Interview with Pam Gray

AIS-V-L-2008-085

August 12, 2008

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Today is August twelfth, and we're sitting here—or we're standing here—(laughs) with Pam Gray. How are you doing today, Pam?

Gray: Good.

Maniscalco: Great.

Gray: Thanks for coming.

Maniscalco: Well, we're standing in the Illinois State Fair Museum. And I have a couple of questions for you about the State Fair, but let's start with some of the easier ones first. Can you kind of tell me your age, date of birth, and where you were born?

Gray: Okay. I was born in Streator, Illinois, and I am fifty-four years old, so I got a birthday coming up in October—I'll be fifty-five. The big five-five. (laughs)

Maniscalco: Well, great. So you're the Director of the Illinois State Fair Museum. Can you kind of tell us how you ended up getting that position?

Gray: Sure. About fifteen years ago, there was a small ad in the local newspaper, and it just said, "Volunteers needed for the State Fair." And so I came out here. There was only about five of us that showed up, and on the day that we showed up, the lady that put the ad in the paper that worked for agriculture said, "Oh, I'm sorry, we couldn't get it organized in time, so we're going to have to pay you." And it was like, "Well, that's not what I wanted. I can go anywhere and get a part-time job." I really wanted to do volunteer work because I believe in volunteerism; I believe in the social aspects of volunteerism and all that.

So I was very disappointed, but I went ahead and worked three days—that's all that was required—and while I was working, I was really even more

disappointed when the person that I was supposed to work with—again, we're both being paid now, because it's not volunteering, we're being paid as a real job—and the person that I was working with showed up an hour and a half late. It was a high school person. We were working in the information booth, and whenever a fairgoer would come by and ask where something was, he would just kind of lean down on the counter and say, "Well, I just really don't know. You can walk down that way and see if it's down there." It was so disappointing to me.

So from that point on, I decided: Well, we need to change this. One of the ladies that works at Agriculture saw in me that I was disappointed in human nature that the person would be so lackadaisical about the whole job thing. He's getting paid. And so Suzanne Moss from the Department of Agriculture asked me if I would be interested in volunteering and running the volunteer program for the next year. That was fourteen years ago. I said, "Yes, I will." I jumped up and down with the opportunity. I thought, "This is my opportunity to do that." So I was in school at the time—in college, taking courses in public administration—so I was interested in that type of work. So I started working on it as soon as the fair got over that year. I kind of got myself organized; I contacted the media outlets, and I said, "We have a volunteer program now this year." So they did some interviews with us, and we got some people applying. That first year, we had about forty-five people—the first year, which was fourteen years ago. This is 2008; it was fourteen years ago that I had the first volunteer program.

Maniscalco: Wow. And now just kind of worked your way from Volunteer Coordinator into Director of the Fair Museum?

Gray: Well, the transition there was, the first year—fourteen years ago—the volunteers were putting signs up, pictures, in the artisans' building. What happened was Suzanne, who was the Volunteer Coordinator, called me. It was parade night, Thursday night, before the fair started that year; She said, "Can you help me tape some photographs," in an area about where we're standing here—literally a ten-by-ten area—"in the artisans' building." They found file cabinets full of eighty-by-ten glossies in the basement of the big ag building. And the reason they found them was they're putting in new air conditioning ducts in that area.

Maniscalco: Oh my gosh.

Gray: And Suzanne thought: This is something that fairgoers would like to see. So she arranged for a small area. We met there on that Thursday night, and we literally just took Scotch tape and started taping them on the walls at about eye level. It was a long day. We'd been working up there, and Suzanne had some things she put out in a display case, some mugs and things that were just things that she had in her personal collection. And while we were doing that—it was about eight o'clock that night—a gentleman tapped me on the shoulder.

I was literally taping things on the wall, and he tapped me on my shoulder, and said, "Ma'am, can you help me? Can I show you something?" I was like, OK. You know, I'm really busy, but I took the time out.

It was an older man. He took me over to an area where I had just taped photographs on the wall, and he pointed to the photograph—an eight-by-ten, glossy, black-and-white photograph—he pointed to the center of it, and he said, "That's my son." I just got goose bumps, because the photograph was of President Nixon standing on a platform where he was getting ready to speak. He was reaching down from the platform to a group of about twelve young boys about sixteen years old; the boys were all reaching up to shake his hand, and right when they were just about ready to shake, the photograph was snapped. All the boys had on black slacks and white shirts tucked in, little bow-ties, you know. And the gentleman said to me, "We didn't know that this photo existed," and it was of his son. I got so excited. I said, "Oh, you're going to have to bring your son in. Tell him about this photograph." And the man just hung his head down, and with a tear in his eye, he said, "My son died in the war." So literally a short time after that photograph was taken, this boy died in the very war that President Nixon was involved in. I literally got goose bumps.

That moment was pivotal to me, because I thought: You know what? That's why I spent all day taping these on the wall and getting this all organized. This man didn't know that this photograph existed, of his son that died in the Vietnam War. So we made sure that gentleman got a copy of that photograph after the fair. And I mean, I hugged the man, and we were just like... (Maniscalco laughs) I literally had goose bumps, I was just so excited. I thought:You know what? This is real. This is what it's about. It's about the people. It's not necessarily about the photograph, but it is the people, the one person that was getting ready to shake his hand, and the story that continues to go on some twenty-five years later.

So I have a story like that every year. (Maniscalco laughs) Because the next year after that experience, we expanded it to not just an eight-by-eight or a ten-by-ten, we tripled in size. We were like a thirty-by-twenty. I spent the year working on getting more photographs. I spent more time. I had volunteers come and help us so we could get more information out, such as that story. We had such a huge crowd every year. People would just flock in by the dozens, admiring all the black-and-white photos that we had. The Department of Agriculture—the State Fair—helped me get more photographs. People saw what we were doing, and they donated mugs. I had a couple of displays that were loaned to us the first few years.

And it became so popular that we moved from the artisans' building to the south end of the grandstand, in a little bit bigger area, but still not the entire area. And every year, it just got bigger and bigger. You know, here we are fourteen years later from that very first experience, and we take the entire

north end of the grandstand, and it's a very, very popular area. People really enjoy the photographs and the memorabilia that we have.

Maniscalco: Well, that's great. That's really cool. So I imagine you're the lady to talk to about fair history, then.

Gray: Yes.

Maniscalco: So can we kind of talk a little bit about some of the history of the fair?

Gray: Sure.

Maniscalco: When did it start?

Gray: The first Illinois State Fair was October 11, 1853. Its agricultural base is the whole idea behind the State Fair in 1853. Farmers at that time—literally, it was manual labor to produce the hundreds of thousands of acres of agriculture that they produced. So at the time, the thinking was from a university capacity, which is University of Illinois, [a land-grant school] individuals said, "Let's put on a fair and gather the farmers from the areas and look at what we consider today's best practice. What's working, what's not, what do we do for different—whether it's beans, or corn, livestock, cattle, horses—whatever it is at the time—because that's what it was about in 1853. So that was the idea.

It was a four-day fair. It was held in Springfield. It was put together rather quickly, but they managed to do it. And so that was such a huge success. They were able to get the *Chicago Tribune* on board, and they did a small ad. I have copies of those ads. I do research year-round to gather information, especially about the early years. I wanted to find out exactly who were the key individuals that got the fair together.

And so for the first few years—forty-some years—up until 1894, the fair was a traveling fair, because you couldn't get in your vehicle, jump on the interstate, and go to Springfield to the fair. So they took the fair to the farmers, literally. They had a two-year run here in Springfield, which would have been 1853 and 1854, and then they traveled. They went to Chicago for two years; they went to Ottawa, Illinois for two years; they went to Centralia for two years. We went to Alton for two years, Quincy for two years, literally getting the fair out because they couldn't come to us here.

So then if you go forward fortyish years to the 1894, people were starting to realize: Well, maybe we need to have a permanent place, because every town we go to, we put up the tents, we have areas designated, and it changes every year. It's just somewhat different and a little chaotic in every location that we go to. But if we had a permanent place, we can always put the cattle barns in one area, every year the horses will be shown in one area, and people will know which area—we can put farming implements in one area.

So that was the thinking there in 1894 when they decided: Let's try to get a permanent place.

They worked on it for several years. They put the word out, and they said, "Chicago, what can you offer us if we have the State Fair in Chicago? Peoria, what can you offer us if we have a permanent Illinois State Fair in your town? Springfield, what can you offer us? Quincy?" And so there was a real bidding war going on for several years, up until the decision was made by looking at what all of the cities could offer, and Springfield won out.

Maniscalco: Really? Do you know what Springfield was able to offer?

Gray: Well, they offered the land. They offered free water, which was a huge thing in that time; that was the main offer. A good central location, or a location that would be on the outskirts of a major city. Railroads. Who has the most railroad traffic coming in? The roads: the covered wagons and the horse and buggies, what is the best transportation? Chicago was pretty good running, but—I'll tell you, the top two cities at that time were Peoria and Springfield; it was a real neck-and-neck up until the last minute. "I can give you this, I can give you that; we can give you this," until the very end when the decision was made for Springfield. And immediately upon that decision being made, they went to work, and built what is the exposition building. If you come in what is currently the main gate in Springfield—we now have 366 acres—that first building on the left is the exposition building. That building is huge, and it was just an incredible building for 1894.

Maniscalco: Can you talk a little about some of the exhibits and the different agricultural products that were probably brought during those times? Have you come across those in your research?

Gray: Yeah. In the research that I have found, mainly was fruit, vegetables, the corn stalks—you know, the tallest corn stalk—that was a big competition. Another thing, in those days they would have singing groups, and they would have competitions for singing groups—different church groups or local communities that would put together singing groups. Small vaudeville acts would be put together. Sadly, they had the freak shows that were put on at that time. They were very big in horse racing. They even had dog racing, horse racing. A big competition at that time was your cattle. Who had the biggest horses? Who had the biggest cows? The most desirable pork and pigs, and just different agricultural—it was just very, very much agricultural based.

Maniscalco: Now it seems the fair has this kind of history of contest and competition behind it; there's some pretty big prizes behind some of these things.

Gray: Yes, very much so.

Maniscalco: Can you tell us a little bit about some of that?

Gray: Sure. Even the very first fair in 1853, the rewards for the different competitions, as you call them, was fairly big at the time. I have documentation from the very first fair, 1853, I have a list of every single person that won a prize. So my goal for the museum—I created a foundation two years ago, which we can talk about as well—but my goal is for people to be able to do research and have it on databases where they can enter a family name from 1853 and do the genealogy work that a lot of people are into and say, "Oh, my goodness. Here we have Great-great Grandpa Gray"—which is my last name, and they were at the 1853 fair, as well, my husband's family, showing horses. "He won a fifty-cent coin piece because he had the fastest Morgan horse," or whatever it is.

Maniscalco: Oh, that'd be neat. That's really cool.

Gray: Thankfully, the Department of Agriculture did really good record-keeping, and I have a listing of all those premiums, is what they call it. In that very first year, it was nine hundred and fifty-four dollars, which is a lot of money in 1853. So they would get a fifty-cent piece or a dollar, two dollars, in 1853, which was very much a lot of money. Typically as well, they would give ribbons—red ribbons, green ribbons. In fact, a few weeks ago, right before the fair started, an elderly gentleman called me from Cantrall, Illinois; he said, "Ma'am, would you be interested in some books and some ribbons?" And I said, "Well, what do you have?" And he said, "Well, we've got a box of books, and they go back to the early 1900s, which are the premium books from the fairs." This was an elderly gentleman in his eighties who said that, of course, he shows here at the fair, his children show at the fair, his grandchildren show at the fair, his father and mother showed at the fair, his grandparents showed at the fair, and his great-grandparents showed at the fair. So literally, there's six generations right there of one family just a few miles north of Springfield, Illinois, that showed in the Illinois State Fair. It's a huge thing to many, many families. So I met with him, and he brought the books; lo and behold, in one of the boxes of ribbons that they had in their barn was a ribbon from 1899. I treasure that ribbon, because ribbons—that's one of my favorite things about the fair—because it's not a monetary prize, as in cash and money, but just think of what that ribbon meant to that person that won it in 1899.

Maniscalco: Yeah, really. Now, you were telling us about what the prizes were then. What about now? What are some of the prizes now?

Gray: Now it's a lot of cash. (laughter) They had a senior spelling bee just yesterday. It's a new thing, which is pretty cool. They have senior citizens compete against each other, you know, instead of a fourth-grade spelling bee. And they have a national contest. They had an Illinois regional contest; those winners came to Springfield yesterday and competed in a senior citizens' spelling bee. They ended up having a tie for first place, and each one of those winners won 150 dollars. So that was their cash prize. Still today, they have ribbons. If you

want, we can go around and see some of the ribbons that I have collected from donations over the years.

Maniscalco: Yeah, that'd be really cool. You know, one of the things I'm realizing is that the State Fair started with this idea of agriculture, and it's kind of exploded. Now there's all kinds of things, even to senior spelling bees. Can you kind of tell us some of that progression?

Gray: Sure. As any—I hate to call it a company—but any entity—which there's not very many of them that's been around since 1853. Okay, this is 2008—155 years ago. There's not very many entities that can sustain itself that long, very long—ten years, five years—let alone 155 years. So in the very, very beginning, I think forward-thinking people saw that we cannot appeal to one group of people, i.e. as in agriculture, we need to appeal to the very young children, we need to appeal to the teenagers, we need to appeal to the young parents that have the young children, we need to appeal to the middle-aged person, and we need to appeal to the senior citizens. That is exactly what this fair does. Whether your mom brings you… I talked to a woman yesterday whose seventeen-year-old son won the Diaper Derby when he was nine months old. She said, "I don't know if he'll let me share the photographs with you, because he's a seventeen-year-old, but give him about twenty years, and we'll get that photo for you." (laughter) But she has the ribbons. Literally, we have the Diaper Derby, we have the smile contest for young children, we have the ponytail contest to see who has the longest ponytail. All the young kids that show in the agriculture fairs, in the local county fairs in 102 counties in Illinois, they are very much a part of this fair. They go, and they compete against their fellow high-school students; they win first place, second place, and then they are eligible to come to the state fair and show their cattle or whatever it is that they're showing. Of course, we have the beer tents now for a certain age group. We have the hog-calling contest, we have the husband-calling contest. We have just a variety of things, and we literally are able to target that age group from the very, very young to the senior citizens that compete in the spelling bee contest.

Maniscalco: That's great.

Gray: Yeah.

Maniscalco: In the very beginning, at the very first years of the fair, it seems like agriculture was really the foundation to the fair. How do you picture it now, in terms of where its place in the fair is now?

Gray: Very high. It's not the mainstream—it is, actually, the majority of what the state fair is about: agriculture. For example, in a couple days, we'll have the Grand Champion sales where the governor comes out, and they auction off the Grand Champion cattle. It's a lot of money that is put through this fairgrounds. People compete through all the 102 counties in whatever realm

they have, whether it's the feed that they have, the cattle, the horses. Then they compete with each other to come to the Grand Champion State Fair; they do it every year. Like the gentleman that I told you about earlier—his great-grandparents, his grandparents, his parents, himself, his own children, and his grandchildren—I can be certain his great-grandchildren will. That is a family tradition, and that's what the fair is. This year, the theme is "A Family Tradition," and that is what it's about.

Maniscalco: Well, great. You know, this is going to be an oral history interview, and it's going to be around for a lot time. You've given us great stories already, and I'm just kind of wondering if there's a story or something you would like to leave in this interview for somebody else that might find it?

Gray: Absolutely. There's a couple that come to mind, although, as I told you, for fourteen years, I have every year one or more really, really great stories, and it's hard to narrow it down. One story that I'll share with you is, a woman called me this past winter—it's a recent story—and she said that her mother had just passed away, and she found a fruit display, which she grew up with—it was hanging on their kitchen wall all of this woman's life—this woman was in her fifties when she called me—and she said she wanted to donate something to our museum. I can show it to you if you want to take a film of it. It is a plaster fruit display—has bananas, grapes, fruit on it. If you can picture it: it's 3-D, it hangs on the wall with a little wire hook on the back, and it hung on her kitchen wall all this woman's life. And when [the mom] she died, she finds out —she knew it as a younger child but over the years had forgotten about—what that fruit display was.

Her mother won that fruit display in 1936 when the mother was fifteen years old. The mother grew up in the north end of Springfield here, large family; the parents of this fifteen-year-old said, "Okay, you're out of school for the summer. What we're going to do is you're going to raise the fruit, and you're going to display it at the Illinois State Fair." Well, this fifteen-year-old girl won first place that year. You'd asked me about some of the prizes. Well, in 1936, that was her first place. It wasn't a ribbon, it wasn't cash; it was that fruit display, and on the back it has "Illinois State Fair, 1936."

So a fifteen-year-old girl won it; she had been displaying items and bringing items to compete with every year prior to that. So if you put yourself back to 1936, that was a huge thing. She wasn't playing Nintendo through the summer, she wasn't on the Internet in an air-conditioned house, she was tending to that garden with her parents and her family, and she won first place for that effort. She kept it, and in her later years—probably some ten years later or so—she married, she began to have children. She had a large family herself; the woman told me they had six kids in her family. She displayed in on her kitchen wall as she raised her family. When you're raising your family, you don't tell them about all these things, you know, but she did tell them she

won it at the State Fair. But just think, on a personal level, what that must have meant to her to hang it on her kitchen wall literally for sixty-eight years.

When the woman died, her daughter brought it to us—we have it in the museum—because she did not want to see this thing go in a dumpster or on the shelf of a Goodwill store or Salvation Army or a secondhand store or literally just thrown in the trash. So I'm always about the people. I think the people, that's what makes the museum what it is, and those are the kinds of stories that I could probably go on and bore you for days about, (laughter) because I have hundreds of those types of stories. That's one of them.

Maniscalco: That's a great one. Well, thank you very much. This is a lot of fun just to hear—

Gray: Yes, you're welcome. Thank you.

Maniscalco: —visit with you.

Gray: Yeah, anytime.

Interview with Pam Gray
AIS-V-L-2008-085

Interview # 2: August 12, 2008 – Walking Tour
Interviewer: Michael Maniscalco, Illinois State Museum

Gray: Okay, this particular article is a timeline that we had blown up. We were giving posters away about six years ago. We just gave a timeline of items, starting with the very first fair in 1853. We go on and talk about some of the highlighted things that happened in 1853, 1854, 1855, 1857 and then we talk—down here we go to like 1891—about different things that were maybe happening in the country to give you an idea of where we're at in the timeline of the fair. 1894 is when the first permanent Illinois State Fair was held in Springfield. In 1921, the first women's automobile style driving contest is held in Springfield; so a woman actually got to drive a car in the races. We just have different items. 1949: the Illinois Governor was Adlai Stevenson. 1961: John F. Kennedy becomes President, is assassinated in 1963. 1963 is when Lyndon Johnson became President. We go on in to more current times, just different things that have happened. Nineteen 1984: the first twilight parade is held the night before the fair officially opens. The twilight parade is a huge thing today in 2008. 1990: one of the buildings that's on the fairgrounds—which is three hundred sixty-six acres today—the Orr Building opened and they show rabbits in that building and they also show chickens and other items. 2001: President Bush. This print was done in 2002 and that's where it stops.

Maniscalco: Now, can you tell us what we're looking at here, Pam?

Gray: Sure, this is a display case of items that people have donated. One of them is a fruit display that a woman won when the woman was fifteen years old in 1936. And, at that time, people would grow their fruit displays and compete with one another and this particular lady won first place. The first place prize wasn't cash, wasn't ribbons, it was a ceramic fruit display that you hang on the wall. It has a wire hook on the back. And on the back of that it says *Illinois State Fair, 1936*. The woman's family grew produce throughout the summer and she displayed it and the fifteen year old won it at that time and kept it all those years. So it must have meant an awful lot to her to do that.

Maniscalco: That's pretty neat. Do you know what she was growing to win this?

Gray: I don't. The woman's daughter who donated it just said fruit displays. It could have been grapes, or you know, it could have been anything that she grew in her family's at the time. It may have been tomatoes or something else that they were growing at that time and competing with other families and other people.

Another item I have in here is three small beanie caps; this is an interesting story. The family of this person came to us in the last year, the siblings of Bobby, who passed away. Bobby had kept these beanies all of his life. He won them in 1952 and '53 and he actually had his blue ribbon with these beanies. The picture here is of Bobby and his mother. The mother had seven children; to keep those kids busy after school was let out for the year they were on a mission every day to find a new trinket that was sewn on the beanies. They competed with other children from the area, I would assume, or in the nearby areas. His picture showed up in the newspaper when he won first place at age three. The mother was so proud of her children, all of her kids. Bobby passed away and his siblings brought these beanies in; it's a treasure to that family. And, again, I think that the ribbons are one of my favorite things because it's not just a piece of cloth that has gold print on it. That is a memento that meant something to this person who kept these beanies all of his years for fifty some years until his passing. The siblings didn't want to see this item just literally thrown away because if you look at, you think, Well, what in the world is this thing? That's what it is. It meant a lot to this person. So, there is a person behind that blue ribbon and a story. Just think of the treasures that he grew up with, the fond memories of his mother helping him sew each and every trinket. There is probably hundreds. There's footballs, cows, fire extinguishers, fish, all kinds of items, coins and so … it meant a lot to that family.

I ask them to write up a story whenever anybody donates anything. I ask them to write up the story behind it so that we have this another hundred years from now.

Maniscalco: Wow. That's great. Thank you.

Gray: You're welcome. This is a display case of some more ribbons. Again, you know, I really enjoy seeing the different ribbons. There is a lot of them that are handed out but there is a person behind each and every one of those ribbons. They have a craft, they have a talent, and they have won first, second, third, fourth or fifth place for an item.

These ribbons were donated from a local family that has them from the 1960s and '70s. They have had them in their barn on their farm but they decided they wanted them to be displayed here in the museum. So, I was glad to see that. I turned one of them around so people could see the back of the ribbon. They usually put the person's first name behind there. In this display case, I also have a photograph down here of a grand champion that they probably got one of these ribbons with.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow.

Gray: The years are not exact but this one … the photograph is from 1971. Some of the ribbons are from 1961 but the concept is usually the same and goes year to year.

Maniscalco: Very neat. What's the oldest ribbon you've collected so far?

Gray: The one that we recently received from 1899.

Maniscalco: Wow. Very cool.

Gray: Yeah, yeah. And sadly, if you go on E-bay, people are selling these ribbons on E-bay.

Maniscalco: Oh my gosh.

Gray: We are a non-profit foundation through the federal government, a 501(c)(3). The money that we raise doesn't go to the State of Illinois but to our actual private non-profit foundation; we don't take the money from that to go out and buy these ribbons. We depend on people to donate them through their families. Maybe someday we will have enough money where we can just throw it around and buy the ribbons. Mainly I like to get the story behind it, you know. I don't want to buy a ribbon that somebody went to an auction and bought a box of ribbons and they paid five dollars and they are trying to sell them on E-bay now. You know, they bought a lot of them for five bucks. I want the story behind the ribbon.

Maniscalco: Great.

Gray: Okay. This is an item that we display in the museum. It's an old phone board from the '40s, 1940s and 1950s that was used by operators that would sit here, three different operators. As a call would come in they would pull up whichever line was calling and connect it to the person that they needed to

speak with. So instead of cell phones that everyone has today, and everybody has one it seems like, you had a land line that was somewhere and you would call in and be able to connect to your person. There was a three digit code that each section had here on the fairgrounds. The operators knew how to do it; they had a listing here of each area or person and their three digit code and they would just connect them.