

COMMENTARY

Chicago History invites historians to reflect on the nature of cities and history. International expositions, the subject of this issue, are urban events that suggest many meanings. Warren Susman sees them as rites of passage in American society; Howard Segal sees them as a chapter in the history of utopianism.

RITUAL FAIRS/WARREN SUSMAN

POPULAR MOTION PICTURES often demonstrate special visions of the past, but historians rarely accept these as historical interpretations worthy of serious consideration. Few, if any, students of world's fairs, for example, would list Vincente Minnelli's 1944 film *Meet Me in St. Louis* in a bibliography of basic works on even St. Louis's Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. Yet I would like to propose that this classic musical film does have something important to teach us, and to suggest a few of the ways in which we might develop those insights.

I suspect that many people recall the Smith family that lived in an American Gothic house at 5135 Kensington Avenue in St. Louis the year the exposition was being built, and perhaps they also will recall that the film ends with the entire family attending the opening of the fair. The film itself seems almost plotless; the major development—the effect of the transfer of Father to New York on every member of the household—is slight enough, especially when in the end he decides to remain in St. Louis. For 113 minutes the film dwells lovingly on all the “domestic trivia that surrounds the day-to-day activities of the family.” The action is divided carefully between the four seasons, each introduced by a lovely filigree illustration suggesting a greeting card of the period. Such division allows not only for nostalgic detail, but also careful examination of a series of important rituals, important festival occasions. Against the background of such rituals,

we witness the various rites of passage of individual members of the family. Thus the film is about rituals and rites of passage as experienced by the well-to-do Smith family, who represent a sentimental American ideal. In that context the final resolution of the film—the trip to the fair itself—becomes a final ritual (as important a ritual as Halloween and Christmas and Sunday dinner) and rite of passage (as significant as Tootie's, the youngest child, emergence into adolescence or Esther's first love or the other sister's engagement).

Roughly 13 million people attended the St. Louis exposition and 40 million Chicago's A Century of Progress. Yet virtually every account we have of world's fairs makes only limited efforts to discuss the experiences of them as part of the everyday life of millions over the years. World's fairs have always been occasions of what came to be called tourism. Fairs present a significant aspect of that phenomenon so characteristic of the culture in the last 150 years. The meaning of tourism in relationship to the fairs needs further exploration.

In addition, world's fairs were “media events.” Indeed, they may have been among the first such events to deserve that most modern name. Even those who did not attend them in person came to experience them secondhand through coverage in newspapers and magazines and eventually in radio, newsreels, and other media. Photographs of fairs (it is important to recall that the photograph and international expositions developed in a sense simultaneously) brought the nature and possibly the significance of these events home to a vast audience. The fact that they were “news” represents an important chapter in the story of fairs.

But the impact of that story remained with

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Song and dance at 5135 Kensington Avenue: Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien in MGM's 1944 musical Meet Me in St. Louis. In the end all the Smiths went to the fair. Courtesy MGM/UA.

millions long after an exposition ceased to be news. The idea of souvenirs is modern, but there is reason to believe that the idea of particular souvenir items commemorating an event or place takes on special significance in the history of visitors to the fairs. Not only did fairs easily adapt themselves to the postcard—a nineteenth-century invention that developed along with tourism—but also to the production of more remarkable souvenir items: a spoon from Chicago in 1893, or a pillow from St. Louis in 1904. American homes were flooded with such items that recalled for years the event and its personal meanings and increased the museum-like functions of American parlors and later living rooms. Such items—as well as the countless photographs taken by fair visitors (by 1939 the organizers of New York's World of Tomorrow would indicate on the fairgrounds especially good vantage points for picture taking)—not only kept alive the memory of a fair for those who attended, but they also brought the life of that event to millions who did not.

No matter how new and different world's

fairs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been, we all know that the fair is an ancient institution. At its high point in the Middle Ages, the frequent seasonal fairs all over Europe provided a series of temporary towns invested with both governmental and ecclesiastical privileges as well as early capitalist commercial functions. Otto von Simpson suggests a link between the fairs of this period and architectural achievement. In his classic account of the Gothic cathedral, von Simpson maintains that "the age of the towering pilgrimage churches was...the age of the great fairs." These medieval fairs served as stations for the great pilgrimages of the period. I propose that in our era pilgrimage becomes tourism, that souvenirs are a more modern form of relic, and that the iconographic function of some fairs' buildings can be related to the iconographic significance of Gothic cathedrals.

These speculations bring me back to the ideas of rites of passage and ritual. Medieval fairs became a sort of temporary town that represented for the visitor a special kind of festival. As products of their times, but with

obvious ties to the past, almost all world's fairs also suggested possibilities of the future. They were frequently idealized towns, utopias, or as H. Bruce Franklin shrewdly suggests about New York's 1939 fair, works of science fiction. By acquainting visitors with many of the most significant aspects of everyday life in the present and the future, often at a time when even museums were less interested in such materials, fairs provided a special experience, a special education. Turning to Victor Turner's analysis of pilgrimage in his book *Drama, Fields & Metaphors*, I suggest a possible parallel here: could not the modern fair represent that liminal stage that Turner assigns to pilgrimage? Doesn't the visit to the fair mean for those who attend a separation from the world as they lived it, an opportunity to regroup and rethink the world from a vantage point somewhere between past, present, and future—a vantage point that leads to an acceptance and participation in a new social order that is emerging technologically, socially, culturally, politically? Aren't the fairs an agency for creating that transformation or making it ideologically acceptable?

There is also a sense in which the fairs can be said to have religious significance and its icons religious importance (to say nothing of its souvenirs). If I understand sociologist Emile Durkheim correctly, all religion can be ultimately defined as the worship of society: the real object of any faith, according to Durkheim the thing that men and women finally worship, is their own society. While this may not be a fully satisfactory proposition, it might help explain part of the attraction—the religious attraction if you will—of these fairs. People went to worship or at least stayed to worship a vision of that society or a social order. And it was a society and culture quite different from the social order that dominated the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the outset the fairs seemed to challenge the basic principles of the older Protestant-puritan, producer-industrial republican order. Even when they struggled to enshrine some of those principles or commemorate them (Philadelphia's Centennial Exposition in 1876 celebrated the birth of the Republic, and New York's 1939 world's fair was nominally

dedicated to both George Washington and "Tomorrow"), American fairs especially revealed important contradictions. What was to emerge from 1851 to at least 1939 was the world's fair as a symbol of a new social vision and a new ideology, a key institution of a new culture based not like the older republican culture on principles of scarcity, limitation, and sacrifice, but on new principles of abundance, self-fulfillment, and unlimited possibilities.

Interestingly enough, we can begin to see the transformation I am suggesting in one of the key fair documents we have: Rev. Henry W. Bellows's important sermon of 1853, "The Moral Significance of the Crystal Palace." Bellows, a distinguished Unitarian minister and leader in New York, urged his congregation to attend the fair held that year in New York in imitation of the great Crystal Palace of 1851 in London. But his argument is a significant step in the transformation of which I write.

For Bellows, the exhibition presented at "one view all the various claims of God's bounty—the benignity of his providence, the variety of his endowments distributed among his creatures, the conspiring benevolence of the general plan." If not a new idea, Bellows's constant dwelling on the importance of abundance becomes striking in this context. For his message is that it is good—fundamentally moral—to enjoy that abundance to the fullest.

Bellows constantly is excited about anything that enables us "to enrich the general stock of comforts and luxuries, the ideas and tastes, of civilized nations." Luxury, so long feared (at least ideologically) by republicans and puritans, becomes in Bellows's vision a religious phenomenon, a thing that can lead to moral development of the highest order. Perhaps the first writer to see the fair as an advertisement (all fairs were to be great advertisements and it is characteristic of the culture of abundance that many things and institutions are in fact turned into advertisements), Bellows welcomes that fact. Admitting that Christians of an earlier era would look "upon the 1853 New York fair's complicated costly and luxurious apparatus for promoting physical and economic ease and pleasure of the Christian world" and would see the Crystal Palace with "tears of indignation and disgust," objecting to

UTOPIAN FAIRS/HOWARD SEGAL

every means "for removing everything painful, self-denying, or laborious in the human lot." Bellows argues the opposite:

The increase of comfort, beauty, convenience and grace in the homes of Christendom, so far from being unfavorable to the prospects of morality, and even spiritually, is directly productive of the order, self-respect, dignity and decency which are the first conditions of moral sensibility and spiritual life.

Bellows's sermon, which was preached to other congregations and published as a pamphlet, is suggestive of a new sensibility or ideology that I believe came to be associated with all later fairs. It is the ideological consequence of the liminality of attending fairs.

Nothing in these suggestions is meant to deny the importance of other functions that others have seen in fairs. It would be absurd not to see, for example, the importance of bureaucratic and corporate structures in shaping the very institution of the modern fair or to see what a serious business they were. Fair managers were, after all, major managers in a corporate America: Lenox Lohr, an army engineer and associate of the Dawes brothers, was to head a radio network and a major museum of science and industry after his tenure at Chicago's A Century of Progress. Grover Whalen, New York's 1939 fair manager, was pictured as a public relations glad-hander only, yet he sat on several important corporate boards, organized one of the most important WPA parades in New York, and served as police commissioner of New York. These interconnections are fundamental.

But of the many things the fairs were, they must also be regarded as festivals in the sense that I have used that idea here. Fairs might well be added to the roster of American ritual celebrations. They were special ritual occasions that came regularly. Every generation, one suspects, has had its fair which not only made countless Americans more aware of the importance of everyday life (a very modern idea itself), but became a significant part of that life. Most important, world's fairs were rites of passage for American society which made possible the full acceptance of a new way of life, new values, and a new social organization. Let us not think about world's fairs in the future without including *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

CONTRARY TO popular stereotypes, world's fairs are more than harmless diversions from everyday life, more than idyllic escapes from individual or collective problems. They are significant social and cultural artifacts which reveal much about the times and the places which produced them, but not necessarily about future times and places. Fairs must therefore be approached seriously and rooted within the mainstream of their respective times and places and not relegated to the periphery as exotic, hence unimportant and un-influential, phenomena.

The United States has always been receptive to world's fairs. The first such international extravaganza was London's 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition, and New York was next in line just two years later with a smaller-scale version of that initial fair. Dozens of major fairs followed throughout the world, among them several taking place in various American cities—not the least in Chicago in 1893. In this as in so many other things, America eventually surpassed the mother country.

World's fairs have been popular in the United States and elsewhere for commercial reasons; they are good public relations for their sponsors, and it would be misleading to ignore this dimension of fairs' history. The most recent world's fair, last year's Energy Expo in Knoxville, is a perfect example of this thrust. Indeed, the local, regional, and national exhibitions out of which world's fairs grew were the predominantly commercial European trade fairs. They persist today and have no real social or cultural goals.

Yet American fairs, unlike their European counterparts, are key components of a distinctive utopian tradition dating back to the founding of the United States as a supposedly unique country with unprecedented potential. More specifically, these fairs are part of an American tradition that was embodied in antebellum communities like New Harmony and the Shaker villages, and which was elaborated in the visionary writings of Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward*, 1888) and others later in the nineteenth century. American world's