

ABIGAIL MARKWYN

# Fair Labor

## Constructing an idealized Pacific city

The message was supposed to be simple and clear: San Francisco was the new queen of the Pacific world and a flagship city for commerce in an empire that extended west across the ocean. Planners and publicists for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition depicted the fairgrounds as an ideal city, an efficient place where everything hummed smartly along and businessmen could not help but invest in its future. This ideal city would embody the ideals of their Progressive Era. But to make it so, they had to carefully control the tensions and politics at the center of the Progressive Era, as these tensions were expressed in the production of the fair, at a time when challenges to the lines delineating class, race, and gender were steadily gaining traction in the United States.

The boosters set themselves up for an impossible challenge. San Francisco might have been queen of the Pacific, but the city was part of the United States. Conflicts emerged at the fair almost from day one. To construct their ideal city, officials placed stringent restrictions on fair employees. But workers often had different ideas about what was right. Culinary workers clashed with traditional union bosses, white female cashiers pushed the boundaries of propriety, black female washroom attendants fought for tips and personal respect, and immigrant performers in the fair's midway Joy Zone faced deportation after demanding back wages and fair treatment.

Why look back at these tensions during the centenary celebration of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition? The fair was supposed to celebrate all that was new, hopeful, and inspiring: technology, light shows, global connections, trade, and the nation's new Pacific-spanning empire. But underneath the surface celebrations were deeper tensions. Looking back at this distant mirror, we might see anew some of the tensions today in technology, gender, labor, and immigration. As we continue to try to reframe and redefine California's place in the Pacific world, some of the very

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*BOOM: The Journal of California*, Vol. 5, Number 1, pps 62–70, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2015 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2015.5.1.62.



Modeling crew at work on Panama-Pacific International Exposition. COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY.

close-up, personal, even mundane seeming conflicts on an ideal fairground a century ago are a reminder that constructing California's image abroad entails real work at home, with real costs.

In 1915, boosters dreamed of establishing San Francisco as the undisputed economic center of the Pacific world. To make it so, the leading businessmen who composed the exposition board realized that they needed an agreement with labor leaders to ensure smooth construction of the fair and to keep labor upheavals from scaring away exhibitors, visitors, or future investors. National manufacturers dedicated to antiunion, open-shop conditions feared doing business in a city with potential for labor unrest, high wages, and union shops, while union leaders were afraid low-paid workers would flood the grounds, undercutting their power in San Francisco. The city already had a burgeoning antiunion,

open-shop movement, brought to greater prominence by the founding in 1914 of the Merchants' and Manufacturers' Association of San Francisco. To alleviate concerns and to demonstrate their support for a venture that would bring business and jobs to the city, the city's two leading labor organizations, the Building Trades Council and the San Francisco Labor Council, entered into an informal accord with the fair.

Labor made numerous concessions, most importantly agreeing not to disrupt the fair with labor stoppages.<sup>1</sup> This was never a formal legal agreement, despite rumors to the contrary.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the accord was widely publicized and soothed the nerves of both manufacturers and labor unions concerned about unrest at the exposition, as did extensive publicity that depicted the city as unmarred by labor disputes. The pact was dubbed the "Pax Panama Pacifica."

The peace prevailed during construction, but a month after opening day, trouble was already beginning to brew on the fairgrounds. Dan P. Regan of the local culinary workers union complained that restaurants in the Joy Zone were failing to pay their workers and resisting employing union labor. “The papers have been lauding to the skies that the Fair was built under union conditions, but it does not state the rotten conditions under which the members of the culinary crafts have to work.”<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for culinary workers, pre-fair negotiations focused on the workers involved in physically constructing the exposition. Culinary workers soon learned that the fair was not, in fact, friendly to unskilled labor. By mid-March, union organizers complained that very few culinary workers were being paid on the grounds, and one local had gone so far as to “levy attachments” on vendors to force payment of wages to members. Moreover, some employers actively refused to allow their workers to unionize. Regan pleaded with John O’Connell, secretary of the San Francisco Labor Council, for aid in publicizing the problem. “It is all very well,” he argued, “for the men . . . that helped to build the fair [to] crow about how thankful Labor should be . . . but how about the unskilled man that has to work under the rotten conditions imposed upon them by the concessionaries.”<sup>4</sup>

The problem persisted even after fair officials got involved.<sup>5</sup> In mid-April the labor council considered a request from the Cook’s Union to declare three cafes on exposition grounds “unfair.”<sup>6</sup> The next week, the joint board of culinary workers requested a boycott of several cafes on the grounds.<sup>7</sup> By late April, union organizers were becoming frustrated. The waitress local lodged a complaint against the Waffle Kitchen because the manager had let “all the union help go and gives our Business Agent no encouragement in regard to straightening out the house and enforcing Union conditions.”<sup>8</sup>

In early May 1915, local labor leader, former mayor, and fair director Patrick McCarthy finally stepped in to address the issue. Reminding fair officials that many labor groups were meeting in San Francisco during the fair, he threatened that the labor council would ask union supporters to stay away from the offending concessions if labor concerns were not resolved.<sup>9</sup> Not long after his intervention, the *Labor Clarion* reported that the Waiter’s Union secured a raise for workers at banquets at the Old Faithful Inn and that the restaurant was employing union members only, and the

union was working to win the same conditions at the Inside Inn.<sup>10</sup>

While these disputes were apparently successfully resolved, waiters and waitresses enjoyed no ongoing labor peace at the exposition. The agreement between the fair and the labor and building trades councils, informal as it was, applied to the powerful building trades unions, not the unskilled workers on the grounds. Lower wage cooks, waiters, and waitresses wielded little power in San Francisco’s labor community. An influx of workers to the city, drawn by the promise of fair jobs, limited the bargaining position of unskilled workers. Socialist influence in culinary unions may have motivated labor leaders to ignore their interests, since the traditional trade unionists had their own interne-cine battles with the socialists.<sup>11</sup>

The *Labor Clarion* briefly reported on these disputes, but overall reporting on the fair continued to be unrelentingly positive, indicating the warm relationship between labor elites and the exposition. Even the editors of the *Labor Clarion* did not see fit to indict fair management for failing to keep the grounds friendly to organized labor, nor did they call for action in support of the culinary workers.

The story of labor at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition reflected the story of labor across America in 1915. Progressive Era politics sought to limit the power of unions, but often did so by fashioning agreements with union leaders, bringing them into the fold of the technocratic elites that Progressives believed could best manage an increasingly complicated society run by big institutions.

The work that went into producing the fair day-to-day also provides a window into the changing role of gender and race at work in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The exposition espoused progress as the highest value, and the artwork and rhetoric of the fair often symbolically encoded many of the central ideas of social Darwinism and scientific racism, which were rampant in America at the time. The employment structure of the fair reflected these gender and racial hierarchies. White men regulated behavior, white women upheld moral order, and people of color performed menial jobs—janitors, washroom attendants, drivers—or performed as exotic attractions in the Joy Zone.

On a cool February morning in 1915, more than nine hundred young white women reported for work to sell postcards, silver spoons, and refreshments to the throngs of tourists and locals who soon poured onto the fairgrounds



Telephone switchboard in service building at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY.

from the huge opening day parade. Clad in simple blue, asexual serge suits, they served as symbolic foils to the sexualized and racialized women who performed on the Joy Zone.<sup>13</sup> Like the white, male exposition guards, their appearance reassured visitors that despite the multitude of foreign people and products, the fair was a safe space with a recognizable racial and moral order.

Still fair officials closely scrutinized the women's comportment, worrying that any misbehavior among the cashiers might call the moral order of the fair into question. Less than a month after opening day, the department of concessions and admissions found it necessary to remind female cashiers of the expected standards of behavior. No "animated or extended conversations" with either employees or guests in front of their booths would be

tolerated. Most importantly, cashiers were not to "be seen arm in arm with Male employees" or to frequent any of the numerous dance halls of the fair. They should spend their break times "eating their meals and attending to their personal comfort." They were absolutely forbidden from associating with other fair employees or visiting other concessions, either while on duty or during their lunch and supper hours. This memo suggests that male and female employees in the Joy Zone had been consorting and perhaps even visiting dance halls together. The guards also received a copy of the memo, along with a note reminding them that these rules would "save these young ladies some embarrassment," and that "cooperation upon the part of male employees would perhaps save these young ladies their jobs."<sup>14</sup>



If these young women wandered the fair dressed in their work uniforms, dancing, drinking, and flirting with the male guards, they would reaffirm the concerns of those who feared a debauched and immoral fair in San Francisco. San Francisco's reputation as the home of "the notorious Barbary Coast, where the lowest forms of vice and sin, show themselves, in all their hideousness and deformity" concerned fair officials and made them vigilant to emphasize San Francisco's safety, both from physical danger and notions that might upset the social order.<sup>15</sup> Such reassurances helped to maintain a boundary between the sexually suggestive shows of the Joy Zone, and the rest of the fair and city. If young white cashiers could work near these shows and continue to act as chaste young women, then the racial and gender lines of the fair remained in place. If they did not, then the exposition's carefully constructed image of a respectable world's fair might begin to crumble, and San Francisco could regain its reputation as an uncivilized frontier outpost, unsuited to be the global economic center leaders yearned to create.

But young women did not always accept these restrictions on their behavior. As more young men and women entered the urban labor force in the early twentieth century, new sexual mores emerged that challenged old ideas about female chastity and public sexuality.<sup>16</sup> Away from their homes and families, young working-class women spent their hard-earned money on dance halls, movies, and fashionable attire, often to the horror of middle-class reformers.<sup>17</sup> Reformers targeted brothels, prostitutes, and dance shows, and rushed to regulate the behavior of unchaperoned young people in cities across the United States.

Simmering conflicts over public sexuality and gender roles erupted at the fair as some young white female employees engaged in behaviors that shocked reformers and flouted the rules set out by officials. Exposition guards twice discovered one young Joy Zone employee occupying a back room at the '49 Camp. Although she claimed to have permission to sleep there, after a guard discovered a man in the adjoining room the second time, the woman was escorted to the chief of concessions and immediately dismissed.<sup>18</sup> She had failed to live up to expectations of female moral behavior at the fair. The incident revealed both the high degree of surveillance under which fair employees lived and worked, and the ways that some women attempted to circumvent the expectations of fair directors and reformers.

Asserting San Francisco's preeminence in the Pacific world also meant demonstrating that racial lines remained firm in a newly imperial United States. In California, on the edge of the continent facing the Pacific, sexual relationships between white women and nonwhite men were a source of great anxiety. When a black employee made "insulting remarks" to a white female worker, he was sent to the exposition guards for disciplinary action.<sup>19</sup> Another young male Hawaiian Village employee accused of paying excessive attention and making "insulting remarks" to white women also lost his job.<sup>20</sup> Fair officials refused to tolerate racial transgressions by nonwhite men, which, like sexual transgressions by white women, threatened the public image—and potential profits—of the fair.

African Americans had hoped to use the fair to demonstrate their status as US citizens and to establish pride in their race.<sup>21</sup> But the entry fees were high, jobs were few, and no collection of exhibits at the exposition honored their heritage or place in California. The Progressive Era—and the year 1915 in particular—was one of heightened anxiety about race relations across the country, with the release of the film *Birth of a Nation* and the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. African Americans were relegated to the position of primitive "other" at the fair either in sideshows or as menial laborers. They demanded the meager benefits their demeaning positions offered, using everyday actions to resist white supremacy.<sup>22</sup>

In late July, an exposition guard brought Helen Castro, a black matron in the women's lavatory in the Palace of Horticulture, and Lovinia Johnson, a white employee of the building's Pine Apple Concession, into the guard headquarters.<sup>23</sup> The two women had engaged in a physical dispute over payment of a restroom fee.<sup>24</sup> Johnson claimed that she had paid the fee, but Castro demanded another payment. Johnson refused and Castro "caught her arm" and Johnson "then struck the maid in the face." Castro maintained that Johnson had refused to pay and that she only grabbed her after Johnson had hit her in the face. In response, Castro's employer, the Western Sanitary Company, vowed to fire her.<sup>25</sup>

This odd conflict over personal space in a public washroom was not an aberration, but one of a number of similar incidents that point to racial tensions on the grounds.<sup>26</sup> Just a week before, Castro had been reported for overcharging and insulting an army captain's wife, a charge for which she



Japanese tea pickers inside the Palace of Food Products, Panama-Pacific International Exposition. COURTESY SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY.

was supposed to have been fired.<sup>27</sup> During the nine months of the fair, white patrons accused black lavatory attendants of hitting them, grabbing them, accusing them of not paying, or insulting them, in toilets in the Fine Arts Palace, Education Palace, Horticulture Palace, Palace of Mines, the Liberal Arts Building, and in locations near Van Ness Avenue, the Tower of Jewels, and in the Joy Zone.<sup>28</sup> Both male and female visitors reported similar conflicts, demonstrating the strange prevalence of these incidents. No other conflict between employees and visitors was reported to the guards with such regularity. The relatively large number of these encounters suggests that they should not be dismissed as simple misunderstandings, but were rather manifestations of larger racial tensions.

Although service employees like the cashiers and wash-room attendants engaged with visitors daily, Joy Zone performers were some of the most visible laborers at the fair and the most prone to being policed for transgressing their prescribed roles. Although fair visitors might have viewed them solely as performers, they were workers, subject to the same kinds of regulations as the exposition guards, cashiers, and washroom attendants. Hundreds of people worked in the Joy Zone, many appearing to visitors as living exhibits rather than workers—the Indians of the Grand Canyon concession, the Somalis of Somaliland, and the Samoans of the Samoan Village among others. Although their work might have been disguised as traditional dances or traditional ways of living, these workers faced, in many cases, more intense

restrictions on their behavior than did those employees whose work was more recognizable to contemporaries as actual labor.

Remarkably, one group of performers went on strike, although the race and immigrant status of the participants obscured the nature of their protest for contemporaries. During the spring of 1915, after their employer failed to pay their wages, thirty-one Somali men and women of the Somaliland concession stopped working and refused to vacate their houses. The concession was already floundering just a month after opening, so the concessionaire canceled his contract with the villagers. The exposition took over the show, but the Somali workers refused to perform because they had not been paid. After the exposition disbanded the show, the impoverished Somalis insisted on remaining on the grounds. In mid-May, the *Examiner* reported that fair officials had ordered them to vacate the premises. But Ahaoun, their representative, told the paper: "I sent word to Mr. Bryan that if we were removed they would have to call upon the Exposition guard to do it. They haven't put us out yet, but of course they will tear our houses down."<sup>29</sup> As Ahaoun predicted, immigration officials assisted the exposition in forcing the Somalis out. Exposition guards "loaded the dark strangers on a Fadgl train, and escorted them to the Yacht Harbor, where a Government tug awaited them for Angel Island, whence they were . . . deported."<sup>30</sup>

The Somali labor conflict demonstrates the difficulties that faced the employees of many Joy Zone concessions. As immigrant workers, often colonial subjects brought to the United States solely as performers, these men and women depended on their employer for everything from wages to housing. If their act was unpopular, they had no choice but to follow the concessionaire when he closed up shop. As poor African immigrant performers, the Somalis had little to no bargaining power. Despite their attempt to stage a strike—to both refuse to dance and to vacate their dwellings on the grounds—they proved no match for the power of the exposition and the US government. The exposition controlled the land they occupied and had the authority to tear their houses down once their presence became an obstacle to the spectacle of the exposition.

When the Somali workers ceased to participate in the spectacle and demanded fair treatment from the exposition, they challenged the fair's racial hierarchy and colonial message. As colonial subjects, the Somalis' appearance at

the fair justified the imperial system by juxtaposing their "primitive" ways of life with those of white Americans and Europeans displayed in the fair's exhibit palaces. As colonial subjects, however, by definition, they could not stage a strike, so their actions threatened the fair both financially and ideologically. Although the Somalis' actions probably went unnoticed by many fair visitors, the episode highlighted the race and class system that governed employment on the Joy Zone. White waiters and waitresses and cashiers might have their own frustrations with their working conditions, but their racial status, nationality, and terms of employment gave them a degree of power not granted to the black Somalis.<sup>31</sup>

Fair planners staged an international exposition to declare California's ascendance as an economic stronghold in the Pacific. But the staging itself involved work that was inexorably bound with local, domestic, class, race, and gender conflicts in the Progressive Era.

While exposition officials scrutinized the behavior of all workers—culinary workers, guards, cashiers, washroom workers, and Joy Zone performers alike—to ensure that their actions reinforced the fair's social hierarchy, the fair did not always work in the way that officials expected. Unskilled workers fought to organize, while their employers fought for an open shop. Young men and women flirted and danced and circumvented the rules laid out by fair officials, therefore threatening the fair's claim to be a morally clean space. African American men and women fought for the meager profits offered by their employment at the fair and their behavior engendered resentment by angry white visitors. Joy Zone performers, like the Somalis, attempted to live their lives in the public venue and found it impossible to escape racial attitudes and expectations of their behavior and place in society. Progressive Era anxieties about class conflict, the regulation of female sexuality and gender roles, and the maintenance of white supremacy permeated the fair's veneer of labor peace and threatened to reveal the real contradictions upon which the Pax Panama Pacifica was built. **B**

## Notes

This material appears courtesy of the University of Nebraska Press. It is drawn from Abigail Markwyn, *Empress San Francisco: The Pacific Rim, the Great West, and California at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition*.





Samoan dance and the golden Buddha of Japan at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. COURTESY OF SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY.

- <sup>1</sup> Frank Morton Todd, *The Story of the Exposition, Being the Official History of the International Celebration Held at San Francisco in 1915 to Commemorate the Discovery of the Pacific Ocean and the Construction of the Panama Canal*, (New York, 1921), vol. 1, 325–330.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles C. Moore to Labor Council and Building Trades Council, 7 September 1912, Labor Conditions – corres. re.:; Carton 36, Panama-Pacific International Exposition Company Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter PPIE-BL).
- <sup>3</sup> Dan P. Regan to John O’Connell, 19 March 1915, Labor Organizations and Trade Associations, Carton 93, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>4</sup> Dan P. Regan to John O’Connell, 19 March 1915, Labor Organizations and Trade Associations, Carton 93, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>5</sup> H.D.H. Connick to John O’Connell, 31 March 1915, SF-PPIE, Carton 16, San Francisco Labor Council Papers, Bancroft Library.

- <sup>6</sup> “Synopsis of Minutes of Regular Meeting Held April 9, 1915, SFLC,” *Labor Clarion*, 16 April 1915.
- <sup>7</sup> “Synopsis of Minutes of Regular Meeting,” *Labor Clarion*, 23 April 1915.
- <sup>8</sup> Laura Molleda to John O’Connell, 29 April 1915, Labor Organizations and Trade Associations, Carton 93, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>9</sup> P.H. McCarthy to H.D.H. Connick, 3 May 1915, Labor Associations and Trade Associations, Carton 93, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>10</sup> “Minutes of SFLC,” *Labor Clarion*, 21 May 1915.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Edward Lee Knight, *Industrial Relations in the Bay Area, 1900–1918* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1960), 270–271.
- <sup>12</sup> On the imperial nature of the fair, see Sarah J. Moore, *Empire on Display: The Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).



- <sup>13</sup> Todd, *The Story of the Exposition*, vol. 2 (New York: Panama-Pacific International Exposition Company, 1921), 279.
- <sup>14</sup> 14 March 1915, copy of bulletin to cashiers, Extracts of Daily Reports of the Guards March-April 1915, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>15</sup> Frederick P. Church to Moore, 18 February 1913, Liquor and Red Light Abatement, Carton 23, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>16</sup> On changing public sexuality, see John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- <sup>18</sup> “Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards for August 4, 1915,” and “Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards for August 20, 1915,” Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards August 1915, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>19</sup> “Extracts of Daily Reports of the Guards, March 31, 1915,” Extracts of Daily Reports of the Guards, March–April 1915, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>20</sup> Frank Burt to Cumming, 3 September 1915, Corres. re: complaints, Carton 8, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>21</sup> Lynn Hudson, “‘This Is Our Fair and Our State’: African Americans and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition,” *California History* 87(3), 2010, 26–45; Abigail Markwyn, *Empress San Francisco: The Pacific Rim, the Great West, and California at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).
- <sup>22</sup> See Robin D.G. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History*, 80 (1993): 75–112, for a discussion of the ways in which African Americans in the Jim Crow South asserted their identities through these kinds of interactions.
- <sup>23</sup> The report describes Castro as “colored,” a term that could mean African American. Nonetheless, given that her surname was a Spanish one, it is also possible that she was of Hispanic descent. Nonetheless, it remains clear that she was perceived as nonwhite, like the other attendants whose actions are described below. “Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards, 25 July 1915,” Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>24</sup> A system of free and pay restrooms existed on the grounds, with quite a few more pay than free toilets, causing confusion for visitors as to whether or not they should pay for use of the facilities.
- <sup>25</sup> “Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards, 25 July 1915,” Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that washroom attendant was one of the few positions available to blacks on the grounds, and these reports suggest that a large number of these attendants were African American. The same was true at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Christopher Robert Reed, “*All the World is Here!*” *The Black Presence at White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 76.
- <sup>27</sup> “Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards, 18 July 1915,” Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards July 1915, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>28</sup> See Extracts from Daily Reports of the Guards, Carton 83, PPIE-BL.
- <sup>29</sup> “Somali Natives at Fair ‘Broke,’” *Examiner*, 14 May 1915.
- <sup>30</sup> Frank Morton Todd, *The Story of the Exposition, Being the Official History of the International Celebration Held at San Francisco in 1915 to Commemorate the Discovery of the Pacific Ocean and the Construction of the Panama Canal*, vol. 2 (New York, 1921), 375.
- <sup>31</sup> Todd, *Story of the Exposition*, vol. 2: 375.