

The Times They've Been A' Changin'

The Oregon Country Fair grows up.

BY URSULA EVANS-HERITAGE

Where can you find a man painted entirely silver, vaudeville performers, belly dancers, great food and topless women with painted breasts? Why, the Country Fair, of course (not to be confused with the County Fair, which is better known for square dancing, farm animals and cotton candy).

The Oregon Country Fair is an event like none other and first time visitors may react in different ways — shock, joy or possibly amusement. On my first visit to the Fair, I may have experienced all of these emotions. But I can't be sure, because I don't remember my first visit. I was 8 months old.

Although my parents never worked for the fair, attending the OCF was a regular part of my childhood. In my 21 years, I've probably attended the fair 18 or so times. Lots of things have changed. And then again, quite a few things haven't.

One of the major changes I've observed has been the popularity of the Fair. Each year the event seems to attract more people. In recent years it's been increasingly difficult to navigate through the wall-to-wall crowds. Now about 18,000 people attend the Fair each day. "It's grown tremendously," says Mitzi Linn, an artist who's had a booth since 1979. "It was really loose ... I don't think I even had to pay [the first time I attended the



The writer's very first fair. (She's the baby.)

fair in the early '70s]" she says. Now, certainly everyone pays — \$13 on Friday and Sunday, \$16 for Saturday, plus service charges.

Another important change that I've witnessed is the crackdown on drugs and alcohol. Now when visitors enter the fairgrounds, their bags are searched. In the past, alcohol

and drug use were blatant. I specifically remember two men sitting next to me, discussing the "fun magic dot" they were putting in their beers. Being a quick 11-year-old, I deduced that they were probably talking about Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, if you catch my drift. "Young people used to come in with coolers of alcohol," says Linn. "It

wasn't enjoyable ... the Fair is more chilled out now."

Here's something that hasn't changed: nudity, or at least semi-nudity. I've seen more topless women at the Country Fair than anywhere except the beach in Barcelona. But most women who choose to go topless at the fair choose to paint their breasts. Again, this has not changed. If anything, our cultural norms of fashion are going towards less and less clothing for women. Ladies, the media seems to be telling us that we should wear as little clothing as possible as long as we cover our nipples and pubic hair. But whatever you do, don't cross that boundary. Remember when Janet Jackson's nipple was briefly exposed at the Superbowl and the panic it created? Well, women at the Country Fair have been defying the cultural nipple taboo by proudly exposing their painted breasts for years.

Although the Fair is getting older, bigger and slightly more commercialized (you can now buy a train ride from Portland, hotel stay and ticket package as well as "Fairaphunalia" off its website), it is probably the most authentic dose of hippie counterculture a person can get without traveling back in time to 1969. And these days, who couldn't use a little more peace and love? ★



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