

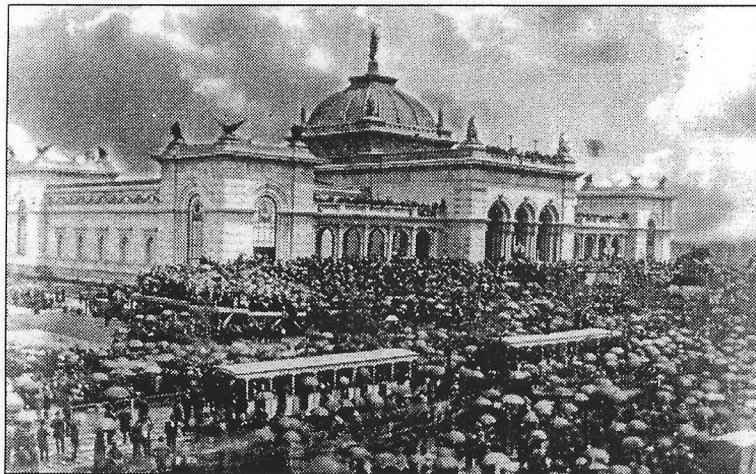
Victorian park is an idea whose time has come — again

Disney's recent announcement that they will build an indoor theme park on Market Street East was a major coup for Mayor Rendell. Together with the redevelopment of Independence Mall, DisneyQuest will offer Philadelphians an extraordinary mix of educational, cultural and entertainment opportunities, create more jobs and pump needed tourist dollars into the city's still vulnerable economy.

This unique combination bodes well for the east side of town. But what about the

west side? A Victorian-era theme park to complement the cultural sites there has the potential to keep those tourist dollars in the city for a weekend or more.

Consider how attractive such a park would be. Visitors could take a leisurely stroll along winding trails amid ornate sculpture gardens and outdoor exhibits of industrial-era machinery, stopping at a 19th-century cafe for a frozen drink, water ice, or specialty dessert to cool down on a hot sum-



The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia drew millions

mer afternoon. They might take a ride on a magnificent antique merry-go-round that spins to the melodies of a Victorian-era band. Fireworks would light up the evening, enhancing the thrill of a steamboat ride down the Schuylkill or a steam engine ride alongside it. Trolleys would transport visitors between the park and many of the other tourist attractions in close proximity, such as the Art Museum, Franklin Institute, the Fairmount Park mansions, Waterworks, and Eastern State Penitentiary.

Sound appealing? It was — over a century ago when Philadelphia

hosted the 1876 Centennial Exhibition.

The Centennial Exhibition was the city's first large-scale theme park. Planning was quick and efficient. Within two years, nearly 250 buildings were erected on the green fields of West Fairmount Park. Fifty foreign countries participated by sending industrial and artistic exhibits. When the exhibition opened on May 10, the eyes of the world were fixed on Philadelphia.

The exhibition was the most grandiose, inclusive and awe-inspiring ever held. So extensive was the showcase of industrial ma-

chinery that the great American bard Walt Whitman urged the Muse of Poetry to migrate from Greece to take her rightful place amid the new achievements of a vigorous industrialized America. There were gear-cutting machines, hydraulic pumps, towering steam engines and remarkable new farm implements. But the greatest wonder was the 56-ton Corliss Engine, which supplied power to 800 other machines at the fair by means of cogs, underground shafts and 1,400 horsepower of energy.

There were other major attractions as well, including Alexander Graham Bell's new telephone, George Westinghouse's air brake and Thomas Edison's quadruple telegraph, which transmitted several messages simultaneously. Such fascinating inventions inspired an extraordinary exchange of information between various nations and earned America the uncontested reputation of industrial giant.

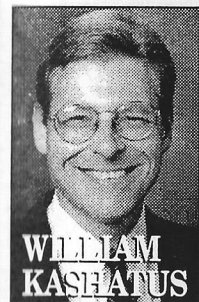
Beyond the mechanical marvels, crowds gaped at the exotic Japanese exhibit, the Italian statuary, the fountain of French cologne and the hand and torch of the Statue of Liberty. Displays and lectures on art and architecture from around the world, nightly torchlight parades and a grand regatta on the Schuylkill added to the splendor of the event.

For the very first time, Philadelphia attracted large numbers of foreign visitors. People from around the nation also came in droves. Railroads lowered their rates to promote the exhibition. The Reading Railroad even ran special trains to the fairground from the heart of the city. A most scenic route by steamboat from the east bank of the Schuylkill could be enjoyed for just a dollar. Admission to the exhibition was 50 cents. By its close on Nov. 10 the exhibition attracted 10,164,400 visitors. Many remained in the city for a week or more, serving as a boon to the local economy.

Today, reminders of that extraordinary Centennial Exhibition still exist. Memorial Hall (now a police station) and the Civil War statuary surrounding it can be found along the winding roads that weave their way through Fairmount Park. Some of the structures that housed the exhibits of other nations were relocated along the Main Line and serve as train stations.

The splendor of these sites still inspires a special awe. It suggests that a Victorian-era theme park that mixes history with entertainment is a popular — and lucrative — combination. ■

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