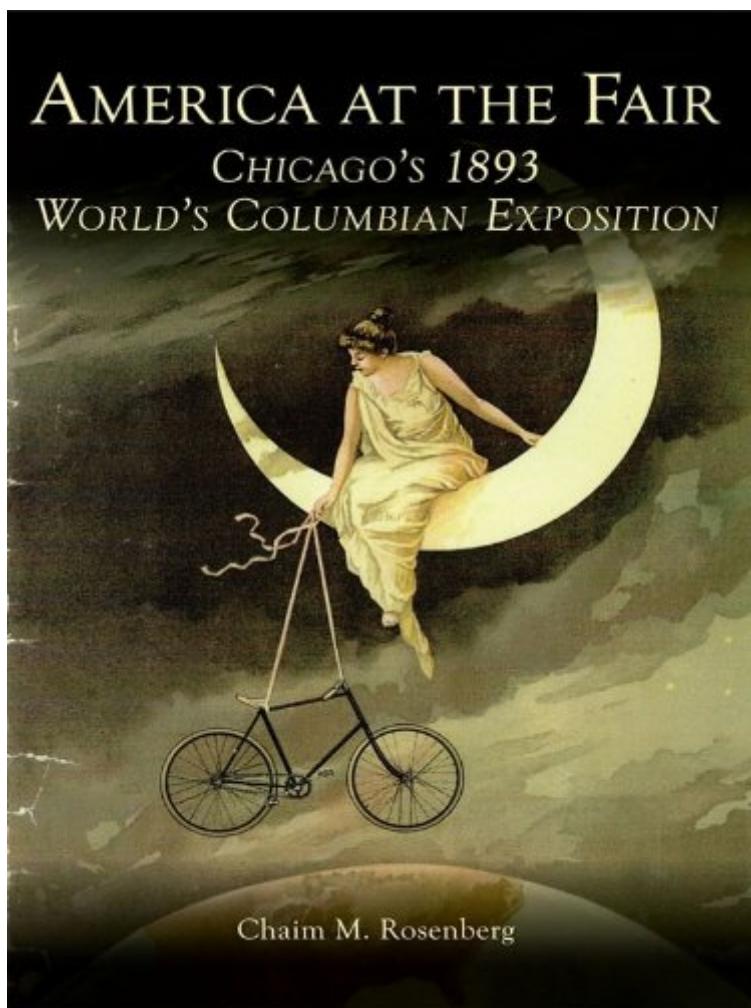


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America At The Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition



Synopsis

At the time of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the United States was fast becoming the world's leading economy. Chicago, the host city, had grown in less than half a century from a village to the country's second-largest metropolis. During this, the Gilded Age, the world's most extensive railroad and steamship networks poured ceaselessly through Chicago, carrying the raw goods and finished products of America's great age of invention and industrial expansion. The Fair was the largest ever at the time, with 65,000 exhibitors and millions of visitors. It has been called the "Blueprint of the American Future" and marked the beginning of the national economy and consumer culture.

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Customer Reviews

As a fan of world's fairs and expositions I had hoped to gain new insight into the World's Columbian Exposition. I lecture to various groups about the history of fairs and the 'White City' is one of my favorite subjects. There is always something new to learn and I had hoped to gain new insight into

different aspects of this event. Unfortunately I was quite disappointed. I found the book to be more like something you would find in a junior high school classroom. The writing style was rather dry and elementary at times. An example is a description of Chicago's public transit system at the time of the fair "The Chicago Northern Street Railway went north. The Western Street Railway went west." There are may other similar passages. The first 60 pages contained a very superficial review of the discovery of America, early settlement and then events taking place in the 1890s. All of this was unnecessary. Coverage of the exposition itself was a little better but I did not learn much more than I have already encountered in other sources. The only highpoint of the book was the collection of advertising cards. Colorful and attractive, they brought to life the period of 1893 in a way that the author did not. This book may be fine for those just beginning to discover the wonder of the World's Columbian Exposition but for a more entertaining and enjoyable 'visit' to this magical event there are volumes that are far superior. I suggest that readers look elsewhere.

History buffs of Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition will welcome this book. It contains many facts and details on persons, places, and things not included in other books about the Fair. However, a caveat: First, this book is not intended to be a definitive account of the Fair. Second, I found a few facts or details misleading or wrong. Unfortunately, when a reader finds even one mistake we question "How many other facts or details are wrong?" Fortunately, Mr. Rosenberg provides references so hopefully there are only a few. Persons who reference the book recommended below will obviously see the errors for both electrical generation and how elevators were powered. Mr. Rosenberg indicates that he used the Boston Public, Harvard University, and Brookline libraries. From his writing, you get the impression "the sun rises and sets in Boston Massachusetts" Indeed, he is so "provincial" it gets on your nerves. To him, almost everything in or involving the CHICAGO FAIR had its origin in the Massachusetts, Boston, or New England area. Obviously, to him, Chicago was filled with yokels back then - and apparently now. He spent one morning visiting and rummaging through the Chicago History Museum. Golly Gee! One morning in the Chicago Museum for research on the Chicago Fair! I found the best fact book on Machinery Hall and electrical generation for the Fair is "The Wonders of Machinery Hall" reprinted from the 1892 and 1893 American Machinist Magazine available from Lindsay Publications ([...]) I give Mr. Rosenberg four stars for his effort to pull together this work. It's a nice addition to the other books on the Fair. The paper and print quality are first rate.

Excellent book. Some rehash compared to others; but also had considerable info i did not know.

overall statistically informative. I enjoyed this book and recommend it. I love reading about turn of the century events and people. I am quite familiar with the location; I played soccer on the midway and one time got onto stag field at the U of Chicago!!!

There are many books about the epochal Columbian Exposition, the cultural, commercial, and technological watershed whose wonders awed the 28 million visitors who ambled through "The White City" between May and October of 1893. But one book arguably contains more detail than most others: Chaim M. Rosenberg's "America at the Fair." For instance, I already knew that the Columbian Exposition was the first world's "electric" fair and that evening ticket-holders were thrilled by dazzling displays of electric lights. But until reading "America at the Fair," I didn't realize that Edison's General Electric Company and the Westinghouse Electric Company had been involved in a "War of the Currents" since 1883 and that Westinghouse gained not only the right to light up the Chicago fair but that it also won the "best site" award in the Electricity Building. Most books which discuss the Fair's Women's Pavilion also mention that architect Sophie Hayden was commissioned to design the building. But, to my knowledge, none but Rosenberg's relates that because of discouragements suffered relative to her association with the Fair (including being paid significantly less than her male counterparts) Ms. Hayden suffered a breakdown and never designed another building. Perhaps, some readers will find that Rosenberg provides too much detail at times. For instance, some might not care that the New York Life Insurance Company, one of the many insurers of the Fair in case of fire, had assets of 137 million and 224,000 policies. While it cannot be denied that Rosenberg obviously adores numbers and facts, he generally makes those things work for him; his detailed-filled descriptions can be very illuminating, as seen in the following description of Chicago's 1893 thoroughfares, found in one of Rosenberg's pre-Fair chapters, "From Village to Metropolis": "Town planners made sure that Chicago had its grand boulevards. Michigan Avenue and Oakwood Boulevard were each 100 feet wide. Drexel, Garfield and Western Boulevards were 200 feet wide, while Douglas, Central and Humboldt Boulevards were each 250 feet in width. State Street was Chicago's main shopping street, built to resemble Regent Street in London. Madison Street was Chicago's great east to west thoroughfare. The manufacturing district was located south of Lake Street and east of Halsted Street. Immigrants, factories, and stockyards filled this area of the city." But the book's main thrust, obviously, is the Fair itself and Rosenberg devotes one chapter to each of the following Fair buildings: manufacturers and liberal arts, electricity, agriculture, transportation, machinery, one chapter combining the "freestanding pavilions," and one which lists the nations who took part in the Fair and a detailed description of their displays. He also combines

the World Congress of Ideas and the Midway Plaisance into one chapter entitled "Lofty Thoughts and Low Down Fun." Scattered generously throughout the book are black and white photographs, sketches, and advertisements which portray different aspects of the Fair, and, at the center of the book is an absolute treasure: 31 pages of facsimile lithograph trading cards in full color --advertising everything from kerosene lanterns and kitchen utensils to corsets and chocolate -- which were distributed during the Fair. Very occasionally, one wishes that the book's plethora of facts were better organized. For instance, when mentioning how Britain came to be one of the "exhibiting nations," Rosenberg relates that it was Robert Todd Lincoln, US ambassador to Britain and son of the late President, who formally invited Britain to the Fair, via Britain's Prime Minister. Rosenberg then goes on to describe, in a short paragraph, the ambassador's lineage and what became of him. It is highly interesting but more than slightly diverting and would have been better placed in a sidebar rather than in the text. But detail-lovers, especially those hungry for information about an event at once as epochal and far removed from the present as the Columbian Exposition, will be thankful for the details, photographic and otherwise, found in "America at the Fair."

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