

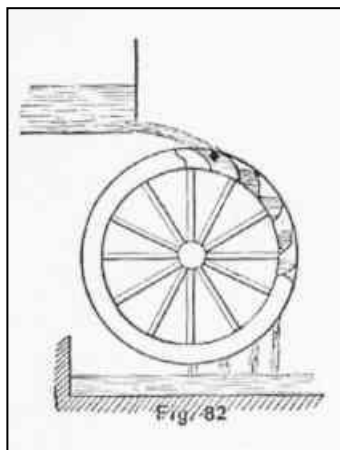
Myth #91: The Last of the 19th Century Ferris Wheels by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Seemingly everyone has ridden a Ferris wheel at a carnival or an amusement park. Nevadans take great pride that the inventor of the Ferris wheel, George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., spent much of his childhood in Carson Valley and Carson City. The irony in this story is most Nevadans are unaware of the location of the last existing 19th-century Ferris wheel. At the same time, the residents of the major European city where this Ferris wheel still carries millions of passengers have no idea that the inventor was a Nevadan.



Local lore credits George W. G. Ferris Jr.'s inspiration for the Ferris wheel as the undershot and overshot water wheels he saw as a child in the Carson Valley in the 1860s. On the other hand, P. Thomas Carroll, former associate professor of history at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), claims that Ferris and his assistant, William Gronau, both RPI graduates in civil engineering in 1881 and 1887 respectively, took their inspiration from Henry Burden's "Niagara of Water Wheels" in nearby South Troy, New York. According to Carroll, the 60-foot vertical water wheel was the most powerful in history, "and very probably--since Ferris and Gronau undoubtedly studied its structure while undergraduates--the model for Ferris's wheel."

We may never know where George Ferris, Jr. first got the idea to construct a 250-foot-diameter amusement wheel carrying 1,440 people in 36 cars above the midway of the Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893. Ferris left no memoirs or other clues prior to his death in Pittsburgh on November 22, 1896. He died of typhoid fever at the age of 37, estranged from his wife and with his business affairs in shambles.



We do know the Ferris wheel captured the imagination of the modern world at the end of the 19th century. The Graydon Wheel, constructed at Earl's Court in London, opened to the public in July 1895. Patterned after the Ferris wheel in Chicago, London's Great Wheel was even larger at 270 feet in diameter and could accommodate 1,600 passengers. A smaller 200-foot-diameter Gigantic Wheel was opened in Blackpool, England, in August 1896; its 30 carriages carried 30 people. A Ferris wheel known as the Riesenrad ("Giant Wheel" in German), comparable in size to the Blackpool wheel, opened in June 1897 in Vienna's Wurstelprater amusement park and cost \$300,000 to construct. However, its smaller compartments only accommodated some 20 passengers. The last Ferris wheel of this era, La Grand Roue (French for the "Great Wheel") opened in Paris at the Universal Exposition of 1900. It exceeded London's Graydon Wheel in size at 300 feet in diameter with 40 cars carrying 40 people.

Today, the vintage giant Ferris wheels are gone except for one. The World's Columbian Exposition Ferris Wheel was dismantled and reconstructed in St. Louis in 1904 for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Renamed the Observation Wheel, it was favorably received by the public. Yet, efforts to sell the amusement ride after the Exposition closed were unsuccessful and it was dynamited and scrapped in May 1906. When London's Great Wheel ceased to be profitable, it was disassembled in 1906-07. The Paris Gigantic Wheel was torn down by the end of 1920 and its carriages used as homes for the homeless in post-World War I France. Blackpool's original Ferris Wheel was dismantled in November 1928.

Only Vienna's Riesenrad remains as a reminder of a bygone industrial era, a symbol of progress and engineering mastery much like Paris' Eiffel Tower. Gracing the Austrian capital's skyline and overlooking the Danube River and the Vienna Woods, the great Ferris wheel has survived two world wars, devastating fires, and business failures. With only 15 cars remaining after serious structural damage during World War II, it has been the setting for numerous movies and TV shows, none more compelling than the Oscar-winning motion picture *The Third Man* (1949). The scene depicting black marketer Harry Lime (Orson Welles) and his friend and western writer Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) talking about the

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value of human life in one of the gondolas, is unforgettable and ranks among the great movie moments in motion picture history. The Third Man is a cult classic in Vienna with its haunting zither music by Anton Karas.

Despite all the modern, gigantic Ferris wheels in the world today, in particular the 442-foot-high London Eye, the Viennese still take great pride in showing off their ancient Reisenrad. The late Inge Morath, renowned Austrian photographer and wife of American playwright Arthur Miller, featured the Vienna Ferris wheel among her outstanding photos.

But ask the Austrians whom George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr., was and you will get a blank stare. Ask a Nevadan for the location of the only remaining historic Ferris wheel in the world and it is unlikely you will get the right answer.

So this story has come full circle, linking in some small way, Vienna, Austria, the site of the last existing 19th-century Ferris wheel; and Carson Valley and Carson City, Nevada, boyhood home of its inventor George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr.



Top illustration: George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr.

Middle illustration: Bowser's schematic diagram of an overshot water wheel from *An Elementary Treatise on Hydrodynamics*, 1921.

Bottom drawing: Newspaper illustration of the Reissrad giant Ferris wheel in Vienna. The young woman pictured in the top right corner rode her horse onto the top of one of the cars which then circled 200' into the air.

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