

## This Day in History... April 21, 1962

# Opening of Seattle World's Fair

On April 21, 1962, the Seattle World's Fair, also known as the Century 21 Exposition, opened to the public.

Plans for the Seattle World's fair began in 1955. At that time, organizers hoped to hold their fair in 1959, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. However, they wouldn't have enough time to get everything ready by then so the plan had to change.

At the time, America was involved in the Space Race with the Soviet Union. Additionally, Boeing had a profound effect on Seattle, making it "an aerospace city." So the new plan for the fair was to show that America wasn't behind the Soviets in the Space Race. Previous talks of an American West-themed fair were dropped, and the new themes were space, science, and the future.

American representatives personally visited Moscow to invite the Soviets to participate in the fair, but they refused. None of the Baltic States were invited, nor were China, Vietnam, or North Korea.



*From the Prominent Americans Series*

Dignitaries, celebrities, and other guests gave speeches or performances at Memorial Stadium on the day of opening. The stage had a countdown clock that had been started by President Dwight D. Eisenhower over two years earlier. When the clock reached zero, president John F. Kennedy, who was on Easter holiday in Florida, pressed a gold telegraph key to start the fair. The key was the same one used by William Howard Taft to start the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.

The fairgrounds, which spanned 74 acres, were divided into several different sections, including the World of Science, the World of Tomorrow, the World of Commerce and Industry, the World of Art, the World of Entertainment, Boulevards of the World, and more. At the center of the fair was the 607-foot Space Needle observation tower. It remains a major tourist attraction. In an attempt to improve tourism, \$130 million was spent to clean up the pollution in Lake Washington and Elliott Bay. A monorail was also constructed to carry visitors 1.3 miles

from downtown Seattle to the fairgrounds.

The World of Science included a NASA exhibit with models and mockups of satellites plus the Project Mercury capsule that Alan Shepard took into space. The World of Tomorrow exhibit included a monorail and several examples of how they expected farms, offices, and schools could be changed in the future. The World of Commerce and Industry included 32 furniture companies, Encyclopedia Britannica, daily fashion shows, and a simulated space flight by Ford Motor Company.

There were many interesting foreign exhibits as well. Great Britain shared its science and technology while Mexico and Peru showed handicrafts and Japan and India shared their national cultures. Taiwan and South Korea showed how quickly their technologies had advanced.



*The best-selling stamp in US history.*

The fair ran until October 21, 1962. President John F. Kennedy was supposed to attend the closing ceremony in October 1962, but bowed out, saying he was suffering from a "heavy cold." In reality, he was dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The fair was a tremendous success and one of the few fairs of the era to turn a profit. In all, over 6 million people attended. The fair did a great deal to promote tourism for Seattle. The location was later the setting for the Elvis movie, *It Happened at the World's Fair*.



*Stamp pictures the Space Needle and the Alweg Monorail.*



*Alan Shepard became the first American in space in 1961.*

The World of Art contained works of 50 contemporary American artists, 50 foreign artists, as well as 72 masterpieces by such noted artists as Rembrandt, Rubens, and Picasso. American artists included Willem de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, Georgia O'Keefe, Jackson Pollock, and Isamu Noguchi.

In the World of Entertainment, there was a boxing championship and a twirling competition as well as several American and foreign performances. The Opera House included orchestras conducted by Igor Stravinsky, live telecasts of *The Ed Sullivan Show*, performances by the New York City Ballet Company, and the Marine Corps Band.

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