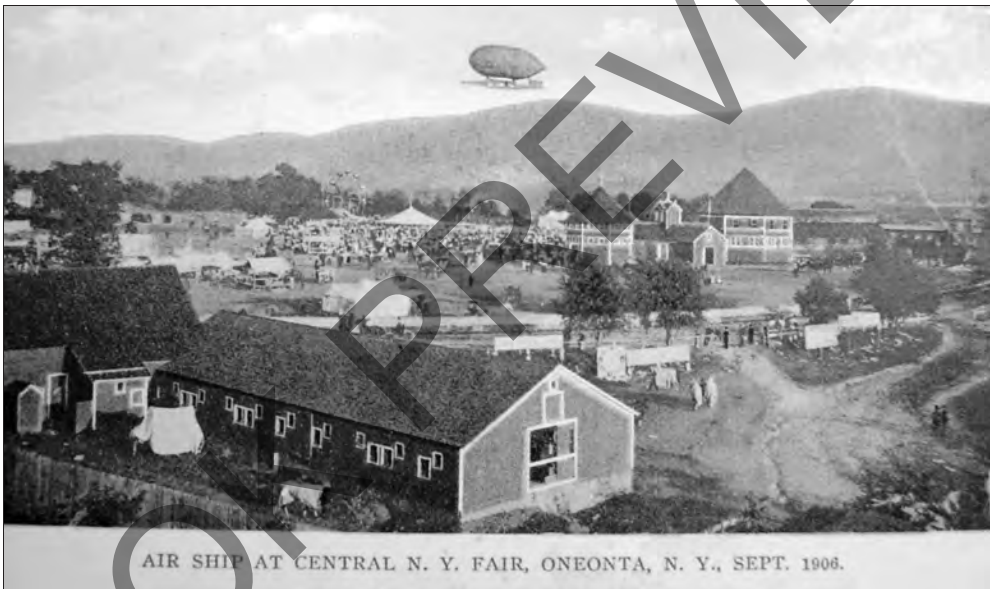


THE ONEONTA FAIR



Jim Loudon



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The Oneonta Fair
by Jim Loudon

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The acknowledgments of the Author appear elsewhere in this book.

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THE ONEONTA

FAIR

BOOK PREVIEW

INTRODUCTION

By 1872 Oneonta had become a thriving community of just under 2,000 souls, a direct result of the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad's arrival in 1865, and the village's subsequent designation as the company's primary shop facility between Binghamton and Albany. This prosperous environment provided the impetus for a group of Oneonta businessmen to organize the Oneonta Union Agricultural Society in late summer 1872, electing Allen Scrambling as President. The intent of the organization was to develop an agricultural fair, but there was no progress toward that goal until the following year.

After fire consumed his bank and hop exchange in Milford during the latter part of December 1872, Oneonta's growing prosperity convinced David Wilber to relocate his business interests to Oneonta the following year, setting up shop in the Walter Brown Hardware Store at the corner of Main and Dietz Streets. From the time they arrived in Oneonta, David and his sons, George I. and David F., strove to advance the interests of their adopted home. His banking business expanded rapidly, and in 1876 he relocated to larger quarters in the Central Hotel building.

In 1873 David and his landlord (and close friend) Walter Brown embarked on an endeavor that would benefit the village of Oneonta for decades to come. In that year the two businessmen reorganized the Oneonta Union Agricultural Society, determined to establish a yearly exhibition and fair. A large section of the Couse farm in East End was purchased and crews were set to work clearing and grading the site.

There was great anticipation prior to the first Fair to be held in October of 1873, which proved to be a genuine success for the promoters. Over the following years the Fair became a major boon for the local economy, filling the village with thousands of visitors from across the state for one week, which generated significant revenue for the railroads and trolley line. The Fair's promoters made every effort to provide new attractions that would maximize attendance; there were marriages at the Roof Garden, gymnasts, balloon ascensions, and later, a "Birdman," who brought the first airplane to Central New York. Trotting races were a big draw from the time the Fairgrounds opened, and the Floral Parade was the most anticipated event of the year.

In 1873 Fair Street was opened to provide easy access from Otsego Street, and in 1888 the Oneonta Street Railway opened a branch from Main Street to the Fairgrounds.

The Fair meant two afternoons out of school for local children, and the trolley line ran open cars up Tilton Avenue and over Fair Street to the festivities. Downtown Oneonta was packed with pitchmen on every corner and, for many years, Charles K. Champlin and his repertory company performed at the Oneonta Theater during Fair Week, offering plays borrowed from Broadway.

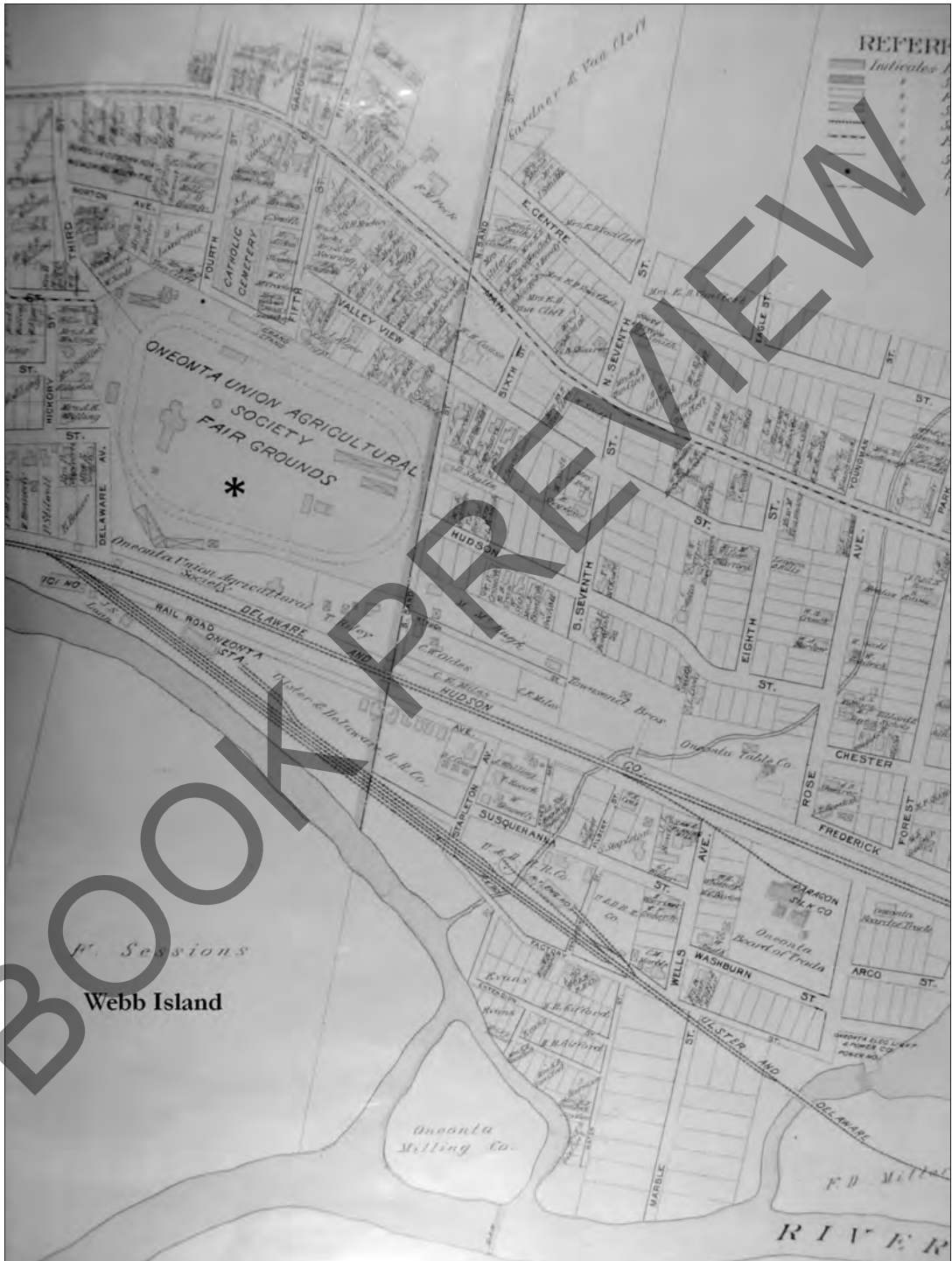
The Floral Parade was always a grand display, offering local businesses an opportunity to advertise through their lavish floats. Prizes were awarded for the most impressive displays, and prize winners paraded again the following day. The Fair also provided an opportunity for politicians to greet large numbers of people, and notables included Teddy Roosevelt in 1899 and his cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1915.

Attendance for the Fair peaked at 30,000 on September 21, 1910, but with the coming of the automobile, fewer visitors stayed in the village and Fair receipts began to dwindle. George I. Wilber, the driving force behind the Fair, died in 1922 and there was no one left to champion the cause. In 1923 D.F. Keyes purchased the outstanding shares of the organization, and in 1927 he commenced selling off building lots on the old Fairgrounds. The development was originally called Belmont Park, and over 100 homes were built on the grounds where thousands of fairgoers once congregated for the most exciting week of the year.

Little remains of the Oneonta Fairgrounds today; Belmont Circle is the original race track, and visages of the concrete Grandstand piers and retaining wall are still visible behind the homes on North Belmont Circle. Looking at what little remains, it might be hard to imagine that Oneonta once hosted the second largest fair in New York State.



Oneonta's location in Central New York State, nestled along the banks of the Susquehanna River in Otsego County.



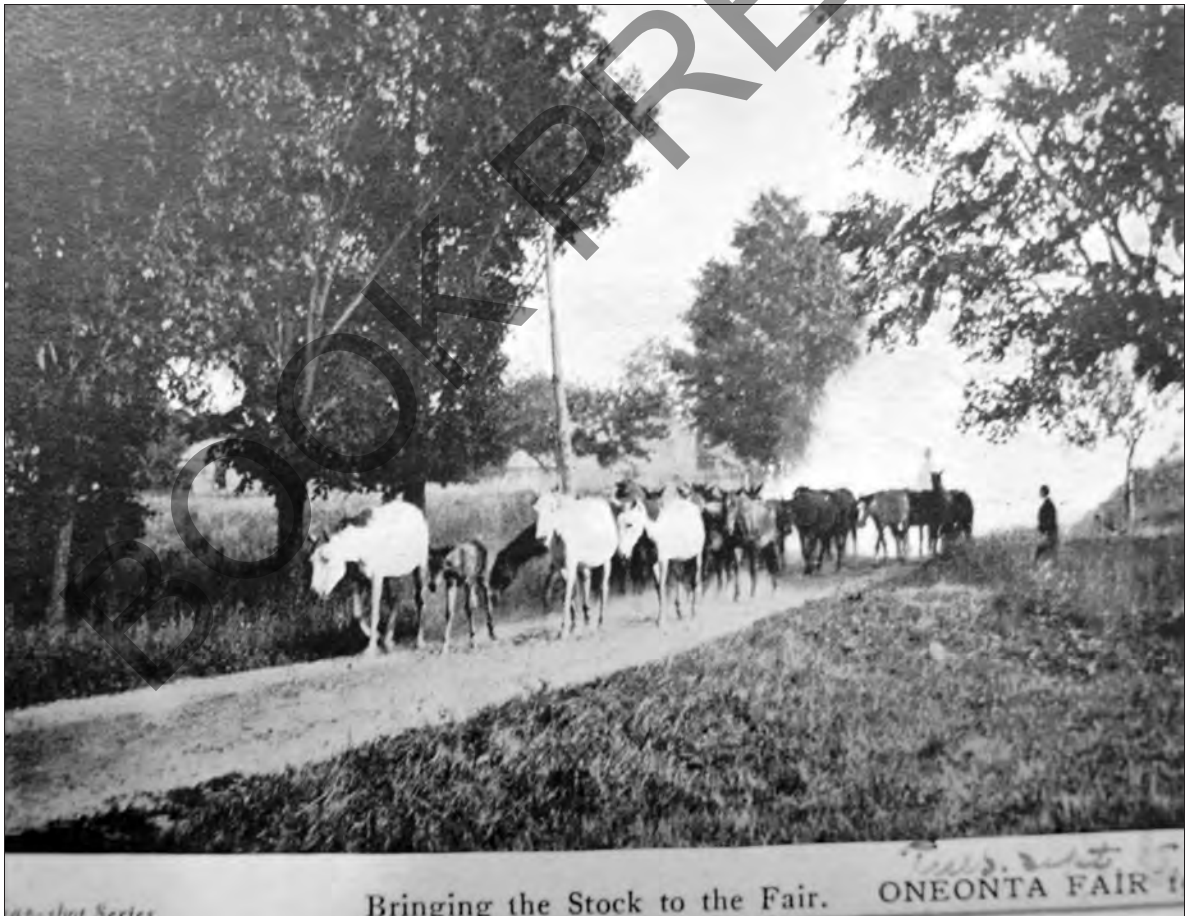
Oneonta, with the sites of the original fair () and the 1949 fair on Webb Island.*

The Roof Garden

The Roof Garden always provided a stage for special attractions at the Fair, hosting magicians, animal acts, weddings, political speeches, acrobats, and even the Golden Globe of Death! It consisted of a raised platform 25 feet deep and 40 feet wide, with a height of 8 feet, and was constructed in 1897 as an extension of the Judge's Stand, which was built in 1874. There were windows on the front and back of the structure, and the inside floor was below ground level in order to provide space for a dining room. For many years the restaurant was operated by the Brown family and was known as Brown's Dining Hall.



A CENTRAL NEW YORK FAIR POSTCARD ALBUM



Central New York Fair, Oneonta, N. Y.,



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