Iowans at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition

What they took to the fair, what they did there, and what they brought home

by Ginalie Swaim
with Becky Hawbaker and Lisa Moran

THE LETTER to the Iowa governor was frantic. "We are notified on good authority that the Missouri delegation is . . . prepared to make a strong fight for St. Louis and to antagonize Chicago in every way. Please," the Chicago committee begged William Larrabee, "have the delegation from your state as strong as possible and prepared for anything they may spring."

The fight had been going on for most of 1889. Which American city would host the upcoming World's Columbian Exposition—St. Louis, Washington, D.C., New York City, or Chicago?

In an age when international expositions had become major commercial and cultural statements, the stakes were high. This would be the first exposition in the Midwest, and Chicago needed the support of midwestern states, whose connections with this major market were solid. Asking for Larrabee's support, the *Chicago Herald* reminded him that "Chicago excels all other cities in the United States. It is the centre of thirty eight railroads that extend in all directions. It has immense fireproof hotels. . . . Its markets are unrivalled and supplied from the whole country."

Having risen from the Great Fire of 1871, Chicago had now set out to prove that it was a match for any East Coast or European metropolis. Chicago's mayor boasted that Chicago would "truly manifest American life, American ideas and American enterprise." *Scribner's Magazine* rejoined that "the woods are full of citizens willing to begin at sunrise and discourse to you until midnight of the wonders of Chicago." So much hot air was expended on the issue that Chicago was dubbed "The Windy City."

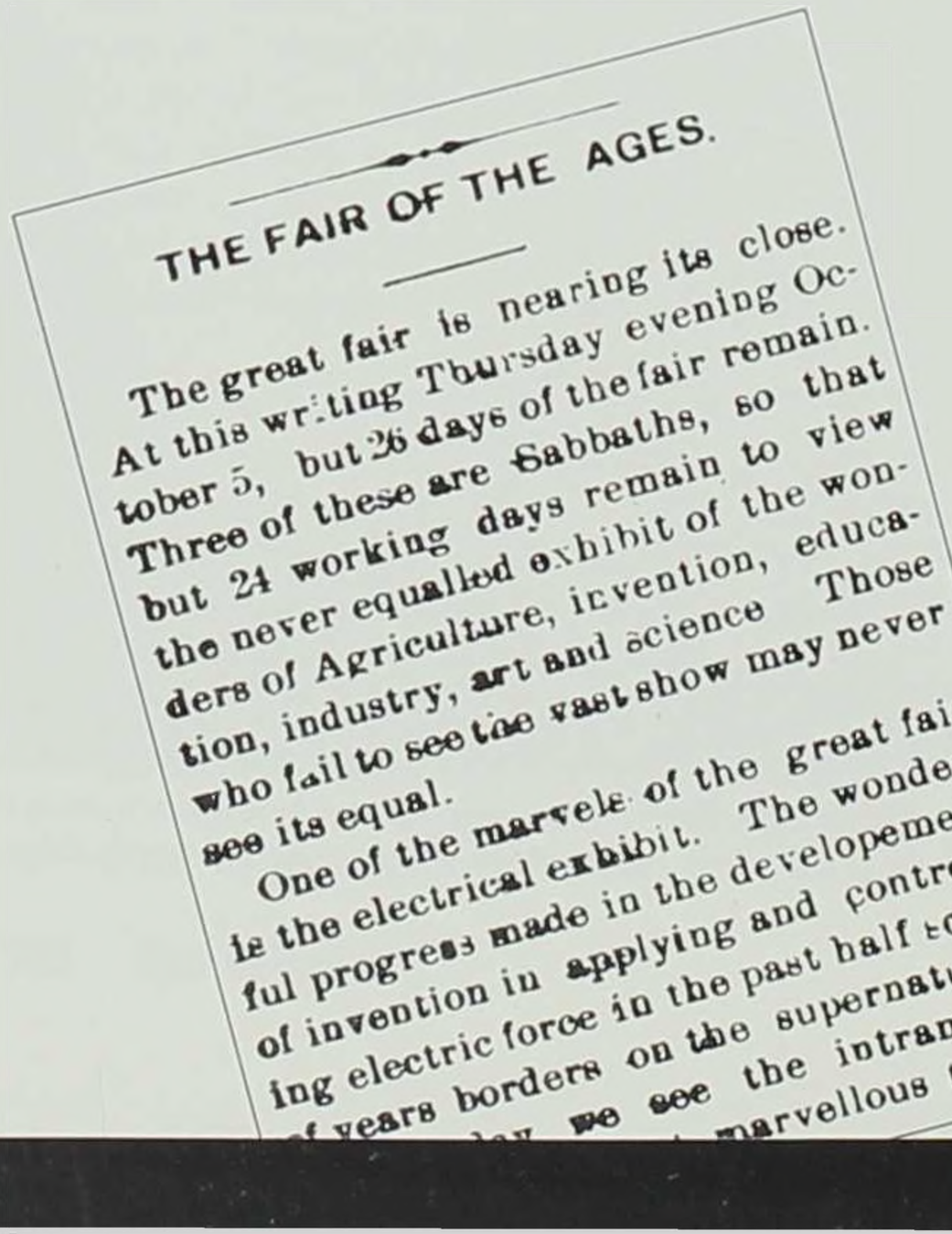
The decision became a congressional one, because federal appropriations were involved. Finally in 1890, on the eighth ballot, Chicago won. The planners would now begin transforming a square mile or so of swamp and sand into "a dream city," a "White City." Laced with reflecting pools and lagoons, graced with Frederick Law Olmsted's landscaping, the exposition buildings that arose became a message of high culture and high hopes. As Iowan

Charles Ashton preened, the exposition "brushed the last ash from the plumage of the victorious young Phoenix and sent it soaring high over the startled eyes of two continents. It was greater than Paris, greater than London, greater than Vienna."

This ideal White City was also far greater than its host city, which lay beyond the exposition gates. As America's second largest city, populated by a million people, Chicago suffered the overcrowding, poverty, and crime that plagued all American metropolises, especially those with large immigrant populations. *Harper's Monthly* described the exposition as "the blossom" and Chicago as "the root," holding "in its grimy fibres as many human activities as the mind of man can well conceive." The long-lasting economic panic of 1893 would descend on the city soon after Opening Day (certainly sharpening the fair investors' appetite for profits). A local smallpox epidemic would ravage the inner city as the fair closed. Surrounding the fantasy of the fair was the reality of humanity and its problems.

NEVERTHELESS, Iowa had plenty of reasons to rejoice that a midwestern city had won this business bonanza. Chicago provided the markets for Iowa's products. Iowa's next governor, Horace Boies, in 1893, credited Iowa's "brawny arms and steady nerves" for the products "from field and mine and shop" that helped "to swell the mighty torrent of trade that has built" Chicago.

And so Iowa—and the nation—next produced a mighty torrent of tourists. Historians estimate between 12 and 27 million attended the fair, many more than once. After Chicagoans themselves, historian William Cronon writes, "the next-largest group of visitors came from Chicago's hinterland. Most were rural farmers and residents of small towns in the Mississippi Valley." According to registration books in the Iowa Building, between 700 and 1,000 Iowans signed in some days. Now, a century later, we'll look at the World's Columbian Exposition through the eyes of a few of those Iowans, who left some record of their impressions of the fair. Here are a few of

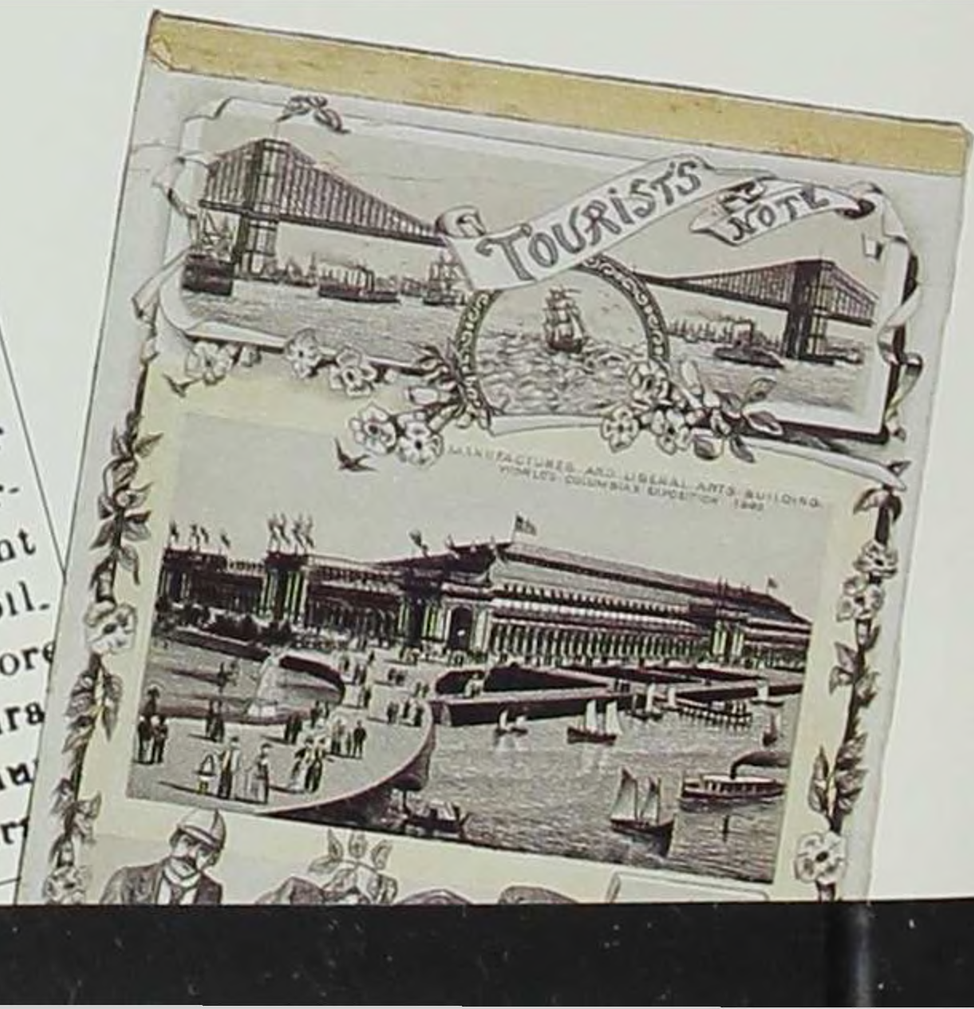


THE FAIR OF THE AGES.

The great fair is nearing its close. At this writing Thursday evening October 5, but 26 days of the fair remain. Three of these are Sabbaths, so that but 24 working days remain to view the never equalled exhibit of the wonders of Agriculture, invention, education, industry, art and science. Those who fail to see the vast show may never see its equal.

One of the marvels of the great fair is the electrical exhibit. The wonderful progress made in the developement of invention in applying and controlling electric force in the past half score of years borders on the supernatural. We see the intramu marvellous tr

Upper left: H. Roy Mosnat photographed scenes at the fair and then created a small album bound by leather ties. Left: One of Charles Ashton's weekly columns for the *Guthrian*. Below: Tablet used by Sarah Jane Kimball as a fair diary. Note the fair's Manufacturing and Liberal Arts Building on tablet cover.



Eliza Hursey and Frank Hinton of Keokuk County honeymooned at the World's Fair. Below: Statues, canals and lagoons, and classical architecture were main components of the fair.

the fairgoers you'll encounter in the following pages.

• Sarah Jane Kimball traveled twice to the fair from rural Jones County and stayed at least a week each time. In a "Tourist's Note" tablet purchased beforehand in nearby Wyoming, Iowa, she jotted down her impressions of the fair.

• Frank Hinton and Eliza Hursey spent their honeymoon at the fair. (So did many others, according to a *Harper's* journalist who noted "the profusion of newly married couples" and quipped that the grooms could thereby "kill two birds with one stone.") On the back of the Hintons' wedding portrait, taken in Ottumwa, Iowa, is an illustration of Columbus landing in America. Although the Columbus motif had permeated marketing, Hinton was not much impressed by the Columbiana at the fair. "Ships. Nina, Pinta, Ferdinand Isabella &c." was all he noted in his diary.

• Charles Ashton, editor of the Guthrie Center *Guthrian*, was also one of eleven members of the Iowa Columbian Commission. Written from the fair, his weekly columns in the *Guthrian* are detailed and exuberant commentary.

• H. Roy Mosnat of Belle Plaine took his camera to the fair. Candid photos of the fair are not common today, and were a costly venture then. Amateur photographers were required to buy a two-dollar permit—four times the daily admission fee—to use their cameras, so intent were the fair's directors on controlling the portrayal of the fair and protecting the monopoly of Chicago photographer C. W. Arnold, who focused on the grandeur, not the humanity, of the fair.

• Charles G. Simpson, like other young Iowa men, had a summer job at the fair. His letters home give us an insider's view.

The exposition would introduce into American culture diverse icons: Aunt Jemima marketed pancakes, Pabst Beer won a blue ribbon, and the Pledge of Allegiance was first chanted nationally by schoolchildren as the fair was dedicated in October 1892. Although the fair lasted only from May through October 1893, vivid memories, new ideas, and some objects endured. The only building that remains is the Museum of Science and Industry, about six miles south of The Loop, near the University of Chicago. Once the fair's Palace of Fine Arts, the museum was rehabilitated in the 1930s.

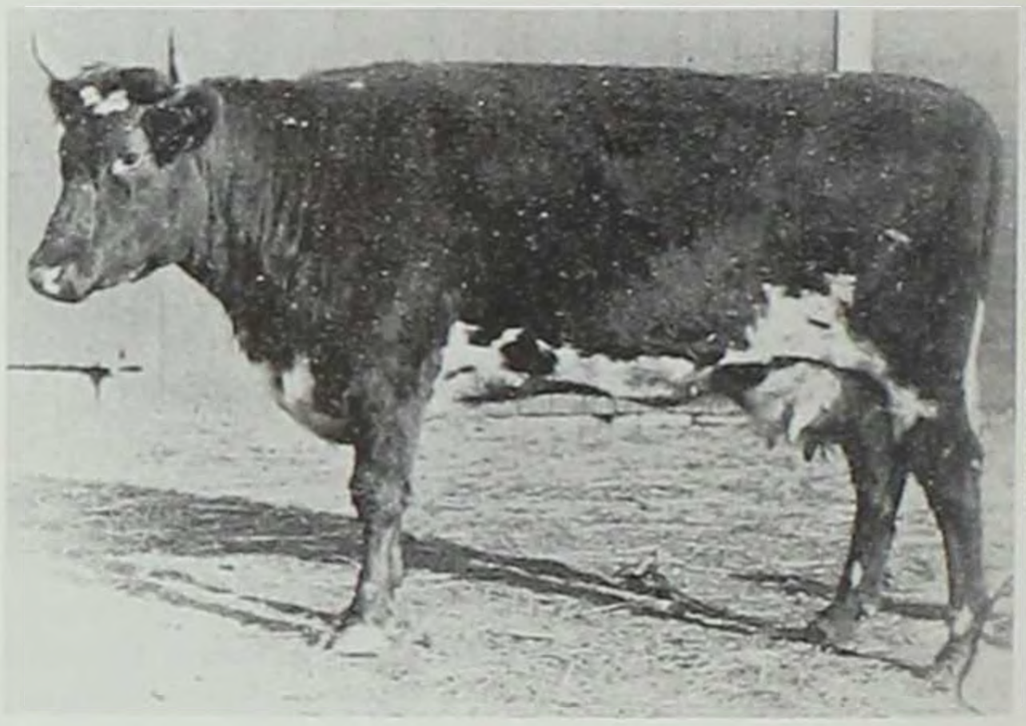
Our exploration of the World's Columbian Exposition is based on images, objects, and personal and published accounts from the 1890s (all preserved in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa) and later research by historians. In presenting the Iowa angle, we ask: What did Iowans take to the fair? What did they do there? And finally, what did they bring back home?

They took their accomplishments

IOWANS TOOK their accomplishments to the fair, to be exhibited in the Iowa Building (most states had their own buildings) and in the enormous "theme" buildings devoted to such subjects as Agriculture, Machinery, Mining, and Women. Other items would be entered in individual competitions, from fine arts to livestock. Student work from public schools across Iowa was gathered together for an extensive display in the Liberal Arts Building.

In some cases, Iowans took their own performing talents. The popular Iowa State Band performed daily at the Iowa Building, at twenty-three dedications for various state and foreign buildings, and for the opening of the Ferris Wheel (and then boarded it for the first ride). They also played for the banquet honoring Princess Eulalia, Infanta of Spain, and for a grand parade of "the world's premium live stock."

Both pride and profits generated the exhibits; international expositions were meant to expand markets. "Every motive of patriotism and pride," an Iowa exposition committee noted, "every commercial instinct would impel us to seize upon this opportunity of a century to advance the material interest of our beloved Iowa." Here's a small sampling of what Iowans took to the fair:



REPORT OF THE IOWA COLUMBIAN COMMISSION (1896)

Daniel Sheehan of Osage took "Nora," a Short Horn, to compete in dairy production. Iowa cattle performed well at the fair, a state report concluded, despite a "barn so hot" and "feed so indifferent."

Horticulture and agriculture. Colorful pyramids of fruit proved Iowa's horticultural diversity: 29 varieties of plums, 89 varieties of grapes, 351 varieties of apples, all cultivated in Iowa in the 1890s. Six-foot-high glass cylinders held Iowa soil cores. Tubs of butter cooled in fifty feet of refrigerated glass cases, and won awards. Iowa apiarists found buyers for their honey from California, Vienna, and Saxony. Among the grains

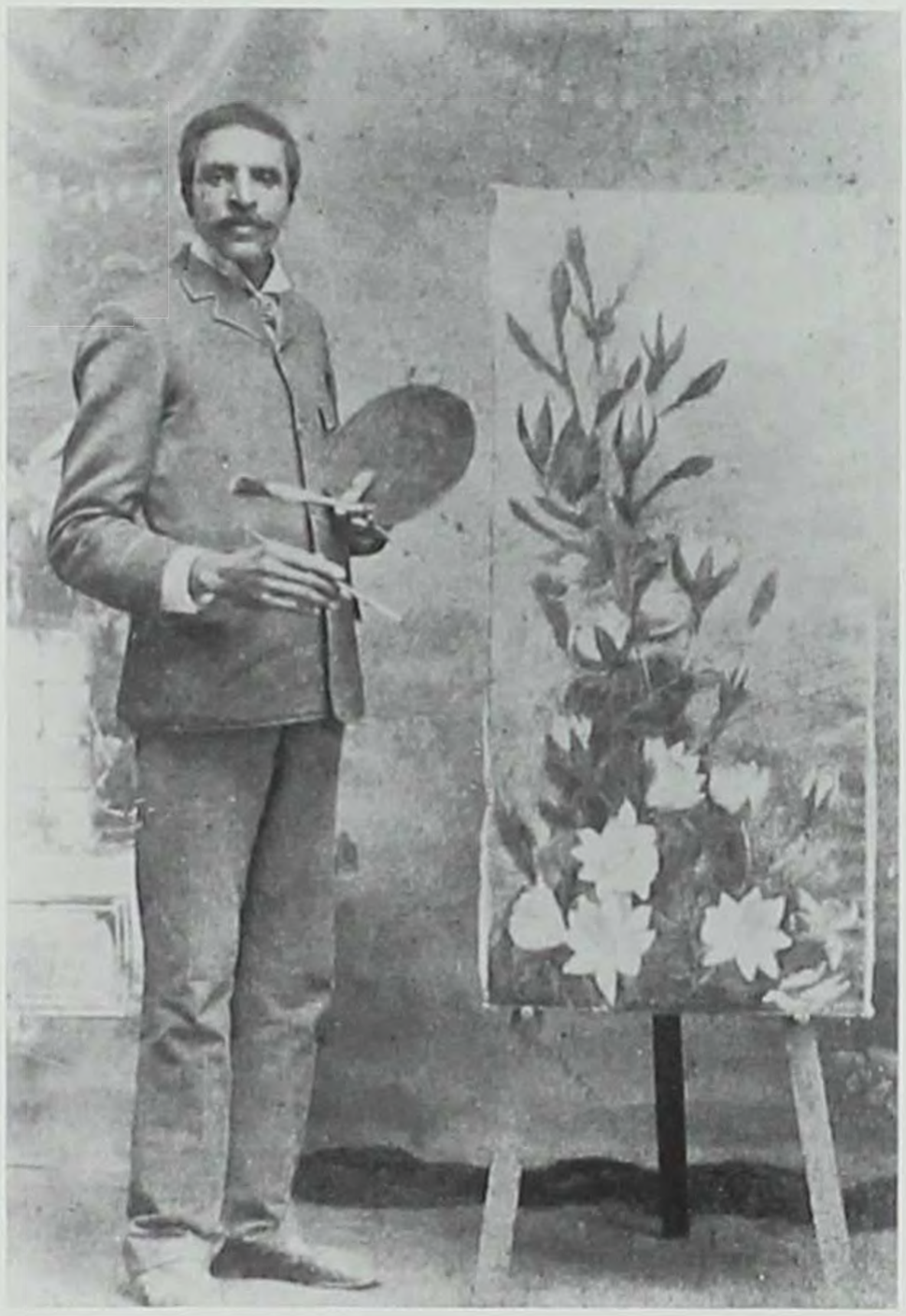
PHOTO (AND INSET) BY CHUCK GREINER

Massive oak chair is inscribed "ladies of Dunlap, Iowa," who commissioned it from P. H. Wind's planing mill in Council Bluffs. The chair was set on the speaker's platform in the Iowa Building.

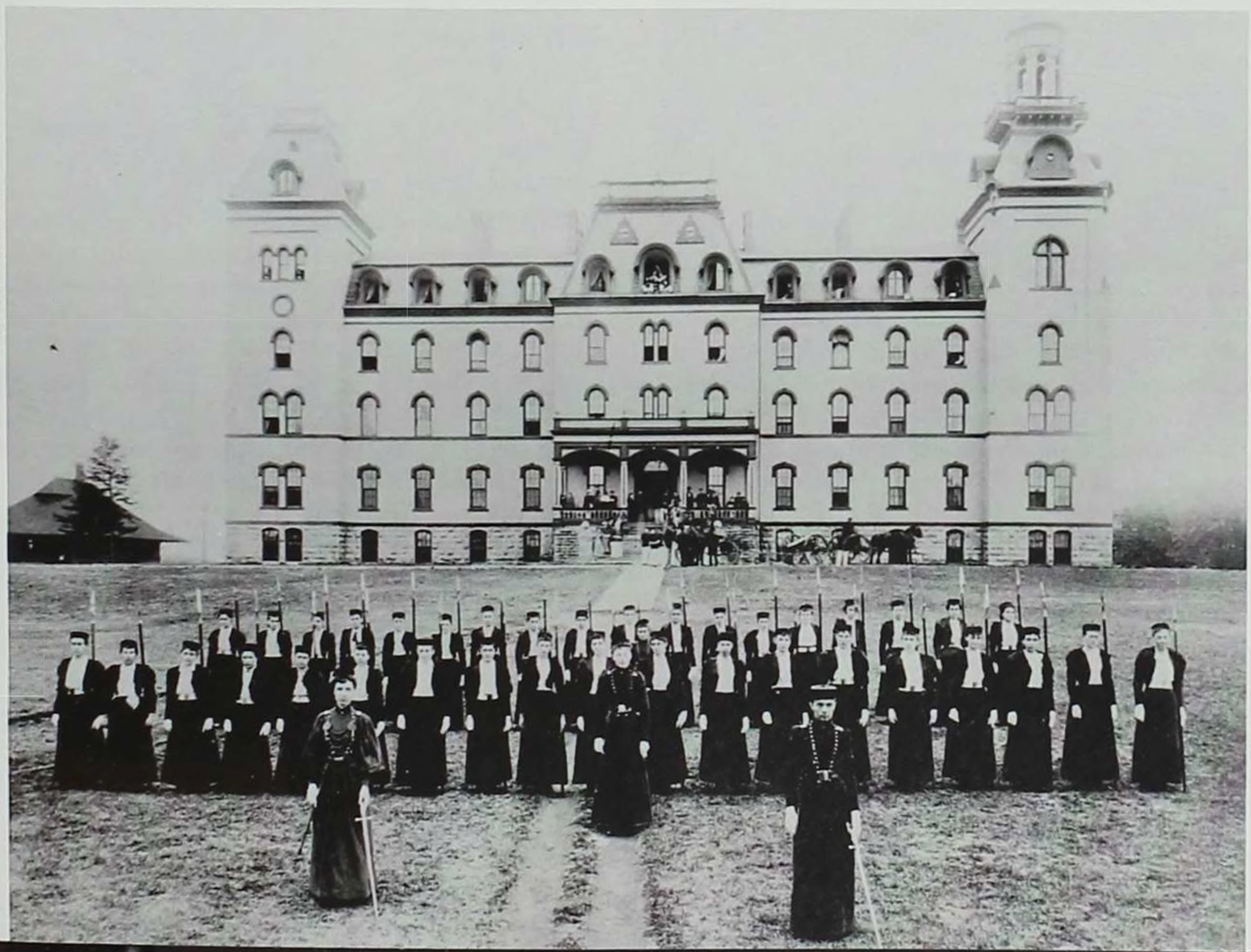
exhibited, corn was clearly king: Winneshiek County farmers sent sixteen-foot cornstalks (with ears nine feet off the ground). As Charles Ashton noted, "There is no humbug in that show."

Minerals and geology. Fort Dodge sent gypsum, Lansing sent lead ore, Keokuk sent geodes. Also, there was coal from Centerville, limestone from Eldora, clay tile from Tipton, and pottery from Red Oak.

Livestock. Poultry, swine, and horses were taken to the fair. Cattle, too—Galloways from Crystal, Iowa, Jerseys from Glenwood, Red Polled from Maquoketa, Aberdeen Angus from Denison, and Herefords from Des Moines. A Cass County farmer sent a fine Suffolk Punch, a new breed of draft horse that Charles Ashton predicted would "take with western farmers."



George Washington Carver, then a science student at Iowa State College, was among thirty-eight Iowa artists whose paintings were selected for the fair. Below: Iowa State College sent three hundred cadets and this "battalion of young ladies" to perform precision drills. Uniformed in blue Zouave jackets, "the girls are an exceptionally healthy-looking and jolly crowd," Ashton wrote.



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY/UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES (AMES)

They took advice

IOWANS TOOK ALONG a great deal of advice about the Columbian Exposition. Those Iowans who were undecided about attending the exposition were courted both by its detractors—who warned of Chicago's crime—and its promoters, the most notable of these being Guthrie Center editor and Iowa Columbian Commissioner Charles Ashton.

Despite Ashton's efforts, Iowans read about thieves, pickpockets, and trunk stealers infesting Chicago. Certain colorful crooks became legendary—one of the most infamous of these was a certain "Antonio," alternately described as the "illegitimate son of an Italian countess" and as "Antonio, the Frenchman." Other shady characters, such as Richard Preston, alias "Windy Dick," George Carr, alias "Mother Empy's Kid," and George Bockman, alias "Little Dutch," were all said to be in Chicago, preying on tourists.

Just as there was no lack of rumors about criminals and crime, there was no dearth of advice as to how to combat crime. The Rand McNally guidebook advised visitors to just "say no" if confronted by a solicitor. "Don't trust your checks with unauthorized individuals," it warned. "Don't let them take hold of your hand-baggage, and do not be persuaded to do anything by their eloquence." The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* warned of the seductive qualities of the pickpocket, who "comes upon you in such unexpected places, under such a pleasant guise and with such insinuating ways that you fall a victim to his artistic skill while admiring the beauty of his face and figure of the excellent fit of his coat."

Awkwardly enough, none other than the wife of an Iowa Columbian Commissioner fell victim to crime while visiting the fair. Mrs. Charles Ashton "had the misfortune to have her pocketbook gone through with by thugs, losing all she had," the *Guthrian* reported, "and then again coming home in the sleeper some thieving person or persons relieved her of another supply of cash." No doubt Mr. Charles Ashton found it difficult to assert the safety of the fair thereafter.

Ashton preferred not to dwell on the unpleasantries of crime; his columns in the *Guthrian* concentrated on advice for visiting the fair cheaply. He promised his readers that "you can by observing the advice given here make a week's visit to the fair for $40.00."

Ashton assured Iowans that inexpensive hotels were plentiful. "Go in companies of three, four or more by using cots," he advised, "and so doubling up in rooms you can get cheap rates." He also urged people to stay a week or more, which would earn them a cut rate at the hotel.

For meals, Ashton suggested Iowans go "to a restaurant or lunch room and get a good solid meal for 25 cents," and to avoid restaurants that charged "50 or 75 cents for a meal that will not do you any more good." He considered the "restaurant monopoly" to be "a conscienceless extortion," and approved of the hundreds of Iowans who packed lunches to eat in the Iowa Building.

"Fine dresses will not be needed," Charles Ashton advised Iowa fairgoers.

Ashton also recommended taking the elevated train, "an excellent way and the cheapest, the ride each way to and from the park costs 5 cents." No doubt some Iowans hesitated to take that advice, after reading other journalists' warning that "Windy Dick" and his gang were fond of creating disturbances on the railway trains and then picking pockets of the unaware.

Ashton believed that the fair was too great an opportunity for any Iowan to miss because of prohibitive costs: "Go see the fair and live plainly while you are there."

They took the train

THE SAME WEB of railroad tracks that delivered Iowa's crops to the Chicago market transported Iowa's populace to the Chicago World's Fair. Railways scrambled to advertise to the fairgoers and to make fares as competitive as possible.

The occasion of Iowa Days at the fair, September 20-21, resulted in some especially frantic advertising skirmishes between railroads. The September 18 *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette* included fifteen separate advertisements for World's Fair railroad transportation and special low fares, including a half-page Chicago and Northwestern railway advertisement (below). The enticements must have worked, for sixty thousand Iowans attended the fair on Iowa Days.

The Illinois Central Railroad advertised itself as "the only true World's Fair route." Indeed, the Illinois Central (I.C.) route ran right along Jackson Park, the site of the fair. This fortuitous location was likely the result of I.C. management's involvement in planning and directing the fair, and of I.C.'s investments in fair bonds.

To prepare for the masses of fairgoers, I.C. built a new million-dollar depot, bought new engines and passenger cars, and elevated all track near the fairgrounds to avoid hindering street traffic. The soon-to-be-legendary Casey Jones engineered one of the special fast trains that shuttled passengers between the suburban Van Buren Street and Jackson Park. This route alone would carry 8.8 million passengers.

The transportation to the fair was only the prelude to the technical wonders Iowans could observe once they arrived. Louis Sullivan's Transportation Building featured numerous state-of-the-art exhibits of locomotives. An elevated electric train ran around the perimeter of the fair, while quieter rides were available in the many gondolas that plied the lagoons and canals.

ADVERTISEMENT IN 1892 CONVENTION REPORT, IOWA STATE SABBATH SCHOOL ASSN.

CEDAR RAPIDS EVENING GAZETTE (9/18/1893)

They rode the Ferris Wheel and explored the Midway Plaisance

IOWANS ALREADY ASTONISHED by the size of Chicago's buildings must have gasped in amazement at the 264-foot Ferris Wheel, which dominated the skyline at the fair. The steel wheel was four stories taller than the world's tallest building at that time (the twenty-two-story "Capitol" building in Chicago). The consensus of fairgoers was that George Washington Gale Ferris's design had met and surpassed the exposition's challenge to American engineers for "something novel, original, daring, and unique" that would outclass the Eiffel Tower, the monument of the Paris World's Fair of 1889.

Although neither the design nor the idea of using a wheel as a pleasure ride was new, the monumental size, mass, and capacity of the Ferris Wheel made it extraordinary. A 1,000-horsepower steam engine turned 36 wood-veneered cabins, which each carried up to 60 people. The steel structure weighed 1,200 tons, and the hollow axle, which weighed 46 tons, was the largest piece of steel that had ever been forged.

Charles Ashton wrote to his Iowa readers that the Ferris Wheel was the "most wonderful demonstration of the exactness of mathematical science and of engineering and constructive skill." He reassured Iowa readers that the Ferris Wheel engendered "no more risk in riding thereon in its vast revolution than there is in riding on the street car" and that "no one experiences any sensation of sickness or fear in the unique ride."

Our Iowa diarist, Sarah Jane Kimball (and 1.4 million other fairgoers) paid the exorbitant fifty-cent fare (the merry-go-round was only five cents) for two marvelous revolutions on the massive wheel. She would have been helped aboard a cabin by a uniformed attendant (perhaps Henry Gillespie of Manchester, Iowa, who earned college money as an attendant). The attendants had the enviable job of riding along in the interest of safety. The loading and unloading of passengers took so long that the ride lasted for twenty minutes. Kimball recorded that there was "a fine view" from the top. The Ferris Wheel revolved until eleven o'clock at night, and when darkness fell, the structure was lit by three thousand electric bulbs, making it "a fine view" in itself.

The Ferris Wheel, alas, was not designed to be portable, and after the close of the fair, the cost of moving it was prohibitive. The Ferris Wheel made two appearances, one at a small amusement park in Chicago, the other at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, before it was blasted apart by two 100-pound charges of dynamite and sold as scrap metal in 1906. Variations of Ferris's design can now be found in nearly every amusement park in America.

After riding the Ferris Wheel, Kimball explored the rest of the Midway: "Went on the streets of Cairo and saw the Egyptians, their camels and donkeys and brilliant gewgaws," she wrote. "Saw the Turkish building and India

building. Was interested in the beautiful carving."

The Columbian Exposition was the first world's fair to feature a separate amusement zone. The Midway Plaisance—a mile-long stretch of rides, beer gardens, restaurants, and entertainment provided by such personalities as Harry Houdini and "Little Egypt" the belly dancer, established the concept of the amusement park in American culture, and added the terms "midway" and "hootchy-kootchy" to American vocabulary.

However, Frederic Ward Putnam, head of the Harvard Peabody Museum and Midway exhibit planner, believed that "there was much of instruction as well as of joy on the Merry Midway." The ethnological exhibits along the Midway were "arranged and grouped to teach a lesson," according to another designer, "to show the advancement and evolution of man." Towards this end, simulated villages representing world cultures, complete with natives, were arranged on what one literary critic of the time called a "sliding scale of humanity," with Teutonic and Celtic displays closest to the White City and the Dahomey of Africa and American Indians furthest away.

As the exhibits taught their intended lesson, they reinforced American stereotypes of non-white cultures as barbaric or childlike. *Scribner's Magazine* described the natives as "uncleanly, unkempt . . . forbidding and repulsive." *Frank Leslie's Popular Magazine* proclaimed, "Sixty-nine [Dahomeyans] are here in all their barbaric ugliness, blacker than buried midnight and as degraded as the animals which prowl the jungles of their dark land."

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (IOWA CITY)

Souvenir of "Street in Cairo" attraction. Below: Crowds throng the Midway Plaisance.

Many of those who visited the Midway regarded the ethnological displays as more of a freak show than educational exhibit. As the *New York Times* wrote, "The late P. T. Barnum should have lived to see this day."

Left: The Iowa Building, photographed by Iowan H. Roy Mosnat. Right: Artful grain mosaics graced its interior. The *Des Moines Capital* commented that "the originality of the work in corn and grains is very attractive after the conventional elegance of such buildings as New York's has become tiresome."

They rested at the Iowa Building

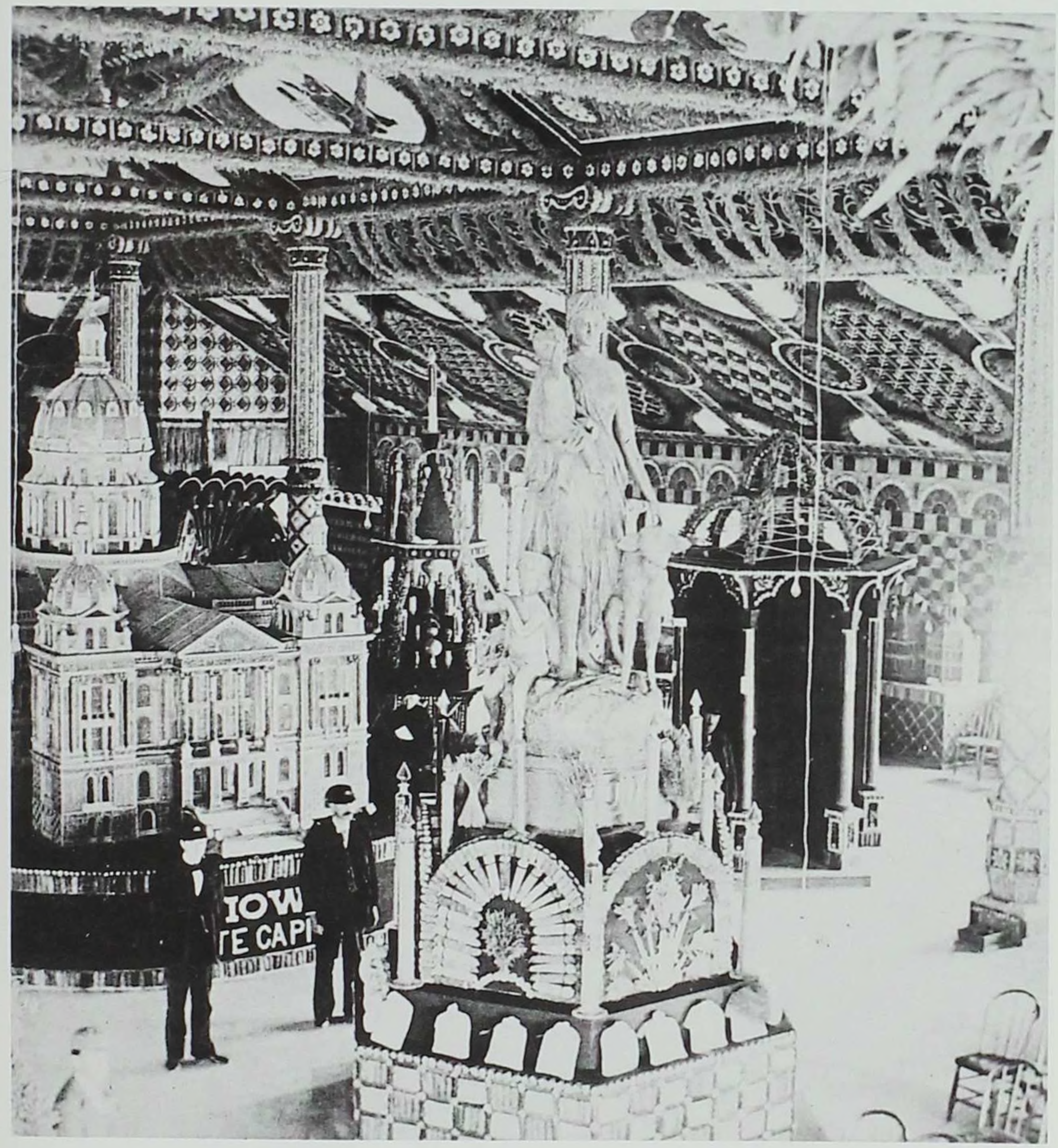
THE IOWA BUILDING served a dual purpose at the World's Fair. It served as a clubhouse for Iowans weary of exhibits and strangers, and as a grandiose presentation of Iowa's accomplishments to citizens and strangers alike. Located near the cluster of about forty other state buildings, the Iowa Building was actually a two-story addition added to an existing park shelter. It had the advantage of being on the cool, breezy shores of Lake Michigan.

Upon entering the building, "all felt instinctively the hearty welcome," wrote Ora E. Miller, president of the Iowa Board of Lady Managers. Visitors might first sign their names, home towns, and local lodgings in the register to enable friends and neighbors to locate each other in the unfamiliar city. To Miller, "the social feature" of the Iowa Building was its greatest strength, and "the reunion of families, old neighbors and friends . . . was a most fitting culmination of the State's hospitality." Next, the visitors might check their valises, rest weary feet in the ladies' parlor or men's smoking room, stop by the library and read their hometown newspaper (or one of seven hundred books and pamphlets by Iowa authors), write a postcard home to the unfortunate ones who could not come, or check the post office, which distributed mail for Iowa tourists.

Many Iowans took Charles Ashton's advice to avoid the concessionaires' high prices by taking in a lunch and eating it at the Iowa Building. Thus, as Miller pointed out, they could enjoy the "dual advantage of rest and a grand musical treat furnished by the celebrated Iowa State Band," who played during the noon hours.

Every inch of the Iowa Building's large Exhibition Hall displayed Iowa's natural products. A glass model of the state capitol was filled with grain. Along with a coal castle, flax palace, and a pagoda with the choicest examples of Iowa corn, the walls, ceiling, and pillars trumpeted Iowa's productivity.

Modeled after the Sioux City corn palaces, panels representing Iowa's industries (livestock,



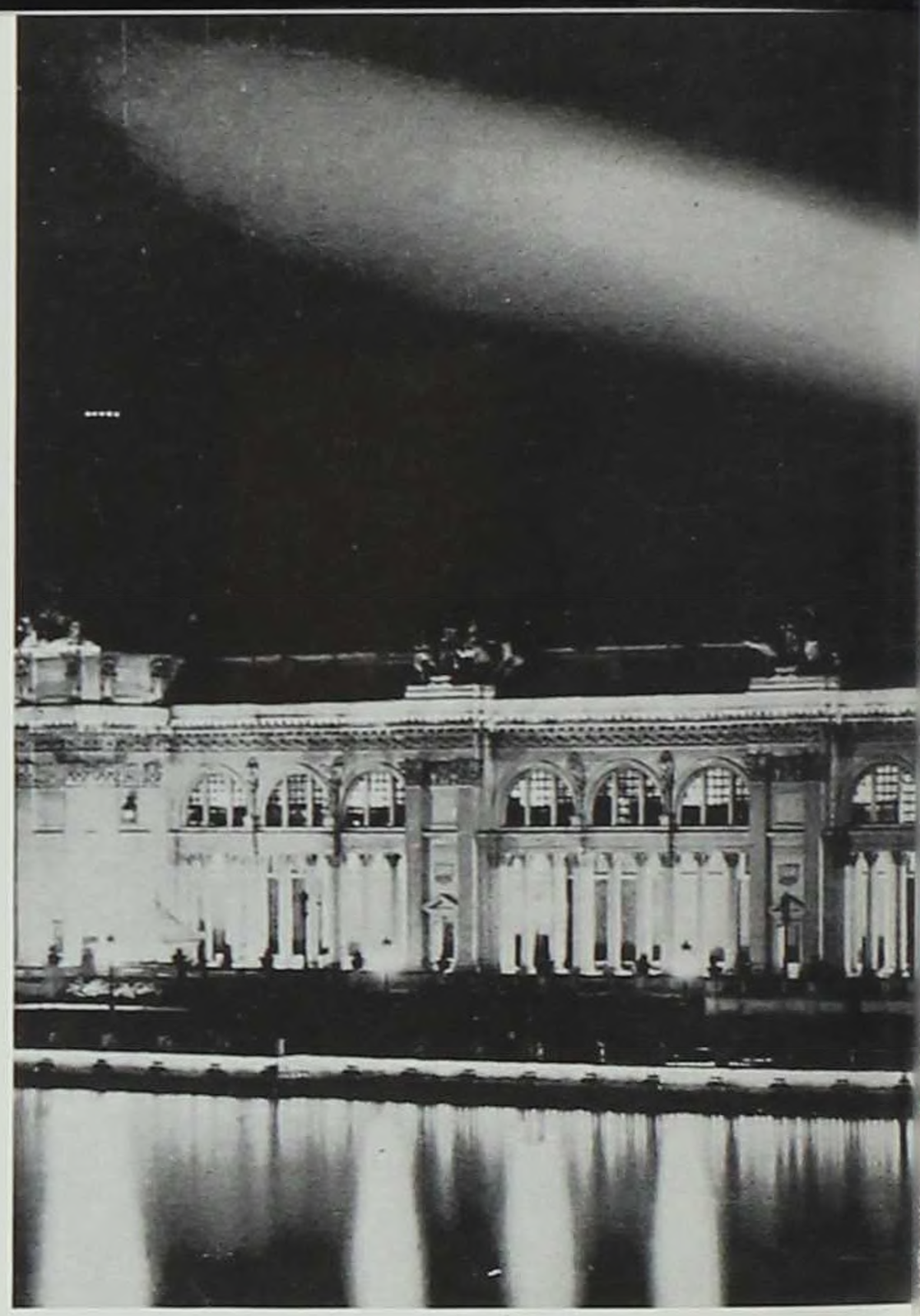
mining, dairy, and clay) were decorated with designs made of husks, cobs, and kernels of corn, wheat, barley, rye, sorghum tops, sumac, tickle grass, and everything from "mustard seed to pumpkin seed." The *Chicago News* reported that "cultivated fields and wild prairies have been searched, and more than a year consumed in getting the grains, grasses, and seeds together." Another Chicago publication marveled that though the display was "one blaze of color . . . not a kernel was dipped in paint or dyed."

Even Iowans found wonder in the familiar products. "To no one was this . . . decoration a greater pleasure or surprise than to the farmer himself," Miller wrote. "This use of corn and other cereals was a revelation."

They witnessed electricity

IOWANS WERE DAZZLED by the wonders of electricity at the World's Fair. Rural Iowa had little exposure to electricity, although it was beginning to light up towns and cities. Iowans were overwhelmed by the lighting of the exposition grounds itself, and wrote home about illuminated fountains, walkways, and buildings. Other Iowans were impressed by the far-reaching search lights, and still others by the interior lighting of the exhibits, which made them "literally as bright as day." Visitors waxed poetic about the beauty of what they saw, describing "electric splendor," "a marvel of grandeur," and

Below: Interior of Electricity Building. Right: Agricultural Building, awash in electric light.



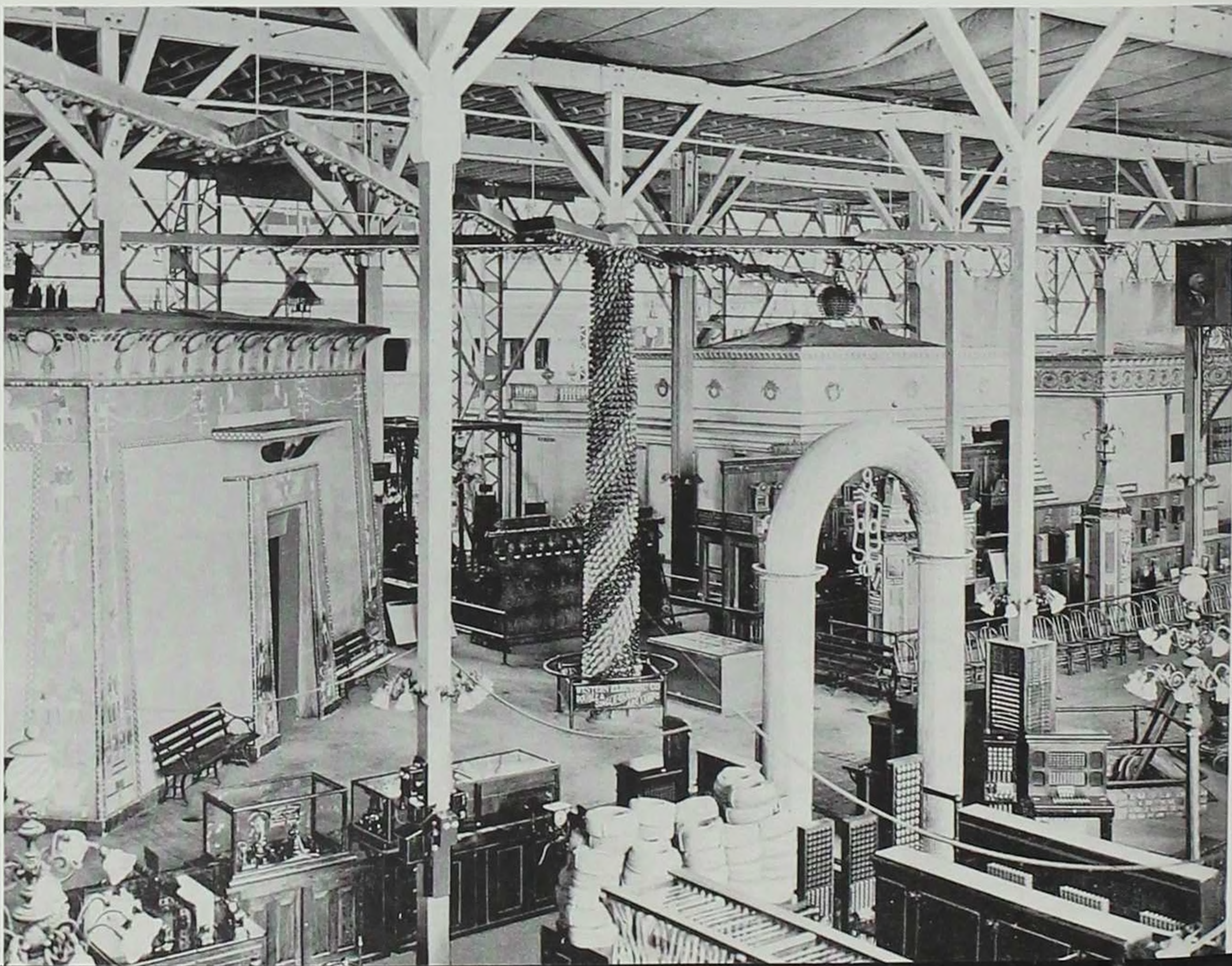


PHOTO BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON IN THE WHITE CITY (1894)

PHOTO BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON IN *THE WHITE CITY* (1894)

"hues as various, brilliant, numerous and beautiful as ever were exhibited in the most bright and perfect bow that ever arched the heavens."

Iowans were equally impressed, however, by the technological implications of electricity. Aside from providing a spectacle of light, the Electricity Building provided a comprehensive exhibit of the inventions that put electricity to use. Both women and men were fascinated by the "All-Electric Home," which featured futuristic wonders such as electric stoves, hot plates, washing machines, irons, dishwashers, doorbells, and fire alarms. Other displays of progress ranged from the ominous—the electric chair—to the mysterious—the telantograph and the kinetograph. Reactions varied. Iowa Columbian Commissioner Charles Ashton found the display of electricity bordering "on the supernatural." And at least one Iowan, a Mrs. Lyons, "could not endure the electric currents in the electric building."

Ashton described one exhibit in detail. "We found a man with an electric incubator hatching chickens by electricity. He had a big setting of eggs, not under his hen, but under the influence of this marvelous power to heat by machinery and in its lurid light." Observing "the tender chicks," he noticed "some asleep and others picking crumbs in the brightness." This was, perhaps, one of the more relevant electrical advancements for farmers, and its implications were a source of wonder, at least for the ever-enthusiastic Charles Ashton. "So one sees in these marvelous discoveries of science the means of performing operations in natural processes," he wrote, "and blending heaven and earth with rainbow beauty and brilliancy."

They held summer jobs

"I EXPECT THE WORK will be pretty hard at first," Charles G. Simpson of Mount Vernon, Iowa, confided to his parents. "But you can depend on it I can put in the time in such a place as this."

Hired as one of 2,500 Columbian Guards, young Simpson would be part of the fair's internal police force to maintain order, direct tourists, and guard exhibits. But the young Iowan intended to see the fair as well. "I have tried to spend from 2 to 3 hours each day, but there are quite a number of the buildings I have not yet seen, let alone being in. But when I get started I can hardly get stopped. They have increased the secret service force and every thing is being guarded more carefully. The number of people is increasing every pleasant day."

In nine long letters to his family in Mount Vernon, Iowa, Simpson also observed darker sides of the fair: "I don't think there has been any great robberies yet," he ventured in his second letter, although "the other night the secret service men found men at work under the Swiss watch case and fired at him but missed."

He was astonished to see "load after load of beer & liquor hauled in . . . and by a load I mean about 3 times as much as I have ever seen in Iowa." Noticing that "there are thousands of dollars spent here every day for liquors," he added, "It beats all how much money some are making."

Simpson also watched as the debate over Sunday openings played out (see story, pages 156-59). "The Sunday opening is killing itself and I hope it may. There are but small numbers turn out and many of the exhibits are closed as well as quite a no. of the buildings are closed," he wrote in late June. "The people can hardly find a guard off duty to ask questions, of course when on duty we answer them but today they don't get much satisfaction from us."

Low attendance on Sundays was countered on other days by enormous crowds that poured from the elevated trains into the fair. "They run trains every 4 minutes during the day and every 20 min after the crowd has left," Simpson reported. "In the busy times they run a train every min."

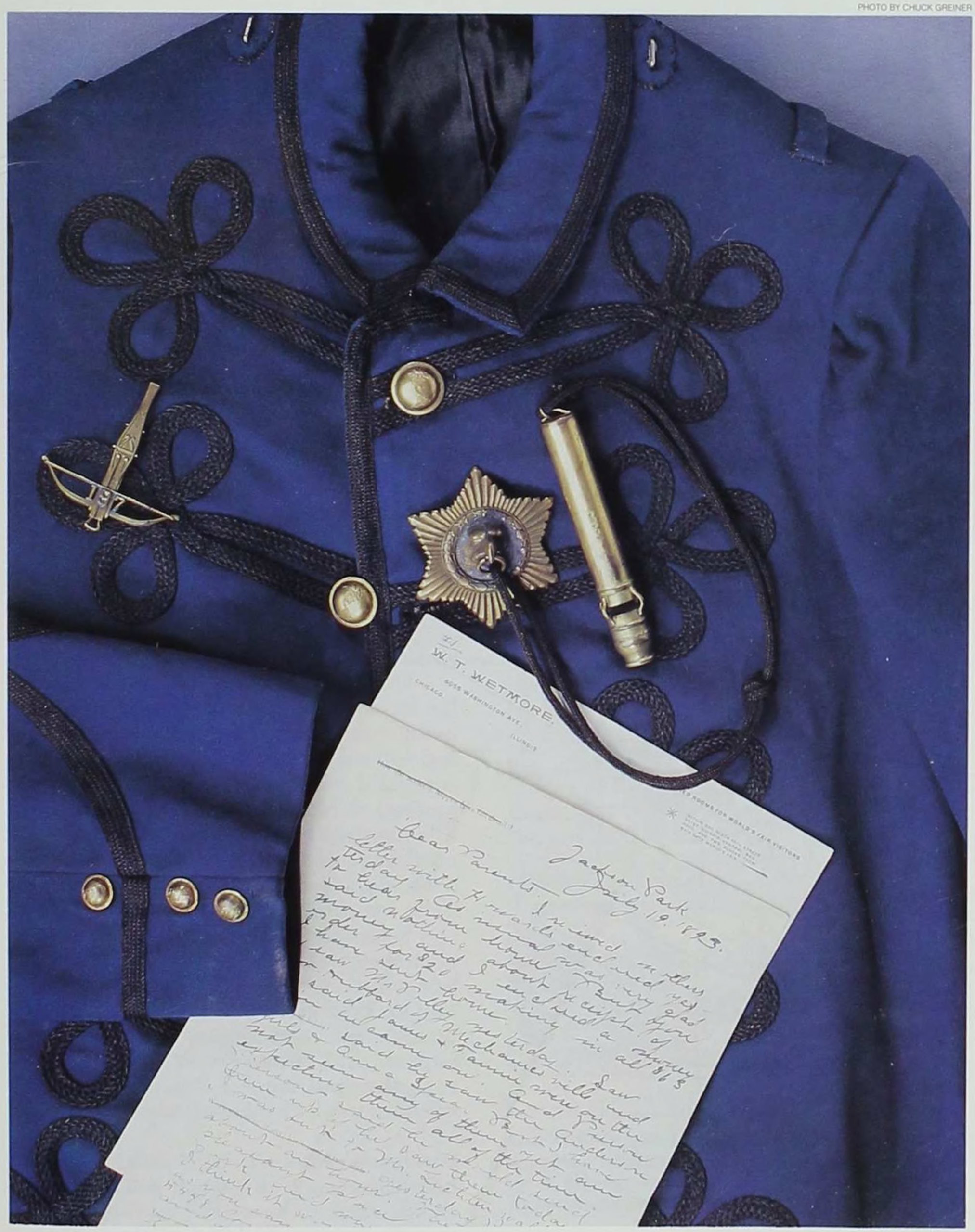
Simpson took pride in his job, and although he refused offers of cigars and beer, he was pleased when a tourist tipped him a silver dollar. But apparently the guards were maligned in the local press. The *Chicago Herald*, for one, had wisecracked that the guards were mostly rural men who could "guess the weight of a hog within twenty ounces." Simpson's letters, which suggest that many of his friends from the Mount Vernon area worked at the fair, defended the guards' reputation: "A very fine appearing lady whom I had directed," he related, "said the guards were the most gentlemanly lot of young men she had ever met and she was from New England. But the trouble is that the Chicago people want the fair policed and guarded by Chicago men and very very few of the Chicago men ever get on at all."

Rural or urban, not all the guards were pleased with the job. Many were discharged "thick and fast" for dozing or writing letters on the job. Others left, fed up with the discipline and long hours. Then, in mid-July, guards and fire fighters were called out when the fair's cold-storage building caught fire. Sixteen men died. "You can rest assured on one thing," Simpson swore. "They will never get me into any of their buildings after they take fire. Friday two Hotels were burned just over the fence from the Fair grounds."

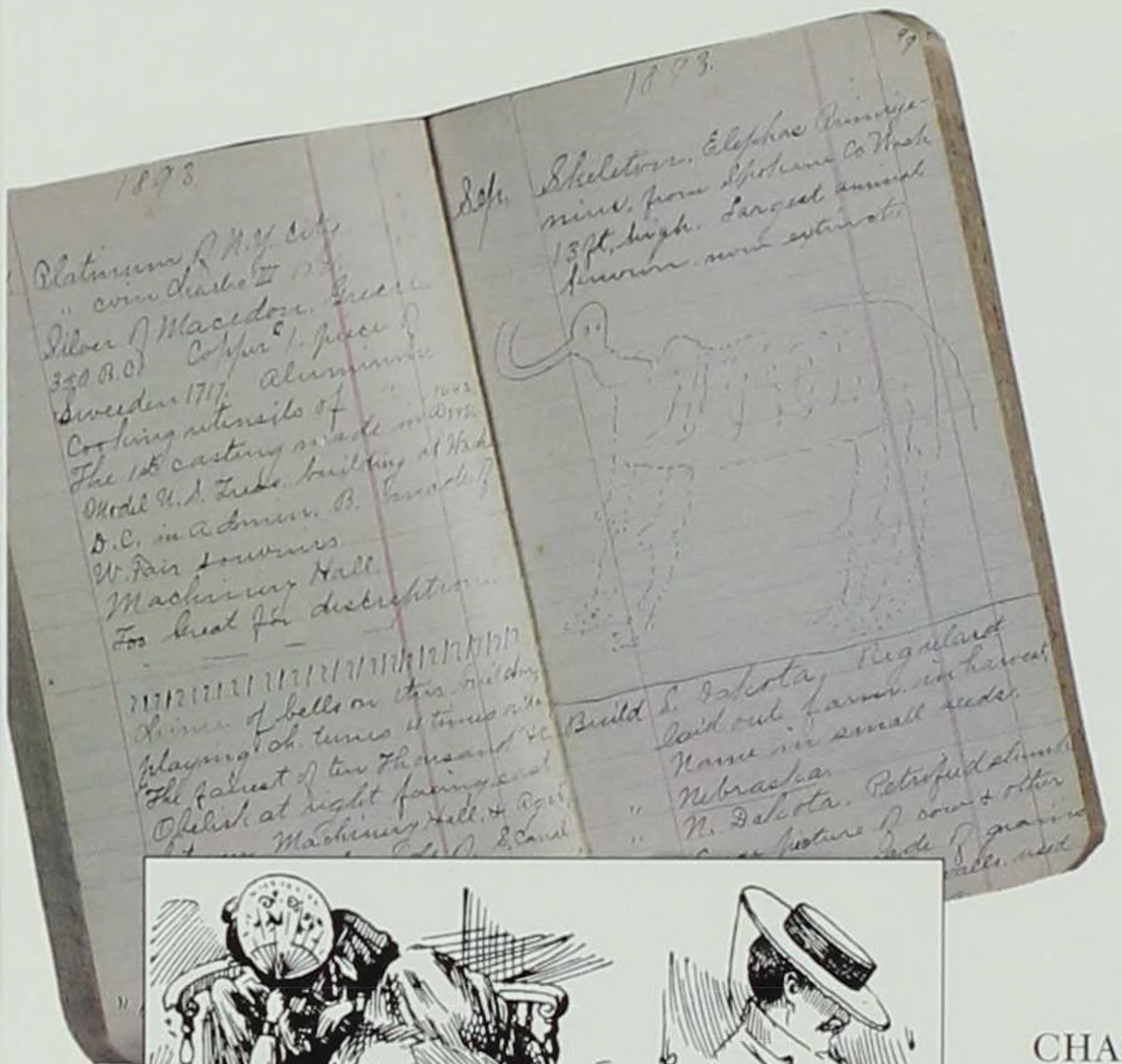
When off duty, Simpson continued to explore the exposition. He watched a panorama of the Battle of Gettysburg; viewed the "electric display"; joined seventy-five friends for a "Cornell reunion at the Iowa Building"; and marveled as three thousand Turner gymnasts completed precision drills. ("The exercises were a good deal like the girls at Clarence used to go through with wands," he added. "But just think 3000 of them.")

By mid-summer Simpson was a seasoned Columbian Guard. The fair "is getting to look pretty tame to me now," he admitted, "but I know what I thought when I first came." Having recognized dozens of acquaintances from Linn and Cedar counties at the fair, he urged his parents to come, too. Despite a summer of living in barracks, standing long hours, and wearing a wool uniform, he still felt the wonder of the fair and wrote his parents: "I don't want either of you to miss it for anything."

PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER



Above: Simpson letters and Columbian Guard uniform of Wallace Mackay. Note image of Western Hemisphere on buttons. Opposite: Columbian Guard by Iowa Building.



They saw enough to exhaust them—but not nearly everything that was there to be seen

From top: Frank Hinton noted many exhibits that impressed him, including a mammoth's skeleton in the Washington state building. He sketched it in his diary. Newspaper cartoon attests to exhaustion of fairgoers.

CHARLES ASHTON could not exude enough. As a nineteenth-century editor (prone to hyperbole) and a fair commissioner (prone to promotion), Ashton saw the exposition as "the climax of four centuries of the evolution of western civilization."

Ashton tried to prepare his Iowa readers for the fair's enormity by describing one particular building, the forty-four-acre Manufacturing and Liberal Arts Building: "Think of a forty acre field, all laid off in alleys, streets and squares, each square beautifully fitted up and filled with the gems of mechanism and the intelligence of all lands," he wrote, "and then think what a work it will be to traverse all these alleys and corridors to take in all this gathering of wonders."

Sarah Jane Kimball gave that building her best effort. "Went in," she wrote in her diary, "but too tired to see half its wonders." Echoing through national magazines, small-town newspapers, and Iowans' diaries is just that remark—"too much." We'll let the overwhelmed speak for themselves:

Sarah Jane Kimball: "Sept. 28th, Thursday—A cold morning with much wind and some clouds. First across to the Ruins of Yucatan then to Forestry building southside then to Anthropological building where I was much interested then to Indian camp then to Indian

PHOTO BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON IN *THE WHITE CITY* (1894)

Chaotic cluster of state buildings lacked the architectural uniformity of the fair's Court of Honor, but provided places where visitors could relax and meet others from their own state. Note Ferris Wheel, top right.

school where we saw the work of the pupils and heard them sing with piano and recite then went to Casino and sat down. Went through Dairy building then walked through Agricultural building then Machinery building then Mines building then went again to Greenhouses then through Transportation building."

***Scribner's Magazine*:** "The unconquerable American desire to do things on a bigger scale than anybody else, which often results in our 'biting off more than we can chew,' has again run away with us. . . . From the fine arts to canned tomatoes, there is more than enough in numbers and in area to wear out the energy and paralyze the brain."

Charles Ashton: "The only just point of criticism is that it is too grand. The human mind has its limitations. Many a visitor has a feeling akin to discouragement as he attempts to get an idea of the wonders of human industry and ingenuity, genius and resources."

***Harper's Monthly*, describing the statuary:** "Whatever else these plaster gods are or are not, they are too many—too many for even the lavish bounty of a dream. . . . They people it so abundantly that the small human element is almost an impertinence."

Charles Simpson: "There are indian relics of every description till you can't rest."

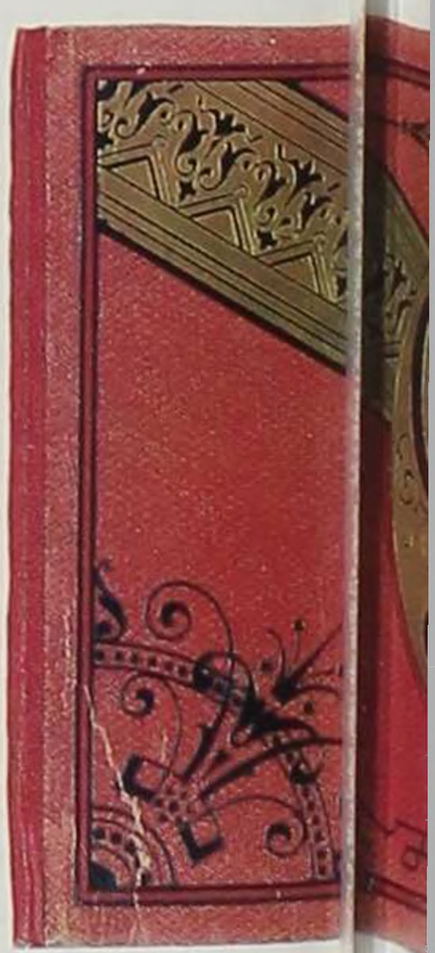
Frank Hinton, about the Woman's Building: "Immense display of apparently everything."

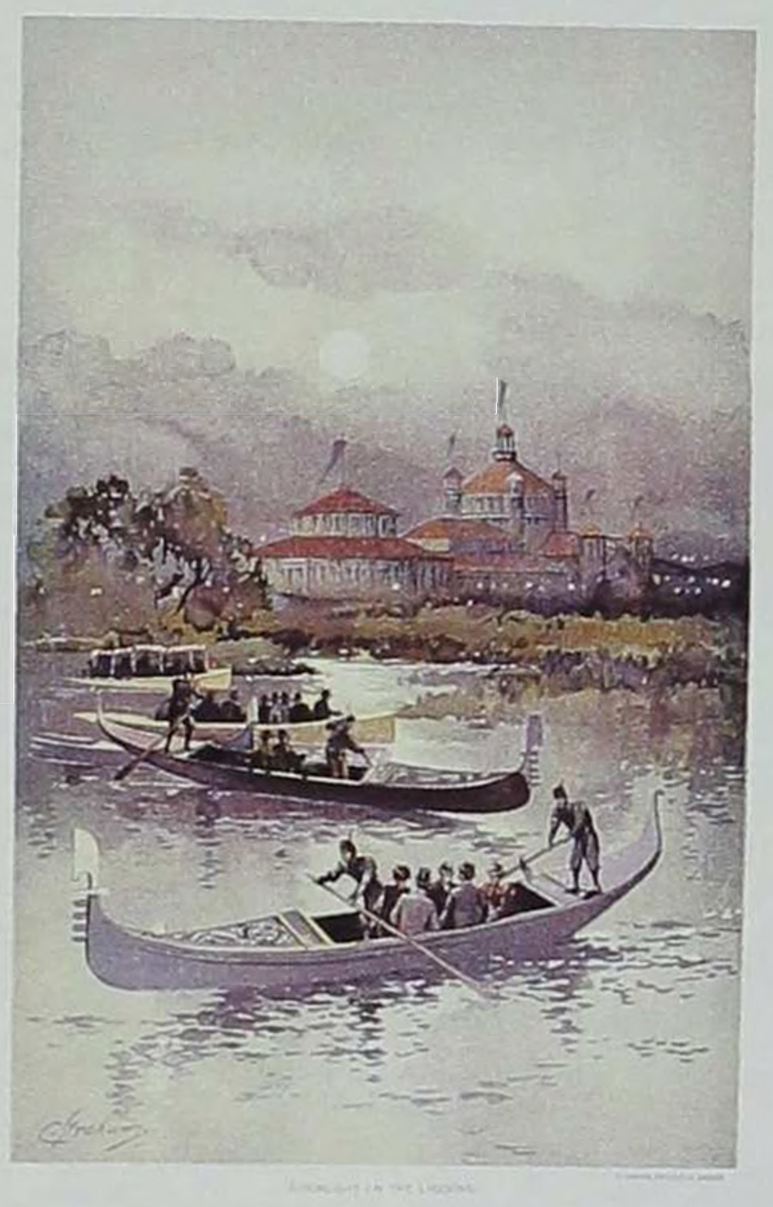
***Cedar Rapids Gazette*:** "Five hours of sightseeing. . . . And it doesn't look pretty. The women are collapsed; the men are cross; the children are worse. But thousands remain sprawled here and there on the grass, reclining in all the state buildings, resting on the lake front or seated on the banks of the lagoons."

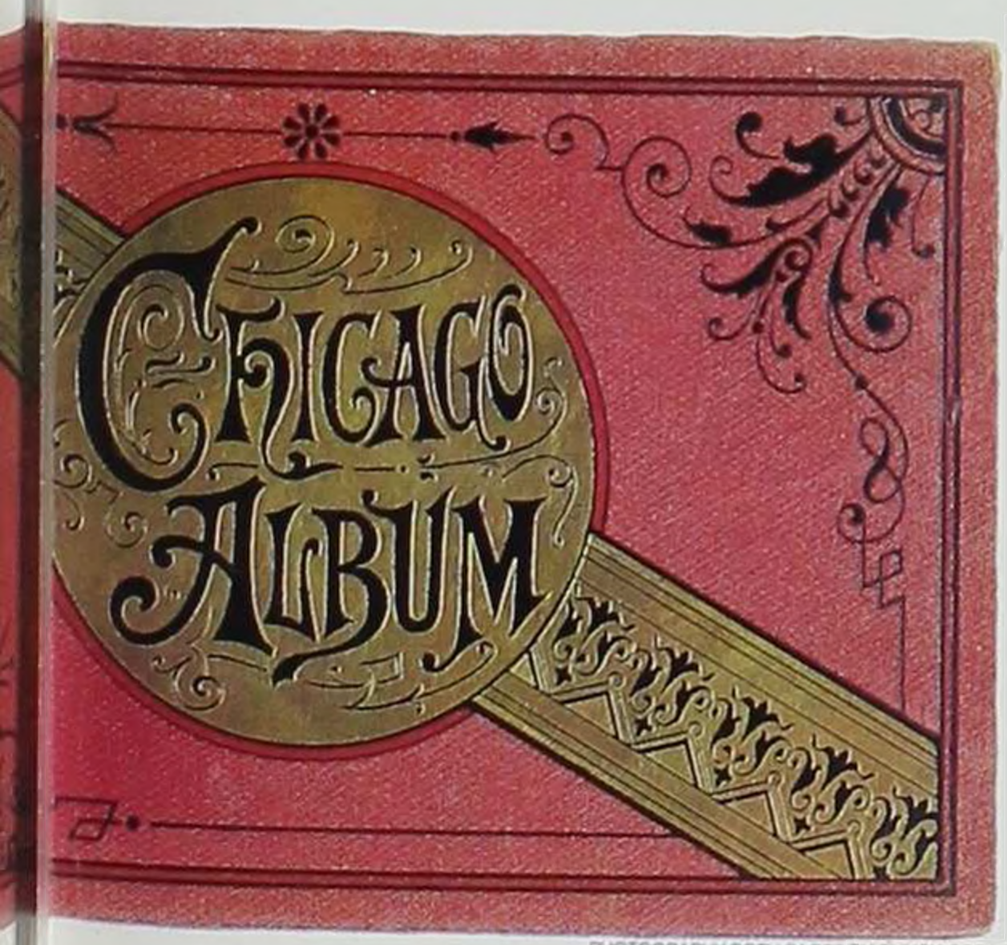
Sarah Jane Kimball: "Father and mother got tired and went home. We followed soon after."

They brought home souvenirs

SOUVENIRS from a century ago! Clockwise from upper left: Ferris Wheel sheet music lyrics begin, "This is the wheel, love / Stately and real, love / Come, we will sail around / Let's leave this common ground." Sample advertising card from Singer Manufacturing Company (each card shows people of a different nationality, dressed in native costume and posed with Singer sewing machines; for more, see back cover). *Chicago Tribune* art supplements romanticize the gondolas in moonlight or electric light. Commemorative coins, as well as fountains and statues, celebrate Columbus. Albums devoted to Chicago's new buildings replace visitors' memories of the devastating 1871 fire with impressions of a vital and aggressive world market. Postcards and watch fob were among hundreds of items bearing exposition motifs.







PHOTOGRAPHY BOTH PAGES BY CHUCK GREINER

They brought home art for their communities

PHOTOGRAPH COPYRIGHT MIKE WHYE

ANYONE WHO HAS SEEN a Tiffany stained-glass window can imagine how the window on the left must have held the gaze of a group of fairgoers from Dubuque. Louis Comfort Tiffany had only recently begun working in stained glass for churches; part of his exhibit at the exposition was a chapel with this "Good Shepherd" window. After the building committee for St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Dubuque saw the window, it was subsequently purchased for the church as a family memorial to D. N. and Clara Aldrich Cooley. St. Luke's

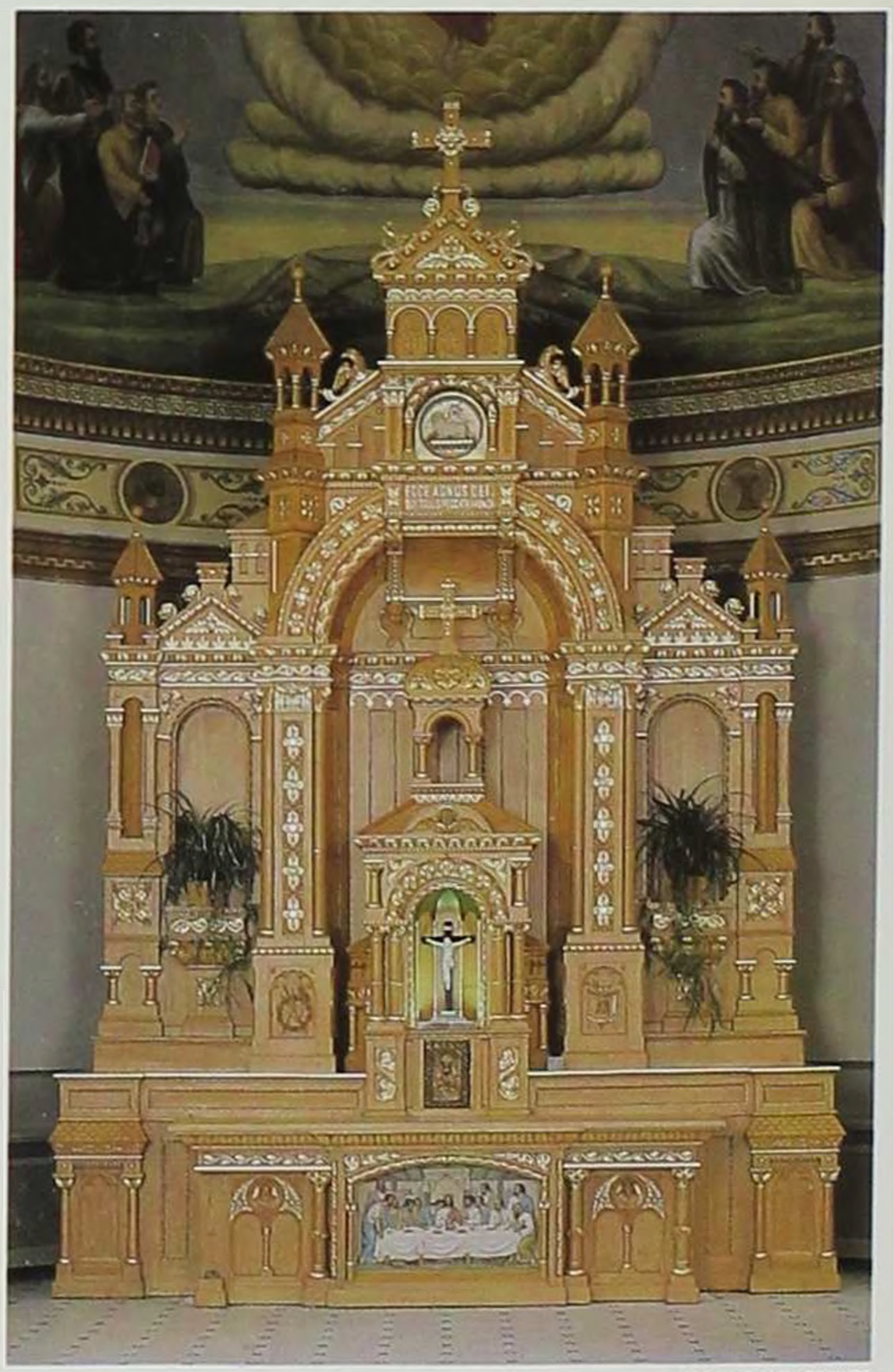


PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER

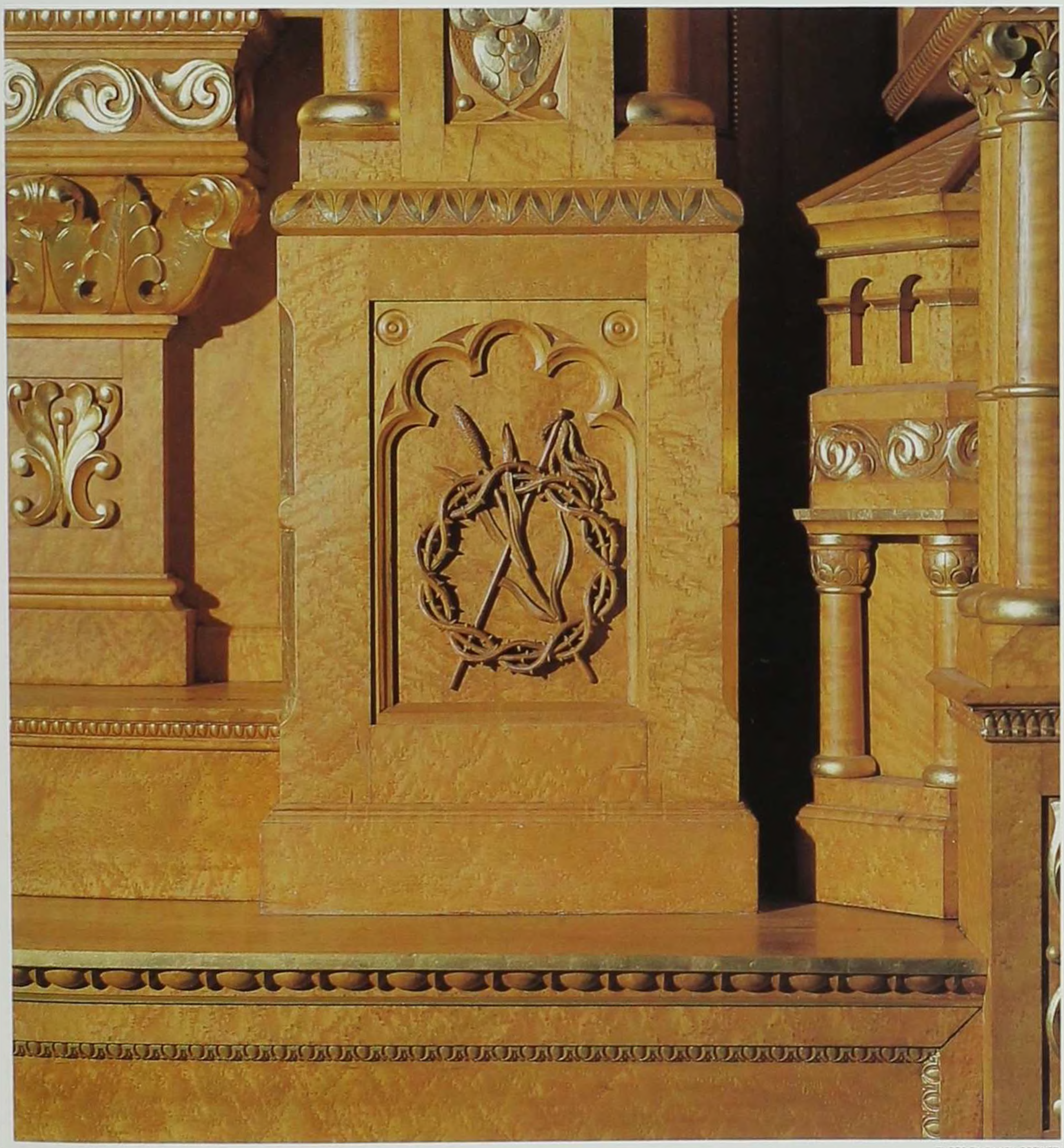


PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER

would later purchase more Tiffany windows.

While many of the wonders at the fair went home with the original exhibitors, some items, like the window, found new owners and became a community's cultural treasures. This twenty-two-foot altar (see left and detail) was purchased by the parishioners of St. Joseph's Church in Carroll, Iowa. Hand-carved of bird's eye maple, the altar had won first place at the exposition. In 1972, the altar was moved to St. Peter and Paul's Church at the Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa.

They brought home architectural ideas

"THIS IS A CITY for a single summer," reflected *Scribner's Magazine* in August 1893. It is hard to conceive that two hundred buildings covering over a square mile would be constructed by twelve thousand workers for only six months of use. But the buildings were not meant to last. The exhibition halls, for instance, were only enormous "sheds," with the metal or wooden framework exposed inside. On the exterior, the elaborate ornamentation and statuary were made of a stucco-like material called "staff"—easily sculpted but not durable. It was all for appearances. In fact, as Opening Day approached, burning coal was banned to keep the freshly painted white buildings pristine. After the fair closed in late October, the buildings would gradually fall to salvage companies, accidental fire, and arson.

The fair's architectural core was a half-dozen buildings called the "Court of Honor." A team of nationally recognized architects had chosen a basic style—Beaux Arts (Neo-Classical Revival)—and had agreed to certain guidelines, including a standard cornice height. These and another dozen exhibition halls would all be predominantly white.

The impression was one of unity and splendor, and fairgoers remembered it. In the following decades, Beaux Arts elements—such as the triangular gables and the rows of columns—began to appear again on public buildings and private homes (as they had during the 1840s). "The fair inspired many a state capitol, county courthouse and college building," notes Iowa architectural historian Patricia Eckhardt, "and its impact on urban planning was equally important." Daniel Burnham, the force behind the developing City Beautiful Movement, was also the fair's master planner. Therefore, the White City comprised a vivid

PHOTO BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON IN *THE WHITE CITY* (1894)

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Opposite: Agricultural Building was one of several Beaux Arts structures. Their triangular gables and columns became popular after the fair. Above: Clay County Courthouse in Spencer. Below, from left: Winnebago County Historical Society Museum in Forest City; Lucas County Historical Society Museum in Chariton; and private home in Sac City.

(continued)
example of what the City Beautiful Movement would bring to some American cities in the next decades: civic buildings built in an orderly and unified setting of boulevards, bridges, and landscaped open spaces.

Some experts say that Beaux Arts was chosen as the prevailing style for the fair because it was adaptable for the construction methods while rich in classical splendor, and because American architects could show that their skills were equal to Europeans. Yet some American architects—especially Chicago's Louis Sullivan—believed American architecture had already surpassed European styles, and were angered that the fair relied on "worn-out," classical traditions.

Commissioned to design the exposition's Transportation Building (right), Sullivan diverged from the Beaux Arts style of the White City. His Transportation Building was light red, with yellow and orange accents, and its heavily ornamented Golden Doorway reflected more Middle Eastern or Oriental styles than classical.

Sullivan would later excel as a Chicago School architect and angrily condemn the Beaux Arts influence at the fair as "a virus." His legacy to Iowa and midwestern architecture was a group of elegant small banks with elaborate exterior ornamentation. His use of stained glass, colored tile, stone work, and terra cotta remind us of his boldly designed Golden Doorway at the 1893 exposition.

PHOTO BY H. ROY MOSNAT (SHSI)

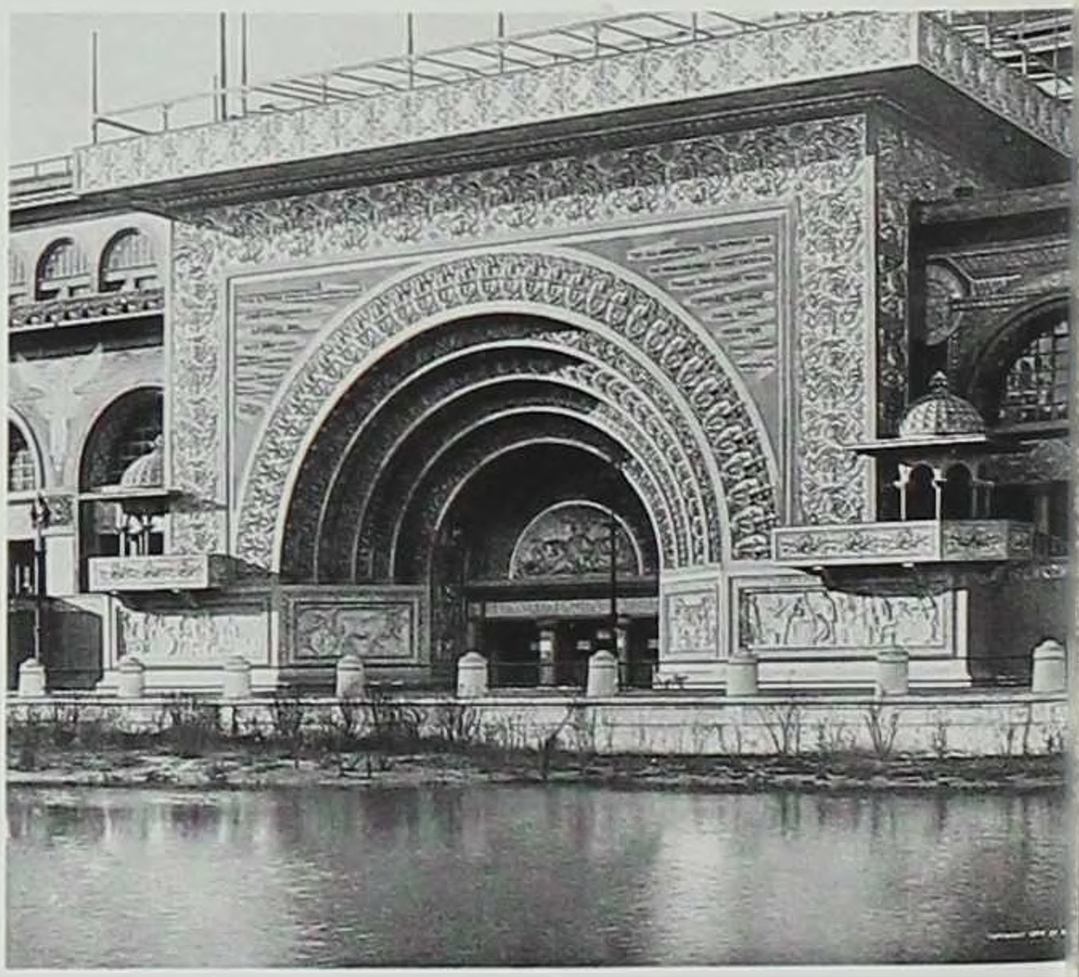


PHOTO BY WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON IN *THE WHITE CITY* (1894)

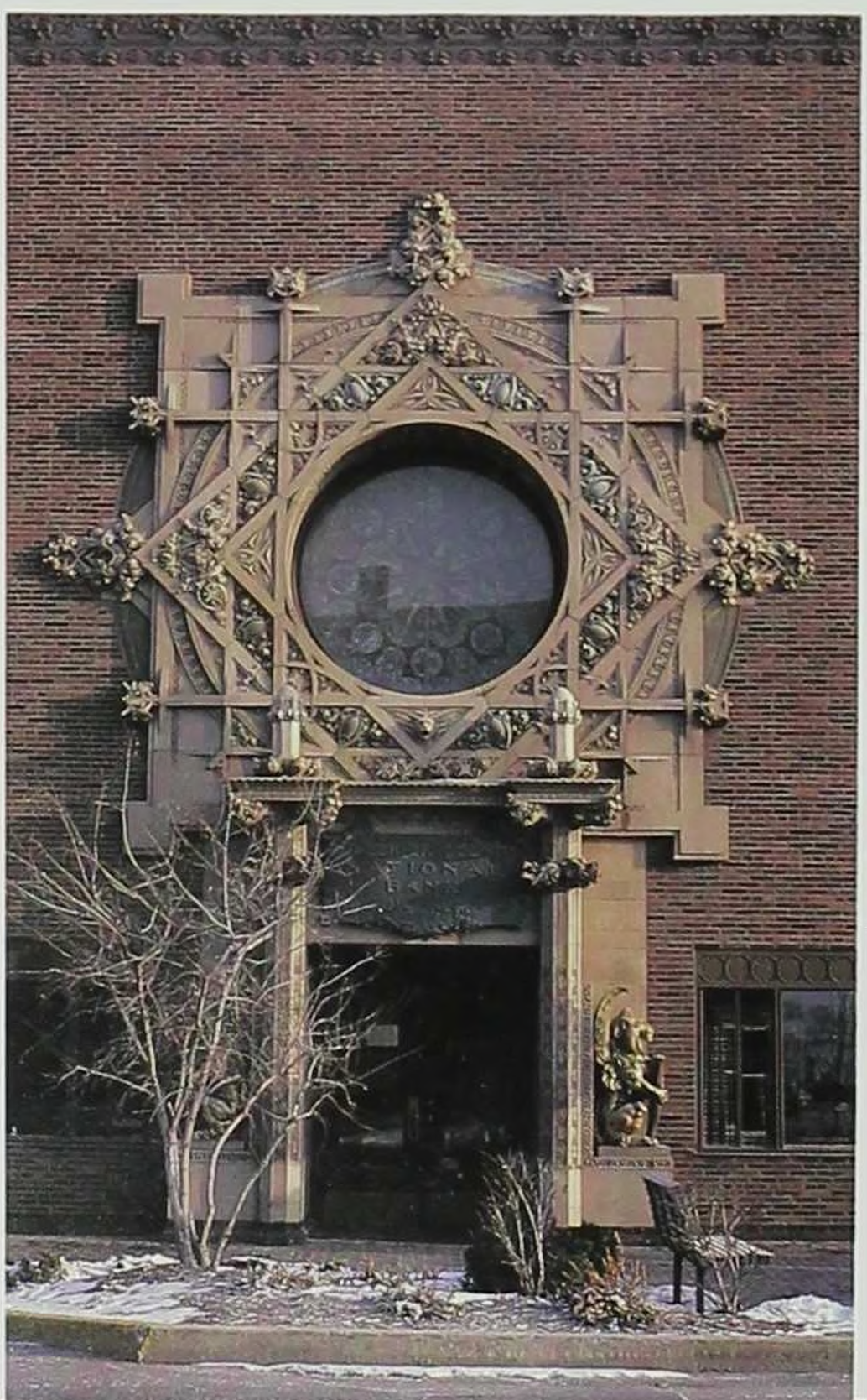


PHOTO BY AND COURTESY OF GERALD MANSHEIM

Above: Sullivan's Transportation Building and its Golden Doorway. His banks in Grinnell (on left), Algona, Cedar Rapids, and five other midwestern towns are celebrations of exterior ornamentation.

They brought home a new way of looking at the past

by Bill Silag

AMONG THE WORLD-RENOWNED artists, industrialists, and scholars who traveled to the Columbian Exposition in 1893 was a young history professor from Wisconsin named Fred Turner. Thirty-one at the time, Turner was just three years out of Johns Hopkins, where he had received his Ph.D. prior to joining the faculty at the state university in Madison.

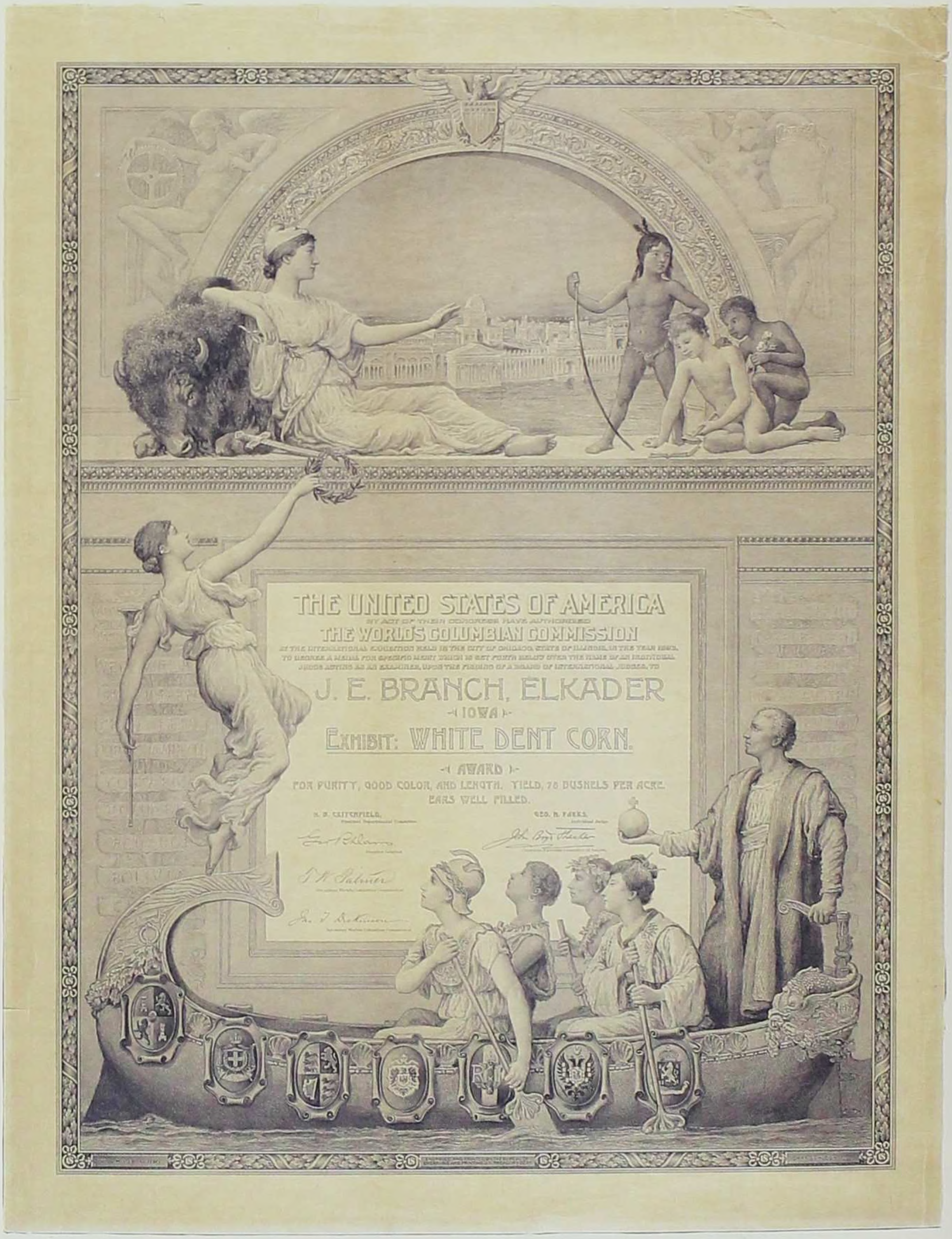
Certainly there were bigger names among the intellectuals who convened at the several congresses connected with the exposition that summer. Literary figures like Henry Adams and William Dean Howells were there, and social reformers like Jane Addams and Susan B. Anthony. But none of them would make such an impact on the way Americans thought about themselves and their culture as did the somewhat absent-minded young man who traveled by train from Madison to address the exposition's Historical Congress on July 12. His speech, of course, was "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

Hours before he was scheduled to speak, Turner was still tinkering and still polishing, and his biographer tells us that the heat that night was so unbearable that the speech itself was cut short and delivered in a quick, summary fashion. No matter, though, for even in its hastily finished and truncated form, what Frederick Jackson Turner delivered to his listeners that hot evening in Chicago would have a profound and sustained influence on American historical scholarship lasting one hundred years (and counting)—and would provide one of the central myths regarding the American experience.

Turner's key points are probably familiar to most *Palimpsest* readers. Americans' movement westward, Turner asserted, set them apart from their European forebears in more than a geographical sense. As they settled the continent, Americans shed their European culture. On the U.S. frontier, there was a return to a simpler life, marked by economic self-sufficiency, informal government, fewer social controls, and infrequent cultural activity. The social order that subsequently developed as these successive frontiers were absorbed into the commercial and political mainstream, insisted Turner, was not like the built-up civilization of Europe but something new, something distinctively American. Turner's enumeration of these interrelated personality traits and cultural features read like a patriot's Independence-Day speech: individualism, independence, inventiveness, adventurousness, mobility, social and political democracy, and nationalism.

Scholars continue to debate the validity of Turner's thesis. Yet its lasting importance is not whether it represents truth or myth, but that it has shaped how we have viewed, researched, and written our local and national past. In Iowa and elsewhere around the country, the Turner thesis has been an operational principle underlying definitions of community and explorations of its changing character over time. Certainly a Turnerian frame of reference informs our centennial histories that describe bands of self-reliant pioneers busting sod and building homesteads on the nineteenth-century prairie. Even in communities based on religious covenants or town-booming schemes, at least an element of Turner's hardy frontiersman acting alone to tame the wilderness is likely to appear in chronicles of the settlement period. No matter that these hardy, self-reliant pioneer settlers actually arrived by rail or steamboat, spent their first night on the frontier in a depot hotel, or perhaps traveled to Iowa in an entourage that included twenty or thirty families joined together in a joint-stock company.

New information about the settlement period ought not distract us from the continuing significance of the frontier thesis. As an aid in organizing data and evaluating change over time, Fred Turner's Chicago speech retains its utility. Look, for example, at how historians such as Allan G. Bogue and Robert R. Dykstra have illuminated the community-building experience in Iowa and in other midwestern states in terms derived from Turner. That Turner ignored variables of race, class, and gender, and that he exaggerated some dimensions of frontier life at the expense of others, are probably less important as deficiencies of his thesis than as opportunities for later historians. And in the years after 1893, as Turner's ideas infused American history—even fiction and film—Iowans would find that his frontier thesis had indeed come home with them from the World's Fair.



J.E. Branch of Elkader brought home an ornate, 20"x26" certificate for corn exhibited at the fair.

They brought home pride— and probably some prejudice

CERTAINLY PRIDE in Iowa and America was one final thing that many Iowans brought back home from the World's Columbian Exposition. The *Des Moines Capital* boasted that "Iowa has the best building, the handsomest booth in the agricultural building, the best band and the best butter." *Scribner's* brazenly told its national audience that the fair "should be sacred to every American, as marking for them and for the intelligent world a point in civilization never before reached by any people."

Sacred or not, the 1893 World's Fair—like all expositions—was not built to endure beyond the six months it was open. *Harper's* found no fault here: "Its impermanence is one of its charms. If it were to remain, one might gradually find flaws in its beauty."

Social critics and historians would indeed find flaws in the fair. For many Americans, the fair was not the epitome of civilization, but rather the same old story of exclusion. A painting by Iowa State student George Washington Carver may have been selected with other Iowa work to be displayed at the fair. But if Carver visited the fair, he would have found only one restaurant and restroom open to African Americans, no clerical or construction jobs for African Americans, and scant exhibit space to present the strides made by his race since Emancipation.

Likewise, American Indians were considered part of ethnological or anthropological exhibits, not as contributors to America. In fact, most non-European/American cultures were considered exotic at best, primitive and uncivilized at worst, and were seen as entertainment amidst the "popular culture" of the Midway Plaisance, compared to the well-intentioned high culture of the rest of the exposition.

Women fared somewhat better, though their work continued to be seen in a sphere separate from men—in fact, in a separate building. The Woman's Building showcased women's contributions in all aspects of human effort. There, women held national meetings, viewed exhibits by clubs (one of the few outlets for women's civic energies), and shared ideas ("networking," we'd call it today). Davenport physician Jennie McCowen spoke on children's reform issues. Dubuque women's rights leader Mary Newbury Adams, eager to "stir up the ladies," coordinated literary congresses and spoke on suffrage and religious issues.

It should come as no surprise to us that by-and-large the Columbian Exposition reflected the dominant culture's value system—for that's who organized the fair and that's what was taken to the fair. As author Henry Adams noted about the fair, "One sees what one brings."

No doubt, Iowans also brought expectations of witnessing grandeur (fed by the public relations efforts), of making business contacts, and of having a good time in a very big city. Aspiring sculptor Nellie Verne Walker apparently also found something more: inspiration. Awe-struck by the exposition, seventeen-year-old Walker returned to Moulton, Iowa, worked seven years to earn money to return to Chicago, studied there with Lorado Taft, and become a recognized sculptor in the Beaux Arts tradition. Sarah Jane Kimball's diary tells us that she entered the fairgrounds eager "to see the glories" and found, indeed, "a museum of everything." A handful of Iowa women who helped coordinate shipment of 117,000 bushels of corn and other supplies to famine victims in Russia found public praise in a reception for Clara Barton in the Iowa Building. In the same building on another date, Miss Floy Brundage of Des Moines even found an audience for her "whistling solo."

Surely many Iowans brought home awards for their exhibits (opposite), customers for their businesses, and souvenirs for their parlors. No one left much personal record on whether the fair reinforced stereotypes or changed world views. Ora E. Miller, on the Iowa Board of Lady Managers, fervently hoped that posterity would admire Iowa's "exhibition of energy, resources and possibilities." Sarah Jane Kimball said simply, "I enjoyed every minute of it and got very tired." □