



The Life and Times of the Great Danbury State Fair

By Gladys Stetson Leahy, John H. Stetson



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Western Connecticut consists of a rich mixture of culture, history, sport, ingenuity and agriculture and the Danbury Fair drank deeply from its roots. While it started as a place for farmers and horsemen to share their respective arts, it grew to become so much more.

The unique influence of John W. Leahy, the last owner and general manager of the Fair, saw the addition of extraordinary displays, stunning performances, musicals, thrill shows, rides and races, while still remaining true to its agricultural heritage.

Leahy's veneration for P.T. Barnum and his desire to keep up with the changing times led him to enthusiastically try new things, some successfully and others not quite so.

You will be captivated by his story and that of the Fair, shared here in both words and pictures by those who knew him best.



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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

A charming chronicle of an annual fair in Danbury, Connecticut, begun by the late Gladys Stetson Leahy and recently finished by her grandson.

In 1956, John Leahy, the owner and general manager of the Great Danbury State Fair, convinced his wife to write its history. The first few chapters of the result are more about the Leahys domestic life than the fair itself, but the author's gift for amusing anecdotes and telling details makes it eminently readable. Readers will be won over by the second page when she recounts her reaction to her husband's sudden insistence that she write the book: This wasn't so bad. What if he had decided I ought to learn to play the clavichord? I have a friend whose husband, all unsolicited, brought home an Irish harp for her birthday. She begins with the history of agricultural fairs in general before settling into the origin of Danbury's in the late 19th century, and then she jumps to World War II, when wartime shortages forced its temporary closing. Her husband became the fair's majority stockholder and general manager during that hiatus and oversaw its resumption in 1946. Despite fires, racing accidents, and bad weather, the fair thrived throughout the period covered by the author, who ends her section in 1956, encouraging readers to attend the fair themselves. After she found that it was too expensive to have the book published, she put the manuscript away in her attic, where her grandson found it after her death. Stetson later added a section covering the years from 1956 to 1981, including the fair's demise, despite attempts by locals to save it. He's a less-engaging writer than his grandmother, but he still moves the history along briskly, providing a different point of view on John Leahy and on the fair that of a child who grew up amid its pageantry. He recounts travels with his step-grandfather to other fairs and conventions as far away as Calgary, Alberta, and his increasing involvement in running the fair as he grew. His grief at the sale of the fairgrounds to a company that later built a shopping mall will sadden readers as well.

A delight for anyone with an interest in agricultural fairs, the late 19th century, or rural Americana. --Kirkus Reviews

About the Author

Gladys Stetson Leahy was born in 1897 in Poland, Maine, where she grew up with her mother in her grandparents' home, a small produce farm. A bright girl with some promise beyond her current circumstances, she graduated from Edward Little High School in Damariscotta.

Presumably under the auspices of her aunt and uncle, Harriett and Luther Spiller, she attended and graduated from Bates College with a B.A. degree in 1919. (Aunt Harriett was the Regional Superintendent of Schools and Uncle Luther was the local postmaster.)

After marrying and being deserted by her third cousin, Abner H. Stetson, and bearing his son, she embarked on a teaching career. She started that career at the Edward Little High School. Over the next several years, she changed jobs and locations frequently, seeking to increase her wages in order to support her son, John Howard, who lived with Gladys' blind mother. To further advance her position, she spent several summers gaining her M.A. degree from Boston University, which she achieved in 1928.

Her career travels eventually brought her to Danbury, Connecticut, where she began teaching at Danbury

High School. She was introduced to John W. Leahy by a mutual friend in the mid-1930s. Eventually marrying him, she joined in helping her new husband with his various business ventures and was cajoled into writing a book (this book) about him and the Great Danbury State Fair.

John Howard Stetson, Jr., is the grandson of Gladys Stetson Leahy and John Leahy's step-grandson. Growing up under the strong influence of both Leahys, Jack began his working career as an office boy at a part-time job at the age of twelve. He graduated from Danbury High School in 1962 and spent three semesters at the University of Rhode Island.

Disillusioned with college life, he left there, came home, married Carol Farwell, and spent the rest of his life as a student of the John W. Leahy College of Life-Long Learning while working his way up the ladder as an employee of the various Leahy enterprises. That culminated in his owning those businesses, which will celebrate 100 years of existence in 2017.

His many joyful years of working at the Danbury Fair prompted him to complete writing the story of its history.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Judith Cole:

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Leslie Martin:

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