**Fair Minded**

**By Anna James**

My girls and I were born in big cities. I was born in Tucson, had my oldest in Philadelphia, and my youngest in Seattle. We got used to the cement, bustling activities, and neighbors so close we could hear them flush their toilets and change their TV channels. Where we live now on the East End of Charleston, squirrels and stray cats are the only wildlife, and our “green space” is a 5 x 3-foot patch of dirt outside our rented apartment. I struggle to keep spindly, dehydrated impatiens alive and toss away the unopened seed packets I buy each fall with good intentions. Our one thriving plant I can’t even identify. It is invincible and needs no care except pruning, but I let it grow so wild that it spills onto the sidewalk. A neighbor once clipped it down when I wasn’t home.

We’re city girls, through and through, and isolated from the world of agriculture that produces our fruits and vegetables, meat, and other necessities. We could easily be convinced that magic is responsible for the jars of honey, cans of beans, and boxes of meat we buy at Kroger—instead of an army of workers, backed by science, who create these products for our table.

By the time we city types pay for our pork chops in tidy Styrofoam containers, we’re so disconnected from their origins, it would be easier to picture farmers picking neat, blood-less chops off trees instead of the reality: live animals being herded for slaughter and processing. Our blackberries could have been spat like Skittles from a machine into flimsy plastic containers rather than plucked from prickly bushes warming in the sun. Intellectually, we know where our food comes from, but there’s a heart-separation. The hard work of harvesting and preparing the food for consumption has been done for us.

But for my citified daughters and their citified mom, that distance between the origins of our food and our supper table might as well be like driving to the moon. That’s why our annual pilgrimage to the State Fair of West Virginia means so much to us. We don’t just get a lesson in agriculture at the fair; it’s far more than that. For us, the fair is a magical place, enticing enough to lure my girls off their phones and away from their friends. For this one day every year, my daughters and I feel more connected with one another, with our state, and with our community.

When my girls and I visited the fair last summer—as we’ve done every August since 2010—we experienced all the usual things. We stood in long lines for homemade cinnamon rolls dripping with butter and hot frosting and then to Trudy’s Dairy for frozen bananas. We followed up that treat with tangy barbecues, sweet brown beans with cornbread, deep-fried Oreos, and a powdered-sugar elephant ear. We enjoyed the games and rides and then paid a buck to see a “real live” zombie and another dollar to see the world’s smallest horse. We tossed dimes into old thrift store glasses and ashtrays, hoping to win a vintage Bug’s Bunny jelly jar. We heard Kanye West blasting from speakers that mingled with the sounds of an old-style carnival barker.

“Everyone’s a winner!” he said. I thought this was a nice, modern advance in the carnival world. My 14-year-old tossed dull darts at underinflated balloons until she walked away triumphantly with a Rasta Banana.

As much as we loved the food and games, though, we spent the bulk of our time with the plants, the animals, and the people who work with them. Our first visit, as always, was to the brainy bristle-backed pigs. We stretched our arms through the bars, scratched behind their ears, and gave their rumps a good pet. We walked through dusty, fragrant barns with fans trained on the soft, clean bodies of Holstein dairy cows and Angus beef cows that the farmers, their wives, their children, and their workers relentlessly maintain. We read the names of the farms, admired the blue-ribbon winners, and watched as the folks cleaned stalls, bathed goats, blow-dried horse’s tails, and polished hoofs for show. It’s hard, dirty work that also requires intelligence and skill.

It’s a world we’d never know without the State Fair of West Virginia.

One of our favorite places is the birthing barn. Last year, we watched a cow go through the birth process, and when things were progressing too slowly, the farmer got concerned. He adeptly reached into the mother and tied a thick, coarse rope around the unborn calf’s legs. The cow stood eerily quiet and still as if she knew the man was there to help. I stared in amazement. The crowd around us leaned in and watched intently. We held our collective breath. I looked at the mother next to me, and she looked back at me. We were strangers experiencing this together, and we smiled at each other in wonder. The farmer braced himself and gave a long hard tug. A half-born calf, as still as a stone, slept at the end of the farmer’s rope. The mother cow lowed. One more strong pull, and a blood-soaked sac of hair and bones fell on the soft straw floor. The crowd gasped. There was a silence among the spectators as we weren’t sure if everything was okay, and then the mother began licking her calf. The calf wiggled its ears and kicked. The crowd let out a sigh and cheered. We looked around at one another and then back at the calf. I hugged each of my daughters. “It’s a boy!” the farmer bellowed. I was so caught up in the moment and so much a part of the experience that I echoed his words, “It’s a boy! It’s a boy!” I wished I’d had cigars to hand out.

A few feet from the birthing barn was a nursery, where, every year, two docile calves with eyes as big as boiled eggs rest in a shelter. Amazingly, visitors can walk into the shelter and pet the hours-old calves, whose fur is as soft as velvet. There’s never anyone monitoring the calves. There’s not even a line leading up to them. We stepped over a hay bale that keeps the animals in, pet the sleepy calves, and cooed to them gently. We were as close to our food source as anyone could possibly get.

“This is where our milk comes from,” I whispered to my girls. It’d be easy to fall victim to a gentler way of thinking—to imagine only nostalgic-looking farms as they appeared in Grandma Moses’ paintings, with perfectly rounded trees, light-beige ground that’s never muddy, the sheep bleached white, and hens with fluffed feathers. But I was yanked from this way of quaint thinking when we tried our hand at milking a goat, with assistance from Rod White and A. J. Carpenter of MAC Dairy. The barn smelled of pungent dung. The goat, tied to a stake, was skittish and shy. When my daughter crouched on the stool to milk her, both the goat and my daughter were nervous. Perhaps sensing this, the goat bucked and put her hoof in the pan of milk they’d been filling up for a while. A. J. had to dump all the precious liquid because of potential fecal contamination.

Farming can be messy and frustrating, but Rod simply smiled and retrieved a new bucket. “Don’t worry about it,” was all he said, and then he asked me to give it a try. I smelled the soft animal fur of the goat, heard her loud chewing in my ear, gripped her teat firmly, and pulled. Milk shot straight out in a stream so small I thought it’d take a whole morning to get enough to cover a small bowl of Wheaties. Still, Rod celebrated with me and said in a gregarious voice, “You’re doing it!” And I was. I’d milked a goat.

Not long after, we moseyed over to the garden, where we met Mike Myles, a 10-year certified master gardener. Like everyone we’ve ever met at the fair, Mike was incredibly gracious and generous with his time. Escorting the three of us on an impromptu tour, he was sharp and knowledgeable and reminded us about the science of farming. We stopped at a tall vine dangling a few feet above our heads, and he challenged us to find the vegetables on it. We finally saw a small, green bead of fruit that, by its markings, resembled a teeny tiny watermelon, or maybe a pickle. I’d never seen anything like it before.

“It’s a Mexican cucumber,” he told us, and popped one into his mouth.

“We’re allowed to eat these?” I replied.

“It’s the last day,” he said and handed one to each of us. The crisp, juicy cucumber was full of fresh flavor. We felt special and lucky, just like when we saw the calf being born. Just like when there was no line to milk the goat. Just like when we got to pet the big-eyed docile calves.

Mike explained how they have to keep the pH in the soil just right, how there are appropriate times to water, and when to withhold water for a greater yield. He talked about hybrid tomatoes and what it takes to create certain flavors and textures. I longed to slip on some gardening gloves, dig in the dirt, and break up rough soil until it yielded dark, soft beds for seedlings. I wanted to water the sprout, encourage the vine, and pop one perfect cherry tomato that I’d grown myself into my mouth.

I was suddenly tired of plastic containers and those thin plastic produce bags we put every vegetable in. The fair had me longing to trade them for a sun hat and a woven basket so I could gather my own.

Across from the garden was a free lumberjack show, sponsored by Stihl. The show was clearly a marketing scheme to sell products—a mock competition between two college-age men outfitted in plaid, loose-fitting dungarees, and long beards I imagine they’d grown for the gig. At first, I was disillusioned by the apparent marketing ploy, but there was a crowd, and my girls seemed interested. I was reminded of tonic salesmen and the fact that there’s nothing new under the sun. Much like the zombie attraction we’d seen earlier, the performance was an old concept in a new form. So, I gave in. We grabbed some fresh roasted corn on the cob and found a spot on the bleachers to watch as the men sawed designs into logs and climbed poles with just their feet and a hank of rope. They were impressive. What they did was an art. It was clear they’d practiced many hours, and my girls and I cheered wildly along with the rest of the crowd.

The show’s winner held his chainsaw above his head and looked a bit like Magic Mike, cavorting for the ladies while revving his impossibly loud chainsaw engine for the children and men. The flash of show business combined with the nostalgia soon had us searching Stihl’s full product line on the Internet.

After the show, I spotted the contestant-performers after they’d changed into their skinny jeans and T-shirts. Without the plaid shirts, but still fully bearded, they looked more like hipsters on summer break from college. The line between them and the past was so thin.

The 2015 fair was winding down, so we headed out past the grounds and back up through the barns, where we’d parked. I felt so overwhelmed with gratitude for the day that I shouted rather loudly, “I love the fair!”

A man in his late 50s or early 60s was sitting on a folding chair outside one of the barns. He was fit and wearing a white T-shirt, jeans, and a red baseball cap with an M&M’s logo.

“What do you like about it?” he asked.

I replied, “The animals, the shows, the people, the food, the games.”

“Do you have any animals here?” he asked. He wanted to know if we were showing. I felt flattered.

“Nah, I’m a city girl,” I said.

“You can have a rabbit,” he said.

I suddenly beamed. I don’t know why I reacted so strongly. Perhaps it was the sense of community, or how genuinely friendly West Virginians are, or perhaps it was how he opened the door and essentially said, “Here’s a chance for you, a confirmed city girl, to take part in the fair.” If I wanted, I could actually be part of the experience and not just an observer.

Since that day, I’ve revisited his words many times. And I’ve revisited our day at the fair. I now work a little harder on that green patch beside our apartment. I buy more of my fruits and vegetables from local farmers at Charleston’s Capitol Market. I’ve even looked into buying my meat from small local farms. And I’ve affectionately remembered the newborn bull and the crowd’s cheer and the pigs we scratched and the way the cucumber tasted, plucked straight from the vine.

The 2016 State Fair of West Virginia will be held at Lewisburg August 12-21. You can find out more by visiting http://statefairofwv.com/ or calling (304)645-1090.