

**Rob Edwards**

## **READING THE RURAL NARRATIVE: THE GYMPIE DISTRICT SHOW AS A SPACE OF COMMUNITY**

Agricultural Shows are a much neglected, but important cultural event in rural and regional Australia. Very little analytic commentary contemplates the annual agricultural show and the most visible work on them has been focused on the large metropolitan shows or exhibitions of an international nature.<sup>1</sup> Histories of regional shows have been written, but generally they are more like who's who catalogues of the local Show Society, whose livestock won Prize Bull in what year and lists of gate-takings.<sup>2</sup>

The Gympie District Show serves as a case-study to add to this sparse literature, drawing on techniques of textual analysis, historical research, and the theoretical perspectives of Michel de Certeau (1988), who offers a model to analyse narratives of place, space, and community. The goal here is to analyse the ways in which rural agricultural shows can reaffirm senses of identity and community through the displays on offer and in the geography of the showgrounds. All of these aspects of the show can be central to understanding a narrative of community in regional Queensland, a narrative that is under-represented in many traditional forms of narrative, such as literature and history which accrue greater cultural capital.

Gympie is a former gold mining town situated in rural southeast Queensland, approximately 160 kilometres north of the capital, Brisbane, and forty minutes drive west of the resort town of Noosa on the Sunshine Coast. Local residents and official histories take Gympie's founding to be the day the Gympie goldfield was declared at the Maryborough Court House on 16 October 1867 (Cooloolool Shire Library Service 2001; Lisa Jocumsen Interview 2005).

The Gympie District Show, established in 1877, is the oldest ongoing cultural event in Gympie and is a showcase of development, progress, and the pioneer spirit within Gympie and district. In its early days, by encouraging agriculture, the Show was an agent of colonialism: it promoted the establishment of white proprietorship, both physical and moral, of a land that had been considered *terra nullius* prior to European occupation. The Gympie District Show has its roots in the colonial enterprise, in the project of occupying the soil, *possessing* the land by making it productive. The colonial aspect of the event was further underscored by the perceived need to establish European agriculture in the face

of competition with Chinese market gardeners. In the town's early years, its potential for agricultural production was relatively untapped, with around 1000 acres under cultivation, producing wheat, maize, potatoes, sugar, gardens, vines, and other crops (Cooloola Shire Library Service 2001: 41). Chinese settlers were the first to begin growing vegetables commercially, as early as 1869, around two years before Europeans began growing food (Vickery Lockwood 1964: 69). Ray Evans observes that competition between Chinese and whites on the goldfields of Queensland was fierce and often violent (2007: 105). In this context, the development of a European agricultural industry in Gympie was considered important, necessary, and possible given the amount of cultivation that was beginning to occur in the region.

Ten years after the discovery of gold, some settlers turned to agriculture to generate their wealth, and in the process, secure British dominion over the lands of the district. The establishment of a Society that promoted those same goals would only be of benefit to both existing farmers and those who sought to join them in that enterprise. It was a sign of the maturing nature of colonisation in the Gympie region, where a less rapacious, more settled form of exploitation was beginning to occur. The name of that Society — the Gympie Agricultural, Mining, and Pastoral Society — is noteworthy in this regard. Its title included each of the major industries of Gympie, whether actual or aspiring. Founded on the discovery of gold, Gympie would not be a viable continuing settlement unless diversification into agriculture and pastoralism occurred. The similarity of the name to that of Queensland's peak body, formed less than two years earlier, the National Agricultural and Industrial Association of Queensland (known as the RNA), established a strong link between the greater colonial goals of the GAM&P Society and the local development of productive industries in the Gympie district.

Over the years, and with the establishment of European ownership over the land, the Gympie District Show took on what locals see as its present role, displaying the "wealth of the district" (Bill and Shirley Bishop Interview 2005). However, as I will show, Gympie's Show is not merely a place in which the products, or wealth, of the region is demonstrated as a kind of "shop window" — a term that several authors have used to describe agricultural shows elsewhere (see Morgan 2005, and Mant 1972 for example) — for investors and possible buyers of these products. More than this, the Show is a place in which the display and consumption of the products of the area helped develop for settlers a story of their place and identity within the region, as well as its past, present, future possibilities, and the kind(s) of community(ies) that exist there. The narrative has its roots in the landscape of Gympie; it is a rural story, encompassing a modernist narrative of progress, agrarianism, civilisation and development. The local show, as Kate Darian-Smith and Sara Wills observe,

“invokes community pride and, especially in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the resilience of country life in the face of massive economic, environmental and social change” (Darian-Smith and Wills 2001: 29).

### **A Rural Story: The Show and its Displays**

The Gympie District Show is a gauge for the progress of “civilisation” in the region. The material exhibits of the Show, the means of promoting them, and the number of exhibits in each competitive section, records, and the amount of space devoted to each exhibit in the media indicates which exhibits hold greater significance in the region, economically, culturally, and symbolically. It further elucidates the kind of narrative the Show has developed, and what changes have occurred to that narrative over time.

The first shows placed a special emphasis on the development of agricultural production, despite gold’s pre-eminence at the time, because the future of Gympie as a settlement depended on agriculture. The agricultural Show provided proof of ownership by displaying the fruits of a land made productive, and also, by way of displays of arts, crafts, and fancywork, demonstrated civilisation’s arrival in the region. Even as “civilisation” became well and truly entrenched over time, the strong symbolic value of agriculture continued to hold sway. At the first Gympie District Show after the Second World War in 1947, pastoralism moved into a more central position as well. Beef Cattle was a new section at that show, and rapidly rose in importance thereafter, while the dairy industry, holding an estimated value to the region of £2 million in 1960 (*Courier-Mail* 14 June 1960: 7), was the marquee industry of the region. The notion of productivity, and the need to continually advance output, ensured that the show, as the site of conspicuous display of the region’s productivity, was essential to establishing the narrative of progress and development.

Such a narrative helped establish a sense of pride within the region and the local newspaper, the *Gympie Times*, was central to the articulation of that sense of pride. Generally, the local media, but particularly the local newspaper, will support events in its circulation area out of self-interest and a sense of “constructive parochialism,” whereby the provincial press will promote local material and social advancement, integrating the paper with its readership (Kirkpatrick 1984: 7-8). A good example of this is found in the 1960 Show supplement, where an article on “Gympie’s Early History: From Petrie to Nash” was placed on a page that listed the judges for that year’s show (*GT* 14 May 1960: 12). This article made the presence of pastoralism before Nash discovered gold clear, suggesting that the Gympie district has always had a strong history of farming and that mining was only ever a transitory occupation. The implication was that the gold rush merely enabled the region to truly progress and develop into the rich farming area that

it is today. Readers were encouraged to infer that the region had gone full circle in developing viable, wealth-creating industries, and that there was a deeper value to agriculture and pastoralism than to mining. Indeed, in a review of its history published in the *Gympie Times*, the GAM&P Society stressed the growth in popularity and profitability of the Show, linking its fortunes to the progress of agriculture in the region. The idea of progress was so important to the history of the Show that the title of the historical review was, "Gympie Show Society's Steady Progress" (4 October 1960: 5). Further, the sense of the rural as the true centre of wealth creation, not mining, helped create the rural story that is so central to the agricultural show movement.

The agricultural show movement is rooted in ideas of the value of agrarianism, or "countrymindedness," as Don Aitkin (1988) terms it. Countrymindedness is the ideology or belief that Australia depends on its primary producers for its wealth, and that farming and grazing — and rural pursuits generally — are ennobling and virtuous, and that the Australian bush is the wellspring from which Australian identity arose. Combined, this means that rural areas are the most important, and should be supported. Aitkin observes that countrymindedness was at its peak between 1925 and the 1960s (Aitken 1988: 51). The non-metropolitan Shows, unsurprisingly, support this belief in the nobility of farming and grazing. Towns such as Gympie, regional centres that act as the centre for outlying farms and districts, provide services and points of sale for farmers and are dependent on those farmers for their incomes; farmers are the "key unit in the social structure of the community" (Poiner 1990: 45–6). These factors have helped cement the rural narrative into the Gympie District Show, and, through the Show, into the Gympie district itself.

The support given the agricultural and pastoral industries at the Show might seem unremarkable in a region that relies on these industries for its wealth. However, the emphasis on farming also demonstrates the strength of countrymindedness as an ideological and social force at the Show, and the source of the narrative that the Gympie Show creates. Many of the headlines in the *Gympie Times* focus on the displays of productive industries, especially agriculture and pastoralism, and the new records set in their sections. Such headlines displayed both the economic and symbolic importance of these sections.

The symbolism of these industries created a strong rural narrative, although there is more to the Gympie District Show than just cattle and bananas, given the role of the Show in displaying the "quality of the district." Anne Long, Chief Steward of the cookery section at the Gympie District Show since 2000, stated that the pavilion alone contains, "fancy work, arts and craft, photography, bees, horticulture, and on it goes," and that, combined with dairy, beef, and machinery, "you get all those sections together, you make a show" (Interview,

Author with Anne Long, 2005). To Long, the sum of the sections is more important than which section is considered more important in any given year.

Long's notion is significant because it creates a more democratic, all-encompassing understanding of the Show and how visitors consume it. As the Chief Steward of the cookery section, Long considers the pavilion sections a crucial part of the Gympie District Show. Indeed, they are vital to displaying the deeper levels of civilisation that a society can produce. As Judith McKay notes in her discussion of nineteenth century exhibitions,

Human achievement was often accorded an official position of supremacy at exhibitions. At Paris in 1867 the exhibits were arranged in concentric galleries that 'progressed' from raw products in the second outermost gallery to fine arts near the central courtyard. Similarly the original classification system at Philadelphia placed raw products at the base, with categories ascending according to the application of human skill (McKay 1996: 55).

The Pavilion contains all those sections that require the careful, advanced application of human skill, including cookery, scrapbooking, horticulture, honey (apiculture), schoolwork, fine arts and crafts, as well as cottage crafts. These and the other sections were, both in order and content, symbols of civilisation and progress. Judges praised the number and quality of fancywork on display at the 1961 Show, declaring the many crochet articles "excellent" (*GT* 16 May 1961: 1). The following year, cooking exhibits, especially the preserves, were "fit to compete anywhere in the State" (17 May 1962: 1), suggesting the domestic skills, the *civilising* skills of those in the Gympie district were equal to those anywhere else in Queensland.

In general, it was Gympie's women who entered the Pavilion sections at the Gympie District Show. Horticultural exhibits of flower arrangements and table settings were demonstrations of floral art and the feminised work of aesthetic gardening. As Katie Holmes (2006: 169) argues, gardening was a gendered pastime. She argues that "women's gardening was more involved with creating beauty" than men's gardening, which focused more on agricultural production — that is, the growing of vegetables. It was women who entered the fancywork section as well. This section showcased knitting, crocheting, tapestry work and other fine needlework. Exhibits presented at the Gympie Show in 1964 included crocheted supper cloths and table centres, as well as millinery displays. The fancywork judge declared the supper cloths the "best she had ever seen and would favourably compete ... at the RNA," while the millinery exhibits "were works of art" to be admired (*GT* 19 May 1964: 2). The fancy work and horticultural sections were linked by their focus on aesthetics. Both sections were related to domesticity, civilised life, and feminine work, and both were at the

apex of the organisational charts for displays at exhibitions, where the more human ingenuity employed the more important they were deemed. Further, all of these items were linked to the domestic sphere. Their importance was centred on making the house a *home*.

Similarly, the household section concentrated on areas traditionally associated with women. Entries presented in the household section included iced cakes, sponges, fruit cakes, Kentish cakes, scones, preserves and jams, and sweets (Anne Long Interview, 2005). Ann Elias, writing about the Sydney Royal Easter Show, stated that the section "could be accused of keeping alive a Victorian attitude towards women as homemakers." However, as with the other domestic competitions (which could be similarly accused), the cookery section was about more than fulfilling the role of homemaker. There was competition, and, as Elias noted, the "primary motivation for the exhibitors include kudos and ambition," not being "duped by patriarchy" (Elias, 1995: 366; 368). Indeed, Anne Long was "tickled pink" when placed third in the rich fruitcake competition one year, because there were many entries, and she was competing "against Iris who had been entering for probably fifty years, and competitors like that." In 2005, Long's section (she is chief steward of the Household Section) won the banner for best exhibit in the pavilion, which gave her great satisfaction, even if she did not take personal credit for the prize (Long Interview, 2005). Martha Sear, writing on women's work at nineteenth century exhibitions, argued that by exhibiting their work, women were asserting the *value* of domestic labour, and by displaying it on their own terms were liberating themselves, or beginning the process of liberation, from patriarchal domination (Sear, 2000: 21–27).

Another motivation for participation in the household section was social. For example, those involved in cake decorating at the Show were often also members of the Queensland Cake Decorators Association, an organisation with affiliated groups around the country, and annual conferences at state and national levels. These occasions were not only opportunities to learn more about the art of cake decoration — "your mind boggles with information" — but also opportunities to meet others sharing that same interest, sometimes even visitors from overseas (Long Interview, 2005).

Women entered the pavilion competitions, not to meet gender expectations, but rather for kudos, competition, and fun — a point Anne Long stressed. Even so, we cannot get away from the fact that women, not men, enter these sections, and that for a very long time the rhetoric surrounding all of these sections has been dominated by ideas of "women's work."<sup>3</sup>

The way in which the "civilised" arts (cookery, floral and fancy work, fine arts) were presented reveals the European tradition from which the exhibition

movement sprang. In Gympie, the sections follow the set pattern: primary products first, then secondary, and finally, the tertiary, domestic and fine art exhibits, the high points of civilisation. This symbolic order makes the pavilion sections among the most important at the Show. The home is a vital aspect of civilising, and the domestic arts are those that make a house a home, make a house liveable. This conceit is overtly middle-class in its orientation towards the comfortable, aesthetically pleasing and relaxing home. For the middle-class Australian, leisure is considered a private form of rest (Pusey, 2003: 119), and flower gardening, for example, can be seen through that prism.

### **The Community's Show or a Show Community?**

Because the Gympie District Show represents and is organised around a range of interests, there are different versions of what constitutes the Show community. First, there is the top-down version of the Show, which is best explained as how the organisers want the Show to be understood. For them, the Show is a demonstration of the best of the region, of what makes the Gympie community tick. Second, a more participatory kind of community exists, one that is created in time and space on the showgrounds during the Show. Both of these forms of community are mediated through a complex combination of business and industry interests, popular participation, tradition, and the Gympie District Show Society. The Show is not an example of an organic or romantic popular event as some might imagine, but rather an event that works through commercial, institutional and bureaucratic instruments. In addition, the Show had been, until the 1980s and 1990s, a gendered event, where men have occupied the majority of positions on the Society's management committee. The structure of the event lends itself to this male bias, given the "masculine" sections of agricultural and pastoral products are considered more "important" than the "feminine" exhibits in the pavilion, despite the key civilising role of the pavilion displays.

The organisers of the Gympie Show, the Gympie District Show Society, were traditionally a group of men who were generally associated with rural enterprise, whether as farmers or as distributors of rural goods and services. From 1961 through to 1971, there were no women on the Show Society Committee. During this period, the maximum number of committee members was forty (GDSS 22 August 1983: 14). The first ever female secretary of the GAM&P Society, Elizabeth (Beth) Green, was appointed at a General Committee Meeting on 29 November 1966. When the new secretary was introduced at the following meeting, the President, WH McGeary made special mention of the fact that for the first time in the history of the Society, "a lady had been appointed to this position" (GAM&P Society 29 November 1966: 22; 15 December 1966: 24). It is

important to note that the Secretary is not a member of the Committee, being rather an employee of the Society. In 1970, Green resigned from the position, and was replaced by a male (GAM&P Society 27 August 1970: 270-71; 29 September 1970: 275).

By 1983, things had improved marginally, with three women on the committee, a female secretary, and a female Auditor, former secretary Beth Green. In that year the Society also agreed not to restrict numbers to forty, opening up more opportunities for women to become involved (GDSS 22 August 1983: 14). In 1989, four women were on the committee, involved in managing the Pavilion, Goats, Space, Catering, the Show Ball, as well as filling the Assistant Treasurer position (GDSS 9 October 1989: 305). Since then, the representation of women on the Gympie Show Society Committee has steadily grown. By 1999, ten women were on the committee, in addition to the secretary and auditor. The increased role of women was recognition of their valuable contribution to the event and their ability to be involved in formerly "male" areas, including the Ring, Stud and Prime Cattle, and Safety, as well as "traditional" sections such as the Pavilion, Schoolwork, and the Ball (GDSS 13 October 1999: 43).

Women assumed more responsibility at the Show, paralleling the increased role of women in society. Since the end of the Second World War, women have participated more in the paid workforce, increasing their involvement by 4 to 6 percent per decade since that time. By 1986, women's share of the labour force was 44 percent (Rosen 1989: 22; Dixson 1999: 225), increasing rapidly each year since. However, this increased participation of women in the workforce took some time to translate into positions on the Gympie Show Committee. Not until 1997 did women attain double-figure representation on the committee, mostly hovering around five committee members until that time. The sudden explosion of active female members in the late nineties is suggestive of Miriam Dixson's argument that a small, highly visible and articulate minority of middle-class women served as pattern-setters, inspiring other women to become involved (Dixson 1999: 222-23). The lag between the pattern-setters and greater participation appears longer than Dixson suggests, but this could be attributed to "country conservatism," which Gretchen Poiner (1990: 49) argues applies quite selectively, "especially to social and consequentially to political issues." The low figures could also relate to the fact that during the 1950s and 1960s women were frequently involved with other kinds of organisations such as church women's guilds and the Country Women's Association.

Over time, these groups became less important fixtures in the social fabric of Gympie, particularly the church guilds, and women therefore found themselves more likely to become involved in other kinds of activities, including the Gympie

District Show Society Committee. By electing women to the Show Society Committee, the male dominated Society recognised the valuable contribution of women to the Show and the Show community. Women were finally given positions on the committee that their strong, long-standing participation in and support of the Show merited, cementing the relationship women have always had with the Show, and their acceptance as part of the Show community. However, it is still hard to imagine a female president of the Society, despite the ground women have won.

There are many commercial and institutional interests that form the Show community. These organisations comprise local businesses, the *Gympie Times*, the Cooloola Shire Council (trustees of the Showgrounds), the Australian Showman's Guild, and the various representative bodies and associations of rural enterprise and sport, including the Equestrian Federation of Australia (showjumping), the Australian Professional Rodeo Association, and the various cattle breeders' associations, such as the Brahman Society. Each of these societies and associations contribute to a broad community of interests that all relate to the success or otherwise of the show. For example, the Professional Rodeo Association's sanction of the Gympie Show Rodeo as an event on the national competition circuit contributes significantly to the quality of competition in the event. Likewise, the Equestrian Federation of Australia's granting Gympie the National Showjumping Championships gave the Show greater prominence beyond the region. Cattle breeders' associations write to the Show Society requesting feature shows for their breeds, recommending judges, attracting sponsors, and ensuring breeders will present their stock at the Show. Their presence means the Show's profile is raised; new developments with their cattle breed can be discussed; and there are opportunities for networking (Email Communication, Rae Gâté to Rob Edwards 16 July 2007).

The *Gympie Times* is arguably the most important of the many organisations involved in developing a Show community. This is so, in part, because of the symbiotic relationship between the Show Society and the newspaper. The Show Society invests in advertising space in the paper, while the paper provides advertising in kind by printing quasi-news items on the Show that include a strong element of advertising. In addition, it is a major supporter of the Show in other ways. As the only local print medium, the *Gympie Times* is the crucial information provider on the Show in the local area, often including a lift-out section that details the Show program, the expectations of exhibitors and provides feature articles on the exhibits of the major industries of the region. The Show's entertainment factor is also given plenty of publicity in order to generate interest and excitement about the upcoming event, assisting the Society in drawing a crowd. In addition, the *Gympie Times* is involved in special

promotional activities, like the 1995 "Wide Bay Capricorn Gympie Times Gympie Show Great Giveaway," which offered \$8000 cash to entice visitors to the Show (GDSS 14 November 1995: 7; 29 November 1995: 6). Such heavy involvement has ensured that the *Gympie Times* has positioned itself as the major link between the broader community and the Show it supports, cementing its position at the centre of the local area.

This series of relationships between the Show Society and the various bodies, associations and societies ensures that the Show links into all the major aspects of agricultural enterprise, creating a large amount of top-down influence on the event, and the kind(s) of community(ies) it constructs. The Show is a popular event, at least in part, because of the wide variety of interests it represents, displays and attracts each year. Graham Engeman, Show Society President since 2001, states that Gympie people are involved in many activities, and "the Show actually brings all of those things together and highlights them." A strong current for Engeman is the idea that the Show brings people together. For him, the opportunity for local residents "to show the rest of the community what makes them tick" is very important, as it allows for personal exchanges and the development of a sense of community (Graham Engeman Interview 2005). Recently-resigned Show Society Secretary Rae Gâté agrees, adding that the Show gives all people within, and those visiting, the district an opportunity to "have a drink, ... have a yarn, or ... meet together and have morning tea or something" (Rae Gâté Interview 2005).

As the district's oldest and most traditional event, the Gympie Show is able to bring together all of the activities that occur in the region under the one umbrella. This enables the Gympie District Show Society to moderate the development of community at the Show. The Show Society is well respected within the town, and given the Show's status as an "institution" (Gâté Interview 2005), the positions of President and Secretary are high profile. Therefore, the umbrella of the Show becomes a place of interaction, discussion, competition and fun, which the Society facilitates.

The geography of the Showgrounds also contributes to the development of community. The ring sits in the centre of the Showgrounds, while everything else, from Sideshow Alley to the Pavilion and Machinery Alley, abuts the ring, or, in Engeman's words, "everything's ... kissing one corner of the ring" (Engeman Interview 2005). Given that the ring is constantly busy with entertainment — showjumping, the Rodeo and other events — it therefore connects everything and everybody, facilitating a sense of connectedness between visitors to the Show. As evident in map of the Gympie Showgrounds and Racecourse below (Figure 1), the ring is central to the Show, acting as a link between the various sections.



Alley to Sideshow Alley — in truth one alley, broken only by a small gap. From there, the traffic is guided along a sealed walkway towards the grandstand and Main Pavilion, imposing an order on the way visitors experience the event. Engeman observes:

the Show encompasses the ring, so you can ... basically walk your way around. It doesn't have a lot of dead areas. We don't take anything away from the ring, so as you walk around, you go from sideshow into machinery alley, and then you walk straight back into the pavilion and the out of space areas, the beef cattle, the dairy cattle, it's just, you just circle the grounds and you take it in. (Engeman Interview)

The enduring structure of the Show maintains a sense of tradition at the event, insulating it from change. One example of this immutability at the Show is the Shannon's Chips trailer, which has been in the same spot at the Show for decades. The loudspeaker announcement said, "We'll always be here," which Engeman observes, is "sobering for us all," because the Show is always there, and "we're only just temporary stewards of it" (ibid). This permanence, which creates, in de Certeau's terms, a "universal and anonymous subject" based on stable, isolatable and interconnected properties (94), is visible in the Show through the various sections and the areas in which they are housed — Machinery Alley, Sideshow Alley, the Main Pavilion. They are the regions of control and mediation that the Show Society utilises to ensure that the Show, and their power over it, is maintained.

This permanence is celebrated by members of the Gympie District Show Society as one of the reasons their Show has survived, because, as Graham Engeman noted, by not changing, as some shows did, into "big entertainment factories," the Gympie Show was offering something different, offering *tradition*. He argues that this tradition is exactly what draws people in and keeps them coming back year after year (Engeman Interview). However, this does not suggest that the Gympie Show has not changed over time. Indeed, from the greater involvement of women to the advent of a beef cattle section in the late 1940s, instances of change are not hard to find. The kind of tradition and stability that Engeman refers to is found more in memories of the event, and in the geography of the showgrounds, which give an impression of immutability to the Show. This impression of changelessness is related to something else within the show tradition, the Show's display of rural enterprise and community, together with the attendant sense of permanence and rootedness connected of the geography of the show, and to Gympie more generally.

Returning to the visitor walking through the unchanged landscape of the Show, there are gaps, opportunities to ignore the order established by the Show Society. These gaps are created by the visitor's appropriation of the landscape. Just as

in de Certeau's city, where space becomes the blind spot of the functionalist organisation — the controlling entity, whether government, police force, or Show Society — (de Certeau 95), the Showgrounds provide opportunities to escape the Show Society's careful construction of the Show's meanings. The names of places, Machinery Alley, Ring, Main Pavilion, are transformed into meeting places, sites of community, imaginary, detached from actual places and existing in the mind alone (104). Therefore, each interaction with the Showgrounds, however mediated by the Show Society, transforms the grounds into a real place only in the use of it, and in the use of the Showgrounds, senses of community are developed — organic, real, experienced. The visitor must interact with the Showgrounds on the terms that the geography of the place has set, but is not restricted in the *manner of interaction*. This facilitates a more bottom-up approach to community than that which the organisations actively attempt to construct. It is an interaction that is implicit in a *Gympie Times* report of activity at the Show in 1950: "the interested onlookers obtained mental refreshment and enjoyment in studying the modern car, machinery, trade exhibits, in circulating among many sideshows, or watching the rapidly changing ring programme" (GT 27 May 1950: 2). Note the opportunities for different kinds of reactions to the attractions: mental refreshment and enjoyment, only two of the myriad possible reactions to interactions on the Showgrounds, some of which would have been expected by the Show Society, others may not have been.

These oppositions (bottom-up versus top-down) do not preclude a coming together of interests, of interaction and development of community that encompasses both forms of community. Community is never completely oppositional and separate. Indeed, because of the organisational role of the Gympie District Show Society, there would be no Show in which to interact without the society's efforts. Further, the voluntary nature of the Show Society means that those involved in organising the Show are locals, and therefore have connections well beyond the Society's meeting rooms. Likewise for those organisations and societies that organise events in conjunction with the stewards: they all come from, and return to, their homes and social places in the local area after the show.

The Show Society understands that the bottom-up interaction is an important aspect the Show, and actively encourages it. Indeed, one of the reasons the Show is still relevant, according to Engeman, is because "it means [locals] can stop and have time to meet up with past friends and acquaintances and just have the time to have a chat." Add to this the number of volunteers involved — Engeman suggests between three hundred and four hundred assist in preparing the show — and the idea of a clear separation between the organisers and the community becomes redundant (Engeman Interview). The Showgrounds are, therefore, quite different to de Certeau's city. The Show Society actively encourages visitors to

mingle freely and attach their own meanings to places, whereas, for de Certeau, the city seeks to control everything, imposing itself physically on those living in it (95), demonstrating a level of detachment from residents of the city. Certainly, the meanings of the show exhibits are carefully constructed and represented, but the means of interaction are not, despite the high level of planning and control the society exerts over the space. Freedom is encouraged in the same way as local involvement as volunteer workers is encouraged.

Volunteers are an important facet of the event. Added to the approximately three hundred involved in preparing the Show were around 150 during it, which amounted to "at least half a dozen to a dozen volunteers with each section" (Gâté Interview). Service clubs were frequently asked to assist the Show Society. One such occasion was when the Society began planning for the "Centenary" Show, and needed to hold a "Monster Working Bee" to prepare the grounds for the event (GDSS 14 March 1987: 205). Also, a number of community groups tender for specific jobs on site and are paid by the Show Society for their labour. In 1990, St Patrick's College won the tender to control traffic and parking at the Showgrounds, while the Gympie Christian Academy Parents and Friends won the tender to clean the grounds. Each group planned to use the funds earned for school projects (GT 15 May 1990: 14). This involvement of local associations and groups is repeatedly praised in the *Gympie Times*, which stated in 2001 that the "Show Society has come up with a winning formula for the show with huge community involvement and input," observing that, "the benefits to Gympie of the Show are enormous" (GT 19 May 2001: 8).

Through the varying and often complementary artifices of official organisation, the geography of the Showgrounds, as well as the interactions of visitors, Stewards, and competitors in that space, the Gympie District Show creates a wide variety of opportunities for community. The Show Society is the official mediator and constructor of community on the Showgrounds, given their role as the organisers. It decides which community organisations do what work at the Show, with jobs such as running the Gate, directing traffic and parking, and cleaning the Showgrounds all available to the most competitive bidder. The Society also makes decisions on the Show program — which entertainers, how many sideshows — and a number of other decisions that impact on the kinds of people that might attend the event, and in what numbers. At the same time, show goers also have an element of control, based on the decision to attend the Show, and which parts of the event they are most interested in engaging with. In addition, the manner in which visitors to the Show interact with the event, and with each other, are mostly beyond the control of the Show Society, ensuring an organic form of community can develop during the course of the Show, but still framed within the Show's parameters: its ties to tradition, its stable and rigid control of space, and its rural, regional, and agricultural focus.

As an event that encompasses so many interests, the Show's potential audience is very broad. Local media plays an important part in drawing crowds to the Show, whether by advertising the Show or providing "news" items that simultaneously promote the Show, building excitement for the event. Another vital aspect of the Show's appeal is that it offers tradition, a sense of stability. However, that stability is in many cases illusory, a fictional narrative that performs a role in Gympie community pride and in maintaining ties to the past.

The Show has modernised in many ways. The clearest demonstrations of these modernising moments involves the promotion of new industries through its sections, most clearly seen with the rise of the beef cattle section in the early post-war years. Another major change saw more women take up positions on the Show Society Committee to better reflect the social realities of the times. Each of these changes were significant modernising initiatives undertaken by the Show Society, ensuring that the Show remained relevant in changing times, albeit without altering the progressivist nature of the Show's narrative.

At the same time, many traditions were retained. The most visibly unchanged aspect of the Show is the geography of the Showgrounds. This stability creates an experience of tradition, as each year the visitor knows that Shannon's Chips, the Pavilion, and Sideshow Alley will be in exactly the same spot, encircling the ring. This experience of tradition is magnified by the rural nature of the event. The ring, with its emphasis on the skills of farm life, such as showjumping, rough riding and woodchopping, remains central to experiences of the Show, and indeed central to its geography. This ensures that regardless of whether a visitor attended the Show for the sideshows, the machinery, or the cookery sections, the Show's rural story is the start and end point for visitors at all times.

The ring, by nature of its centrality to the event's geography and narrative, also provides the focal point for formations of community. The rural story articulates the region's productive diversity and its resilience by creating physical reference points for all the products and many of the cultural activities of the region. The narrative is transformed into a spatial organisation that highlights, through the sections on display, the region's progress and cultural achievements, providing opportunities for interaction, conversation, and the establishment of common bonds. Through negotiation, interaction and sometimes conflict, the Gympie District Show has been able to facilitate, and to some extent control, the development of senses of community at the event. The spatial organisation of the event facilitates the formation of community, providing visitors and Show Society committee members alike opportunities to experience the Show in unique ways that compliment and sometimes exceed the Show Society's expectations. Through these different mechanisms, the Gympie District Show creates a space for a whole of town community to develop, one that, despite

the different interests and diverse communities that visitors to the Showgrounds might belong to outside the Show, is enacted on a yearly basis during the operating hours of the event. This *experienced* community serves to reaffirm local loyalties and attachments to place, ensuring that residents not only embrace the Show, but are proud of their district as well.

The Gympie District Show suggests ways in which agricultural shows can often play integral roles in creating senses of identity and community in rural areas, places that may lack other organs of cultural inscription frequently found in metropolitan centres, such as artists, novelists, universities, or those who focus on remote regions of Australia, including anthropologists and archaeologists. In addition, displays of local produce and skills — the "best" of the region — and the careful construction of the geography of the showgrounds can facilitate social engagement and a "knowing" community with ties to its land, its people, and a story of itself through the development of a narrative of the locality. In the case of the non-metropolitan agricultural show, this narrative is based on the rural lifestyle of the region, and the implicit (and at times explicit) countrymindedness that is expressed around "showtime." In reading the show and its geography as a text, it is possible to develop understandings of the ways in which rural stories develop and reaffirm the value of the lifestyles and the lives of those living within a given region.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For studies of large, metropolitan shows, see Anderson (2003) and Scott and Laurie (2008), while studies of international exhibitions include those by McKay (1996) and Hoffenberg (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Recent examples of this include works by Bill and Jan L'Estrange (2001) and Morgan (2005). Only Kate Darian-Smith and Sara Wills (2001) have written on regional shows with any depth, while Richard Waterhouse's ground-breaking study of Australian rural cultural history, *A Vision Splendid* (2005), writes sparingly on the agricultural show, despite that event's often central role in rural cultural and community life.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Oakley (1976); Oakley (2005); and Curthoys (1981).

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