

## County Fairs, Why?

by Baxter Black

“Most people just don’t get it,” said Ron, bemoaning the urban politicians that continue to whittle away at funding for county fairs and the Ag Extension Service. “It’s all about the kids learning real life.”

To their misfortune, urban children have much less opportunity to connect with real life. They look at some farm kid working on his show steer every day for months. It is beyond their comprehension. “Why”, they think, ‘Would anyone want to waste their time in such a mindless pursuit?’ and then they whip out their Game Boy and fall into a trance.

Thank goodness there are some politicians, corporations and influential associations that DO get it. As farmers and livestock raisers continue to decline in numbers, it is even more critical that parents, county agents, ag teachers, 4-H leaders, scientists and teachers instill in the next generations the realities of life that farming depends on. Does America want to become a net importer of food in fifty years?

I appreciate Mrs. Obama’s garden, Whole Foods specialty markets, organic and natural producers. They have a niche market. But who is going to feed the other 99% of our burgeoning population, much less a hungry third world?

Those kids, our kids who are fitting steers, doing chores, picking apples, showing hogs, driving the grain truck, learning to weld, riding pens, irrigating strawberries, managing a pasture, hosing the milk room, stacking hay and learning to read the sky are assimilating the mountain of knowledge that it takes to make dirt and rain into food.

Farm kids start learning the land and the livestock when they are old enough to carry a bucket. When they help with the daily chores they are practicing. It’s like taking piano lessons or tennis lessons except what farm kids learn has a much more profound objective; feeding us all.

Our culture expends a great deal of effort on future NBA stars, astronauts, environmental lawyers, doctors, and political science majors. But for every 100 rock stars, Rhoades Scholars and Heisman trophy winners our country produces, we better make sure we spend enough to train at least two future farmers, so the rest of them can eat. That is the essence of the county fair.

Beneath all the fun, auctions, and show ribbons, the serious business of learning how to make a living off the land continues like an underground river.

The list of ‘essential professions’ is a short one. That’s the reality of real life. Farm kids hold our future in their hands. They are in training to feed the world. And fair board members and county agents get it.