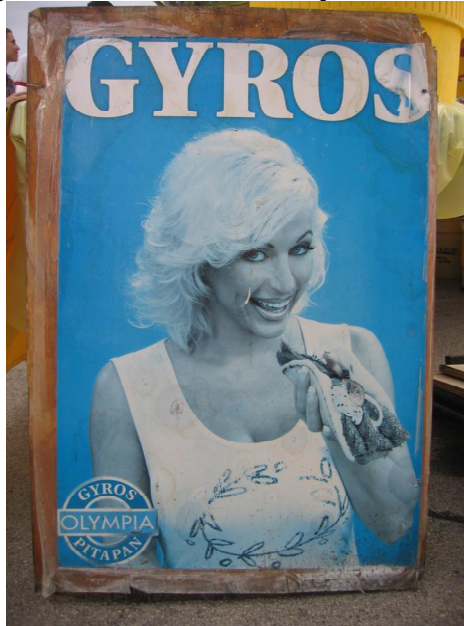


The Agony and the Ecstasy of Sawdust Days



Roily rollicking crowds mingled deflated and elated through Menominee Park. A barely legal teen with a half-finished pot leaf tattoo kissed the cheek of her biker boyfriend. Two children in snot-and-grime encrusted Disney T-shirts fought over a corndog. A Mexican cowboy strutted the midway in a perfectly pressed cream-colored suit and matching hat trimmed with gold. A middle-aged couple in sexless suburban separates performed a dance at the Cajun tent that was so startlingly erotic, I felt myself flush when he dipped her head an inch from the ground and held his lips a breath apart from hers.

The people of Oshkosh displayed their casual finery on the rickety Ferris wheel held together with duct tape and daydreams. They eagerly preened on line to procure deep fried Twinkies and ruffled their plumage riding bumper cars in preparation for parking lot fender-bending at closing time.

Pre-teen princesses in short shorts rode a circular topsy-turvy ride called The Ring of Fire (a subtlety ironic allusion to one's burning ass after a third trip to the burrito booth) and aging hippies strode the pioneer encampment in buckskin and beaver pelts. Under the glittery carnival lights and post-card pink summer sunset, everyone looked sweaty, glistening, schlumpy, and beautiful.

The fair is a place where your authentic self, stripped of artifice and pretension, can mingle with a mass of humanity and amble against the pace of people you will never see again.

For the young, it is a chance to flaunt all that is taut and treasured. Tiny tube tops and tottering high heels wink towards sideways ball caps and low-slung pants. For the aging, it is an opportunity to relax what sags. Braless cougars raise their beer-cozied

Budweisers to toast second husbands who dock their pension pontoons before the fireworks start. The fireworks are a beautiful pyrotechnic lightshow, an impending romance, a drunken ex-husband with a point to make.

In the late evening heat, ankles swell, expectations rise, and frowsy shorts are eaten by inner thigh flab.

It was my third day at the fair and I stalked the flea market in full Forth of July regalia: a majorette's red-white-an'-blue star-spangled suit with several layers of crinoline, an American flag fringed jacket, and gay parade boots.

“Are you one of the dancers?”

“No.”

“Were you in the parade?”

“Nope”

“What kind of get-up is that?”

“It's a Forth of July suit and every time you make fun of it, the terrorists win.”



An acquaintance of an acquaintance of a friend of mine cornered me by a roach-coach serving delightful meat snacks (a winking cow spoke from a cartoon bubble, “You don't need teef to eat our beef”). She was hip, cool, with-it, smooth, and stylish. Her glasses were expensive, her haircut was modern, and her features were pointy and precise.

“Can you believe the people here? What a freak show!”

I looked around. There were sweats-n-sneakers moms with casually clad children, shorn military men wearing shirts remembering fallen soldiers in Iraq, an elegant club of older women sporting red and purple outfits, and my own friends, a stunning blue-eyed blond in wedge sandals and an exotic dark-haired beauty in a Spirit of '76 vinyl jacket. I thought everyone looked amazing. I decided I didn't like the cat-eyed pixie-cut girl and her stellar style accessorized by judgment.

Sawdust Days, or as the locals call them, Dirtball Days are fashion-free, fun-filled festivals of fried food, fake history, and stomach-churning rides. If you dressed up, ate a healthy meal before you came, and strolled the fairgrounds mocking the proceedings, you missed the point.

How you look, what you wear, and who you hope to be is scrambled upside down as you ride The Zipper, shaken side to side on The Sizzler, and spun this way and that on The Tornado. If it's hard for you to feel something real in the moment, let the centrifugal force of Starship 3000 pushing against your chest illicit a genuine emotional response.

I saw a swarm of lake flies dancing under lamplight, I bought a petrified alligator foot for a dollar, my date threw a baseball at milk jugs to win me a stuffed green unicorn, and there was Crystal Lil's, a metaphor for life. The gaudy bordello funhouse started with a complex maze (birth and childhood), directed patrons to trudge up a steep staircase (striving for success), and then, in the end, there was a surprise swirly slide down (death!)

Funhouse mirrors reflected a hundred different versions of myself back at me. Some were familiar, but some were startling and new.



TRIED: I tried the Garnier depuffer, a small roll-on wand you swipe under each eye to control bags (or in my case, a footlocker and matching luggage set). I am shocked to report that this product works and the cooling tip is a pleasant sensation in warm weather. The same effect can be obtained by refrigerating two spoons and placing them over your swollen peepers, but I enjoy the pseudo-science of futuristic products and would rather be "surface-cell recharging with pro-vitamin B5" than sticking a couple of tablespoons on my face like Uri Geller with a hangover.

TRUE: Heart-shaped lockets with your true love's picture inside may be the sweetest way to declare your affections. The recently dumped or perpetually punk can put a piece of paper reading "Your Name Here _____" in their hearts.

TIRED: Flat-ironed hair, I'm over you. The humid Wisconsin weather requires a rethinking of slick, smooth tresses. When I see stick-straight strands managed with products and controlled with manic force-of-will, I feel like I need to organize my sock drawer and figure out tax forms. When I see fuzzy, frizzy, hedge-headed people, I feel like frolicking in the summer streets with a Bomb Pop.

TRENDY: Swelling your chest with pride beats a boob job.