



Exhibiting the possibilities : the Montana State Fair  
by Douglas Michael Edwards

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History  
Montana State University

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Abstract:

This thesis analyzes the history of the Montana State Fair between 1903, its inaugural season, and 1917, the last season before the First World War altered the institution's mission. It begins by looking at the origins of the event, calling attention to early agricultural fairs in Montana then emphasizing the influence of the state's participation in several nineteenth-century world's fairs. The growth of the fair and its utilization as a promotional vehicle is discussed in detail. In the process, the improvement of the grounds and the rising popularity of the event are explored. Then the thesis highlights the role of the fair as an educational institution designed to guide the course of Montana's agricultural development. Particular attention is given to the manner in which the event served to encourage Montanans to embrace the emerging social and economic order of an incorporated America. The final chapter discusses the declining influence and eventual death of the state fair in 1933. In sum, this thesis argues that for a decade and a half the Montana State Fair existed as a central state institution, one that fostered the development of the state's natural resources and familiarized Montanans with the mass of inventions and ideas profoundly altering American society at the turn of the century. In the process it challenges popular images of so-called agricultural fairs and illuminates a side of these events not heretofore unveiled by scholars.

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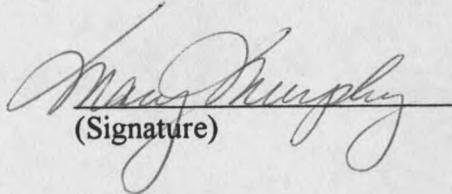
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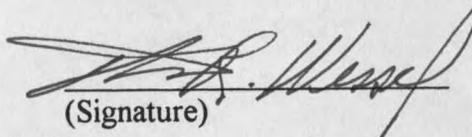
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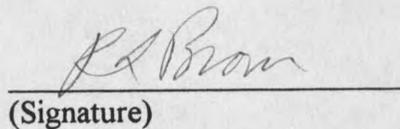
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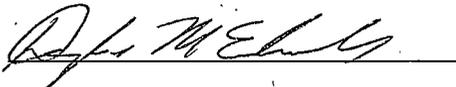
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the history of the Montana State Fair between 1903, its inaugural season, and 1917, the last season before the First World War altered the institution's mission. It begins by looking at the origins of the event, calling attention to early agricultural fairs in Montana then emphasizing the influence of the state's participation in several nineteenth-century world's fairs. The growth of the fair and its utilization as a promotional vehicle is discussed in detail. In the process, the improvement of the grounds and the rising popularity of the event are explored. Then the thesis highlights the role of the fair as an educational institution designed to guide the course of Montana's agricultural development. Particular attention is given to the manner in which the event served to encourage Montanans to embrace the emerging social and economic order of an incorporated America. The final chapter discusses the declining influence and eventual death of the state fair in 1933. In sum, this thesis argues that for a decade and a half the Montana State Fair existed as a central state institution, one that fostered the development of the state's natural resources and familiarized Montanans with the mass of inventions and ideas profoundly altering American society at the turn of the century. In the process it challenges popular images of so-called agricultural fairs and illuminates a side of these events not heretofore unveiled by scholars.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

"Folks, we're all going to the State Fair," Tom Farmer announced enthusiastically to his family, quickly dismissing his wife's concerns about the cost by insisting that "we need a little vacation."<sup>1</sup> The following day, as Mr. Farmer wished, the entire family climbed aboard their automobile and ventured more than one hundred miles to Helena, where they took in the Montana State Fair. The story of the Farmers' fictional trip appeared in a 1918 edition of the *Montana State Fair News*, a publication that extolled the benefits afforded by a day at the fair and encouraged participation in an event that had secured a position as one of the state's premier promotional and educational institutions.

Established in 1903 and held annually through 1932, the six-day Montana State Fair played a central role in the development of the Treasure State at the beginning of the twentieth century. The significance of the Montana State Fair, however, has not been recognized by historians. Neglect is not peculiar to Montana's exposition, as state and local fairs in general have not received the scholarly attention they warrant, despite having been fixtures in American society since the early nineteenth century. Consequently, popular understanding of these events is largely mythical, based on fictional accounts and nostalgic memories rather than historical evidence. State fairs and other so-called agricultural fairs are commonly portrayed as populist gatherings, organized and maintained

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<sup>1</sup> B. J. Paulson, "One Large Time," *Montana State Fair News*, July 1918, 2.

solely through the efforts and for the benefit of rural communities. Illustrating that fairs were not always built upon agrarian foundations and that they often existed as more than icons of rural bliss, the history of Montana's state fair challenges traditional interpretations. It was a complex institution with a far more ambitious agenda than those of the festivals portrayed in literature and film.

Arguably the work that has been most instrumental in shaping popular conceptions of American fairs was Phil Stong's *State Fair*, a fictional tale of an agrarian family's pilgrimage to one of the country's most prestigious fairs--the Iowa State Fair. Published in 1932, Stong's work cast fairs as idealized rural institutions where contented agrarians celebrated country life, met old friends, and earned recognition for the products of their labors. This book chronicled the journey of the Frake family from their prosperous farm in New Brunswick, Iowa, to Des Moines. Camped at the fairgrounds on the outskirts of the capital city, the Frakes savored a rewarding week of excitement and relaxation. The father's prize boar, Blue Boy, captured the first-place ribbon in the hog contest, his wife swept the pickle competition, and the two children, Margy and Wayne, each enjoyed passionate week-long affairs with members of the opposite sex. In addition, the parents found time to reacquaint themselves with old friends; Wayne exacted revenge on the "hoop-la" concessionaire who duped him the year before; and Margy repeatedly tested her courage on thrilling midway rides. Despite triumphs, trysts, and thrills, at week's end each member of the clan happily returned to the sanguine predictability of life on the farm.

This soothing vignette of rural stability and prosperity certainly appealed to depression-era farmers. Agrarian visitors were prosperous and happy when they arrived, even more so on departure. In the words of one reviewer, "the state fair is only a brief

idyll in the idyllic lives of the Frakes."<sup>2</sup> *State Fair* became a best-selling book subsequently adapted to stage and film. More importantly, it established a state-fair model for future fair organizers to emulate and a master narrative to shape ongoing experiences and memories of fairs. An engaging story, then and now, Stong's novel did not present the complexity of state fairs. The same reviewer pierced through Stong's veiled depiction, commenting that the author's "dreamy Iowa would seem an even more appealing land if we did not have so much evidence indicating quite clearly that it does not exist."<sup>3</sup> The fictive quality of Stong's account was probably even more apparent to Montana readers, for the novel's arrival in bookstores corresponded with the last year of the struggling Montana State Fair. Discouraged by a decade of diminishing appropriations and patronage, only stalwart supporters could have hoped that the event would open the following year.

Another person who no doubt recognized the limits of Stong's novel was Wayne Caldwell Neely, a rural sociologist who wrote a pioneering study of agricultural fairs. *The Agricultural Fair* was published three years after Stong's fictional account. Neely delved beyond stereotypes and presented a historical analysis of the evolution of agricultural fairs in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the timeless, quaint, and bucolic event that the Frakes visited, agricultural fairs as described by Neely are complex institutions that have a legacy of perpetual modification. In fact, he suggested that change is a common characteristic of fairs that must be recognized in order to understand them. "Like the society of which it is part," wrote Neely, "the fair is subject to eternal change; we see it at one time or another

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Cantwell, "This Side of Paradise," review of *State Fair*, by Phil Stong, *New Republic* 71 (July 1932): 215.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>4</sup>Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

assuming characteristic forms, now given a new direction, now fulfilling some new interest of society, now dropping some old function as it becomes obsolete or is elsewhere better performed."<sup>5</sup> To understand these events, then, requires acknowledging their elastic nature and their relationship to the societies in which they exist. The Frakes did not have to confront these issues when they visited the Iowa State Fair and neither did those who read about their journey, for Stong's state fair was one of the imagination, not reality.

Scholars have only slowly built upon the work of Neely and begun to dismantle the image created by Stong. Specific aspects and functions of various fairs have been the focus of several shorter works. Fred Kniffen authored two insightful articles addressing the development and proliferation of agricultural fairs in the United States. The first, "The American Agricultural Fair: The Pattern," examined the physical design of fairgrounds and concluded that form followed function.<sup>6</sup> He charted the geographic spread of fairs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a companion piece, "The American Agricultural Fair: Time and Space."<sup>7</sup> In a more recent article, "The Nineteenth-Century North Carolina State Fair as a Social Institution," Melton A. McLaurin explained that "during that era fair week was the social event of the year, an occasion anticipated by all elements of society."<sup>8</sup> Warren J. Gates investigated the role of fairs as agents of progress in "Modernization as a Function of an Agricultural Fair: The Great Grangers' Picnic Exhibition at Williams Grove,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, ix.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Kniffen, "The American Agricultural Fair: The Pattern," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 39 (December 1949): 264-283.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Kniffen, "The American Agricultural Fair: Time and Place," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 41 (March 1951): 42-57.

<sup>8</sup> Melton A. McLaurin, "The Nineteenth-Century North Carolina State Fair as a Social Institution," *North Carolina Historical Review* 59 (Summer 1982): 213.

Pennsylvania, 1873-1916."<sup>9</sup> All of these articles are helpful for understanding the nature of county and state fairs held throughout the United States.

Two very good studies that address many of these issues in the context of specific state fairs are Karal Ann Marling's *Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair* and Chris Allen Rasmussen's doctoral dissertation, "State Fair: Culture and Agriculture in Iowa, 1854-1941."<sup>10</sup> As the title indicates, Marling emphasized the social function of the event she described as Minnesota's "central cultural institution."<sup>11</sup> In a more analytical work, Rasmussen identified the many ways in which the Iowa State Fair changed over the years, emphasized that the event "was seldom held without some disagreement over its exhibits and entertainments," and asserted that it was influential in "the creation of a distinctive middle western identity."<sup>12</sup> Boasting both longevity and notoriety, the Iowa and Minnesota State Fairs have long been the models by which other fairs measure themselves and are judged by outsiders. Fair managers across the continent have aspired to organize events as large as those held annually in Minnesota and Iowa, to offer comparable attractions, or to measure up in some other manner.

Several additional sources warrant attention. An interesting cultural analysis of county fairs is found in Leslie Prosterman's *Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair*.<sup>13</sup> This is a contemporary study, but it contains useful models

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<sup>9</sup> Warren J. Gates, "Modernization as a Function of an Agricultural Fair: The Great Gangers' Picnic Exhibition at Williams Grove, Pennsylvania, 1873-1916," *Agricultural History* 29 (July 1984): 262-279.

<sup>10</sup>Karal Ann Marling, *Blue Ribbon: A Social and Pictorial History of the Minnesota State Fair* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1990); Chris Allen Rasmussen, "State Fair: Culture and Agriculture in Iowa, 1854-1941," Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>Marling, introduction, n.p.

<sup>12</sup>Rasmussen, 530, ii.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Prosterman, *Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern*

and theories for evaluating fairs of the past. Donald B. Marti's *Historical Directory of American Agricultural Fairs* is also helpful. It enumerates hundreds of fairs, past and present, complete with brief histories and bibliographic information.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, the growing body of scholarship on world's fairs held in the United States provides valuable insight into the role of public exhibitions in American culture. As a journalist pointed out in 1914, the annual gathering of people at state and county agricultural fairs cannot be dismissed lightly, for "it is their world's fair."<sup>15</sup> In particular, Robert Rydell's *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* addressed the grass-roots influence and popular appeal of these larger expositions.<sup>16</sup>

An obvious limitation of the existing scholarship is that it has focused primarily on events held in the eastern and midwestern United States. Fairs located there have longer histories and the Midwest, home of the legendary Iowa State Fair, has customarily been identified as the heartland of rural America. It is not surprising, therefore, that previous research concentrated on fairs in these regions. Nevertheless, state, regional, and county fairs also developed on the western half of the continent. The California Agricultural Society founded a fair as early as 1854; Colorado held an official state fair by 1886; and Montana opened a publicly financed state fair in 1903.<sup>17</sup> By concentrating on eastern and midwestern fairs, scholars have generally ignored the existence of fairs in the American

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*County Fair* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Donald B. Marti, *Historical Directory of American Agricultural Fairs* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> "The Point of View," *Scribners Magazine* 56 (October 1914): 552.

<sup>16</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Marti, 43, 52.

West, where annual exhibitions like the Montana State Fair were instrumental in developing the region and shaping its culture.<sup>18</sup>

Successful participation at several world's fairs during the nineteenth century eventually convinced state builders that Montana should have a permanent, annual exhibition of its resources. Consequently, in 1903 the state legislature passed a bill that created the bureaucratic apparatus and appropriated funds for the establishment of the first publicly-financed Montana State Fair, to be located in the capital city of Helena. The fair soon became an influential state institution that hastened the settlement and economic development of Montana. Organized and funded in an effort to attract the human and pecuniary resources necessary to exploit the state's varied natural resources and to guide the course of Montana's growth, the exposition projected visions of perpetual progress and unlimited prosperity that served to unite the Treasure State's divergent economic, social, and political interests. Straight ahead toward an ideal future--this was a mutually acceptable direction for all Montanans, whether miner, farmer, politician, or capitalist. As an advertising medium, an organ of public instruction, and a symbol of infinite possibilities, the state fair was a force in the "modernization" Montana. It helped to integrate the Treasure State into a global market system and acquainted Montanans with the technological, organizational, and ideological characteristics of an increasingly "incorporated" America.<sup>19</sup> This thesis examines the origins of the Montana State Fair, its

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<sup>18</sup>There are two books that provide some insight on the nature of fairs in the American West, although both feature fairs in western Canada. See David Breen and Kenneth Coates' *Vancouver's Fair: An Administrative and Political History of the Pacific National Exhibition* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982); and David C. Jones, *Midways, Judges, and Smooth-Tongued Fakirs: The Illustrated Story of County Fairs in the Prairie West* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983).

<sup>19</sup>For an excellent analysis of the effects of incorporation on American culture see Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

value as a promotional device, and its influence as an educational institution during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a time when the state found itself amid a series of fundamental transformations.

In the thirty years that the Montana State Fair existed, the state of Montana--only eleven years old at the turn of the century--experienced a number of dynamic changes. The creation and early growth of the fair occurred as Montana was still adjusting to the transition from territory to state. Politics bordered on the absurd, copper barons struggled for power and profit, and urban centers battled for the spoils of statehood, one of which was the Montana State Fair. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the Treasure State had enjoyed booms in gold, silver, copper, cattle, and sheep, but it lacked an internal industry capable of providing economic stability and a foundation for future growth. Agriculture increasingly appeared to be the answer. By 1910, small-grain farming eclipsed mining and grazing as the state's leading industries, the result of a homestead boom of magnificent proportions. In less than a decade, the settlement frenzy more than doubled the state's population and filled the once sparsely settled eastern counties. The homestead boom took place amid transformations wrought by industrialization, consumerism, and progressivism. Adding to the maelstrom were the impact of World War I, the subsequent collapse of the homestead boom, and the emergence of the Great Depression. Life in Montana during the early decades of the twentieth century was anything but static or predictable.

The Montana State Fair opened its gates annually despite all these changes, but it was not immune to them. As Wayne Caldwell Neely wisely concluded, "it is evident that fairs are the creation of the society underlying them, and that they are established, shaped

and sometimes abolished in response to the processes that change that society."<sup>20</sup> Initially utilized to showcase Montana's myriad of natural resources--minerals, timber, ranching, and agriculture--the fair soon emphasized developing the state's farming potential. It served as a clearinghouse for products that were exhibited at world's fairs, at eastern land shows, on traveling railroad exhibits, and at other miscellaneous venues. In addition to advertising the state, the fair introduced visitors to the latest innovations in agricultural equipment, household appliances, and consumer products. Such displays, organizers hoped, would shape the values of communities the fair helped to populate. When the homestead boom subsided in the late teens and the state entered a period of economic decline, the exhibition also experienced trying times. World War I temporarily redirected the mission of the state fair, while the post-war decade brought financial reductions and evaporating patronage. Helena business interests, which had long profited by utilizing the fair to cash in on Montana's newest resource--a consumer market--tried to save the event. But the fair, already weakened by the state's fiscal problems in the 1920s, could not overcome the damaging effects of the emerging national depression.

Organizers and supporters of the state fair continually restructured the event to accommodate immediate conditions; thus, an analysis of the fair sheds light on the concerns and intentions of Montana's state builders. Among other things, a study of the Montana State Fair exposes the unbridled optimism shared by the state's economic, political, and cultural barons. These turn-of-the-century boosters foresaw great things in the future and the fair reflected their enthusiasm. In fact, they utilized the event to publicize their vision of Montana's future and to provide an ocular demonstration of the rate of progress. It took years of droughts, grasshopper infestations, post-war price

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<sup>20</sup>Neely, 16.

reductions, and severe economic conditions to dampen the people's spirits. Eventually doubt did set in, and Montanans' future-oriented gaze was redirected to the halcyon days of the past. Perhaps nowhere was this shift in attitudes more evident than at the Montana State Fair, which in 1925 adopted the revealing motto "A Fair Like We Used To Have."<sup>21</sup>

Although the exposition was an institution designed, boosted, and financed by elites for the express purpose of promoting and directing the state's development, it depended upon the patronage and support of ordinary citizens, and therefore included elements of popular appeal. The annual event included the educational, social, and recreational components traditionally associated with fairs. It is important to realize, however, that the lines separating these elements were seldom as distinct as many scholars have suggested and each aspect usually reinforced the primary message of the fair--modernization. People socialized as they milled among promotional displays, educational exhibits often provided entertainment, and thrilling extravaganzas frequently taught a lesson or two. Accordingly, many events might easily fall within more than one category. Auto races, for instance, were social gatherings, entertainment, and previews of the latest in four-wheeled technology. Nevertheless, the fair was a multifaceted event with broad popular appeal.

A promotional device, an educational forum, a social event, and an amusement center--the Montana State Fair was all these things and more. It genuinely offered something for almost everyone. A trip to fair provided visitors with an opportunity to meet with others and offered them a chance to earn prestige and monetary awards by entering crops, crafts, food products, or babies in contests. Men, women, and children were all encouraged to attend. While on the grounds they might listen to a distinguished

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<sup>21</sup>*Twenty-Third Annual Montana State Fair*, premium list, 1925, cover.

speaker, witness a thrilling aerial exhibition, wager on assorted equestrian events, or enjoy the excitement of the midway. The event entailed much more than wild rides, side shows, and a day at the races, however; it was also a trip to the city, educational lectures, model kitchens, eye catching displays, and barking vendors. Perhaps most important, the fair served as a temporary vacation from the toils of everyday life; it was an experience to be savored--a time to celebrate the past, enjoy the present, or dream about the future. Diverse offerings attracted tens of thousands of ordinary citizens, like the fictional Farmers, to Helena each fall.

Published more than a decade before Phil Stong offered the world his fictional depiction of the Iowa State Fair, the story of the Farmers' 1918 trip to the Montana State Fair gave readers a much richer depiction of the role of fairs in twentieth-century American society. Like the Frakes, the Farmers met old friends, enjoyed amusement rides, and even won a few awards. Yet, the Farmers witnessed much more. The men previewed "tractors of every description . . . power plows, threshers and other heavy machinery," received instructions from representatives of the various companies, and returned home with "a generous supply of descriptive machinery literature."<sup>22</sup> While the men learned about the advantages of modern farm equipment, the women stopped by the Baby Conference where they "learned all about the scientific care of babies."<sup>23</sup> Later that afternoon, the family united to tour the main agricultural hall's "great rooms filled with remarkable displays of grains, vegetables, grasses, flax and corn with walls and ceilings decorated most artistically."<sup>24</sup> They capped the day off by watching the "Call to Colors," an extravaganza that launched "a tidal-wave of patriotic fervor that swept the grandstand

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<sup>22</sup>Paulson, 2.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 4.

crowd off its feet."<sup>25</sup> Upon returning home, even Mrs. Farmer, who had grudgingly attended the event, expressed pleasure in having gone. In fact, "she was brimful of good nature and felt fifteen years younger than her years. She had been to the Montana State Fair."<sup>26</sup>

The following chapters analyze the Montana State Fair between 1903, its inaugural season, and 1917, the last season before the Great War for Civilization altered the institution's mission. Chapter Two explores the origins of the event, calling attention to early agricultural fairs in Montana then emphasizing the influence of the state's participation in several nineteenth-century world's fairs. The growth of the fair and its utilization by boosters as a promotional vehicle is discussed in Chapter Three. Secondly, this chapter sheds light on the improvement of the grounds and the rising popularity of the event. Chapter Four concentrates on the role of the fair as an educational institution designed to steer the course of Montana's growth. Particular attention is given to the manner in which the event served to encourage Montanans to embrace of the emerging social and economic order of an incorporated America. The conclusion, Chapter Five, discusses the declining influence and eventual death of the state fair. In sum, this thesis argues that for a decade and a half the Montana State Fair existed as a central state institution, one that fostered the development of state's natural resources and familiarized Montanans with the mass of inventions and ideas profoundly altering American society at the turn of the century. In the process, it challenges popular images of so-called agricultural fairs and illuminates a side of these events not heretofore unveiled by scholars.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 8.

## CHAPTER 2

## A STATE FAIR?

On October 5, 1903, Frank L. Benepe, President of the Montana State Fair, ascended a platform on the outskirts of Helena, Montana, extended salutations, then introduced the guest of honor, Governor Joseph K. Toole. After welcoming the ten thousand people who had gathered, the governor spoke optimistically about the Treasure State's future and formally opened the first Montana State Fair, thus launching the maiden season of an event that would serve the state for the next three decades.<sup>1</sup> This was not Montanans first experience with fairs, however; almost as soon as Euro-American settlers arrived in the region they began to coordinate such gatherings. More important, in 1884, while still a territory, Montana began a tradition of sending exhibits to world's fairs held in the United States, a practice it continued well into the twentieth century. These international expositions afforded unmatched opportunities to promote Montana's abundant natural resources in an attempt to attract the settlers and capital necessary to spur the development of the state. Politicians, businessmen, railroad executives, and others interested in the development of the state embraced these events as an advertising medium capable of expediting the exploitation of Montana's natural resources. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, visitors to world's fairs could see for themselves

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<sup>1</sup>"Montana's First State Fair Opened Yesterday," *The Helena Independent*, 5 October 1903, 4.

the Treasure State's mineral wealth. But, as Montana's agrarian base grew, displays at major expositions shifted toward extolling the state's agricultural possibilities. In addition to publicity, exhibitions served to ameliorate internal discord by presenting a vision of harmony and mutual purpose for Montanans as they navigated the precarious course from territory to state, and implemented an economic transition from mining to agriculture.

The foundation of permanent Euro-American settlement in Montana was laid in the early 1860s, built upon "a golden cornerstone."<sup>2</sup> A series of rich placer strikes at colorfully named locales like Grasshopper Creek, Alder Gulch, Last Chance Gulch, and Confederate Gulch attracted swarms of fortune seekers. Mining camps, some of them quite substantial, sprang to life almost overnight. Although most of these instant centers of population proved ephemeral, Virginia City, Helena, Butte, and a few others eventually reached a measure of stability, providing markets for agricultural goods. In response, many newcomers abandoned the gold fields, swapped pick for plow, and began to farm the region's fertile valleys, where they established communities supported by tillage rather than mining. Montana's first agricultural fairs materialized in these agrarian centers.

Several of the first agricultural communities in Montana appeared in the Gallatin Valley, and it was there that many of the earliest documented fairs took place. Gallatin City, situated near the headwaters of the Missouri River, reportedly organized a fair as early as 1866.<sup>3</sup> By 1872, the township had procured land "conveniently located near the city, and enclosed in a neat substantial fence" to serve as a permanent fairgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995): 64.

<sup>3</sup>Francis L. Niven, "The History of Fairs in Gallatin County," unpublished manuscript, c. 1974, 7, in Gallatin County Pioneer Museum and Historical Society, Bozeman, MT.

<sup>4</sup>*Headwaters Heritage History*, Diamond Jubilee ed. (Three Forks Area Historical Society, c. 1983): 44.

Financed by the recently formed Eastern Montana Agricultural, Mineral and Mechanical Association, the 1872 event featured horse racing and awarded prizes for an assortment of agricultural products, livestock, homemade goods, fine arts, and women's equestrian competitions.<sup>5</sup> Gallatin City hosted successful events for the next two years. A reporter described the 1873 assemblage: "Money is very plenty - gambling brisk, reminding me of the old times, saloons doing a good business, and the horse talk - my pencil fails - I cannot describe it."<sup>6</sup> The occasion apparently drew patronage from nearby Madison, Jefferson, and Meagher counties, but Gallatin City's fair was principally a local event, organized and financed by municipal leaders as an annual festival serving the immediate region.

Similar gatherings took place in other recently established towns. Like Gallatin City's, these fairs never became permanent fixtures in their respective communities. Held under the auspices of an assortment of short-lived associations, they opened intermittently under frequently changing names. Fair activity arose in other section of the territory as well. Citizens of Deer Lodge considered holding a fair in 1870, but eventually concluded that the idea "was premature as the territory is not populous enough or productive enough to sustain more than one good exhibition of stock and product."<sup>7</sup> Less hesitant, Missoula residents organized the Western Montana Agricultural, Mineral, and Mechanical Association in 1874 and held a fair the following year. Four years previous Helena businessmen had been infected by the fair bug.

In August 1870, seventy-nine individuals and partners, all but two of whom were listed as Helena residents, purchased shares of the Montana Agricultural, Mineral, and Mechanical Association. A list of shareholders reads like a virtual who's who of Helena's

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<sup>5</sup>Niven, 7.

<sup>6</sup>*Avant Courier* quoted in *Headwaters Heritage History*, 44.

<sup>7</sup>Niven, 7.

prestigious citizens; among others, it included the names of Anton M. Holter, Cornelius Hedges, A. J. Davidson, Francis Pope, and Conrad Kohrs.<sup>8</sup> The record of incorporation stated that "the purposes of this Association are to acquire by purchase or otherwise grounds enough to accommodate the Territorial Fairs and other purposes and for improving the same in the County of Lewis and Clark."<sup>9</sup> The inaugural season was highly anticipated. In particular, the "territorial society was all agog over plans for the first annual territorial party which was held at the International hotel" and attended by the governor and his wife.<sup>10</sup> The central feature of the fair, aside from the always popular equestrian events, consisted of various contests. Artistic entries vied for awards as high as five dollars, while superior examples of cheese, candles, kegs of lager beer, and other "home manufactures" earned their producers cash prizes and diplomas. And, befitting Helena's mining-based economy, the program included "competitions for the best miner's picks, hydraulic nozzles and other mining equipment."<sup>11</sup> This association, unlike those short-lived ones formed in Missoula and Gallatin City, sponsored annual events for more than two decades.

When its charter expired in 1891, the Montana Agricultural, Mineral, and Mechanical Association was reorganized and given a different name, the Montana State Fair. The restructured corporation immediately announced that "our 23rd Annual Exhibition Opens at Helena, August 13, [1892] and continues 7 days."<sup>12</sup> Largely the

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<sup>8</sup>Montana Secretary of State, Record Book A of Certificates of Incorporation, August 1870, Montana Historical Society (hereafter identified as MHS).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., August 1870.

<sup>10</sup>Margaret Walsh Nagle, "What Actually Would Happen at 'Fair Like We Used to Have' Is Revealed in Early Journal," newspaper clipping, MHS vertical files.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, n.p.

<sup>12</sup>*The Montana State Fair: Articles and By-Laws*, n.d., n.p., MHS. Suggests that a fair was held as early as 1869, a year earlier than the 1870 incorporation of the Montana Agricultural, Mineral, and Mechanical Association.

same stockholders who had financed the first association, bought the \$4,000 worth of shares of the Montana State Fair at twenty-five dollars each. Montana's recent attainment of statehood surfaced in the mission statement of the new corporation, which dedicated itself to "aiding in the development of the industrial and productive interests of the State of Montana by holding State Fairs."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the renamed corporation could not match the record of success achieved by its predecessor. A string of continuous openings that began in 1871 ended abruptly in 1896. Hampered by the economic panic that swept the nation in the 1890s, "the men who had always promoted the fair at Helena found themselves unable to do so."<sup>14</sup> The grounds sat abandoned, falling into disrepair, until they were acquired after the century turned to serve as the home of the first official Montana State Fair.

It would be convenient to identify these nineteenth-century events as the forerunners of the 1903 Montana State Fair, viewing it as simply a rebirth of the former fairs. Such an assumption, however, is most likely erroneous. To begin with, although "territorial" and "state" were adopted as distinctive surnames, early fairs held in Helena had no sanction from territorial or state governments and they do not appear to have been anything more than local events funded entirely by private funds and catering to communities in the immediate vicinity. When the Montana State Fair opened its doors almost a decade after the death of these fairs, it was financed and officially sanctioned by the state to represent all of Montana. This is not to imply that Helena's early fairs were not influential. They led to the development of the grounds that would eventually house the state fair, a factor that certainly contributed to the decision to locate it in Helena.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., n.p.

<sup>14</sup>"Montana State Fair Will Open Tomorrow," *Helena Independent*, 4 October 1903, 9.

Furthermore, the second corporation, the Montana State Fair, indicated a desire to have an annual exposition at home that, at least in name, represented the state, much like those exhibits that Montana had been sending to world's fairs.

Since territorial days Montanans had advanced their interests at international expositions held in the United States. Financed through legislative appropriations and private donations, substantial displays, highlighting the cornucopia of natural resources that awaited exploitation in Montana, were organized and sent to the New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition (1884), the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (1893), and the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha (1898). Perhaps more than anything else, Montana's involvement with these events prompted the creation of an officially authorized, publicly-financed state fair. Firsthand experience with the promotional potential and symbolic power afforded by these spectacles, and the enthusiasm that preparing for them generated among the citizens of the state no doubt prompted Montana's politicians and business interests to believe that they should launch an exposition of their own. When the Louisiana Purchase Exposition opened its gates in 1904, the Montana State Fair had already enjoyed a successful first year and was able to contribute to the exhibit sent to St. Louis, where the state continued a twenty-year pattern of involvement with world's fairs.

Montana's maiden venture at world's fairs took place in 1884, when territorial leaders paraded before the nation a sample of the natural resources that lay within the area they hoped to make a state. The opportunity presented itself as Montana's politicians mounted another campaign for statehood. Federal lawmakers had rejected Montana's first bid in 1866, but the territory was maturing rapidly in the 1880s and many leaders believed that the time had come for another try. According to several prominent Montana historians, "the arrival of the railroad and the booming quartz mining and livestock

industries combined to send Montana's population soaring and breathed new fervor into hopes for statehood."<sup>15</sup> Encouraged by a revitalized economy and rapidly growing population, the legislature convened a second constitutional convention and drafted a governing document that easily passed in the general election of November 1884.<sup>16</sup>

Now federal legislators merely needed to be convinced that it was in the nation's best interest for them to approve Montana's request for statehood. What better way to do this than to display the vast mineral deposits that were waiting to be extracted from the mountains of the Treasure State. Industrialization required capital, and Montana held vast quantities of gold and silver to contribute to the nation's coffer. Furthermore, expansion of mining activities would create jobs, increase railroad traffic, and open new consumer markets in the West. To make their case, territorial leaders put together an exhibit highlighting Montana's mineral wealth, loaded it aboard railroad cars, and dispatched it to the New Orleans World's Industrial and Cotton Exposition.

Completion of the transcontinental Northern Pacific Railroad figured prominently in both the renewed desire to advance from territorial status and the ability of Montana to participate at New Orleans. By providing cost-effective access to smelters and reduction works, and a reliable link to national and international markets, rail transportation accelerated the development of silver mining operations in the territory, making it the nation's second largest silver producer by 1883. Although the railroad rejuvenated the territory's depressed economy, politicians soon targeted the Northern Pacific as an untapped source of revenue. Taxing railroads, an option only available to states, presented an opportunity to substantially increase Montana's treasury.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>15</sup>Malone, 194.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 188, 194.

both the Northern Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads abetted those who sought to tax them by "forwarding to New Orleans, free of charge," Montana's exhibit for the Industrial and Cotton Exposition.<sup>18</sup> Railroad executives recognized that the development of industry in Montana equated to more raw materials for them to haul out and more passengers and goods for them to haul in. This was only the first of many times that railroads facilitated Montana's participation at expositions, institutions that they themselves would later utilize to promote the region.

Appointed "to represent the interests of the Territory of Montana," John S. Harris, a successful rancher from Deer Lodge, headed the commission tasked with designing an exhibit that would "direct the attention of the world to the material resources and advantages of this Empire Territory of the Northwest."<sup>19</sup> If Montana wanted to be considered for statehood it needed to shed its rather infamous territorial reputation, one fraught with images of ruthless vigilantes, rowdy cowboys, and renegade Indians, and to show that it had something of value to offer the nation. To this end, a promotional pamphlet distributed in New Orleans championed Montana's salubrious climate, natural beauty, and well-funded schools, and it assured readers, who undoubtedly remembered Custer's demise and Chief Joseph's capture, that "danger, or even annoyance, from Indians no longer exists."<sup>20</sup> The brochure also described the excellent conditions for raising livestock and the expansive forest reserves that awaited the logging industry. These, however, were presented as added perks that enhanced Montana's primary attribute.

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<sup>18</sup>*Montana at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition* (Helena: George E. Boos and Company, n.d.): 51.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 3, 4.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

Above all else, the exhibit sent to New Orleans advertised "the mineral wealth of the Territory, the most important factor of its prosperity."<sup>21</sup> The same handout that described climate and Indian conditions underscored that mining was "the chief industry of the Territory," and that therefore the "principal feature of the exhibit consists of ores and minerals." Twenty-eight pages of the pamphlet, almost half the total, detailed the outputs and production capacities of prominent mines and reduction works already in operation. Those who visited the exhibit or read the handout undoubtedly learned of Montana's mineral prowess. "Extensive and comprehensive," the display included "a large collection of rare and costly specimens from several noted mines of gold, silver, copper, lead, and iron."<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Tingle, wife of Dawson County's state representative, sent a letter to the *Helena Independent* expressing her satisfaction with Montana's efforts. "I was quite proud of Montana," she wrote, "the space is large, well filled and beautifully arranged, reflecting credit on the commissioners."<sup>23</sup>

As impressive as it may have been, the showing made by the Treasure State at New Orleans did not overcome political maneuverings in the nation's capital that prolonged the attainment of statehood. With the House and the presidency in the hands of Democrats and the Senate controlled Republicans, each party refused to admit states that might shift the balance of power in favor of their opponents. But, territorial politicians did not have to wait much longer. Democrats, who lost control of both houses of Congress and the Oval Office in 1888, withdrew their opposition and agreed to grant statehood to Washington and the Dakotas. Along with these Republican strongholds, largely Democratic Montana entered the union as the forty-first state and its leaders began the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>22</sup>"New Orleans Exhibit," *Helena Independent*, 22 January 1885, 2.

<sup>23</sup>"New Orleans Exposition," *Helena Independent*, 24 January 1885, 2.

task of charting the post-territory future, a process that had only begun when they financed an exhibit for the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.

Montana's participation at the Chicago exposition took place amid vastly different circumstances than its involvement with the New Orleans exposition. Economically, the state was suffering the effects of a collapsed silver market, a situation that precipitated a shift toward mining copper instead. Politics were in even worse shape. The notorious battles waged between the "copper kings," William Clark and Marcus Daly, coupled with the rise of an urban-based populist movement, severely disrupted internal politics and tarnished the young state's national reputation. On top of this, heated debates concerning the permanent location of the state capital eroded what little camaraderie existed among Montanans. The "war of the copper kings" and the "battle for the capital" left deep wounds that were slow to heal. The Chicago World's Fair presented an opportunity to restore Montana's national image and to assuage tensions building up within the state.

The Montana legislature facilitated participation in the exposition by quickly establishing the Montana Board of World's Fair Managers and appropriating \$100,000 to finance a display. Lawmakers appointed Missoula businessman Walter Bickford to head the board. In an effort to generate support for the activities of the commission, Bickford authored weekly articles and disseminated them to newspapers across the state.<sup>24</sup> Almost immediately, he initiated the process of collecting products to display in the ample space Montana had secured--seven thousand square feet in a state building of its own, three thousand in the Hall of Mines and Mining, three thousand in the Agricultural Building, and another one thousand in the Forestry Pavilion.<sup>25</sup> In addition to these venues, the

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<sup>24</sup>Robert Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 27.

<sup>25</sup>Dave Walter, "Montana's Silver Lady: Curvaceous Heroine of the Columbian Exposition," *Montana Magazine* 76 (March-April, 1986): 69.

resources of the state were "interestingly set forth by the Northern Pacific Railway in an exhibit made in two elegant cars . . . in the Transportation Building."<sup>26</sup> Once again the railroad cooperated in promoting the state at a world's fair. Supplementing Bickford's efforts, the Montana Board of Lady Managers, under the direction of Eliza Rickards, the governor's wife, collected an array of items to represent the state's women and children. Soon after initial preparations had been put in motion, word arrived concerning the magnitude of the scheduled exposition and the substantial amounts of money that other exhibitors were spending in preparation. In response, the board determined that their exhibit required something more; it needed a spectacular attraction that could lure visitors to Montana's displays.

Two Chicago entrepreneurs, Joseph O. Harvey and Frank D. Higbee, approached Bickford with a suggestion for the creation of a nine-foot, solid-silver statue of the mythical goddess, Justice, to serve as the centerpiece of Montana's exhibit in the Hall of Mines and Mining. Bickford applauded the concept and proceeded to hasten its realization. Richard Henry Park, an accomplished sculptor from New York, secured the right to execute the statue by contributing \$3,000 to the project. For giving a like amount, Ada Rehan, an internationally renowned actress, bought the opportunity to be the model for *Justice*. Although he was well aware that Rehan would pose for Park, Bickford craftily generated local publicity by suggesting that *Justice* was to be modeled after a Montana woman. Nationally, the prominence of the artist and the model provoked widespread interest. The cumulative effect of these activities was phenomenal. Historian Dave Walter noted that "statewide support swelled for all of Montana's displays, and state

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<sup>26</sup>*Montana: Exhibit at the World's Fair and a description of the various Resources of the State* (Butte: Butte Inter Mountain Print, 1893): 61.

pride coalesced around the issue of "The Silver Statue."<sup>27</sup> Exuding "immense strength and exquisite grace . . . with a superabundance of life and movement," *Justice*, with one foot on a globe, would balance gracefully upon the back of a Montana eagle.<sup>28</sup> Introduced in New Orleans, Montana's credentials as a mineral-laden interior colony were boasted in Chicago.

Although it cost nearly \$250,000, the magnificent depiction of Justice perched atop a plinth of gold served Montana well. Before it even had a physical form, *Justice* became an emblem of the Treasure State's greatness that inspired pride and unity among an increasingly agitated and divided state population. Once unveiled the statue had an even greater impact. Many Montanans considered it an example of the state's superiority not only in comparison to other states, but in relationship to the great civilizations of the past as well. For viewers who might not reach this conclusion on their own, promotional literature guided them toward a proper appreciation of *Justice*. One pamphlet distributed to Chicago fairgoers explained that Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians had excelled at statuary, "but the enduring marble and bronze were the best material employed. It has been left for Montana to offer the world a statue of Justice in the beautiful white metal that ribs her mountains and which has been classed as precious since history began."<sup>29</sup> In addition to locating Montana in civilization's hall of fame, *Justice* provided some much needed positive publicity that conveniently advanced the interests of the state. Amidst the industrial violence of the Gilded Age and vitriolic national debates concerning the silver issue, the sixteen-hundred-pound, sterling-silver statue, depicted without her traditional blindfold, artistically expounded the Treasure State's stance on bimetallism. Perhaps most

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>28</sup>"Rehan in Solid Silver," *Helena Independent*, 19 March 1893, 1.

<sup>29</sup>*Montana: Exhibit at the World's Fair . . . .*, 14.

important, the Grecian goddess attracted countless spectators to Montana's exhibit in the Hall of Mines and Mining.

*Justice* might have been the main draw, but it was not the whole show.

Commissioner Bickford and his associates had succeeded in organizing a first-rate, well-patronized exhibit. Pleased with the results of the venture, Bickford stated at the conclusion of the event that "we could not get the same amount of advertising for the State of Montana for a million dollars in cash."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, more than 170,000 promotional pamphlets were distributed by state representatives at the mining exhibit.<sup>31</sup> These handouts, like those distributed in New Orleans, concentrated on extolling Montana's mineral wealth; nevertheless, a brief description of agricultural conditions in the state reflected a growing interest in exploiting this resource as well. Those who read the literature learned that:

Great as are the mines of Montana . . . they are not to be compared in point of value and importance with the treasure of soil that lies hidden beneath the unturned sod of her magnificent agricultural area . . . . Happily for Montana her resources are diversified, and while she glories in the wealth of her mines, which promise a constantly increasing product for years to come, her chief and certain reliance for the future is Agriculture.<sup>32</sup>

Divergent from the message conveyed by *Justice*, this rhetoric suggested that Montanans had grown weary of the economic instability resulting from dependency upon a single resource and were ready to develop the state's other natural assets.

Any harmony, not to mention justice, fostered by Montana's participation in the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition was ephemeral. The metallic spokeswoman went on a national tour following her debut in Chicago and never found her way back to

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<sup>30</sup>*Helena Weekly Herald*, 5 June 1893, quoted in Walter, "Montana's Silver Lady," 72.

<sup>31</sup>Walter, "Montana's Silver Lady," 72.

<sup>32</sup>*Montana: Exhibit at the World's Fair . . . .*, 31.

Montana where the "copper kings" were gearing up for another round and the divisive capital question remained unresolved.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the White City experience left its mark on Montana. To begin with, it familiarized numerous Montanans with expositions and encouraged them to associate fairs with progress. Even the majority of Montanans, who did not venture to the exposition, were able to take part in the spectacle vicariously through assisting in the preparation of the exhibits or simply by monitoring the progress and discussing the merits of the "Silver Lady." State residents who actually journeyed to Chicago and witnessed the advancements of industrialization could assure neighbors at home that Montana was indeed headed in the proper direction by developing its resources in support of national progress. Lastly, the entire experience demonstrated to local elites the value expositions. Those who had paid attention recognized the utility of such spectacles for, at least temporarily, uniting the public and channeling their energies in a given direction. Apparently, William Clark and Marcus Daly took heed.

For more than two decades Clark and Daly had dedicated themselves to the task of undermining the other's ambitions. Regardless of the issue, these rivals invariably chose opposite sides--the location of the state capital was no exception. Daly thought that Anaconda should be the capital, while his nemesis championed Helena. In 1894, the two mining monarchs waged a pitched battle to resolve the issue. Despite spending an estimated \$2,500,000 dollars promoting his cause, Daly failed to bring the capital to Anaconda.<sup>34</sup> Clark, who spent at least \$400,000, came out on the winning side and consequently won the hearts of Helena's citizens. Needless to say, defeat only intensified

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<sup>33</sup>Dave Walter asserts that Harvey and Higbee toured the statue in the East and Midwest following the exhibition. In 1896 a dispute erupted between the the exhibitors and the owners, Samuel Hauser and William Clark. Apparently the parties reached a compromise in 1903 that resulted in *Justice* being reduced to bullion at an Omaha Smelter.

<sup>34</sup>Malone, 214.

Daly's disdain for his adversary and prompted him to challenge vigorously Clark's persistent efforts to become one of Montana's United States senators. Given the antagonistic nature of their relationship, few were the times that Daly and Clark supported a common cause. The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898 was one of these instances.

Omaha hosted the 1898 world's fair, one that organizers fashioned to celebrate and sanction the federal government's imperialist policies--past and present, at home and abroad.<sup>35</sup> In particular, the exposition commemorated westward expansion and proclaimed that the time had arrived to take full advantage of the continent's "Inland Empire." Furthermore, supporters posited that expositions provided the means to that end. In the words of John Baldwin: "The exposition has become the instrument of civilization. Being a concomitant to empire, westward it takes its way--The Crystal Palace, the Centennial, the World's Fair, the Trans-Mississippi Exposition."<sup>36</sup> Omaha's exposition lacked the extravagance of Chicago's, but Montana, which had routinely offered itself to the nation as a resource-abundant internal colony, did not pass up the opportunity to once again showcase its assets.

The Montana Legislature appropriated \$15,000 to support an exhibit at the Omaha fair.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, very few records are available concerning the Treasure State's participation at this event; however, those that exist disclose that both "copper kings" actively supported Montana's exhibit.<sup>38</sup> Chaired by W. H. Sutherlin, the commission

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<sup>35</sup>See Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>36</sup>Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 105.

<sup>37</sup>"Five Mile Auto Race For Montana Record," *Helena Independent*, 5 October 1906, 1.

<sup>38</sup>According to Malone et al., Clark "first tasted public acclaim as Montana's centennial orator at the Philadelphia Exhibition in 1876," 212.

established to prepare for the event included both the Daly and Clark.<sup>39</sup> Historians can only imagine the dynamics of a board meeting at which these archenemies collaborated. In addition to leadership, Daly contributed fiscal support as well, matching the legislative appropriation. An official guidebook to the exposition acknowledged Daly's generosity, noting that largely because of him "this young state has not only taken 2,000 square feet in the Mines building, 1,000 square feet in the Agricultural building and a like area in the Liberal Arts building but has erected a cosy, comfortable home for its citizens."<sup>40</sup> With reports of the Montana Column's trek toward the Philippines dominating front-pages, the exhibit at Omaha failed to incite enthusiasm in Montana comparable to that generated by participation at the Chicago World's Fair. Nevertheless, the experience reemphasized to Montana's elites the multifarious potential of expositions, while further inculcating the notion that fairs not only aided progress, but that they also symbolized it.

Steps toward the creation of an officially sanctioned, publicly-financed state fair in Montana quickened after the Omaha Exposition. In fact, at the first legislative session following the 1898 fair Montana lawmakers passed a bill "granting to the Montana State Fair Association, A Corporation, A Franchise for holding and conducting the annual State Fair of the State of Montana for A period of ten years at or near the city of Butte."<sup>41</sup> The bill included no appropriation and stipulated that "if said association shall fail to hold said fair two years in succession, the franchise hereby granted shall be forfeited."<sup>42</sup> During

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<sup>39</sup>*Official Guide Book to the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition* (Omaha: Megeath Stationary, n.d.): 167, in Smithsonian Institution Libraries. *The Books of the Fairs; A Microfilm Collection Drawn From the Holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries* (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1989): reel 129, no. 1.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>41</sup>Montana. *Laws, Resolutions and Memorials of the State of Montana passed at the Sixth Regular Session of the Legislative Assembly*. (Helena, MT: State Publishing Company, Legislative Stationers, Printers and Binders, 1899): 108.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

that same year, 1899, William Clark, still seeking a seat in the U. S. Senate, purchased a 21-acre pleasure spot on the outskirts of Butte with the intention of turning it into a modern amusement park dedicated to the area's children.

Over the next two years Clark funneled more than \$100,000 into Columbia Gardens.<sup>43</sup> Lavishly landscaped grounds surrounding a lake provided a relaxing retreat from the urban confines of Butte, while a dance hall, children's playground, and other attractions introduced working-class residents to the type of mass entertainment made famous by the Midway Plaisance at the Chicago World's Fair and New York's Coney Island.<sup>44</sup> Financed initially by Clark and later by the Anaconda Company, Columbia Gardens was continually improved and maintained for the enjoyment of locals for the next six decades. Scholars, like many of Clark's contemporaries, have often asserted that this apparent gesture of goodwill was in reality an attempt to induce Butte voters to support Clark in his quest for a Senate seat. Perhaps so, but he continued his philanthropy long after he finally went to Washington. Local residents, who quickly embraced it as a symbol of community pride, did not seem to care why the park existed. While the construction of Columbia Gardens apparently diminished Butte's desire to host the state fair, as authorized by the legislature in 1899, it undoubtedly caught the attention of other communities that would have like to have a similar attraction.

The arrival of the twentieth century brought with it an end to the feud between Clark and Daly. Marcus Daly died in 1900 and his rival, who could finally introduce himself as Senator Clark, vanished to the nation's capital. Realigned mining interests

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<sup>43</sup>Dave Walter, "Beautiful Columbian Gardens," *Montana Magazine* 73 (September-October 1985): 22-27.

<sup>44</sup>For an excellent analysis on the role of commercial amusements at the turn of the century see John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

continued the struggle for control of the copper industry, but their maneuverings no longer permeated every aspect of life in Montana. Meanwhile another breed of capitalists emerged as powerful political, economic, and cultural barons.

Seeking to guide Montana in a different direction during the twentieth century, this new group of power brokers rose to prominence by boosting the state's agricultural attributes. Reaffirming his title of "empire builder," James J. Hill completed the Great Northern Railroad, providing reliable access to the vast open plains that constituted the High Line of Northern Montana. At the same time, Paris Gibson promoted a new townsite known as Great Falls and Ignatius O'Donnell advanced the cause of Billings. These men and others, like Governor Joseph K. Toole and U. S. Senator Thomas H. Carter, gazed beyond the hypnotizing allure of precious metals and recognized the profits to be made by exploiting Montana's other resources. Furthermore, they believed that agricultural development would establish the basis for a stable and prosperous future. This new group of visionaries initially advocated irrigated farming as the key to Montana's future prosperity and they rejoiced when Congress passed the Newland's Reclamation Act in 1902. All that was needed, they believed, was an effective method for advertising the agricultural possibilities that lay within the borders of their state. Unsurprisingly, they turned to fairs, organizing an exhibit for St. Louis' 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition and simultaneously creating the Montana State Fair.

Exactly who conceived the idea to fund an official state fair was a point of contention at the beginning of the century and there is no clear answer as it draws to a close, but the timing of the action is obvious. The excitement generated by the announcement that a world's fair would be held in St. Louis played an important role in the decision to establish a permanent fair at home. In 1903 a bill appropriating \$42,000 for the support of an exhibit at the St. Louis Exposition appeared before the Eighth

Legislative Assembly. During the same session, Senator William M. Biggs and Representative Charles H. Bray, both of Lewis and Clark County, submitted bills in their respective forums for the establishment of the Montana State Fair. After considerable debate both the state fair and the world's fair bills passed. Ironically, however, legislation authorizing and financing an exhibit for the Omaha exposition failed to win support in the regular session.

Approval for an exhibit at the St. Louis exposition required a special session of the 1903 legislature, called specifically for that purpose. The origins of this bill actually dated back to 1901. Many people in the state had assumed that the legislative session held that year would produce funding for an exhibit at the exposition, which was initially scheduled to open in the spring of 1903. When lawmakers made no appropriation, Governor Toole, "in response to the urgent request of the Press of the State and the personal solicitation of many citizens," established an honorary commission to begin soliciting private donations and otherwise planning for the event.<sup>45</sup> However, the opening date for St. Louis's exposition was moved to 1904 and the commission took no action. At the next legislative session the governor personally addressed lawmakers and encouraged them to appropriate a total of \$35,000 to support exhibits at both the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and the Lewis and Clark Centennial to be held in 1905 at Portland, Oregon.

The legislature obliged by submitting a bill that encountered little resistance until the Senate amended it by naming a five person commission to head the project. Disputes concerning appointees broke out among Representatives and the House refused to concur. Unable to reach a compromise, the House continually rejected amended versions of the bill and failed to pass any by the final night of the legislative session. Once again the governor

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<sup>45</sup>"Montana at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana* 6 (1907): 122.

appointed an honorary commission, which immediately met and petitioned the governor to call an extraordinary session of the legislature to establish a formal commission and appropriate sufficient funds. Not surprisingly, Governor Toole complied with the request. Legislators soon met in an extraordinary session and quickly passed a bill establishing the Montana World's Fair Commission and appropriating \$60,000 to fund exhibits at both events--\$50,000 for St. Louis and \$10,000 for Portland.

The effort that concerned individuals put forth to ensure that Montana sent an exhibit to these events attests to the importance that many Montanans had come to attribute to expositions. Also telling is the fact that the Montana Historical Society documented the state's participation at both these events in its annual publications for the years of 1904 and 1907.<sup>46</sup> State historians considered these pivotal events in the history of Montana. Before Montana took part in either of these events, however, it held its first state fair. It was probably the energy unleashed by preparations for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition that precipitated Montana lawmakers' establishment of an annual exposition of their own, an action that reopened old social cleavages.

The clamor over the location of the state capital was only one of many squabbles that took place in Montana after it became a state. Similar contests erupted over the other spoils of statehood, as "each region and each major town in the new state vied for the state university, the agricultural college, the normal school, the mental hospital, the school for the deaf, and other institutions."<sup>47</sup> Most of these issues had been ironed out by 1900;

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<sup>46</sup>"Montana at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana* 5 (1904): 80-108; "Montana at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition" and "Montana at the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana* 6 (1907): 19-82, 88-101.

<sup>47</sup>Malone, 200.

however, the proposal to create a state fair reinvigorated the fighting spirit of several communities. An editorial in the *Helena Independent* observed that "judging from the articles which have appeared in the press of the state concerning this matter there appears to be a strong sentiment in favor of a state fair, but not unnaturally several different towns think they are best located for the holding of such an exhibition."<sup>48</sup> Helena and rapidly growing Great Falls fought most ardently for the prize at stake, while several other towns put forth lesser efforts. Waged within the halls of the capital and on the front pages of newspapers, the battle for the state fair frequently harkened back to the capital controversy.

Introduced by legislators serving Lewis and Clark County, both the House and the Senate bills identified Helena as the proper home for the state fair. The notion that Helena should automatically receive that right sparked the ire of many solons from other counties. Disgruntled lawmakers submitted numerous amendments in an effort to change the location of the fair. Missoula, Billings, Butte, Great Falls, and Bozeman were each proposed as alternative locations.<sup>49</sup> Attacking from another direction, Senator Fletcher Maddox of Madison County challenged the organizational structure outlined in the original bill and tried to amend it so that the board of directors consisted of the presidents of the Woolgrowers, Stockgrowers, Horticulture, and Breeders associations.<sup>50</sup> The nature of this amendment suggests that the fracas involved more than the mere location of the fair. On another level the struggle for the fair represented a concerted effort by nascent agricultural interests to wrest power away from the old order of elites.

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<sup>48</sup>Editorial, *Helena Independent*, 6 February 1903, 4.

<sup>49</sup>*Great Falls Tribune*, 17 February 1903, 1.

<sup>50</sup>*Helena Independent*, 5 March 1903, 8.

Furthermore, it demonstrates that the state fair was not simply an agricultural event, as the leaders of agricultural groups were not invited to participate in managing the institution.

Reports on the progress of the debates appeared daily in newspapers throughout the state. The *Helena Independent* and the *Great Falls Tribune* served as the voices for their respective communities. Each proclaimed the reasons why that community should or why some other location should not be selected as the home of the state fair. The *Tribune* credited Great Falls' businessmen with coming up with the idea for a fair and pointed out that the Electric City was the logical location for such an event. "This city," exclaimed the *Tribune*, "is the most central to the great farming districts of the state, [whereas] the location of the fair at Helena would have little to do with the agricultural development of the state."<sup>51</sup> As it became more likely that Helena would win the contest, attacks against that town intensified, often resurrecting memories of the clamor for the capital. "The Helena hog is much in evidence; and grunting away, in the front, as is the record of that city," editorialized the *Tribune*, adding that "because the people of the state were good enough to Helena to locate the state capital at that city, the old town appears to think it has the call upon every other state institution which may now be available."<sup>52</sup> When it became obvious that Great Falls had lost the contest, the *Tribune's* editors committed themselves to trying to ensure that Helena would lose as well. At one point the paper remarked that "Great Falls has nothing whatever to say against the pretensions of Bozeman for this fair. As compared with Helena, Bozeman has vastly superior claims."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>*Great Falls Tribune*, 12 February 1903, 8; Editorial, *Great Falls Tribune*, 13 February 1903, 2.

<sup>52</sup>Editorial, *Great Falls Tribune*, 19 February 1903, 2; Editorial, *Great Falls Tribune*, 21 February 1903, 2.

<sup>53</sup>Editorial, *Great Falls Tribune*, 13 February 1903, 2.

Bozeman was considered an appropriate location because, like Great Falls, it served agrarian communities.

Capital City journalists rose to the challenge and faithfully defended their town as a wise choice. Helena's *Independent* rebutted charges levied by other papers and pointed out why that city should be selected. One issue instructed that "owing to the splendid railroad facilities offered by this town, it is the best place that an institution of the kind could be established."<sup>54</sup> Another advantage of holding the fair in Helena, supporters argued, was that the city already had grounds suitable for the exposition. Throughout the rhetorical duel, the *Independent* maintained confidence that Helena would secure the right to host the fair. When the state fair bill was finally put to a vote, with Helena named as the location, it passed forty-four to two in the House and seventeen to four in the Senate.<sup>55</sup>

The creation of the Montana State Fair marked the culmination of two decades of experience with exhibiting at world's fairs. Montana's political, business, and cultural leaders had learned to appreciate both the symbolic and promotional power inherent in these events, while widespread community involvement in amassing and funding displays demonstrated the willingness of ordinary citizens to contribute to the boosting of the state. In addition, the railroad corporations, which would play a paramount role in fostering the development of Montana during the twentieth century, had shown their respect for the advertising potential of expositions. State leaders, Montana citizens, and railroad interests--each of these groups would soon contribute to making the Montana State Fair

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<sup>54</sup>Editorial, *Helena Independent*, 3 March 1903, 4.

<sup>55</sup>Montana. *House Journal of the Eighth Regular and Extraordinary Sessions of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Montana* (Helena: State Publishing Company, Legislative Stationers, Printers and Binders, 1903): 231; *Senate Journal . . . Montana*, 196.

an extraordinary promotional vehicle. If the fair was established, at least in part, to help unify Montana, it got off to a rocky start; nevertheless, upon learning that its city would host the exposition, the *Helena Independent* assured readers that "Montana can rest assured that it will have a state fair that will be a credit to the commonwealth."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 4.

## CHAPTER 3

## THE BIG SHOW WINDOW OF THE WEST

The bill passed by Montana's Eighth Legislative Assembly set forth "that for the promotion of the public welfare there shall be and is hereby established a State Institution, to be designated and Known as the 'Montana State Fair.'"<sup>1</sup> In declaring the fair a state institution, legislators envisioned that it would serve all Montana's divergent interests. The bill declared that the fair was designed to "disseminate knowledge concerning, and to encourage the growth and prosperity of all agriculture, stock grazing, horticulture, mining, mechanical, artistic and industrial pursuits."<sup>2</sup> The management of the event rested with a board of directors comprised of one resident from each county, who were to select from their numbers a president, secretary, treasurer, and any other necessary officers. Aside from the secretary and treasurer, who were to receive a small salary, members of the board would volunteer their efforts. Thus equipped with legislative authority and a paltry appropriation of \$10,000 for the first two years, the board organized Montana's first state fair. From modest beginnings, the state fair expanded rapidly in size, popularity, and promotional significance. Initially representing each of Montana's varied industries, as tasked by law, the focus of the fair soon narrowed to promoting agricultural development.

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<sup>1</sup>Montana. *Laws, Resolutions and Memorials of the State of Montana passed at the Eighth Regular Session of the Legislative Assembly* (Helena, MT: State Publishing Company, Legislative Stationers, Printers and Binders, 1903): 173.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 173.

It emerged as one of Montana's premier advertising mediums, annually showcasing the state's agriculture prowess in an effort to attract investment capital and settlers. The fair served as a clearing house for products exhibited at world's fairs, at eastern lands shows, on traveling railroad exhibits, and at other venues. And, like those exhibits sent outside the state, the institution served as a symbol of progress around which state residents could rally. Nicknamed "The Big Show Window of the West," the Montana State Fair functioned as the central component of an extensive promotional campaign that expedited the development of the state's agriculture resources and helped to usher in a new era in the history of Montana.<sup>3</sup> Before the fair could accomplish any of these things, however, the board had to provide a suitable home and secure popular support.

The community of Helena, which clearly stood to benefit from hosting the fair, did not receive the privilege unconditionally. In return for being named the host community, Helena was required to arrange for the donation of at least eighty acres of land, located within three and one-half miles of the city, to serve as the State Fair Grounds. Thanks to the efforts of the defunct Montana Agricultural, Mineral, and Mechanical Association, members of the board knew exactly where they could acquire a suitable tract of land. In fact, this had been one of Helena's principal lobbying points. To fulfill the obligation, a group of prominent citizens "secured the site previously used by the Montana Fair Association" from wealthy horse breeder Charles D. Hard for "a reasonable price" and subsequently transferred the title to the state.<sup>4</sup> These grounds were to be maintained by

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<sup>3</sup>1918 Letterhead, Montana State Fair Association, vertical files, Montana Historical Society (cited hereafter as MHS). The vertical files at the Montana Historical Society contain miscellaneous material concerning both the Montana State Fair and Montana's participation in world's fairs, in particular the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.

<sup>4</sup>"Montana State Fair Will Open Tomorrow," *Helena Independent*, 4 October 1903, 9. Charles Hard had previously donated land for Helena's Montana University.









































































































































