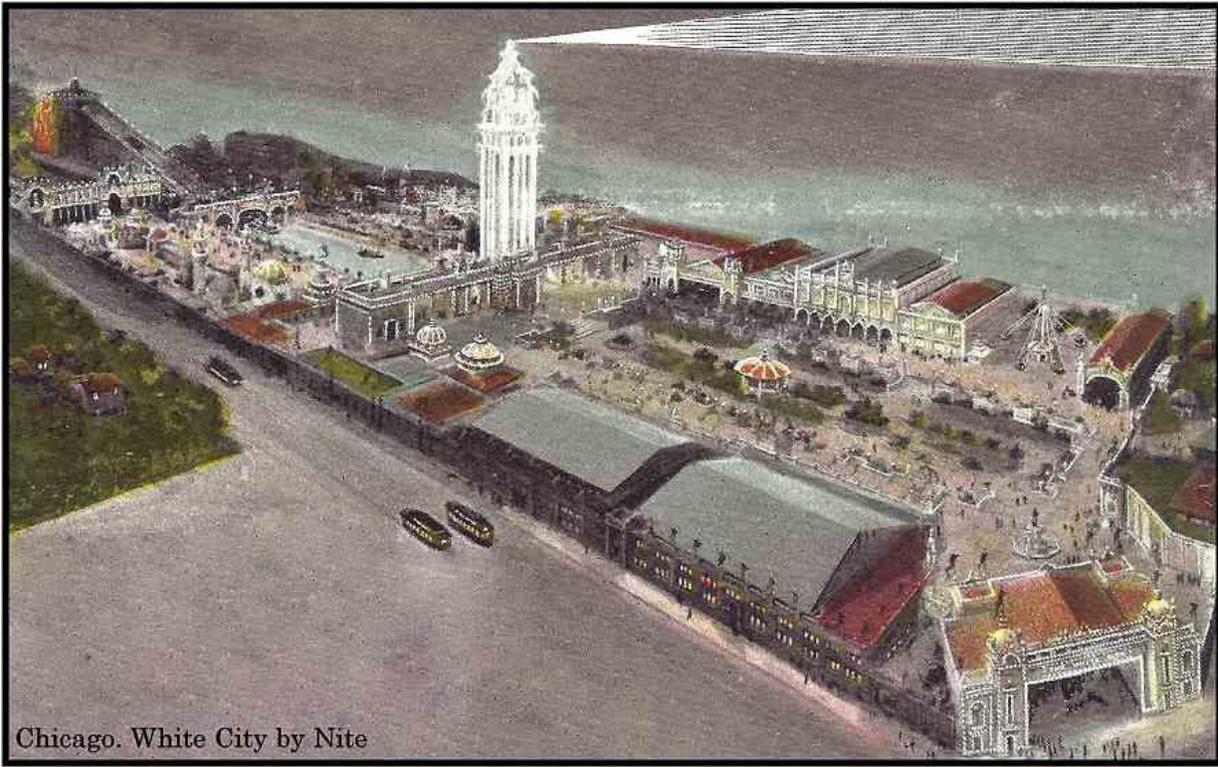




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June 2014

AMUSEMENT PARKS IN AMERICA



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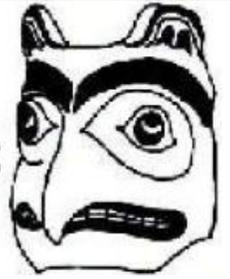


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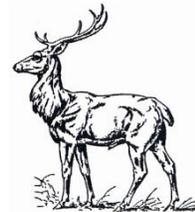
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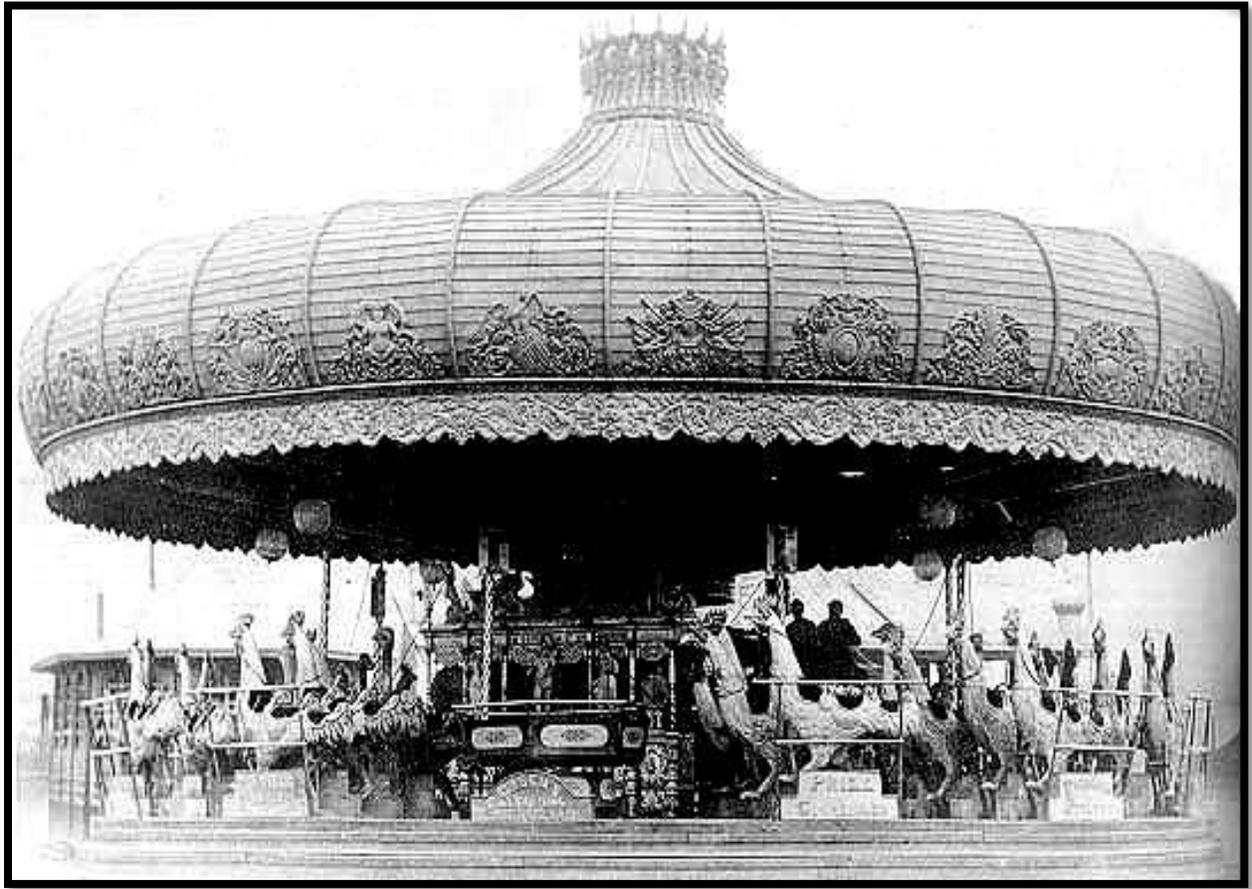
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AMUSEMENT PARKS IN AMERICA



Once upon a time, summer was a time for sea bathing, playing croquet, sailing and walking. Life didn't have the hectic pace that keeps us distracted today. Thousands of people would flock to the beaches in the summers and especially on the weekends. Many people would even seek out mineral springs, looking for medicinal benefits. Swimming was much more popular in those days. The average home didn't have running water, so baths were usually taken out of doors or on a trip to town.

Coney Island became an amusement resort, as did many other towns along the ocean shore. It is considered to be the birthplace of the American amusement resort. Several luxury hotels were built there in the 1870's and a ten-mile railroad was extended there from the city. Coney Island was described as "heaven at the end of a subway ride". They also called it the "Nickel Empire." Every ride cost 5 cents and so did a hot dog or a pop.

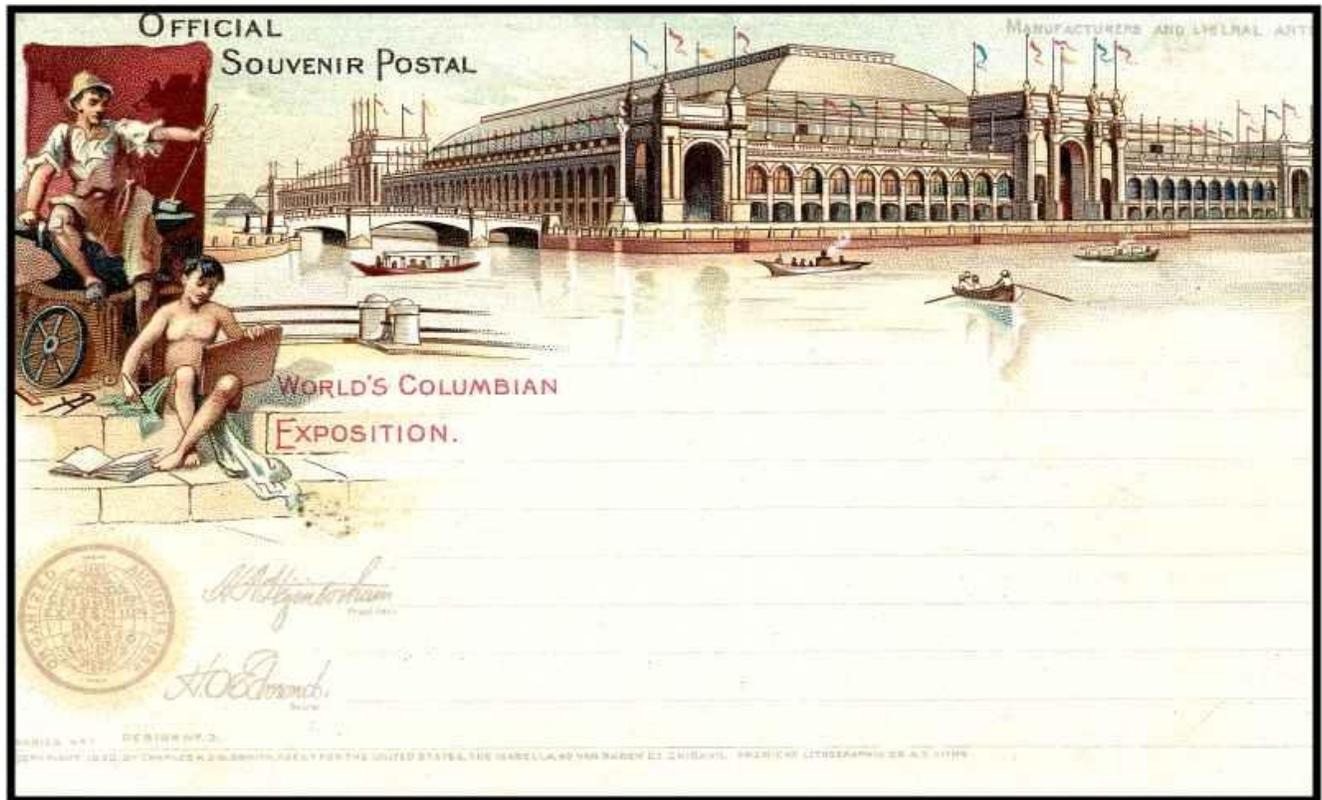


Carry-Us-All with wooden roosters carved by Charles Loof in the 1870's.

The famed artisan Charles Looff came to Coney Island from Europe in the 1870's and he carved wooden animals that were attached to a circular floor that turned in circles. It opened in 1875 and it was known as a "Carry-Us-All" or carousel. Lamarcus Thompson built the world's first roller coaster, the Switchback Railroad, in 1884 at Coney Island.

Most of the early amusement resorts sprang up near population centers like Coney Island in New York and Ocean Beach near the western edge of San Francisco. Nearly every major city in America had at least one amusement park in the early years of the 20th century.

One of the earliest parks, Chicago's White City, grew out of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. White City was the common name for dozens of amusement parks in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Inspired by the White City and Midway Plaisance sections of the World's Columbian Exposition, the parks started gaining in popularity in the last few years of the 19th century.



The enormously successful World's Columbian Exposition attracted 26 million visitors and featured a section that is now commonly considered the first amusement park: a midway, the mile-long Midway Plaisance, the first Ferris wheel constructed by George Ferris, Thomas Rankin's Snow and Ice Railway, a forerunner of the modern roller coaster, which was later moved to Coney Island as well as lighting and attractions powered by alternating current. Sebastian Ziani de Ferranti had just completed the first power plant with AC power in London only the year before.

The Columbian Exposition also featured the debut of several foods that became popular in the United States: the hamburger, shredded wheat, Cracker Jack, Juicy Fruit chewing gum and pancakes made using Aunt Jemima pancake mix. The Zoopraxographical Hall was the first commercial theater. Ragtime music composed and performed by Scott Joplin exposed millions of people to a new form of music and it instantly became a staple for fairs and carnivals.

While the Midway Plaisance became the Exposition's main drawing card, it was not the primary purpose of the World's Fair in the eyes of its founders, who pictured it to be the beginning of a classical renaissance featuring electrically-lit white stucco buildings collectively known as White City occupying the main court.

While White City gave the park its visual identity, the throngs who attended the Columbian Exposition tended to collect at the Midway Plaisance and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which set up shop just outside the park grounds after the fair's founders rejected Buffalo Bill Cody's attempt to become an official Columbian Exposition exhibitor.

Chicago's Columbian Exposition was destined to be remembered primarily for two ironic visions, that of the crowds at the Midway Plaisance, with exhibitions of boxer John L. Sullivan and exotic dancer Little Egypt as well as its games and its rides, and the architecture of White City.

Paul Boyton's Water Chutes, featuring a shoot-the-chutes ride that wasn't present in the Columbian Exposition, was the first amusement ride to charge admission when it opened in 1894. Inspired by the immediate success of his Water Chutes with 500,000 people visiting in its first year of operation, Boyton moved and expanded his Water Chutes in 1896. In 1895, Boyton also opened Sea Lion Park, one of the earliest embodiments of an amusement park, at Coney Island with several rides, including a shoot-the-chutes, an old mill ride and a sea lion show.

An enterprising man named George Tilyou operated Coney Island's first Ferris wheel in 1894 at the Bowery, near the Iron Tower, which was built for the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and moved to Coney Island a year later. Tilyou built several other amusements that were scattered around Coney Island. In 1897, he consolidated all of his rides into one place by his Ferris wheel. Tilyou called it Steeplechase Park.



In the half decade after the end of the Columbian Exposition, the American concept of the amusement park was starting to take hold. White City amusement parks were making their appearance in Philadelphia in 1898 (it was also known as Chestnut Hill Park) and in Cleveland, Ohio in 1900. An explosion of nearly identical amusement parks soon followed. Parks were being erected at a frenetic pace.

A typical White City park featured a shoot-the-chutes and lagoon, a roller coaster (usually a figure eight or a mountain railway), a midway, a Ferris wheel, games, and a pavilion. Some White City parks featured miniature railroads. There were roughly 250 amusement rides operating in the United States in 1899; the number almost tripled to 700 by 1905; and more than doubled again to 1500 by 1919.

Railway companies, noticing the popularity of Midway Plaisance of the Columbian Exposition and the lack of railroad ridership on the weekends, constructed trolley parks as an effort to improve their bottom line. Power companies were starting to partner with railroad companies to create electric trolley companies and construct "Electric Parks."



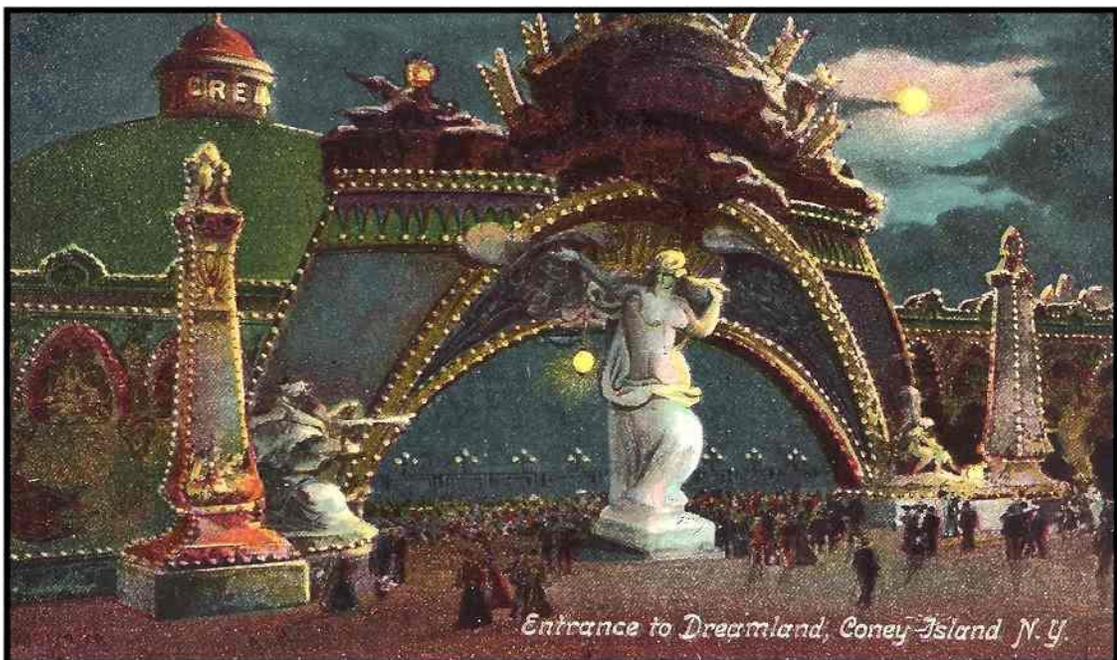
Night Scene - Electric Park - Kansas City, Missouri

In 1901, partners Frederick Thompson and Elmer Dundy, operated the very popular ride they called "A Trip to the Moon" at the Pan-American Exposition which opened in Buffalo, New York. They also opened a similar ride at Coney Island's Steeplechase Park.

Poor weather and bad economic conditions forced the closure of Sea Lion Park in 1902. Boyton sold Sea Lion Park to Thompson and Dundy who redesigned the park and reopened it as Luna Park in 1903.



A year later, in 1904, former New York State Senator William Reynolds opened Dreamland to record crowds and his theme was "Bigger and Better". Whatever Luna built, Dreamland had to build it bigger and better. Where Luna had 250,000 lights, Dreamland had a million. On opening day, 135,000 eager patrons visited the park.



Some long-established parks changed their names to White City upon the addition of amusement rides and a midway. Like their Luna Park and Electric Park cousins, many cities had two (or all three) of the Electric Park/Luna Park/White City triumvirate in their vicinity, with each trying to outdo the others with new attractions.

Roller coaster designer and entrepreneur Frederick Ingersoll provided many parks with figure eight roller coasters and scenic railways long before expanding the Luna Park chain in 1905. Over a quarter century period, the Ingersoll Construction Company, erected more than eleven roller coasters per year.

The competition was fierce, often driving the electric parks out of business due to increased costs from equipment upgrades, upkeep and increasing insurance costs. Boyton's Water Chutes went out of business in 1908 in the face of increasing competition. More than a few succumbed to fire. Only one park that was given the White City name continues to operate today: Denver's White City, which opened in 1908, is now known as Lakeside Amusement Park.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

When I began collecting postcards in earnest 30 years ago, I was fascinated by the amount of history that was contained on postcards of amusement parks. I never dreamed it would lead me to where it has taken me today. Watch for more installments to come.