

Introduction

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ASK ANY PHILADELPHIAN about the 1876 Centennial, and he or she will probably be able to tell you something about it. Most will mention Memorial Hall in West Fairmount Park, the major survivor of the fair, repurposed as today's Please Touch Museum. They may recall a visit to the Centennial exhibit in the museum basement, with its diorama of the 1876 fairgrounds. More knowledgeable Philadelphians might discourse on how the successful Centennial attracted ten million visitors and ushered the United States into the first rank of global powers. They may know that Centennial visitors were the first to witness the telephone, drink Hires root beer, and climb into the arm and torch of the Statue of Liberty, on display to raise funds to erect the rest of the colossus.

Then ask them about the 1926 *Sesqui*-Centennial and watch them stare at you blankly. Some might remember stories told them by parents or grandparents about the big ballyhoo in the summer of 1926. A few might have heard of a giant illuminated Liberty Bell that spanned Broad Street at Oregon Avenue in South Philadelphia. One or two might have Sesqui souvenirs at home, like a tattered Liberty Belle doll dressed in stars and stripes. But most Philadelphians, even those familiar with their city's history, will confess ignorance. They might ask where the fair was and what remains of it. They might ask why nobody knows about it. The Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition, held in South Philadelphia between May 31 and December 31, 1926, is the Rodney Dangerfield of World's Fairs. It don't get no respect.

The Sesqui possessed impeccable credentials. It was the first world's fair to be staged in the United States in a decade. It was the first exposition

to be held in the United States since the World War of 1914–1918. It was one of only eight international expositions to take place anywhere on the globe during the 1920s, as nations struggled to rebuild after the devastation of the Great War. Once the Sesqui had survived its initial stumbles, it was described by the *New York Times* as “one of the great American international expositions . . . a fine thing to display to the nation.”

Yet most books about international expositions either mention the Sesqui-Centennial briefly or skip it altogether. Books on Philadelphia history, which might be expected to pay attention to the city’s second world’s fair, also gloss over the Sesqui. Several doctoral dissertations by local scholars cover the fair within a larger context or focus on a specific aspect of it. Foremost among these are Martin W. Wilson’s *From the Sesquicentennial to the Bicentennial: Changing Attitudes toward Tourism in Philadelphia, 1926–1976* and Ellen Freedman’s *The Women’s Committee and Their High Street Exhibit at the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition of 1926*.

Besides the avalanche of promotional materials issued during the fair itself, only two books are devoted to the Sesqui. *The Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition* is the fair’s “official” history. Published three years after the Sesqui ended, the book is an exhaustive effort to salvage the Sesqui’s tarnished reputation. In 2009 James D. Ristine authored *Philadelphia’s 1926 Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition*. The slender, 128-page volume features mostly postcard views of the fair, accompanied by brief captions.

On the rare occasions when the Sesqui is cited by historians, it usually rates two comments: (1) it rained a lot, and (2) it was a financial disaster. It did rain a lot at the Sesqui: there was some precipitation on 107 days out of the fair’s 184 days of operation. When it wasn’t raining, it was brutally hot: that summer, the eastern half of the country was racked by a deadly heat wave. And the Sesqui-Centennial was a financial disaster. The City of Philadelphia acknowledged that it lost nearly \$10 million on the fair. That’s the equivalent of \$106 million today, adjusted for inflation; a more realistic figure, reflecting labor costs, would be \$410 million. Within weeks of the fair’s closing, a \$1,000 Sesqui-Centennial bond sold for \$40. Not long afterward, the exposition’s organizing body declared bankruptcy. Besieged by lawsuits, the city spent the rest of the decade trying to clean up the financial wreckage of the fair.

The official price tag for the Sesqui was roughly \$23 million, plus another \$10 million to build the Sesqui Stadium and to install an infrastructure in undeveloped South Philadelphia. Adjusted for inflation, that amount would equal \$434 million today, or a whopping \$1.44 billion if labor costs are included. That’s about one-third of the 2016 adopted budget for the City of Philadelphia (\$3.998 billion). In reality, the amount

spent by Philadelphia on the Sesqui was much higher than \$23 million, given the miscellaneous appropriations and special loans pushed through by City Council surreptitiously, and the money distributed clandestinely in countless insider deals. The true cost of the fair will never be known, given the concerted efforts by certain political factions to bury the Sesqui, both literally and figuratively.¹

To be fair, most international expositions have gushed red ink. The managers of the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, held in New York's Crystal Palace in 1853, lost their shirts. The 1876 Centennial appeared to have made a profit of nearly \$2 million, until someone read the fine print and noticed that the \$1.5 million appropriation from the federal government was a loan and not a grant. Most twentieth-century fairs also ended up in the red, from the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo (which hosted the assassination of President William McKinley to boot), up to the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans, which lost \$120 million and declared bankruptcy *before* it closed. At least the Sesqui had the decency to go belly-up several months after closing day.²

Yet turning a profit was never the primary purpose of an international exposition. There were the secondary benefits of millions of visitors spending money on local hotels, restaurants, and businesses. More important, a world's fair was supposed to provide its host city with immeasurable benefits in the form of an enhanced international profile, increased opportunities for business investment, exposure to new technology and industry, and improvements to its permanent infrastructure. Without world's fairs, would Chicago and San Francisco have their art museums, or Paris its Eiffel Tower and Metro?

Staged at the southern tip of Philadelphia, the 1926 Sesqui-Centennial forced the city to spend millions to fill and grade the region's swampy land, and then to install paved roads, trolley tracks, sewers, and street lighting. Unfortunately, the city made these improvements in its most sparsely populated region, while neglecting rapidly growing areas like the Northeast. There would be few South Philadelphians to enjoy the benefits of this infrastructure until years after World War II. Meanwhile, the city canceled or postponed urgently needed improvements as it poured money into the bottomless pit of the Sesqui. A subway loop to the new Museum of Art was scratched; so were rapid transit lines to the city's northwestern and far northeastern districts. Other badly needed improvements—a municipal court, a convention center, and upgrades to the city's water supply—were delayed for years because of the Big Ballyhoo in South Philadelphia. And what did the city have to show for its expenditures? A shoddily built stadium that was a white elephant for most of its sixty-six-year existence.

Even if they lost money, most world's fairs attracted tens of millions of visitors. Extrapolating from previous fair attendance and the number of Americans living within 150 miles of Philadelphia, Sesqui planners expected between forty and fifty million guests. Fewer than five million paying visitors actually attended the fair during its six-month run. That was roughly one-half of the attendance for the 1876 Centennial held fifty years earlier, before the invention of automobiles, airplanes, electric trolleys, radio, and movies. Only the abysmal 1907 Jamestown Tercentenary Exposition (2.85 million visitors) saves the Sesqui from the ignominy of being the most sparsely attended American world's fair of the twentieth century.

Perhaps it was lucky that more people didn't come, because the Sesqui was both a financial and an imaginative failure. It was a self-satisfied celebration, designed to delight the Sinclair Lewis protagonist George F. Babbitt, reflecting his petit bourgeois love of patriotic bunting, military bands, and multicolored bathroom fixtures. Yet even Babbitts were bored by the Sesqui. It was trapped between the old and the new, following the protocol for a nineteenth-century trade fair in the increasingly consumer-oriented culture of the twentieth century. As in 1876, most Sesqui exhibits were piles of stuff, displays of manufactured goods of every variety, artfully arranged within endless rows of decorative booths in cavernous warehouses. Even the cutting-edge technology at the fair, like talking pictures and electric sound amplification, was standard stuff by 1926. Some observers carped that a visit to one of Philadelphia's department stores would have been as edifying, and would not have cost fifty cents.

With so little to recommend it, why write about this fair-to-middling fair?

The true story of Philadelphia's second world's fair is much more than financial finagling and bad weather. It's an allegory for the ongoing struggle between the yin and yang of Philadelphia, caught between the gleaming vision of William Penn's "virgin settlement" and the sordid reality of its "pay-to-play" politics, between the enlightened civic duty of some citizens and the unlimited greed of others. It's the story of planners and architects who hoped to liberate Philadelphia from its grimy industrial shell and transform it into the City Beautiful. It's also the story of the men who owned the slaughterhouses that poured filth into the Schuylkill River, and how they boycotted the Sesqui because the resulting cleanup would threaten their livelihood.

The Sesqui saga is a study of Philadelphia boss politics in the early twentieth century. The 1920s marked the high noon of the Republican Organization under William S. Vare, who rose from peddling vegetables in South Philadelphia to being elected U.S. senator from Pennsylvania. In the 1920s,

Vare emerged as the most omnipotent political boss Philadelphia had ever known, ruling the city with an iron hand that reminded observers of Benito Mussolini. Through the Organization, Vare wielded control over nearly every politician and public servant in City Hall. Among his puppets was W. Freeland Kendrick, the former pawnshop owner whom Vare raised to the mayoralty in 1923. Kendrick paid back the favor by moving the Sesqui from the Fairmount Parkway, the city's new showplace, to the swamps of South Philadelphia, Vare's political stronghold. This move alone guaranteed the fair's failure, since it added millions of dollars in development costs and delayed construction. But it brought thousands of jobs and millions of dollars to "Varesville." The price of Kendrick's loyalty to Vare was his political career. The price of Philadelphia's allegiance to Vare was its financial stability.

Looking beyond Philadelphia, the Sesqui-Centennial served as a microcosm of America during the 1920s, and the culture wars that seethed beneath its surface. Philadelphia women tested their newfound political muscle at the Sesqui, defying the Organization to create the one truly successful attraction at the fair. Cardinal Dennis Joseph Dougherty demonstrated the power of Roman Catholics by celebrating a Solemn Pontifical Mass that attracted more attendees than any other Sesqui event. Meanwhile, African Americans struggled to keep their voices from being stifled by a callously racist white establishment. Jewish leaders generously contributed their money and talent to save the Sesqui from oblivion, only to be vilified by anti-Semites. The resurgent Ku Klux Klan planned to hold its 1926 Klunkovation at the Sesqui in September, with the blessing of City Hall. A coalition of blacks, Jews, Catholics, and other thoughtful Americans finally convinced Mayor Kendrick that burning crosses were not the best way to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

The Sesqui attracted fewer than six million visitors. But those guests who did show up to the party included nearly everyone who made the 1920s roar, with the possible exception of Al Capone, Charles Lindbergh, and Clara Bow. There was President Calvin Coolidge. Gloria Swanson. Jack Dempsey. Herbert Hoover. Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Gene Tunney. John Philip Sousa. Marian Anderson. Gangster Arnold Rothstein. Polar explorer Richard E. Byrd. General John Pershing. Johnny Weissmuller. President Borno of Haiti. Tom Mix. Queen Marie of Romania. Damon Runyon. Leopold Stokowski. Sessue Hayakawa. "Gentleman" Jimmy Walker. Plus more governors, ambassadors, generals, admirals, and assorted dignitaries than anyone could count.

For one surreal summer, the somber streets of Philadelphia were crowded with Cossacks, cowboys, Chinese princesses, colonial Quaker maids, Tunisian Berbers, fez-wearing Persians, fez-wearing Shriners, and Great War

veterans clad in every color of the rainbow. Hundreds of American and foreign flags fluttered in the air, and the streets were decked with bunting and decorations. At night, the chop-suey joints and dance halls along Chestnut Street were packed with customers, drawn by the flickering colors of that new-fangled French import, neon lighting. Atop City Hall, William Penn was swathed in electric lights that bathed him in bright red. The skies were filled with more airplanes than anyone had ever seen, along with giant dirigibles like the TC-5. Pedestrians learned to avoid South Broad Street, lest they get run over by Mayor Kendrick's limousine with its screaming siren, as he raced down to the Sesqui for yet another official reception.

At the Sesqui, Philadelphians gazed at canvases by Kandinsky and Matisse and wondered what art was coming to. They knelt on tatamis and tried to understand the differences between the Japanese and Formosan tea ceremonies. They ate blinis at the Russian Tea House, while faux-Russian musicians in silk tunics strummed balalaikas. They ate *weisswurst* at the Alpine Haus while genuine Bavarians in dirndls and lederhosen danced the *Schubplattler*. After dark, they danced the Charleston under the stars in the Forum of the Founders, hoping to win a silver cup. And they stared in wonder at the eighty-foot-tall Liberty Bell that straddled Broad Street, studded with twenty-six thousand amber, gold, and pink lightbulbs that made it glow like molten metal. The Sesqui may have been a giant boondoggle, but it turned staid, sooty Philadelphia into a dazzling Rainbow City for six magical months.

A NOTE ON SPELLING: *Sesqui* is a Latinate term meaning “one and a half.” Therefore, *sesquicentennial* means “one hundred and a half,” or a 150th anniversary. The accepted spelling of this word, according to *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, is *sesquicentennial*. This was the spelling used by the *New York Times* in its contemporary coverage of the fair. But when John Wanamaker, the fair's foremost proponent, selected this term to refer to the 150th anniversary of American independence, he used the more archaic, hyphenated spelling of “Sesqui-Centennial.” So did major Philadelphia newspapers; so did the fair's governing body, the Sesqui-Centennial Exhibition Association. So will this book, although it will also use the abbreviation “Sesqui,” which quickly became Philadelphians' preferred name for their second world's fair. It's worth noting, however, that when the powers that be cannot agree on how to spell the name of a fair before the first spade of dirt is turned, there's sure to be trouble ahead.

NOTES

1. All currency projections and calculations are based on the Purchasing Power Calculator at MeasuringWorth.com. 2016 city budget from the City of Philadelphia “Open Budget” website, available at <http://www.phila.gov/openbudget/>.

2. Financial data taken from Findling and Pelle, *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*.