

The Viking

Amy Strong

500 years before Columbus "discovered" the Western hemisphere, Leif Erickson opened up the shores of Vinland - Newfoundland - to Norse settlers for farming. Perhaps it was their invasion method that doomed the Norse to "also ran" status: rather than enslaving the native populations, the fierce Vikings coexisted relatively peacefully, learning to work the land and intermarrying with the new people.

Knowing that one of their own had been the first by far, Norwegian pride never could sit still for all the hoo-ha directed at the Mediterranean ports every hundred years.

The World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, was to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America. Captain Magnus Andersen of Norway tried to convince his government to send a recently (1888) unearthed Viking longship built circa 900 CE, to gently remind the southern countries of the earlier Norse discoveries. Norway did not want to ship its 1000 year old national treasure to Chicago, so for \$16,000.00 Capt. Andersen had his own replica built. It was in this replica, named The Viking, that Capt. Andersen and 11 other crew members set sail from Bergen, Norway on May 1, 1893.

The trip to Chicago was calculated to be 4800 miles. The 12 men cooked and slept on the open deck. The only below deck shelter was for supplies, below the floor boards. For the men, a tarp provided a tent like cover. On windy days, the red and white striped sail billowed proudly; in calm, the men set up a long bench down the center of the deck, sat, and rowed. 12 men rowed a 78 foot long, 20 ton ship, using 32, 18 foot long oars. 28 days later, including stops in New York and other East Coast towns and a trip through the Great Lakes via the Erie Canal, The Viking arrived at the Exposition, a proud display in a floating parade that included replicas of Columbus' three ships. It was July 12, 1893.

Unbelievably, The Viking is still among us - although she could use a little loving care. At the southwest end of Lincoln Park Zoo, the stripped down ship rests behind a high chain link fence. Its dragon heads, sails and shields were removed for repairs years ago and are being housed in private homes. A bust of Capt. Andersen has been erected across from it. A sign proclaims that this is The Raven, a misnomer given the ship about 30 years after the Exposition. And the zoo, planning a new reptile house for that spot, wants the boat gone by 1994.

The Viking Ship Restoration Committee was formed in 1979. To date, they have raised a couple hundred thousand dollars, mainly from donations by the area's Norwegian heritage organizations. The money might be enough to restore the ship, but more is needed to erect a new home for it and to transport the vessel to its new location. The Committee would like to see The Viking reside at the Museum of Science and Industry, the only other surviving structure from the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Unfortunately, the museum hasn't got the funds to foot such a bill on its own.

Says John Henderson, Chicago Park District research and policy manager, "I think the Park District has the civic responsibility to make sure this artifact is conserved and preserved. We're just hoping that some benefactor will come in and help us with that responsibility."