

The Best of the Fair

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and the Chicago History Museum

The whole world was watching Chicago in the spring of 1893. The young city was growing fast. Thousands of people moved to Chicago every day to work in its stockyards and factories. Tall buildings were sprouting higher and higher, even to eighteen floors. On the lakefront south of the city, the biggest fair the world had ever seen was taking shape. The fair would show America and its inventions to the world, and people in Chicago were excited to be the center of attention.

Nine-year-old Lily and her friends couldn't wait for the fair to open. Every day at school, they shared news about the fair. "I heard it will be the most beautiful city ever," Lily's friend Sarah whispered in class.

Lily disagreed, "It's a fair, not a city. It's the World's Columbian Exposition," she pronounced carefully.

"But it will be as big as a city, and cleaner and nicer than any city in the country," Sarah insisted.

"My dad said that it will be lit up at night so that it looks like daytime!" Frances said.

Lily whispered: "My grandfather said there is going to be a giant wheel that you can ride into the sky," her eyes growing wide with excitement, and a little bit of fear.

"I can't believe it," Frances shook her head. The girls silently imagined it all.

There were rumors that construction on the fair was running late, especially since the winter had been so cold and snowy. So much snow fell one week that some of the buildings' roofs fell down.

Months before, Lily's grandfather took Lily and her little brother Joseph to the fairground. It was little more than a mucky swamp that had a

smell that made Lily feel a bit ill. It was hard to believe that the White City, as people called it, could rise from such an unpleasant place. Maybe the fair wouldn't open on time. Maybe it wouldn't be as wonderful as everyone hoped.

The weeks before the fair's opening dwindled down to days. Would the fair open on time? "I'm going the first week," Frances bragged.

"I'm going opening day. I saw a poster for a Wild West Show, and I'll see it too," Sarah boasted. Lily wasn't sure when she was going—but soon, she hoped.

May 1, 1893, came, and the World's Columbian Exposition opened as planned. Not all the buildings and attractions were finished, but

most people loved it anyway. Frances went the first week, but the ground was muddy from construction, and she complained that her best dress got ruined.

Lily wanted to see the fair soon. She told her grandfather, "I'm ready to go see this fair. Will you take me please?"

Lily's grandfather liked the idea. "My friend Mr. Weller is working there. I'll see if he has any advice."

A few days later, Grandpa came home with a big smile on his face and a package tucked under his arm. He'd been to see Mr. Weller. "Here you go." He handed Lily the thin package wrapped in brown paper.

Lily gasped when she looked inside. "Tickets!" she exclaimed, waving the pieces of paper that looked a lot like money. "Admit the Bearer—Complimentary. What does that mean?"

she asked. Grandpa said that Mr. Weller gave them passes to get in free.

A brightly colored book caught Lily's eye. She stared at the flags and symbols of different parts of the world on the cover and flipped through the pages. It was the "International Guide to the World's Columbian Exposition" and it told everything to see at the fair. There was so much!

Under the book was a map of the fair. "Figure out what to see," Grandpa said. "Find things Joseph will like. Mr. Weller said he'd give us an illuminating tour." Lily couldn't wait. She spent the whole next day reading every word of the guide and memorizing the map.

Finally the big day arrived. Lily was

dressed in her best white dress with lacy collars and cuffs before Grandpa was even awake. "There's so much to do! Let's go," Lily urged. The whole way downtown, Lily chattered about everything to see at the fair. Joseph and Grandpa listened, but paid more attention to trying to keep up with Lily's pace.

By the time they arrived at the elevated train, Grandpa and Joseph were ready for a rest. But there was no time for that; there was a train to catch. None of the family had ever ridden an elevated train. This was the first elevated train in Chicago, built to take visitors to the fair. They climbed higher and higher until they could look in the third floor windows of nearby buildings. "What will keep the train from falling off?" Lily asked nervously. Amazed, Joseph stared out the window with big eyes and smiled.

As they rumbled along, Lily caught her first

glimpse of the fair. She could see why it was called the White City. Its buildings glowed bright and white in the sun. Joseph didn't want to get off the train. Grandpa convinced him that the fair had trains, too. Lily couldn't wait. "Let's go, Joseph, the gates opened at eight! We're hours late!"

The family scrambled down the stairs and got pushed along in a crowd toward the fair's gates. Lily spotted a sign for the pay gate, but because they had free tickets, Grandpa said they didn't have to wait in line and pay fifty cents each.

Lily grabbed Grandpa's hand tightly as they entered. There were so many people that the only thing Lily could see if she looked straight up was the tall, golden dome on the Administration Building. Soon, the crowds spread out, and Lily could finally see again. She couldn't believe the

sight.

They were standing in the heart of the fair in front of the Grand Basin; she knew this from studying her map and guidebook. Around the huge reflecting pool of water were the grandest buildings Lily had ever seen. They shone so white in the sun that Lily's eyes hurt. Rows and rows of columns, towering domes, majestic statues, and grand fountains surrounded them. Banners and flags waved in the breeze. "We're in the Court of Honor! This is the Grand Basin, and that giant building over there is the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building." Lily read from her guidebook: "It measures 1,688 by 788 feet and covers more than 31 acres, being the largest exposition building ever constructed."

"Look!" Joseph pointed at a small boat cruising through the water.

"That must be one of the electric boats. I

never saw such a thing!” Grandpa exclaimed.

Lily ran ahead, “Come on! Over here!” She ran down the side of the Grand Basin, across a canal, and up the Agricultural Building’s steps. The Manufactures Building looked even bigger from across the water.

“Wait, Lily,” Grandpa called. “We should find Mr. Weller.” Lily wondered where Mr. Weller’s booth was. “I can’t remember,” Grandpa said, “But he said we couldn’t miss it because it’s right next to the best thing at the fair.”

“Grandpa, there are more than 200 buildings. Do you remember anything else?” Lily asked.

Grandpa shrugged. “All I know is that he’s next to the best and we’ll get an illuminating tour.”

“What’s illuminating?” Joseph asked.

“It means to explain or to light something

up,” Grandpa said.

Lily was worried. “Which place is the best? We’ll never find him!” She wanted to thank Mr. Weller and get the tour he promised.

Grandpa didn’t let on that he was worried, too: “We’ll just ask people for directions to the best place.”

“I think the train was the best place,” Joseph said.

Lily rolled her eyes. “Let’s look here,” she pointed at the Agricultural Building. In they went.

Compared to the bright sun and white buildings outside, the giant room seemed dim and Lily couldn’t see well. When her eyes adjusted, she gasped. The huge room was filled with booths, signs, people, and noise. Everything

celebrated farming and farm products—sometimes in unusual ways. They marveled at a giant wheel of cheese from Canada that weighed over 22,000 pounds. One booth featured live ostriches. Lily spotted two different models of the Liberty Bell, one made of grains like wheat and oats and the other made of oranges.

Lily and her Grandpa laughed at a map of the United States made of pickles. “Excuse me,” Grandpa asked the man with the pickle map. “Do you know where we can find the best place at the fair?”

“You’re here! This is it. You won’t see anything better than this map made of pickles,” the man replied.

“Do you know Mr. Weller? He’s supposed to be at the best place at the fair,” Lily asked.

The man shook his head. “Try the movable sidewalk. That’s the second-best place at the

fair,” the man answered. Lily looked at her map. The sidewalk was on a pier that reached into the lake, where steamships from downtown arrived. They headed there.

Lily directed Grandpa and Joseph past a long row of columns called the Peristyle toward the pier. Lily couldn’t believe how far the pier reached into Lake Michigan. Joseph liked the movable sidewalk. People could ride the sidewalk to the end of the pier and back. Lily’s guidebook said it could hold up to 5,000 people at a time.

“Can we ride it? It’s like the train!” Joseph yelled.

“Fare 5 cents, Ride as Long as You Wish,” Grandpa read the sign and pulled 15 cents from his pocket for tickets. They rode to the end of the pier and back. Joseph wanted to ride again, so they looped around once more.

Finally Lily convinced Joseph that they had to find Mr. Weller. When they got off the sidewalk, Lily asked the man at the ticket booth, “Do you know the best place at the fair?”

“You’re here! You won’t see anything better than the moving sidewalk. It’s the first ever,” the man replied.

“Do you know Mr. Weller? He’s at the best place.” Lily asked.

The man shook his head. “Try the Midway. A lot of people think that’s the best,” the man suggested. They thanked him and looked at the map. The Midway would be a long walk, but they headed there next.

They walked the whole length of the giant Manufactures Building, and by the time they reached the far end, they were tired. Grandpa stopped at a stand run by two men from Austria and bought sausages on a roll with pickles,

peppers, onions, mustard, and relish and a new kind of drink to share. It was filled with bubbles that tickled Joseph and Lily’s mouths and made them giggle and burp. Lily spotted a souvenir for her mother, an egg-shaped salt and pepper shaker set with “1893 Columbian Exposition” in raised gold letters. Grandpa gave her money to buy it. Then, Grandpa flagged down a man pushing a rolling chair to see if they could get a ride to the Midway.

The man said they’d be better off taking the fair’s railway. “Save yourselves a few cents,” he said. Another train ride was just fine with Joseph.

On the train, Lily looked at her map as they passed the Palace of Fine Arts and exhibits built by states and countries. Lily knew from the guidebook that there was a lot to see in that area, like the real Liberty Bell from Pennsylvania and a Japanese temple on an island. “I think

we're going to have to come back ten times to see it all, Grandpa," Lily said.

Soon they came to the Midway stop.

Joseph didn't want to get off, but Lily told him there were more trains. The shouting and noise from the Midway hurt Lily's ears. A boy ran up and handed them a paper: "The Authentic Daily Programme of the Midway Plaisance."

"Where should we go?" Grandpa wondered. There was so much: Colorado gold mining, a glass factory, a show of trained wild animals.

"Look!" Lily said, pointing to the paper. "Ice Railway—Greatest Attraction in Midway—South of Ferris Wheel," she read. "Maybe that's where Mr. Weller is."

"A railway?" said Joseph. "Let's go!"

It wasn't hard to find. They just walked toward the sounds of people shrieking happily.

The ice railway was a place to sled even though it was summer. Lily looked hopefully at Grandpa, and soon she had ten cents for a ride that made her laugh and scream. Joseph watched, disappointed that it wasn't a train. They asked the man running the ice railway, "Where's the best place at the fair?"

"You're here! There's nothing better than the ice railway," he said.

"Do you know Mr. Weller? He's at the best place." Lily asked.

"Try the Ferris wheel. That's the second-best," the man suggested with a shrug.

It wasn't hard to find the Ferris wheel, one of the biggest things they'd ever seen. "I can't believe it moves," Lily said.

“It is like a train in the sky,” Joseph said.
“Let’s ride it!”

Grandpa reached into his pocket for money again. It was turning into an expensive day: the tickets cost fifty cents each, as much as admission to the fair.

In line, they watched the great wheel and its 36 cars creak around. The top was 250 feet off the ground, far higher than anything else in Chicago. “This is an amazing invention,” Grandpa marveled.

Finally it was their turn. Six cars stopped at the platform, and it took a few minutes to board sixty people into each car. The cars were bigger than the fancy train cars that went back and forth to New York, and they had conductors like real trains. Lily, Joseph, and even Grandpa gasped when the car began to move. The wheel was gentle and quiet. As they rose higher and higher,

Lily grabbed Grandpa’s hand. Joseph shut his eyes. “Don’t worry,” said the conductor.

For the first ten minutes, they stopped six times so that all 36 cars could fill with passengers. Lily liked it when they just floated in the air more than when the wheel moved and gave her a funny feeling in her stomach. At the top they could see the whole city, smoke rising from buildings’ chimneys, and boats bobbing on the lake.

Once the wheel was filled with more than 2,000 passengers, it went all the way around without stopping. It was the most exciting, and scariest, nine minutes of Lily’s whole life. Joseph hid his head in Grandpa’s lap. Grandpa didn’t tell them, but he was excited and a little bit afraid, too.

When the wheel finally stopped to let them off, Lily’s legs were shaking so much it was hard

to walk. “Mr. Weller must be near here,” Lily said. “What could be better than that?”

She asked a man at the gate, “Do you know Mr. Weller? He’s at the best place at the fair.”

The man shook his head. “I’ve never heard of him. And as far as I know this is the best place.” The family didn’t know what to do. They looked at Lily’s map, discouraged. It didn’t look like they’d be able to find Mr. Weller.

Lily watched the Ferris wheel turn, thinking hard about what to do. She noticed for the first time that there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of glass bulbs ringing the wheel. “Those must be the electric bulbs I read about that light up the wheel,” she thought. Just then an idea jumped into her head—Mr. Weller said the tour would be illuminating!

“I think I figured it out!” she cried. “We

didn’t go to the Electricity Building. Maybe that’s where Mr. Weller is! The guide says it’s one of the best things here, and it is illuminating!”

Lily had read that the Electricity Building was full of bright lights and machines powered by electricity, something very new. Grandpa agreed they should give it a try, so off they went.

They made their way out of the busy Midway, past the wooded island and the Horticultural Building. They noticed the Transportation Building. It wasn’t white like the others and it had a golden doorway with paintings of trains. They had to drag Joseph away. “This way!” Lily called, running ahead.

Outside the Electricity Building, they heard a shout. “There you are!” said Mr. Weller. “I’ve been waiting for you all day!”

“We’ve been looking for you all day!” Grandpa said. “If it weren’t for Lily, we wouldn’t

have found you!”

“Are you ready for your tour? The Electricity Building is the best of all,” Mr. Weller explained.

They headed into the huge building. The first thing they saw was a glowing tower of electric lights. “It’s by Thomas Edison,” said Mr. Weller. “It has 18,000 electric bulbs, all in one place!” The lights were so bright that Lily felt like she was looking at the sun.

“Over here, listen to this!” said Mr. Weller. Lily heard music—an orchestra playing—but she didn’t see one. “The musicians are in New York,” said Mr. Weller proudly. “The sound is coming by the telephone!” Lily couldn’t believe it—an actual telephone!

Next Mr. Weller took them to a house in the exhibit hall filled with lamps, sewing machines, stoves, fans—everything Lily could imagine and

more, all powered by electricity.

“You wouldn’t need any matches in this house,” Grandpa said.

Next they looked at another of Edison’s inventions. It was called the kinetoscope, and it showed moving pictures. Lily and Joseph stared, hardly believing that the pictures moved. “This building is the best part,” Lily said. “We’re seeing the future!”

Mr. Weller had one more place to take them. They walked next door to the Manufactures Building and climbed high upstairs to the roof. The view took Lily’s breath away. They could see the entire Court of Honor, Grand Basin, and all the fair’s buildings. It was beginning to get dark, and electric lights began to come on everywhere. Everyone was amazed. The buildings of the White City glowed a warm gold. The electric lights made the city seem more

magical and wonderful than before. The golden dome of the Administration Building looked the most beautiful. They watched in awe as the fountains below shone with changing colors as music played. The longer they watched, the more Lily loved it.

Suddenly they heard loud bangs coming from the lake. Fireworks! Bursts of colored lights sparkled in the sky. The children shrieked and laughed. Lily gave Grandpa a hug. “Thank you, Mr. Weller! Thank you, Grandpa!”

Lily knew that this day was one that she would never, ever forget.