is an interview with Grace Williams for the Youngstown State University Canfield Fair Project by Carrie Stanton at the Administration Building on the fairgrounds on May 18, 1983 at 9:30 a.m.

Would you tell me about when you first became associated with the fair?

W: My adult life started with the fair. I was just out of high school when I went to work for Attorney E. R. Zieger. At that time he was secretary of the fair and part of my job was to do fair work. Little did I know then what I was in for. I remember a little bit of my first fair.

S: Good!

W: It was only a three day fair: Friday, Saturday, and Monday. Entry day was on Thursday. Much later August tenth was set for closing date in most departments, which gives directors more time for preparing for their exhibits. But in the early days entries were made and brought in the day before the fair started.

I was put to work making poultry entries and knew little about poultry. There were probably eighty classes and no entry sheets had been made up. So, for each different class I had to make out sheets listing: hen, pullet, cock, cockerel, and breeding pens; then list the entries. I don't remember what time entries closed, but it was a long day for me.

I remember the office. It was space in an old, old

building, part of the remains of the old grandstands, I believe. It was some distance from our one midway, Canfield Drive, even farther from the restrooms.

At my first fairs, historical pageants were the grandstand shows. Out of town agencies were in charge, with local people, all ages, participating. They were fun for the "stars," as well as the spectators who knew many of the actors.

The Depression years were hard on everyone, including the fair. During the winter of 1932 all premiums were cut, some as much as 25%. Even so, before the close of the fair, we owed \$6,000 in premiums and had only \$2,000 on hand to pay them. Exhibitors were paid only 30% of their premiums, the first and only time that has happened. After several better years, they were eventually paid in full.

Following the depression years attendance picked up. Then came the "war years" and rationing of gas and food, affecting everyone and the fair. At one time the Ohio Department of Agriculture considered closing all fairs for a year. Our board indicated they would go along even though they weren't in favor of it. The idea was given up and the fair went on.

Patriotism was the theme during World War II. We bought flags, 150 of them, and we bought bonds.

S: Oh, the fair bought . . .

W: We bought bonds with money from any fair profit for the year. It was during this period that all service people in uniform were admitted free. This custom has continued ever since.

S: Oh, I didn't know that. Even now?

W: Yes.

S: Was there ever a year when there wasn't a fair?

W: No, at least not that I know of.

S: Always?

W: Yes.

S: It's gone on and gone on?

W: Of course, I can't vouch for way back when.

Those first years, in addition to being a legal secretary, I was doing more and more fair work. I worked on entries along with several others, but once the fair started I worked alone. I figured all the premiums, without the use of an adding machine and wrote checks and did all the so-called bookkeeping. Some time later, the director in charge of concessions resigned and so I got into that. At first I didn't like that but as time went on and I got to know the concessionaires, I really enjoyed it. I worked on concessions up until I became secretary.

S: The job with Zieger, was that a full time job?

W: He was an attorney. That was his profession.

S: The fair was a side line?

W: Yes. His office was in Youngstown and whatever fair business went on was handled from there.

S: So you really worked for him and then . . .

W: Yes, as a legal secretary. The fair was a secondary job for both of us.

S: As the years went by did you eventually get into the fair more and more?

W: Yes, I've mentioned some of that. By the time Mr. Zieger resigned as secretary of the fair, I was familiar with all facets, having worked in and with most departments and was elected as secretary.

At the same time he gave up the fair, he retired from the practice of law and it was decided by the board that the fair office should be in Canfield. The site chosen was 12 West Main Street in the center of Canfield. The Mahoning County Extension Service occupied the first floor of a beautiful old house. My office was on the second floor along with an office of a construction company. As I've said, the office during my first couple years was horrible! Eventually they decided to tear it down.

S: That was on the fairgrounds?

W: Yes. With no place to go, a little corner at the grandstand was selected as a fair-time office. The area under the grandstand was used only as the parimutuel office for betting and paying off winners during the races . . . when it became noisy and hectic.

Mr. Zieger realized we had to have a fair office and within two years had it--a yellow block tile with two rooms, complete with our own restroom and a fireplace which was used on cool days and nights. Our present office is an addition to that building. It wasn't put on until several years after the move to Canfield. At that time there wasn't much activity on the fairgrounds and the board thought it best to stay at 12 West Main Street.

The addition was added in 1962, while Ed Craig was president. I thought it was the greatest and still do, although we are feeling the need of more storage space.

My office was furnished as well as the downstairs lounge, but in the director's room there were only wood folding chairs and a small table--no screens on the windows and on warm nights when the board met, the bugs were bad!

Before I moved to the grounds permanently, the director's room was furnished. We had heat, storm windows and screen. Eventually air conditioning was added and carpeting. We are now most comfortable.

S: How many directors were there?

W: Twelve, I believe. The number has increased from time to time until we now have seventeen.

The first year I was secretary, eighty acres of the adjoining Wetmore farm to the south was purchased at \$600 an acre. Interest on the mortgage was 3%, quite a difference from today's rates. Midways had been added and with this additional land more have been.

S: Do you think it's grown as much as it will?

W: Yes and no. We have plenty of land, but with the move south, we need more toilet facilities, larger buildings for commercial displays, and some means of transporting people from the parking areas to the fair "proper." One year on a Sunday, our attendance record was 158,000 plus. That is too many for comfort. It's scary and I remember well the problems created at the rest rooms.

S: How many acres have been added?

W: The most recent a few years ago was 80 and then another 50. We now have a total of 353 acres. It's the biggest county fair in the state, both in acreage and attendance. In fact, we're larger than some state fairs.

S: I understand that Ohio was one of the first states to have regulations of fairs. The fairs are actually regulated by the state. Is that why some of the fairs are so big in Ohio?

W: That's why the state has the reputation of having the cleanest fairs, particularly as to shows. Girlie shows and beer are not permitted.

S: Are they real strict? Do they come around and check?

W: Oh yes, we have state inspectors on the grounds all the time. The State Department of Agriculture has had financial problems in every department and they have had to cut down on the number of inspectors but because of our size, they continue to send the same number as in the past.

S: What kind of things do they inspect?

W: The state inspectors check rides, shows, games, concessions . . . The board checks food stands.

S: What do you remember about some of the old-timers? Mr. Kilcawley and Mr. Bishop? No one seems to remember them to much.

W: Both were prominent business men--outstanding men in the community, as well as fair directors. George Bishop was a long time member of the board, served several years as president, later was re-elected president. After the second two year term he recommended that future presidents serve only two years. This has been followed ever since.

Mr. Bishop was director in charge of grounds and buildings for many years. It was his suggestion that all our buildings be white with green roofs.

Mr. Kilcawley had charge of the gates and his records were kept so that we knew how many cars a minute came through the gates . . . very comprehensive records. He later became treasurer and when a former custard stand on the grounds became available, it became the treasurer's office. He had it landscaped at his expense.

My first years as secretary there was little or no landscaping. After I started working on concessions, one year I made a deal for free landscaping around the office in exchange for free landscaping at the entrance to the commercial building and space inside the building.

Mr. Kilcawley looked at the work being done, then went

to the man doing the work and arranged to have the treasurer's office landscaped, saying he would pay for it. The "planter" not knowing Mr. Kilcawley, or his wealth, and not being impressed with his appearance, came to me to be assured he would get paid!

Mr. Kilcawley was responsible for having the big stone moved and getting us started on "name grandstand attractions." Has anyone mentioned that?

S: No.

W: Mr. Kilcawley liked Lawrence Welk and his band, and the Lennon Sisters were great favorites. He wanted to bring them to the fair, he made all arrangements and underwrote the \$5,000 to be paid for their one day engagement. It was an enormous amount in those days. They came, four darling girls and their father, and it went over so big we brought them back again the next year.

S: Homer Schaeffer talked about Bob Hope. Was he here just once?

W: No, he was here two years. I remember the first year when we got the word he was coming, the Vindicator used it as headlines in one of their editions.

S: What's this I hear about you and the rooster crowing contest?

W: For years we have attended fair meetings and visited other fairs, always on the look-out for ideas for Canfield. One year at a workshop, the Indiana State Fair told about a rooster crowing contest they held. The idea appealed to me so I got all the information from them and later presented it to Howard Moore who was the director in charge of the poultry department. He liked the idea and details were added to our premium list. We were following the rules of the Indiana State Fair but I thought we should have our own rooster in the copy. I went to Ralph Fowler, Mahoning dispatch, and he showed me pictures of roosters and it didn't take long for me to find one I wanted--the "proud one in full crow" with "something to crow about".

At first it was used only for the contest, then it was added to the cover of our premium list on our stationery. It caught on and now it is used every way possible in connection with the fair.

In 1968 we were in Chicago at an IAFE convention. A trade show was part of the convention and one morning

director Chuck Blunt said, "I want to show you something." He led me to a huge eight foot rooster and said, "We have to have it." I was delighted and agreed, as did other directors attending the convention. It is now a part of the fair. Then it disappeared. Did Homer Schaeffer tell you about that?

S: Oh, yes! When did you notice it was gone?

W: Possibly a day or two. It disappeared right after the fair and we were all still very busy.

S: How long?

W: Over two months. Early in December it was discovered chained to the flag pole at Canfield High School. It was brought by Homer Miller to the grounds, set up in front of the office, and was the first thing I was when I arrived. My first and best Christmas gift!

I just mentioned Homer Schaeffer. He is a "real innovator," as far as the fair is concerned. I'm sure he told you about all the things he has started. One of the first and best was getting the ethnic groups in the area interested in being a part of the fair. Along with Judge Woodside and others, the various groups displayed artifacts, handwork, and products representative of their countries. These were in a large tent. Each group had a float and on Friday night there was a parade in front of the grandstand, along with each group performing. It was all colorful--beautiful--and we had wonderful publicity.

That led to my being invited to Chicago to tell about it at the Chicago convention of the International Fairs and Expositions. We had been a member of the IAFE for a number of years but no one had ever attended the convention. I went alone. Fortunately, a good friend, executive secretary of the Ohio Fair Association as well as secretary of the Montgomery County Fair at Dayton, had gone to the convention many years and took me under her wings. She introduced me to the right people, and took me to meeting I should attend.

At that time I was on the executive committee of our State Fair Association--OFMA--and so at the convention, I attended sessions of the Federation of State Fairs. After a couple of years, I was elected to their board of two years and at the same time was elected to the executive board of IAFE.

By that time Elbert and Betsy Agnew had gone to the IAFE convention and then other directors became interested and went. The Canfield Fair was becoming known

at the convention and throughout the fair world.

S: When you say International . . .

W: It is the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, with members from all over the United States, Canada, and a few from England.

S: Do you get a lot of ideas from exhibits?

W: Yes, from sharing ideas with other fair people and the Trade Show which I have mentioned, where we get ideas for advertising, fair supplies, et cetera. One year we saw an interesting show with talking birds, and a hen that played tic-tac-toe. We booked it and have had it at Canfield for several years.

S: Old McDonald's farm, where did you get that idea?

W: From another fair. Many now have them as well as petting zoos. We have just farm animals.

S: This is a particularly nice one.

W: Yes, and the children love it.

S: No one seems to know exactly when the fair started using the grounds after the fair is over.

W: For many years there were no off-season events. I think about 1945, a contract was entered into with Charles Findlay of Pittsburgh to hold midget auto races during the following summer months. They proved to be a good money maker for the fair and auto races of various kinds continued for a number of years. Eventually, auto racing became so popular that too many tracks opened and business at Canfield fell off. With the death of Charles Findlay and several other owners, racing was finally discontinued.

Then came the auto auctions, the first in 1966. Owners have changed, but the auctions have continued ever since.

Gradually we started having more and more summer events. Only a couple of our buildings are heated so only summer events are booked. The unheated buildings are rented for storage of boats, trailers, and cars.

S: Is the hay and grain building heated?

W: No, only the administration building, commercial, Colonial Inn, arts and crafts, and maintenance.

S: Not the hay and grain?

W: No, it is used for storage.

S: I thought they used that for Christmas Shows?

W: The Arts and Crafts Building is used for the Christmas in the Home Show, sponsored by the County Extension Service. It is held the last day of October. During the winter months we have little call for use of the Arts and Crafts Building and so use it for storage. During the summer months we now have the grounds and buildings used for many events.

S: Like what?

W: All kinds of shows: horse, pony, rabbit, poultry; antique sales and shows.

S: The racing barns?

W: They are used all year for owners training horses for harness races.

S: Whatever happened to the old red barn?

W: You remember them?

S: Yes.

W: They were eventually torn down after being an eye-sore for too many years. George Bishop for many years pointed them out when we had our annual hay rides--and more promises they would be gone the next year, and eventually they were.

S: Was there a fire?

W: A couple summers the Ringling Brothers brought the circus to our grandstand--a great place for it. Following the second year, one of our barns burned to the grounds with, I believe, three horses lost. It was a real tragedy.

S: You had insurance that would cover that? On the horses?

W: The barn was covered but owners must carry their own insurance on horses.

S: Has there ever been a fire during the fair?

W: No, we are careful and keep our fingers crossed. We've had some accidents with rides and so forth, but nothing really major.

S: No really bad weather besides rain?

W: We've always had our share of rain and wind, but the year it rained five days and nights was the worst.

S: That wasn't too long ago, was it?

W: No, it wasn't. The downpours took their toll. The parking lots were a sea of mud and when the fair was over and concessionaires had moved out, it really looked like a disaster area. It took months of work on the grounds to bring them back, but Homer Miller and his crew did and by the time for the next fair we were hoping for the best.

S: Well, people still come back, but maybe they don't come back the second time.

W: If they get stuck in the mud, they aren't apt to. We do have people who come regardless of the weather. Last year we thought we were going to have another rainy fair. The first day we had two hard rains, one in the morning and again at night. The next day was sunny and windy, drying things up and the good weather continued for the remaining days.

S: What about exhibits?

W: We've had all kinds of exhibits and displays. The Garden Forum sponsored Garden Clubs gardens and decorated doors. We had a beautiful butterfly and moth collection. One year we displayed the winning wardrobe of Mary Jane Diehl, a local girl who was the national winner of the Singer sewing machine contest. One of her prizes was a trip to Paris, and she returned just a matter of a couple days before the fair to help set up the display. The whole thing gave us a lot of good publicity.

S: I remember that.

What about the windows in the office?

W: Concession's business is transacted through these windows: locations, permits, tickets, payments for space, along with answering questions.

S: How much do they charge for space? Does it depend on location?

W: It depends on whether the concession is food, and most are \$20 a foot frontage plus electricity. Games are \$35.

Building space is \$35 a front foot.

S: Do the concessionaires pay a percent?

W: Only rides and shows.

S: It's not set ahead?

W: They know what the percentage will be.

S: But they don't have a total?

W: They can't until they know their total take.

S: When did the fair start? I remember it didn't open until twelve o'clock on Sundays.

W: Quite a few years ago, the churches didn't approve of the time the Sunday fair started so the gates didn't open until 12:30, and the grandstand Sunday afternoon program was the county high school's band concert.

That reminds me of the great traffic tie-up on all the roads leading to the fairgrounds. One year we had rain the first couple of fair days. Sunday was beautiful and because of the popular band concert following church everyone wanted to come to the fair and they all must have started out about the same time. At that time we charged for parking and that always slowed up traffic but never like that Sunday. Eventually everything stopped. Do you remember that?

S: I think so.

W: Following that mess, the board decided on free parking.

S: That helped quite a bit?

W: Yes, considerably.

S: Is there a special gate for exhibitors?

W: Yes.

S: Do they just go in with their cars?

W: Certain gates are specified for exhibitors and concessionaires and they are given a gate sticker for their particular gate.

S: Is the rabbit-poultry barn a new one?

W: No. Poultry exhibits have been at various locations on the grounds, but at the present one for some time.

- S: I notice there aren't many church tents anymore.
- W: That's right. I think because the churches have problems getting workers. For a number of years my church was at the fair and did very well. But having to move all the equipment to the grounds then back to the church along with all the work during the fair, got to be too much. As is always true with churches, the real work falls on only a few people. The Austintown Church has been with us many years at various locations. For some time they have used our Colonial Inn, and having a building is much easier than being under a tent.
- S: How many people do you employ during the fair?
- W: Last year Burgoyne made out almost 800 W-Forms. That included two maintenance and three office full-time employees. Otherwise they were all extra workers.
- S: A lot of college . . .
- W: Yes, a lot of college and high school boys work on the maintenance crew during summer months. At fair time they work at parking and ushering.
- S: Mr. Bowman said those who work the gates are all bankers and take their vacations at fair time.
- W: Yes, but not only workers take their vacations around the fair but many out of town visitors plan their vacations around the fair dates. The other day we had a call from a man about trailer space. He told us he had missed attending two out of the last 25 years. This love of the fair is something!
- S: Is the trailer space relatively new? Do you charge extra for people to go there?
- W: Possibly ten years ago or longer in our advertising, we invited people to bring their trailers and spend their vacations at the fair. The idea caught on and now we sometimes wonder why we did it.
- S: They stay the whole five days?
- W: Many do.
- S: Do you charge by the day? And have electric?
- W: We charge by the day, by the size of the trailer, and for electric. We can't provide electric for all.
- S: When do you feel as though the fair is all ready?

W: I never feel that it is all ready. But like Christmas, it comes--whatever.

S: Do you start right after the fair getting ready for the next one?

W: Sometimes sooner! During the fair, the board meets every day at noon and there have been times that the next fair would be brought up. I'm thinking of changes we might want to make. Then following the fair, after a week or so, we met again reviewing changes, priorities, and so forth. During the years we didn't open the fair until Sundays, the board, riding on the Kilcawley wagon, went around the midways checking what we liked and didn't like. That, of course, can no longer be done. Are you familiar with "the wagon"?

S: I think I've seen pictures of it.

W: Mr. Kilcawley presented it to the fair. At first it was used quite a bit, but after our crowds grew, it became too difficult to move around. However, we still have it.

S: Is that why you discontinued the parades?

W: Parades never went through the grounds. They went around the track at the grandstand.

S: Has the fair changed quite a bit?

W: Yes, from the acreage and attendance, the exhibits and displays, and entertainment.

I don't know how much I've told you of what you want to know. I hope something.

Howard Aley wrote our history and in proof reading it--reading about the accomplishments of our directors--I asked him, "Just what have I done for the fair?" He replied, "You were the cog." I like to think that I played a part in it.

I never married. When I could have I wouldn't and when I would I couldn't!

S: Is there anything you would like to add?

W: The fair has been my life. It's been great and I've enjoyed it. I've had many nice experiences--met wonderful people and made many good friends and been most fortunate in working with many good boards.

WILLIAMS

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S: Thank you.

W: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW