

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

Sept. 7, 2006

WITH THE KIDS

Cue the pig and spider

The upcoming film 'Charlotte's Web' is a handy tie-in for the county fair.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

Pity the life of the poor animal actor, especially the nameless porker that will be assuming a starring role at the new "Charlotte's Web" exhibit at the Los Angeles County Fair, which opens Friday in Pomona.

Tackling the role of Wilbur from E.B. White's classic children's tale, Piggy A has been given daily baby lotion massages to get his complexion a luxurious milky white — after all, he'll have nonstop meetings with his adoring public and be at the center of countless photo opportunities throughout the 18-day run of the fair.

"If the little fella gets tired of all the attention, we have a couple of others ready to take over," says Sky Shivers, superintendent of the newly renovated Big Red Barn, where the exhibit will be housed. "We can't call them stand-ins, though. They're pigs. More like lay-ins."

Other live animals — and one giant spider — will be presented alongside Wilbur in the bucolic barnyard that is a faithful re-creation of Zuckerman's farm from Paramount Pictures' live action film "Charlotte's Web," starring Dakota Fanning and due out this Christmas.

Using materials and stills from the motion picture, fair officials worked carefully to construct a near duplicate of the barn with weather vane and cupola, outside pens and surrounding hills, albeit at about one-third the actual size. Walk-around characters from the movie, storytelling and a fair-wide scavenger hunt are also planned for the area.

The movie company's incursion into the realm of county fairs makes sense, considering the L.A. County edition draws about 1.3 million visitors a year, says Gerry Rich, president of worldwide marketing for Paramount.

"Our relationship with the fair is one of those rare opportunities to reach our audience in a compelling atmosphere as opposed to putting up just another billboard or poster," Rich says.

After all, the theme of the movie and the countryside locales seem to mesh with what a county fair is all about — animals, friendship and families.

"Replicating the iconic image of Zuckerman's farm just fits perfectly for everyone involved," Rich says. "The barn is such a magical place in the movie and we want to give audiences a hint of that at the fair."

In addition to the critters scampering about at Zuckerman's — such as Templeton the rat, Gussy and Golly geese and Samuel the sheep — livestock runs the gamut at the fair barn, from ordinary chickens and goats to exotic Asian water buffalo, ostriches and llamas. Herding and guardian dogs will also be standing by, with several breeds of rabbits, turkeys and game birds.

There's also a section for odd farm animals that includes unusual swine, sheep and goats with naturally occurring wild color patterns or those mimicking other species, oddly shaped horns and miniature stature.

The barn boasts one of the largest petting yards around Southern California where kids can mingle with about 125 furry friends, as well as catch numerous shows and demonstrations.

"About 97% of our visitors walk through our barn," says Kathy Wadham, the fair's exhibits manager.

"We figure 600,000 children get to see these animals and learn more about what they provide for us."

Wadham says that one of the biggest attractions at the barn is the maternity ward, where about 60 animals are born every year at the fair. She remembers one year being amazed watching a huge crowd of adults and kids that stood patiently for

six hours waiting for a cow to give birth.

"That shows us how important it is to help educate folks about animals and just how important agriculture is," she says. "Sure, come and have fun, but we hope they learn a little something too."

A little of this, a little of that ...

This year, the L.A. County Fair is full of gut-wrenching rides (like the zero-gravity upchuck thrill of the Skycoaster, which combines skydiving and hang gliding) and gut-ripping foods (like the new Krispy Kreme chicken sandwich served with honey and optional slice of cheese), but there are plenty of activities that don't push the extreme envelope.

If you need to escape the scorching sun, head over to Winter Wonderland, where the fictional town of Snow Port Village is re-created with beachside and snowy décor. Kids can take a twirl on an ice rink, slide down a mini-toboggan run and pay a visit to Santa. Everyone can stay for a staged show every hour that ends with an unexpected flurry of floating white stuff.

Live animal shows, storytelling and daily presentations from children's authors await guests at the America's Kids/Education Expo. This year, the "Leap Into Literature" theme also features character appearances weekdays from such well-known books such as *Stellaluna*, the *Berenstain Bears*, *Clifford the Big Red Dog* and *Madeline*.

Saunter over to Heritage Square and watch — or participate in — myriad old-timey activities such as panning for gold, making adobe bricks, quilting and rag-doll sewing. Kids can play with vintage toys and games to find out what life was like before Xbox and iPods. For some Old West action, check out the new Gold Rush High Dive Show, which promises a lot of hootin' and hollerin', as well as a really big ladder.

Elsewhere, families can catch the daily fair parade led by the majestic Budweiser Clydesdales, admire the handiwork of Habitat for Humanity volunteers as they construct a 900-square-foot home that ultimately will be relocated to Chino, and tour the Fairplex Garden Railroad, where they can actually operate the mini-trains that span more than 5,000 feet of track.

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Brenda Rees can be reached at weekend@latimes.com.