

Book Review

March 2015

City of the Century: the Epic of Chicago and the Making of America

Donald L. Miller

Touchstone, New York, 1996.

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Summary

The City of the Century focuses on Chicago from “the founding” to “the fire” to “the fair” to the First World War; a period of extraordinary civic and business achievement in America and Chicago. The giants of industry are imbued with civic responsibility in addition to their private ambitions. The architects and city-builders established an aura still unmatched in American history. A great story, well told; every city can benefit from the story of Chicago.

Implications for the American City

This book provides a great perspective on American society and the culture of urban America and its cities. The impact of different waves of immigrants is nicely illustrated in ***City of the Century, The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America*** by Donald W. Miller as also presented in ***Shaping Our Nation. The Resilient City*** offers the best reflection on the spirit of a community to take a blow of disaster and rebound to a higher plane.

Specific ideas to recall from the Chicago experience are:

- 1. Leadership matters.** People built Chicago through all its growth periods: From Gurden Hubbard and William Ogden to Mayor Carter Harrison to the Chicago Trinity of Phillip Armour, George Pullman and Marshall Field to Daniel Burnham and the numerous industrialists, architects and writers that populated the City in the Gilded Age. Each prospered individually, but so did the City.
- 2. Economic advantages must be developed and leveraged.** Chicago’s location was incredibly advantageous; a fact recognized by ambitious people. Reversing the course of the Chicago River to force the unnatural connection of Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River was an engineering marvel creating enormous wealth. The City was at the edge of the world’s mid-western breadbasket connected to it by a new railroad technology with high-volume water access to global markets using the Erie Canal to New York and the Mississippi River to New Orleans. The advantage of location was not wasted.
- 3. Community-wide action based on a civic-vision can achieve results** beyond the capability of any individual. The leaders and wealthy members of Chicago society band together to win the competition for the world’s fair; but the effort was also subscribed by the citizens of the City as they bought shares of the action and widely supported the City’s application. Citizens saved the lakeshore for the general public. Burnham’s ***Plan of Chicago***, once completed was taught in the public schools. The sense of community counts.

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- 4. Leadership of the Right Age.** Leaders during the 22 years between the Fire and the Fair were in their 30s and 40s during the crucible of The Fire [please see the table below]. There were among the re-builders that produced The Fair in 1893 when they were in their 50s and 60s. Leaders were in their most productive period. ..the right people in the right place at the right time remains a critical factor in any city.

Published Reviews

The PBS series American Experience produced a show based on Donald Miller's book. It can be found with the link:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/chicago>

Amazon Book Description

<http://www.amazon.com/City-Century-Chicago-Making-America/dp/0684831384>

Excerpt: "The epic of Chicago is the story of the emergence of modern America. Here, witness Chicago's growth from a desolate fur-trading post in the 1830s to one of the world's most explosively alive cities by 1900. Donald Miller's powerful narrative embraces it all: Chicago's wild beginnings, its reckless growth, its natural calamities (especially the Great Fire of 1871), its raucous politics, its empire-building businessmen, its world-transforming architecture, its rich mix of cultures, its community of young writers and journalists, and its staggering engineering projects -- which included the reversal of the Chicago River and raising the entire city from prairie mud to save it from devastating cholera epidemics. The saga of Chicago's unresolved struggle between order and freedom, growth and control, capitalism and community, remains instructive for our time,..." "

TheAmericanCity.org's Commentary

The story of Chicago is The Fire and The Fair. The Great Fire started Sunday night the 8th and raged through Tuesday morning the 10th, 1871.

Donald Miller tells of the times before the fire, during the fire and its aftermath; and the twenty two years after the Fire when the World's Columbian Exposition opened. From the near-total destruction of the City to its resurgence in front of the world two decades later is an incredible tale, well told in *City of the Century*.



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THE FOUNDING

Louis Joliet [1645 – 1700] and Jacques Marquette [1637 – 1675] toured the area in 1673 from Lake Michigan at what is now Chicago, across the Des Plaines and Illinois Rivers and ultimately to their desired destination, the Mississippi River. Their conclusion about the site of today's Chicago was that the sands and the waters were unsuitable for habitation.

But a settlement did emerge, and then the City. The founder was Gurden Hubbard, known as The Old Settler [1802 - 1886] arrived in 1829, the year before the town was surveyed. The “founder” was William Butler Ogden [1805 – 1877], a railroad tycoon and unmitigated promoter of Chicago's prosperous destiny. Both survived to see the Great Fire and the City's resurgence.

“Modern Chicago was born in 1848.” [p89] Telegraph service reached the town; the Illinois-Michigan Canal opened; an ocean-going steamship arrived from Montreal; Cyrus McCormick moved to the City; construction began on the first railroad; turnpikes were built. The Chicago Board of Trade opened and began trading in grain and livestock. Chicago was the pivot point closest to the agricultural “horn of plenty” in the Midwest with a connection of the Atlantic Ocean via the Erie Canal [1825] and another to the Gulf of Mexico via the Illinois-Michigan Canal. Economic success would have been hard to avoid.

THE FIRE

Mrs. O'Leary's cow may not have started the Great Fire, but it did start in her barn, while she was sleeping. The fire was real and destroyed an area along Lake Michigan seven miles north-south and one mile inland. To the City's everlasting credit, re-building started on Wednesday, the 11th of October.

Messrs. Vale and Campanella writing in *The Resilient City* say:

“Chicago's restoration was even more astounding [than that of San Francisco in 1906 after the earthquake]. Within a week, more than 5,000 new makeshift buildings were ready for occupation, and work had begun on 2,000 more permanent structures. In spite of the comprehensive destruction, the city was substantially rebuilt in just two years...” The authors continue, “Remarkably, Chicago's economy grew even faster in the year after the fire than it had in the year before,....” [p29]

To paraphrase the authors, few Chicagoans thought the destruction was the end, but rather the beginning of something new. It was an “episode” in the Chicago story, by no means the final chapter. As the authors discuss when recounting the burning of the White House and Capital in 1814, the American reaction was not as the British expected. The reaction was to re-build immediately. “With breakneck speed, workers erected what became known as the Old Brick Capital.” “The reappointment of Benjamin Henry Latrobe to rebuild the Capital, and James Hoban to resurrect the White House, signaled a determination to create a capital at least of equal worth to the one lain waste.” [p109]

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And so Chicago prospered and was an economic engine of the future from the 1870s to the Great Depression. But before the Great Fire and The Fair was the fight for The Lakefront. The author's words are best:

"Chicago today has one of the most magnificent waterfronts in the world, a chain of sandy beaches, curving walkways and generous greenswards, largely because of that decision [the canal commissioners set the lakefront aside for public use, marking their map 'Public ground – A Common to Remain Forever Open. Clear and Free of Any Buildings, or Other Obstructions Whatever']. It was a pledge that Chicago's most valuable land 'by right belongs to the people,' as Daniel Hudson Burnham put it in his 1909 Chicago Plan." "It was a pledge, however, that was kept only because concerned Chicagoans were willing to fight in the courts and the state legislature for nearly half a century for a free and clear lakefront." [p101]

Citizen activism has always been critical to the preservation of important public resources, especially those with tremendous commercial value. The story of Chicago is replete with examples of private and public actions that helped create the city of today with its tremendous public lands and culture. The lesson is clear.

THE FAIR

The City's elite decided to compete for the world's fair that would celebrate the 400th anniversary of the landing of Columbus. The great cities of America were interested, competing for the honor and the commercial benefit. The competition necessitated Congressional intervention, and in the end, Congress awarded Chicago with the rights to the fair to be held in 1892.

Although a year late, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition entertained 27.5 million visitors; it is estimated that approximately 25% of the nation's population went to the Exposition over the six months of its existence. The pavilions of mining, manufacturing, transportation, communication, agriculture – all driven by electricity - presented a dramatic view of the future. The Woman's Pavilion was trendsetting.



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Mayor Carter Harrison, petitioned Congress to allow the fair to open the next year, but the request was denied. The Chicago World's Fair established the City as an up-to-date metropolis; a reputation previously withheld by the Eastern Establishment.

THE FUTURE

Mr. Miller continues the story of Chicago through the disassembly of the White City mostly accomplished ironically by a fire, labor riots and strikes, the demise of Pullman's town to the Burnham Plan of Chicago, 1909. The final word goes to the author:

"Chicago's visionary White City planner failed, in the end, to heed the lessons his own tumultuous city provided in 1893: that a city's greatness is the result of an uneasy balance between order and energy, planning and privatism, diversity and conformity, vice and reform, art and enterprise, high culture and low culture, the smart and the shabby, the permanent and the temporary. Interesting cities are places of stimulating disparity and moral conflict where crudity and commerce are often accompanied by memorable advances in the arts."

The Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal [1887 – 1922] solidified the connection between Chicago and the Mississippi River and the Port at New Orleans. The previous canal was of dubious reliability and only in 1892 was the flow of the Chicago River permanently reversed to establish a dependable shipping channel. To this day, the engineering feat that accomplished the reversal is still a marvel.

The Chicago Public Library was established in 1872. It operated in a series of temporary facilities until its permanent home was completed in 1897; the Art Institute of Chicago was formed under another name in 1866 and was renamed with its present identity in 1882; the Field Museum opened in 1893; the University of Chicago was founded in 1890 by the American Baptist Education Society and oil magnate John D. Rockefeller on land donated by Marshall Field. The great institutions that make Chicago the magnificent city it is today were started or enhanced after The Fire and metamorphosed into their current form before The Fair. The Fire was only, as was said, an episode in a bigger story.

It is convenient to pass over Chicago of the Al Capone era, the 1968 Democratic Convention and persons like the first Mayor Richard Daley. Through it all, the City persists as an important place.

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SELECTED LEADERS OF CHICAGO 1637 – 1967			
	Born-Died	Age: The Fire 1871	Age: The Fair 1893
The Finders			
• Jacques Marquette	[1637 – 1675]	-	-
• Louis Joliet	[1645 – 1700]	-	-
The Founders and Settlers			
• John Jacob Astor	[1763 – 1848]	-	-
• Gurden Hubbard, The Old Settler	[1802 - 1886]	69	-
• Wm. Butler Ogden, Founder	[1805 – 1877]	66	-
The Builders			
• Cyrus McCormick	[1809 – 1884]	62	-
• Carter Harrison	[1825 – 1893]	46	68
• Potter Palmer	[1826 – 1902]	45	67
• “The Chicago Trinity”			
○ George Mortimer Pullman	[1831 – 1897]	40	62
○ Phillip Danforth Armour	[1832 – 1901]	39	61
○ Marshall Field	[1834 – 1906]	37	59
• Gustavas Franklin Swift	[1839 – 1903]	32	54
• Aaron Montgomery Ward	[1844 – 1913]	27	49
• Jane Addams	[1860 – 1935]	11	33
• Richard Warren Sears	[1863 – 1914]	8	30
• Alvah Curtis Roebuck	[1864 – 1948]	7	29
The Architects and Artists			
• Wm. LeBaron Jenney	[1832 – 1907]	39	61
• Daniel Burnham	[1846 – 1912]	25	47
• Louis John Wellborn Root	[1850 – 1891]	21	43
• Louis Henry Sullivan	[1856 – 1924]	15	37
• Frank Lloyd Wright	[1867 – 1959]	4	26
• Theodor Dreiser	[1871 – 1945]	-	22
• Carl Sandberg	[1878 – 1967]	-	15

Source: Wikipedia; assembled by wckplanning.com

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Related Readings:

- ***A Clearing in the Distance, Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the Nineteenth Century***, Rybczynski, Witold, Scribner, 1999.
- ***City of the Century: the Epic of Chicago and the Making of America***, Miller, Donald L, Touchstone, New York, 1996.
- ***The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840 – 1917***, Peterson, Jon A., The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2003.
- ***The Plan of Chicago, David Burnham and the Remaking of the American City***, Smith, Carl, University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- ***The Resilient City. How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster***, Vale, Lawrence J. and Thomas J. Campanella, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- ***Triumph of the City, How our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier***, Glaeser, Edward, The Penguin Press [USA], London, 2011.
- ***Shaping Our Nation***, Barone, Michael, Crown Forum, New York, 2013.
- ***The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America***, Larson, Erik, Crown Publishers, New York, 2003.