

The 1915 World's Fair

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Presidio of San Francisco
Golden Gate National Recreation Area



Bob Bowen Collection



In 1915, the Presidio's bayfront and much of today's Marina District was the site of a grand celebration of human spirit and ingenuity, with a liberal dash of nationalism and civic boosterism thrown in. Known formally as the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915, locals simply called it "The Fair." The fair was a milestone in San Francisco history, and left a lasting physical legacy that is still evident today.

Creating a Celebration



San Francisco 1906.

In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt announced that the U.S. would complete a canal across the Isthmus of Panama, begun years earlier by a French company. The canal would cut 8,000 miles off the distance ships had to travel from the east coast to the west. No canal of this scale had been built before, and many said it could not be done. The geopolitical effects of the canal on the ascendancy of the United States on the world stage were profound.

At the turn of the 20th Century, San Francisco was the largest and wealthiest city on the west coast of the United States. In 1906, a disastrous earthquake struck San Francisco. The ensuing fire was more devastating than the Chicago fire of 1871. Less than 10 years after most of San Francisco was destroyed, the proud city was rebuilt and its people were ready to hold a party, one designed to dazzle the world and showcase the new city.

Even as San Francisco was rebuilding after the earthquake, local boosters promoted the city in a competition to host a world's fair that would celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal. The new San Francisco was the perfect choice, and Congress selected the city over several other aspirants, including New Orleans and San Diego.

In order to build this grand fair, over 630 acres of bayfront tidal marsh, extending three miles from Fort Mason to east of the Golden Gate (today's Marina District and Crissy Field), were filled. On this new land, 31 nations from around the world and many U.S. states built exhibit halls, connected by forty-seven miles of walkways. There were so many attractions that it was said it would take years to see them all.

A Fair Like No Other

"The foundation color of the buildings is a soft gray and as it rises it is changed to the soft yellows picked out in places by blue and red and green and the eye is carried up and up by the architecture, spires and things, to the beautiful blue sky above."

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

The scale and design of the fair were truly exceptional. The Palace of Machinery, the largest structure in the world at the time, was the first building to have a plane fly through it. The Horticulture Palace had a glass dome larger than Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Tower of Jewels reached 40 stories skyward and held 102,000 pieces of multicolored cut glass that sparkled by day and were illuminated by intense electric lights at night. When the fog came in, 48 spotlights of seven different colors illuminated the sky to look like the northern lights.



Bob Bowen Collection

Horticulture Palace.

Showcasing Technology



Lincoln Beachy flying the Little Looper at the fair.

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition looked to the future for innovation. It was intended to showcase new technologies and how they were making the world a better place. Things we take for granted today—cars, airplanes, telephones, and movies—were in their infancy and were shown off at the fair, and some well known technological luminaries were involved in the fair.

Henry Ford, who brought mass production to American manufacturing and made the automobile affordable to middle class society, built an actual Model T assembly line at the fair. Fords were produced three hours a day, six days a week.

Every day at three o'clock, rain or shine, the calls of "Contact!" and "Clear!" could be heard, followed by the roar of an

airplane. Lincoln Beachy, one of the best known pilots of the day, performed daring stunts in the *Little Looper* plane, including flying upside down and intentional stalls and recoveries, to demonstrate the reliability of aircraft. Sadly, Beachy crashed and died during one of his shows in an experimental monoplane.

New farming and agricultural technologies were also introduced at the fair. Luther Burbank, creator of many new kinds of plants including the Burbank potato, Santa Rosa plum, Shasta daisy, and the fire poppy, was in charge of the Horticulture Palace. Author Laura Ingalls Wilder was particularly impressed with new dairy techniques. She wrote, "I saw...cows being milked with a milk machine. And it milked them clean and the cows did not object in the least."

A Small World

Reflecting breakthroughs in transportation and communication, visitors to the fair could seemingly go places and meet people from around the nation and the world, all in a day. They could stroll through California's "Big Trees" inside the Southern Pacific Railroad exhibit, or see the Oregon Exhibit Hall, with its replica of the Greek Parthenon with columns made of redwood trunks. They could spend the night in a full-scale replica of Old Faithful Inn at the Yellowstone National Park exhibit, and meet Blackfoot Indians at the Glacier National Park exhibit. They could view a working model of the Panama Canal, experience Samoan dancing and Sumo wrestling, or visit the Persian and Siamese exhibits. The French exhibit hall was a replica of the Hotel de Salm in Paris, where Napoleon's Order of the Legion of Honor was headquartered. Today's Palace of the Legion of Honor at Lands End is a copy of this building.

Many of the cultural perspectives presented by the nations, states, and corporations that exhibited at the fair would be seen today as insensitive to indigenous peoples and women. This was not surprising: the fair was a celebration of the prevailing notions of the day, not an examination of them.



The Oregon Exhibit Hall.

The Legacy



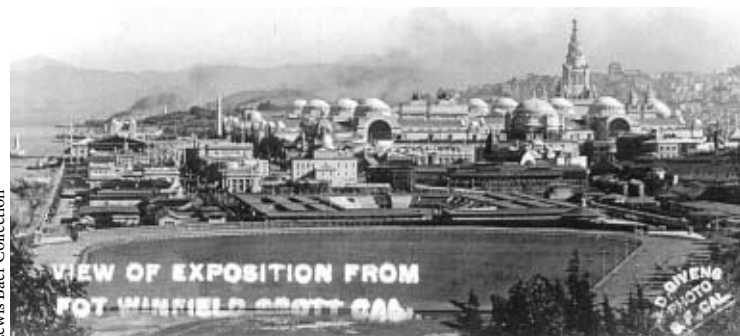
Palace of Fine Arts.

The Panama Pacific International Exposition closed in November 1915, just nine months after it opened. It succeeded in buoying the spirits and economy of San Francisco, and also resulted in effective trade relationships between the United States and other nations of the world.

The physical structures of the fair were built to be temporary. Most were torn down shortly after the fair closed. However, a stroll from Fort Mason to Fort Point today reveals many reminders of the

fair. The walk takes you through land created for the fair from bay wetlands. The railway tunnel under Fort Mason and the San Francisco Yacht Harbor still exist, and the shape of an old race track may be seen on perimeter of the grass Crissy airfield. The most impressive remnant of all is the Palace of Fine Arts. This landmark, much loved by San Franciscans and visitors from around the world, was spared demolition and was restored and reinforced in the 1960s. It continues to dazzle many millions of people each year.

A View of the Fair from across Crissy Field



The fair in 1915.



The site of the fair today.