Texas and the World Fairs, 1851-1935

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As Texans approach the Sesquicentennial of the founding of the Lone Star Republic, they are showing more and more interest in the Texas Centennial of 1936 and the two great Fairs held to commemorate that event. Equally interesting and instructive, however, is the experience Texans had in participating in World Fairs long before they staged their own extravaganzas.

At the turn of the century, Finley Peter Dunne’s apocryphal Irish bartender, Mr. Dooley, took a realistic view of World Fairs. When asked by his friend, Hennessy, “Why do they get them up?” Dooley replied: “They get them up f’r th’ advancement iv thought an’ th’ gate receipts ... But they’re run f’r a good time an’ a deficit.”

Beginning with the London Crystal Palace Exposition in 1851, Texans, as visitors and exhibitors, have partaken of the good times and deficits of the various World Fairs, deriving an “advancement iv thought” and culture and spreading a significant image of Texas to the world.

Handicapped at first by the remoteness of its location, the poverty of its American Civil War and Reconstruction ordeal, and the restrictions of its rigid Constitution, Texas played only a modest role at the great Fairs of the nineteenth century, with one notable exception, the World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. In the twentieth century, as petroleum enriched the Lone Star State, Texas participated more substantially and even staged its own gigantic birthday parties, the Texas Centennial and San Antonio’s HemisFair ’68.

The London Crystal Palace Exposition was the granddaddy of all modern World Fairs. It is surprising that such a young, frontier state as Texas was represented at all at this Fair, yet “two very common Barrels” from Texas created quite a stir. They contained a new product, dried meat biscuits, invented by an ingenious Texas patriot, Gail Borden. They were exhibited at the Crystal Palace by Borden’s partner and agent, Dr. Ashbel Smith, one of Texas’ most versatile and remarkable men. The biscuits won a gold medal for Borden and soon were put to use in the Crimean War. Smith’s keen mind must have been stimulated by the wonders exhibited in the great Crystal Palace, for upon his return to Texas he organized the first Texas fair, which opened at Corpus Christi in 1852 with Smith as general manager. In 1876 Smith participated in the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia as one of the award judges, and in 1878 he attended the World’s Exposition at Paris as honorary commissioner from Texas. One wonders how much these stimulating experiences at the World Fairs affected the development of Texas Fair Exposition in later years.

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Fairs had on this statesman-scholar who played such a large role in founding the University of Texas. Another exhibit that gained international attention at the Crystal Palace in 1851 was Samuel Colt’s revolver, the Colt .45, which the Texas Rangers, especially Samuel Walker, had had considerable part in developing.

The success of the London Exposition touched off a series of imitations throughout the world. It was inevitable that France would attempt to outdo its English rival, and before the century was over Paris had five great Fairs to its credit. Texas had no official exhibits at any of these Fairs, but several private citizens provided distinguished representation for the state. At the Paris Fair of 1868 a young lady of exceptional talent who was soon to become a Texan exhibited several fine pieces of sculpture, a bust of Garibaldi and a bust of the Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. This sculptress was Elisabet Ney, who two years later accompanied her husband, Dr. Edmund Montgomery, to America and soon thereafter settled near Hempstead, Texas, later maintaining a house and studio in Austin. She would be heard from again at later Fairs. Exhibiting at the Paris Exposition of 1889 was Thomas Volney Munson of Denison, one of the foremost viticulturalists in the world. This authority on grape species, who did so much to save the grape and wine industries of France that he was awarded the Legion of Honor, presented a noteworthy display of Texas grapevine specimens at the Fair and won a silver Medal. At the Paris Exposition of 1900 Texas was represented by an outstanding painter, Stephen Seymour Thomas, a native of San Augustine who had settled in Paris. Thomas won a bronze medal at the Fair for the portrait of his wife, “Lady in Brown,” which hung in the Grand Palais des Beaux-Arts. At that great fair over eighty Texas individuals or firms exhibited their products, especially cotton and grains as well as pecans, coal, and granite.

For the most part Europe was too far for heavy Texas participation in the great Fairs, but in the United States it was a different story. The Centennial of the United States was the occasion of the first large American Fair, the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876. A number of states appropriated or raised money for substantial exhibits at this Fair, including a number of state buildings. Most of the Southern states, still reeling from the bitter, grinding effects of Reconstruction, passed up this opportunity. The fifteenth Legislature refused to make an appropriation for the representation of Texas at Philadelphia, but a number of private groups such as the United Confederate Veterans and the Knights Templar attended the Fair from Texas under the inducements of special excursion rates by the railroads. One of the exhibits at the Fair became a Texas heirloom, for in 1887 Walter Gresham installed a prize-winning mantle from the Centennial Fair in his new palatial home, the “Bishop’s Palace.”
By 1884 the spirit of the New South encouraged dynamic commercial growth and the promotion of the resources and opportunities of the Southland. Out of this movement grew several large Expositions, particularly the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial at New Orleans, 1884-5, and the Atlanta Exposition of 1895-6. The proximity of New Orleans and the interest of Texas in the commercial development of the South caused Texans to take a sizable interest in the New Orleans Fair. The Eighteenth Legislature repudiated the strict construction of its predecessors and read the State Constitution liberally enough to authorize an expenditure of $20,000 "to assemble ... and maintain ... an exhibit of resources, etc., of Texas ..."). Colonel Henry Exall, a leading cattleman and banker of Dallas, was named "Vice-President for Texas to the Cotton Centennial," and he returned so enthused over the value of great Fairs as to help found and later head (1889) the State Fair of Texas. Among Texans exhibiting at the New Orleans Fair were T.V. Munson, with another of his fine botanical exhibits, Anna Dial Hearne, one of the cultural leaders of Austin whose paintings won for her a gold medal, and Stephen Seymour Thomas, then only sixteen years old, who exhibited his remarkable painting, "San Jose Mission," which he raffled off to finance his first formal training in art.

Although the State government of Texas did not appropriate funds for the other great Cotton States and International Exposition at Atlanta in 1895-6, a number of Texans, especially from the Galveston area, strongly supported the Fair and helped to persuade the Federal Government to appropriate $200,000 for the Exposition.

Texas' main effort in the Fairs of the 1890s was its remarkable showing at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893. This Fair caught the nation's fancy as no other Fair before or since, and not only were Texans attracted to it in great numbers, but Texas came forth with a fine exhibit. Although the Legislature and Governor Hogg read the Constitution too strictly to find a loophole for State financial aid, a gallant effort was made with the Governor's blessing to raise the money from private sources. Businesses, women's clubs, school children, all rallied to the campaign that was conducted primarily by the Texas World's Fair Commission and its Women's Association, headed by Mrs. Benedette B. Tobin, a most active civic leader and artist from Austin. Over $30,000 was raised, enough to finance a large, handsome building and to provide for a number of fine exhibits. The Texas building was designed by a rising young architect of San Antonio, J. Riely Gordon, whose achievements were later to number more than sixty courthouses, including fifteen in Texas, and the state capitol buildings of Arizona, Montana, and Mississippi. Over the entrance of the building was a symbolic pair
Texas Building at the World’s Fair Exposition in Chicago in 1893. It was designed by J. Riely Gordon of San Antonio.

First exhibited in the Texas Building was a huge equestrian portrait of General Houston which had been painted the previous year by Stephen Seymour Thomas. Later the painting was taken to France by the artist where it had a “place of honor in the French ‘Salon,’” but in 1920 Thomas donated it to the city of Houston where it created something of a problem because of its huge size (10’ x 14’). After hanging in the University Club, the Fine Arts Museum, and the Public Library, the painting found a permanent home in 1951 at the San Jacinto Monument. Another painting of note in the Texas Building was Louis Eyth’s “The Speech of Travis to His Men at the Alamo.” This painting by Eyth has been lost, but a copy of it is in the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library in San Antonio.

Texans also were exhibiting in other buildings at the Fair. Seymour Thomas’ painting, “The Innocent Victim,” displayed in the

of Longhorns and inside was an impressive carved figure of Sam Houston. The latter was the work of Elisabet Ney, who had sunk into obscurity in Texas until her career was renewed by the opportunity of exhibiting at the World’s Columbian Exposition. The Texas World’s Fair Commission, under the urging of Mrs. Tobin and former Governor O.M. Roberts, commissioned Miss Ney to do two figures for the Texas exhibit, one of Sam Houston and the other of Stephen F. Austin. The latter figure was not finished in time for the Fair, but both figures later were placed in the State Capitol and replicas are in the National Capitol.
Fine Arts Building, won a medal, Mrs. Tobin exhibited a number of her works of art in the Women’s Building, and Frank Reaugh, a brilliant young artist of the Texas range, made his first national impact at the Fair. Thomas V. Munson had an outstanding viticultural exhibit, said to be “the most complete botanical display of the whole grape genus ever made.” Some red snappers and croakers from Galveston Bay splashed merrily in the tanks of the Fisheries Building, and “cowboys from Texas” performed daily in “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West Show that stood just outside the Midway.

“Texas Day” at the Fair was celebrated on September 16 after a number of postponements. Governor Hogg was too worn out from the Legislative session to attend. That he might not have been entirely welcome can be judged from the fact that a few weeks earlier a disgruntled Texan had sat in the doorway of the Texas Building informing passers-by, “This building will be open to visitors next Monday ... The Governor of the State will not be here. We don’t want him. If he comes we will throw him out. He vetoed the appropriation ... against the will of the people of Texas ...” Though Governor Hogg was missing, former Governors John Ireland and Richard Hubbard served in his place on Texas Day.

Two Texans had especially prominent roles at the World’s Columbian Exposition. One was Colonel Henry Exall, who was appointed by President Benjamin Harrison to be Commissioner at Large to the World’s Fair Commission, the body responsible for the Fair. The other was John T. Dickinson, who had the very active and responsible role of Secretary to the Commission, serving from 1889-1893. Dickinson had been a former editor of the Houston Telegram, Secretary of the Texas House of Representatives, and Secretary of the State Capitol Board. His experiences with Fairs began in 1888 when he directed “the famous Inter-State Military Encampment and International Music Contest” that celebrated the completion of the Texas State Capitol. Later that year he served as Secretary and General Manager of “the International Fair Association at San Antonio” and directed “its first great Texan-Mexican Exposition ... held in November, 1888.” To some extent one could say John T. Dickinson was the great-grandfather of HemisFair ’68.

Texas had only modest exhibits at Omaha’s Trans-Mississippi Exposition in 1898 and the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901, another Fair that exploited the Hemisphere theme. Edward G. Eisenlohr, a rising young Texas painter who studied under Frank Reaugh, made a creditable showing at Buffalo, and Seymour Thomas won a medal with his “Baby after the Bath,” though the Exposition is better known for the assassination of President William McKinley than for anything cultural.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 at St. Louis afforded
Texans an opportunity to partake more fully of a Fair than ever before, as the distance was not great and Texas' ties with St. Louis were strong. Once again a struggle developed over the question of state financial aid. Though Governor Joseph Sayres was sympathetic and the House Judiciary Committee reported favorably on a proposed grant of $200,000 for a proper representation of Texas, the Twenty-Eighth Legislature struck down the measure more for lack of revenue than on constitutional grounds.29

Once again private forces came forward. John H. Kirby, the leading East Texas lumberman and banker, was named President of the Texas World's Fair Commission. He rallied bankers, lumbermen, railroad executives, and other businessmen to contribute generously to the promotion of Texas at the Fair. At the Lumbermen's State Convention in Galveston, Kirby exhorted the gathering to subscribe to the Texas World's Fair Commission on the basis of the number of board feet of lumber manufactured or sold, and his Kirby Lumber Company took the lead with a pledge of $5000.30 The women, too, played a large role in enlisting support for the Texas exhibit, holding teas, socials, and other money-raising parties around the state.31

The Texas Commission numbered many prominent leaders such as Paul Waples and B.B. Paddock of Fort Worth, Royal Ferris and Barnet Gibbs of Dallas, and L.J. Polk of Galveston.32 Serving as General-Manager of the Commission and directing the Texas exhibitions was Louis J. Wortham, a versatile man who was one of the founders and editors of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, a state senator, and an historian whose work included a five-volume *History of Texas*.33

Thanks to Kirby's influence, Wortham's energetic leadership, and the interested efforts of thousands of Texas citizens, Texas was able to make a very commendable display at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The Texas Building was one of the most handsome structures at the Fair. Designed by Charles H. Page, Jr., and built at a cost of over $45,000, the edifice was quite distinctive. It sat atop a hill overlooking the other state buildings and was built in the shape of a great star, with five long pointed wings radiating from the circular rotunda above which was a great dome crowned with a large bronze statue of Liberty.34

Inside the building was a splendid display of art. Statues of Austin, Houston, and Governors Sayres, Roberts, and Ross, all done by Elisabet Ney, stood "on pedestals about the outer edge of the Rotunda."35 In the center of one of the wings was her fine figure of General Albert Sidney Johnston lying in state. Miss Ney had some competition from a young San Antonio Sculptor, Pompeo Coppini, who had several figures on display, including a tragic group entitled "Victims of the Galveston Flood."36
The victims of that terrible flood were recognized in another quite
different way at the Fair. One of the main attractions on the Mid­
way, or “Pike,” as it was called, was “The Galveston Flood,” a vivid
recreation of the disaster by slides, sounds, and unusual lighting ef­
fects, a sort of “Cinerama” produced in a large building by the
Criterion Concession Company.37

The Texas Building contained, besides its sculpture, many fine
paintings by Texas artists, including “The Battle of the Alamo” by
San Antonio’s R.J. Onderdonk.38 There were also many exhibits of
the products, achievements, and prospects of the State. Above all, the
building served as a hospitality house for the thousands of Texas
visitors who flocked to the Fair. A hostess committee of prominent
Texas ladies took turns directing the hospitality and social activities.
Heading the ladies’ work was Miss Katie Daffan, outstanding writer,
educator, and social worker, who later became Vice President of the
Texas State Historical Association (1912-14) and served as Chairman
of the Lady Commissioners from Texas to the World’s Fair.39 Each
hostess inaugurated her week of hospitality with a reception to which
the social leaders of Texas were invited. The most prominent figures
found themselves invited by many of the charming ladies, and some
made more than one trip to St. Louis rather than displease a worthy
Texas matron. Mrs. W.F. Robertson, Dick Dowling’s only daughter
and a leading socialite of Austin, had a particularly distinguished
assemblage for her inaugural reception, including Former Governor
Francis Lubbock, former Governor Hogg and his daughter Ima, Judge
and Mrs. John H. Reagan, and Senator Morris Sheppard.40

Not only did Texans attend the Fair in droves but they exhibited
in many departments of the Fair. Sam H. Dixon, author of The Poets
and Poetry of Texas, was in charge of the Texas Horticultural exhibits
and enlisted a great number of entries, many of which won prizes.41
T.V. Munson had another fine exhibit of grapes, and Professor
William B. Phillips of the University of Texas had a splendid
mineralogy exhibit that later became the nucleus for the geology col­
lection of the University.42 Seymour Thomas served on the Jury of
Awards in the Art Section of the Fair, and Frank Reaugh was among
Texans exhibiting there.43

One Texan who had a particularly active part in the St. Louis
Fair was young Karl St. John Hoblitzzelle, who was Secretary to the
Director of Works, Isaac Taylor. For several years Hoblitzzelle diligent­
ly assisted in the construction and operation of the Fair, and his ex­
periences and the acquaintances he made there pointed the direction
of his future career in Texas and the Southwest. In 1905 he brought
a number of the Exposition entertainers to Dallas and began what
would become an empire of theaters, entertainment, and philanthropy
in the Southwest. Thirty years later Hoblitzzelle contributed mightily
to Texas' own great Fair, the Centennial Exposition of 1936.\(^44\)

In 1915 the completion of the Panama Canal was the occasion of a major Fair at San Francisco, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. The distance between San Francisco and Texas and the limited association Texans had with the West Coast were largely responsible for Texas having only a modest part in this Fair. An inexpensive Texas Building was erected, modeled after the Alamo, which fitted well with the Spanish American motif of the Fair. Edward Eisenlohr was one of the exhibitors in the Art Palace, and another distinguished Texan, Professor Charles W. Hackett, read a scholarly paper at the Congress of Historians, one of many such conventions held at the various World's Fairs. Hackett later became director of the Latin-American Institute at the University of Texas (1940-1951).\(^45\)

World War I put a damper on World Fairs and not even the "Roaring Twenties" showed much interest in this form of education and amusement. The Sesquicentennial Fair at Philadelphia was rather a bust and Texas played little part in it. The Great Depression, however, proved to be a stimulant to World Fairs, as it was believed that the Fairs might revive the sluggish economy, and the New Deal was receptive to almost any form of pump-priming.

Chicago sought to duplicate or surpass its feat of 1893 with a Century of Progress Exposition in 1933. The Fair was by no means as beautiful as the Columbian Exposition, but its many attractions from the Sky-Ride to Sally Rand drew a surprisingly large number of Texas visitors. One such visitor was Leslie C. McDonald, a West Texas farmer from Floydada, who proved to be the 20,000,000th customer to go through the Fair's turnstiles and received as a prize—another farm!\(^46\) Among other Texas visitors to the Fair was the Houston Civic Opera Association, which presented an "elaborate production" of Aida there on August 23. Partly because of the Depression, the individual states did not have separate buildings at this Fair but shared one huge structure, the Hall of States. Texas was one of twenty three states to exhibit in this way, and its pavilion, designed by Ivan Riley and Walter Wolfe, tastefully emphasized its history under Six Flags and called attention to its products, its resources, and its governor, Mrs. Miriam A. "Ma" Ferguson.\(^47\) Though the Chicago Fair was extended a second year, the Texas exhibit was discontinued. The Fair officials tried to persuade Texas Ranger Frank Hamer to appear at the 1934 Exposition with Bonny and Clyde's bullet-ridden car, but the nationally famous peace officer scorned such publicity.\(^48\)

By 1934 Texas had become absorbed in its own approaching centennial celebration, and a great Fair (indeed two!) became part of its plans. No constitutional scruples prevented the state government from appropriating $3,000,000 for Texas' one hundredth birth-
day, nor did loyalty to the theory of states’ rights prevent Texans from seeking and accepting $3,000,000 for the celebration from Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Benefiting from the experiences of participation in the Centennials and World Fairs of the previous nine decades, Texans would put on a birthday party worthy of the vast state and worthy also of separate treatment by this and other historians. In the future lay not only the Centennial but also HemisFair ’68 and many other World Fairs where Texans would continue their “advancement in thought,” culture, and “a good time.”

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4Dellinger, Fairs Are for Everybody, 209.
5Elizabeth Brooks, Prominent Women of Texas (Akron, 1886), 76-77.
7Esse Forrester O’Brien, Art and Artists of Texas (Dallas, 1935), 209.
8Report of the Commissioners-General for the United States to the International Universal Exposition, Paris, 1900, Senate Documents, 56th Congress, 2nd Session (1900-01), No. 232 (4 vols., Washington 1901), II.
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