

State Fair

By Aubrey Solomon

Philip Stong, an Iowa newspaperman who had experienced life on a farm, published his first novel, "State Fair," in the spring of 1932 and it became a nationwide bestseller. The motion picture rights were quickly purchased by Fox's head of production, Winfield Sheehan, for a reported \$15,000. Fox had suffered three years of withering financial returns due to the Depression economy, an over-expansion of its theater chain, and protracted near-bankruptcy litigation. Sheehan saw "State Fair" as a potential blockbuster even though its rural tone and characters were atypical for a high-budget production.



Abel Frake (Will Rogers) counsels his son, Wayne, (Norman Foster) about life outside their Iowa farm. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

During the early 1930s, despite 48 percent of the U.S. population living in small towns, rural-based films were shunned by the major studios since audiences across the country preferred big city stories. *Daily Variety* categorized this division as "city pix vs. hick pix."

Fox's advantage in countering the anti-"hick pix" bias was Will Rogers, the studio's most popular male star at the time. Rogers was a unique cultural icon who could bridge both urban and rural audiences. Widely regarded as the most brilliant humorist since Mark Twain, his satirical comments on American society had been disseminated through newspaper columns and radio broadcasts since the 1920s. After a tentative start in silent films, Rogers' screen success exploded with the arrival of the talkies. His Midwestern drawl and irresistible "aw shucks" personality vaulted him to the top tier of Hollywood talent. A succession of hit films at Fox including "They Had to See Paris" (1929), "Lightnin'" (1930) and "Young As You Feel" (1931) were among the few bright spots in the company's slate of releases.

Rogers was cast as Abel Frake, a farmer whose greatest dream was to win a first place ribbon at the fair for his beloved hog, Blue Boy. Adding to the boxoffice punch as his daughter, Margy, was Janet Gaynor who had won the very first Best Actress Oscar and was the studio's highest grossing leading lady since 1927. Lew Ayres, known for his brilliant portrayal in "All Quiet on the Western Front" (1930), was borrowed from Universal to provide a romantic

interest for Gaynor at the fair. Rounding out the cast were Louise Dresser as Abel's wife, and Fox contract stars Norman Foster as his son, Wayne, and Sally Eilers as the trapeze artist who seduces him.

In August, 1932, Henry King, who had directed films since 1915 and had a reputation for Americana, traveled with two camera crews and a sound unit to the State Fair in Des Moines, Iowa. King wanted to capture the sights and sounds of the real fair as well as shoot scenes that could be used in rear-projection process work. Principal photography began at the Fox Studio in Westwood on Nov. 1, 1932 and continued through Dec. 23, for a total of 46 days. At a final cost of \$594,956, it was the second most expensive Fox film of the year.

During the production, Rogers gave an interview about acting alongside a sometimes ornery hog and joked, "A hog's at his best when he's on a plate between a couple of eggs." Rogers also quipped that he never read the books his scripts were based on because "I don't want to be disappointed in the picture version. They always clean up the stories for the movies, and when they get through cleaning there's generally nothing left except the same old plot."

"State Fair" was released on Feb. 10, 1933 and was widely acknowledged as a fine achievement. *Film*

Daily raved, "Great cast and ace entertainment. Fine human interest story packed with laugh and heart punch." The New York Times enthused, "Mr. Rogers is excellent in his role." "State Fair" opened to record crowds at New York's Radio City Music Hall, an unusual success for Fox at the time. It went on to have over 9,000 bookings, the most for any Fox film of 1933 and amassed \$1,207,995 in domestic film rentals. Even though foreign countries did not have state fairs, the film's popularity brought in an additional \$428,970 from international markets. A profit of \$397,685 resulted, making it one of the few successful Fox releases of the year. It was nominated for Academy Awards in Best Picture and Writing Adaptation categories. It was also picked as one of the ten best films of 1933 by the National Board of Review and placed fifth in the *Film Daily* Poll of Critics. The book was named a *Literary Guild Selection* and reprinted in 1933.

After Will Rogers' untimely death in a plane crash in 1935, his final two films "Steamboat Round the Bend" and "In Old Kentucky" were released posthumously and were followed by the reissue of three older titles. "State Fair" was given a national re-release on August 7, 1936 and brought in rentals of \$281,200 with an additional profit of \$182,800.

Although considered a family film, there was a report in 1933 that a Midwest exhibitor complained of an "episode of just plain dirt" in the film. A scene in which trapeze artist Emily seduces Wayne was considered too suggestive for some small-town audiences. When the film was set for its 1936 reissue, the

newly enforced Motion Picture Code (introduced in mid-1934) insisted that the scene be excised.

The box office and critical success of "State Fair" was characterized as an anomaly in a July, 1935 *Variety* article with one of the best-known headlines in publishing history, "Stix Nix Hick Pix."

Twentieth Century-Fox remade "State Fair" twice as a musical with songs by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. The 1945 version with Jeanne Crain and Dana Andrews was a major hit but the 1962 remake with Pat Boone, Ann-Margret and Alice Faye was not as successful. There was also an unsuccessful attempt at a CBS television series in 1976. Never sold to television until the early 1970s, the original "State Fair" languished in Fox's vaults because of a lack of pre-print materials which were destroyed in a 1937 vault fire. A studio print discovered in the 1960s led to a restoration which allows today's audiences to view it again.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Aubrey Solomon has published three books on the Fox Film Corporation and 20th Century Fox. He has also produced documentary specials, written for many episodic television series and several feature films. His most recent story credit is for "Ice Age: Collision Course."