

A Tale of Two Fairs

by Joseph D. Kubal, *Volunteer Researcher*

If you've been to the Museum of Science and Industry, you've likely waited in line to see the *Coal Mine* exhibit. With its 60-foot-tall metallic head frame soaring into the building's interior and its underground chambers lined with "black diamonds," also known as coal, the exhibit is a fan favorite. But did you know *Coal Mine* has a connection to the Peabody family of Mayslake Hall?

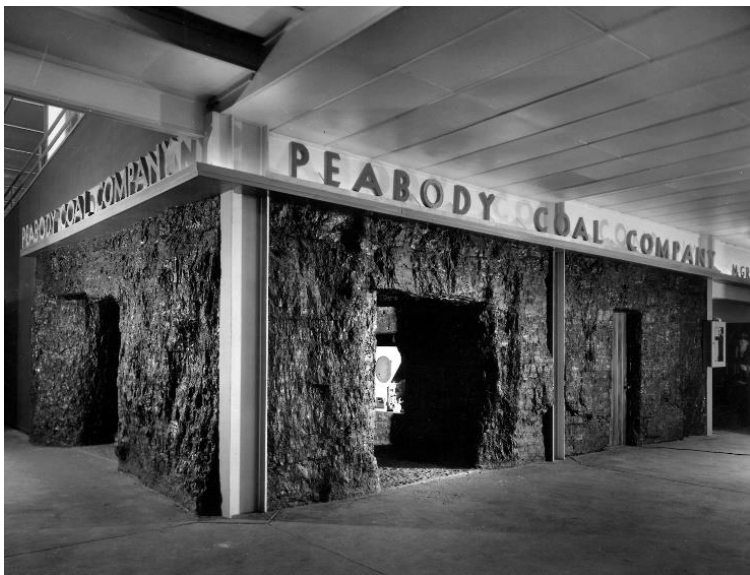
In 1933 Chicago hosted the Century of Progress International Exposition, a world's fair held on Lake Michigan's shoreline several miles north of the Museum of Science and Industry and south of today's Adler Planetarium. Organizers hoped Century of Progress would surpass the aura left by the city's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, and they weren't disappointed. The 39 million visitors the expo welcomed between 1933 and 1934 was so significant that Chicago added another star to its flag in celebration of the event.



Panorama of A Century of Progress Exposition, Chicago, 1933, Harry Koss, 1933. LOC, LC-DIG-ds-05672

The Peabody family was involved in both Chicago fairs. During the Columbian Exposition, May Henderson Peabody, the first wife of Mayslake's original owner, Francis Stuyvesant Peabody, raised money for the children's building when she acted as the chair of the Spanish room for the Columbian Bazaar, the overwhelmingly successful fundraiser held in the home of socialite Bertha Palmer.

Francis Peabody's son, Stuyvesant "Jack" Peabody, carried on the family tradition by sitting on the enrollment committee for the Chicago World's Fair, which helped to promote Century of Progress to the public. He also used the fair as an opportunity to have the Peabody Coal Company, the company his father began and he took over, shine at the exhibition.



Peabody Booth Interior at A Century of Progress, 1933. Courtesy Museum of Science and Industry Chicago

The Peabody Coal display was housed in the north wing of the general exhibits building, just opposite the 18th Street entrance to the fairgrounds. Visitors were amazed to discover the display was carved from a solid 276-ton block of coal 30 feet long, 20 feet deep and 9 feet high, into which they could easily walk. According to the exhibit's brochure, "Visitors . . . almost invariably exclaim[ed], 'It looks just like coal' or 'What a clever imitation.'"

Atop the massive shelled-out room was a plain Peabody Coal Company sign. Upon entering, visitors saw a map pinpointing the locations of coalfields, the company's mines and offices, and the territory Peabody served. There were photographs showing modern methods of coal mining, an illustrated description of Peabody Coal's "smoke-less firing method," and a functioning cross-section of a modern coal burner with views of the mechanical operations. All of the exhibits were made more dramatic by a realistic flame effect running along the top of the coal seam near the ceiling.

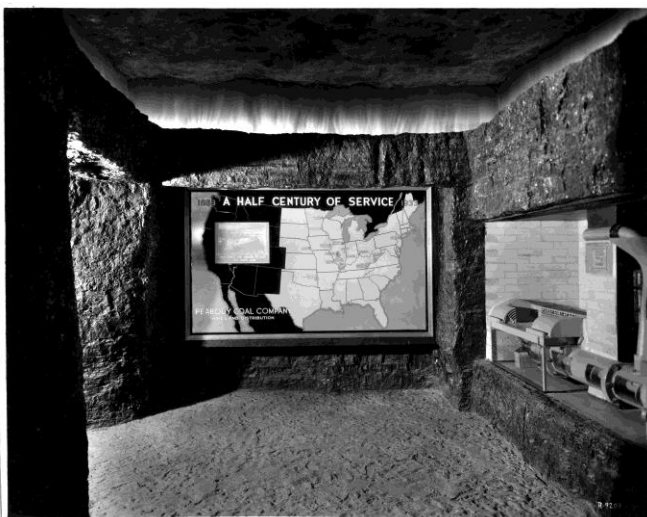
The Museum of Science and Industry opened on June 19, 1933, not quite a month after the fair. The building was constructed using remnants of the Palace of Fine Arts from the Columbian Exposition and re-surfaced with limestone cladding. The original Beaux-Arts structure, one of the many of the Columbian Exposition's "White City," was designed by Charles B. Atwood of D.H. Burnham Company and financed in part by Sears, Roebuck and Company president and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald.

In August 1933, O.T "Pop" Kreusser, the museum's director, appears to have contacted Peabody Coal, requesting the coal from the Century of Progress exhibit. Peabody's advertising manager, W.H. Royce, responded a month later saying the museum was "welcome to the coal and rock faces now installed in our Century of Progress exhibit." Royce sent a permit issued by the fair on Dec. 19, which stated the "Museum of Science and Industry will remove coal walls, mine roof and smoke-less system firing charts."

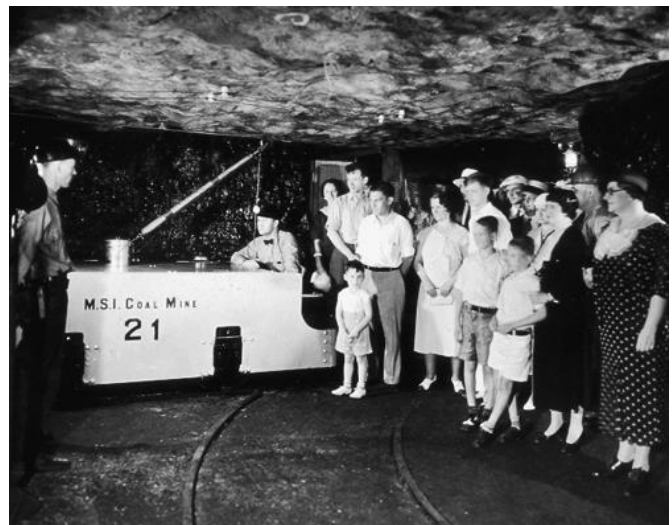
Letters from the museum's archives indicate the transfer was completed by Jan. 10, 1934, but the plaque that hangs at *Coal Mine* today reads: "The coal faces and rock roof in this mine were taken from Illinois Seam Number Six in Number Fifteen mine in Mount Olive – Macoupin County, Illinois by courtesy of Consolidated Coal Company of Saint Louis, St. Louis, Missouri – 1933." There's no evidence of a connection between Peabody and Consolidated, so what happened to the coal from Peabody's Century of Progress exhibit?

According to Doug Zimmer, a volunteer with the Museum of Science and Industry's collections department, "Handwritten notes indicate that the donation at least got as far as a room that was across from the *Coal Mine*. That's where the trail ends."

The exact fate of the Peabody's Century of Progress exhibit is unknown, but the connection between Chicago's two world's fairs, one of the city's most beloved museums, and Peabody Coal is intriguing and illustrates the large but often unseen role the Peabody family played in the history of Chicago.



*Peabody Booth Interior at A Century of Progress, 1933.
Courtesy Museum of Science and Industry Chicago*



*Visitors Enjoying MSI's Coal Mine Exhibit, ca.1935-49.
Courtesy Museum of Science and Industry Chicago*