



# THE ONEONTA FAIR

Jim  
Loudon

## ONE WEEK IN SEPTEMBER

### *The Oneonta Fair*

by Jim Loudon

(Square Circle Press, softcover, 112 pages. \$17.95.  
[www.squarecirclepress.com](http://www.squarecirclepress.com))

reviewed by John Rowen

*The Oneonta Fair* is an informative history of the Central New York Fair. Between 1873 and 1926, the Fair was held on the east side of Oneonta and for many years it was second only to the New York State Fair in size and attendance.

This is the fourth book by Loudon, an historian and artist who lives in Oneonta. His three prior books were about the Oneonta roundhouse, railroads in Otsego County, and Electric Lake in Oneonta. Although this is not a long book, it is carefully researched and generously illustrated. It includes 155 black and white illustrations such as maps, photographs, newspaper ads, articles, and postcards.

In the first half of the book, Loudon describes the history of the Fair. He offers biographical sketches of Walter Brown and David Wilber, who started the Fair. The author also offers a biographical sketch of David Wilber's son, George, who took the Fair to its most successful years in the early 20th century. Loudon also describes the building of the fairgrounds. Using newspapers and programs, he gives readers a sense of the diverse entertainment acts that were offered.

The book's second half includes Fair recollections from Oneonta residents and a 31-page long photo gallery, from old postcards, of Fair scenes.

This book will appeal to readers interested in Oneonta and Otsego County history. It is also important in showing the changes and constants in entertainment over the decades. For example, in the movie *The*

*Place Beyond the Pines*, Ryan Gosling plays a daredevil motorcycle rider who rides sideways and upside down in a globe-shaped steel cage. *The Oneonta Fair* suggests Gosling's act dates to at least 1910. In that year, a woman named CeDora came to the Oneonta Fair and rode a bicycle, and then a motorcycle, in a 20-foot high steel cage painted gold, the Golden Globe of Death.

Balloons, parachutists and aircraft were always popular at the Fair. Today, we take jet travel for granted. In the early 1900s, however, aviators had to move their planes to events such as the Fair *by railroad* and they made their own repairs to their wood and canvas planes with the help of local carpenters.

Loudon describes animal acts. Two of my favorites were "Educated Ben," a pig who knew how to count, and "Big Jim," a bear who roller-skated and wrestled with grappler "Kid Green" from New York City. The Fair also had a floral parade, with wagons, automobiles and floats decorated with numerous flowers. Given that Huntington family members moved from Oneonta to Pasadena, California, the reader wonders if the Oneonta Fair inspired the Rose Bowl Parade.

The Fair attracted 30,000 visitors in 1910. As the 1920s progressed, attendance declined. In 1922 George Wilber died. With declining attendance and the absence of the energetic Wilber, the Fair board decided to close the event and sell the fairgrounds for residential development.

Today, the only tangible sign of the Fair is a retaining wall and some foundations for the grandstand in the Belmont Park neighborhood. However, the Fair lives on: in the memories of some Oneontans and in this thoroughly researched book. 🐷