

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Contact:
Lauren R. Dolan
312-799-2161
dolans@chicagohistory.org

CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM PRESENTS BERTHA HONORÉ PALMER

Exhibition explores one of the most historically significant figures of late 19th-century America

CHICAGO (April 21, 2009) – On the anniversary of Bertha Honoré Palmer’s 160th birthday, the Chicago History Museum will open an exhibition featuring a selection of her clothing and personal effects that will honor this remarkable and influential Chicago woman. The exhibition opening May 23, 2009 explores Bertha Honoré Palmer’s efforts to promote women’s lives and achievements and her later career as a successful business woman.

“The exhibition will tell the stories of her magnificent achievements and how she built relationships that allowed her to make such an important impact on Chicago and the world,” stated Gary T. Johnson, Museum president. Palmer achieved positions of great responsibility, influence, and social stature by wearing traditional but exquisite attire of the period and thinking like a modern woman. A gown that she wore at the World’s Fair of 1893 as President of the Board of Lady Managers will be on display. In this position she was able to secure The Woman’s Building featuring 47 nations, many obtained through Palmer’s personal acquaintances with political leaders and royalty. Of the 14 ensembles on display, two are from the World’s Columbian Exhibition of 1893 and seven gowns she wore to the Paris Exposition of 1900, where she was the only female member of the U.S. Commission. Two of these gowns featured Palmer’s proud Midwestern heritage through a design of wheat and corn embedded in the silk velvet, which earned her the title, “princess of the prairie.” Palmer played crucial roles in both world’s fairs. Supported by immense wealth, this Victorian grande dame promoted women’s achievements, was a champion for her city, and became a great celebrity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

“The gowns worn by Palmer on display in the exhibition are the most opulent examples of dress of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Palmer took her social positions very seriously and realized how she dressed and who she knew would help her make significant strides for women,” stated Timothy Long, exhibition curator.

-more-

ChicagoHistoryMuseum

Bertha Honoré Palmer and her husband Potter traveled internationally and purchased a large number of Impressionist paintings. They were among the first Americans to enjoy these works of art and built relationships with artists such as Renoir, Cassatt, Degas, and Monet. They exhibited many of these pieces at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition to expose this new style of painting to the masses. The Palmers' collection is the keystone of the current French Impressionist collection at the Art Institute of Chicago.

After her husband Potter Palmer's death in 1902, she lived in London and Paris where she socialized and built close friendships with royalty such as King Edward and Queen Alexandra. She then moved to Florida where she invested and developed the land in Sarasota County. "At this point in her life, Palmer relaxed socially, dropping her queen-like image, and began to apply the business knowledge she had obtained throughout her life," stated Long. As a shrewd and smart business woman, Palmer was so successful in cattle ranching and real estate that by her death in 1918 she had doubled the fortune left by her husband, Potter Palmer, just 16 years earlier.

The exhibition will showcase Bertha Palmer not only as a politically powerful and successful business woman, but also as a social force in the world. There were headlines and photographs of Palmer and her lifestyle in all the major newspapers. "She was the woman the world watched - an American who became the center of Parisian and London societies. She was successful, wealthy, and a supporter of the arts and women," stated Long.

The exhibition closes on January 4, 2010 and will be displayed in the Costume and Textile Gallery. This exhibition is made possible by the support of the Costume Council of the Chicago Historical Society. The Costume Council will be hosting a dinner and private viewing of the exhibition on July 22. More information on this event will be available on the Museum's website www.chicagohistory.org in the coming months.

###

The Chicago History Museum, a major museum and research center for Chicago and American history, is located at 1601 N. Clark Street. The Museum can be reached by CTA buses 11, 22, 36, 72, 151, and 156. Parking is conveniently located one block north of the Museum at Clark and LaSalle Streets (enter on Stockton Drive). Admission to the Museum is \$14 adults with audio tour, \$12 seniors/students with audio tour, free for children 12 years and younger. General Admission is free on Mondays. Please call 312.642.4600 or visit us at www.chicagohistory.org. The Chicago History Museum is affiliated with the Chicago Historical Society and acknowledges the Chicago Park District's generous support of all the Museum's activities.