



The staunch women of the Great World's Fair

"It seems peculiarly appropriate that this honor should have been accorded our sex when celebrating the great deeds of Columbus, who, inspired though his vision may have been, yet required the aid of an Isabella to transform them into realities." Bertha Honore Potter, President of the Board of Lady Managers of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

by Irene McMahon

We approached the lakefront site of the Great World's Fair from the west and into the Midway Plaisance at the south border of the University of Chicago between Stony Island Avenue and Cottage Grove Avenue. We were armed with copies of "Columbian Gallery, A Portfolio of Photographs of the World's Fair" by Charles Dudley Arnold and published in 1894 by The Werner Company of Chicago; a current treatise by Frank A. Cassell, Professor of History at Roosevelt University, who focuses on the Women of the Fair, and the speech by Mrs. Potter Palmer, whose "brilliant address" introduced the Woman's Building and set its style.

We parked on the plaisance and relived briefly the captured image of fairgoers in their dark suits and bowler hats, the women in dashing-flowered chapeaux, the children in knickers and skirts to mid-calf, these images in sharp contrast to crowds that populate similar Disney-inspired events today. But, nonetheless we could picture ourselves there on that plaisance with the Pagoda of The Chinese Joss House on our left and "Old Vienna" on our right. Ahead of us in our misty photo loomed the stately Ferris wheel "revolving in gentle motion and seeming to give welcome to the incoming tide."

We drove on past the University of Chicago and Rockefeller Chapel, built in 1891 in the eclectic combination of Classical Greek and Roman, Italian Renaissance and French Bourbon which was to set the architectural style of the coming event.

We were searching for what is left of the spectacular White City. "Not much," we'd been told, but to our golden surprise, where Hayes Drive meets Richards within Jackson Park there suddenly rose a colossal gilded "Statue of the Republic," a woman with arms uplifted "showing forth the emblems of liberty and country." She once dominated the Court of Honor but has since moved from that exalted place and, as imposing as she seems, we learned this replica is a mere one-third of the size of the original statue which was 60-foot tall.

Nearby, on a peninsula jutting into Lake Michigan, is La Rabida Children's Hospital, on the site of the expositions' Convent de La Rabida, replicating the monastery near Huelva in Spain where a young Columbus had been given haven, and where it is said he had lodged his young son when he finally set sail for the "New World."

The building which is today's Museum of Science and Industry was the only heated building on the fair grounds. It was saved from demolition after the exposition closed because it was selected to store arti-

facts. Originally, it was the fair's Palace of Fine Arts, modeled after the Parthenon in Athens with columns and caryatids and the north pond lapping against its imposing staircase. The exposition's other impressive buildings were throwaways, molded from cement, plaster and horsehair, shaped like pastry on iron and timber frames, meant to last a mere six months. But the Palace of Fine Arts was reconstructed of permanent materials to become the useful structure it is today, the Museum of Science and Industry.

Chicago outbid New York, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. for this exposition to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America. However, since the nation's last fair of 1876 in Philadelphia was such a disaster, it was whispered that Philadelphia stood little chance for a repeat performance.

The world's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the result of efforts by Chicago businessmen and politicians to advertise the city and to seek expanded national and international markets. To make the fair a success the planners sought the participation of hundreds of groups. Americans thought of it as a national endeavor in which they took patriotic pride. Indeed, enthusiasm was so high people wanted to make it a part of their everyday lives. (We own a treasured pressed-back chair with a worn Columbian insignia on the back, now

barely distinguishable.)

But, 1893 was a difficult time for America. We were just a few decades past the Civil War, slavery had been abolished but the position of African-Americans was deteriorating, the country had moved from agriculture to industry, and now reform groups saw it as an opportunity to publicize their concerns and ideas for a new and better world. Both Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass pointed out that people of color were shut out of the fair.

Labor and religious organizations all wanted a voice. Women had no vote and many hoped the fair would energize the drive for suffrage.

As early as 1889 when a fair was being considered, women began lobbying for special recognition. Susan B. Anthony and the wives of cabinet members in President Benjamin Harrison's administration were successful in moving Congress to establish a Board of Lady Managers. Once established by an Act of Congress the Lady Managers moved swiftly to establish the exposition as a showcase for women's achievements.

Their success was due largely to Bertha Honore Palmer, wife of Potter Palmer, owner and manager of Chicago's Palmer House.

"Even more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered together to celebrate, is the fact that the general government

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Women

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has just discovered women," pronounced Bertha Palmer to a pre-Exposition gathering at the Art Institute of Chicago. She was greeted by cheers and waving handkerchiefs. Although there were disagreements within the group, her strong personality, political skills and charm kept them together; and Bertha Palmer encouraged women throughout the world to participate in the Woman's Building.

This was the first world's fair in which women planned and designed their own building. Located on the west bank of the North Lagoon with a frontage of 400 feet and 200 feet in depth, the foreground was terraced with flower beds and a stairway down to the edge of the water.

Sophia Hayden, the first woman to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology won the competition to design the Woman's Building with her Italian Renaissance plan. (However, this "first woman" status became almost too much for her to bear resulting in a breakdown.)

The interior differed from those of the other exposition halls. Instead of being open and expansive like the other buildings, it appeared more domestic. The building was divided into parlor-like rooms each decorated by women from a different state.

Blueprints of the Woman's Building are now on exhibit at the Chicago Historical Society until July 17, along with pictures of the building and artifacts from the exhibits, crocheted doilies, pottery, embroidery, paintings, books and other objects that represented achievement in what was then regarded as women's work.

The second major achievement of Bertha Palmer and the world's fair women was the organization of the Congress of Representative Women. During the seven day congress, women set forth their progress in education, industry, literature, art, reform and religion. Eighty-one meetings were held in the new Art Institute and in the Woman's Building, drawing more than 150,000 people.

Lucy Stone spoke on the progress of American Women in 50 Years, Jane Addams compared household work and factory work, Susan B. Anthony called for political power to match women's influence.

Over 40 nations had sent delegates to this congress where royalty mingled with such reform leaders as Nurse Clara Barton, Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The French commissioner saw it "as an outstanding effort in the realm of ideals."

However the wealthy Bertha Palmer was no suffragette and she was opposed to using the fair for suffragist causes. She turned against

Jane Addams of Hull House, believing the social worker was too closely associated with "anarchists." Her reform impulses were genuine, but she resisted change that would threaten the position of her class.

However, she was outspoken about her genuine concern about the low status of women workers and the lack of recognition women received for their role in the production process.

"Without touching upon politics, suffrage or other irrelevant issues, this unique organization of women for women will devote itself to the promotion of their industrial interests," Bertha Palmer said.

She seemingly overlooked other aspects of women's issues which manifested themselves along the Midway. While the women's congress idealized the American woman in pristine white meeting halls, "Little Egypt," the belly dancer on the midway may have been most remembered of all the women at the Fair.

But The Woman's Building and the Congress of Representative Women stimulated an organizational thrust that was not lost after the fair. New associations of Jewish and Black women were formed along with literary societies and state federations of women's clubs. International links between the Women's Movement in the United States and Europe were strengthened.

The exposition also stimulated

activity in city planning throughout the world by demonstrating the advantage of site planning and organizing groups of buildings in an orderly aesthetic manner. The "City Beautiful" movement dominated civic thought for several decades, influencing the design and use of federal buildings in Washington D.C. and other American cities.

The classic style which defined the exposition was in marked contrast to the modern school of architecture for which Chicago has become famous, causing Louis Sullivan to say: "The damage wrought by the World's Fair will last for half a century." But the two trends developed concurrently during the following decades.

The exposition provided Chicago and the world with a moment of glory that lifted its visitors from the reality of corruption, unemployment, ugly cities and factories, providing promise of a brighter future. There were contradictions to the high ideals presented. The depictions of foreign peoples and countries were often insensitive, divisive, concentrating on differences rather than commonalities. African-Americans, despite the presence and elegant words of Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells, had no formal recognition. Today there are still inequalities. But, memories of the fair live on as a once golden opportunity for all to voice their opinions.

Well, almost all.