THE WORLD’S FAIR OF 1893
A Tribute to Agriculture and Advertising

Grade level: Middle school through high school
Estimated time: Four class periods
Specific topic: Identifying the connections between agriculture, advertising, and mail order catalogues during the 1890s as expressed at the World’s Fair of 1893.
Subtopic: World’s Fair of 1893

Teacher background information

World’s fairs and expositions held in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries celebrated the past while introducing visions of the future. The World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, was a “city of realized dreams,” proclaimed the Catholic World. Farmers were lured to the fair by the nostalgic tone devised by fair planners. Many of these farmers supported the populist movement “and they seemed to be saying ‘Whoa,’ and ‘Hold on,’ and ‘Let’s look at the old-time rural values’” (Hakim, 137).

By catering to a rural clientele, Chicago had become the mail-order center of the United States by the time of the fair. Patrons visited the fair in great numbers and, while in the city, visited the mail-order houses themselves. “During the Columbian Exposition, [Montgomery Ward and Company] was said to have been visited by 285,000 of its customers” (Emmet, vii).

Ferris wheel on the Midway of the World’s Columbian Exhibition
Key concepts
Regionalism, boosterism, nostalgia, populism, and advertising

Key questions
Why did farmers embrace the fair? How did objects displayed at the fair appeal to rural visitors? Why were mail-order catalogs popular in rural areas? How does advertising influence the decisions of consumers?

Goals of this lesson
Students will learn that the fair represented an “idealized world for middle-class urbanites” and “a model of America’s urban future” (Gilbert, 99) while celebrating the country’s agrarian past.

Objectives
1. Students will learn that while the fair celebrated advancement, it also reflected past glories associated with rural life.
2. Students will realize the importance of advertising, especially through the mail-order catalogs that were popular with rural residents at the time.
3. Students will interpret photographs of fair exhibits that pertain to agrarian life.

Materials
Master copies of all photographs and handouts are provided.

1. Photographs of the Canadian exhibit of “Mammoth Cheese” and the interior of the Agricultural Building (one per group)
2. Montgomery Ward’s catalog page from the 1890s (one per group)
3. Map of the fairgrounds (one per student)
4. Photo analysis worksheet (one per student)
5. Print advertisement analysis worksheet (one per group)
6. Magnifying glass (one per group, optional)
7. Each group will also need some basic art supplies, including poster board, scissors, glue sticks, old magazines, and markers, crayons, or colored pencils.

Procedures
1. Divide students into groups of four. Distribute copies of the photographs and the photo analysis worksheet to each group. Student groups should work together using the worksheet to interpret the Canadian exhibit image. How would the reactions of rural fair visitors differ from those of urban fair visitors to this exhibit?
2. Have groups share their findings with the entire class. Compare and contrast individual group findings and hold a class discussion about the photographs.
3. Ask students to study the photograph of the interior of the Agricultural Building. What new observations can students make about agriculture and the fair?
4. Distribute a copy of the Montgomery Ward’s catalog page to each group. Explain to students that prospective customers saw these advertisements in large printed catalogs for the purpose of purchasing products via mail order and that the images are from a reproduction Montgomery Ward catalog of the 1890s era. Discuss the reasons why mail-order catalogs were popular in rural areas. Ask the students to analyze the images for their effectiveness by completing the print advertisement analysis worksheet.
5. Instruct each group to present their findings to the entire class.
6. Distribute the map of the fairgrounds. Locate the Agricultural Building on the map. Then use the map with students to locate other fair buildings and exhibits that might have appealed to farmers from rural areas.
7. Ask students to develop an advertisement that attracts travelers from rural areas to visit the fair. Each group will design and present a poster, using the 1890s advertising techniques they previously analyzed. Their goal is to “lure” rural visitors, primarily farmers, to the fair. Posters must include both language and imagery. Students can either draw their own artwork or use magazine clippings.
Suggestions for student assessment:
Assess the group posters. Devise a rubric to score the advertisements based on three major categories. Share the rubric with students before they design their posters. For example:

Language: Is there a catchy slogan? Is language broken up visually or are there larger headings and smaller subheadings?

Artwork: Is the poster eye-catching? Do the images represent the fair? Is there an effective use of color?

Target audience: Does the poster make a specific appeal to rural visitors?

Additional resources


James Madison University: www.jmu.edu/madison/teach/burson/1890.htm

Extension activity
Historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered one of the important addresses at the fair. Turner titled his address, “The Significance of the American Frontier in American History.” While the address is dense, it is worthwhile to examine parts of it while studying the fair. Turner’s thesis states that the nostalgia craze then in vogue in rural America had a great deal to do with the contiguous borders of the United States being inhabited by the 1890 census. Why does Turner believe the frontier was significant to America and Americans? How did its “disappearance” affect fairgoers? Do Americans need a “frontier”? If so, what is our frontier today?

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts
State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science
State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

State Goal 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.

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Canadian exhibit at the World's Columbian Exhibition

Interior of the Agricultural Building at the World's Columbian Exhibition
PHOTO ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Each member of the group should select one quadrant of the photograph to study in detail. Use the back of the sheet to record the evidence found in your quadrant. Then unite the four quadrants to form one whole picture. Share your observations with each other. Finally fill in the table as a group. If available, use a magnifying glass to observe detail.

**Evidence**
List the physical details (or evidence) found in the photograph.

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

**Inference**
What conclusions can you draw from the evidence?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

**As a group complete the following:**

1. When your photo is whole again, make up a creative title and a caption.

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

2. Is the subject posed or captured spontaneously? Why is this important in understanding the image?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

3. What do you think were the photographer’s intentions? Did he or she have a certain agenda in taking this photograph? What might it have been?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

4. What points of view or beliefs are not included in the photo?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

5. What is the message of the photo? What ideas does it express?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
PRINT ADVERTISEMENT ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Examine the Montgomery Ward catalog page and answer the following questions:

1. What product interests you most on this catalog page? Why?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Use the same product you chose for question #1 to answer the following five questions:

2. Who is the intended audience(s) for the ad? Support your answer with evidence from the advertisement.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. What mood is created by the ad? What feelings does it stimulate?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

4. Analyze how language is used in the advertisement. Is it informational or does it provoke an emotional response? Is the language catchy, as in a slogan? Is it memorable? Support your answer with evidence from the advertisement.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

5. Does the advertisement convey the sense that the product it is promoting would improve your life in some way? If so, how?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

6. What information do you need to make sense of the advertisement? Does it allude to certain beliefs? Is it a reflection of a certain lifestyle? Does it assume information and knowledge on the part of the person looking at the advertisement?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

7. Now look at the entire catalog page. Quickly scan the other products for sale. Do the products on this page have anything in common? If yes, what? If you had to name this page (classify its contents), what would you call it?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

8. Do you think this catalog was useful to residents of rural areas? Why or why not?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Please give us your feedback! After reviewing and using this History Lab lesson, please send us your feedback. Your ideas and honest assessment will ensure that these lessons keep improving and will provide us with useful insight for future teacher fellows. To fill out this form online or discover additional History Lab activities, visit the educators section of the Chicago Historical Society’s website at www.chicagohistory.org.

Name:______________________________________________  E-mail:_________________________________

School:_____________________________________________  Grade you teach:________________________

Are you a CHS member? (circle one):               yes                      no

Name of unit you are evaluating (check one):

☐ America’s Documents of Freedom
☐ African American Life in the Nineteenth Century
☐ The Civil War: Up Close and Personal
☐ Chicago’s World’s Fairs
☐ Face-to-Face with the Great Depression
☐ America and Protest

Name of lesson you are evaluating:_____________________________________________________________

1. On a scale of one to five (with five being the best) rate this lesson in terms of the quality of the student learning experience it provides (circle one):

   5    4    3    2    1

2. What were the strengths of this lesson? _________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________

3. What aspects of this lesson needed additional fine-tuning?________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________

4. What advice, tips, or suggestions would you give to future users of this lesson? _________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________

5. Where does this lesson fit in your course of study (scope, sequence, unit)?_____________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________

6. If applicable, how did the use of primary sources impact student learning?_____________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your time. Please send the completed form to:
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