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THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY

MURDER, MAGIC, AND MADNESS AT THE
FAIR THAT CHANGED AMERICA

ERIK LARSON

THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY

“As absorbing a piece of popular history as one will ever hope to find. Readers will soon forget that Larson’s work is nonfiction and, instead, imagine that they are holding a fictional page-turner.”

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“Larson tells this true story with a novelist’s verve, conjuring the grandeur of the scene, the power of the historical moment.... He brings to life the human emotions and frailties behind great events, often with humor.... Larson makes us long to see that vanished city by the lake, and wish for a little of the innocence lost.”

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“A book as lively as its title.... *Devil* is given shape and energy by the author’s dramatic inclinations.”

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“[Larson’s use of] Burnham’s creative triumph and Holmes’ triumph of destruction ... as a sort of yin and yang of the human spirit is convincing. Alternating chapters from each story make the other more compelling, and the end result is a far more pungent, more compelling picture of an era than either narrative could have achieved alone.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“A spectacular and grisly tale.”

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

“Absorbing. Larson has an eye for the heartbreaking detail.”

“A vivid history of the glittering Chicago World’s Fair and its dark side.... Larson is a talented writer with a gift for surprising language, and an admirable impulse to show and not tell. The book whips back and forth from character to character, anecdote to anecdote, building plenty of momentum in the process.”

—*New York* magazine, Best Pick of the Week

“[Shows us] the glory to which human imagination can soar, and the horror to which it can sink. Simply terrific.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“A great story, recounted with authority, entertainment, and insight.... Larson writes with marvelous confidence, enthusiasm, polish, and scholarship.”

—*New York Daily News*

“Fascinating, detailed and novelistic.”

—*The Oregonian*

“Vastly entertaining.... Larson sets his scene splendidly. His description of the fair itself, of its grandiosity and almost magical impact, is stellar. He has given us a rousing and moving story ... of the heights and depths of which we humans are capable.”

—*The Toronto Globe and Mail*

ALSO BY ERIK LARSON

Isaac's Storm
Lethal Passage
The Naked Consumer



ERIK LARSON

THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY

Erik Larson, author of the international bestseller *Isaac's Storm*, has written for *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Time*, where he is a contributing writer. He is a former staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal*. Larson lives in Seattle with his wife, three daughters, and assorted pets, including a golden retriever named Molly.



Chicago, 1891.

THE
DEVIL IN THE
WHITE CITY

MURDER, MAGIC, AND MADNESS
AT THE FAIR THAT CHANGED AMERICA

ERIK LARSON



Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

*To Chris, Kristen, Lauren, and Erin,
for making it all worthwhile*

*—and to Molly, whose lust for socks
kept us all on our toes*

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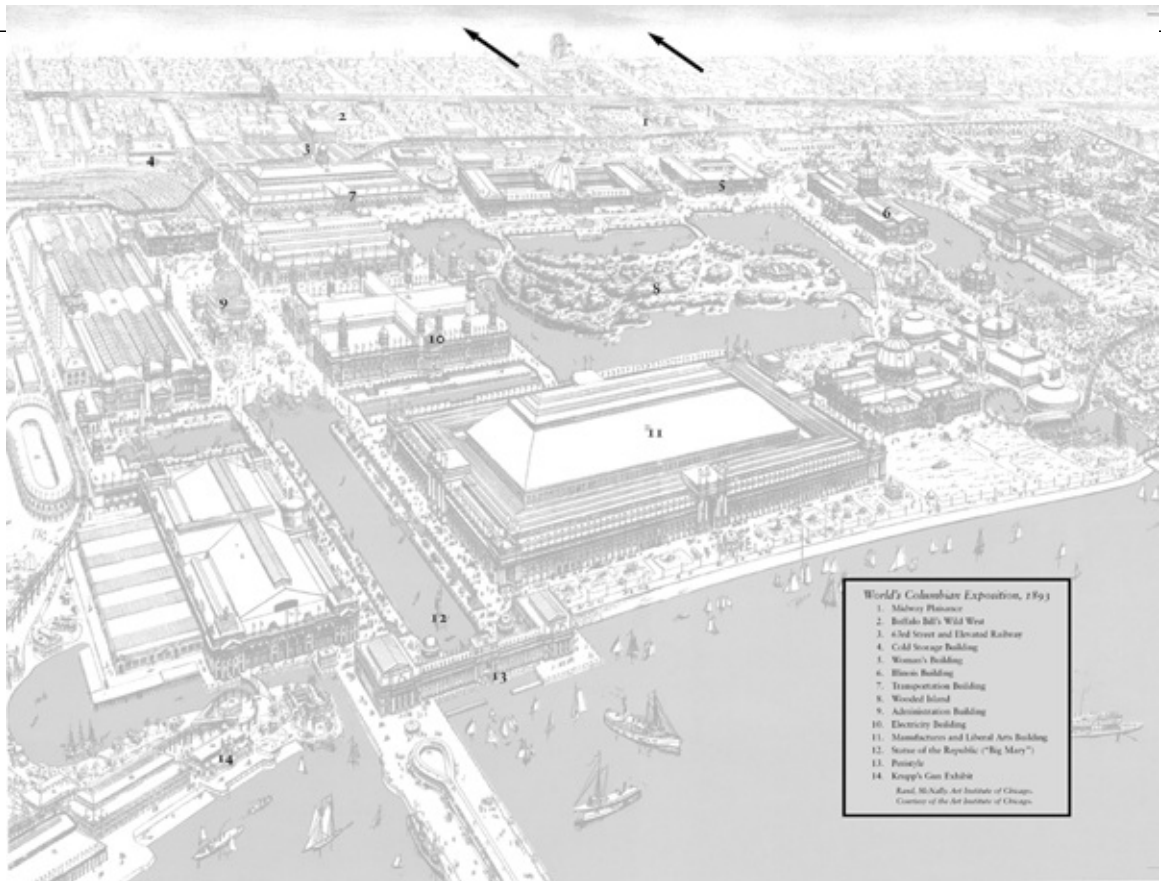
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EVILS IMMINENT

(A NOTE)

IN CHICAGO AT THE END of the nineteenth century amid the smoke of industry and the clatter of trains there lived two men, both handsome, both blue-eyed, and both unusually adept at their chosen skills. Each embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized the rush of America toward the twentieth century. One was an architect, the builder of many of America's most important structures, among them the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C.; the other was a murderer, one of the most prolific in history and harbinger of an American archetype, the urban serial killer. Although the two never met, at least not formally, their fates were linked by a single, magical event, one largely fallen from modern recollection but that in its time was considered to possess a transformative power nearly equal to that of the Civil War.

In the following pages I tell the story of these men and this event, but I must insert here a notice: However strange or macabre some of the following incidents may seem, this is *not* a work of fiction. Anything between quotation marks comes from a letter, memoir, or other written document. The action takes place mostly in Chicago, but I beg readers to forgive me for the occasional lurch across state lines, as when the staunch, grief-struck Detective Geyer enters that last awful cellar. I beg forbearance, too, for the occasional side journey demanded by the story, including excursions into the medical acquisition of corpses and the correct use of Black Prince geraniums in an Olmstedian landscape.

Beneath the gore and smoke and loam, this book is about the evanescence of life, and why some men choose to fill their brief allotment of time engaging the impossible, others in the manufacture of sorrow. In the end it is a story of the ineluctable conflict between good and evil, daylight and darkness, the White City and the Black.

ERIK LARSON
SEATTLE

Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood.

DANIEL H. BURNHAM
DIRECTOR OF WORKS
WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION, 1893

*I was born with the devil in me. I could not help the fact that I was a murderer, no more
than the poet can help the inspiration to sing.*

DR. H. H. HOLMES
CONFESSION
1896

PROLOGUE

Aboard the Olympic

1912



The architects (*left to right*): Daniel Burnham, George Post, M. B. Pickett, Henry Van Brunt, Francis Millet, Maitland Armstrong, Col. Edmund Rice, Augustus St. Gaudens, Henry Sargent Codman, George W. Maynard, Charles McKim, Ernest Graham, Dion Geraldine.

Aboard the *Olympic*

THE DATE WAS APRIL 14, 1912, a sinister day in maritime history, but of course the man in suite 63–65, shelter deck C, did not yet know it. What he did know was that his foot hurt badly, more than he had expected. He was sixty-five years old and had become a large man. His hair had turned gray, his mustache nearly white, but his eyes were as blue as ever, bluer at this instant by proximity to the sea. His foot had forced him to delay the voyage, and now it kept him anchored in his suite while the other first-class passengers, his wife among them, did what he would have loved to do, which was to explore the ship's more exotic precincts. The man loved the opulence of the ship, just as he loved Pullman Palace cars and giant fireplaces, but his foot problem tempered his enjoyment. He recognized that the systemic malaise that caused it was a consequence in part of his own refusal over the years to limit his courtship of the finest wines, foods, and cigars. The pain reminded him daily that his time on the planet was nearing its end. Just before the voyage he told a friend, "This prolonging of a man's life doesn't interest me when he's done his work and has done it pretty well."

The man was Daniel Hudson Burnham, and by now his name was familiar throughout the world. He was an architect and had done his work pretty well in Chicago, New York, Washington, San Francisco, Manila, and many other cities. He and his wife, Margaret, were sailing to Europe in the company of their daughter and her husband for a grand tour that was to continue through the summer. Burnham had chosen this ship, the R.M.S. *Olympic* of the White Star Line, because it was new and glamorous and big. At the time he booked passage the *Olympic* was the largest vessel in regular service, but just three days before his departure a sister ship—a slightly longer twin—had stolen that rank when it set off on its maiden voyage. The twin, Burnham knew, was at that moment carrying one of his closest friends, the painter Francis Millet, over the same ocean but in the opposite direction.

As the last sunlight of the day entered Burnham's suite, he and Margaret set off for the first-class dining room on the deck below. They took the elevator to spare his foot the torment of the grand stairway, but he did so with reluctance, for he admired the artistry in the iron scrollwork of its balustrades and the immense dome of iron and glass that flushed the ship's core with natural light. His sore foot had placed increasing limitations on his mobility. Only a week earlier he had found himself in the humiliating position of having to ride in a wheelchair through Union Station in Washington, D.C., the station he had designed.

The Burnhams dined by themselves in the *Olympic's* first-class salon, then retired to their suite and there, for no particular reason, Burnham's thoughts returned to

Frank Millet. On impulse, he resolved to send Millet a midsea greeting via the *Olympic's* powerful Marconi wireless.

Burnham signaled for a steward. A middle-aged man in knife-edge whites took his message up three decks to the Marconi room adjacent to the officer's promenade. He returned a few moments later, the message still in his hand, and told Burnham the operator had refused to accept it.

Footsore and irritable, Burnham demanded that the steward return to the wireless room for an explanation.



Millet was never far from Burnham's mind, nor was the event that had brought the two of them together: the great Chicago world's fair of 1893. Millet had been one of Burnham's closest allies in the long, bittersweet struggle to build the fair. Its official name was the World's Columbian Exposition, its official purpose to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, but under Burnham, its chief builder, it had become something enchanting, known throughout the world as the White City.

It had lasted just six months, yet during that time its gatekeepers recorded 27.5 million visits, this when the country's total population was 65 million. On its best day the fair drew more than 700,000 visitors. That the fair had occurred at all, however, was something of a miracle. To build it Burnham had confronted a legion of obstacles, any one of which could have—*should* have—killed it long before Opening Day. Together he and his architects had conjured a dream city whose grandeur and beauty exceeded anything each singly could have imagined. Visitors wore their best clothes and most somber expressions, as if entering a great cathedral. Some wept at its beauty. They tasted a new snack called Cracker Jack and a new breakfast food called Shredded Wheat. Whole villages had been imported from Egypt, Algeria, Dahomey, and other far-flung locales, along with their inhabitants. The Street in Cairo exhibit alone employed nearly two hundred Egyptians and contained twenty-five distinct buildings, including a fifteen-hundred-seat theater that introduced America to a new and scandalous form of entertainment. Everything about the fair was exotic and, above all, immense. The fair occupied over one square mile and filled more than two hundred buildings. A single exhibit hall had enough interior volume to have housed the U.S. Capitol, the Great Pyramid, Winchester Cathedral, Madison Square Garden, and St. Paul's Cathedral, all at the same time. One structure, rejected at first as a "monstrosity," became the fair's emblem, a machine so huge and terrifying that it instantly eclipsed the tower of Alexandre Eiffel that had so wounded America's pride. Never before had so many of history's brightest lights, including Buffalo Bill, Theodore Dreiser, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Clarence Darrow, George Westinghouse, Thomas Edison, Henry Adams, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, Nikola Tesla, Ignace Paderewski, Philip Armour, and Marshall Field, gathered in one place at one time. Richard Harding Davis called the exposition "the greatest event in the history of the country since the Civil War."

That something magical had occurred in that summer of the world's fair was beyond doubt, but darkness too had touched the fair. Scores of workers had been hurt or killed in building the dream, their families consigned to poverty. Fire had killed fifteen more, and an assassin had transformed the closing ceremony from what was to have been the century's greatest celebration into a vast funeral. Worse had occurred too, although these revelations emerged only slowly. A murderer had moved among the beautiful things Burnham had created. Young women drawn to Chicago by the fair and by the prospect of living on their own had disappeared, last seen at the killer's block-long mansion, a parody of everything architects held dear. Only after the exposition had Burnham and his colleagues learned of the anguished letters describing daughters who had come to the city and then fallen silent. The press speculated that scores of fairgoers must have disappeared within the building. Even the street-hardened members of the city's Whitechapel Club, named for the London stalking grounds of Jack the Ripper, were startled by what detectives eventually found inside and by the fact that such grisly events could have gone undiscovered for so long. The rational explanation laid blame on the forces of change that during this time had convulsed Chicago. Amid so much turmoil it was understandable that the work of a young and handsome doctor would go unnoticed. As time passed, however, even sober men and women began to think of him in less-than-rational terms. He described himself as the Devil and contended that his physical shape had begun to alter. Enough strange things began happening to the men who brought him to justice to make his claim seem almost plausible.

For the supernaturally inclined, the death of the jury foreman alone offered sufficient proof.



Burnham's foot ached. The deck thrummed. No matter where you were on the ship, you felt the power of the *Olympic's* twenty-nine boilers transmitted upward through the strakes of the hull. It was the one constant that told you—even in the staterooms and dining chambers and smoking lounge, despite the lavish efforts to make these rooms look as if they had been plucked from the Palace of Versailles or a Jacobean mansion—that you were aboard a ship being propelled far into the bluest reaches of the ocean.

Burnham and Millet were among the few builders of the fair still alive. So many others had gone. Olmsted and Codman. McKim. Hunt. Atwood—mysteriously. And that initial loss, which Burnham still found difficult to comprehend. Soon no one would remain, and the fair would cease to exist as a living memory in anyone's brain.

Of the key men, who besides Millet was left? Only Louis Sullivan: embittered, perfumed with alcohol, resenting who knew what, but not above coming by Burnham's office for a loan or to sell some painting or sketch.

At least Frank Millet still seemed strong and healthy and full of the earthy good humor that had so enlivened the long nights during the fair's construction.

The steward came back. The expression in his eyes had changed. He apologized. He still could not send the message, he said, but at least now he had an explanation. An accident had occurred involving Millet's ship. In fact, he said, the *Olympic* was at that moment speeding north at maximum velocity to come to her aid, with instructions to receive and care for injured passengers. He knew nothing more.

Burnham shifted his leg, winced, and waited for more news. He hoped that when the *Olympic* at last reached the site of the accident, he would find Millet and hear him tell some outrageous story about the voyage. In the peace of his stateroom, Burnham opened his diary.

That night the fair came back to him with extra clarity.

PART I

Frozen Music

Chicago, 1890–91



Chicago, circa 1889.

The Black City

HOW EASY IT WAS TO DISAPPEAR:

A thousand trains a day entered or left Chicago. Many of these trains brought single young women who had never even seen a city but now hoped to make one of the biggest and toughest their home. Jane Addams, the urban reformer who founded Chicago's Hull House, wrote, "Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon the city streets and to work under alien roofs." The women sought work as typewriters, stenographers, seamstresses, and weavers. The men who hired them were for the most part moral citizens intent on efficiency and profit. But not always. On March 30, 1890, an officer of the First National Bank placed a warning in the help-wanted section of the *Chicago Tribune*, to inform female stenographers of "our growing conviction that no thoroughly honorable business-man who is this side of dotage ever advertises for a lady stenographer who is a blonde, is good-looking, is quite alone in the city, or will transmit her photograph. All such advertisements upon their face bear the marks of vulgarity, nor do we regard it safe for any lady to answer such unseemly utterances."

The women walked to work on streets that angled past bars, gambling houses, and bordellos. Vice thrived, with official indulgence. "The parlors and bedrooms in which honest folk lived were (as now) rather dull places," wrote Ben Hecht, late in his life, trying to explain this persistent trait of old Chicago. "It was pleasant, in a way, to know that outside their windows, the devil was still capering in a flare of brimstone." In an analogy that would prove all too apt, Max Weber likened the city to "a human being with his skin removed."

Anonymous death came early and often. Each of the thousand trains that entered and left the city did so at grade level. You could step from a curb and be killed by the Chicago Limited. Every day on average two people were destroyed at the city's rail crossings. Their injuries were grotesque. Pedestrians retrieved severed heads. There were other hazards. Streetcars fell from drawbridges. Horses bolted and dragged carriages into crowds. Fires took a dozen lives a day. In describing the fire dead, the term the newspapers most liked to use was "roasted." There was diphtheria, typhus, cholera, influenza. And there was murder. In the time of the fair the rate at which men and women killed one another rose sharply throughout the nation but especially in Chicago, where police found themselves without the manpower or expertise to manage the volume. In the first six months of 1892 the city experienced nearly eight hundred violent deaths. Four a day. Most were prosaic, arising from robbery, argument, or sexual jealousy. Men shot women, women shot men, and children shot one another by accident.

But all this could be understood. Nothing like the Whitechapel killings had occurred. Jack the Ripper's five-murder spree in 1888 had defied explanation and captivated readers throughout America, who believed such a thing could not happen in their own hometowns.

But things were changing. Everywhere one looked the boundary between the moral and the wicked seemed to be degrading. Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued in favor of divorce. Clarence Darrow advocated free love. A young woman named Borden killed her parents.

And in Chicago a young handsome doctor stepped from a train, his surgical valise in hand. He entered a world of clamor, smoke, and steam, refulgent with the scents of murdered cattle and pigs. He found it to his liking.

The letters came later, from the Cigrands, Williamses, Smythes, and untold others, addressed to that strange gloomy castle at Sixty-third and Wallace, pleading for the whereabouts of daughters and daughters' children.

It was so easy to disappear, so easy to deny knowledge, so very easy in the smoke and din to mask that something dark had taken root.

This was Chicago, on the eve of the greatest fair in history.

“The Trouble Is Just Begun”

ON THE AFTERNOON OF MONDAY, February 24, 1890, two thousand people gathered on the sidewalk and street outside the offices of the *Chicago Tribune*, as similar crowds collected at each of the city’s twenty-eight other daily newspapers, and in hotel lobbies, in bars, and at the offices of Western Union and the Postal Telegraph Company. The gathering outside the *Tribune* included businessmen, clerks, traveling salesmen, stenographers, police officers, and at least one barber. Messenger boys stood ready to bolt as soon as there was news worth reporting. The air was cold. Smoke filled the caverns between buildings and reduced lateral visibility to a few blocks. Now and then police officers cleared a path for one of the city’s bright yellow streetcars, called grip-cars for the way their operators attached them to an ever-running cable under the street. Drays full of wholesale goods rumbled over the pavers, led by immense horses gusting steam into the murk above.

The wait was electric, for Chicago was a prideful place. In every corner of the city people looked into the faces of shopkeepers, cab drivers, waiters and bellboys to see whether the news already had come and whether it was good or bad. So far the year had been a fine one. Chicago’s population had topped one million for the first time, making the city the second most populous in the nation after New York, although disgruntled residents of Philadelphia, previously in second place, were quick to point out that Chicago had cheated by annexing large expanses of land just in time for the 1890 decadal census. Chicago shrugged the sniping off. Big was big. Success today would dispel at last the eastern perception that Chicago was nothing more than a greedy, hog-slaughtering backwater; failure would bring humiliation from which the city would not soon recover, given how heartily its leading men had boasted that Chicago would prevail. It was this big talk, not the persistent southwesterly breeze, that had prompted New York editor Charles Anderson Dana to nickname Chicago “the Windy City.”

In their offices in the top floor of the Rookery, Daniel Burnham, forty-three, and his partner, John Root, newly forty, felt the electricity more keenly than most. They had participated in secret conversations, received certain assurances, and gone so far as to make reconnaissance forays to outlying parts of the city. They were Chicago’s leading architects: They had pioneered the erection of tall structures and designed the first building in the country ever to be called a skyscraper; every year, it seemed, some new building of theirs became the tallest in the world. When they moved into the Rookery at La Salle and Adams, a gorgeous light-filled structure of Root’s design, they saw views of the lake and city that no one but construction workers had seen before. They knew, however, that today’s event had the potential to make their success so far seem meager.

The news would come by telegraph from Washington. The *Tribune* would get it from

one of its own reporters. Its editors, rewrite men, and typesetters would compose “extra” editions as firemen shoveled coal into the boilers of the paper’s steam-driven presses. A clerk would paste each incoming bulletin to a window, face out, for pedestrians to read.

Shortly after four o’clock, Chicago standard railroad time, the *Tribune* received its first cable.

Even Burnham could not say for sure who had been first to propose the idea. It had seemed to rise in many minds at once, the initial intent simply to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the New World by hosting a world’s fair. At first the idea gained little momentum. Consumed by the great drive toward wealth and power that had begun after the end of the Civil War, America seemed to have scant interest in celebrating its distant past. In 1889, however, the French did something that startled everyone.

In Paris on the Champ de Mars, France opened the Exposition Universelle, a world’s fair so big and glamorous and so exotic that visitors came away believing no exposition could surpass it. At the heart of the exposition stood a tower of iron that rose one thousand feet into the sky, higher by far than any man-made structure on earth. The tower not only assured the eternal fame of its designer, Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, but also offered graphic proof that France had edged out the United States for dominance in the realm of iron and steel, despite the Brooklyn Bridge, the Horseshoe Curve, and other undeniable accomplishments of American engineers.

The United States had only itself to blame for this perception. In Paris America had made a half-hearted effort to show off its artistic, industrial, and scientific talent. “We shall be ranked among those nations who have shown themselves careless of appearances,” wrote the *Chicago Tribune’s* Paris correspondent on May 13, 1889. Other nations, he wrote, had mounted exhibits of dignity and style, while American exhibitors erected a mélange of pavilions and kiosks with no artistic guidance and no uniform plan. “The result is a sad jumble of shops, booths, and bazaars often unpleasing in themselves and incongruous when taken together.” In contrast, France had done everything it could to ensure that its glory overwhelmed everyone. “Other nations are not rivals,” the correspondent wrote, “they are foils to France, and the poverty of their displays sets off, as it was meant to do, the fullness of France, its richness and its splendor.”

Even Eiffel’s tower, forecast by wishful Americans to be a monstrosity that would disfigure forever the comely landscape of Paris, turned out to possess unexpected élan, with a sweeping base and tapered shaft that evoked the trail of a skyrocket. This humiliation could not be allowed to stand. America’s pride in its growing power and international stature had fanned patriotism to a new intensity. The nation needed an opportunity to top the French, in particular to “out-Eiffel Eiffel.” Suddenly the idea of hosting a great exposition to commemorate Columbus’s discovery of the New World became irresistible.

At first, most Americans believed that if an exposition honoring the deepest roots of the nation were to be held anywhere, the site should be Washington, the capital. Initially

even Chicago's editors agreed. As the notion of an exposition gained shape, however, other cities began to see it as a prize to be coveted, mainly for the stature it would confer, stature being a powerful lure in this age when pride of place ranked second only to pride of blood. Suddenly New York and St. Louis wanted the fair. Washington laid claim to the honor on grounds it was the center of government, New York because it was the center of everything. No one cared what St. Louis thought, although the city got a wink for pluck.

Nowhere was civic pride a more powerful force than in Chicago, where men spoke of the "Chicago spirit" as if it were a tangible force and prided themselves on the speed with which they had rebuilt the city after the Great Fire of 1871. They had not merely restored it; they had turned it into the nation's leader in commerce, manufacturing, and architecture. All the city's wealth, however, had failed to shake the widespread perception that Chicago was a secondary city that preferred butchered hogs to Beethoven. New York was the nation's capital of cultural and social refinement, and its leading citizens and newspapers never let Chicago forget it. The exposition, if built right—if it topped Paris—might dispel that sentiment once and for all. The editors of Chicago's daily newspapers, upon seeing New York enter the contest, began to ask, why *not* Chicago? The *Tribune* warned that "the hawks, buzzards, vultures, and other unclean beasts, creeping, crawling, and flying, of New York are reaching out to get control of the fair."

On June 29, 1889, Chicago's mayor, DeWitt C. Cregier, announced the appointment of a citizens committee consisting of 250 of the city's most prominent men. The committee met and passed a resolution whose closing passage read: "The men who have helped build Chicago want the fair, and, having a just and well-sustained claim, they intend to have it."

Congress had the final say, however, and now the time for the big vote had come.

A *Tribune* clerk stepped to the window and pasted the first bulletin. The initial ballot put Chicago ahead by a big margin, with 115 votes to New York's 72. St. Louis came next, followed by Washington. One congressman opposed having a fair at all and out of sheer cussedness voted for Cumberland Gap. When the crowd outside the *Tribune* saw that Chicago led New York by 43 votes, it exploded with cheers, whistles, and applause. Everyone knew, however, that Chicago was still 38 votes shy of the simple majority needed to win the fair.

Other ballots followed. Daylight faded to thin broth. The sidewalks filled with men and women leaving work. Typewriters—the women who operated the latest business machines—streamed from the Rookery, the Montauk, and other skyscrapers wearing under their coats the customary white blouse and long black skirt that so evoked the keys of their Remingtons. Cab drivers cursed and gentled their horses. A lamplighter scuttled along the edges of the crowd igniting the gas jets atop cast-iron poles. Abruptly there was color everywhere: the yellow streetcars and the sudden blues of telegraph boys jolting past with satchels full of joy and gloom; cab drivers lighting the red night-lamps at the backs of their hansoms; a large gilded lion crouching before the hat store

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