

Come to the Fair

Originally designed to be a small festival, commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair evolved into a show case of modern culture. More than 19 million people came from every part of the world to experience it. It had a Palace of Manufacturers, America's first shopping mall, a Palace of Education, with a full working farm and an art school from Austria housed inside. Most impressive was the Palace of Electricity which showcased the wonders of electric lighting. The St. Louis Art Museum, Forest Park, and the modern day Olympics, all had their start at the Great Fair of 1904. And it happened, right here in Missouri.

In 1904, Missouri introduced itself to the rest of the world. Can you imagine throwing a party so extraordinary, so sensational, that people still talked about it 100 years later? Well, that's what happened here in St. Louis, in a place called Forest Park. The party? It was officially called the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, but it's more commonly known as the 1904 World's Fair. It was sort of a coming out party for the City of St. Louis, and a fascinating preview into modern life. Originally, it was designed as a small festival to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Louisiana Purchase. But, by the time it opened in 1904, it had grown to become the World's Fair. More than 19 million people came from every part of the world to experience it. The exposition had lofty ideals. It was to be a living, working university of mankind, a record of our progress and our potential for the future. Former Missouri Governor David Francis was one of the principle organizers of the fair.

We need to have a certain narrowness of vision altered. We need to learn something of our own merits and possibilities, so that many of our own people will realize a little better than they do, that St. Louis is, in its way, as great as city as any on the continent.

The fair sprawled across a 1,272 acre sight, larger by a good measure than any previous fair or exposition. It covered much of what is now St. Louis' Forest Park. Neighboring Washington University also housed a portion of the Fair. Foreign pavilions were built there and the universities athletic fields and stadium were host to the 1904 Olympic games, held in conjunction with the World's Fair. The heart of the fair was the grand Festival Hall, and the eight classically-styled palaces that fanned out around it.

Each of the palaces had their own architect; so that they didn't all look the same. They had originally thought that they'd like to have the Fair built out of steel, and really have permanent structures. But, they realized real quickly that it would have taken the entire production of steel for a whole year in the United States to do this. Well, they were made out of a material called "staff"--it was a combination of jute and plaster and wood. And, they were put on a frame, a wood frame. This was a very soft material, originally, so that they could mold it and put it up and do things that—that's why the buildings all looked so good. And the palaces were all free and there were like 150 miles of sidewalks and aisles you could go through at no charge at all.

It had a Palace of Manufacturers to show-case modern merchandise. A Palace of Education which boasted a full-working farm, an art school, and an iron ore mine. There were representatives from almost every country in the world, and the new discipline of anthropology was being explored. Hundreds of individuals from indigenous groups were brought in, displayed in their native dress.

They decided it wasn't just going to be a fair of things, bringing things to the fair, showing things; this was to be a fair of people: for example they had all the American Indian tribes, or nations, represented at the fair; the Eskimos were there; they brought over entire Philippine villages and African villages and they built their homes right on the Fair grounds and they were represented. There was never less than 20,000 people on the Fair grounds at any one time, because it had so many people that actually lived on the grounds.

By 1904, still photography was becoming common place. It was the motion picture that was new. These rare film images of the fair capture both the grandeur and the folly of this magnificent event.

This too, is a part of our Missouri heritage. Soldiers reenacted scenes from the South African Bower War. A replica of the ancient city of Jerusalem covered 13 acres. There were some strange things too...President Roosevelt's likeness was carved in butter, and a life-size model of a California grizzly bear constructed entirely of prunes! And then there was the Palace of Electricity.

This was the largest use of electricity to its time, and there was, they had to supply their own electricity. Thomas Edison was at the Palace of Electricity and they had such things as a tape recorder, x-ray, they showed things of the future that we use every day today and think nothing of, which was like going into a wish book and, it was just an amazing thing to see.

Most of it is gone now, within months of the Fair's closing, most of the magnificent architecture had disappeared. Most, but not all. If you come to Forest Park today, you'll see the legacy of this historic event. And if you stretch your imagination, you'll feel the magic too.

Take the St. Louis Art Museum for example. It was meant to be part of the Fair, but it was built as a permanent structure. St. Louis was becoming an important commercial center, but it wanted to showcase its cultural side as well. This building, built to house one of the world's greatest art collections, is still in use today. The lighting, patrons with thousands of paintings, sculptures and other art work.

This hill is covered with grass now, but during the Fair, it was the site of a spectacular series of man-made water falls, called the Cascades. Noted St. Louis composer Scott Joplin was so entranced by the Cascades he wrote one of his best-loved piano rags in its honor. The Cascades are gone, but here at the bottom of the hill, the lagoon that received all that clear water, is still here. Imagine this in 1904. On either side of this lagoon there were extraordinary buildings, built in a heroic style. Then, seven months after it opened, the Fair was closed. Jerusalem vanished; the Tyrolian Alps and the Irish village that once thrilled fair-goers were gone. All that was left was a memory so deeply imprinted in our history, that it's still legendary today. The 1904 World's Fair. It's a part of your Missouri heritage.