

## **CAN SAN DIEGO HOLD A LEGITIMATE INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION?**

Someone in San Diego is always advocating the holding of an international exposition. Despite this constant advocacy, the city has never held a genuine World's Fair. The Panama-California Exposition, held in Balboa Park in 1915, was not a world's fair, but a regional fair that highlighted the possibilities of the American Southwest. When the rival 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco closed, many countries sent their exhibits to San Diego because war in Europe made it difficult for them to send the exhibits home. San Diego's continuing fair was renamed the Panama-California International Exposition in 1916 because the new exhibits had broadened its scope. Japan was the only foreign country to put up a building at San Diego's first exposition, albeit the tea pavilion and garden were built by a trade association rather than by the Japanese government.

Organizers of the 1935-1936 California-Pacific International Exposition held in Balboa Park called it a world's fair, but foreign countries did not participate. Consular representatives of foreign nations or commercial agents representing foreign enterprises staffed exposition buildings, such as the House of Pacific Relations and Spanish Village.

Ex-mayor John L. Sehon, ex-Congressman W. Bowers, architect Irving J. Gill, and hotel men objected to putting the 1915 exposition in Balboa Park. Similarly, merchant and civic leader George W. Marston thought the center of the park was no place for an exposition, but he did not express his thoughts in public.

San Diego City and County, exhibitors, voters who approved bonds, and subscribers to Exposition stock financed the 1915-1916 exposition. San Diego City and County, the federal government, exhibitors, and subscribers to stock financed the 1935-1936 exposition. The 1915-1916 exposition showed a small net profit of \$38,000 and the 1935-1936, \$44,000. If physical improvements and corollary benefits to the City were considered, profits would be larger.

In 1917 boosters prolonged the fair for three months during which time it ran up bills and consumed most of its profit. The U.S. entry into World War I in April 1917 put the San Diego exposition to rest.

Some San Diegans grumbled about the closing of Balboa Park for the Expositions and about a suspected tie-up between gambling activities in Tijuana and at the Exposition.

Institutions in the park found Exposition restrictions to be burdensome. Zoo officials complained that the number of visitors had dropped due to competing attractions and the difficulties of access caused by the 1935-1936 exposition.

Expositions damaged Balboa Park by putting buildings on park land and by creating circulation patterns that did not allow for the differing needs of pedestrians and automobiles.

Promoters claim expositions bring prosperity to cities and leave behind usable buildings on empty public land.

World War II shattered Albert V. Mayrhofer's dream of an Exposition in Balboa Park in 1942. The Korean War nullified Guilford H. Whitney and Ewart W. Goodwin's 1949 proposal for an "American Way of Life" celebration in Balboa Park and Mission Bay in 1955.(1) Promoters bounced back in 1954 with a plan for a "Festival of the Seven Lively Arts" in Balboa Park in 1957.(2)

Speaking in opposition, Wayne Dailard, manager of San Diego's 1936 Exposition, claimed expositions had become obsolete.(3) He proposed a series of summer events similar to Santa Barbara's "Old Spanish Days."

Under Dailard's management, a private organization put on a 33-day "Fiesta del Pacifico" in 1956, with a 14-day pageant, "The California Story," in Balboa Stadium.(4) San Diego City and County gave \$50,000 each on condition the request would be one-time only.(5) The fiesta dragged on for three more summers. City Council representatives balked at donating funds and approving use of Balboa Park buildings for continuing fiesta activities.(6) Hotel owners complained the fiesta lowered attendance at San Diego's regular summer attractions.(7)

Claiming that San Diego could not obtain certification from the Bureau of International Expositions, a committee headed by Fred Stalder in 1964 advised against holding a World's Fair in San Diego in 1967-1968. Upon being told by Joseph B. Scholnick that a California World's Fair would cost \$7.5 million, would result in a \$5 million cash profit, and would leave structures worth \$20 million, the same committee, under Douglas Giddings, advocated holding a

World's Fair on Mission Bay's Fiesta Island as part of the 200th anniversary of the founding of Mission San Diego de Alcalá.(8)

Convinced San Diegans would not support the holding of a World's Fair, Tom Ham, Hugh A. Hall, and Charles Cordell, of the 200th Anniversary organization, said 1969 would be a year of celebration with July 16 as the big day. Old Town would become the focus of activities.(9) When the anniversary year ended, City and County taxpayers discovered the celebration had cost them more than a million dollars, and had closed with a deficit of \$300,000.(10) And there had been no noticeable increase in tourists.(11)

In 1972, Mayor Pete Wilson started "America's Finest City Week"—the city was San Diego.(12) Athletic and cultural events took place throughout the city. The observance was designed to please residents rather than visitors.

At the instigation of Mayor Maureen O'Connor, San Diego held an Arts Festival in 1989 featuring "The Treasures of the Soviet Union." Theatrical and musical events lasted for three weeks, beginning October 21. An exhibit of 27 Faberge eggs, housed in the San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park, stayed in the city until the end of the year. It was seen by 252,010 people.(13)

The Festival cost the city \$2.9 million from hotel-motel taxes. Another \$3 million came from private donations. The event earned the city \$2.8 million, the bulk of which was to be spent on children's programs. Since the returns did not match the expenditures, the deficit, according to normal accounting procedures, would be \$3.1 million, of which \$100,000 was incurred by the city alone.(14)

CIC Research, Inc., a market research firm, stated the festival had an overall economic impact on San Diego of \$15.49 million,(15) which figure was too small for Bruce Herring, director of the festival, who put the economic impact at \$46.7 million.(16) With so much impact, it is ironic that hotel occupancy rates and attendance at other tourist attractions were down during the festival from amounts in the previous year.(17)

Mayor O'Connor's hope that citizens would hold "Arts Festivals" in San Diego at 3-year intervals came to naught. Exposition fever rises and falls. It does not maintain a steady pitch. A city budget skewed in favor of cultural organizations and against occasional promotions does not help the situation. Whatever profit the Museum of Art in Balboa Park may have gained during the Soviet Union Festival was offset by the perpetuation of automobile parking on

landfill on the east side of the park destined by a 1989 Balboa Park Master Plan for recreational development.

At the moment, the dubious success of the 1989 Arts Festival has put a damper on plans for holding international expositions in San Diego. Incurrable San Diegans still revel in the prospect of a great exposition, but the trend is against them. Big expositions, such as New York City in 1964-1965, Montreal in 1967, New Orleans in 1984, and Vancouver in 1986, no longer make money. People today have television and automobiles and need not seek diversion at expositions. Theme parks offer many of the delights of expositions. Transportation companies no longer offer special rates to regional fairs.(18)

World's Fair enthusiast Alfred Heller made a distinction between large world's fairs with Bureau of International Exposition recognition and with a number of exhibit booths or pavilions put up by nations that are members of the Bureau and of smaller expositions, with or without Bureau recognition and with minimum to no foreign participation. Among the larger World's Fairs he cites Montreal, 1967, Osaka, 1979, Tsukuba, 1985, Seville, 1992, Taejon 1993, Lisbon, 1999, Hanover, 2001, Aichi, 2005, and Shanghai, 2010... (According to exhibit designer Leonard Levitan the Hanover Fair was intended to be a "filler in" during the slack summer months when the city's regular trade fairs were absent) Among the small fairs were Seattle, 1962, New York City, 1964-1965, Spokane, 1974, San Antonio, 1958, Knoxville, 1982, New Orleans, 1984, and Vancouver, 1986. Without exception fairs did not make a profit though in some cases left-overs such as buildings, landscaping and theme parks seemed to host cities to justify their expense. The largest attendance at a World's Fair was in Osaka, Japan in 1979 (more than sixty-four million). The bulk of those in attendance were Japanese.

Heller claimed that recent expositions have shown a shift in theme from Progress through Industry and Better Products to the ecological consequences of man's misuse of his environment as a result of this same "Progress." This theme while stressed in some exhibits is also undermined by corporate exhibitors who now pay for and staff many pavilions, including those of the United States. Beginning in 2002 the United States withdrew from the Bureau of International Expositions. As a result, U.S. participation in foreign World's Fairs has been controlled by whatever corporation agreed to pick up the bill. Neither does the United States government finance domestic expositions, as it did during and before Franklin D. Roosevelt's Administration; although it is likely—though Heller does not say so—that wily Congressmen would find a way around this restriction. Even if eager businessmen in San Diego should advocate holding a small fair (a World's Fair is out of the question!) it would

face hurdles including the lack of corporate sponsorship to defray the enormous expense and the lack of a tenable (preferably blighted) site on the city's waterfront of considerable size to allow for layout, approach, infrastructure and hotel accommodations.(19)

San Diego historian Richard Pourade questioned the holding of expositions in San Diego. He claimed the city did not have the cohesiveness that could be found in Santa Barbara or the sense of tradition that could be found in New Orleans.(20) Unlike San Diego in 1915-1916 and in 1935-1936 when a city of friends turned the fairs into cooperative day-by-day activities, San Diego, in the last four decades, has become a city of laid-back strangers. If everyone does not contribute his or her time, talent and money for a lengthy period, it is unlikely that a private or semi-private organization can make a success of another exposition anywhere in San Diego.

The Central Balboa Park Association (a consortium of institutions in Balboa Park) in collaboration with the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department held an "Expo 2000: Past, Present and Future" which ran from January 2000 to January 2001. Two days and three nights (December 31, 1999-January 2, 2000) were set aside for festivities. The first evening was a New Year's Eve celebration for adults who paid \$30 per person to get in (or \$50 to \$75 dollars per person for a buffet dinner with a dance or costume party and entitlement to participate in special events on the grounds). January 1 was a "Family Fun Day" and January 2 a "Community Day," with free entertainments reminiscent of those of San Diego's two prior Expositions in Balboa Park. Jubilee celebrations continued for the rest of the year, though to the regular visitor to Balboa Park scheduled events did not differ from those at other times. As an occasion for private parties that achieved recognition in the Society Pages of the *San Diego-Union Tribune*, it was successful but as a community event it lacked acceptance. The Exposition Spirit of years past had vanished. Whether or not the three nights and two days or the entire year qualified as an "Exposition" is best left for specialists in the linguistic art of semantics

To many, the holding of Super Bowls in San Diego, like those of 1988, 1998 and 2003 or another large-scale athletic spectacular has replaced the idea of holding repeat Expositions in San Diego. A plan was discussed in 2006 to hold an International Olympics in San Diego/Tijuana in 2015 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Panama-California Exposition. Unlike Expositions, a Super Bowl is a one to two-week pre-game and game event. In this short time, promoters manage to squeeze a multitude of pre-

game activities ranging from musical shows, dances, fireworks, charitable deeds, such as the renovating of homes for the disadvantaged, dinners, publicity stunts, and television commercials. Super Bowls leave sponsoring cities with a financial profit, above what the cities spend to put on the celebration. Master Incorporated, a research firm, estimated that the 2003 Super Bowl brought \$367 million into the City of San Diego economy while extra City expenses to host the Bowl came to around \$4.1 million.(21) For these reasons, competing cities want Super Bowls.

San Diego's prospects of caging another Super Bowl depend on many factors. The city's warm, usually rainless climate in January and February no longer overwhelms. The City must be able to provide efficient facilities, spacious grounds, accommodations for visitors, awards, music, dances, dinners, parades, and general hoopla. Even more than Expositions, a Super Bowl is not a panacea. Nevertheless, the likelihood of holding another in San Diego at some uncertain time in the future is probably greater than the pie-in-the sky dream of an International Olympics. How all this memorializes the 1915 Panama-California Exposition on its host site in Balboa Park is hard to perceive. As the White Queen replied when Alice said, "One can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

NOTE: In May 2006 the U.S. Olympic Committee rejected a proposal by parties in San Diego and Tijuana to hold the first bi-national Olympics in 2016.

---

## NOTES

1. *San Diego Union*, May 14, 1950.
2. *San Diego Union*, October 26, 1954.
3. *San Diego Union*, August 28, 1955.
4. *San Diego Union*, July 18, 1956.
5. *San Diego Union*, November 13, 1955; October 31, 1956.

6. *San Diego Union*, November 16, 1956.
7. *San Diego Union*, May 1, 1950; December 3, 1959; February 27, 1960.
8. *Evening Tribune*, March 9, 1965; *San Diego Union*, March 9, 1965.
9. *San Diego Union*, April 30, 1966.
10. *San Diego Union*, December 20, 1969.
11. *San Diego Union*, January 23, 1970; Richard Pourade, *City of the Dream*, 1977, 249.
12. *San Diego Union*, August 21, 1972.
13. *Los Angeles Times*, San Diego County Edition, October 22, 1989.
14. *San Diego Union*, April 13, 1990.
15. *San Diego Union*, February 12, 1990.
16. *San Diego Union*, April 13, 1990.
17. *Evening Tribune*, February 15, 1990.
18. *San Diego Union*, December 17, 1990; John Allwood, *The Great Exhibitions*, 1978, 185.
19. Alfred Heller, *World's Fairs and the End of Progress: An Insider's View*, Corte Madera, CA: 1999.
20. Pourade, *City of the Dream*, 107.
21. *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 15, 2003, C-8.