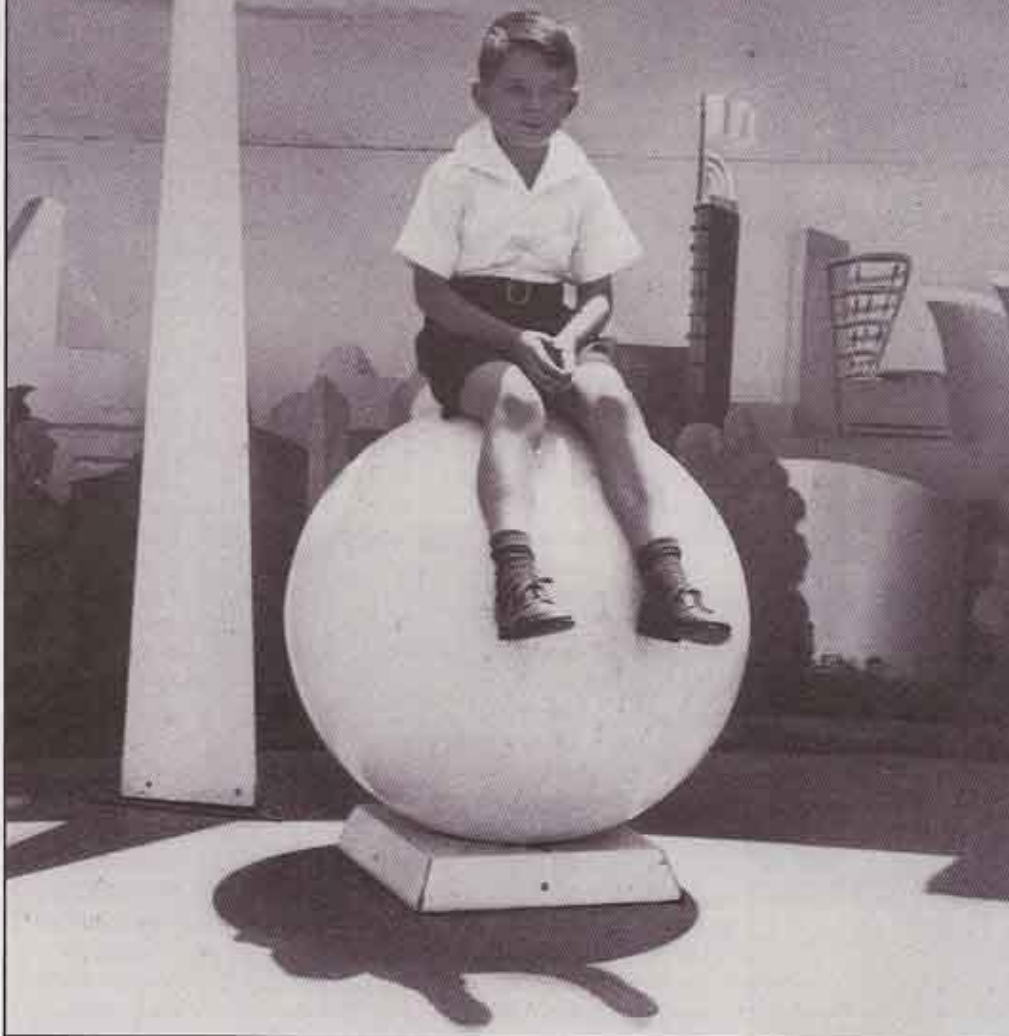


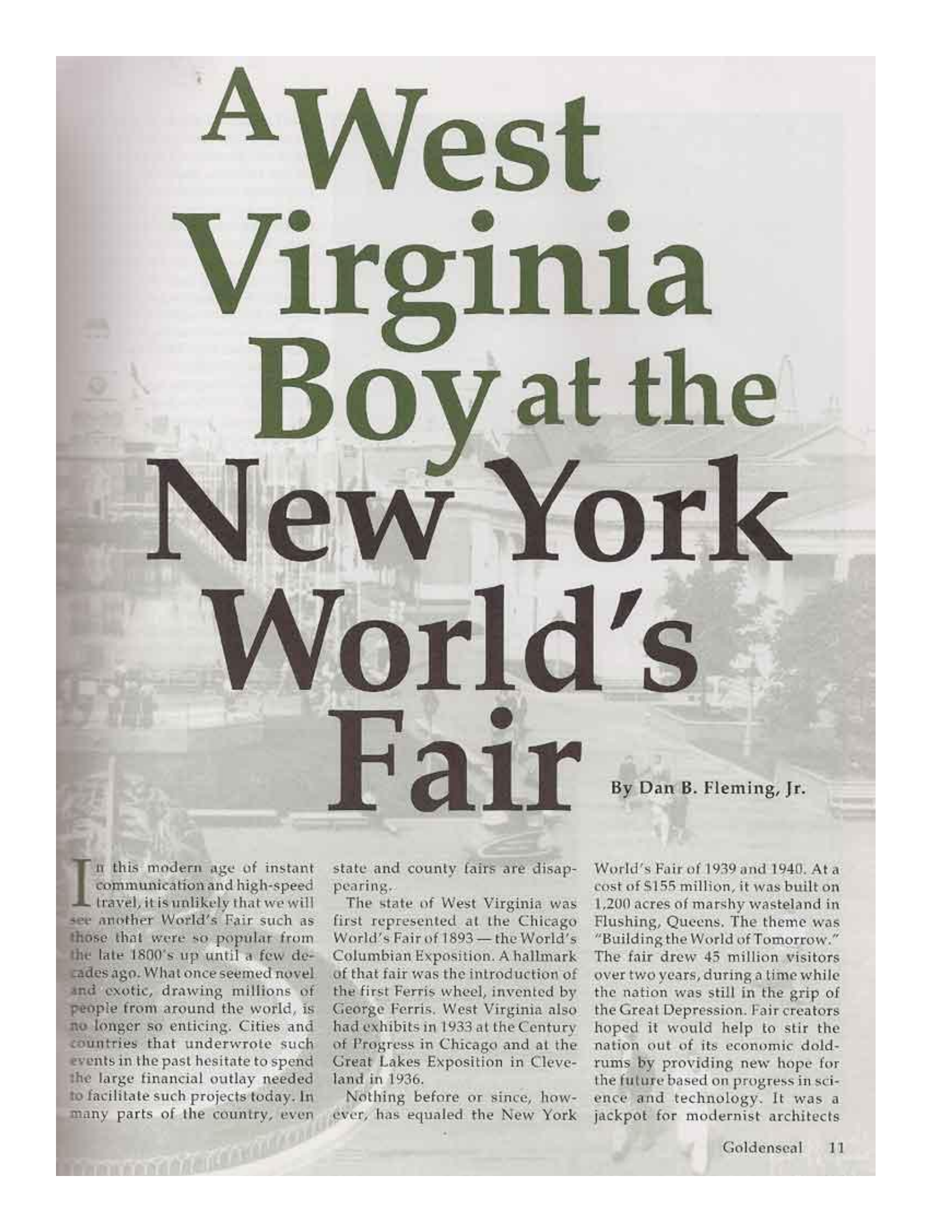
NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR 1939



Dan B. Fleming, Jr., our author, at the New York World's Fair in 1939.

Right: The Court of States included the classically styled West Virginia building, visible at right in this photo. Courtesy of the West Virginia State Archives, WVSA hereafter.

Ever since I was a young child, I have enjoyed going to a fair. Seeing the happy faces of people winning blue ribbons for the best canned preserves, listening to a "carney" pitching a midway game to win a stuffed animal, or getting messy fingers from eating cotton candy, fairs have always been fun to me. However, nothing will ever equal the unique experience I had at the New York World's Fair during the summers of 1939 and 1940.



A West Virginia Boy at the New York World's Fair

By Dan B. Fleming, Jr.

In this modern age of instant communication and high-speed travel, it is unlikely that we will see another World's Fair such as those that were so popular from the late 1800's up until a few decades ago. What once seemed novel and exotic, drawing millions of people from around the world, is no longer so enticing. Cities and countries that underwrote such events in the past hesitate to spend the large financial outlay needed to facilitate such projects today. In many parts of the country, even

state and county fairs are disappearing.

The state of West Virginia was first represented at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 — the World's Columbian Exposition. A hallmark of that fair was the introduction of the first Ferris wheel, invented by George Ferris. West Virginia also had exhibits in 1933 at the Century of Progress in Chicago and at the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland in 1936.

Nothing before or since, however, has equaled the New York

World's Fair of 1939 and 1940. At a cost of \$155 million, it was built on 1,200 acres of marshy wasteland in Flushing, Queens. The theme was "Building the World of Tomorrow." The fair drew 45 million visitors over two years, during a time while the nation was still in the grip of the Great Depression. Fair creators hoped it would help to stir the nation out of its economic doldrums by providing new hope for the future based on progress in science and technology. It was a jackpot for modernist architects



West Virginia resident commissioner State Senator Dan B. Fleming, Sr., at right, with fair official C.T. Strickling in 1939. Courtesy WVSA.

and social planners.

Convinced that this was a good opportunity to let people everywhere learn more about West Virginia, the 1937 State Legislature appropriated \$35,000 to prepare an exhibit in New York, with another \$40,000 appropriated later. A fair commission was formed. My father State Senator Dan B. Fleming was selected to be the resident commissioner for the West Virginia exhibit, with Governor Homer A. "Rocky" Holt serving as ex-officio chair. House Speaker James Kay Thomas was the vice-chairman, and Agricultural Commissioner J.B. McLaughlin was appointed secretary. The exhibit was constructed in New York over a period of two years and was barely completed in time to open on April 30, 1939.

The fair presented a view of what the world might be like in the future, ranging from cities located in space to new forms of agriculture, industry, transportation, and communication. The symbol of the fair was the 700-foot-high trylon and perisphere. Inside the perisphere

was a scale model of a city of tomorrow.

Some of the most popular industrial exhibits were sponsored by the Chrysler, Ford, and General Electric corporations. The most famous exhibit at the fair — where

you could wait for hours to enter — was Futurama, sponsored by General Motors. Visitors there would ride in a moving chair that simulated riding in an airplane as they flew over communities of the future, an experience like something from a science fiction movie. There was also an international area, including exhibits from 60 nations. A large entertainment area featured shows such as Billy Rose's Aquacade, showcasing swimmers such as Johnny Weismuller of Tarzan movie fame.

The West Virginia building was located in the Court of States and was classical in design. The interior included exposed beams and paneled wood that emphasized West Virginia's timber industry, using materials such as black walnut, butternut, birch, and spruce. There were large murals showing composite scenes of the state displayed on the upper walls, designed by W.C. Grauer, the director of the Old White Colony at White Sulphur Springs. These paintings were flanked by large photomurals enlarged by George Kossuth of Wheeling, using photos by Kossuth and other West Virginia photographers.

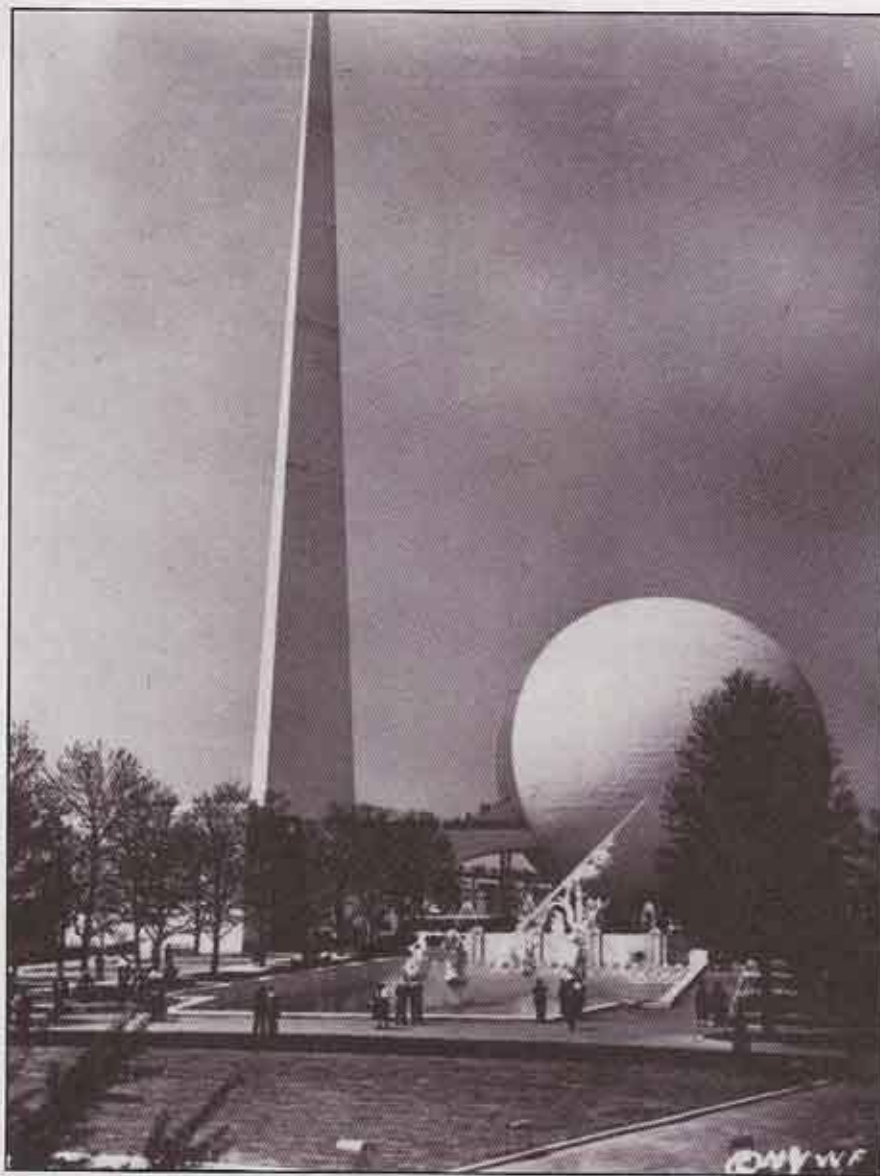


Dan Fleming, Jr., is near the front and center (see circle) in this photograph, including children from many nations, an early version of Donald Duck, and actress Judy Canova. Courtesy of WVSA

There were eight dioramas in the four walls and 10 exhibit cases housing West Virginia products, including the work of state artists and artisans. Exhibits included pottery from the Homer Laughlin China Company and Warwick China, as well as Fostoria, Blenko, Fenton, and Seneca glass. There was also pottery made by my mother Ruth Fleming, by Carol Ogdin, and by high school students from Blacksville. [See "Blacksville Pottery: Local Hands and Native Clay," by John Lilly; Spring 2000.] The smallest metal tube in the world — made of nickel by Montel Metals in Huntington — was featured, as were displays from the chemical industry of the Kanawha Valley. The most dramatic item in the exhibit was the largest block of bituminous coal ever mined. It weighed in excess of six tons and was shown in a large display case in the center of the floor.

I was seven years old when the fair began on April 30, 1939. A few weeks later, I was very excited when my mother told me that we were going to spend that summer at the fair. I was particularly excited when I discovered that I would miss the last few weeks of school. I had never been in a city larger than Charleston, so I had no idea what it would mean to live in New York or to go to a World's Fair. The only fair I had ever attended was the Pleasants County Fair in St. Marys, and that seemed a big deal to me at the time.

We took the train to New York from Parkersburg — my first overnight train ride. Our family rented an apartment near the fair in Flushing. After getting settled, my mother and I took a subway to the fairgrounds — another novel experience. Sixty-five years later, I can still remember my first view of the fair. I gawked at the spectacular buildings with futuristic murals on the walls, huge statues, lagoons with spouting fountains, and flags of all colors and designs. The first building I remember seeing was



The 700-foot tylon and nearby perisphere were hallmarks of the fair. The perisphere housed a scale model of a futuristic city.

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the U.S.S.R. pavilion, topped by a giant worker nicknamed "Worker Joe," holding a red star to the sky.

For the next two summers, my life seemed unreal. A typical day found me being given a dime and allowed to head off on my own into the fairgrounds. I soon learned that there were places I could even get free food. The Heinz exhibit had booths that gave me free samples of their products in little paper cups. My favorites were baked beans and macaroni and cheese. If it was a hot day, I would visit the



The exterior of the West Virginia building. Dan Fleming, Jr., and his mother Ruth are visible at right, standing on the steps. Courtesy of WVSA

Chrysler building, featuring a new innovation — air conditioning. One of my daily hangouts was the amusement area where I could hand-feed milk to baby bear cubs. I became acquainted with some of the operators of the children's rides, and they would let me ride for free when business was slow. I also found that a good source of money was a grassy area across from the West Virginia building, where tourists would stretch out to rest. I discovered that if I searched carefully, I could nearly always find some loose change that had dropped out of their pockets. Finding a nickel or dime was great, and a quarter was a real jackpot.

Performers of all kinds appeared at Children's World, and I would go to see shows by Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and was able to talk to movie stars such as Judy Canova — a frequent star in the comedy half of Saturday matinee

double features. It was exciting to see athletes such as Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey. My favorite experience was leading the Children's Day Parade, seated beside the World War I hero Sergeant Alvin York.

Probably the biggest moment for everyone at the fair was the visit by the King and Queen of England. They were entertained at the Hyde Park home of President Roosevelt, where they were served hot dogs and then sailed down the Hudson River to visit the fair. They took the fair by storm and were greeted by monstrous crowds, pushing and shoving to get a better look at them as they rode through the fairgrounds in an open car. I was not sure at the time why everybody was so excited, but I was there and got a good look at the King and Queen while surrounded by cheering and



The interior of the West Virginia building. Highlights included native hardwood beams and paneling; extensive murals and photographs on the walls showing scenes of the state; glass, pottery, and industrial displays; and a six-ton block of coal at the center. Photograph by Underwood & Underwood, courtesy of WVSA.

waving crowds.

My worst day at the fair was when I took the Life Saver Company parachute jump. I was placed on a tiny canvas seat and raised several hundred feet in the air. Then the chute was dropped in a semi-free fall. Even today I have a fear of heights; I am still not sure whether it started with or came after the jump.

The staff in the exhibits were all very friendly to me, with the exception of the Japanese pavilion. The staff there appeared to be very pleasant, but had little use for children, and certainly not me. On Japanese Day at the fair, representatives of Japan presented to the fair's officials a torch representing eternal friendship between the U.S. and Japan. My father often related how the Japanese pavilion was my least favorite

place to go, owing to their two-faced approach. He noted that the bombing of Pearl Harbor reinforced my view, since the "eternal friendship" lasted only a year.

My father was fortunate in being elected the president of the States' Association at the fair, providing him entree into many special events. One of his most important duties as the exhibit manager was public relations, welcoming thousands of West Virginians who visited the fair. My father loved to show the folks from back home around and would help them in any way possible. The many West Virginians living in the New York area would also frequently visit the



A live television broadcast from the fair in 1939 included, from the left, Senator Dan B. Fleming, Sr., Dan Fleming, Jr., television personality Muriel Roberts, and RCA exhibit manager and Morgantown native Joe D'Agostino. Courtesy of WVSA.

exhibit to get a taste of home.

A cross my father had to bear only too often was the unfortunate image that many visitors had of the ignorant West Virginia hillbilly. One woman from Boston told my father, in a very condescending manner, "Why, you seem just like people living anywhere," and commented on his wearing shoes. He responded to her, "At least we never burned witches at the stake."

My father loved to show the folks from back home around and would help them in any way possible.

Adding freshness to the day-to-day activities at the West Virginia exhibit was the constant flow of new hostesses who would work there for two weeks at a time. Many had never been in New York, let alone a World's Fair, and the enthusiasm of these short-term employees infected everyone with their joy and excitement. They were provided with travel and per diem expenses, allowing many West Virginians, such as school teachers, a chance to work the fair while helping represent the state in greeting visitors and performing other duties.

Another West Virginian, Joe D'Agostino, originally from Morgantown, was manager of one of fair's most featured exhibits — the RCA pavilion. He soon became a good friend of my father. In 1932, D'Agostino

had been the first man in the United States to have television reception in his home, which was located in Plainfield, New Jersey. Before managing the RCA exhibit, he was an engineer for the National Broadcasting Company and built the first amateur radio station in Morgantown. Graduating from West Virginia University at the age of 18, he went to New York and became a leader in helping to develop the new invention of television. Despite his success in New York, Joe remained true to his West Virginia roots and served five years as head of the New York WVU Alumni Association.

Joe invited my father and me to be televised with him at the set in

the pavilion, so we were on world-wide television in 1939. Of course, there were only a few hundred sets that could receive the show at the

time. While we were being televised, I was worried that I would foul up as they asked me questions while large cameras and very bright and hot lights loomed over us. As a result, I didn't fully appreciate the unique experience until years later.

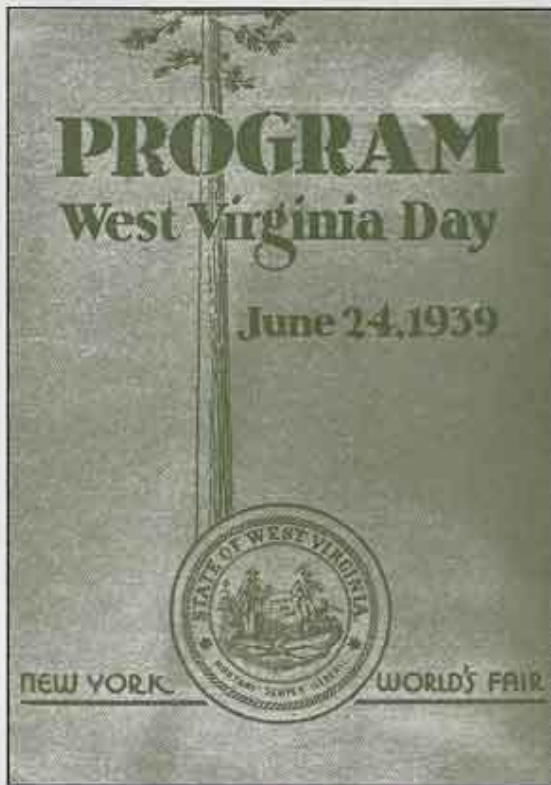
Each state with an exhibit at the fair had their day in the sun. West Virginia Day was quite a big event, with special trains leaving the northern and southern parts of the state, as well as Washington, D.C., bringing hundreds of guests to attend the two-day program. In 1939, the speakers included Assistant Secretary of War Louis Johnson of Clarksburg and John W. Davis, presidential candidate in 1924, also a native of Clarksburg. In 1940, Governor Homer A. Holt was the featured

speaker. A high point in 1940 was the vocal program presented by Eleanor Steber, well-known singer at the Metropolitan Opera and a native of Wheeling. She later visited the West Virginia building.

Each West Virginia Day also featured a West Virginia Breakfast, including everything from Morgan County tomato juice and Preston County buckwheat cakes to Pocahontas County lamb chops and Fayette County sourwood honey. One unique touch in the program was a recipe for cooking ramps — certainly a dish unknown to New Yorkers.

When not at the fair, we would often go into Manhattan. I was most unimpressed by Chinese food, but I enjoyed the unique aromas, sights, and sounds of New York. A favorite story, one I have told so often that it bores my children, concerns the time when my mother took me to see a world premier movie. Since I was accustomed to the old Robey Theater in St. Marys, I did not know what to expect. We waited more than an hour in a line several blocks long to see the *Wizard of Oz*. Adding to the excitement were the in-person appearances of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, who sang, danced, and spoke to us from the stage.

The second year of the fair in 1940 was much less exuberant than the first. World War II had broken out the previous fall, and some nations failed to return the second year. Germany had no exhibit and was the only major European nation not represented. Sadly, a suitcase bomb was set off at the British pavilion on the Fourth of July, killing two people and wounding others, making future visitors uneasy as to what might happen to them. The war atmosphere, coupled with the ongoing Great Depression, contributed to the fair losing money. The second year, the amusement area was less cultural and more "honky-tonk," featuring carnival attractions, naked women, and other shows that I did not see.



Wheeling opera singer Eleanor Steber presented a vocal program to highlight the 1940 West Virginia Day at the World's Fair. Courtesy of WVSA.



The Fleming family at the fair. From the left, they are Dan B., Jr., sister Eleanor, mother Ruth, and Dan B., Sr. Date unknown, courtesy of WVSA.

By the end of the summer of 1940, I was a real veteran fairgoer; the *New York Herald Tribune* called me "a champion sightseer of the fair." At the end of August, my mother and I returned home by train. The following Tuesday, I began school at St. Marys Elementary School, my perspective of the world greatly broadened, to say the least.

One of the last remnants of the fair for me occurred shortly after we returned home. We received a call that a live turkey had arrived for me at the train station. Apparently, I had signed up to win a turkey at the Virginia exhibit and had won. For a time, we wondered what else might show up out of the blue.

Despite all the glamour of the fair and New York, it was wonderful to return home and lead a normal life once again. My father stayed until the fair closed on October 27, 1940. Today, you can still visit the site of the fairgrounds, located near Shea Stadium. The Queens Museum has an excellent display on the fair. Most of the

materials on the fair from my father's personal collection have been donated to the West Virginia State Archives in Charleston.

Thinking back about those marvelous days at the fair 65 years ago, West Virginia seems to have been well represented, showing the best features of the Mountain State. Many visitors ranked it near the top of the state exhibits. My family was proud to help represent West Virginia to the rest of the world. Even though I left the state many years ago, I am still a dyed-in-the-wool Mountaineer. 🍁

DAN B. FLEMING is a native of St. Marys, currently living in Blacksburg, Virginia. He graduated from West Virginia University with a master's degree in political science, received his doctorate in teacher education from George Washington University, and served as a Fulbright Scholar in India and a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association. He is professor emeritus of education at Virginia Tech. This is Dan's first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.



West Virginia was well represented at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, our author reports. Here, state officials raise the West Virginia flag on opening day, April 30, 1939. They are, from the left, Senator Dan B. Fleming, Sr., Speaker of the House James Kay Thomas, and Senate President William M. LaFon. Courtesy of WVSA.