



Ferris Wheels: An Illustrated History

Norman Anderson

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June 21, 1893 dawned clear in Chicago. By mid-afternoon hundreds of invited guests and curious spectators crowded around a small platform on the Midway Plaisance at the World's Columbian Exposition. Promptly at 3:30 the official party took their places and following the speeches, George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr. blew a small, golden whistle. The giant observation wheel was officially open to all those who wanted the never-to-be-forgotten thrill of riding the Ferris Wheel. The miracle of engineering Ferris had built in less than six months was 264 feet tall, taller than any other building existing at the time, and the 36 cars each held up to 60 passengers. Before the Exposition closed, nearly a million and a half people paid 50 cents for a twenty-minute ride on The Eighth Wonder of the World. And since then, amusement wheels worldwide that carry people up, over the top, and down have been called Ferris wheels. The idea of the Ferris wheel may be as old as the water wheel, and written descriptions and drawings of pleasure wheels go back at least four centuries. And during the last hundred years the Ferris wheel has become the universal symbol of the outdoor amusement industry and the undisputed Queen of the Midway. There have been dozens of experiments with design and construction early portable wheels by Strobel, the Condermans, Sullivan and others; one-of-a-kind wheels like Schnitzler's Asbury Park wheel with a tower and Stubb's water-turned wheel at Electric Park in Waterloo, Iowa; giant wheels in London, Blackpool, Vienna, Paris and more recently in Japan. All of these builders and rides plus others are described in Ferris Wheels: An Illustrated History.

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