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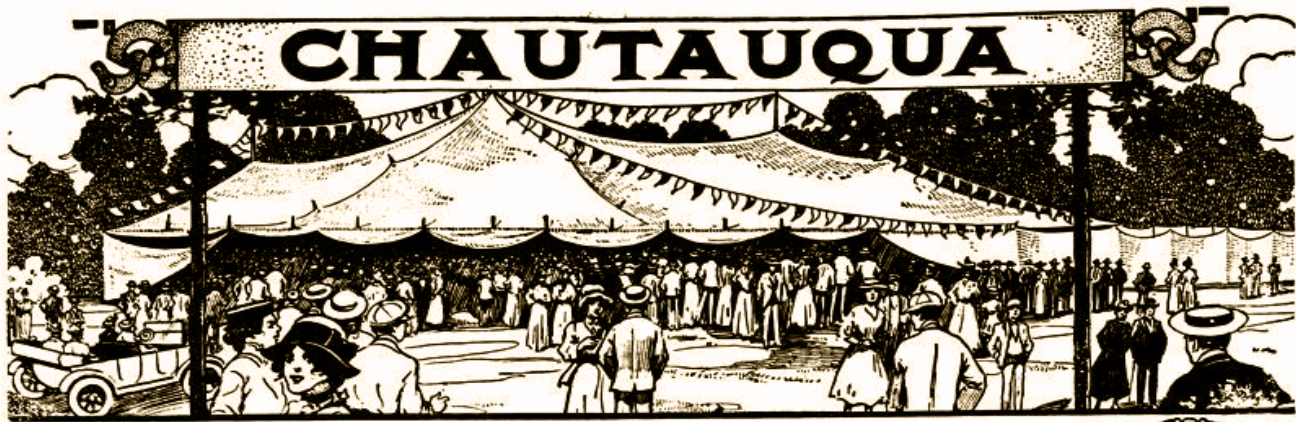
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Thanks again,

Sharon Hall
Editor, Publisher, Researcher, Writer and Graphic Designer
Digging History Magazine



CHAUTAUQUA

The Poor Man's Educational Opportunity



During an era spanning the mid-1870s through the early twentieth century, Kansans, like many Americans across the country, anticipated the summer season known as Chautauqua, an event Theodore Roosevelt called “the most American thing in America”. By 1906 when Roosevelt made such an astute observation the movement had evolved into a non-sectarian gathering, where “all human faiths in God are respected. The brotherhood of man recreating and seeking the truth in the broad sunlight of love, social co-operation.”¹

The Chautauqua movement began, and was so named, in 1874 at Chautauqua Lake situated in Chautauqua County, New York. In 1873 “the Methodists were holding a camp meeting” near the lake. The group had earlier formed an association, purchased fifty acres of land at a cost of \$10,000 and then began to develop the property.

A number of cottages had been constructed and by 1873 it was “fixed that the great National Sunday School Institute is to hold its session on this ground one year hence.” The assembly was being organized by Dr. John H. Vincent, corresponding secretary of the Sunday School Union and philanthropist Lewis Miller.²

The first meeting would be officially called the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly, since its founding purpose would be directed toward training Sunday school teachers and church workers. Regional and state Sunday school conventions were regularly held in the summer to elect officers and conduct association business, as well as conduct religious services and training classes.

In June 1874 the Pennsylvania State Sunday School Convention held a session regarding the inner workings of Sunday schools, with questions and answers such as:

[Q] "Ought a woman to superintend a Sunday-school?" [A] "A good sensible woman was certainly better for such work than a bashful stick of a man."

[Q] "What shall we do with a teacher who is always smoking?" [A] "To this question he hardly knew what to say, but thought he would employ the teacher to tell the pupils what an expensive habit it was, and believed he might be cured by example."³

Attendees were looking forward to the first meeting at Chautauqua Lake, a fourteen-day event which would commence on August 4, conducted in three terms: (1) August 4-9; (2) August 10-13; (3) August 14-18. Morning, afternoon and evening lectures would be conducted with a variety of Sunday school-related topics:

- Dynamics of the Sunday School
- Language and Illustration in Teaching
- The Use of Imagination in Teaching
- The Study of Childhood

and more.

Lodging in cottages or tents near the meeting grounds could be secured at reasonable rates. As opening day approached finishing touches were put into

place for an exhibit known as "the Park of Palestine" which represented a section of the Holy Land in Palestine. Attendees arrived via train, crossing the lake by steamer. On the twelfth day ten thousand people were in attendance.

President Grant attended in 1875, bringing nationwide attention to the event. In August 1878 Dr. Vincent founded the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), which would later be called simply Chautauqua Institution. In Vincent's words the concept was simple – a way to self-education the masses:

The full-orbed "Chautauqua idea" must awaken in all souls a fresh enthusiasm in true living, and bring rich and poor, learned and unlearned, in neighborhood and comradeship, helpful and honorable to both. Education, once the peculiar privilege of the few, must in our best earthly estate become the valued possession of the many...

Every day should be sacred... Chautauqua pleads for universal education; for plans of reading and study; for all legitimate enticements and incitements to ambition; for all necessary adaptations as to time and topics; for ideal associations, which shall at once excite the imagination and set the heart aglow . . . Show people no longer young that the mind reaches its maturity long after the high-school days end, and that some of the best intellectual and literary labor is performed in and beyond the middle life. College halls are not the only places for prosecuting courses of study. College facilities are not the only opportunities for securing an education. A college is possible in everyday life if one chooses to use it; a college in house, shop, street, farm, market, for rich and poor, the curriculum of which runs through all of life, a college which trains men and women everywhere to read and think and talk and do . . . this is the "Chautauqua idea."⁴

CLSC, available across the nation as a four-year correspondence course of required reading, was especially popular among women and those living in isolated rural areas. Once a student had completed his or her course of study they might travel to the annual Chautauqua Lake assembly to participate in elaborate graduation ceremonies.

CLSC was widely praised by the turn of the century:

To this end, all uplifting and stimulating forces, whether secular or religious, are made to conspire in their impact upon the person whose weal is sought . . . Can we wonder that Chautauqua is a sacred and blessed name to multitudes of Americans? . . .

The true significance of the Chautauqua movement seems to me not to lie chiefly in the great summer gatherings, in the crowded lectures, the enthusiastic conferences, and the inspiring commencement address at Chautauqua itself, nor in the diplomas awarded there. But the Chautauqua circles throughout the land mean useful, wisely-directed home reading and intelligent general conversation in the home circle wherever their influence extends.

Over 8,400 people enrolled in CLSC the first year and four years later the original “class of 1882” graduated 1,718 who had completed the reading courses, successfully passed their examinations and received diplomas. In 1878 Chautauqua attendees, excited about CLSC’s potential, returned home to share the idea with friends and family. Many established their own CLSC Reading Circles and by the turn of the century over 10,000 were in existence across the nation.

It was from these “circles” that the larger-scale Chautauqua Movement began to evolve away from the original New York

meeting (although those meetings continued unabated until the 1930s and the Depression years) with regional assemblies conducted throughout the country.

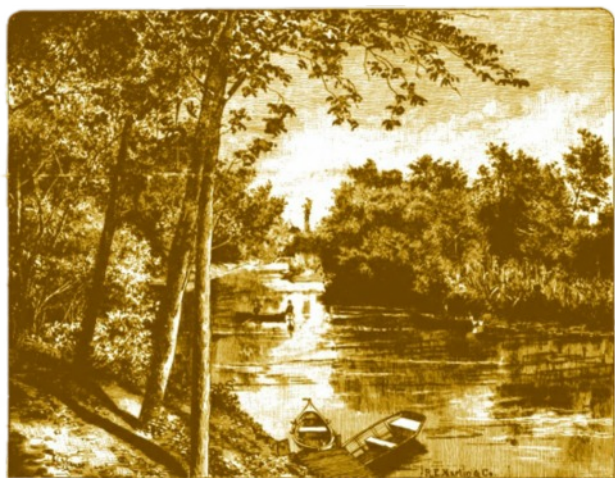
In 1904 the movement expanded yet again with the Chautauqua Circuit which allowed for localized versus regional assemblies. Chautauqua had evolved from a location in New York to a common word in the nation’s lexicon by this time. Organizing Chautauqua assemblies and smaller-scale lyceum lectures was conducted as a business, complete with a roster of popular speakers.

Kansans began enrolling in CLSC courses and by the summer of 1880 a circle of Burlington residents had completed their course of study for that year, “embracing Roman, English and American History, and Literature.” CLSC groups were established in several towns across Kansas in the early 1880s: Emporia, Minneapolis, Hiawatha, Atchison, Council Grove, Topeka, Wichita and more.

Once organized members elected officers and many met in or were affiliated with churches. In 1882 Wichita’s circle was touted as a “kind of ‘college at home’ institution” where people of all faiths and philosophies were welcome. In attendance at the Presbyterian church were

Hewit, the Presbyterian; Harper, the Baptist; White, the Swedenborgian; Shelton, the Sinner; and all the other idiosyncrasies in creation can come and be represented as individual students in this college. The only danger to the institution is the liability of being blown up by the clashing of thought and the scintillations of intellect. There were a few passes made last night which looked ominous, but perhaps we can keep down the surging tide. . . Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, all are welcome provided you mean to enter heartily into the work.⁶

Kansas Chautauqua assemblies began to be organized in the 1880s, with programs organized around theology and temperance lectures, travel lectures with elaborately illustrated canvas displays, sermons, children's programs, concerts and more. The Kansas Chautauqua Assembly was held at Topeka's Garfield Park from July 19-28, 1887.



The Association and its governing body (the majority of which were ministers and organized under the auspices of Kansas Methodism) made every effort to ensure that prices were kept at the lowest point possible. Campers were instructed to bring "their own bedding, a good supply being necessary as the nights are often cool." For those who would be camping in tents, a number of markets were situated nearby to purchase food and supplies.

For those who didn't bring their own, "an abundance of tents" of government issue were available to rent. A 10 x 12 foot tent rented for \$3.00 and a 12 x 14 for \$4.00 for the assembly's duration. Garfield Park would be platted and locations could be reserved for \$2.00 in advance.

Straw for ticks was furnished at no extra charge. Should anyone renting a tent desire a wooden floor those could be installed for \$1.50 to cover the expense of lumber and carpenter labor. These events were meant to be well-organized and orderly as

"competent and tried officers" were employed to patrol the grounds and maintain order around the clock. Anyone not occupying one of the tents was expected to depart by 10:30 p.m., "At which time quiet is insisted upon, and lights will be put out."⁷

Organizers had "the best talent of the whole country" as "thousands of our best citizens will gather here to secure the privileges of social, intellectual and moral culture." July 27 was set aside as CLSC day when Chautauqua graduates would receive their diplomas. The closing day of Chautauqua was dedicated to honoring the nation's heroes.

Ottawa began holding an annual Chautauqua in 1891. By early May expectations were high with a full program in place. Forest Park was more attractive than ever with a new lily pond. Organizers hoped "our citizens will all join heart and hand to make this the grandest of these truly grand gatherings."⁸

The assembly began on June 16 and by the following day 2,000 had arrived as more attendees were on the way, despite four hours of rain the first night. The first year's event, while highly anticipated and well-organized, was challenged by heavy rains. Future assemblies would need to prepare the camp grounds for adequate drainage, and perhaps consider a later date, say after July 4 when that part of Kansas didn't typically receive such heavy rains on a daily basis.





Ottawa would also have its own CLSC graduates. This is the first graduating class (undated photo), young and old, proudly holding their diplomas:



By 1890 crowds were averaging 15,000 per day at the Ottawa Assembly.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s towns big and small across Kansas began holding annual Chautauqua assemblies: White Cloud, Wathena, Sabetha, to name a few. By then Chautauqua had become an industry. It would be a chance for towns across the state to open their doors and roll out the red carpet once a year. Of course, one of the greatest potential benefits accrued to the town's business community, despite claims of non-commercialism. The Wyandotte Assembly held in Kansas City, Kansas was becoming an annual affair by 1906. As the *Kansas City Globe* opined, "Chautauqua is social life, and social life is Chautauqua."⁹ Chautauqua, as far as

enraptured Kansans were concerned, would be around for a long time to come.

By the early twentieth century Chautauqua burgeoned right alongside an ever-growing lyceum movement (which had actually begun in the early 1800s) as booking agencies like the Redpath Lyceum Bureau were kept busy handled bookings for both.

The 1920-21 season was the "greatest lyceum year" according to *Lyceum Magazine*. The Redpath Bureau (with multiple offices) had its best month so far in January 1919 as bookings totaled over \$90,000. "Committees are buying larger courses and buying earlier than ever before."¹⁰ The '20s were beginning to roar.

While Chautauqua assemblies were large-scale events held once a year, lyceum lectures were booked at various intervals throughout the year. For example, as mentioned in the Kansas ghost town article of this issue, Nicodemus held regular lyceum lectures.

Lyceum wasn't a new concept either, as historians point to the establishment of Aristotle's school of philosophy circa 335 B.C. The American lyceum movement began in Massachusetts around 1826. The nineteenth century can be referred to as the "century of acceleration". One can't help but conclude that the lyceum and Chautauqua movements played a significant role in educating the masses.

Despite its enthusiastic anticipation as an annual event, Chautauqua assemblies began to dwindle, in part due to the widespread introduction of radio technology and motion pictures, which precluded the need for large-scale gatherings to disseminate knowledge and information to the masses. Other realities began to set in by the late 1920s and early '30s.

The Great Depression dealt a death blow to Chautauqua assemblies across the nation.

DIGGING HISTORY

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ON THE COVER
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