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Dime Museums in Chicago, IL

[DIME MUSEUM HISTORY]

Dime museums were institutions that were popular at the end of the 19th century in the United States. Designed as centers for entertainment and moral education for the working class (lowbrow), the museums were distinctly different from upper-middle class' cultural events (highbrow). In urban centers like New York City and Chicago, where many immigrants settled, dime museums were popular and cheap entertainment.





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Dime Museums were one of the lowest rungs on the showbiz ladder, sometimes not much more than a storefront with a mix of sideshow acts, macabre curios, and freaks. But it was where a hungry performer could always find work, and Harry Houdini would return to Dime Museums so many times that he earned the nickname, "Dime Museum Harry." The social trend reached its peak during the Progressive era (ca. 1890–1920).

[KOHL & MIDDLETON'S DIME MUSEUM - CHICAGO, ILLINOIS]

(Reminiscences of George Middleton as told to and written by his wife)

In coming down from the northwest in 1882, C. E. Kohl and I decided there was an opening in Chicago for a dime museum, so we formed a co-partnership and I went on to Chicago to look up a location, which I found at 150 West Madison Street, just east of Halsted. It was an instantaneous success, and we kept in operation a great many years.

The next year we opened one at 150 S. Clark Street, near Madison (now 10 South Clark Street after the 1909 Chicago streets being renamed and renumbered), and at 150, 152 and 154 W. Madison, opposite Union street, which were also very successful.

During the 1893 Chicago World's Fair we opened another one at 294 State Street, which was also a success. We also established them in Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Cleveland. All except Cleveland paid handsomely, which was our only failure in the dime museum business.

It was a strange business, and for a few years the dime was something new for the price of admission to a place of amusement. Thousands and thousands of people would pass along and say, "Oh, let's go in for fun;" but as years went by those same people became critics and would not spend their dime nor their time unless the show was considered worth it.

The dime museum business, with its curiosities, its stage performance and its music, led to the continuous vaudeville of the theatres; then came the ten, twenty and thirty cent performance, the people all the time demanding better shows, for which they were willing to pay, until finally it has reached the high class

KOHL & MIDDLETON.
DIRECTOR GENERAL DAVIS,
PRESIDENT HIGINBOTHAM, and
DIRECTOR PERD PECK
-HAVE CLOSED-
BUT-
Midway Plaisance
-BUT-
Kohl & Middleton
-OF THE-
CLARK-ST. DIME MUSEUM
-WILL ON-
Monday, Nov. 13,
Reproduce Old Midway

TYPICAL MIDWAY DANCERS.
The identical girls who made you forget
Home and Business all last summer.

THE STARTLING
Torture Dance.
The distracting Turkish Musicians
and the Old Familiar
HOT-HOT-HOT MAN
Will all appear in their Original
Specialties. A grand
NOON-DAY BUSINESS MEN'S MEETING
-ALL WEEK AT-
KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
CLARK-ST.
DIME MUSEUM.



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**MIDDLETON'S
CLARK ST. MUSEUM**



**HOUDINI
WIZARD OF
SHACKLES**

No pair of handcuffs or ankle shackles ever invented can hold him. \$50 reward paid for any pair from which he can not free himself. Bring your own handcuffs.

CORA BECKWITH
and the Champion
Lady Swimmers

vaudeville of today, in which higher salaries are paid than in any other class of amusement, excepting grand opera.

So what does this enterprising duo have to do with the Columbian Exposition? The Fair and its popular Midway closed at the end of October of 1893, but, the men just didn't want to see it end! So, by November 12th they had put together a gigantic show reproducing the "Old Midway," just in case there was anyone left in Chicago who had not visited the original. "Rrrrrright here on our stage! The Columbian Exposition!"

[LONDON DIME MUSEUM / GEM THEATER, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS]

Formerly the London Dime Museum, which was in operation from at least the early 1890's, managed by 'Captain' John White, and featured a vaudeville house on the main floor and an 'oddities' museum on the upper floor. The building became the Gem Theater in 1908 through to 1949. In 1929, the Gem Theatre began to feature burlesque in addition to movies. It stood directly across the street from the landmark Second Leiter Building, later the first Loop home of the flagship Sears, Roebuck, & Co. department store.

By early 1950, the name of the theater was changed to the Follies Theater, also known as the Follies Burlesque. It lasted until 1972, when the management started showing hard-core pornography in order to keep operation open. It reopened in 1974 for legitimate theatrical use, but after one performance, the theater was closed again. "Deep Throat" was showing here in 1975. The Follies Theater was destroyed in a fire in 1978.



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Today, the enormous Harold Washington Library Center, Chicago's main library building, is located on the site of the theater on the north-west corner of State Street and Congress Parkway.





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~~~ MORE PHOTOGRAPHS & IMAGES ~~~

~~~~~ KOHL & MIDDLETON'S DIME MUSEUMS ~~~~~

KOHL & MIDDLETON CLARK-ST. DIME MUSEUM

WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY, NOV. 23, 1896.

LAST WEEK OF CORA BECKWITH!
And Her Troupe of
Lady Swimmers.
New Programme of Fancy Swimming and Diving.



MISS JOHNSON, Champion High Diver of the World.
BE SURE AND SEE THE
FUNNY TUB RACES!

GLOBE DIME MUSEUM

STATE-ST., NEAR VAN BUREN.

GREAT DOUBLE BILL.
Biggest Show in Chicago at Any Price of Admission.

GOLIATH The HOUDINS
Strongest Man Alive. Greatest Illusionists.



ROSA And Her Great Company
of Oriental Dancers.
In THE ONLY ORIGINAL **MIDWAY**



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**KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
CLARK STREET DIME MUSEUM
MONDAY, OCT. 22.**

BIG ELLA
WILL SAY
GOOD-BYE!

LAST WEEK OF
**ELLA
EWING,**

**THE TALLEST OF
HUMAN BEINGS.**
68,768 persons, in-
cluding 25,000 ladies,
with whom Ella is a
great favorite, visited
the Museum LAST
WEEK.

See the Long-Haired
PRINCESS.

Commodore Speck,
the Human Mito, and
His Manikin Goats.

**LADY SWORD SWALLOWER. PUNCH and JUDY,
GIOVANNI'S MUSICAL GLASSES, THE LIVING
PICTURES, HOUDIN, Magician, and**

TWO GREAT STAGE SHOWS!



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KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
HOWLING SUCCESS AT
KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
CLARK-ST. DIME MUSEUM.

SECOND WEEK. © SECOND WEEK.

COMMENCING
MONDAY, MARCH 27.

FUNNIEST SHOW YET.

GIGANTIC GIRLS
--IN--
ADVANCE STYLES.

We would not if we could avert
The coming reign of the hoopskirt.
'Twill not last long and then the dress
That clings will come again to bless.

THREE THEATERS

And a Big Gathering of New Wonders,
which can only be found at:

KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
CLARK-ST. DIME MUSEUM.



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KOHL & MIDDLETON'S West Side Dime Museum

FOR ONE WEEK

Commencing Monday, Feb. 2d.

—THE GREAT—

Hyers Sisters'

Colored

Comedy Co.

—IN THE—

BLACKVILLE TWINS

In five acts, and a wedding.



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KOHL & MIDDLETON'S
SOUTH SIDE DIME MUSEUM.
CLARK NEAR MADISON ST.

WE RESPECTFULLY ANNOUNCE
OUR FIRST

GRAND BIRD EXHIBITION

NOW IN ACTIVE PREPARATION.

WANTED!

*Parties to place their Birds on Exhibition
for which we will pay liberally. Birds
of any and all species will be ac-
cepted. Fancy Pigeons, &c., &c.*

*Apply Immediately at
South Side Dime Museum Office
and learn the advantages
we offer exhibitors,*

Your Obedient Servants,