

Sundays at the Fair

Iowa and the Sunday Closing of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition

by Merle Davis

IN THE LATE nineteenth century, as plans were laid to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World by holding a grand international fair in the United States, the fair became embroiled in an increasingly acrimonious debate over whether the exposition would be open on Sundays.

Americans' Sunday activities had long been regulated by various statutes commonly called blue laws. The laws differed from state to state: in Iowa a term in jail or a fine of one to five dollars—no insignificant sum at that time—was the punishment for any person “found on the first day of the week, commonly called the Sabbath,” engaged in a number of proscribed activities, including fishing, hunting, dancing, buying or selling property, “or in any labor, the work of necessity and charity only excepted.” The Iowa law, like similar laws in most other states, exempted persons, such as Jews and Seventh-day Adventists, “who conscientiously observe the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath.”

The federal government's role in the proposed world's fair would make it the prime target for those demanding that the fair be closed on Sundays. In April 1890 federal legislation was enacted to hold “an international exhibition of arts, industries, manufacturers, and the products of the soil, mine, and sea.” The act established a national World's Columbian Commission (state commissions would follow), selected Chicago as the host city, and set dates for May through October. The act also provided up to 1.5 million federal dollars to cover the

costs of the commission and to erect and maintain certain government buildings and exhibits, if Chicago first raised ten million dollars.

Even before this legislation, demands were already being made for the fair to be closed on Sundays. As early as October 1889, for example, the Synod of Iowa of the Presbyterian Church placed itself “emphatically on record as opposed to the opening of the Columbian Exposition on the Sabbath day, as not only condemned by the Christian conscience, but by the best progressive thought of the American nation.” After April 1890, petitions demanding the fair be closed on Sundays began trickling in from across the nation. What began as a trickle soon became a flood. Indeed, during the 1891/92 session of Congress, 590 pages of fine print in the *Congressional Record* contain lists of petitions demanding Sunday closing.

These petitions normally came from mainline Protestant churches or from Christian young people's societies, such as the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor, an interdenominational evangelical youth ministry, or from other organizations with strong religious connections, such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

The petitions normally asked simply that the exposition be closed on Sundays. But some petitions added other requests as well—that Congress prohibit the sale of intoxicating liquors at the fair and censor the fair's art displays. For instance, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Morning Sun, Iowa, “prayed that federal aid to the Columbian Exposition be conditioned on the closing of the Exposition on

Sunday, that the sale of intoxicating liquors be prohibited on the grounds, and that purity be preserved in the art department." Similar petitions came from Christian Endeavor societies and Protestant churches across Iowa.

In the winter and spring of 1892, as the Iowa General Assembly considered appropriating \$125,000 for an Iowa exhibit at the fair, petitions began to flood into Des Moines from organizations such as the WCTU of Mount Vernon and Christian Endeavor societies of Nora Springs, Cresco, Pleasant Plain, and other places, all praying for Sunday closing.

Protestant denominations in Iowa commonly demanded a strict observance of the Christian Sabbath. The Synod of Iowa of the United Presbyterian Church—which also denounced Sunday newspapers “as one of the most stealthy and potent influences” against the Sabbath—“joined heartily with the good people in all the nation” to close the exposition on Sundays. Similarly, the Upper Iowa Annual Conference

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of the Methodist Episcopal Church denounced the “disposition on the part of some of our people, especially our younger members, to regard the Sabbath as a holiday rather than a holy day, a day for worship and spiritual culture, seeking their own pleasure in buggy riding, visiting, picnicing, or other recreations,” and implored the Columbian Commissioners to close the fair “on the Lord’s Day and thus place the American Christian Sabbath on exhibit before the world in contrast with the continental Sabbath.”

Asked his opinion, William Stevens Perry, Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Iowa, feared that Sunday had become “a more dissipated week-day.” To the Methodist Episcopal’s Des Moines Annual Conference, efforts to open the fair on Sundays were “un-Christian and un-American.”

In January 1891, *The Independent*, a weekly religious magazine from New York, queried

senators and congressmen and published their answers in a lengthy article titled “Shall We Obey God’s Commandment?” The Iowa delegation was far from unanimous. “I am opposed to Sunday Amusements,” answered Congressman Isaac S. Struble, Republican from LeMars, “believing the day should be observed more in accordance with the views of Christian people than by attending ball-plays, theaters, exhibitions, etc.; and so am opposed to opening the Exposition on Sunday.” In a similar vein, Congressman Edward R. Hays, Republican from Knoxville replied that “All business of this whole country . . . should respect the American Sabbath by closing its doors.”

Congressman Walter I. Hayes, Democrat from Clinton, took the opposite view: “There are a great class of laboring people that have no other time at their disposal, and who, if it is not so opened, will be practically debarred from its benefits, altho there are none more entitled or to whom greater consideration should be shown.”

Much of the debate dealt with the effect Sunday closing would have on working-class people—either those visiting the fair, or those employed in fair-related jobs. “Every blow dealt against the Sabbath is a blow at the interests of the working-man,” said the Methodist Episcopal *Christian Advocate*. Sunday openings “will not only compel hundreds of men to work on that day needlessly, but will put into the hands of greedy capitalists and tyrannical corporations a new fetter with which to increase the bitterness of the toils of working-men.” Indeed, some fair workers labored very long hours. Iowa editor Charles Ashton wrote about a gate keeper who had “been on duty ninety-eight hours in the week of seven days. He wants the fair closed,” Ashton reported, “he can’t stand the open Sunday.”

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa was concerned that Sunday openings would “increase the toil and traffic and turmoil of Chicago’s Sunday” and “trample on the rights of conscience and the liberty to the rest of the exhibitors and the army of employees . . . in transporting and feeding visitors.” The Lutheran delegates feared that opening on Sunday would “proclaim to the world that . . . our country has surrendered the American

Sabbath, the most distinctive of American institutions, and enthroned in its place the Continental Sunday, 'the holiday of despotism.' They blamed "the miserly greed for gold and the prodigal greed for amusement and the infidel hatred of Christianity" for "most of the clamor for Sunday opening."

This echoed the arguments of the American Sabbath Union, an alliance of Christian denominations, Sabbath associations, and reform groups such as the WCTU. The American Sabbath Union, and like-minded groups such as the Iowa Sabbath Association, demanded a stricter observance of the Sabbath on theological grounds. While they argued that stricter observance would give working people a day off, they still intended to dictate how that day off would be spent. Leaders of the Sabbath movement commonly opposed Sunday newspapers and even the operation of trains on Sundays. Convened in Des Moines in 1891, American Sabbath Union leaders asked for help from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) "in securing the gates" of the fair "so that God may be honored and the workingmen

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employed on the fair grounds and by the railroads running thereto may have their rest day."

The AFL agreed that "the Rest day should be zealously guarded against the encroachment of those who live upon the labor of others." But their accord ended there. At its 1892 convention, AFL president Samuel Gompers told the delegates that "the days the wage-earners will have the best opportunity to visit the World's Fair will be on Sundays. . . . A visit to the Exposition and a view of the arts and handicrafts of the peoples of all nations can only ennoble the visitor. . . . There is no idea nor thought for the desecration of the Sabbath."

Although trade unions were more concerned with wages, hours, working conditions, and the right to organize, they did enter the debate over Sunday closing. *The Locomotive Fireman's Magazine*, then edited by labor leader Eugene

Victor Debs, labeled as "bigots" and "cranks" those who wanted Sunday closing, and insisted that "the old theologies have no place in these practical, common-sense days." Trade unions from across the nation petitioned Congress to

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open the exposition on Sundays, including local unions in Iowa such as Waterloo's Lodge No. 314 of the International Association of Machinists; Burlington's Tin, Sheet-Iron and Cornice Workers; Sioux City's Cigar-Makers; and Dubuque's local union of Carpenters and Joiners. Ultimately, petitions representing as many as 300,000 working people asked Congress not to act on Sunday closing.

Organized labor was not alone in its opposition. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, social reformer and militant feminist, declared, "When the vast army of men who will construct the magnificent buildings and beautify the grounds, who day by day will lift the heavy machinery and foreign exhibits in place, desire to bring their wives and children to the exposition, Sunday will be the only day they will have leisure to do so," she wrote; "the only day, too, when farmhands of the country, men and women from the workshops and the factories, clerks from the busy marts of trade, servants from their domestic vocations, can claim a few hours of recreation."

Opposition to Sunday closing also came from those who feared governmental interference. Seventh-day Adventists and Seventh-Day Baptists—who considered Saturday the Sabbath—were among the most outspoken. Petitions from their local churches poured into Congress. One of many was from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Audubon, Iowa, protesting "against committing the United States Government to a union of religion and state" by closing the fair on Sunday or creating "any other religious legislation." Fearing that congressional closing of the fair on Sundays would break down the separation of church and state, citizens from Buchanan and Palo Alto

counties petitioned Congress "not to legislate on any religious matter and that the World's Fair may be kept open on Sunday."

Congress acted on the question in the summer of 1892. It authorized that five million commemorative silver half-dollars be given to the fair's directors to help underwrite fair expenses, but then tacked on a proviso that all appropriations hinged on the fair being closed "on the first day of the week, commonly called Sunday." This was the first national Sunday legislation ever adopted in the United States. It was, in effect, a national blue law.

To the Reverend Wilbur F. Crafts, the vote was a victory. Crafts, a spokesman for the American Sabbath Union, had considered the "chief workers" for Sunday openings "liquor dealers, infidels, and Seventh day Adventists." "The Sabbath has won its Waterloo in the official votes at Washington," he rejoiced, "and if this victory is promptly followed up in Congress and in our States and cities, the Continental Sunday of toil and dissipation, the worst of foreign invaders, will soon be driven from our land."

Not everyone was so confident. Consider the Webster City *Graphic-Herald's* editorial, "CLOSE the GATES or WE'LL KILL." "The theory of an open Fair on Sunday," the paper reflected, "leaves every one free to remain away from

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the grounds in compliance with their convictions of duty. But the Sunday closers would compel everybody . . . to comply with the religious-enforcing statute. The Book which says, 'Remember the Sabbath day,' also says, 'Thou shalt not kill,' yet so furious is the zeal of the closers to keep the gates shut to show the world 'that we are a Christian nation,' that they even appeal to the President to enforce closing, if need be, by military force! Who could doubt our Christianity after visiting Chicago some fine Monday morning and finding the outer walls of the Fair grounds piled high with bloody corpses of men, deliberately shot down

like dogs, that, forsooth, we might show to the heathen world there assembled, 'that we are a Christian nation'?"

The legislation did not have the effect Congress intended. The fair's directors accepted the souvenir Columbian half-dollars, but they balked at closing on Sundays. The matter eventually reached the courts, where legal maneuverings dragged on through the summer and fall of 1893 (the fair ran from May through

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October). The upshot was that the fair remained open most Sundays—despite action by Congress, threatened boycotts by church groups, and lamentations by Sabbatarians.

Several states, including Iowa, and some foreign countries closed their exhibits or buildings on Sundays. Many Christian groups were jubilant when Sunday attendance at the fair fell far below expectations. A resolution by the Northwest Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the fall of 1893 epitomized these sentiments: "We rejoice that the number in attendance upon that day has been much smaller than upon other days. We believe that this fact has exalted the Sabbath not only in the eyes of European visitors, but also in the minds of the directors and all other American citizens."

Despite all the turmoil surrounding the Sunday question, for the thousands who visited the fair—even on Sunday—the sights of the fair would remain embedded in their memories as one of the great events of their lives. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Major sources include Wilbur F. Crafts, *The Sabbath of Man* (Washington, D.C., 1902 ed.); William Addison Blakely, *American State Papers Bearing on Sunday Legislation* (Washington, D.C., 1911 ed.); *Christian Advocate*, *The Independent*, and *Congressional Record* for 1890-1893; and synod and annual conference proceedings of Iowa religious denominations, 1888-1894 (Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian were especially useful).