

County Fair  
by Wade Wingler  
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As I sit down to write this column, I notice the sweet smell of cranberry muffins wafting in from the kitchen. My ten-year-old daughter, Katie, is working on her foods project for the Hendricks County 4-H Fair. With luck, all her grumbling about working on projects will be rewarded with some nicely colored ribbons. At ten, she sees the fair as mildly amusing but, it's mostly a lot of work. I suspect this will soon change for her.

Unlike most kids in Hendricks County, I did not belong to 4-H, but I certainly spent a lot of time at the fair. You see, my dad was the guy selling the big satellite dishes at the commercial tent. Instead of working on gardening and electrical projects and trying to become a Junior Leader, I spent my summers at the fair in and around the commercial tent, checking in with my folks and begging them for a little extra money for things like milk shakes and cotton candy.

I remember the exact summer when the fair stopped being a week long bore-fest and became one of my favorite times of the year. I was twelve. Twelve is that magical age when you're no longer a "little kid" but you're not quite a teenager either. You don't understand why you don't understand girls, but you spend a whole lot of time trying to figure it out.

The year was 1983. Michael Jackson's album, "Thriller", was playing on the radio. A new product called Nintendo had just gone on sale in Japan, "Return of the Jedi" was in theaters and President Regan's "Star Wars" was in the papers. I had just finished my sixth-grade year at Amo Elementary and wondered if my new found crush on Rachel Tomblin would carry me through the summer and into my seventh-grade year at Cascade Junior High.

Most people, both then and now, would agree that we have a pretty nice county fair. There's a lot to see and do. There are smells and tastes that we only enjoy a few times a year. It's amazing how a simple lump of dough can be combined with sugar, butter and cinnamon into a mouth watering elephant ear with an unmistakable aroma that can draw people from blocks away with and transform a late summer afternoon into an oasis of Hoosier charm. However, in 1983, to a twelve-year-old, hormonal boy from Coatesville, it wasn't just a quaint county fair--IT WAS VEGAS, BABY!

I found gluttonous delight in the form of funnel cakes, corn dogs and candy apples. I watched the porcine equivalent of Siegfried and Roy as the hog-farming kids got those sweaty brutes to run through a chute on command. I discovered the exhilaration of gambling for goldfish on the midway and the thrill of rickety roller coasters and the spinning Scrambler that made me want to throw up my lemon shake-up. And then there was the cheerleading contest! Those lovely, slightly-older-than-me beauties came from far away and exotic places like Brownsburg and Plainfield. Although they weren't clad

in feather boas and stiletto high heels, to an adolescent boy, they were just as exciting. To me, it was Sin City.

In the talent show that summer, there was one kid who earned standing ovations by wearing a single sparkling white glove and doing a pretty passable version of Michael Jackson's moonwalk across the stage. Today I can't tell you what happened to that kid, or even his name but, at that moment, he was Hendricks County's version of the King of Pop and, for that week anyway, I was his best friend.

That summer, the fair stopped being about sitting in my Dad's booth and watching Nickelodeon with my friends. That year a new and more grown-up world was squeezed into about thirty grassy acres in Danville. I hung out with the farm kids. I shot hoops with the sporty kids. I even found the courage to say "Um...uh...hi there." to the Fair Queen. That summer, amidst the dust of the demolition derby and the barking of the carnival workers, I embarked upon my journey to manhood.

I think some of the best stories of all time are about young people coming of age. Mine just happened to occur in the summer of 1983 at the Hendricks County fair. Oh, and as for my gallant pick up line used ever-so-suavely on Miss Hendricks County? Well, let's just say that "*What happens at the county fair stays at the county fair!*"