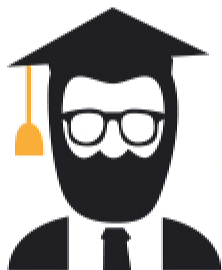

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`Sell the cookstove if necessary, but come to the fair.'

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`SELL THE COOKSTOVE IF NECESSARY, BUT COME TO THE FAIR'

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At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Americans got dazzling glimpses of the future and the gams of 'Little Egypt'

"Sell the cookstove if necessary and come," ran the famous cry that novelist Hamlin Garland included in a letter to his parents, back home on the farm. "You must see the Fair. "

The fair was the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893-the White City, as it became universally known. No world's fair before or since has captured the national imagination quite as completely. Not even the Centennial fair of 1876 or the New York World's Fair of 1939 so shaped the way the nation saw itself and the world. The Exposition was one of the epochal events of its time. It is hard for us today to grasp the impact a simple world's fair could have on the nation-an impact combining the appeal of a moon launch and the Bicentennial celebration. In its half-year of existence, it drew 27 million visitors-a number approaching half the American population.

Marking 400 years since Columbus stepped ashore, the Exposition aimed to celebrate much more than an anniversary. In the dreams of its ambitious organizers, the White City would also mark America as a great civilization, the crowning flower of a historical progression as relentless as that of the stately Grecian columns along its Court of Honor.

With its shining neoclassical architecture, its stretches of water and great perspectives, the fair carried visitors in imagination across time to the classical era and across space to the grandeurs of Europe and the mysteries of Asia. Moored like an imperial Great White Fleet of buildings in formation around the central Grand Basin, focused on the huge, laurel-wreathed statue that personified the Republic, the fair was a means of mental transportation and conquest. Nothing says more about the power of the White City than that it inspired the Emerald City. Children's writer L. Frank Baum never forgot the fair and transmuted it into Oz, there at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.

But for most visitors, the White City was all the more astonishing for lying at the end of a dirt road or a sooty railroad. To travel to Chicago and the White City, to put up in one of the wooden hotels that sprang up like mushrooms at the edge of the fair and then pass through the gates, was suddenly to be transported to something resembling the prairie preacher's vision of heaven or the Celestial City in The Pilgrim's Progress. To visit the Exposition was to visit not just Chicago but, it seemed, ancient Rome and Greece, as well as the distant reaches of the planet, Java and Dahomey, as sampled in the "anthropological exhibits" of the multifaceted Midway Plaisance.

Many visitors entered through a simple, tall plank fence, like that surrounding an old baseball park. But the most dramatic entrance was probably made by rail from downtown Chicago. These visitors disembarked at the train station that was in back of the domed Administration Building, then emerged into the bright court surrounding the Lagoon, to be struck head-on with the sheer size and extent of the white buildings.

The great bright vistas spoke of the past and the future at once. To stroll around the Grand Basin and through the Court of Honor, with its serious but overblown renditions of Greek and Roman architecture, was to get an impression of sweetness and light, of a spun-sugar classicism. But inside the buildings, one encountered massive machinery (p. 46)-steam engines and electric generators, huge stacks and mounds of agricultural, mineral, and industrial plenty-and wonders from all over the world: art, craft, engineering.

There, the cookstove was electric-as strange in that time of wood and coal as cooking by laser would be in ours. America in 1893 was still largely rural. The average American was a farmer used to horses, kerosene lamps and hand-pumped water. Telephones were rarities, and few believed they would ever become a regular fixture in the home. Electric light was a charming novelty used mainly in public spaces. The phonograph and the automobile were technological toddlers. Still, it was clear that change was coming. In downtown Chicago, typewriters and elevators were helping create the new day of office work in a new kind of building-the skyscraper.

While the whole world was invited to Chicago-there were 48 state and nation exhibits at the fair-the 200 buildings on 633 acres were mostly a kind of encyclopedic, three-dimensional Yankee catalog, something like the great department stores of Chicago itself. Marshall Field's, Sears, Carson Pirie Scott. It was also a kind of tract, an argument for the superiority of our civilization. Fairs, said President Grover Cleveland, are the "timekeepers of progress." The fair measured American progress and found it highly satisfactory, as well as inevitable; it saw itself as American destiny made manifest.

The nationalist chest-beating now seems naive and a bit embarrassing, the condescension unattractive, but the ambition was touching-perhaps even noble. To remember it, in the shadow of the recent 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing, is to sense the difference a century has made.

It was in the neoclassical architecture, grandly constructed from a plaster, cement and jute fiber combination called "staff," as flimsy as a film set, that the Exposition's theme was struck most clearly. Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park and dean of American park and town planners, was hired to lay out the fair. Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham was put in charge of hiring the finest architects and sculptors of the day. These included Richard Morris Hunt, who had done the base of the Statue of Liberty, the firm of McKim, Mead & White, George B. Post, Louis Sullivan and William LeBaron Jenney. The list of sculptors was headed by Daniel Chester French, Frederick W.

MacMonnies and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Mary Cassatt painted murals for the Women's Building. "You know," sculptor SaintGaudens remarked to Burnham, disdaining false modesty, "this is the greatest meeting of artistic minds since the 15th century! "

The Court of Honor, built along the Grand Basin, itself edged by broad boulevards and linked to a series of canals, offered an excuse for a dramatic Beaux-Arts arrangement of vistas and axes. What was new was not so much the architecture as the size and composition of the whole-it was to be an American Paris. Out of the Basin rose a 65-foot-high gilded female figure of the Republic. Court of Honor buildings, all alabaster white, were by far the largest that most visitors had ever seen (one structure took up 30 acres).

There were a few exceptions to the classical style. The White Star steamship line, for instance, created a sort of nautical folly of a pavilion, with portholes and deck. And Louis Sullivan deviated from the party line for his famous Transportation Building, with its great Golden Door ornamented in classic Sullivanesque floral and abstract patterns. The Golden Door was a favorite of fairgoers. Behind it stood a model of Pullman, the ideal workers' town that George Pullman had created south of Chicago, as well as one of the most elaborate private railroad cars ever built, at a cost of $38,000, named the Santa Maria and fit for a robber baron.

Behind their Renaissance or classical facades and lobbies, the Beaux-Arts buildings combined the wooden frame technology, which had been used to rebuild Chicago so rapidly after the fire of 1871, with the metal equivalent of a vast railroad shed.

Chicago and the fair shared in mystery, excitement and danger. The city had fought hard for the fair, besting New York and other cities. In the 1890s it was regarded as a wonder in itself, a city of the future, all the more American for being heavily populated by recent immigrants-its population had doubled in the 1880s. It was also a city of 5,000 saloons, an ethnic melange with more than 40 percent of its citizens foreign-born, the center of the nation's railroad system and Carl Sandburg's "City of Big Shoulders." It was, wrote William Dean Howells " an ultimate Manhattan, the realized ideal of that largeness, loudness and fastness, which New York has persuaded the Americans is metropolitan."

The White City provided an alternative vision, a utopia seen from afar. In promotional material, the view was always from a distance-from the eye of the eagle or, in one often reprinted photograph, of a woman with a parasol atop the giant Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building. A man named William Prettyman was hired as director of decoration, then replaced by painter Francis D. Millet, whose task it was to paint everything white. One of his engineers invented a pressurized sprayer to get the job done in the limited time allotted. A ban on the burning of coal on the grounds kept the White City white, in contrast to the sooty gray city to the north. The Exposition was a kind of stage set, and photography was strictly regulated-even for amateurs, who had to pay $2 just to bring a camera onto the grounds.

The White City was whitest at night, when necklaces of lights outlining the buildings, and the floodlights on facades and fountains-an unprecedented display of electric candlepower-set it against blackness. Howells described the night view from one of the gondolas that shared the water of the Grand Basin and its connecting canals with electric launches: "In the splendor of the hundred moony arc-lamps of the esplanades and the myriad incandescent bubbles that bead the white quays," Howells wrote, "I found myself in the midst of the Court of Honor ... for the moment I could not believe that so foul a thing as money could have been even the means of its creation."

But money was the means, and if the outside projected classical unity above crass concerns, inside the great plaster temples lurked the soul of a corn palace. A strange commercial surrealism prevailed. Behind the white columns the crowds found giant barns, steam threshers, buildings made of ears of corn, pyramids of giant pumpkins, piles of grain and stacks of lumber. The fair seemed inadvertently fantastical, as shown by its very first postcards of giant apples on flatbed railroad cars, of jackalopes and furbearing trout-a surrealism of the American heartland, the unintentional result of sheer enthusiasm.

Pyramids and temples of fruit and metal ingots and logs provided a kind of architectural equivalent of the artist Archimboldo's vegetable portraits. In the Horticultural Building there was a Liberty Bell made of oranges, and in the California Building, a life-size knight made of prunes. In the Electricity Building, the Western Electric Company displayed its switches and sockets in an Egyptian temple, while one state offered a Greek temple with columns made of grain-filled glass jars.

Above all, the fair was the dry run for the mass marketing, packaging and advertising of the 20th century. Newly introduced American Express rail and hotel packages, advertised in bright lithographs of high-pitched reds and blues, marked the beginnings of modern tourist travel. Around the fair's perimeter ran an elevated electric train called the Intramural-the first in a family of sleeker monorail trains that no future world's fair would be without. Inside the grand buildings the visitor found a foretaste of 20th-century technological and commercial America. New products were introduced and new brands became famous. The fair introduced the first fiberglass, the first American souvenir postcards, the first zipper, the first demonstration of long-distance telephone service from Chicago to New York City. It foreshadowed mass consumption, made possible by national brands and by giving names and identities to things that had previously been generic substances. Also introduced were: Chase & Sanborn, the official coffee of the Exposition; Baker's Chocolate, Quaker Oats, Cream of Wheat and Aunt Jemima in person. Pabst Beer got a blue ribbon at the fair. The illusion of fruitful progress and harmony stood in contrast to change and conflict outside. A few days after the fair opened, the stock market crashed and 1893 became a depression year. The fair took place in the shadow of the 1886 Haymarket labor riot and the 1892 Homestead strike, which saw the wealthy shaken by fears of worker unrest and the specter of anarchist attacks.

The first American automobile rolled out of the shop of the Duryea brothers in 1893, and at the

Exposition's lecture series-World Congresses" of experts-Frederick Jackson Turner formally asserted that the frontier, which had defined American character, was now closing. His thesis was given credence by the fact that Buffalo Bill was performing his Wild West Show near the fairgrounds: the frontier had become entertainment. While the fair ran, the Dalton Gang was finally captured, and the former Indian territories of Oklahoma were opened to settlers.

Alongside the neoclassical architecture, and the "city beautiful" movement that it inspired, stood the Midway Plaisance, a motley set of entertainments encamped like Huns before Rome, the ancestor of Coney Island and even Disneyland. Chicago's was the first fair to have an official commercial and entertainment section apart from the educational one.

Even Henry Adams rode the Ferris Wheel

It was Henry Adams who best understood the importance of the fair. It offered, he wrote, "matter of study to fill a hundred years." A leading historian and scion of one of America's prominent families, he rode the Ferris Wheel (SMITHSONIAN, July 1983) high above the milling crowds of the Midway Plaisance and delighted in the spectacle. Below him were ranged a strange collection of buildings housing Hagenbeck's Animal Show, "A Street in Cairo," "A Taste of Java," an assemblage of domes, obelisks and minarets. In the distance shimmered the pediments and domes of the White City.

In The Education of Henry Adams, Adams had attempted to unify history with metaphorical reflection on modern energy, the Dynamo, and the power of medieval faith, the Virgin Mary. One can imagine him pondering the Exposition atop the Ferris Wheel, which carried some 2,000 passengers in cars as large as small streetcars and towered 264 feet above the ground. Two 1,000-horsepower steam engines drove the wheel's steady and silent rotation around a 45-foot axle-the largest single piece of steel ever forged, visitors were told. For Adams, this was about as close as possible to getting inside a dynamo. He wondered if the fair's art was not all "a stage decoration; a diamond shirt-stud, a paper collar." Yet, seen as a whole, he decided, "Chicago was the first expression of American thought as a unity."

The closest thing to Adams' idealized Virgin were the ubiquitous statues of Columbia-figures of fuzzy iconography, variously representing Liberty, the Republic, Electricity and, indirectly, the high Victorian ideal of Womanhood. Part goddess of liberty, part huntress Diana, part Persephone, goddess of the harvest, she was quite adaptable. At the Anheuser-Busch display, for instance, she was clad in a vaguely Wagnerian mailed corset, a nod to the Germanic background of the product and its consumers.

There were plenty of dynamos. Westinghouse had edged out General Electric for the contract to light the White City, winning a key victory for modern alternating electric current in its battle with Edison's direct current. The personification of alternating current was inventor Nikola Tesla (SMITHSONIAN, June 1986), who stood with 200,000 volts coursing harmlessly through his body at the Westinghouse exhibition in the Electricity Building. Both companies sponsored elaborate decorative light shows. Such

projects, along with the Ferris Wheel nearby, put a new spin on the dynamo: they linked engineering to entertainment in a pattern that foreshadowed the cinema and the amusement park.

In the Midway Plaisance, the displays from "folkloric" peoples-the half-timbered German and Irish buildings--were closest to the White City, with "less civilized" ones seemingly more and more distant, until visitors finally reached the "primitive." There, the Dahomey exhibit sported a sign denying that its inhabitants were cannibals. From the Midway, pageantlike processions including camels and rickshas would set out through the White City, like emissaries of subject powers sent to Rome. Admission was charged at each individual display, in contrast to the White City, where visitors were obliged to shell out only 50 cents to get in.

In keeping with the organizers' passion for classification, the sideshows of the Midway Plaisance were categorized without irony as "ethnology" and, in keeping with their emphasis on education, placed under the charge of Frederic W. Putnam, a Harvard anthropology professor. No doubt baffled to have sword swallowers and belly dancers under his tutelage, Putnam must have breathed a sigh of relief when he came upon a 27-year-old impresario named Sol Bloom, the son of Polish immigrants, who had seen the recent Paris fair. Bloom's resume makes him sound like the very prototype of the film tycoons, a Sam Goldwyn or Louis B. Mayer, and he would eventually become a flamboyant U.S. Representative from New York. But in the Midway, Bloom saw something his more academic colleagues did not: that there was both real skill and art in "primitive" crafts and ceremonies.

"I came to realize," he wrote, "that a tall, skinny chap from Arabia with a talent for swallowing swords expressed a culture which to me was on a higher plane than the one demonstrated by a group of earnest Swiss peasants who passed their day making cheese and milk chocolate." In this he was forward-looking, as he also was in his understanding that "ethnology," in varying degrees of authenticity, could be sold as entertainment.

The belly-dancing rhythm of the hootchy-kootchy, the danse du ventre and the caricatured melody of the Casbah are familiar to cartoon watchers. "Little Egypt," the most famous of the Midway dancers, represented the epitome in 1893 daring. The beauties of the Midway, including those of the World Congress of Beauties ("Forty Countries, Forty Beauties"), all more fully garbed than advertising might have led male patrons to hope, contrasted with the classical females of the White City.

The arrangement of the Midway exhibits and the treatment of those on exhibit bespoke a racism that extended to the aptly named White City. Excluded from even the most menial of jobs building and maintaining the fair, African-Americans were provided eating and restroom facilities only in the Haiti Building. Frederick Douglass called the White City "a whited sepulchre" and produced, with Ida Wells, a pamphlet titled "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition." That reason was simple racism-an essential part of an approach that categorized countries on a pyramid, with "progress" embodied, naturally, in American civilization at the top. This attitude extended

overseas. The Japanese Ho-o-den temple met with approval but also condescension. Artisans arrived from Japan to erect the building with what one guidebook called "their little pile driver."

Women, too, were exiled to their own building, designed by Sophia G. Hayden. It took strenuous protests by wives of the leading powers behind the fair and by Susan B. Anthony, the feminist leader, to achieve even that segregated measure of participation.

If Frederick Jackson Turner's speech at the Exposition echoed a Census Bureau report declaring the frontier closed-and with it the frontier experience of "continually beginning over again"--there were other signs on the Midway, in such exhibits as a Sioux chief's cabin, in front of which the Sioux chief was persuaded to pose. Buffalo Bill had long found it more lucrative to stage mock shootings of bison than real ones. Now, he decided to broaden the appeal of his show. Operating just outside the walls of the Exposition, he added daredevil bareback riders from Asia to his show, and the phrase 'and Congress of Roughriders of the World" to his show bills.

The end of the frontier sent many in search of its replacement in technology, culture or empire. just as the West was won, early imperialist efforts aimed at extending the frontier to the Philippines and Cuba-a process that would shatter the air of friendship with Spain celebrated at the fair. Hawaii was declared under U.S. protection in 1893; five years later, Theodore Roosevelt would adopt the name "Roughriders" for his famed unit of cavalrymen.

The fair ended on an ominous note when Chicago mayor Carter Harrison was shot to death the day after Chicago Day, October 9, 1893, which had marked the largest attendance of any single day. The assassination by a deranged malcontent seemed to foreshadow the coming era of violence and social turmoil. In January 1894, fire destroyed many of the buildings-a fire to be echoed that summer by fire and conflict at the town of Pullman. In the face of the depression, George Pullman had reduced wages by a third while keeping rents unchanged. His utopian town-a corporate White City-became the scene of a bitter struggle between workers and employers; federal troops were sent in to suppress the strike.

The images of the fair that survive are static: it was the last fair before the motion picture camera. Today it seems like a great Hollywood film set awaiting its Cecil B. DeMille-and like a world frozen just before change. Edison's Kinetoscope made its first appearance in 1893, but his protomovies had yet to be turned into newsreels. Elsewhere, Edweard Muybridge showed his famous images of horses and men caught in midstride. It remains for us, too, a silent spectacle-the only sounds that survive are wax cylinder recordings of gamelan music played by the Javanese.

This immobility was appropriate for the vistas of the White City, appropriate to the ideal of unchanging values its classicism projected. Only the Ferris Wheel, rolling through the sky, seemed to mock that stability. The world was about to change dramatically. Movement, speed, social upheaval were in the offing.

What is striking, too, is how little material evidence survived the fair. On the grounds, only the Fine Arts Building survived (100 artworks displayed in it may be seen at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art and National Portrait Gallery through August 15); it was rebuilt in more durable materials to become the Museum of Science and Industry. A Chicago amusement park took the name "White City." Driving through Jackson Park today, you see a man fixing a car in a parking lot where white columns once stood. Faceless public housing has replaced the cheap hotels around the periphery of the grounds. Along the former Midway Plaisance, a part of southside Chicago called "the Midway," University of Chicago students and children play soccer by a bus shelter scrawled with graffiti. In a circle in the park-the former site of the domed Administration Building-stands a reduced-size model of the statue of the Republic that served as focal point for the Lagoon.

But the architectural ideals of the White City are alive in cities all over the country, one of the finest examples being Union Station in Washington, D.C. "The damage wrought by the World's Fair will last for half a century from its date if not longer," Louis Sullivan wrote. "It has penetrated deep into the constitution of the American mind, effecting there lesions significant of dementia." But that was 30 years later, when Sullivan's career had faded. The simple story of modernism battling the dragon of eclecticism was a gross oversimplification. Even at the same time the Beaux-Arts fair was built, the modern skyscraper was being born in downtown Chicago, offering wide expanses of glass, the reduction of ornament and the expression of the steel frame in the facade of the building. In the wake of postmodernism-with its welcoming of tradition, its affection for quoting older buildings, its respect for larger city planning, even its sense of theatricality-the White City stands higher today in architectural estimation than it has for half a century. One testimony to this fact is the big new public library in downtown Chicago, designed by Thomas Beeby, with such classical features as pediment, ornamental sculpture and "acroteria," draped garlands carved in stone.

When Henry Adams wrote, "Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving," he had no answer. Nor do we. But a look back at the Exposition from the perspective of a century provides glimpses of a strangely familiar world. For all its evocations of the ancient and the distant, 1893 sketched out the beginnings of much of our contemporary world.

PHOTO: View toward Machinery Hall and the Agricultural Building (at the far left) was a festival of bright flags, fancy fountains, florid statuary, domes, columns, towers and neoclassical facades in alabaster white.

PHOTO: Engraved panorama with 19 numbered sites told where serious exhibits were, as well as providing a sense of the fair's design-done by Frederick Law Olmsted-and location in relation to Chicago and Lake Michigan. Out of view to far left were tawdry but thrilling Midway charms of the Ferris Wheel and "A Street in Cairo."

PHOTO: Elegant Electricity Building enclosed 265,000 square feet, housed inventions by Edison and Nikola Tesla.

PHOTO: Transportation exhibit with Golden Door, designed by Louis Sullivan, had vast annex full of railroad cars.

PHOTO: Horticultural hall, seen from an island in the Lagoon, was a giant greenhouse with glass dome 113 feet high.

PHOTO: World's finest Ferris Whell cost 50 cents a ride and had soft plush seats that lifted you 264 feet in the air.

PHOTO: At Hagenbeck's Animal Show on Midway Plaisance, people get ready to ride an assortment of animals. Present: a muzzled bear, goose, ponies, zebra, ride-on baby elephants, an adult elephant and two camels.

PHOTO: Terpsichorean charms of "Little Egypt" helped put the word "hootchy-kootchy" into the American language.

PHOTO: Miles of fancy scrollwork needed for exterior facades were molded well in advance by a cadre of artisans.

PHOTO: Beneath the high steel arches of Machinery Hall, the industrial nations of the world showed off their heavy equipment, mainly big power belts, generators, turbines. Most machines were powered by steam.

PHOTO: Watercolor lithograph depicts the classical expanse of the Grand Basin and surrounding buildings. With fountains, gondolas and broad, imposing facades, fair managed to seem like Venice and Versailles combined.

PHOTO: In the fall, a gaudy poster touted the special carnival to be held 22 years after date of the Great Chicago Fire.

PHOTO: Exposition memorabilia, owned by collector Stephen Sheppard, includes a kerosene lamp with Columbus portrait, egg timer, pictures of the Ferris Wheel, gilded Tiffany vase and a souvenir spoon now worth $3,500.

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By Phil Patton

Writer Phil Patton's recent book, Made in USA: The Secret Histories of the Things that Made America, will be published in paperback by Penguin in July.

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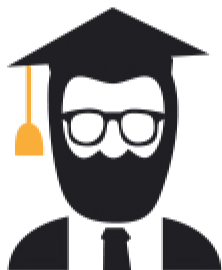
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