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Is Agriculture Losing Its Hold Upon the Big Exhibitions?

In conversation recently with a gentleman closely identified with the agricultural interests of this province he stated in effect that agriculture was gradually losing its hold or influence upon the leading Canadian exhibitions, or in other words, so much time and attention are being given to special attractions and similar features of the show that agriculture and its interests instead of forming the leading departments of the fair are gradually being forced aside by these other branches of far less educational value and interest to the public generally.

To make a statement of this nature in face of the fact that the exhibits of live stock and the bulk of farm products shown at the 1899 exhibitions have been larger and better than for several years back, is seemingly to state something that is not founded on fact. But while the gentleman referred to fully recognizes that the exhibits of agricultural products at our fall fairs are as large if not larger than ever before, he takes the ground that the growing prominence given to the attractions before the grand stand and to the ubiquitous side-show tends to detract from the agricultural features of the show and so make the whole exhibition more of a place of amusement than, as it should be, an event of the greatest educational value to the country.

While many may not concur with the above view, yet it must be admitted that the special attraction feature is year by year gaining a greater hold upon and becoming a more important factor on the programmes of our leading exhibitions. Whether this tends to lessen the influence of or to supplant the place of agriculture at the fall fair may be open to question. It does seem to be, however, that the greater prominence given of late years to the special attraction and the side-show, naturally lessens the importance of the agricultural exhibits, both of live stock and farm products as a feature of the fair and tends to give the amusement or entertainment feature of the exhibition a more important place than is given to the more valuable educational side of it.

The time was, and it is not many years ago either, when

the special attraction formed only a mere incidental feature of the fair. In fact, we well remember the time, and it is not a generation ago, when all that was to be seen before the grand stand at any exhibition was the old, enjoyable horse race, the parade of the show animals, and other like events. But how all this has changed! Instead of being the leading event, the horse trot or the prize exhibit is a mere incidental, and at most leading shows has had to give way nearly altogether to the trapeze artist, the skirt dancer, the high diver, or the clown. Besides, the scenery necessary for the elaborate fireworks display at the evening performance, and which remains standing during the day, so obstructs the view of the track that a horse race cannot be watched all the way around the ring, and a person on the grand stand can only see the beginning and the end of the race.

We may well ask what has been the cause of these changed conditions? Is the agriculturist to blame in not keeping up his end of the concern, and in not making exhibits sufficiently attractive, or is the management of the exhibition responsible in catering to the lighter side of human nature rather than to that which makes for education and progress? Probably if we submitted this question to the board of directors of a fair we would get the reply that special attractions are a necessity at a big show in order to make the finances come out on the right side, and that the exhibition association could not afford to pay the amount of money for prizes it is now doing if the increased revenue which the special attraction brings were not forthcoming. While there may be some ground for this contention, yet we are somewhat inclined to the view that the cost of these special features would probably equal the amount of extra revenue they bring into the treasury over and above what would be received if they were not there.

But what is a special attraction anyhow? Is it not something that will draw or specially attract people? If so, then why could not some features of the agricultural exhibit be given more prominence and made to take the place of many of the special attractions? We are convinced that there are many features connected with agriculture and its interests which if brought to the front and advertised as such would constitute as good a drawing card as many of the so-called special attractions to be seen at any of our big fall fairs. We have a striking instance of this in the butter-making competition which took place at the Toronto Industrial Fair a few weeks ago. Though located under the grand stand and with no very special accommodation for visitors it was, from the time the contest opened till it closed, closely watched by a large crowd of on-lookers. And what is more, a large number of these were people living in the city who came specially to see how the butter they consume every day is made. There are other features of the farm and of agriculture generally that in like manner could be put forward as drawing cards for the fall fair if properly arranged and advertised.

But we have enlarged more on this topic than we intended. This whole question opens up such a wide field for profitable discussion that it is hard to confine ourselves to reasonable limits in touching upon it. We would be pleased, however, to hear from any of our readers interested in this question. The position or influence of agriculture at our fall fairs seems to be at stake and its champions should come forward in its defence.