

THE DREAM CITY

The World's Columbian Exposition, 1893

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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, fellow members of  
the Athenaeum:

Zipper...

Belly Dancing...

Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer...

and the massive, sustained use of alternating  
current electricity.

These things have something in common other  
than the fact that all four played prominent roles at  
my bachelor party. All four debuted or were  
popularized at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, also  
known as the "World's Columbian Exposition." Few  
people today recognize the importance of this event,  
which observers at the close of the 1800's described

as the most significant event in America in that century, other than the Civil War. The Columbian Exposition changed our nation, and its themes and advances and influence reverberate in our modern world. Tonight, I'll take you there.

World's fairs were a big deal in the nineteenth century. In the 1880's, Americans began discussing the idea of holding one in 1892 to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. Chicago soon emerged as one of the front-runners to host the Fair.

The Chicago of the late 1800's was a booming city. Chicago had re-emerged from the ruins of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. From 1870 to 1890, the

population of Chicago **quadrupled**, and by 1890, it was America's second-largest city. Still, Chicago had an inferiority complex, and was viewed by many throughout the U.S. and the world as being decidedly second-rate. In 1890, Rudyard Kipling wrote of Chicago: "Having seen it, I desire never to see it again. It is inhabited by savages."

To burnish its image, the leading men of Chicago fought hard to get the fair. Chicago's leading men worked and spoke tirelessly trying to win the right to be host city. Indeed, the volume and persistence of Chicago's oratory in pursuit of the World's Fair caused a New York newspaper editor Charles Anderson Dana to describe Chicago in a

particularly memorable way. And so, the Columbian Exposition's first permanent contribution to American culture became Chicago's nickname of "the Windy City" – based on its politicians, and not on the breezes off Lake Michigan.

In November, 1890, Congress chose Chicago to host the Columbian Exposition. Chicago's first task was to select an architectural firm to oversee building the Fair, and they chose the Chicago firm of Burnham and Root. Of these two men, John Root was known as being both the brains and the charm of the firm, with Daniel Burnham viewed more as an affable but accomplished sidekick. The Boards asked Burnham and Root to provide a general outline for

the Exposition within 24 hours, and Burnham and Root did not disappoint. They proposed a collection of immense neo-classical buildings, the beauty and scale of which the world had never seen before, set amidst a system of canals and lagoons. The plan dazzled the Boards, and Burnham and Root got approval to do whatever was necessary to bring their ambitious plans to fruition. Burnham and Root knew that it would take miracles to bring their vision to reality – the scheduled opening of the Exposition was only about two short years away, and nobody had ever attempted such a massive construction project.

Burnham and Root first secured the involvement and cooperation of America's leading architects of

the time, including their competitor, Louis Sullivan. Perhaps their best choice was the man to head up designing and building the grounds – America’s best landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmstead.

From my work as an attorney, I know that construction law and Murphy’s law are close relatives. The building of the Columbian Exposition proved to be no exception.

First, there was the issue of deciding upon an actual site for the Exposition within Chicago. After much political maneuvering (and considerable delay), they agreed on a location by the shores of Lake Michigan, known as Jackson Park. Jackson Park was a sandy, marshy, and desolate spot. But Jackson Park

it would be. In February, 1891, the all-star architects signed on, and within a week, all produced drawings complying with Burnham and Root's directions – that the buildings be neoclassical in style and enormous, and that their cornices all be at a uniform height of 60 feet to promote a sense of unity and harmony on the fairgrounds.

And then things really became challenging...

John Root caused the first major problem by dying. Pneumonia killed him only days after the architects submitted their first drafts. From then on, Daniel Burnham alone, the lesser of the two partners, would bear the burden of being in charge of the Exposition's construction.



And what a burden it was. The design of the Exposition included eighteen major buildings in a so-called “Court of Honor,” the largest of which would be the Manufacturers’ and Liberal Arts Building. The Manufacturers’ Building would be the biggest single structure ever built to that time. To give you an idea of its immensity, it was to be larger than the U.S. Capital, the Great Pyramid, Winchester Cathedral, Madison Square Garden, and St. Paul’s Cathedral – **combined**. To put it in more local terms, the Manufacturers’ Building would be 1.3 million square feet, compared to our Wal-Mart Distribution Center’s 1.25 million square feet. The Manufacturers’ Building would be bigger, built

without power tools, cranes, bulldozers and such, and designed by draftsmen without computers or any precedents at all. All the while, they would also be building 17 other smaller but equally grand buildings, and dozens of state and foreign exhibit buildings, all in the span of only two years.

And then the economy tanked. Railroads closed, banks failed, and the American and international economies spiraled downward into a depression.

On top of that, construction on the Exposition site did not get off to an auspicious beginning. Labor unrest began immediately.

But the problems weren't limited to the people working on the Exposition. When engineers tested

the sandy, marshy grounds of Jackson Park, they discovered that the ground was softer than they'd thought. The engineers learned that their plans called for building the world's largest building directly over the softest ground in the area. Test weights placed on that site kept sinking into oblivion.

Meanwhile, work began on the other buildings and on collecting exhibits for the Exposition. In their very first effort to secure an exhibit, the Exposition Boards dispatched a man to Zanzibar, with directions to locate a tribe of pygmies, and entice a family of them to return to Chicago for the Fair. He had two years to accomplish this. Somewhere in Zanzibar, he was killed.

Meanwhile, the organizers worked on powering the Exposition. Early on, it became obvious that electricity would be a major focus of the Exposition. Thomas Edison and GE, lobbied hard to get to be the power provider for the Exposition. They proposed electrifying the Exposition for \$1.8 million, and insisted that they would not make “one penny of profit on the deal.” The Board, however, described that bid as “extortionate,” and refused. GE came back with a bid of \$554,000. However, the Westinghouse Company proposed to supply the Exposition with a new, experimental form of electricity, called “alternating current,” and said they’d do it for \$399,000. Westinghouse got the

contract to wire the Exposition, and thus the Fair changed the history of electricity.

Construction on the first building of the Court of Honor didn't begin until July 3, 1891, only sixteen months before the Exposition's scheduled Dedication Day. Construction was already behind. Also, people across America were distressed that the Exposition planners had yet to find one great, singular, defining work for the Fair. Everyone in the world knew that the previous world's fair, the Paris Exposition of 1889, had produced what most people considered the engineering marvel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the Eiffel Tower. Chicagoans and all Americans wanted to find something comparable to the Eiffel Tower for the

Columbian Exposition. There were ideas, but none comparable to Eiffel's masterpiece.

Work on the Fair's other attractions, however, was progressing well. Among the apparent success stories at this point was development of a section of the Fair called the "Midway Plaisance." Originally, the organizers envisioned the Midway as a place where visitors would be **educated** about foreign cultures. To that end, the initial head of the Midway was a Harvard professor of ethnography. When the Harvard Professor abruptly quit, the Boards chose a 21-year-old entrepreneur and promoter named Sol Bloom to oversee the Midway. Bloom changed the focus to entertainment and created such a successful

concept that to this day, every carnival, state fair, and amusement park has a place called the “Midway” -- another enduring legacy of the Columbian Exposition.

Sol Bloom made other lasting contributions to our culture --to Sol Bloom and the Columbian Exposition go the credit for bringing “belly dancing” to America. The Boards were so confident that Bloom’s belly dancer would be a hit at the Fair, that they dispatched her and Bloom throughout the Midwest to impress business leaders. At one meeting, Bloom discovered that his hosts had no musical accompaniment for the bellydancer other than a solo pianist who had no idea what to play. Off

the top of his head, Bloom composed a tune to accompany the belly dancer, and it joins our growing list of enduring legacies of the Columbian Exposition – (sing).

Work on building the Fair continued apace. Although construction on the buildings was wildly over-budget and behind schedule, there was some cause for optimism. However, frustration grew over the absence of anything comparable to the Eiffel Tower.

Eventually, this frustration effected Burnham, the usually-diplomatic architect overseeing the building of the Fair. This frustration led him to attend a meeting of the engineers working on the



Fair. The engineers went to the meeting expecting ~~the polite~~ Burnham to thank them for their work, but instead Burnham raged against the engineers, accusing them of letting down the nation by failing to come up with something to “out-Eiffel Eiffel.” One young engineer took Burnham’s challenge to heart. Even while Burnham spoke, wheels started turning in his mind, and he came up with an idea. The young engineer was named George Washington Gale Ferris. Thus the Columbian Exposition would give us yet another enduring item. People have been riding Ferris Wheels ever since.

~~By the Spring of 1892, construction on all of the Fair’s major buildings was well underway, but there~~

<sup>More</sup> ~~were still~~ <sup>emerged</sup> problems as the Dedication Day loomed  
drew closer. The international economy continued to  
decline. Scores of workers were injured building the  
Fair, and dozens died. Workers constantly threatened  
to strike. Men and women from Algeria showed up  
to take their place in the Algerian Village in the  
Midway, only to discover that they had been told to  
show up one year too early. Storms often damaged  
or destroyed the buildings under construction.

Faced with all the problems and delays, the  
Fair's painter, Frank Millet, declared that in order to  
save time, all the buildings of the Court of Honor  
would be painted a uniform shade of white. Millet  
also devised a new technique of applying the paint ~~to~~

~~the buildings~~ quickly, and so, the Columbian Exposition gave the world another lasting gift – the invention of spray paint.

The public grew more and more interested as Dedication Day for the Fair approached.

One magazine editor sensed the growing national enthusiasm for the Exposition. He urged that on Dedication Day, all of the children in America should offer something to their nation. He composed something he felt would be suitable, and national educational authorities sent copies across the ~~nation~~<sup>country</sup>.

American schoolchildren have been reciting that composition – which we all know as “the Pledge of Allegiance” – ever since. Congress honored the day

by giving everyone a day off, and we still get that day off today – we know it as Columbus Day.

~~Finally~~, Dedication Day arrived in October, 1892 and ~~it~~ went well. Burnham's workers still had several months to finish the buildings before the grand opening, and they'd need every second.

The focus of construction work then centered on the Ferris Wheel. The time for building the wheel was very compressed. On top of that, building the wheel involved making its axle, which was both the largest single metal casting ever, and the heaviest thing ever lifted above the ground.

As if that did not pose challenges enough for the Fair's builders, Chicago's winter struck with a

vengeance. For weeks through January and February, 1893, temperatures fell to 20 below zero. Then the cold broke, and the workers went on strike. But the frantic finishing work continued in earnest.

And then it started to rain -- and it didn't stop. For nearly two whole weeks before the grand opening, sheets of rain fell on Jackson Park, exposing leaks in the roofs, turning paths to rivers of mud, and making the workers miserable.

On the very eve of the Opening ceremonies on May 1, 1893, an English reporter visited the grounds. What he saw through the wind-whipped rain and the night shocked him. He could see that the Fair was "grossly incomplete." The temporary rail lines built

to transport construction materials to the buildings under construction still crisscrossed the grounds. Litter, huge piles of empty crates and lumber and trash <sup>stood everywhere</sup> ~~covered the~~ grounds. Disgusted, the newspaperman returned to his hotel.

The next morning, that reporter joined 250,000 people for the opening, and what the reporter saw shocked him even more than the chaos of the previous night ~~had~~. The railroad tracks, the lumber, the crates and the litter were GONE.

10,000 workers had labored through the night and the storm. One thousand washerwomen on their hands and knees had scrubbed the mud off the floors of the Manufacturers Building. The reporter

marveled at the transformation of the grounds that had taken place overnight. Then, as if on cue, the storm broke ~~and~~ the sun came out, ~~The crowd cheered,~~ and President Grover Cleveland pressed the button that started the Fair's generators. It was an auspicious beginning

But the next day, only 10,000 people visited the Fair. The rumored incomplete nature of the grounds, and the dismal economy kept people away initially. But as the weeks went by, stories in newspapers and magazines across the country and word of mouth from the people who attended the Exposition, began to draw the crowds.

What visitors saw stunned them with its beauty and power. Indeed, the massive, beautiful and harmonious buildings of the Court of Honor were so striking that some people wept when they first arrived. Visitors wore their Sunday best and talked in hushed tones, awestruck by the sight.

Keep in mind that cities in those days were dirty, crowded, crime-ridden, unsafe, shrouded in clouds of coal dust and soot, and reeking with the smell of horses and manure. In contrast, the Exposition had clean public restrooms, very few horses, electric streetlights, advanced healthcare, ever-present security, and a daycare where parents were given claim checks for their children.



Beyond the buildings and landscape, visitors to the Exposition saw exhibits ranging from the ridiculous to the sublime. Visitors were introduced to new products and ideas at the Exposition, such as the first zipper, Edison's kinoscope (the first form of motion picture), Aunt Jemima syrup and pancakes, shredded wheat, cream of wheat, the first picture postcards, the first US commemorative stamps, the first US commemorative coins, the first elevated electric railway, and carbonated diet soda – all debuts at the Columbian Exposition, and all still with us today. Pabst Blue Ribbon beer did not debut at the Fair, but it was selected there as the world's best beer, a fact duly noted on its label to this day. Melvil

Dewey, the inventor of the Dewey Decimal System, debuted a product described by some as “the most important organizational invention of the century” – we know it as the vertical file.

For many visitors, the Exposition was their first experience with electricity. In fact, the Exposition consumed four times the amount of electricity used by the entire city of Chicago. Visitors marveled at all the electric lights and an all-electric kitchen, with such things as a machine that washed dishes, an electric stove, and light switches. If those weren't enough, visitors could enjoy the Fair's other exhibits, such as a 22,000 pound cheese, and a life-size statue of a medieval knight made entirely of prunes. To

remember it all, Fair-goers could purchase the first portable camera and take home “snapshots,” a term coined at the Exposition.

And visitors LOVED the Midway. Although one moralist described belly-dancing as “the worst violation of decency and virtue ever heard of,” it sure did sell tickets. Similarly, visitors flocked to something called “The World’s Congress of Beauty,” which purported to be a display of foreign costumes, but which was really a beauty pageant featuring forty women from around the world. Critics questioned whether all of the women were really foreigners, all of the costumes were authentic, and indeed, whether one of the models was female at all. One writer

stated that the managers of the World's Congress of Beauty made only one indisputably true promise – “admission 25 cents.” The crowds ate it up. And they LOVED the Ferris Wheel.

Despite all the decadent fun of the Midway (beer consumption in Chicago doubled during the Fair), the Boards' emphasis on order made the Fair considerably safer than the visitors' home towns. There were only 2,929 arrests made at the Fair, most of which were petty theft and disorderly conduct. There were, however, three <sup>abandoned</sup> fetuses discovered on the grounds, and one investigation of a “Zulu acting improperly.”

Likewise, the Fair's own health care system worked to keep visitors well cared for. Over the course of the Fair, over 11,000 people sought treatment for various ailments, including 820 cases of diarrhea (compared to only 154 of constipation), 365 foreign bodies lodged in eyes, 594 cases of fainting and exhaustion, and one case of, and I quote – “severe flatulence.” That, of course, raises the question – how did John Tilley manage to attend the 1893 Chicago World's Fair?

If Tilley did attend, he wasn't lonely. Over the five months of the Exposition, over 27 million people visited the Fair -- one quarter of the population of the entire United States. On the day designated as

“Chicago Day” alone, over 730,000 people attended the Fair, meaning that on that single day, more than one out of every hundred Americans was in Jackson Park. Consider how much cultural weight we modern-day Americans assign to Woodstock – only 400,000 attended that. Exposition attendance was a common cultural experience shared by a larger percentage of Americans than any other peacetime event in American history.

At the Exposition, common folk mingled with the celebrities of the day. Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, Susan B. Anthony, Helen Keller, Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Houdini, Woodrow Wilson, and Booker T. Washington attended. Archduke Franz

Ferdinand of Austria attended, but spent most of his time drinking beer and making side trips to Chicago's houses of prostitution. Author Hamlin Garland wrote to his parents, telling them to "sell the cookstove if necessary and come – you MUST see the Fair." Meanwhile, on the Fairgrounds, a young pianist worked at creating the first distinctly American musical genre – the music was called "Ragtime," and the pianist was Scott Joplin.

The Fair closed on October 30, 1893 on a somber note – the wildly popular Mayor of Chicago had been killed by an assassin. But the effects of the Fair lingered on, and continue to this day.

First of all, as you can tell by all the products that debuted or were popularized by the Exposition, the Fair had a profound impact on establishing the modern-day American notion of consumerism. Our modern consumer-based society received its first expression at the Fair, and because of the Fair's massive attendance and cultural impact, it was the best advertising opportunity yet. The Fair has been described as a "dry run for modern American mass-marketing and packaging." The Exposition gave us many of our first truly national brands. Before then, people would buy locally-produced and marketed items. Afterwards, people knew of and could obtain



familiar national brands. And from then on, “fun” was inexorably linked with consuming.

Second, the Fair was essential to the popularization of electricity. Not just electricity, but all of technological progress were emphasized by the Fair. At a time of immense technological change, the Fair reassured visitors that technology would lead the way to a better world in the next century.

Third, the Fair had an enormous effect on increasing Americans’ comfort with the shift from a rural, agrarian nation to an urban, industrial nation. The Fair showed Americans that cities could be beautiful, safe and clean. Indeed, the Fair spawned the “City Beautiful” movement. Nearly every city of

any size in America shows the effects of that movement, with richly ornamented neoclassical public buildings, parks, and the like. Indeed, after the Fair the supervising architect, Burnham, went on to give us ~~the~~ modern Washington D.C. – he’s responsible for the Washington Mall as we know it.

But the Fair’s profound effects on America’s cities weren’t limited to real cities. Author L. Frank Baum and his artist based their fictional city of Oz on the Fair. One carpenter who worked on the Fair was so impressed by what he helped produce that he wanted to name a son “Columbus.” His wife convinced him otherwise, and he named his sons Roy and Walt. But the stories of the wonders of the Fair

that carpenter, Elias Disney, told his sons would inform their creation of Disneyland and Disneyworld.

Fourth, the Fair changed American architecture. The neoclassical style of the Fair became the style of choice for major construction for nearly forty years. Not only that, but the backlash against the Fair's embrace of the neoclassical style would lead dissenters – Louis Sullivan most notably -- to explicitly reject the use of European patterns and try to create a new and distinctly American architecture. One of Louis Sullivan's young architects followed Sullivan's lead in rejecting the Fair's architecture, and instead resolved to create a completely new style. That young architect who was disillusioned by the

Fair's architecture that he worked on was Frank Lloyd Wright.

Finally, the Fair's wonders and success were essential to America's assertion of cultural, technological and industrial parity with Europe. The Fair showed the world that America had come of age, and in this and all of the other ways previously cited, the Columbian Exposition stands as the blueprint for modern America.