

The Iowa State Fair

Kurt Ullrich

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Ullrich's photos and essays capture the tension between tradition and modernity in classic state fairs.

The idea of a state fair evokes a certain sense of nostalgia, and nostalgia is a theme resounding throughout Kurt Ullrich's extended photo essay, *The Iowa State Fair*. Both in his short essays about what the fair meant in history and means to visitors today, and in his black-and-white images of participants, animals, and attractions, Ullrich puts together a valentine to a tradition he clearly enjoys.

Ullrich's shooting style has the feel of a long-form photo story in a newspaper's weekend section, with straightforward images that combine to show the range of activities included in the annual summer fair. As he describes it early in the book, the fair is "a middle-of-Iowa cauldron of human energy, a place with few demands and more than enough stuff-on-a-stick." His essays romanticize the way the fair endures, with participants talking about attending with their grandparents during childhood or Ullrich ruminating on how the fair signals the end of summer and the promise of its return. The essays have a deeply earnest, almost sepia tone, depicting the fair as a connection to an agrarian past that the author deems worth commemorating.

Quite a few of Ullrich's photos capture that tug-of-war between modernity and nostalgia at today's state fair. One image shows a woman using a smartphone camera to snap an image of the "butter cow," a massive sculpture made of butter, and a longtime fair tradition. Others juxtapose the fair's iconic ferris wheel against the backdrop of downtown Des Moines. There's a shot of a reenactor dressed as Lincoln performing the Gettysburg Address, another of kids in trendy t-shirts playing with hay, while both a heavy metal band and a marching band with a row of sousaphones make appearances. These kinds of shots nicely fit the writing's theme of timelessness.

The best shots are some of the simplest, capturing candid moments: a young child in the Future Farmers of America tightly hugging her sheep, a closeup of crowd reactions to a music competition, a little girl and a goat dressed in wedding outfits as part of a contest. While other images in *The Iowa State Fair* take a wider view of the surroundings, these shots have tighter compositions that really focus on the people enjoying their visits to the event, making the kind of memories that Ullrich's book celebrates.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Fall 2014)

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