

City of

Big Shoulders

A HISTORY OF CHICAGO

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CHAPTER SIX

THE FIRE,

THE BOMB,

AND THE FAIR,

1871 - 1893

- During the years between 1871 and 1893, three events served both to define Chicago and to reveal the city to the nation. Observers seeking the “real” Chicago might have done better to examine the city’s railroads, its grain industry, its ethnocultural politics, or its acquisition of clean drinking water. These did not capture the public’s imagination, however, nor did they make for good stories in the era’s newspapers. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the Haymarket Bombing of 1886, and the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, however, were nothing if not enthralling stories. Americans often learned about Chicago through these events. For them and for us, they provide windows through which to view late 1800s Chicago.

THE FIRE

Perhaps the most famous Chicagoan is not a person at all. Perhaps it is Mrs. O’Leary’s cow, the alleged culprit behind the Great Chicago Fire of October 8–9, 1871. But the blame for the destruction of the city should not be laid on an animal. Large fires were a fact of life in nineteenth-century cities. Nearly all buildings at this time were built of wood. Few had fire-resistant walls or roofs, and most were constructed close to (if not touching) adjacent buildings. Cities used wood planks to pave their roads, which further blanketed cities with wood. (Chicago had fifty-five miles of planked streets in 1871.) Wooden bridges spanned rivers and canals, thus neutralizing the only natural “fire breaks” within cities. Roofs were made of highly flammable tar and pine chips; the chips were easily dislodged and blown about by the wind once they caught fire. Large quantities of hay and straw were kept in cities. Nearly

all homes relied upon open flames (for example, coal and kerosene) for heating, cooking, and lighting.

All American cities experienced massive urban fires: New York City in 1835, Pittsburgh in 1845, and Philadelphia in 1865. Chicago itself routinely endured fires that devastated large portions of the city. Only one month before the Great Fire of 1871, the *Chicago Tribune* warned Chicagoans about their “miles of fire-traps, pleasing to the eye, looking substantial, but all sham and shingles.”¹ Only demolishing existing buildings and rebuilding them with fireproof materials and fire walls would have remedied the situation, but that would have been unthinkably impractical.

The only force that stood between Chicago and a massive inferno was the 185-man fire department. Armed with steam-powered water pumpers that were only slightly better than bucket brigades, mid-nineteenth-century urban fire departments relied upon rapid response, and not high technology, to fight fires. Watchmen perched high in the courthouse’s cupola kept a twenty-four-hour vigil over the city, and each firehouse had its own observation tower as well. When flames were spotted, the watchmen pinpointed the fire’s location with the aid of mariner’s spyglasses and notified nearby firehouses. Speed was the key: firemen could control a blaze if they responded within a few minutes.

An unusually dry summer and fall in 1871 made Chicago especially ripe for a major fire. On October 7—the day before the Great Chicago Fire began—a fire destroyed twenty acres west of the city’s downtown area. Half of the city’s fire department worked on the blaze and extinguished it only after fifteen hours of effort. This latest of innumerable city fires was the worst ever recorded in city history, but the October 7 fire held that distinction for just one day.

On the night of October 8—a Sunday night—Chicago residents’ worst fears were realized. The Great Chicago Fire began in the O’Leary’s barn at about 9:00 P.M. that evening. The barn was located near the intersections of Jefferson and Taylor Streets, less than one mile southwest of downtown. Perhaps a cow really did start the blaze by kicking over a lantern, but no one knows with certainty. Regardless of how the fire began, it quickly spread. A twenty-mile-per-hour wind drove the fire straight toward the city. Exhausted firemen, still recovering from fighting the previous day’s blaze, were slow to respond to this fire. Also preventing a rapid response to the fire was a watchman’s misjudgment of its precise location; he incorrectly sent the initial alarm to the wrong firehouse. Most Chicagoans were unconcerned. One city resident did

not even bother to go out and look at the blaze at first: "Why should I care as long as our house is not on fire? There is a fire every Monday and Thursday in Chicago!"² Although seven fire companies arrived at the O'Leary barn within forty-five minutes, they arrived too late. They encountered a fire of mammoth proportions. By 11:00 P.M., the fire department declared the blaze out of control.

Terror-stricken Chicagoans fled down crowded streets before the advancing flames. At times, the flames marched through the city as fast as a man could run. "You couldn't see anything over you but fire," one Chicagoan remembered. "No clouds, no stars, nothing but fire."³ The fire generated high winds that hurled flaming lumber through the air. "It seemed like a tornado of fire," recalled one survivor.⁴ The din of fire, collapsing buildings, church bells, shouting, and terrified animals enveloped the city. Many fleeing citizens tried to carry a few belongings with them. Frightened horses pulling carriages added to chaos in the streets. Families became separated; crying children wandered aimlessly through the crowds. Looters plundered goods from deserted stores. Bridges collapsed under the weight of hundreds of fleeing Chicagoans. "I saw a woman kneeling in the street with a crucifix held up before her and the skirt of her dress burning while she prayed," recalled one Chicagoan. "We had barely passed before a runaway truck dashed her to the ground. Loads of goods passed us repeatedly that were burning on the trucks."⁵

All night long, the fire burned on. The inferno was so large that observers in Indiana could see the glow on the distant skyline. At 7:00 the next morning, fire hydrants went dry as the city waterworks burned to the ground. City residents could do nothing now but hope for rain. Some fled northward, certain the fire would not cross the Chicago River. It did. Others made their way to Lake Michigan and waded out into the water for safety. Flames created temperatures so high that plate-glass windows cracked, iron and steel melted, and limestone construction blocks disintegrated into powder. One eyewitness remembered that "stoves, and sheet and pig iron all melted miserably and ran helplessly down, roaring with rage, to the ground, and there it cooled in all fantastic attitudes and shapes."⁶ The blaze raged for more than twenty-four hours, devouring the wooden city. A cold October rain finally began falling late Monday night. The rain extinguished the flames about 3:00 Tuesday morning.

The most destructive urban fire to date in U.S. history, the Great Chicago Fire was distinguished by the sheer magnitude of the blaze and



The Chicago Fire of 1871 left the downtown in complete ruin, as this view from the corner of Randolph and Market Streets reveals. Buildings could not be repaired; the heart of the city had to be razed to the foundations and constructed anew. This allowed Chicagoans to rationalize the downtown area. Chicago Historical Society, IChi-02808

the extensive loss of property. Although only three hundred people died in the inferno, the fire destroyed the entire downtown section of the city, which included nearly everything between Harrison Street on the south, Chicago Avenue on the north, the two branches of the Chicago River on the west, and Lake Michigan on the east. All told, the burned-out district was about four miles long and one mile wide. The heart of Chicago—including more than seventeen thousand buildings, many of the city's retail stores, hotels, the Board of Trade, the White Stockings' baseball park, the courthouse, the post office, the Tribune Tower, and most of the city's theaters and banks—now consisted of twenty-five hundred acres of smoldering ruins. Financial losses exceeded \$250 million, which forced several insurance companies into bankruptcy. The homeless, who had to seek shelter as winter approached, included one hundred thousand of the city's three hundred thousand residents. The devastation seemed so extensive that many thought the city could never recover. John Greenleaf Whittier penned this immediately popular eulogy for the once great city:

Men said at vespers: "All is well!"
 In one wild night the city fell;
 Fell shrines of prayer and marts of gain
 Before the fiery hurricane.

On three score spires had sunset shone,
 Where ghastly sunrise looked on none.
 Men clasped each other's hands, and said:
 "The City of the West is dead!"⁷

But far from being dead, Chicago was about to experience an amazing recovery. Within two years, the city had been completely rebuilt. The scope of the rebuilding project was breathtaking. One historian struggled to communicate what happened in post-fire Chicago: "It is common to see ten or a dozen or fifty houses rising at once; but when one looks upon, not a dozen or fifty, but upon ten thousand houses rising and ten times that number of busy workmen coming and going, and listens to the noise of countless saws and hammers and chisels and axes and planes, he is bewildered."⁸ As devastating as the fire had been, it had not touched the sources of Chicago's wealth, namely, its lumber yards, the Union Stock Yards, and most of its grain elevators. Most important, the city's lifelines—the railroads—were unscathed. Business could continue.

Chicago played such an indispensable role in the nation's economy by 1871 that businessmen throughout America had a vested interest in seeing Chicago rebuilt. As one Chicagoan put it, "The capitalists, the mercantile and business interests of this country and of Europe cannot afford to withhold the means to rebuild Chicago."⁹ He was right. Businessmen in New York City sent \$600,000 to the city to assist in its recovery and sent wagons through the New York City streets to collect spare clothing for needy Chicagoans. Cincinnati raised \$160,000 in aid before the fire stopped burning. Milwaukee closed its public schools for one day as the city collected relief supplies. Boston sent \$400,000 to the city, Buffalo sent \$100,000, and little Lafayette, Indiana, sent \$10,000. One Chicago resident called the relief effort "the grandest display of true Christian feeling the world ever saw." He continued, "Here we were, hundreds of thousands of people—houseless, homeless, without food or shelter; and first from all parts of the United States, and then from every country and city in the civilized world money came pouring in till in less than a fortnight we had to telegraph them to stop."¹⁰ Not all Americans wanted to assist Chicago,

however. The Sons of Temperance from Urbana, Illinois, believed the inferno was a judgment for the city's refusal to close its saloons on Sunday. One Indiana newspaper thought the fire was divine repayment for William T. Sherman's burning of Atlanta during the Civil War. "God adjusts balances," the newspaper opined. "Maybe with Chicago the books are now squared."¹¹ Not only was the city almost completely recovered within two years, but the new, post-1871 Chicago enjoyed significant economic advantages over the pre-fire Chicago. By leveling the entire downtown area, the fire allowed Chicagoans to rationalize land use in the city. Before the fire, downtown Chicago was a haphazard and inefficient collection of businesses, homes, warehouses, and barns. The wealthy's impressive mansions stood side-by-side with the poor's clapboard dwellings; downtown office buildings and stores were side-by-side with stables and livestock pens. After the fire, city dwellers moved to outlying areas, and downtown property was devoted almost exclusively to commercial use. With the elimination of thousands of small shanty homes and stables, existing businesses could more easily expand. Property values skyrocketed as investors realized the new Chicago would consist almost entirely of state-of-the-art commercial buildings. With land more expensive, Chicago builders soon invented a new type of building: the skyscraper. Builders built *up*, instead of *out*, to maximize their return on expensive city property.

The fire also enabled Chicagoans to control city fires, of which the 1871 fire had only been the most recent and most cataclysmic. The city council enacted laws in 1872 that prohibited the construction of wooden frame buildings within much of the downtown areas of the city. Chicagoans had noted that, in addition to the many wood structures that were incinerated in the blaze, the cast iron columns and beams in ostensibly fireproof buildings had melted in the intense heat. In the new downtown, terra cotta was applied to buildings' metal frames, thus making them heat resistant. There would be no Second Great Chicago Fire.

An important aspect of rebuilding an incinerated Chicago was providing emergency relief assistance to fire victims. Prominent commercial and civic leaders feared that the relief donations that poured into the city—more than one million dollars worth of clothing, food, and cash—would encourage laziness and dependency if they were distributed carelessly to the city's "undeserving poor." Whether Chicago "should ever recover from the terrible calamity that had swept over it, or whether the ruin should be utter and irrevocable," wrote local journalist Sidney Gay,

largely depended upon the "wise and economical distribution of aid."¹²

City leaders therefore carefully controlled the distribution of post-fire relief aid. They prevented the city council from disbursing relief, because councilmen were elected by the people and were, in the eyes of wealthy commercial and civic leaders, too beholden to "interests." Prominent city leaders feared that vote-hungry councilmen would distribute largesse to their constituents, most of whom were immigrants or immigrant-stock Germans and Scandinavians on the devastated North Side, thus winning votes but creating in the process a class of welfare-dependent parasites. Instead, city leaders, most of whom were Anglo-American Protestants, relied upon the independent Relief and Aid Society to distribute the supplies that flooded into the city in the days following the fire. The Relief and Aid Society remained safely out of the reach of elected politicians: it was run by an Executive Committee of fifteen industrialists and businessmen, four lawyers, and one doctor. Powerful Chicagoans such as Mayor Roswell B. Mason believed that this commercial and civic elite was better able to determine what served the public interest than were the base politicians who worked the ethnic wards for votes.

The Relief and Aid Society provided much needed aid to fire victims, but it did so in accordance with the philosophy of "scientific charity." Applicants for aid were examined closely to assess their worthiness. Chicagoans who had demonstrated past entrepreneurial zeal and had owned property were most likely to receive aid; chronically poor Chicagoans who could offer no track record of thrift, investment, steady employment, and financial success often got none. After the initial days of immediate post-fire emergency relief, able-bodied men were granted relief aid only if they were employed. The Relief and Aid Society did not allow a permanently unemployed class of Chicagoans to be dependent upon public charity. When aid recipients made no progress in improving their lot, they were often disqualified from receiving further relief. Eight hundred Chicago families suffered this fate in early 1872.

Many Chicagoans chafed at this heavy-handed distribution of relief funds. German immigrants in the city protested that the Relief and Aid Society harbored Anglo-American prejudices. Native-stock Chicagoans, they charged, had a better chance of receiving aid than did the newcomers of different ethnic backgrounds. This bias posed special hardships on the heavily ethnic North Side that had suffered most in the fire. Several prominent Anglo-American women also rejected the Relief and Aid Society's emphasis on social engineering. Katherine Medill, wife of *Chicago Tribune* publisher and future mayor Joseph Medill, criticized the society

for its lack of humanitarian concern. She distributed relief on her own to fire victims, whom she described as “people who are in every way worthy and beyond the Society’s rules.”¹³ Mrs. H. L. Hammond, a Protestant activist and wife of a Chicago Theological Seminary official, likewise operated her own relief agency. Aurelia R. King, wife of prominent Chicagoan and Relief and Aid Society board member Henry King, wrote to out-of-town friends and instructed them to send donations to her and not to the society. It is intriguing that many relief agencies that opposed the policies of the Relief and Aid Society were headed by women. The Chicago Y.M.C.A. and the United Hebrew Relief Association also administered their own post-fire relief agencies.

The battle over post-fire relief—and the underlying battle over who would define Chicago’s public interest—suggests that the city was what one historian has called a “smoldering city” in more ways than one. The fire presented the city with a great challenge, but so did latent class divisions and ethnic tensions. It was not a homogeneous and monolithic “people of Chicago” that rose from the ashes to rebuild their city. Rather, it was a people fractured by economic, ethnic, and gender differences that nonetheless managed to rebuild their city.

Civic leaders put a positive face on the post-fire reconstruction, however. The rational distribution of land in the downtown area, the new fire-resistant commercial buildings, and the triumphs of many strong-willed entrepreneurs inspired cheery reports of a post-fire urban renaissance. Thus, only one year after the fire, a local magazine asked rhetorically, “Was not the great fire a blessing in disguise?”¹⁴ The *Chicago Tribune* was even more confident the following year. It agreed with the “common remark” heard about town “that Chicago was set forward ten years by the fire.”¹⁵ The city even celebrated the two-year anniversary of the fire—much to the amazement of the *New York Herald*, which was shocked that a city actually celebrated the anniversary of its own destruction. There was reason for celebration. In physical terms, the rebuilt city was far superior to the old one.

Chicagoans began invoking the image of the phoenix to explain their city’s miraculous recovery. Like the legendary bird that burned itself on a funeral pyre only to rise again as a youthful creature, Chicago had been reborn by 1874 as the most modern city in the world. London’s *Saturday Review* saw in Chicago all the virtues that made the United States the most dynamic nation on the globe. In 1874, it called Chicago the “concentrated essence of Americanism.”¹⁶ Seeing Chicago’s post-fire grandeur, poet Vachel Lindsay quipped, “The Chicago Fire should occur

many times. Each successive time the buildings [emerge] smarter, less expensive, more economic, more beautiful.”¹⁷ Although the city’s reconstruction resulted in undeniable economic advantages, some Chicagoans realized that such benefits were being purchased at a cost. The *Chicago Tribune* noted in 1873, “The tendency is to be metropolitan in everything—buildings and their uses, stores and their occupants. And village notions are passing away with them.” The transformation of Chicago into a modern industrial city—a city devoted to business and commerce—meant the sacrificing of personal relationships. The *Tribune* continued: “We are getting to be a community of strangers. No one expects to know . . . half the audience at the church or theatre, and, as to knowing one’s neighbors, that has become a lost art.”¹⁸ The remnants of small-town ways had perished in the fire. A massive city rose from the ashes.

THE BOMB

One thing that did perish in later-nineteenth-century Chicago was the city’s radical labor movement. In 1886, a bomb exploded at a Haymarket Square labor rally, killing several policemen who had arrived to disperse the protesters. Policemen then fired into the assembly and killed an undetermined number of activists. Perhaps the first famous terrorist bombing in the United States, it confirmed Anglo-Americans’ worst suspicions regarding labor unions and marked the zenith of leftist labor activity in America.

To many Anglo-Americans, late-nineteenth-century unionists themselves were probably more alarming than their often modest demands. First, the majority of unionists were immigrants. In Chicago, for example, about two-thirds of the city’s 18,400 Knights of Labor members in 1886 were immigrants. Anglo-Americans’ disdain for European immigrants easily translated into disdain for organized labor. Many Anglo-Americans were convinced that socialism, communism, and union agitation were motivated, not by legitimate labor grievances here in America, but rather by un-American agitators. In early 1886, the *Chicago Daily News* wrote, “Socialism in America is an anomaly, and Chicago is the last place on the continent where it would exist were it not for the dregs of foreign immigration which find lodgement here.”¹⁹ Of course, this was an overgeneralization. One of Chicago’s foremost labor radicals, Albert Parsons, claimed ancestors who came to America on the Mayflower’s second voyage and fought for Texas during the Civil War.

Parsons notwithstanding, the immigrant stereotype persisted.

Further, union leaders were often labeled as violent anarchists. Believing that every form of government was immoral, anarchists in late-nineteenth-century America were never numerous and always colorful. Some thought the existing world system of oppressive governments would collapse if a significantly earth-shattering “momentous deed” were perpetrated. To this end, anarchists were the modern world’s first high-profile terrorists, throwing bombs into crowds in hopes that this would be the “momentous deed.” Their most famous acts of violence were assassinations of Czar Alexander II of Russia, Empress Elizabeth of Austria, and U.S. President William McKinley. Some socialist labor leaders grew impatient with their inability to secure power peacefully and reluctantly turned to violence, reinforcing the public notion of unions as hotbeds of anarchist violence.

Anarchism discredited the budding labor union movement. Most unionists were not anarchists, and the Knights of Labor (America’s largest labor union with 700,000 members by the 1880s) repudiated anarchism. Native Anglo-American Protestants, however, commonly assumed a link between anarchism, labor unions, and violence. Many Chicagoans cringed when they learned of articles such as this one, which appeared in the city’s anarchist newspaper, the *Alarm*, in 1885: “Dynamite! Of all the good stuff, this is the stuff. Stuff several pounds of this sublime stuff into an inch pipe (gas or water pipe), plug up both ends, insert a cap with a fuse attached, place this in the immediate neighborhood of a lot of rich men who live by the sweat of other people’s brows and light the fuse. A most cheerful and gratifying result will follow. In giving dynamite to the downtrodden millions of the globe, science has done its best work. The dear stuff can be carried around in the pocket without danger, while it is a formidable weapon against any force of militia, police or detectives that may want to stifle the cry for justice that goes forth from the plundered slaves.”²⁰ Many Chicagoans wrongly assumed all unionists and immigrants embraced these sentiments.

Many Anglo-Americans also stereotyped unionists as atheists. Chicago’s Reverend E. A. Adams put it bluntly: “The result of atheism must always be anarchism.”²¹ By branding the unionists as anti-Christian, it was easier for Anglo-Americans to reject their ideas without evaluation. “Either these people are to be evangelized,” warned Chicago evangelist D. L. Moody in 1886, “or the leaven of communism and infidelity will assume such enormous proportions that it will break out in a reign of terror such as the country has never known.”²²

Thus, when Anglo-Americans considered labor unions in the late 1800s, they saw multiple threats to the United States: labor violence, socialist attacks on capitalism, immigrant influence, and godlessness. Because unionists seemed to pose a threat to property, peace, and profits, government nearly always supported management in its conflicts with workers. Policemen and soldiers regularly intervened to help factory owners break strikes. Courts rarely ruled in favor of unionists. At Marshall Field's classy downtown Chicago retail store, customers who were known to be union members were quietly escorted from the emporium by Field's private detectives.

Indeed, unionists found themselves involved in strikes, fights, and shoot-outs. Union newspapers also attracted many writers of socialist or communist persuasion. Much of the labor violence that occurred in America, however, was as much the fault of business owners and policemen as it was of the union members. Antiunion people handled unionists in a way that almost guaranteed violence. Moreover, most union members *were* exploited by their employers. Factory wages were extremely low, working conditions were unsafe, living conditions were atrocious, and employees received no compensation if they were injured or killed on the job. Although urban laborers had reasonable grievances, neither employers nor the government provided relief. The late 1800s was the age of unbridled laissez-faire capitalism.

Labor unrest mounted in post-Civil War Chicago. In 1877, the city saw pitched battles in its streets as local workingmen joined that year's Great Railroad Strike. Tensions remained high in the following years as more immigrants came to Chicago, jobs became scarce, and low wages persisted. Seeking remedies for their plight, the Knights of Labor announced a 1 May 1886 deadline for instituting the eight-hour workday. At one union rally in 1886, twenty-one thousand Chicagoans turned out. A second rally and parade two weeks later drew an entirely different crowd of twenty-five thousand. When the May 1 deadline came, forty thousand Chicagoans went on strike. Several days later, a strike at Cyrus McCormick's International Harvester factory led to the Haymarket bombing.

The bone of contention between McCormick and his workers had always been low wages and the length of the workday. Workers had struck in 1884 when McCormick cut wages 15 percent but then failed to restore wages to their previous levels as promised. The strike led to McCormick's hiring of armed guards, and gunshots were exchanged. McCormick workers struck again in 1886, in part because they sought an

eight-hour workday. McCormick refused to negotiate. Instead, he locked the striking men out of his plant and brought in strikebreakers. Those replacement workers filled the factory jobs vacated by the strikers, spelling doom for the union effort.

On 3 May 1886, six thousand striking men were meeting outside the International Harvester plant. The shift changed, and hundreds of strikebreakers poured out of McCormick's plant. The angry strikers, now face-to-face with the men who were taking their jobs, attacked the replacement workers. McCormick had hired private guards for just such an occasion. They and Chicago policemen sprang into action with clubs and pistols. Two men were killed and several more were injured.

Chicago's labor movement mobilized for action. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, one of the city's German-language newspapers, immediately printed and distributed more than twelve hundred circulars. Under bold headlines that screamed, "REVENGE! Workingmen, to arms!!" the flyer, printed in both English and German, called for the city's workers to "destroy the hideous monster that seeks to destroy you."²³ A second circular, issued the next morning, exhorted, "Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!" Union leaders called a rally to protest the murders. They scheduled it for that night (May 4) in Haymarket Square, which was located on Randolph Street between Desplaines and Halsted. The usually sedate *Chicago Tribune* warned the unionists against responding with violence: "If the Communists of this city are counting on the looseness of our police system and the tendency to proceed against crowds by due process of law, and hope on that account to receive more leniency than in Europe, they have ignored some of the significant episodes in American history. . . . Every lamp post in Chicago will be decorated with a Communistic carcass if necessary to prevent wholesale incendiarism . . . or any attempt at it."²⁴

The rally at Haymarket Square saw no "wholesale incendiarism." Perhaps it was because of the *Tribune's* warning or simply because of the steady rain that the 1,500 gathered workers did nothing but listen as speakers extolled the virtues of socialism and anarchism for several hours. Mayor Carter Harrison even visited the meeting, having granted permission earlier for the rally to be held. He strolled about for some time, was convinced that there would be no trouble from this sedate and soggy group, and left. He stopped by the nearby police station and told the chief there that the speakers were finishing up and police intervention would not be necessary. The rain picked up and many left. Only about 300 men remained at Haymarket Square as the last speaker was

finishing his harangue. Suddenly, a team of more than 150 Chicago policemen barged into the square. They interrupted the speaker and demanded that all remaining persons go home.

It was then that the bomb exploded. Someone threw it into the midst of the policemen. Police began firing into the crowd, and workers fled for safety. Seven policemen eventually died from the blast, and more than sixty were wounded. The death toll among the workers was unknown; most refused to seek medical treatment for fear of being reported to the police.

Almost overnight, the Haymarket bomb created mass hysteria in Chicago and across the nation. The *New York Times's* headline the next morning read, "Anarchy's Red Hand." The *Albany Law Review* demanded punishment "for the few long-haired, wild-eyed, bad-smelling, atheistic, reckless foreign wretches."²⁵ The *Philadelphia Inquirer* likewise demanded that Chicago teach the "foreign Anarchists" that the United States did not coddle "cutthroats and thieves."²⁶ Anglo-Americans took the bombing as proof that law and order was disappearing. They feared America was becoming polluted by the cesspool of European socialism. They increasingly dismissed labor unions as Trojan horses used by immigrant anarchists to destroy America.

Justice was swift and harsh, although many insisted that the word *justice* was inappropriate. Police charged seven local anarchists with murder. All were German immigrants; only one spoke English. Albert Parsons had fled the city after the bombing and escaped arrest, but he returned of his own free will and surrendered himself so he could stand trial with his comrades. There was no evidence that any of the men threw the bomb. Indeed, all eight defendants presented credible alibis that made it clear that they could not have thrown a bomb on the night of 4 May 1886. The identity of both bomb-thrower and bomb-manufacturer was never determined. As the prosecuting attorney said in his closing remarks to the jury, however, it was anarchism that was on trial in Chicago. The prosecution argued that *encouraging* acts of violence was the same as *committing* acts of violence. The city's anarchist newspaper, the *Alarm*, maintained that the accused men's irreligion was also on trial. The *Chicago Daily News* and Anglo-American Protestants throughout the city pointed out that the accused were infidels and enemies of the Christian faith. "The authorities are making a point against them that they do not believe in God," reported one labor sympathizer a week after the riot, speaking of the arrested Haymarket anarchists.²⁷ For many Anglo-American Chicagoans, the combination of bombs, strikes, socialism,

foreigners, and atheism was far too much. The jury deliberated only three hours before finding all eight men guilty of murder. One received a fifteen-year prison sentence; the other seven were sentenced to death.

Petitions for clemency from around America poured into Chicago. The influential journalist Henry Demarest Lloyd headed a national clemency campaign, and Lyman J. Gage, who would later serve as U.S. secretary of the Treasury, lobbied for mercy as well. Requests for clemency even reached the Illinois governor's office from overseas. Despite the conviction on the part of many that the Haymarket defendants were to be punished for their radical political beliefs and not for any crime, pleas for clemency were ignored. Four Haymarket defendants were hanged and one committed suicide while awaiting execution. (George Engel's last words as he stood at the gallows: "Hurrah for anarchy! This is the happiest moment of my life."²⁸) Two men had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment because they had officially requested mercy; these men were later pardoned by Illinois Governor John Altgeld in 1893. The funeral for the five executed Haymarket men hailed them as martyrs. Twenty thousand mourners followed the caskets to the train depot, while another two hundred thousand onlookers lined Chicago's streets. A portion of the funeral procession was led by a uniformed war veteran who marched with an American flag draped in black.

Other Chicagoans did not mourn at all. The Commercial Club of Chicago, a club consisting of the city's prominent businessmen, had for several years considered bringing a U.S. military fort to the area, with soldiers who could maintain order in the event of a riot or violent strike. The May 1886 Haymarket bombing drove them to act quickly. Within six weeks of the bombing, with the help of Civil War veteran and Chicago resident General Philip Henry Sheridan, they identified a suitable location for such a fort. The Commercial Club then paid \$300,000 for a six-hundred-acre parcel of land in Highwood, a small town twenty-eight miles north of the Loop on the shoreline of Lake Michigan, and donated it to the federal government free of charge for the purpose of constructing a military outpost. Soldiers were rushed from Fort Douglas, Utah, to the uncleared land that would become Fort Sheridan; they arrived three days before the Haymarket executions, pitched their tents, and prepared to fight rioting urban immigrants instead of warring American Indians.

The Haymarket bombing dealt a crippling blow to America's young labor movement, even though the bombing had not been the work of labor union men. The Knights of Labor, for example, immediately de-

nounced the bombers as “cowardly murderers, cutthroats, and robbers” who deserved “no more consideration than wild beasts.”²⁹ But such statements were futile. To most Anglo-Americans, there was little difference between anarchists, immigrants, socialists, communists, and labor unionists. Almost immediately after Haymarket, the Knights of Labor experienced a precipitous decline in membership. At their peak in 1886, they claimed 730,000 members nationally; by 1888, membership had plummeted to 260,000. In Chicago, the death of the Haymarket men decapitated the city’s robust labor movement.

Haymarket also intensified anti-immigrant sentiment in Chicago and across the nation. The accused Haymarket bombers confirmed the immigrant stereotype: radical, violent, dangerous, atheistic, and un-American. It became even easier for policemen, soldiers, Pinkerton agents, governors, and presidents to assume an immigrant’s guilt (or a unionist’s guilt, since the two were often synonymous) when such a stereotype seemed validated by the event at Haymarket Square.

In 1899, a monument was built in the square that honored the fallen Chicago policemen. The bronze image depicted a policeman with up-raised hand attempting to establish peace. During the tumultuous 1960s, modern-day anarchists again put Haymarket Square in the news. They blew the statue from its pedestal with bombs in both 1969 and 1970. An outraged Mayor Richard J. Daley relocated the statue to the lobby of the main Chicago police station.

THE FAIR

As if to signal its complete recovery from the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the city hosted the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition—an event so famous that one recent historian has called it “the most famous fair ever held on American soil.”³⁰ In the middle and late 1800s, expositions were a combination of inventors’ showcase, international summit meeting, promotional extravaganza, and entertainment. The host city constructed an impressive (and costly) collection of buildings to house the exposition. Nations from all over the world sent displays designed to impress visitors. Intellectuals from around the world came to these expositions in order to gauge the pulse of human achievement. The common people came to gawk at the amazing sights.

Owing to their enormous expense, world expositions were held only in the world’s largest and most affluent cities. London was home to the

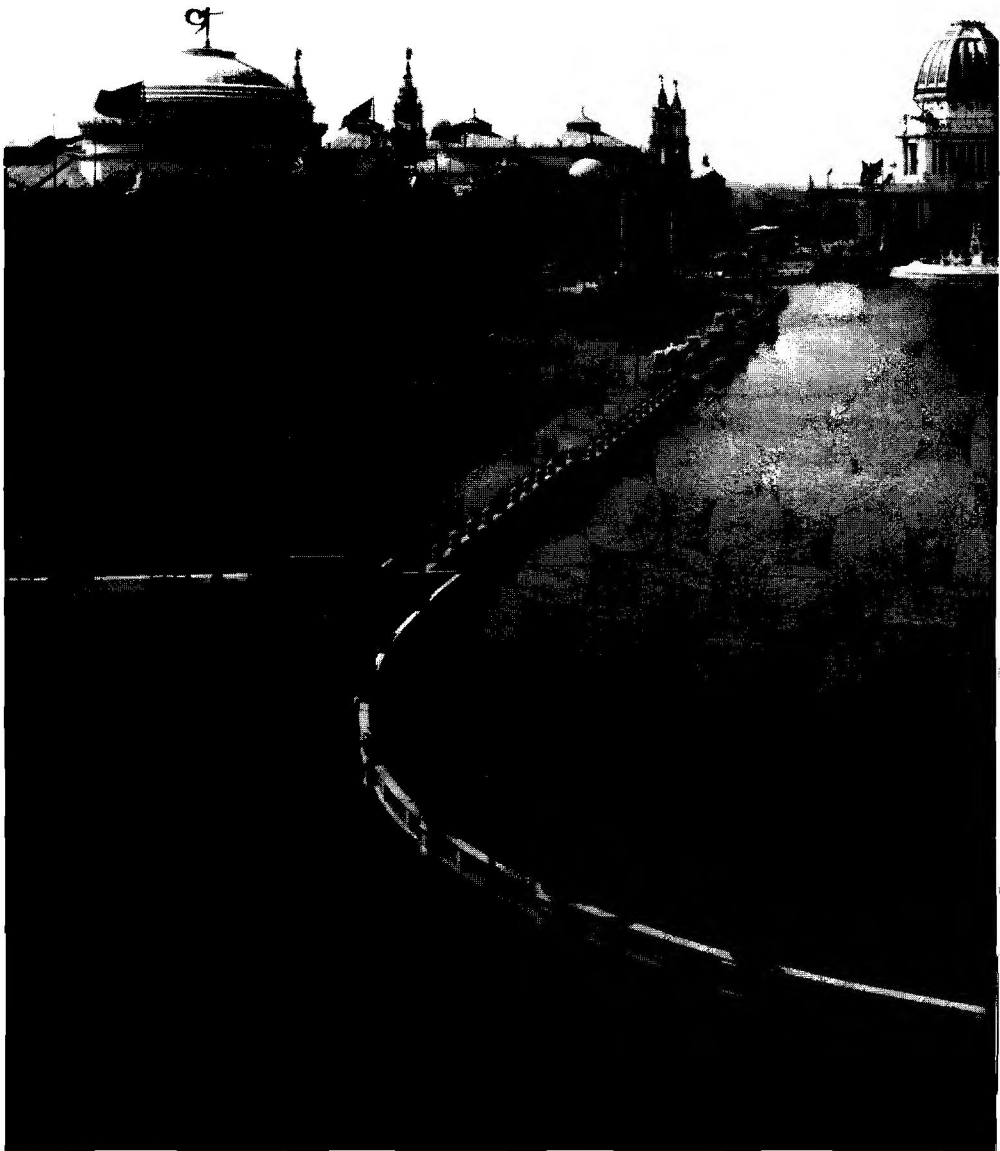
famous 1851 Crystal Palace Exposition, and New York followed with its own Crystal Palace Exposition in 1853–1854. Philadelphia hosted the 1876 Centennial Exposition, which honored the one-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Paris hosted the 1889 world exposition, unveiling to the world its new Eiffel Tower. Americans sought to host an exposition in 1892 or 1893 that would commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to the New World. New York was the logical choice, and many laughed when the uncultured frontier city of Chicago requested that *it* host the exposition. “Don’t pay any attention to the nonsensical claims of that Windy City,” advised Charles A. Dana, who was using the word “windy” to refer to the city’s incessant stream of booster rhetoric and self-promoting hot air. “Its people couldn’t build a world’s fair if they won it!”³¹ One New York City cartoon lampooned Chicago’s audacious request. The great cities of the United States were pictured as ladies seated around a table. All are vying for a bouquet—marked “World’s Fair”—that Uncle Sam will apparently bestow upon one fortunate lass. All the women are beautiful and elegant except for the one labeled Chicago. She is a bony, homely teenager whose evening gown sports a pattern of little pigs (a reference to the city’s notorious meatpacking industry). Her bust is gaudily embellished with diamonds. She is demanding the bouquet, her skinny arms grasping for the prize. New York, in contrast, is a cultured woman who looks down at Chicago with an appropriate air of condescension and contempt.

What Chicago lacked in charm and culture, however, it made up for with nerve. The city raised more than ten million dollars to finance the fair, which impressed the U.S. Congress. It granted the Columbian Exposition to Chicago. The city wasted no time in making the fair so impressive that it wowed even the city’s harshest critics. Hired to oversee the building project were Frederick Law Olmstead (perhaps the most famous architect in America) and Daniel Burnham. For the exposition’s site, they chose Jackson Park—a marshy, undeveloped area of sand dunes and bushes located on Lake Michigan about seven miles south of city hall. In three years, they transformed the area into a state-of-the-art international city. Steel frames gave form to enormous convention halls, and the frames were covered with a white plaster that shone like marble. Domes, vaulted ceilings, arches, columns, and fountains rose out of the Jackson Park marshes. Dubbed the White City for its resplendent plaster buildings, the “city” was built among a beautifully landscaped matrix of lagoons, parks, moving sidewalks, and wide promenades. This marsh-into-oasis metamorphosis was made possible by an army of construction

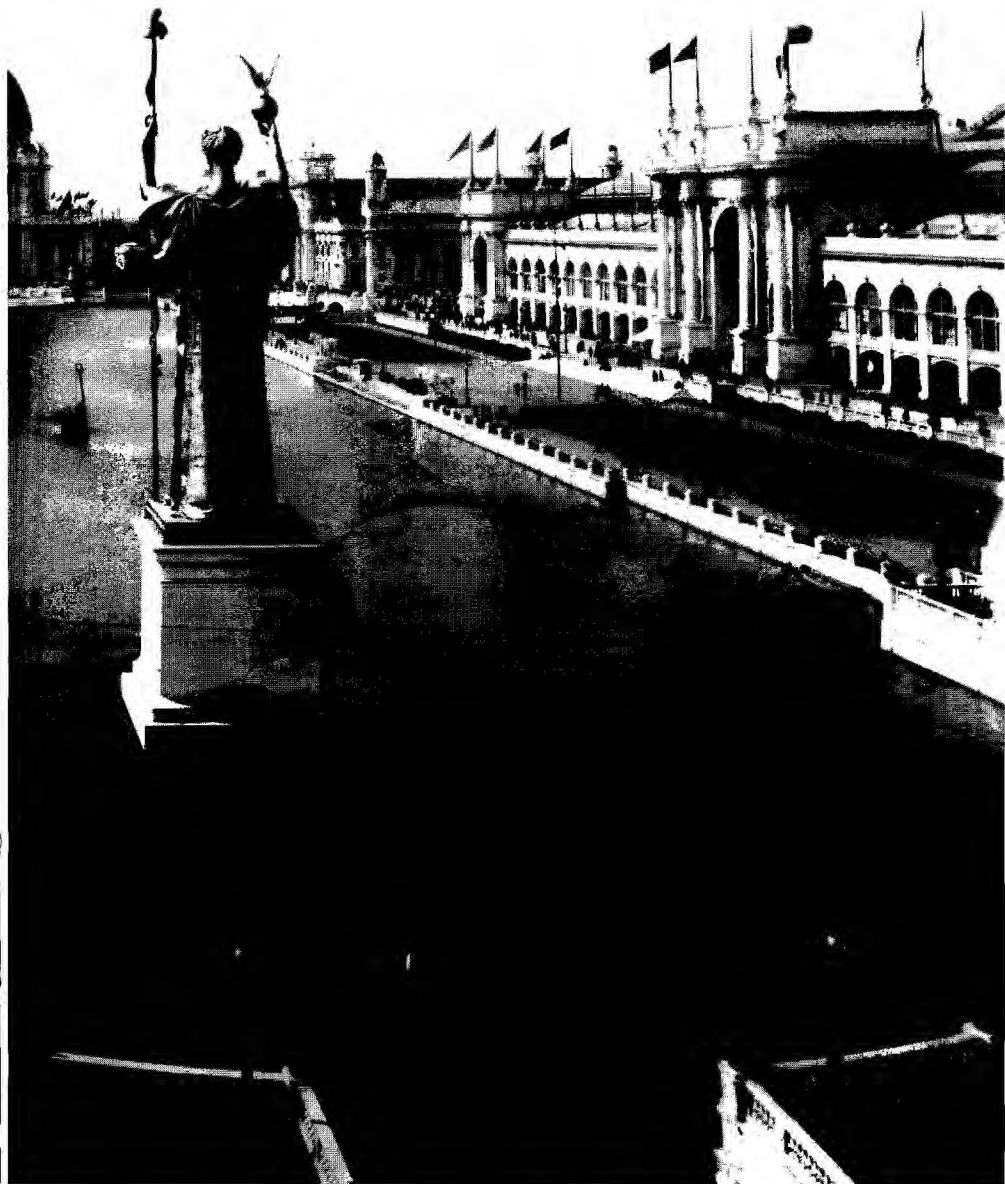
workers that was sometimes twelve thousand strong. These men often labored at night under newly invented electric lights and lived in barracks constructed for them at the Jackson Park site. One of these construction workers was Elias Disney, father of the man who later built amusement parks that would rival the White City's fame.

Not only was it beautiful, it was also big. Chicago's Columbian Exposition, which occupied more than six hundred acres, was three times larger than the largest previous exposition. The 1876 Philadelphia Exposition had attracted 10 million visitors; the Chicago exposition, however, drew 27 million attendees between 1 May 1893 and 30 October 1893. In its final months, the exposition enjoyed an average daily attendance of 150,000. Seventy-two foreign nations sent exhibits to the fair; nineteen of them, along with thirty-eight U.S. states, erected their own buildings to show off their wares. One building at the exposition—the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building—was the largest building in the world: it covered forty-four acres of space, contained eleven acres of skylights in its roof, and accommodated 150,000 visitors at one time. Other “theme buildings” housed exhibits in machinery, transportation, agriculture, electricity, mines, anthropology, forestry, aquatic life, and the arts. A Women's Building proclaimed the triumphs of the world's women, while a Children's Building housed both educational exhibits and a functioning nursery (where, in the words of one visitor, “babies are tenderly cared for by sweet-faced nurses in snowy caps and aprons”).³² One building was constructed in downtown Chicago along the lakefront to house the various international parliaments and public speeches that accompanied the fair; this building is the present Chicago Art Institute.

As in all fairs, some exhibits were merely mediocre. Missouri sent a woman who sculpted objects out of butter, visitors to Pennsylvania's exhibit were subjected to a map of the United States made out of pickles, and on the Midway one could see a two-headed pig. These were the exceptions, however. Most visitors were treated to some truly incredible sights. Moveable sidewalks transported visitors over the half-mile pier that reached into Lake Michigan. The Electricity Building glowed at night thanks to nearly 130,000 electric lightbulbs. For visitors who knew only of kerosene lamps and candles, the Electricity Building's lights seemed a miracle. Chicago answered Paris's Eiffel Tower by unveiling the world's first Ferris wheel. Designed by thirty-four-year-old bridge designer George Washington Ferris, it was a monstrous thing that stood 140 feet high, accommodated sixty passengers in each of its thirty-six glass-enclosed cabs, held 2,160 riders at one time, and rotated on a



Millions were dazzled by the 1893 Colombian Exposition, which was often called the White City because of its brilliant plaster neo-classical buildings. In an era when many



feared that the city was a hopeless source of evil ugliness and immortality, the seemingly perfect White City sent a more optimistic message. Chicago Historical Society, IChi-23142

forty-five-ton axle (the largest piece of steel ever forged at that time). Gondoliers in fifteenth-century garb moved serenely across the fair's large lagoons. Exhibits included a reproduction of Christopher Columbus's *Santa Maria*, which was anchored in the South Pond, a demonstration of gold mining in South Africa, electric calculating machines, and Thomas Edison's kinetoscope, a forerunner of the movie projector. Typical of the state-of-the-art displays one could behold at the fair were the awe-inspiring cannons built by Germany's Krupp Iron Works. These were the largest guns ever built: nearly sixty feet long, weighing 127 tons, able to propel shells sixteen miles.

The Midway Plaisance offered visitors a glimpse of life and culture around the globe, as it contained a mock Eskimo village, a traditional Irish cottage, a Java village, a German village (complete with castle, moat, drawbridge, palisades, and peasants' huts), "Old Cairo" (complete with camel drivers), and an African village. For many visitors to the fair, the Midway offered a kind of evolutionary yardstick against which the triumphs of modern man could be measured. Not coincidentally, the most westernized nations' Midway exhibits were located at the Plaisance's east end, nearest the White City; the "least civilized" cultures, such as the African village, were located at the Midway's western end. After strolling amid sod-roofed huts, open cooking fires, and scantily clad natives on the Midway, one stepped into the utopian White City with its electric lights, moveable sidewalks, and glistening faux marble walls. The implicit message regarding the "progress" of the races was unmistakable. "From the Bedouins of the desert and the South Sea Islanders," wrote Marian Shaw, a journalist who toured the Midway, "one can here trace, from living models, the progress of the human race from savagery and barbarism through all the intermediate stages to a condition still many degrees removed from the advanced civilization of the nineteenth century."³³

Promotional posters billed the exposition as "forming in its entirety the most significant and grandest spectacle of modern times." Most visitors agreed with that assessment. Richard Harding Davis, a leading American journalist, called the fair "the greatest event in the history of the country since the Civil War."³⁴ One observer from Scotland praised the White City as "perhaps the most flawless and fairy-like creation, on a large scale, of man's invention."³⁵ A man who traveled all the way from New Zealand to see the exposition left "feeling assured that if I lived to the age of some of the most ancient patriarchs I could never again have a chance of beholding its superior or even its equal."³⁶ Hamlin Garland de-

scribed the experience of his elderly parents from the rural Dakotas: "The wonder and the beauty of it all moved these dwellers of the level lands to tears of joy which was almost as poignant as pain."³⁷ The exposition even overwhelmed American cultural leader Henry Adams, a man not easily overwhelmed. "At Chicago," quipped Adams, "educational game started like rabbits at every building, and ran out of sight among thousands of its kind before one could mark its burrow."³⁸ Constructed and landscaped in three years, the exposition's utopian city impressed nearly all comers and also turned a profit for its backers.

It is difficult, however, to assess the meaning or the significance of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. It was a clear example of the sense of optimism and confidence that pervaded the United States and western Europe around 1900. The world had seen no major world war for almost eighty years. Science and technology were on the march. Medical knowledge was improving. Most Western thinkers thought man could usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity. The White City seemed to capture this confidence that utopia was possible. Significantly, these modern people thought that utopia would be found, not in a garden (as in the biblical Eden), but rather in a city. Consider the *Chicago Tribune's* farewell as the exposition came to a close. It bid a fond good-bye "to a little ideal world, a realization of utopia, in which every night was beautiful and every day a festival, in which for the time all thoughts of the great world of toil, of injustice, of cruelty, and of oppression outside its gates disappeared, and in which this splendid fantasy of the artist and architect seemed to foreshadow some far-away time when all the earth should be as pure, as beautiful, and as joyous as the white city itself."³⁹

There is little doubt that Chicagoans hosted the exposition as a way of promoting the city. They routinely told visitors that the real exhibit was Chicago itself, the urban phoenix that had burned to the ground only twenty years earlier. Influential Chicagoans were so concerned about their city's image that they actually bribed the city's criminals to keep them away from the White City. Any pickpockets caught at the exposition paid an immediate \$10 fee to the arresting officer; that gave policemen an incentive to watch the pickpockets. But all pickpockets arrested downtown between the hours of 8 A.M. and 4 P.M. would be immediately released upon arrival at the police station. In other words, pickpockets were given free reign in the city during those hours when visitors would be touring the White City.

In the end, the exposition was a skillful weaving of Chicago boosterism, American flag-waving, and international fair. Visitors came to see

what the world (and especially the United States) had to offer. They left convinced that Chicago was one of the world's great cities. In 1964, when Time Incorporated and *Life* magazine published its popular *Life History of the United States*, it entitled its eight-page discussion of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition "Coming-of-Age Party in Chicago." But what exactly had come of age, and for whom was the party thrown? Was it the United States? Or was it Chicago? The exposition's ambiguity is what made it so important. Perhaps it was only fitting that the White City met its demise in an equally ambiguous fashion. The fair ended just as the United States entered an acute and painful economic depression. Legions of Chicago's poor, unemployed, and homeless squatters took up residence in the abandoned shells of the White City. In July 1894, federal soldiers and striking railroad workers clashed at the abandoned White City, and a raging fire broke out. The inferno engulfed the entire frame-and-plaster White City; city residents traveled to Jackson Park to watch the spectacle. Just as the old frontier Chicago had ended in a great fire, so did the modern city end in fire as well. Only two Columbian Exposition buildings stand today: the former Fine Arts Palace, which functions as the present-day Museum of Science and Industry, and the present-day Art Institute. The exposition's Midway Plaisance remains as well, linking Jackson Park and Washington Park while fronting the University of Chicago. Although little remains from the 1893 fair, its meaning to a growing city and a nation rising to prominence was profound.

* * * *

What do the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the Haymarket Bombing of 1886, and the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 tell us? Among other things, they reveal the deep ambivalence and sense of uneasiness that Americans harbored toward cities in the second half of the 1800s.⁴⁰ It was during the late nineteenth century that Americans moved in large numbers from the farm to the city, but they made this move with deep reservations. The city was widely perceived as a dangerous, evil, and unnatural place. According to the era's conventional wisdom, gambling halls, labor radicalism, saloons, brothels, and atheism did not flourish in the cornfields of Iowa, the cotton patches of Mississippi, or the family farms of Indiana. Vice and disorder, many Americans assumed, were the special province of the city. "The city has become a serious menace to our civilization," explained Josiah Strong, an influential American minister in the late 1880s, "because in it . . . each of the dangers we have discussed is

enhanced, and all are focalized.”⁴¹ In his blockbuster 1891 book *Our Country: Its Possible Future and the Present Crisis*, Strong wrote, “Here is heaped the social dynamite; here the roughs, gamblers, thieves, robbers, lawless and desperate men of all sorts, congregate; men who are ready on any pretext to raise riots for the purpose of destruction and plunder.”⁴² No one could deny the city’s commercial successes, but many wondered if they were paying too high a price for economic development.

Perhaps this ambivalence toward the city explains why the fire, the bomb, and the fair captured Americans’ imaginations to the extent that they did. The Great Chicago Fire was a disaster so enormous and so sweeping that it seemed the ultimate act of divine judgment, wiping out the very heart of the wicked and unbelieving city. That city leaders could never definitively pin the blame for the fire on Mrs. O’Leary, her cow, or anyone or anything else only seemed to underscore the providential nature of the conflagration. Did not the fire prove that life in the city was unnecessarily dangerous? Did it not prove that the city was excessively and fatally unnatural, an act of human will that would inevitably perish in a judgment of fire? It was in this context that two myths were born. One was the myth of Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. It was important that Chicagoans attribute the fire to something other than an act of Providence; it is revealing that they pinned the blame on a poor and careless Irish immigrant and her animal. The second myth proved equally enduring: the myth of the city’s Phoenix-like rebirth. The story of the city’s rebuilding transformed the fire from disaster into blessing. By dint of their wills, Chicagoans rebuilt their city better than it was before. Humans triumphed over the fire in the long run; the fire did not win. The Great Chicago Fire became an American success story, one that city dwellers could tell themselves in order to put to rest any lingering concerns about the wrongness of the city.

The bomb touched an even deeper nerve. The Haymarket rally itself was not a large one, few people died in the affair, no citywide riot followed the incident, and even prosecutors conceded that blame for the bombing could not be determined. And yet the Haymarket bombing became a national event, because it highlighted deep anxieties regarding labor radicalism, urban unrest, safety, and law and order. The Haymarket bombing pushed to the surface all those things that Americans most feared about their cities. They seemed full of strange immigrants, Europeans who may not fully embrace the “American way” of doing things. They seemed hotbeds of labor unrest, socialism, and communism, and they seemingly posed real threats to the American capitalist

system that had allowed many Anglo-Americans to enjoy unprecedented prosperity. Cities seemingly nurtured anarchism and lawlessness, threatening the safety of law-abiding citizens everywhere.

It was essential, then, for the city to respond to the Haymarket bombing swiftly and definitively. Far more than the Haymarket anarchists were on trial in Chicago: the American city was on trial as well. Editorials in the newspapers of other large American cities cried out for death penalties, in part to deter their own labor radicals and in part to vindicate the American city. Order had to be restored. In convicting the accused—although all the defendants presented credible explanations for why they could not have thrown the bomb—the court sought order more than it did justice. Talking about bombs was judged as serious as throwing bombs, because talking about them disrupted urban harmony.

The World's Columbian Exposition was an attempt to show Americans and the world that urban harmony, in the form of a utopian city—the White City—was possible. Good planning and human willpower could in time perfect the city. For example, one of Chicago's most vexing problems—the problem of clean drinking water—was solved ingeniously at the White City. Daniel Burnham constructed a water purification plant at Jackson Park (something the city itself did not have at the time), installed newly invented Pasteur filters on the White City's drinking fountains, and built a 101-mile-long pipe to bring pure mineral water from Waukesha, Wisconsin, directly to the White City. The fair stood as an example of what was possible, as proof that urban disorder was not inevitable. The White City was by design a city of illusions, an answer to those critics who rejected urban life as hopelessly lawless, dirty, and unwholesome. At least in some sense, the Columbian Exposition was born of urban defensiveness. The White City was a vivid display of the indomitable human spirit amid the people's deep reservations about the emerging American city.

The fire, the bomb, and the fair occurred within this context of late-nineteenth-century apprehensions regarding the American city. Urban leaders managed these events to combat the perception that cities were dangerous, immoral, and unnatural. In their capable hands, the events served as redemptive opportunities. Of course, Chicagoans were not alone in this enterprise of legitimizing the urban project; similar urban myths, with similar themes, were crafted in other cities. Perhaps not surprisingly, the anti-urban diatribes of people like Josiah Strong almost disappeared in the early twentieth century. The American city had been validated, in part because of the fire, the bomb, and the fair.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEW

IMMIGRATION,

1880 - 1920

- Chicago's story is in many ways the story of newcomers to the city: French missionaries and trappers in the 1600s, Anglo-American frontiersmen in the 1700s and early 1800s, Irish laborers and German skilled craftsmen in the first half of the 1800s, German and Bohemian laborers in the immediate post-Civil War years. Even so, nothing compares with the large numbers of immigrants who came to the city in the years between 1880 and 1920. All told, about 2.5 million European immigrants—most from southern and eastern Europe—came to the city during that period.

As late as 1880, the Irish and Germans remained the largest immigrant groups in the city. These pre-1880 immigrants—a product of what historians call “the old immigration”—were quite different from the newcomers who constituted the “new immigration” of the 1880s, 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s. Most of the pre-1880 immigrants hailed from northern and western Europe. Many (for example, the Irish, the British, and Canadians) already spoke English and were familiar with Anglo-American culture. This made it easier for them to assimilate, to transact business with native Anglo-American Chicagoans, or to compete in the local political arena. Other pre-1880 immigrants (for example, Germans) possessed skills that proved invaluable in a growing city that was making the transition from preindustrial frontier town to modern metropolis.

The new immigration, however, brought millions of immigrants to the United States from southern and eastern Europe. The chief peoples in this wave of immigration were Poles, Italians, Bohemians, and Russian Jews. Unlike the Irish, these immigrants spoke no English, and most were penniless and uneducated. They rarely possessed a trade that could translate into a skilled job. The new immigrants were often scorned by both native Anglo-Americans and the older, more established immigrants. Some immigrant groups (such as the Poles) created tightly knit ethnic communities and clung together for support. Other immigrant

groups (such as Italians) were often made up of men who arrived without their families, worked for several years, saved their wages, and returned to Europe.

Chicago was not unusual in receiving 2 million European immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The new immigration was a national phenomenon, and more than 23 million people came to America between 1880 and 1920. By 1910, foreign-born immigrants and their children accounted for more than 70 percent of the populations of New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Boston, Milwaukee, and Buffalo and for between 50 and 70 percent of the populations of San Francisco, Newark, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati. A U.S. government survey of twenty-one industries in 1910 discovered that 58 percent of all industrial workers were foreign-born; about two-thirds of these foreign-born workers were "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe.

POLES AND GROUP SOLIDARITY

The first Polish immigrants came to Chicago in the 1850s. The number of Poles in the city remained small, perhaps reaching 2,000 by 1870. By 1890, the number of first- and second-generation Poles in Chicago reached 40,000. That number grew to 210,000 by 1910 and to 401,000 by 1930. These Poles came from one of the last feudal societies in Europe and therefore possessed only the rudimentary agricultural skills of peasant serfs. Few were craftsmen, fewer still were professionals, many were illiterate, and all were poor. Polish immigrants moved to American cities that were home to heavy industrial factories, cities such as Chicago and Buffalo. In Chicago, the majority of Poles took jobs in the steel mills, the stockyards, or the city's many factories. They were paid poorly, in part because they took unskilled jobs and in part because employers discriminated against them.

The influx of new immigrants created five distinct Polish neighborhoods in Chicago by 1890. The largest was the Polish Downtown on the Near Northwest Side (close to Division and Ashland Streets). In this small neighborhood three-fourths of a mile long and one-half of a mile wide, 86 percent of the residents were Polish. They were serviced by two of the largest Polish Catholic parishes in the world, St. Stanislaw Kostka and Holy Trinity. The other major Polish neighborhood was located in South Chicago near the city's sprawling steel mills. Seventy-two percent

Table 1. IMMIGRATION TO CHICAGO, 1830–1980

	<i>approx. number of immigrants</i>	<i>largest immigrant groups</i>
1830s	12,000	Germans, Irish, Norwegians
1840s	16,000	Irish, Germans
1850s	55,000	Germans, Irish
1860s	145,000	Germans, Irish, Bohemians, English
1870s	205,000	Germans, Swedes, Bohemians, Canadians
1880s	451,000	Germans, Swedes, Irish, Poles, Norwegians
1890s	587,000	Poles, Russians, Dutch, Italians, Bohemians
1900s	783,000	Russians, Austrians, Poles, Italians, Hungarians
1910s	809,000	Italians, Poles, Czechs
1920s	859,000	Italians, Lithuanians, Poles, Mexicans
1930s	673,000	not available
1940s	526,000	Europeans displaced by World War II
1950s	438,000	English-speaking peoples
1960s	374,000	Hispanics
1970s	230,000	Hispanics, Indians, East Asians

Source: "Introduction: Ethnic Life in Chicago," in Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones, eds., *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 5.

of area residents here were Polish. Other significant Polish communities took root in the Lower West Side (adjacent to major rail lines, several large factories, and the Illinois and Michigan Canal) and two neighborhoods near the Union Stock Yards.

Most noticeable in Chicago's Polish immigrant community was the process of building what scholars have termed "institutional completeness." Polish immigrants created Polish institutions to assist them as they adapted to life in America. The Poles' preference for Polish institutions over preexisting American institutions did not subside as their years in America passed. In many ways, the Poles resisted assimilation.

Polish immigrants to Chicago first created death-benefit societies. These organizations amounted to burial insurance cooperatives: men contributed money to the society each year, and the society pledged to provide the member with a proper Polish burial. By pooling their

Table 2. EUROPEAN-BORN IMMIGRANTS IN CHICAGO, 1890 AND 1920

<i>country</i>	<i>1890</i>	<i>1920</i>
Germany	161,000	112,000
Ireland	70,000	57,000
Sweden	43,000	59,000
Great Britain	38,000	38,000
Czechoslovakia	25,000	50,000
Poland	24,000	138,000
Norway	22,000	20,000
Russia	8,000	102,000
Denmark	7,000	11,000
Italy	6,000	59,000
Austria	6,000	30,000
Lithuania	—	19,000
Netherlands	5,000	9,000
France	2,500	—
Hungary	—	26,000
Greece	—	12,000
Yugoslavia	—	10,000

Source: Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A. Jones, ed., *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 548–50.

resources, Poles prevented financial hardships such as paying for expensive burials from being passed on to their surviving families. These death-benefit societies soon expanded and sponsored social activities. Polish immigrants also established building and loan associations. For men and women who had lived as landless serfs in the Old Country, owning a home in Chicago became a priority. Men contributed money to the association until they had accumulated enough funds to make a down payment on a house. The association then extended a low-interest loan to the member. The system worked: the percentage of Polish families who owned their homes was double the citywide average. Poles in Chicago also established an orphanage and industrial school, four Polish cemeteries, two day nurseries, an old-age home, a hospital, and three Polish-language daily newspapers. With the notable exception of their

Table 3. THE CHANGING NATURE OF IMMIGRATION:
OLD AND NEW IMMIGRATION IN CHICAGO, 1860–1920

<i>percentage of total population of Chicago</i>				
	<i>Germans</i>	<i>Irish</i>	<i>Scandinavians</i>	<i>East and South Europeans</i>
1860	19%	18%	2%	< 1%
1890	15	6	7	6
1920	4	2	3	14

<i>percentage of foreign-born population of Chicago</i>				
	<i>Germans</i>	<i>Irish</i>	<i>Scandinavians</i>	<i>East and South Europeans</i>
1860	39%	36%	4%	< 1%
1890	36	16	16	14
1920	14	6	11	48

Source: Irving Cutler, *Chicago: Metropolis of the Mid-Continent*, 3d ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1982), 55.

workplace, Poles could live in a largely Polish world where they did business with and sought assistance from their countrymen.

Perhaps the most significant and powerful of Polish institutions was the Polish Catholic Church. By 1910, 140,000 out of the 210,000 Poles in Chicago were church members. More so than for any other immigrant group, the church was the focal point of community life in the Polish neighborhoods. At St. Stanislaw Kostka in 1919, for example, seventy-four parish societies—ranging from the Club of St. Rose (which did needlework) to the Court of Frederic Chopin—provided cultural activities for parishioners. Every Polish Catholic church also had its own parochial school. The schools' purpose was to preserve the Polish youths' sense of religious and cultural heritage. While people of other ethnic groups worshiped in Roman Catholic churches and built church-affiliated schools, none were so committed to parochial schools as the Polish. Sixty percent of all Polish children attended parochial schools in

Table 4. IMMIGRATION TO THE TEN LARGEST U.S. CITIES

1860		1890		1920	
city ranked by population	percent foreign born	city ranked by population	percent foreign born	city ranked by population	percent foreign born
New York	48%	New York	42%	New York	36%
Philadelphia	29	Chicago	41	Chicago	30
Brooklyn	39	Philadelphia	26	Philadelphia	22
Baltimore	25	Brooklyn	33	Detroit	29
Boston	36	St. Louis	25	Cleveland	30
New Orleans	38	Boston	35	St. Louis	13
Cincinnati	46	Baltimore	16	Boston	32
St. Louis	60	San Francisco	42	Baltimore	12
Chicago	50	Cincinnati	24	Pittsburgh	21
Buffalo	46	Cleveland	37	Los Angeles	21

Source: Raymond A. Mohl, *The New City: Urban America in the Industrial Age, 1860-1920*, (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1985), 20.

1920; by comparison, only one of the ten Italian Roman Catholic parishes even operated its own parochial school.

Because their churches were so important, Chicago's Poles found themselves involved in a bitter fight over their control. At least in theory, the Roman Catholic Church was *catholic*. It claimed to transcend national boundaries and ethnic differences. In practice, however, ethnic divisions within Chicago's Roman Catholic Church were sharp. The Irish controlled the administrative positions within the local Catholic hierarchy, largely because they had come to Chicago first, were numerous, and could speak English. The Polish Catholics chafed at this. They sought to own their churches, to enjoy the leadership of Polish priests, and to determine local church matters for themselves. In short, Poles sought independence and autonomy within the Roman Catholic Church.

The Irish leaders of Chicago's archdiocese refused. They insisted that churches were owned by the archdiocese and that the archdiocese alone appointed priests. What resulted was a protracted struggle between Pol-

ish and Irish Catholics in Chicago, a struggle that began almost as soon as the first Polish parish was started in 1869. The battle came to a head in 1916 with the appointment of George William Mundelein, a German American who served as archbishop of Chicago until 1939. A fierce Americanizer, Mundelein was determined to squash all vestiges of ethnic churches in Chicago. He deliberately appointed Polish priests to non-Polish parishes, halted the building of purely national parishes, and standardized parochial school curriculum (which included a policy of instruction in English only). The Poles resisted, and Mundelein backed down. Chicago's Polish Catholics never created the autonomous ethnic parishes they desired, but their unity forced Mundelein to grant them a degree of national separatism. Local Poles won a qualified victory over the indomitable Mundelein, who continued assigning Polish priests to Polish parishes. This decision created *de facto* Polish national parishes despite Mundelein's desires.

The Poles successfully resisted Mundelein because they displayed a group solidarity that did not weaken. That same unity, however, prevented them from wielding political power and rising to the upper echelons of the local business community, and it has prevented them from producing from among their numbers such professionals as doctors, lawyers, and professors in similar proportion to those produced by other ethnic groups. Refusing to bargain and to ally themselves with other ethnic groups (such as the Irish and Czechs), Poles attempted to vote as a bloc. One historian calls this bloc political behavior a "drive for recognition" on the part of Poles.¹ Although Poles succeeded in electing a few local officials, significant victories eluded them. The bloc strategy failed in a polyglot city like Chicago, where political winners were those who fashioned coalitions of different ethnic groups. Poles lacked the clear majority necessary to carry elections without coalitions, and their ethnic solidarity alarmed other less numerous ethnic groups in the city.

Historian Edward R. Kantowicz makes an intriguing connection between ethnic solidarity and economic success. Perhaps securing the American Dream of upward mobility and personal wealth requires an atomistic, or individualistic, pursuit of success. Poles were community-oriented. Few Polish immigrants invested their meager savings in second-hand goods, loaded those goods into a sack, hopped onto the trolley car early in the morning, rode across town to a different ethnic neighborhood, and spent the day hawking their wares. Chicago's Polish newspapers exhorted its readers to "*Swój do Swego*" ("support your own"). Far from encouraging commercial relationships that transcended

ethnic boundaries, such pleas advocated economic nationalism. Poles worked their shifts at the factory and returned home to family and church. Perhaps more than any other ethnic group, Poles defined success in terms of economic stability (but not affluence or prosperity), tightly knit communities (but not individualistic triumphs), and religious (as opposed to secular) security. They were not risk-takers who speculated and invested. Instead, they faithfully labored in their factory and stockyard jobs, content to see their wages rise modestly but steadily. Kantowicz concludes, "If Polish immigrants came to America seeking primarily bread, a home, and a better standard of living for their families, and at the same time they tried to preserve their communal lifestyle as much as possible, the conclusion is inescapable that they got what they wanted and have been successful on their own terms."²

ITALIANS AND TEMPORARY IMMIGRATION

Italians first immigrated to Chicago in the 1850s and numbered only 1,400 as late as 1880. When numerous immigrants flooded into the city beginning in the late nineteenth century, Chicago's Italian-born population rose to 5,700 by 1890, 16,000 by 1900, 45,000 by 1910, and 59,000 by 1920. So many Italians relocated to Chicago that the Italian government opened a consular office in the city in 1887. Most of these newcomers were not from the prosperous, industrialized states of northern Italy; rather, they were overwhelmingly poor, illiterate farmers (or *contadini*) from southern and central Italy.

Three immigration patterns distinguished the Italians from most other immigrants. First, Italians, more than any other group of Europeans, planned temporary stays in America. Often a wage-earning male would make the voyage to America alone, work in the United States for five years, save his wages, and return to Italy. Perhaps half of all Italian immigrants returned to Italy as they had planned. This was one reason the city's Italians were long underrepresented in local politics. Although numerous (they supported five Italian-language newspapers), the frequent exodus of immigrants for Italy and their replacement by new, inexperienced men made it difficult for the Italians to organize themselves politically.

Second, many Italian immigrants found work through the *padrone* system. New arrivals would make contact with an Italian labor broker (called a *padrone*) who usually spoke English. The *padrone* would then

find work and negotiate wages for his workers. The system worked well for many Italian men: they had no family responsibilities (so they could quickly move from one neighborhood to another to find work), they had no interest in acquiring career skills (because they planned on returning to Italy), and they had little reason to learn English. The system made it easy for the *padrone* to exploit his workers, however. He made his living by skimming a percentage of his workers' wages.

Third, Italian immigrants practiced *campanilismo*. The men from entire villages in southern Italy would often immigrate en masse to America; these men then took up residence with friends, neighbors, and relatives from the Old Country. Chicago reformer Jane Addams observed that often an entire tenement house would be filled with Italian tenants hailing from the same village. In effect, whole villages (minus many wives and children) immigrated intact. For example, men from Naples and Messina lived in Chicago's Near West Side community, immigrants from Palermo and Catania lived on the Near North Side, and men from Genoa lived in the south end of the Loop (near the present-day Merchandise Mart). Settlement patterns such as this enabled first-generation Italian immigrants to preserve much of their ethnic heritage and many of their customs. These immigrants were not isolated, atomized Italians tossed into the American melting pot; they were immigrants who in many ways transplanted their Italian villages to Chicago and preserved traditional folkways.

The largest Italian neighborhood in Chicago—home to one-third of the city's Italians—was located in the Near West Side near Taylor Street and Hull-House. By any measure, this area qualified as a slum. The Italian immigrants' intention to return to Italy accounts for their poor living conditions. Men unburdened by families simply piled into cheap, filthy, overpopulated boarding houses. Few bought their own property. Other Italian neighborhoods, all likewise crowded and dirty, were located at the south end of the Loop and on the Near Northwest Side. Perhaps the most colorful Italian enclave was located on the Near North Side in an area that was known as Little Sicily or Little Hell. It had been an Irish shanty town until the massive immigration of Sicilians to the area at the turn of the century. Centered around West Division Street, the neighborhood was isolated by poor transportation and the river, and it remained virtually untouched by American ways, "a transplantation of Sicilian village life in the heart of a hurrying American city."³

Because most Italian immigrants to Chicago were *contadini*, they preferred not to work indoors in the city's steel mills, meatpacking houses,

and factories. They instead sought outdoor work, as they had done in Italy. Accordingly, most Italians in Chicago held unskilled jobs as railroad laborers, construction workers, or small-scale fruit and vegetable vendors. Railroad work was especially demanding: twelve-hour workdays, hard labor, bad food, tyrannical foremen, low pay (about \$1.50 per day), and housing in railroad boxcars. Carl Sandburg painted this picture of the poor Italian railroad laborer in his poem entitled "Child of the Romans," published in 1916:

The dago shovelman sits by the railroad track
 Eating a noon meal of bread and bologna.
 A train whirls by, and men and women at tables
 Alive with red roses and yellow jonquils,
 Eat steaks running with brown gravy,
 Strawberries and cream, eclaires and coffee.
 The dago shovelman finishes the dry bread and bologna,
 Washes it down with a dipper from the water-boy,
 And goes back to the second half of a ten-hour day's work
 Keeping the road-bed so the roses and jonquils
 Shake hardly at all in the cut glass vases
 Standing slender on the tables in the dining cars.

The Italians' apparent lack of preparation for city life led even a sympathetic reformer such as Jane Addams to observe paternalistically, "The South Italians more than any other immigrants represent the pathetic stupidity of agricultural people crowded into city tenements."⁴ Italians never wielded much political power in the city, a fact that was attributed by contemporaries to Italians' political backwardness but was more likely a result of their fierce independence. When coupled with the high repatriation rate among Italian immigrants, Italians' reluctance to forge political coalitions with other ethnic groups meant that they were not political leaders in the city.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect about Chicago's Italian immigrants was their relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. With the Church headquartered in the heart of Italy, one would expect Italians to be the most loyal of Catholics. This was not the case for Italians in Chicago. Most southern and central Italians were disaffected with the Roman Catholic Church. In Italy, the church often sided with wealthy landowners who routinely exploited the *contadini*. These impoverished farmers saw the Catholic Church more as an adversary than as an ally.

Local conditions seemed to confirm that perception. It was the city's Irish who controlled the local Roman Catholic diocese, and the Irish church leaders did not accept the Italian newcomers. Having long been alienated from the Catholic Church in Italy, many *contadini* fashioned a folk religion based more on magic, mysticism, and charms than on Christianity. For example, it was common to see Italian immigrants carrying or wearing a *cornio*—a goat's horn made of coral—to protect them from the evil eye.

At least initially, Chicago priests in the Italian neighborhoods were horrified by the conspicuous synthesis of pagan and Christian beliefs they saw. Italian priests—who came to Chicago beginning in 1903—were able to reverse this antichurch sentiment. They paid special attention to meeting the immigrants' social and cultural needs and in so doing almost singlehandedly preserved the Italians' sense of community in Chicago. As a result, they won thousands of estranged Catholics back to their church. Whereas the Italian community's commitment to the Catholic Church had been weak in 1900, by 1930 it was strong and vibrant. Together with Italian-language newspapers and Italian benevolent societies, the Church offered guidance to and provided leadership for Italian immigrants in Chicago.

EASTERN EUROPEAN JEWS AND UPWARD MOBILITY

Only about 10,000 Jews lived in Chicago in 1880. Most of these were highly assimilated German Jews, and visitors to Chicago at that time would have been hard-pressed to find a Jewish neighborhood in the city. By 1900, another 70,000 Jews had come to the city, and by 1930 the city's Jewish population had swelled to 275,000. With that number, Chicago boasted the third-largest Jewish population of any city in the world, behind only New York City and Warsaw, Poland. Eighty percent of these recent Jewish immigrants hailed from eastern European areas such as Russia, Poland, and the eastern portions of Austria-Hungary. Most settled southwest of Chicago's downtown and took over an area that had been populated by Germans, Czechs, and the Irish. Bounded by Canal Street, Damen Avenue, Polk Street, and Sixteenth Street, this area became the city's Jewish neighborhood. Housing was cheap, crowded, and dangerous.

The heart of this thriving, squalid, teeming Jewish neighborhood was the corner of Maxwell and Halsted Streets. Hundreds of peddlers



Maxwell Street around 1910, heart of the Jewish commercial district and home to hundreds of street peddlers. Notice the storefront signs in Hebrew. As this photograph shows, some women wore traditional clothing, while others preferred dressing "like the Yankees." Chicago Historical Society, IChi-19155; Barnes-Crosby photograph

jammed the street with their pushcarts, wagons, and stands. Potential customers forced their way through the crowds of people and the maze of shouting vendors. Little English was heard on Maxwell Street. All bartered, argued, cursed, and persuaded in Yiddish. One Chicagoan had these recollections of the area:

The smell of garlic and of cheeses, the aroma of onions, apples, and oranges, and the shouts and curses of sellers and buyers fill the air. Anything can be bought and sold on Maxwell Street. On one stand, piled high, are odd sizes of shoes long out of style; on another are copper kettles for brewing beer; on a third are second-hand pants; and one merchant even sells odd, broken pieces of spectacles, watches, and jewelry, together with pocket knives and household tools salvaged from the collections of junk peddlers. Everything has value on Maxwell Street, but the price is not fixed. It is the fixing of the price around which turns the whole plot of the drama enacted daily at the perpetual bazaar of Maxwell Street. . . . The sellers know how to ask ten times the amount that their wares will eventually sell for, and the buyers know how to offer a twentieth.⁵

The established Jewish immigrant who had accumulated sufficient capital could open a stand on Maxwell Street. One needed an inventory to sell there, but most newly arrived Jews were penniless. Many therefore embraced a job that required little capital and few craft skills: they became door-to-door salesmen. Bernard Horwich, who arrived in Chicago in 1880 at age seventeen, recalled what life was like for these Jewish peddlers:

They carried packs on their backs consisting of notions and light dry goods, and it was not an unusual sight to see hundreds of them who lived in the Canal Street district, in the early morning, spreading throughout the city. There was hardly a streetcar where there was not to be found some Jewish peddlers with their packs riding to and from their business. Peddling junk and vegetables, and selling various articles on street corners also engaged numbers of our people. Being out on the streets most of the time in these obnoxious occupations, and ignorant of the English language, they were subjected to ridicule, annoyance and attacks of all kinds.⁶

Peddling was difficult, but traveling throughout the various Chicago neighborhoods—and dealing with immigrants from other nationalities—imparted commercial skills to these vendors. Upward mobility

would come sooner rather than later for most Jewish immigrants.

For some, economic prosperity came very soon, often within one generation. While most eastern European Jews managed just to scrape by, their children often fared quite well. Joseph Goldberg, for instance, immigrated to Chicago from Russia around 1900. Working in the Maxwell Street area, he bought a blind horse and sold fruits and vegetables. His son, Arthur, served in President John F. Kennedy's cabinet and became a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Samuel Paley, who also lived near Maxwell Street, made cigars. His son, William, founded and became president of the Columbia Broadcasting System. David Goodman and Abraham Rickover worked as tailors in Chicago; their sons were musician Benny Goodman and U.S. Naval Commander Hyman C. Rickover. Barnet Balabin, whose father owned a small grocery store near Maxwell Street, became president of Paramount Pictures. It was possible, then, for Jewish immigrants in Chicago to succeed within one generation.

It was Chicago's established German Jewish community that experienced the most conflict with these new Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. The more recent immigrants were an embarrassment to the established German Jews who had lived in Chicago for several decades. German Jews tended to be cosmopolitan, highly assimilated, and well accepted by Chicago's native Anglo-Americans. Eastern European Jews, in contrast, were provincial and remained wedded to Old World customs. Whereas German Jews dressed much like Anglo-Americans, Jewish men from eastern Europe wore long beards and long black coats, and their wives wore kerchiefs or wigs and billowing black "peasant dresses." German Jews modified their Jewish faith into what would be called Reform Judaism, which meant that they dined with their gentile friends, ate gentile food, and were not averse to shopping or to recreation on Saturday. Eastern European Jews embraced orthodox beliefs, which meant they remained kosher, preserved their Sabbath, and maintained Talmud Torah, or Jewish religious schools. As successful businessmen, the German Jews could match any Anglo-American's scorn for labor radicalism and anarchism. Eastern European Jews, however, were often in the vanguard of Chicago's radical labor protests. As one Chicago rabbi put it, Chicago's Jews were "divided by pecuniary, intellectual, and social distinctions, provincial jealousies, and even religious distinctions and differences."⁷

Motivated by both compassion and self-interest, Chicago's German Jews invested large sums of money in institutions and projects that

promised to speed up the eastern European immigrants' assimilation. Sears, Roebuck and Company president Julius Rosenwald, for example, helped fund the Chicago Hebrew Institute in 1908. The institute consisted of classrooms, clubrooms, a library, gymnasiums, assembly halls, and a synagogue. Backers touted the institute as a place where both younger and older Jews could meet and relax. In truth, the German Jewish patrons hoped they could encourage the assimilation of their benighted fellow Jews. The eastern European Jews resented such condescension and established their own support organizations.

By 1910, the flight of eastern European Jews from the Jewish ghetto was on. Many had accumulated substantial savings and could afford better housing. Why did the Jewish immigrants experience such rapid economic success? Perhaps because, more so than any other immigrant group, eastern European Jews came to America without any thought of returning to the Old Country. Anti-Semitism had been rife in eastern Europe, so many European Jews had no desire to return. They therefore threw themselves into their work with a view toward long-term economic success.

Factories and railroad tracks consumed more and more land in the Jewish neighborhoods, which pushed families westward. As the Jews vacated the Maxwell Street area, many African Americans—newly arrived in the “Great Migration” to Chicago from the South that occurred following World War I—took their places. By the 1930s, few Jews remained in what had become, and still is today, a predominantly black community.

GREEKS AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS

Chicago was home to a small Greek community in 1880 that numbered only several hundred. Most Greeks lived on the North Side near Clark, Kinzie, and South Water Streets. By 1910, however, fifteen thousand Greeks lived in the city. Although small in comparison to the number of Poles, Italians, or Jews in the city, the Greek community in Chicago was one of the oldest and largest such settlements in the United States. Most of the newer Greek immigrants settled on the Near West Side, displacing Italians and creating a community that came to be known as Greek Town or the Delta. Greek Town was bounded by Halsted, Harrison, Blue Island, and Polk Streets. This description of Greek Town in 1911 suggests a tightly knit community:

Practically all stores bear signs in both Greek and English, coffee houses flourish on every corner, in the dark little grocery stores one sees black olives, dried ink-fish, tomato paste, and all the queer, nameless roots and condiments which are so familiar in Greece. On every hand one hears the Greek language, and the boys in the streets and on the vacant lots play, with equal zest, Greek games and baseball. It is a self-sufficient colony, and provision is made to supply all the wants of the Greek immigrant in as near as possible the Greek way. Restaurants, coffee-houses, barber-shops, grocery stores, and saloons are patterned after the Greek type, and Greek doctors, lawyers, editors, and every variety of agent are to be found in abundance.⁸

Although few in number, the Greeks made an immediate impact on the city. In addition to taking the Italians' housing, they also took their jobs. Contemporaries described the Greek immigrants as so fiercely individualistic that they found it difficult to work harmoniously with others. The "true Greek," observed one Chicago newspaper in the late 1890s, "will not work at hard manual labor like digging sewers, carrying the hod, or building railways. He is either an artisan or a merchant, generally the latter."⁹ Many Greeks turned to private business and especially to the fruit-peddling trade. This put them in direct competition with the more numerous Italian peddlers. It was a battle the Greeks won, largely because of their entrepreneurial spirit. One historian observes, "Wherever one [the Greek immigrant] turned in America, the admonition was to work hard, save, invest, succeed, and become independent."¹⁰ By 1895, a local newspaper reported: "The Greeks have almost run the Italians out of the fruit business in Chicago not only in a small retail way, but as wholesalers as well, for the big wholesale fruit houses on South Water Street are nearly all owned by men from the isles of burning Sappho. As a result, there is a bitter feud between these two races, as deeply seated as the enmity that engendered the Graeco-Roman wars."¹¹ It is estimated that ten thousand of eighteen thousand Greek Chicago men owned their own establishments in 1919.

CZECHS AND PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

The first Czech immigrants, also known as Bohemians, came to Chicago in the 1850s, and by 1870 they had built a significant community of 10,000 members. With the great waves of immigration after 1880, however, their numbers swelled. By 1895, 60,000 Czechs had cre-

ated a Bohemian enclave known as Pilsen; it was bordered by Sixteenth, Twenty-second, and Halsted Streets and Western Avenue. When that number soared to 110,000 by 1910, Chicago became one of the largest Czech centers in the world, second only to Prague.

The Czechs enjoyed more economic and political success than many other immigrant groups. To begin with, most Czech immigrants were not as poor as other newcomers, nor were they as poorly educated. Only about 2 percent of Czech immigrants were illiterate, compared with an illiteracy rate of 24 percent for all immigrants. Unlike the Italians, Czechs came to Chicago to stay, which translated into an insatiable desire to own property in the city. To this end, they founded numerous Czech building and loan associations that functioned as lending institutions for Czech home buyers; in 1910, 94 of the 197 such institutions in Chicago were owned by Czechs. One 1895 study describes the Czech penchant for penny-pinching and saving:

Often good artisans were compelled to work for low wages, even \$1.25 a day; still, out of this meager remuneration they managed to lay a little aside for that longed-for possession—a house and lot that they could call their own. When that was paid for, then the house received an additional story, and that was rented so that it began earning money. When more was saved, the house was pushed in the rear, the garden sacrificed, and in its place an imposing brick or stone building was erected, containing frequently a store, or more rooms for tenants. The landlord, who had till then lived in some unpleasant rear rooms, moved into the best part of the house.¹²

Such thrift enabled the Czechs to move out of Pilsen into a larger community that became known as Czech California. The enclave took its name from California Avenue, which ran through the community, near present-day South Lawndale. Always determined to own property, Czechs soon owned nearly 80 percent of the buildings in Czech California. They built impressive structures such as Sokol Havlicek-Tyrs (an imposing three-story building that contained a large social hall and a gymnasium), the Pilsen Brewery, Pilsen Park, the Catholic St. Ludmila Church, and the Protestant John Hus Church. Czechs were so dominant in this area that the Czech language was taught in Farragut and Harrison high schools, the two public high schools in the community.

Although Czechs preserved a tightly knit community, they were not separatistic. They freely associated with other ethnic groups. No one personified this Czech attitude toward cooperation better than Anton

Cermak, a Czech who was elected Chicago's mayor in 1931. Unlike the Poles, the Czechs realized that they possessed insufficient numbers to win electoral victories by voting as a monolithic bloc. They fashioned coalitions with other ethnic groups, a strategy that enabled them to elect eighty public officials between 1890 and 1920. Their ultimate political triumph was Cermak's mayoral victory.

SWEDES AND THE DISPERSAL OF AN ETHNIC ENCLAVE

Scandinavian immigrants had long been numerous in Chicago. Many Norwegians and some Danes and Swedes flocked to the city between 1840 and 1870. After 1870, however, the influx of Swedes far outpaced that of other Scandinavians, and Chicago's Swedish population rose to 20,000 in 1880, 43,000 in 1890, and 121,000 in 1920.

What set the Swedes apart from other immigrants is the community that a small group of Swedish pioneers had established in the city before 1880. For example, Swedes in Chicago had founded thirteen ethnic churches in the city by 1880, proof of a vibrant and rooted ethnic life. Their established presence in the city—along with their northern European origins—distinguished them from the other groups migrating into Chicago between 1880 and 1920.

Because a small number of Swedes had planted themselves in Chicago before 1880, however, the settlement patterns of Swedes between 1880 and 1920 differed markedly from that of other new immigrants. When Russian Jews or Poles came to Chicago in the 1880s and 1890s, they were ethnic pioneers. No local Russian or Polish community awaited them. Swedes who came to Chicago in the 1880s, however, found three established Swedish neighborhoods. The largest was Swede Town on the Near North Side, which was bounded by Division, Superior, Franklin, and Larabee Streets and the north branch of the Chicago River; about half of Chicago's original Swedish community resided here. Two smaller communities were located on the Near West Side and the Near South Side. These Swedes had lived in the city for several years and had accumulated cash reserves; they knew the city and spoke at least some English. It was therefore easier for the older Swedes to move out of the downtown area when the waves of new immigrants swept into Chicago after 1880. Most of these established Swedes moved to a ring of better quality homes that were slightly farther away from the Loop.

This small group of pre-1880 Swedish immigrants proved invaluable

to later Swedish immigrants. Those immigrants of the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s benefited from the pathbreaking initiatives of earlier Swedish immigrants and thereby accelerated the community-building process. For example, the older Swedish immigrants fled the inner city and dispersed throughout the outlying regions of the city as the waves of new immigrants came to Chicago; many newer Swedish immigrants—those who came during the “new immigration”—joined them and avoided the downtown slums. The early migration of Swedes to outlying areas inhibited the formation of distinct Swedish enclaves; the only enduring Swedish community was Andersonville, located near Clark Street and Foster Avenue. The dispersal of the majority of Swedish immigrants throughout the Chicago area also quickly assimilated the Swedes, since they distinguished themselves from other immigrants who were forced into older inner-city housing. “The people down there,” remarked one second-generation Swedish man, referring to the new inhabitants of his old neighborhood in Armour Square, “began to be nothing but foreigners who cared nothing for making the neighborhood attractive.”¹³ Thus, between 1880 and 1920, while Poles, Italians, and Greeks were building their distinct ethnic enclaves, Swedes were vacating theirs.

* * * *

Other immigrant groups came to Chicago around 1900 as well. Though this selective survey has omitted discussion of Lithuanians, Austrians, Hungarians, and the Dutch, the theme of this chapter should be clear: a staggering number of immigrants made Chicago their home between 1880 and 1920. Although all major American cities experienced the influx of European immigrants, the number of immigrants coming into Chicago was especially large. By 1900, Chicago had more Poles, Swedes, Czechs, Dutch, Danes, Norwegians, Croatians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, and Greeks than any other city in the United States. It is even more astonishing that the vast number of European newcomers to the city enabled Chicago to proclaim itself at one time or another the largest Lithuanian city in the world, the second largest Czech city in the world, and the third largest Irish, Swedish, Polish, and Jewish city in the world.

Far from existing solely within separate national groups, immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds associated. They worked together in the workplace and also did business with one another, via either the ubiquitous peddler or the multiethnic open-air market. Anglo-American efforts to assist the immigrants—such as Jane Addams’s Hull-House or Billy Sunday’s missionary outreaches—paid little attention to ethnic

boundaries. Moreover, the legal system and local politics threw immigrants together into a world in which ethnicity meant little.

Regardless of nationality, Chicago immigrants shared many common experiences that offer insights into immigration, assimilation, and Chicago itself. Many of these new immigrants succeeded in Chicago only because they worked hard and were painfully thrifty. They worked bad jobs for long hours at low wages, and yet many immigrants still found a way to save part of their income. They invested. They sacrificed immediate gratification for long-term success. They did not spend their children's inheritance. Instead, they bequeathed inheritances to their children, and, accordingly, the children and grandchildren of these new immigrants often did quite well in Chicago.

Another common experience among immigrants to Chicago was that, even if they sought to assimilate (at least to some extent) into American culture, most new immigrants did not want to lose their ethnic distinctiveness. They sustained ethnic churches and synagogues where they found the old language spoken and the old customs practiced. Ethnic newspapers flourished. Nearly every immigrant group established schools (usually religious) that served as transmitters and preservers of their heritage. Although immigrant parents labored long hours for poor wages, they allocated scarce resources to these schools so their children would not forget their roots. Nearly every immigrant group maintained ties with its homeland. Many groups (Italians, for example) sent money back to families in Europe. Others (the Irish) contributed money to European political causes. Still others (Ukrainians) organized paramilitary units that might assist in liberating the motherland in Europe. (The local Ukrainian Sich, for example, outfitted men in military uniforms, drilled in city forest preserves and in wooded areas, and even started an aviation school in the city to train a Ukrainian air corps.) Few Chicago immigrants saw themselves as severing all ties with Europe and refashioning themselves as U.S. citizens. Most foreign-born immigrants instead saw themselves as citizens of two nations.

And yet second- and third-generation immigrants of all ethnic backgrounds assimilated rapidly despite the desires of foreign-born immigrants to preserve their ethnic heritage. To be sure, some (such as Germans) assimilated more rapidly, while others (such as Poles) resisted assimilation. American institutions, however, had a corrosive effect on ethnic particularism. It is perhaps evident how Chicago's public schools—with their standardized, English-based curriculum—helped to assimilate European immigrants. American pastimes, like baseball, also

helped. Immigrant children loved the game, and it was an activity in which anyone, regardless of ethnicity, could participate. American economic life also stoked the fires of the melting pot. Immigrants from different countries worked side-by-side and rubbed shoulders in street markets. Addams, speaking of the city's German immigrants, observed that she "found strong family affection between them [foreign-born immigrants] and their English-speaking children, but their pleasures were not in common, and they seldom went out together."¹⁴ In other words, second- and third-generation immigrants loved their foreign-born relatives but found that they had less and less in common with them.

Another common feature of life for turn-of-the-century immigrants to Chicago was that they received virtually no government assistance. In 1900, there was no such thing as food stamps, government-funded low-income housing, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation, or hospitals that rendered free emergency care to the impoverished. Immigrants came to Chicago penniless. When they needed assistance, they turned to the hundreds of mutual aid societies that the ethnic communities had created themselves. In short, the immigrants helped themselves. It is remarkable that such mutual aid societies were as successful as they were (and they were extremely successful), as they were tantamount to the poor allying themselves and pooling their meager savings to escape poverty. It is to the immigrants' credit that they made such institutions work.

Another vital institution in immigrants' lives was the church or synagogue, which was often the hub of an immigrant community. New Chicagoans often relied upon their houses of worship to preserve old traditions and to maintain a link to the past. Religious schools, whether Catholic parochial schools or Jewish Talmud Torah schools, usually devoted much time to cultural instruction and preservation, often by teaching the mother tongue to immigrants' children. Churches and synagogues were usually established upon an ethnic—and not a multi-ethnic—basis. The predominantly Irish neighborhood of Bridgeport is a good example of this. Throughout the 1900s, this one-by-one-and-a-half-mile neighborhood was home to ten Catholic parishes of five different nationalities: Irish, German, Bohemian, Polish, and Lithuanian. If you sought a Baptist church in 1920s Chicago, you could choose among churches organized around thirteen different languages.

Also important to immigrants was the saloon. The saloon-to-citizen ratio suggests that one saloon existed for every sixty Chicago families, and about 500,000 Chicagoans used a saloon's services on any given day

in the 1890s. The ethnic saloon of 1900 Chicago was far more than a place to buy a beer or a shot of whiskey. Saloons often functioned as community centers for new immigrants. There immigrants could find an established businessman—the barkeeper—who spoke the mother tongue. The barkeeper often served as an informal employment service, connecting available workers with employers. The saloon’s owner frequently served as an ethnic bank, lending money to needy immigrants. Newspapers from the mother country could be found at the saloon as well. For the ethnic factory worker seeking a quick lunch during his noon break, the saloons served fast sandwiches and filled lunch pails with beer. When a big room was needed for a wedding, an anniversary celebration, a dance, or a labor union meeting, the saloon often provided it. New immigrants could hardly relax after work in the cramped, dingy, dirty, and smelly tenements that they crowded into; they instead went to the spacious and comparatively clean saloon. On muggy summer nights, immigrants might pay the saloon keeper a nickel to sleep on the cool saloon floors. Chicago’s saloon keeper–politicians even received grudging praise from William T. Stead, the English moral reformer who penned *If Christ Came to Chicago* in 1894, a scathing critique of the city’s vice and immorality. Stead judged that, unlike the city’s wealthy businessmen and church leaders, the saloon keepers practiced the “fundamental principle of human brotherhood which Christ came to teach.”¹⁵

Immigrants in Chicago were not necessarily unhappy. An earlier generation of scholars tended to argue that “the history of immigration is a history of alienation and its consequences . . . [such as] the broken homes, interruptions of familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong.”¹⁶ It is easy to assume that they were miserable when we read descriptions of turn-of-the-century immigrant life in Chicago, like one penned by Jane Addams in 1910: “The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond description. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer. . . . Many houses have no water supply save for a faucet in the back yard, there are no fire escapes. . . . Meanwhile, the wretched conditions persist until at least two generations of children have been born and reared in them.”¹⁷ In considering the hardships faced by most immigrants, we should avoid projecting present-day standards of happiness, which usually include material prosperity, on these people. Moreover, we should avoid seeing the immigrants as passive sub-

jects who did not shape their own experiences. Life in Chicago might have been difficult, but it was often more difficult back in an immigrant's homeland. For example, Russian and Polish Jews in Chicago certainly faced anti-Semitism, but they did not suffer from the state-sponsored pogroms that they experienced in Europe. Perhaps most important, Chicago was a place where hope abounded. Immigrants knew they had a reasonable chance of improving their lot. Carl Sandburg in 1916, in a poem entitled "Happiness," published in 1916, wrote:

I asked professors who teach the meaning of life
to tell me what is happiness.

And I went to famous executives who boss the work
of thousands of men.

They all shook their heads and gave me a smile
as though I was trying to fool with them.

And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out
along the Desplaines River

And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their
women and children and a keg of beer and an accordion.

In Sandburg's eyes, Chicago's immigrants were not mired in unhappiness. Indeed, the writer claims he found happiness, not in universities or corporate board rooms, but along the banks of a Chicago river among a group of festive immigrants.