

'Progressive and proud'

Each year, more of the curious and eager gather at a Wisconsin fairgrounds to celebrate some old-fashioned liberalism.

By P. J. HUFFSTUTTER
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BARABOO, WIS. — As Russell Beecher, a lifelong Republican, wandered through the political picnic at the Sauk County Fairgrounds this weekend, he was reeling from the celebration of all things liberal.

Inside the fair's pole barn, hawkers sold hundreds of neon-orange "Impeach Bush!" T-shirts and "Say No to War!" buttons. Grandmothers in floppy flower-print hats gabbed about universal healthcare coverage. Aging hippies, gathering petition signatures to pull troops from Iraq, stood side by side with volunteers for presidential candidates registering voters and handing out bumper stickers.

Suddenly, Beecher spotted an island of respite: A booth promoting Texas congressman and Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul.

But the campaign volunteers were quick to promote Paul as a "different" kind of GOP candidate and remind the crowd that "Republicans used to be the party of liberals."

The fair, known as the Fighting Bob Fest, is an annual celebration of old-fashioned liberalism — the really, really old-fashioned kind.

Each year in this rural community of about 10,700, farmers, city dwellers and political junkies from across the Midwest gather to honor Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette — a firebrand who, nearly a century ago, fought against railroad trusts, the U.S. entering World War I and the League of Nations. Once a Republican governor and senator, he grew so disdainful of the party system that he helped found the state's progressive movement.

He was also an inspiration to a group of modern progressives looking to celebrate liberalism. In 2002, it organized a traditional "chautauqua," or family reunion, here in south-central Wisconsin. It was like the ones La Follette used to get his message across in the early 1900s.

That first year, nearly 1,000 people showed up to drink beer, eat organic-beef bratwursts and rail against a White House administration that was leading the country to war in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Since then, the beer and the rhetoric continue to flow, and the crowds have steadily grown for an event that's part political rally, part Midwestern jamboree.

"It's become a ritual for Midwesterners with a sense of humor and a liberal streak in them — no matter how small that streak might be," said Beecher, 42, a freelance writer based in Chicago. "And my streak is very small."



THE USUAL SUSPECTS: Marcie Jessup, right, leads mock characters of President Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald H. Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice, all in jailhouse stripes.

This year, the festival drew more than 7,000 curious Democrats and Republicans, eager Libertarian and Green Party voters, and some who are politically homeless.

In the immediate aftermath of this year's fest, attendees have flooded organizers with e-mails and phone calls, searching for ways to bolster the region's progressive voting bloc.

"It shows that this is not a historical event, but a movement of the moment," said John Nichols, an associate editor of the Capital Times, a progressive newspaper that co-sponsors the event. "To many voters, the political calculations of both parties are offensive to the spirit of Bob La Follette."

Ed Garvey, one of the event's founders, said Monday that there were discussions about expanding the festival next year and holding similar events in Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois.

That such a festival even exists is unusual, said Larry Sabato, a political scientist at the University of Virginia.

It's far from the regular stomping grounds for this year's presidential hopefuls. Major-party politicians opt to eat barbecue and sling barbs at one another at such traditional gatherings as the Fancy Farm Picnic in western Kentucky, or down piles of herring and trade quips at the Shad Planking in Virginia.

Indeed only a handful of White House contenders — including Paul, Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) — have even bothered to set up a volunteer booth in the festival's barn.

"Still, if any state were going to host one [like this], it makes sense that it'd be Wisconsin," Sabato said. "It's a very purple state: It was so close in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections that the Democrats barely took the state by the rind of its cheese."

Hawkers lined the fairground's midway, selling ideology along with La Follette tchotchkes. A Fighting Bob pocket knife? A bottle of Fighting Bob "Regime Change" mustard, in smoky garlic flavors?

"What a deal!" said Suzanne Bergen, 60, a member of the Raging Grannies, an international activist group.

But she left her wallet untouched. For her and most of the attendees, this was a day for celebration, not commerce. "La Follette would probably hate such things," Bergen said.

Attendees cheerfully crammed onto the fairground's plywood bleachers, munched on grilled-cheese sandwiches — made with Wisconsin milk, free of growth hormones — and shared lyric sheets for political sing-alongs.

"My apologies to the estate of John Denver in advance," Wisconsin-based singer Peter Leidy said.

Standing on a tiny platform, encircled by dozens of oversized tires from a recent tractor pull, Leidy took a deep breath and launched the crowd into a few rousing rounds of "Take Me Home, Karl Rove: As Sung By President George W. Bush."

"Almost heaven, Crawford Texas/Going back there, home to where my ranch is/Life is good there, better than D.C./People pointing fingers, coming after me."

Wisconsin Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton shook her head in amusement.

"To borrow a quote, 'This is a hootenanny for heretics,'" Lawton later told the crowd.

"That's right!" shouted Arnold Williamson, 64, a dairy farmer clad in a T-shirt that read "Hubert Humphrey in '68."

"We're progressive and proud!"

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Huffstutter was recently on assignment in Wisconsin.

THE NATION



Photographs by ANDY MANIS For The Times

ANNUAL FETE Gloria Berman, left, and Suzanne Bergen, members of the Raging Grannies group, entertain attendees of the *Highland Bowl* in Baraboo, Wis. The fair is named after Robert La Follette, who helped found the state's progressive movement.