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# Fair Fotos

BY WENDY LIBERATORE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLIFFORD OLIVER

Through the lens of Clifford Oliver's camera, the ubiquitous sights of the county fair are transformed into timeless nods to rural living.

He captures the focused determination of a boy atop a massive Percheron horse, the thrill and fear on the faces of rollercoaster riders, and the wet and dimpled nose of an ox. Moreover, Oliver's photographs of New York's county fairs glorify its people—those who visit by the thousands and the exhibitors who make the seasonal spectacle what it is. Yet no matter where he turns his lens, Oliver sets up his scenes to define the annual summer ritual as iconic, wholesome, and pleasurable.

"Cliff captures with his camera the joy of the fairgoers and participants," said Ida Williams, public relations and marketing manager for the Washington County Fair (WCF). "Awe, wonder, and happiness. The WCF folk life that his photos represent document the vast array of activities that are occurring at any given moment at the fair. Not only does he capture the action, he captures the emotion."

The folks at the fair liked his photos so much that, a few years ago, they hired Oliver as its official photographer.

"It's so much fun and so beautiful," said Oliver of the Greenwich event that takes place every August. "It celebrates how we live, and there is something for the entire family."



Plowboy atop a Percheron horse.



The veteran photographer said he has been in love with the county fair since childhood. A native of the Bronx, he lost himself in books about the wilderness and rural living. And against his mother's better judgment, he also tended a menagerie in their city apartment, which included dogs, rabbits, chickens, and a snake. With his love for animals and the country, he cherished his frequent weekend visits to upstate New York to see extended family and friends. On one of those trips, his family made its way to the Dutchess County Fair in Rhinebeck. It was a revelation.

Above Left: Rollercoaster riders at the Washington County Fair.

Above Right: Laughing Percheron.

Right: Nosey ox at the Washington County Fair.



“The animals, the people, the food, the carnival atmosphere—I loved it all,” he said. “Everything I love about the country was compressed in one place for a week. It was wonderful.”

Moreover, he realized that the county fair was, and still is, responsible for upholding fading agrarian traditions.

“I think the county fair helps to preserve rare and endangered feats,” said Oliver, who is well known regionally as a portrait and landscape photographer. “You see a sheep being clipped, and its wool being spun, and a team of six horses being driven. It’s not often you see that. It’s beautiful.”

Not surprisingly, Oliver eagerly began to document it with his camera.

“For a city kid, I thought it was a fantasy land, and too, I was having experiences that my inner city peers didn’t have,” he said. “Photographing it was proof.”

*Above:* Draft horses pulling weight with focus on horseshoes.

*Right:* Scott Nokowski waves from his tractor.





*Right:* Fairgoers Howard and Fuller.

*Below:* Team of six working horses, pulling wagon.







Besides, he added, “I always take pictures of things I love.”

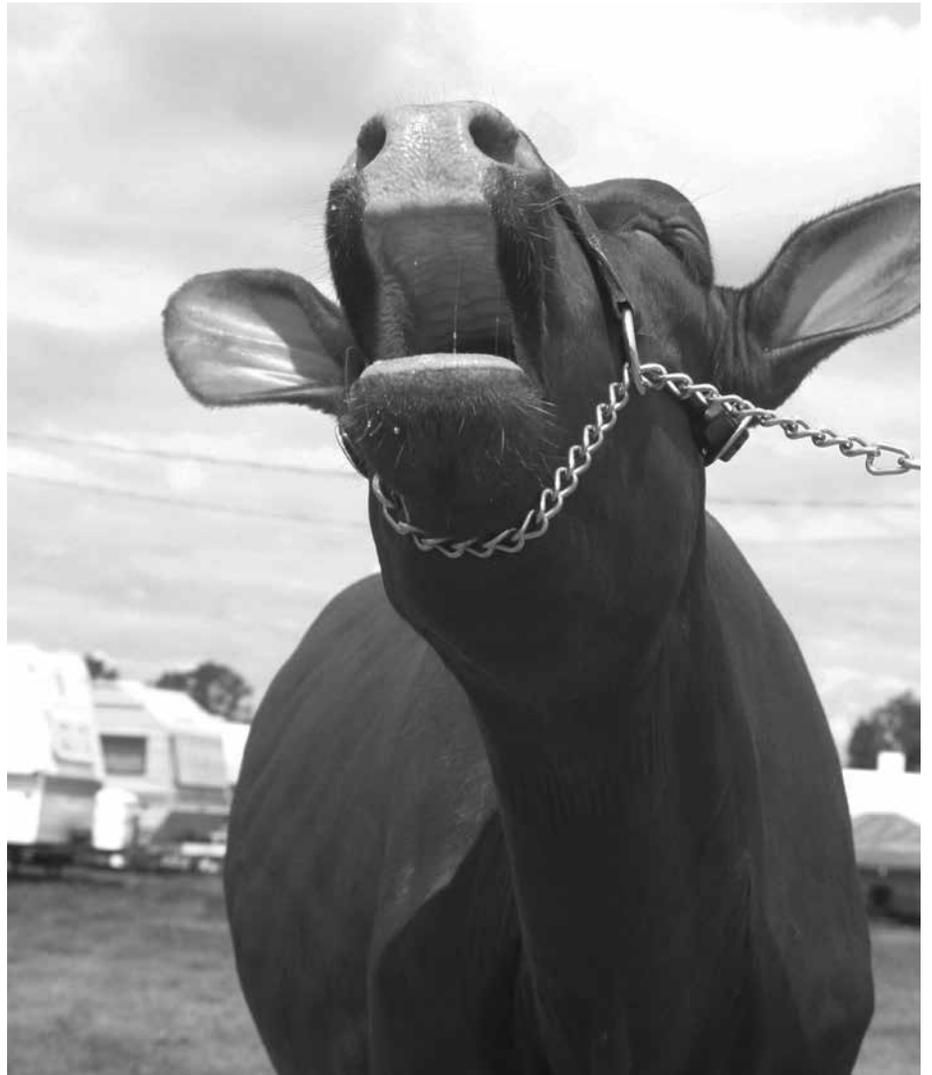
After a stint with the US Navy, during which time Oliver honed his photo skills, he moved to Pine Plains. In his decade there, he photographed the Dutchess County Fair. After landing a job as a biomedical photographer at Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, he regularly trained his camera on the New York State Fair, with an occasional visit to the Herkimer and Cayuga county fairs. But the pursuit was recreational.

When he moved to Greenwich in 1990, to become the staff photographer of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservations, he discovered the Washington County Fair. He recognized that this fair was special.

*Left:* Ruth Potter at spinning wheel at the Saratoga Fair.

*Above:* Washington County Fair bicycle giveaway.

*Right:* Singing cow.

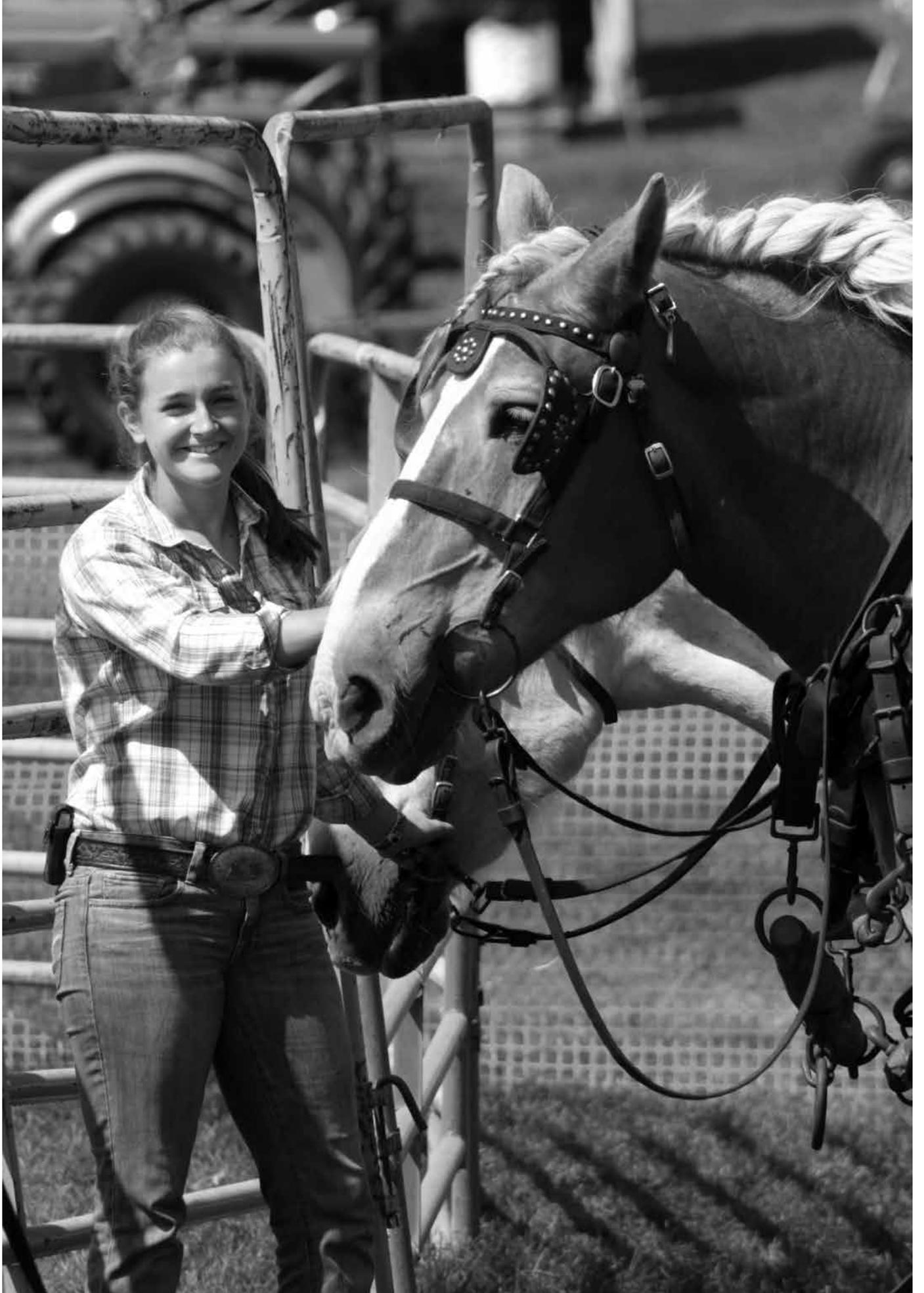




Three "ticket ladies" greeting fairgoers at the gate at the Washington County Fair.



Equine coffee clutch at the Washington County Fair.



Easton Murray leading two horses by harnesses.



Easton Highway Supervisor, in straw hat.



Helping hands at the Washington County Fair.

“It was the best of all fairs,” said Oliver. “It had the largest collection of animals, a big horse show with pleasure horses, gymkhana, barrel races, rodeo, and the working horses. I love draft horses. They are so strong, intelligent, and versatile.”

That adoration is plainly in view in his photographs. Consider the image of a team of draft horses pulling weights. The focus is on their strength—chest of rippling muscles, supported by large legs with bulging joints and mug-sized hooves. Two men, in the rear, adjust the slide of concrete weights that shift as

these powerful animals easily haul their burden.

In yet another image, Oliver’s keen eye grabbed a team of six horses pulling a wagon with two cowboy hat-wearing drivers. With dust kicking up around the animal’s feet and a ridge of trees as the backdrop, the photo hints of the frontier pioneers.

“These are the animals that built America,” said Oliver. “They worked the fields, they carried us to war. People used to be brought up to handle horses. The fair shows us this. Horsemanship hasn’t changed much, but it’s a fading art.”

While Oliver is attracted to the herds of farm animals, he also is lured by the old-time country arts. That’s obvious in a portrait of a woman at her spinning wheel. Dressed with care in skirt, blouse, and jewelry, and her hair pulled back neatly in a bun, the woman sits in a sheep barn, spinning wool. Surrounded by other spinners, this older, stately looking woman glances up at the camera as her wheel spins rapidly in a blur.

“I feel like the photos provide a historical record,” said Oliver. “I’m afraid these things will go away.”

His pictures also demonstrate Oliver’s reverence for fair fellowship. Exhibitors readily smile for his camera, helping him to grab a shot of a happy young woman leading two horses by their harnesses, a man waving from the seat of his tractor, and a trio of women greeting fairgoers at the gate.

The delight of the visitors is palpable, too. It is clear on the faces of a man in a straw hat and a little girl in cowboy boots who, pressed against a corral fence, perhaps daydreams of the year she rides a horse like the one cantering by.



*Above:* A wishful little girl watches a rider at the Washington County Fair.

*Right:* Eraserhead at the Washington County Fair.

After the fair shuts down for another year, Oliver hands over his photographic record to fair officials who will use it for advertisements, programs, and other promotional material for the following year.

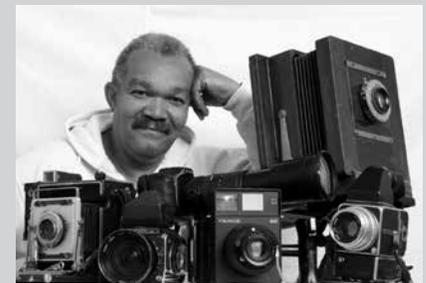
“In the selection I look for the photo that is going to reach the potential fairgoer on the personal level,” said Williams. “I want them



to think, ‘I want that.’ For the fairgoer, “that” is not an item, but a moment or connection. In a time when connections are distant and primarily through electronic sources, Cliff is able to capture the intimate, cherished moments of life.”

For this, Oliver only receives a small stipend. But he doesn’t seem to mind.

“When I’m at the fair, I feel like I’m in heaven,” said the photographer who spends every hour of the week within its borders. “I have access, and I photograph to my heart’s content, and at the same time, expose the joys of the farm. I think it will always have a universal appeal.” ▼



Clifford Oliver has been focusing his camera on a wide variety of subjects including equines, canines, portraits, and lifestyles. His images have appeared in numerous books, magazines, and in exhibitions in such distinguished spaces as the Fenimore Art Museum and the Albany Institute of History and Art. He lives in Greenwich, New York.

Wendy Liberatore is a freelance writer who specializes in dance and visual arts. She is a regular contributor to *The Daily/Sunday Gazette* and *Saratoga Living*. Her works have also appeared in *Playbill*, *Dance Magazine*, *Chronogram*, and *Hudson Valley Magazine*. She lives in Greenwich, New York.



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