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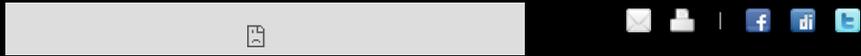
A Fair to Remember: Knoxville's National Conservation Exposition of 1913

Although it isn't often mentioned in history books, the NCE drew over a million visitors to the new cause of environmentalism

By [Jack Neely](#)

Posted November 11, 2009 at 10:42 a.m.

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 **The Land Building.** Built anew for the 1913 Exposition, it was by some accounts even more impressive than the Liberal Arts Building. It included a 3,500-seat auditorium where Gifford Pinchot, Helen Keller, and others spoke.

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Knoxville, fall of 1913. It was a city of 36,346, by the last census. Boosters, of course, claimed 96,000—and it could seem like a real city. Knoxville had a couple of train stations, two combative daily newspapers, three vaudeville theaters, several movie theaters, downtown streets floodlit with electric lights, and an admirable electric streetcar system. For at least 30 years, Knoxville's optimists believed that they lived in a city that was not only modern and progressive, but one that would one day eclipse Atlanta as the great city of the South. In 1913 Knoxville was already bigger than Charlotte; during that decade, it passed the older port-city metropolises Charleston, S.C., and Mobile, Ala. Passing Atlanta might not have seemed so absurd. The oldest Knoxvilleians could remember when Knoxville was bigger than Georgia's upstart metropolis.

The Smokies were visible, when the wind blew the factory smoke away, but few Knoxvilleians had ever seen the mountains up close. It was hard to get to the Smokies, and unless you knew somebody up there, there was little point in trying. The Smokies were all private property. You had to worry about bears and getting lost, but also about the fact that you were trespassing, and that you might get shot.

The Lost Fair: National Conservation Expo of 1913



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That fall witnessed an unusual commotion just outside of town to the east, at the end of the streetcar line, in old Chilhowee Park: A mock coal-mine explosion; a man sliding 75 miles an hour down a cable across a lake; motorcycle races, balloon ascensions, hot tamales, fireworks every night for two months; portraits of President Wilson's face glowing in mid-air; elephants cavorting; a woman, known as Mozelle of the Mist, dancing in the water. And music all the time, brass horns and strings and men singing in Italian. These were scenes Federico Fellini would never picture.

A lot of people were there that fall, some of them familiar faces from the papers: reformers Booker T. Washington, Helen Keller; Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan; Cardinal Gibbons, the Archbishop of Baltimore, author, labor advocate, and the most famous Catholic priest in America. In all, during that two months, the event registered more than one million visitors. The daily attendance sometimes approximated the entire population of Knoxville.

It was the National Conservation Exposition. The idea was to promote in a big, unforgettable way, a concept little known to previous generations: that natural resources were finite, and had to be tended carefully. That water and air and forests needed to be saved, for the survival of the human race. And that Knoxville was right on the front edge of understanding all that.

It was touted at the time as the first event of its kind in the history of the world. Some went farther: All expositions up to 1913, they said, had celebrated events of the past. The National Conservation Exposition was the first big fair in human history that was all about the future. In several ways, it was: The people who threw this fair already had some basic understanding of what their region and their country would be wrestling with for the rest of the century—erosion, flood control, vanishing fossil fuels, air and water pollution.

Some of the claims made for the National Conservation Exposition were grandiose, but hard to disprove.

Conservationism, the ideal of it at least, had taken an early hold on Knoxville. Partly it grew out of the fact that the city was the population center of the Southern Appalachians, sometimes cited as America's biggest source of hardwood, and the chance of East Tennessee's cash cow vanishing was an anxiety for the lumber barons who could see beyond next year. Moreover, Knoxville was also a Republican town, and had cheered loudly every time an especially popular president named Theodore Roosevelt came to town.

Roosevelt introduced conservationism to America's dinner-table conversation. In 1908, TR established the National Conservation Commission, and within months, Knoxvilleians were contemplating an exposition to celebrate the new idea. Knoxville had pitched two big fairs at Chilhowee Park, the Appalachian Exposition of 1910, and followed it by an equally successful one in 1911. Both had a progressive and conservationist theme. Teddy Roosevelt himself attended the Appalachian event in 1910 and gave a speech exhorting conservationism, which up to that point had seen most of its impact in the American West.

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'Ain't in It for My Health: A Film About Levon Helm'

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South Knoxville



MEDITERRANEAN

Holy Land Market

Sutherland Avenue



ASIAN

Anaba Japanese Cuisine

West Knoxville

President Taft had attended the one in 1911; he remarked that, given the region's natural resources, he didn't see why East Tennesseans weren't all millionaires.

Those first two expositions were mainly regional in appeal. Knoxville could have thrown another one in 1912, but chose to gather forces and finances for a big, memorable one in 1913.

Taking the lead was a thin, frail man in his mid-40s, with a mouth-swallowing mustache; he looked like a comic in a one-reel silent film. William McDonald Goodman, originally from Georgia, was a publisher of a Southern-regional business journal, and helped start a promotional group of self-styled progressives called the Commercial Club, which met in the new Arnstein Building beside Market Square. Many of them may have been genuine progressives by conviction, but progressivism was seen as Knoxville's tactic to licking the rest of the South. "Progressive" was something Republican Knoxville was in a way that the backward Democratic South wasn't.

The Exposition, Goodman said, was "not a celebration, like other large expositions." It would be one that "looked forward, pointing the way to better conditions...in line with the advanced thought of the day."

In 1910, you couldn't think of yourself as a forward-looking businessman in Knoxville without at least tolerating the word "progressive."

The early 20th century saw a kind of an anti-conservative chic among Knoxville's business-minded Republicans. William J. Oliver, a major manufacturer who had supplied equipment for the construction of the Panama Canal, was chief of the 1910 expo. A Republican, he'd entertained both Roosevelt and Taft in his Kingston Pike home. Eventually leaving the mainstream Republican Party to join Roosevelt's Bull Moose Progressives, he chided his fiscally conservative contemporaries: "Our banks and investing citizens generally do not look with favor on any local enterprise that does not provide a job for some friend or relative or an opportunity to sell a piece of real estate at a fictitious value.... Our great trouble and the reason we do not advance faster is because of our intense desire to appear well in the eyes of a few as being 'conservative.'"

The successful businessman of 1910 was a progressive businessman—and the progressive businessman was a "conservationist."

Dozens of Knoxville businessmen signed on to the cause. Banker-attorney T.A. Wright, a Republican who was sometimes suggested as a strong gubernatorial candidate, was president of the Exposition Company. White Lily Flour's founder, J. Allen Smith, was vice president. The Board of Directors included lots of big shots: cigar manufacturer W.R. Johnson, who was also mayor of Park City, the incorporated community nearest the Exposition; W.J. Savage, the British-born industrialist-inventor; and banker W.S. Shields, who would later leave his name on a notable college football field.

Even lumber tycoon W.B. Townsend, who had profited from the lack of control in the Smokies, was one of the directors.

A National Advisory Board, first convened in Washington in early 1912, included several senators, the U.S. Commissioner of Education (who happened to be Philander Claxton,

former University of Tennessee professor) and—significantly in those days when American women couldn't vote—one woman. Julia C. Lathrop, director of the newly formed U.S. Children's Bureau, was already famous for her work at Chicago's Hull House, the landmark refuge for the urban needy.

The chairman of the Exposition's advisory board was Gifford Pinchot. A controversial figure in his time, Pinchot was a close ally of Roosevelt's, and the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service. His term ended in 1910 when he was fired by TR's successor, William Howard Taft, who was less enamored of conservation's ideals than Roosevelt had been. Pinchot was first chairman of the National Conservation Commission.

Pinchot advocated using forests in sustainable ways, but not for preserving wilderness for its own sake. At the time, most of the fire he drew was from the right; many of his battles were with clear-cutting timber interests. However, he also opposed John Muir, the Western naturalist who favored a hands-off approach to wilderness areas. To middle America, the two conservationists hadn't seemed very different until 1913, when they differed about damming a river in a California valley called the Hetch Hetchy, when Pinchot sided with the pragmatists.

The directors brought the proposal to the people of Knoxville in a mass meeting on Market Square in February, 1912, where Shields and others presented the case to the people, mainly including the need for investment. Anticipated federal funding never materialized. They had some better luck with state funds, but in the end it looked like it was going to be mainly Knoxville's baby.

Goodman and company doubled the old Appalachian Expositions' fair grounds in size; architects and contractors built several grand new buildings around the double lake, renovating several others used in the previous expositions. The exposition buildings were large, white, and classical, like the exposition buildings at the most talked about world's fairs in Chicago and St. Louis.

All the new buildings and fund-raising, most of it from Knoxville sources, caused enough of a stir that several progressive national leaders agreed to appear, and rated a big story late that summer in the Associated Press.

The National Conservation Exposition opened on Sept. 1, 1913, with a parade from downtown and a carefully timed congratulatory telegram from President Wilson.

Despite a flub—because of the gubernatorial motorcade and parade down Magnolia—the Magnolia streetcar lines were delayed, as the big crowds waited downtown for the next streetcar east. Also, many had to work—if only until noon. Most Knoxville businesses reportedly closed at noon to let their employees go to the fair.

There were empty seats in the 3,500-seat auditorium in the giant Land Building when Tennessee Gov. Ben Hooper, who had spent his early years in a Knoxville orphanage, spoke: "For thousands of years, the history of the human family has been a record of waste.... Men have sinned...by the wanton destruction of the world's resources."

People did arrive, if late. The first day drew 33,280 ticketed customers. It wouldn't be the biggest day of the fall.

Even those who had seen the previous two expositions were astonished at the array of 11 large buildings, all white, like the famous World's Fair 20 years earlier in Chicago. John R. Graf was the chief architect, but a 25-year-old architect named Charlie Barber, who hadn't yet co-founded the firm of Barber-McMurry, was known to have supplied some of the fancy touches, like the Fine Arts Building's elaborate white granite fountain with a "bronze figure of a nude boy playing on a pipe of reeds."

There was a houseboat restaurant called the Van-Wright, a long, tall, double-decker restaurant on the lake. The host who greeted visitors on opening day was a young druggist named David Chapman. He'd been on the Board of Directors of the previous two expositions, and was involved with this one, too.

A "Woman's Building" highlighted weaving and fabrics. A Negro Building was touted as designed by a "Negro architect," and built by a "Negro contractor." The mostly industrial display on the park's northern end outlined the African-American contribution to American society. It was "a signal triumph for the Negro race in the Southern Appalachian region."

The Knoxville Journal, not necessarily an objective voice, declared it "the biggest and best exposition in the history of the South.... It was one of the most stupendous undertakings in the history of the progressive metropolis of East Tennessee."

Music was an almost constant accompaniment. Channing Ellery's Band, a 46-piece brass and string orchestra from Chicago that gained fame at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and apparently made a career of enthralling exposition audiences, featured classical favorites, including arias; all of their singers were male, and most had Italian names. It was, said the Journal, "music of a high class...not too classical to be enjoyable."

Ellery's Band played twice daily in the marble bandstand, dedicated to the fair by Knoxville's burgeoning marble suppliers.

Other bands, Mummolo's Band, Waters' Band, played when the Ellery Band was silent. Knoxville's Jubilee Chorus, the city's "180 best Negro singers," performed spirituals and vaudeville favorites. And there were phonograph demonstrations. There were "moving pictures," still a novelty in 1913, in two locations, twice a day.

There was football. Knoxville College played another black college, Livingston, on the fair grounds. A stranger match was between Knoxville High and the Southern Railway, which might suggest a poor match in terms of brawn. But the high-school kids won, 7-0.

There was baseball, like semi-pro team Knoxville playing Middlesboro.

The sign indicating the "Midway Jungle"—a reporter's squib implies it was suggested by Teddy Roosevelt's jungle adventures—led toward John Robinson's Herd of Trained Elephants: "the best herd of elephants in the world," a claim few could dispute with certainty.

Beyond was Joy Street, which offered candy wheels, balloons, a Wild West Show and, to be fair, an Indian Village.

Most of the concession stands were run by the Paragon Amusement Company of Boston, but near the Negro Building, one could get less-corporate fare, Wienerwurst, on a hand-lettered sign, and Hot Tamales, probably locally made—a black-owned tamale factory was a few blocks away.

And there was art—in fact, for Knoxville, it was an art show unequalled for several decades to come as a show of important contemporary works. The Fine Arts building displayed 50 oil paintings, plus 65 watercolors and illustrations, and 15 statues: works by John Singer Sargent, Childe Hassam, Robert Henri, William Merritt Chase.

Knoxville Museum of Art curator Stephen Wicks has made a study of the Exposition shows, which he says were the beginning of the discussion that Knoxville should have its own art museum. The Exposition, he says, “exposed a pretty big audience to a cross-section of really high-grade American art.” It also showed that East Tennessee artists like Catherine Wiley and Hugh Tyler “were on a par with what you’d find in New York or California.” Not that it was daring, he admits; the Exposition came a few months after the famous Armory Show in New York, which had turned art on its head with cutting-edge work from Europe. Knoxville’s exposition, which highlighted American artists, offered no Cubism, no Dada.

But some of it was enough to unnerve the Journal’s anonymous art critic. Of Charles W. Hawthorne’s “Rose,” the reporter said, “the picture is atrocious in color and the face of the girl is anything but pleasing.” Of Alice Schille’s “Old Virginia,” “one cannot look at it with a degree of pleasure.” George Marcum’s painting, “The Pile Driver,” won the judges’ nod as best of show, but the Journal sniffed that it was “remarkable in its technique rather than pleasing as a picture.”

Best local watercolor went to C.C. Krutch, “the Corot of the South”—and Best Collection to Hugh Tyler, uncle of a likely attendee named James Agee, who was not yet four years old.

Knoxville’s own Catherine Wiley, renowned as Tennessee’s premier impressionist, had already won the top prize at previous expositions, and sat this one out as a judge.

A log cabin purported to be the very cabin where Admiral Farragut was born, more than a century earlier, had been moved from Concord, and was at the exposition for inspection. It was one of only a few historical exhibits. The Woman’s Building offered a small Civil War display. The fair happened to align with the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Chickamauga, and a reunion party of gray-bearded Union veterans of the Chickamauga-Chattanooga campaign came by.

Much of the fairgrounds’s attractions were practical. A Dr. Frances Bradley from Atlanta offered free checkups for children. Some may have gone to the Child Welfare exhibit in 1913 just to see what a female physician looked like.

And every night, maybe the most spectacular aspect of the whole fair: a parade of electrically lit boats with stylish young men and women, anticipating the fashions of 1914; Mozelle, the Maid of the Mist would perform “water feats”; and a fireworks show

demonstrating “flaming photographs” of Woodrow Wilson, Goodman, and Knoxville Mayor Sam Heiskell.

“They cannot all be seen in a day, so vast is the extent of the exposition, and so many are the exhibits,” gushed a reporter. Others said it was impossible to see the fair in two days.

You wonder how much people saw of the actual conservation-oriented exhibits enough to be educated. Judging by photos which survive, they were earnest and very wordy, placards of black-and-white paragraphs outlining the problems that the American coal supply wasn’t infinite, that wild birds had value and needed protection, that poor farming practices and flooding were responsible for growing loss of topsoil—and that human life was a subject of conservation, too, and health could be improved with better hygiene and nutrition. Though sometimes couched in religious and moral language (which was, more or less, the language of Teddy Roosevelt), most presentations began with the assumption that nature’s greatest good was its service to man, the problems that were laid out—along with some of the solutions—aligned with what would much later be called “environmentalism.”

The prosaic science of conservationism could hardly have competed with Joy Street, with its elephants and Indians and the “real Egyptian fortune teller” and daredevil feats over the river, like the man who, apparently to prove the durability of the inner tubes from which he was suspended, traveled at 75 mph across the lake on what later generations would call a zip line—or the controlled coal-dust explosion in a steel tube, to simulate a real mine explosion, and demonstrate mining’s dangers.

A visitor from New Orleans, who was doing some reconnaissance in preparation for an exposition there, spoke to a reporter. “Nowhere have I learned more.... It is a wonderful exposition, a most wonderful exposition.... We expect to show the people of Knoxville who visit something fine, but I am afraid our grounds never will rival yours in natural beauty.”

At the end of the Fair, *Atlanta Constitution* publisher and future Pulitzer laureate Clark Howell declared, “Knoxville is a much better known and better advertised city today than is Atlanta.”

The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* said, “the National Conservation Exposition...is on a much-larger scale than would be expected in the mountains of Tennessee, even in so modern a city as Knoxville.... educational in the highest degree in bringing about of the right state of the public mind.... Conservation is in its infancy. Those who live to see it reach maturity will behold a wonderful country and a prosperity beside which that of the present is small.... As for the conservation of our physical resources, and especially that part of it which has to do with the saving of the forests and the prevention of flooding in the rivers, Knoxville is splendidly situated for the seat of such an exposition.”

U.S. Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson called it “A great exposition in every sense of the word. Not only the best by far ever held in the South, but in many respects one of the greatest expositions ever held anywhere.”

Hardly anyone topped Cardinal Gibbons, the archbishop: “When I behold so many citizens of the United States coming from various parts of the country to this exposition, and to your fair city seated on a mount, the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah occurs to my mind: ‘Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for the light is come....’”

It was thought that more expositions, and more glory, would follow. Nine months after the closing of the NCE, an assassination in Bosnia distracted the world. Five years later, the boys were coming home in parts, and Knoxville may have survived World War I as a less idealistic city. An annual fair did arrive, and made use of some of the old exposition’s buildings. The fairs that followed boasted little in the way of global or ideological aspirations.

As if to appeal to patrons who might be anxious about too much education or exhortation, the East Tennessee Division Fair, which began in 1916, was advertised as just “a good old-fashioned fair.” The buildings were never as gleaming white as they had been in 1913. One by one, they vanished, by neglect or fire, some to be replaced by more practical buildings. Only the marble gazebo, where Ellery’s Band accompanied Italian tenors, survived.

Progressives survived, too, but had turned their eyes away from municipal boosterism to the practical business of saving natural resources. A national park, which preserves forests absolutely from all industrial use, was a different idea from Gifford Pinchot’s practical—and, in 1913, more marketable—ideal of wise management of timber reserves. Though Pinchot’s ideals were radical enough for most Americans in 1913, a decade later a generation of Knoxvilleians pushed the ideal of conservation farther.

Several of the problems presented at the 1913 Conservation Exposition, especially flooding and erosion, would begin to be addressed 20 years later by the Tennessee Valley Authority. But some of his contemporaries also credited Goodman with the original idea for the Smoky Mountain National Park. By one account he did persuade Richard Austin, the Republican congressman who was a big fan of the exposition, to introduce a bill to that effect in Congress before 1919, but it didn’t get past committee.

Historian Betsey Creekmore (Sr.) wrote in the 1950s that the Smokies Park movement was an outgrowth of the 1913 exposition. But Carlos Campbell later wrote, “The evidence...is that, although there was a somewhat nebulous sentiment for a national park” at the time of the 1913 exposition, “most of the references were to national forests or just plain ‘conservatism.’” Campbell, a kid at the time of the 1913 exposition, was thickly involved with the Smokies Park project in the 1920s and ’30s, and became the park’s first historian. He said Goodman’s idea never “reached the proportions of a movement.” That effective movement, he said, began in 1923, with two former Kentuckians, Willis and Annie Davis, who moved to Knoxville after the exposition.

But there are human links. Most of those who’d been involved in the Conservation Exposition supported the Smoky Mountains National Park movement, and several of them were among the cadre who led it.

W.S. Shields was an old man in his 70s when he was a director of the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association in the 1920s; he had been on the board of directors of the 1913 exposition, and had taken a leading role in financing it.

Ben Morton, the grocery jobber who as mayor of Knoxville during the early push for a national park in the Smokies, was heavily involved in the Park movement, and an early member of the Tennessee Park Commission; he'd been on the Board of Directors of the National Conservation Exposition of 1913.

Lumberman W.B. Townsend, a late recruit to the park movement, and who made possible the first major purchase of park property by offering an unusual deal on his 75,500 acre Little River timber tract at about \$3.50 an acre, had been a director of the 1913 exposition.

Jim Thompson, whose thousands of widely published photographs of the Smokies in the 1920s were almost evangelical in their persuasiveness to politicians and financiers that the mountains should be preserved as a park, took most of the promotional photographs of the 1913 Exposition, including those reproduced here.

Knoxville druggist David Chapman, whose herculean efforts earned him the monicker "Father of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park," had been a director of the 1910 and 1911 expositions, and worked at the 1913 exposition.

By the late 1930s, as the nation was celebrating a beautiful new national park, the fruit of years of labor by hundreds of Knoxville's progressives who had contributed hundreds of hours and dollars to the project, Knoxville was being derided as dirty, ugly, backward. Even though many of its progressives of 1913 still lived there, and were still doing progressive things, in the mountains and later with TVA's far-flung projects, Knoxville itself had lost every whiff of progressivism. To Belgian writer Odette Keun, who spent a summer in Knoxville proper in 1936, the city was "corrosive.... one of the ugliest, dirtiest, stuffiest, most unsanitary towns in the United States." It seemed to her like a backwater that had never been anything else. She wasn't the only one; that general impression, sometimes more politely expressed, would prevail for decades.

In 1938, the palatial Liberal Arts building went up in flames, in a spectacularly memorable fire. You could see the flames from miles around. People talked about that for years.

Today, the National Conservation Exposition is unmentioned in the handiest recent histories of American expositions and in most histories of the conservation movement. Knoxville historians tend to mention it mainly as a forerunner to the Tennessee Valley Fair.

A website purporting to list all known American expositions listed it with a speculative note: "Never held?"

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TomB writes:

Good, well-researched article. I was familiar with the Appalachian Exposition (and its fancy AE logo) but not this later one at the same location.

The idea around a major Knoxville event focused on conservation would resurface with planning in the late 1970s for the Energy Exposition during the midst of the Carter-era energy shortages in the US. It was later renamed the more appealing Worlds Fair by its opening in 1982 and energy conservation was downplayed.

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