Ferris Wheel Encyclopedia Article

Ferris Wheel

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Ferris Wheel

A Ferris wheel is a carnival ride consisting of a large, vertical wheel rotating around an axle, invented by engineer George Washington Gale Ferris for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, in 1893. Ferris was born February 14, 1859, in Galesburg, Illinois. As a childhe lived in Carson City, Nevada. He graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1881 and set to work designing railroads, bridges and tunnels. In 1885 he began inspecting structural steel for the Kentucky and Indiana Bridge Company. He took what he learned on the job and started his own business, the G. W. C. Ferris & Company, which acted as a consultant to steel users. In 1892 Daniel Burnham (1846-1912), planner for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, announced he was looking for a visual focal point for the site that would rival the Eiffel Tower built for the Paris Exposition three years earlier. Ferris reacted by producing a design for a giant upright wheel. It was both an engineering and an aesthetic marvel. The original Ferris wheel towered 250 feet over the exposition and could hold 60 people in each of its 36 cars. It weighed 2100 tons, boasted a forged steel axle 33 inches by 45 feet, could carry 150 tons of riders, and was driven by two, 1000-horsepower reversible steam engines. The combination of its lights and the rhythm of its whirling motion was similar to the visual impact of a steam-driven paddle wheel. To finance the venture, Ferris raised $250,000 through a stock issue. His wheel made a profit of more than a million dollars. Ferris died three years later, in 1896.