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CONCEPT, ATLANTA CYCLORAMA CENTER

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FILE: Cyclorama Reconstruction

The "Battle of Atlanta" painting is unique not only as a large and famous painting, but also, being a cyclorama, it cannot, like most other things, be seen from without, but to view it one must literally get inside the circular canvas which is approximately 120 feet in diameter and 50 feet high. This physical peculiarity places a very important limitation on the cyclorama from an exhibition standpoint and creates a major safety problem. Spectators must either be lowered into the 50-foot high circular picture area from above or brought to the viewing platform from beneath through a tunnel and up stairways as in the present cyclorama building. Neither arrangement makes it possible to effect quick evacuation of the audience from the picture area. This brings about a definite safety-to-life problem in case of a fire emergency, especially under the panic environment that would exist.

Although the painting is housed in a noncombustible building and by careful study every step feasible has been taken to improve the existing structure from a safety standpoint, the "fire loading" from the painting itself is ever present and is considerable. The picture contains approximately one-half-acre of free-hanging linen canvas impregnated with more than 8,000 pounds of oil paint which would burn intensely if once ignited. A carbon dioxide gas fire extinguishing system has been provided to protect the painting but this cannot be brought into action until the audience has been evacuated. Even though the attendance is now limited to 150 people at one time, think of the calamity that might result should fire trap an audience inside this paint-soaked canvas enclosure! Indeed, Atlanta should feel fortunate that she has thus far been spared such a possible catastrophe.

The Plan

The cyclorama painting can be housed and exhibited in a manner that will assure complete protection from fire to both the painting and the viewing audience and also provide control of atmosphere in the area for preservation of the painting. This,

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however, will require an entirely new and different concept in building design and arrangements from that of the present cyclorama building, which is approaching a half-century in age and is obsolete. The provision of a new cyclorama building of proper though unique design could eliminate the safety-to-life problem now prevailing and permit full capacity loading of the viewing platform when attendance is heavy as with holiday and convention groups. The new building could be more beautiful and much more appropriate for its occupancy than the present one. It could afford improved lighting, which is much needed, and better programing and sound effects. It would, moreover, provide a special area located away from ground moisture for housing the painting, which area would normally be sealed off to permit controlled atmosphere as regards temperature and humidity to prolong life of the canvas. In the event of fire in the picture area, it would allow complete and safe evacuation of the entire audience from the area in a matter of seconds, followed immediately by automatic flooding of the picture with carbon dioxide gas to extinguish the fire without leaving any residue, and thus assure complete fire control for the painting, at the same time providing full life safety.

To embody these enhancements, this special structure of new concept would, of course, be of fire-resistive construction and would be similar in design to a two-tier wedding cake; the first story being about 300 feet in diameter and 20 feet high. This story would be protected by automatic sprinklers and occupied as a Civil War museum, relating principally to the Battle of Atlanta, which in time could become the very finest museum of its kind. The second story would be 125 feet in diameter and about 50 feet high, or approximately the size of the present cyclorama building. It would house only the cyclorama painting and its foreground scenery. The arrangement would be unique in that the 30-foot diameter viewing platform would be on a hydraulic (aqua) lift. After being fully briefed on the Atlanta Campaign in a small theater by use of animated film the audience would be assembled on the platform on the first floor level and then with appropriate music and sound effects be elevated to viewing position in the picture area in the second story.

At this point the platform would slowly make one complete revolution and by means of sectionalized sound programming, the individual viewer would be informed about the portion of the battle scene appearing before him. The platform would have an integral ceiling that would move up and down with the platform and which, when in the lowered position, would form a gas-tight separation between the first and second stories by means of a simple water seal.

With the arrangement described, should a fire occur in the picture area, for example, while the platform is loaded and at the viewing position, either the operator or the automatic fire detection system would allow the platform to be lowered immediately by gravity at a controlled speed to the first floor level to discharge the audience safely, the ceiling simultaneously forming a seal between the two stories. By interlock control, as soon as the seal is formed, a carbon dioxide fire extinguishing system would flood the picture canvas with fire extinguishing gas without the time delay that is now required. All emergency safety equipment would be designed on a multiple "positive operation" basis. The arrangement would provide full safety to life for occupants of the building, coupled with prompt and complete fire control for the painting. It would also safely permit full audience capacity on the platform and allow a controlled atmosphere normally to be maintained in the picture area for prolonging life of the canvas.

Special Features

If such a new cyclorama building should be undertaken, it is suggested that the project also include two special features; first, the old locomotive "Texas" which is now in the basement of the present building should be reconditioned for actual operation so that it could take part with the "General" in any future re-enactments of the Andrews' Raid*. Normally, however, the "Texas" would be kept on exhibit in the first story museum, but there would be provided within the museum a length of fenced-off track

* A re-enactment of "The Great Locomotive Chase" annually, or even quinquennially, utilizing both the engines, Texas and General, operating under steam over the L. & N. Railroad along the original route of the chase, could become a tourist attraction of national prominence.

on which the old engine could be moved back and forth at regular intervals, operating on compressed air, which would give the engine all the sound and other effects as though actually moving under steam.

The other feature would be to include a water fountain of appropriate size, water patterns and lighting effects near the entrance to the building. A large sculptured phoenix would constitute the central figure, with gas burning on the water's surface at the several cascading levels beneath the figure to symbolize the resurgence of Atlanta after the battle. The phoenix theme could even include a programmed periodic envelopment of the phoenix by flames, accompanied by the figure disappearing below the surface - to rise again when the flames subside.

Atlanta could be proud of a new cyclorama building such as described and the city deserves it. The preservation work on the picture which is reported to be very necessary could be performed as each picture section is moved from the old to the new building.

The "Battle of Atlanta" is entitled to a new home, so let the job be done right. The cyclorama can be made an even greater tourist attraction and credit to the city than it has been in the past and concurrently incorporate full safety-to-life measures. If located in the new auditorium-hotel complex area, with the larger audiences that could be handled and with longer hours of operation the revenue derived should certainly make the project feasible.

Gordon F. Price

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