

The Sanitary Fair of 1864 and the Delphic Oracle

Held in 1864, the Mississippi Valley Sanitary Fair was housed in a temporary, 500-foot long building in St. Louis, Missouri. It featured an art gallery, bed linen and quilt department, cannon display, soda fountain, skating pond, a showroom for sewing machines, a separate showroom for farm implements, beer garden, "New Bedford Department" with walrus tusks and hinged seashells, and an actress portraying the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, who sold dolls. Food, handcrafts, and raffles were in abundant supply. The hall was lit by 3,000 gas jets and decorated with wreaths, rosebushes, cages of canaries, and plaster statuary provided by local businesses. All of this was to raise money for the U.S. and Western Sanitary Commissions to send supplies to the front for the troops.



Stall #12 was listed as the "Delphic Oracle." The columns were decorated with signs of the zodiac, skulls, paper hearts, and mythic creatures. The dome was strung with ropes decorated with Christmas ornaments and was topped with a stuffed owl. The center of the booth was occupied by a wheel that could be spun to reveal fortunes for those willing to donate a dime. The ladies running the booth wore mystical sashes and diadems that aided them in assisting those wishing to find their fortune by spinning the wheel. The "Prophetess" who ran the wheel purported to be the "seventh daughter of a seventh daughter."

Needless to say, no gambling was permitted at the Fair, but fortune telling seemed to be fine!

The Fair was extremely successful and made over \$550,000 in three days, though the highest price charged was the \$2 admission to the building.

The ladies of the Second Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery can present an interpretation of the Delphic Oracle thanks to the carpentry skills of Lt. Cain. Our booth features a wheel with authentic 19th century fortunes ("Leave nothing for tomorrow which can be done today." "If one will do, do not take two."), a banner with zodiac glyphs, stuffed owl, and appropriate mystical, yet patriotic, decorations in appropriate colors and sparkly fabrics and ribbons. The ladies have special sashes and diadems that enable us to help interpret the Oracle.

