

Gray and Chicago

By far the most exciting event in Chicago in 1893 was the Columbian Exposition. The Minutes of the 21st Session of the Arkansas Annual Conference meeting at Fort Smith the first of February noted that "G.W. Gray was announced as transferred to the Central Illinois Conference". At the 38th Session of the Central Illinois Conference meeting in September of that year Gray is mentioned five times. He is listed in his appointment as "Secretary Methodist City Evangelism Society" and also as a member of the "Committee on Education" for the Conference. The Bishop listed him as the "alternate preacher" for the Missionary Sermon the following year. The only "listed contribution" that Gray made to the meeting had to do with the report of the "committee on Book Accounts" when the Minutes say, "Gray moved to amend section 4 by inserting the word 'among', it was passed".

Throughout the 19th century and the early 20th, there were a number of world's fairs or exhibitions. The early ones were in England, but by the middle of the century they came to America. In 1876 the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia was the occasion for Alexander Graham Bell to display his telephone for the first time to the public. The Columbian Exposition became the occasion for the first public display of the practical use of electricity.

The Exposition's design was directed by the famous Chicago architect, Daniel Burnham. He had been a partner of John Root and together they had formed a very successful impact on the city. During the Panic of 1873, though, Root had to supplement his income by playing the organ at the First Presbyterian Church. Together they designed the gate of the Union Stock Yards and the Armour Mission building-- called by some the largest non-sectarian religious and educational institute (1887). It later became the Illinois Institute of Technology.

The fair was a great success, even though it opened a year late, with an attendance of some 21 million persons. Some artists looked on it as an architectural calamity, and sociologists contrasted the pretty facade with the bleak reality of despair and unemployment in the city nearby. It was into this kind of an environment that Gray began his final stage of achievement.

GRAY AND THE SETTLEMENT HOUSE

There is no first hand account of how Gray began his work in Chicago, although a letter of his dated December 12, 1911 recorded that the settlement house began on January 8, 1894 and that "in a year and a half we opened our hall for the men who were left over from the world's fair". In the Minutes of the Central Illinois Conference for September 1914 the Obituary for Gray stated that he "rented a hall over a saloon on South Halsted Street where he held evangelistic meetings in the evening, and the floor was filled with men asleep at night... He sheltered 84,000 men & boys that winter, and 1,657 professed conversions. This beginning grew to be the first settlement house on the line between the 18th & 19th wards."

The Chicago Evening Post for Monday, December 22, 1913, in response to Gray's death, wrote that the settlement work was the result of Gray's "passing through the tenement district of Blue Island Avenue". On the same day the Chicago Daily Tribune wrote, under the headline "Dr. George W. Gray, Boy's Friend, Dead", that