

# Another Woodward Dream Cruise

## phi phi alpha at the michigan state fair

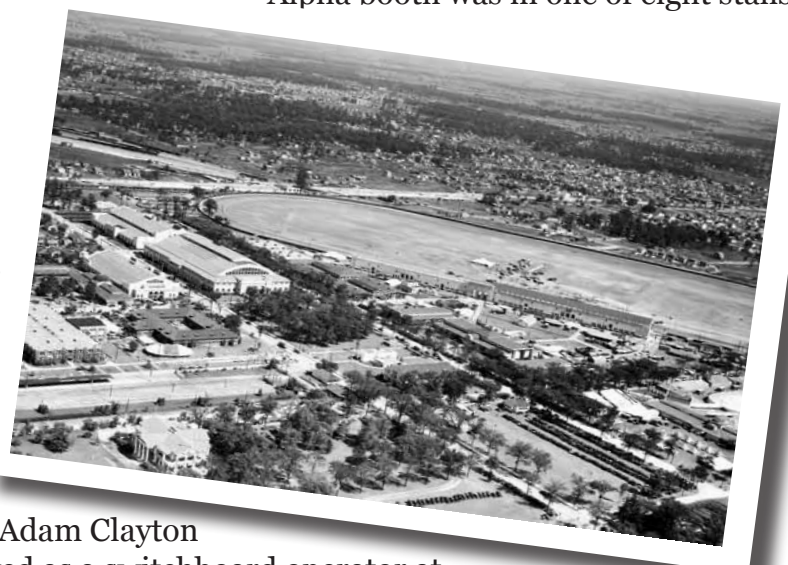
Even in the 1950s, the Michigan State Fair was the oldest in the country. We had all been there as little kids, but now we were going to be food vendors at the main entrance as a fund-raiser for our fraternity. I have no idea when the Phi Hot Dog Booth was initiated or how long the tradition lasted, but the Michigan State Fair tradition ended in 2009 when the State of Michigan withdrew support and, after 160 years, the oldest state fair in America ended. Established in 1840, the Michigan State Fair was cancelled, in spite of the Michigan Exposition and Fairgrounds Authority Act 361 of 1978 which provides for its continuity. The fraternity, however, lives on—especially in the hearts and minds of its brother/fraters.

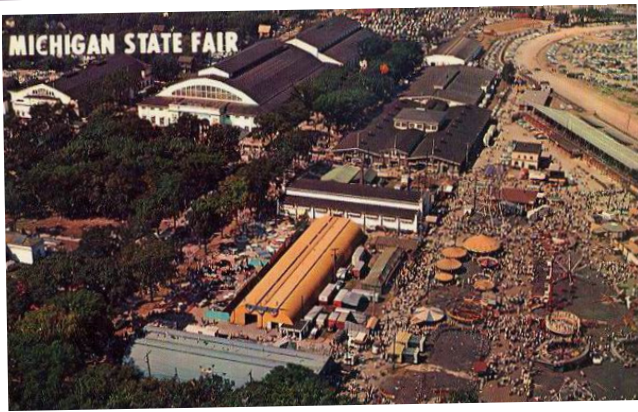
In recalling our Phi Phi Alpha fraternity project these many years later, my report will be as sketchy today as our business acumen was back then. We learned a great deal in two seasons of The Hot Dog Hustle and some of the memories have improved with age.

In 1955, the “old Phis” encouraged the “new Phis” to carry on their project of selling hot dogs, pop, and French fries at the Michigan State Fair on Woodward Avenue near Eight Mile. It seemed a good way to assemble the brothers to support their activities for the coming year at 313 Philadelphia Street.

The cumbersome plywood booth, coolers, friers, and steam table had been stored at Homer Smith’s parents’ house on Arden Park in Detroit. Many fraternity brothers showed up to load it all onto a borrowed truck and we were much impressed with the stately mansions on that historic street. Homer’s folks’ house looked like the Detroit Public Library to us white kids from suburbia. It was right across the street from Prophet Jones’ bright blue and white French Regency “chateau.” The Phi Phi Alpha booth was in one of eight stalls in the Smith’s garage.

Homer’s dad owned the several hotels in Detroit where African Americans were welcome. One of those was the Gotham, known by blacks all over the country. The Gotham was the place to lodge, dine and socialize for countless celebrities, Civil Rights activists, entertainers, athletes, government figures, Black millionaires and others. Some of the regulars who lodged and dined there over the years included Louis Jordan, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, B.B. King, The Harlem Globetrotters, Langston Hughes, Louie Armstrong, Thurgood Marshall, Sammy Davis Jr., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sarah Vaughn, Joe Louis, Adam Clayton Powell and Actress Marla Gibbs, who was once employed as a switchboard operator at the Gotham. The Gotham’s famed Ebony Room was The-Place-to-Be-Seen in Detroit’s Paradise Valley of the 1950s. [Source: Wikipedia]





Our two fourteen-day episodes for the fraternity at the State Fair were full of such fascinating and new adventures. The hot dogs were the least important part.

We had to go through permit and unionization rituals at the Fairgrounds just to assemble our own booth and make obligations for delivery of meat products, buns, potatoes, soft drinks, and propane gas tanks. One of the union enforcers called me “Tony” and I felt like I was a big city hustler—for at least a few minutes.

Our 10’ x 15’ plywood booth was painted glossy refrigerator white and had big, black letters announcing the tasty treats offered. It also had “Phi Phi Alpha, Alma College” painted on the sides. The four panels were held together by flimsy galvanized hook-and-eye hardware and a grimy green tarp provided the roof. Propane tanks were stacked outside the back wall and an extension cord was strung up for bare light bulbs that hung around the three serving sides.

Jim Gordon and I had volunteered to stay with the booth for the run of the Fair each year, but we were definitely not city boys. Nor were we farm boys. We hailed from the ‘burbs of Oakland County and the farm products shown at this citified location placed us firmly in the middle between two worlds totally foreign to our previous experience.

“Flash” Gordon and I kept our old Boy Scout cots, sleeping bags, and duffle in a pile behind the booth during the day and moved it all inside to sleep after the crowds left and the gates were locked each night. We were locked in with the livestock. We showered in the Sheep and Swine Building right behind the booth where we had the pleasure of assisting at the birth of several litters of piglets. The best daytime bathrooms were in the lobby area of the Coliseum, the very place where we had seen Roy Rogers and the Shrine Circus not many years before. It was sheer magic for us to be brushing our teeth alongside old men who lived on park benches and blew their noses with one finger.

We had to carry water from an outdoor spigot to the booth’s steam table. At subsequent trips to such fairs we have seen how the Health Department has dictated far more efficient and sanitary food-handling procedures but, in the Fifties, our stomachs and immune systems must have been stronger.

Dozens of fraternity brothers arrived each day to cut potatoes and heat the oil in the deep fryer. So many arrived that “Flash” and I did not have to do nearly as much during the daily hours of the State Fair. We acted as managers and simply showed our volunteers how to operate the inside preparations and over-the-counter sales to the thousands who passed by on their way from the Woodward Avenue parking lot to the Coliseum and Midway.

Our two-season sojourn at the State Fair provided a wonderful opportunity to reacquaint with our fraternity brothers, but more than that, our annual fourteen-day camp-out with the “carnies” provided even more opportunity for growth:

- The night before opening day I decided to walk down to the midway to see the assembly of the giant double Ferris wheel. As I passed under an overhead streetlight, I could see another person walking toward me from two or three blocks away. As he passed the next street light I realized he was much closer than I had at first perceived; he was only two feet tall. As we passed, he reached up and grabbed my arm and asked if I had a light

for his cigarette. I was so terrified that I could not speak and only shook my head negatively.

- W.G. Wade Shows put up a “kiddie lot” of rides for tots with a tiny ticket booth directly across from our booth. On opening day, a very ample (fat) woman introduced herself as the ticket taker and asked if we could help her into and out of the booth for her shifts there. She needed to be shoved into it and, if we fed her enough dogs and fries during the day, it would take both of us pulling and squeezing to get her out.

She told us how her husband was head of the commissary for the “carnies” and how they spent their nights rolling drunks in the bar at State Fair and Woodward.

- In the open lot just east of our booth backing up to the Rabbit and Poultry Building was the fold-out trailer/stage of a husband and wife mind-reading act. They traveled all over the county in a brown 1948 Pontiac with a pair of huge German Shepherds. The car’s trunk opened into a double bed and the tiny trailer/stage held their sound system and “prizes” for the suckers. They shared many tricks of their trade and were proud of their resourcefulness.

- An exotic dancer from the carnival burlesque shows hung out at our booth for free dogs and fries. She had long, straight hair that hung down to her knees and was dyed in three different colors of blonde. After eating with us, she would take a nap on a nearby picnic table, reminding us to wake her before her next performance on the Midway.

- On the final day of our second year, I was so burned out that I took the streetcar toward downtown looking for something other than “Fair food.” Near Grand Circus Park I found a tiny café and took a seat on a stool. I ordered pea soup and milk and, when I asked for my bill, the counterman said it was gratis. When I looked bewildered, he just pointed to my white pants and jacket. We were both wearing food-handler’s duds. (My alter-fraternity!)

“Flash” and I agreed that we should have applied for Sociology credit before taking on this summertime responsibility.

The fraternity brought in about \$10,000 in profit from each season to give us a great start on our fall program at Alma College. Now that I think of it, we probably should have looked for a better way to store the cash than in a canvas bag behind the booth with our camping gear.

“Flash” Gordon is gone now. So is the Michigan State Fair. Bettie and I toured the Fairgrounds in its final year to see if we could find the exact spot where the booth had been but only the Coliseum and Poultry buildings remained. Everything else had been demolished. But there was an exhibit in a new building that looked like a car dealership where tots sat in a five-row bleacher section to watch cows giving birth to their calves. We couldn’t find any place that had just hot dogs, French fries, and pop.

