

COUNTY FAIR

My parents were the owners of a mom-and-pop appliance business that was chronically on the verge of insolvency and that never succeeded beyond providing a hand-to-mouth existence for our family. I understood this as a child because my parents routinely shared their fears with my older sisters and me while we were growing up.

Mother and dad ran their business out of a dilapidated storefront that featured seriously fly-specked display windows and cheap asphalt siding patterned to look like fake brown bricks. The store was located directly across the street from the town's Sears and Roebuck, and it seems remarkable now that my parents sold any appliances at all.

Looking for a way to gain commercial visibility, for a few years in the 1950s they rented a booth at the local county fair. Their booth was in the exposition building, the place where you would find insurance agents, aluminum siding salesmen, Vitamix blenders, miracle Ginsu knives, and, for a time, my parents' appliances. The booth was bare-bones—maybe a couple of standup signs and a few banners supplied by the appliance manufacturer, along with four or five refrigerators and freezers.

The fair was held in August. This was summer vacation time for my sisters and me, and sometimes we got to stay home. Other times our parents would drag us to the fair for the day. After spending perhaps ten incredibly boring minutes standing around our booth, we kids would wander off to explore the remainder of the modest-sized fairgrounds.

My favorite section was the midway where people spent their money on games that appeared easy but that were generally rigged to make them nearly impossible to win. This, despite the fact that from time to time I would see swaggering young men dressed in Levis and tight-fitting t-shirts with cigarettes dangling from their lips and

with young women hanging on their arms carrying enormous stuffed animals. These prizes the men apparently had won at a booth where for 25 cents you had a couple of chances to throw baseballs to knock down a trio of whitewashed milk bottles that were evidently filled with concrete.

One year my sister won a couple of live baby ducklings at one of the booths by tossing dimes that landed and stayed on plates perched on pedestals behind a rope barrier. She said that her secret to getting the dimes to stay on the plates was by wetting them in her mouth before tossing them onto the plates. But what was she thinking? We lived in a house on a tiny lot in an urban neighborhood. Now we would have live ducks running around our backyard. In any event the ducks didn't last long. One died within a day or two. The other lingered for maybe a week before succumbing, despite my mother's best efforts to save it by administering it an enema with an eyedropper as we looked on. By that point we were not heartbroken.

Matters took a different turn on the far side of the midway. There, for a dollar, men (and even teenage boys, as I was to discover a few years later) could crowd into a tent attached to a semi trailer one side of which lowered to form a stage, revealing young women who stripped down to pasties—and nothing else—in front of the leering men, some of whom would encourage the women by tossing additional dollars onto the stage.

Then there was the men's public restroom, an unadorned concrete block building situated on one side of the fairgrounds property. Inside, along one wall was a row of toilets sitting side by side—no doors, no partitions. Another wall featured a rusted sheet metal trough lined with men standing side by side. The three or four sinks in the restroom looked not to have been cleaned since sometime before the fair's opening day. As a modest and shy preadolescent boy, one look inside and I backed out to return to the restrooms in the exposition building where I had better hope for more privacy if not for better sanitation.

Meanwhile, my parents were trying to sell appliances. One year, perhaps to make a few dollars as well as to attract passersby to the booth, my mother sold necklaces made of beads infused with cheap perfume. Even I could see that these necklaces were beyond pathetic. Another year my parents announced that they were holding a drawing to award a free chest freezer to a lucky entrant whose name would be drawn on the final day of the fair. I'm not sure that this promotion resulted in any appliance sales, but it did increase foot traffic, as people filled out homemade entry forms and stuffed them into a crepe paper covered box with a slot cut in its top that my mother had improvised.

As the final day of the fair approached, though, my parents began to realize what hadn't occurred to them when they had hatched this promotion: They simply couldn't afford to give away a freezer. The cost to us would be the equivalent of a week's income for our family. When anyone asked when the drawing would take place, my father took to saying that the winner would be announced at the grandstand show on the final night of the fair. Then that evening, as the show was starting and the crowds in the exposition building were thinning out, my parents simply packed up the booth, loaded the appliances on their truck, and quietly slipped away.

No one in the family ever mentioned the drawing again.