

# They Traveled To Alton Fair In Steamboat, Prairie Schooner, Surrey

Alton, July 17—Glad in home-spun, traveling by prairie schooner, surrey, steamboat and that newest mode of transportation—the railroad—thousands of pioneers headed for Alton in the late fall of 1856 to attend the Illinois state fair.

It was the fourth year of the exposition's existence, when its future was insecure, its treasury slim.

The 100th anniversary of the founding of the fair will be observed at the exposition's permanent home in Springfield from Aug. 8-17 this year. The approaching centennial recalls the early years of the fair when it roamed gypsy-like throughout the state, visiting all the larger cities over a 10 year period before settling permanently in the capital city.

The third state fair was held in Chicago. Even as it was having a successful run in that city a move began to take the next fair to southern Illinois. Alton, Jonesboro and Salem bid for it. Citizens of Alton subscribed \$5000 to help outfit the fairgrounds and the

agricultural society gave the "Bluff City" the nod for the fair of 1856. Sept. 30, Oct. 1, 2 and 3 were the dates chosen.

A tract between Alton and North Alton was selected as the site. Trees and underbrush grew there in abundance. Ezra Miller, a builder and contractor, received the task of clearing the area and supervising construction of crude buildings to house the exhibits.

Roads leading to the grounds were graded; the city council ordered strict enforcement of an ordinance prohibiting hogs from "roaming at large in the business portion of the city"; the Alton Gas Co. installed gas pipelines to various points in the city so that street lights could be installed; downtown buildings were colorfully decorated.

Following the custom of the times, the first day of the fair was devoted to classifying the exhibits and assigning them to their proper place.

A steamboat accident occurred on the second day. The Alton &



Birdseye view of the Alton fair in 1856.

St. Louis packet, "Winchester," loaded with passengers, struck a reef about six miles above St. Louis and according to a newspaper account "immediately sank to the bottom."

Another boat, the "Reindeer," attempted to come alongside to take off the passengers but it went hard aground. Apparently there were no lives lost because a search of subsequent issues of the newspapers revealed no further mention of the accident.

A record breaking number of livestock was entered in the competition. But there were few breeders of premium horses and cattle from the Alton area. The list of awards shows only a few blue ribbons going to residents of this section. In this select group was S. A. Buckmaster, of Alton, who exhibited the best gelding or mare in the light harness horse class. In the swine competition, George Barry was the only winning Alton exhibitor. He took first prize for the best breeding sow, 2 years old.

But in the poultry department it was another story. Every award but one went to Madison county citizens. Among them were G. D. Wilson, of Ridgely; Charles W. Dimmock, J. Junett, Miss J. Head, Miss Emiline Head, all of Alton, and J. T. DeBaum, of Godfrey.

Awards were made at the 1856 fair for the best plows, harrows, corn planters, harvesters, mowers, threshing machines, hay presses, corn shellers, and cultivators.

And the entry list also contained such things as clothes washing machines, spinning wheels, churns, steam engines; cistern pumps, parlor stoves, cooking stoves, dental instruments, buggies, pianos, saddles, needlework, brooms, books, gunpowder—in fact, almost everything that the ingenuity of the pioneers could produce.

Attendance was good throughout the four day run of the fair and it was pronounced a success.

After leaving Alton, the exposition continued to roam the state. But by 1894 the management could foresee a fatal decline if the fair were not situated permanently in one city where the facilities could be expanded to accommodate the evergrowing number of exhibits and visitors. Several neighboring states already had settled their fairs in a permanent location and Illinois officials feared the attractions to exhibitors and visitors in

those states would be so much greater that the Illinois fair might not survive.

In January, 1894, the state board of agriculture met in Springfield to make its decision on where the fair would be permanently situated. Six cities were in the running—Springfield, Decatur, Peoria, Bloomington, Chicago and Aurora.

It required eight ballots before one city emerged with a majority of the 21 votes cast. Springfield was the victor with 11 votes.