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The Chautauqua Movement

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ENTERTAINMENT



ILLUSTRATION BY TONI TAYLOR

THE CHAUTAUQUA
MOVEMENT

Exhausted, careworn mothers dressed themselves, their infants and toddlers in Sunday finest. Parents admonished older children to be on best behavior and not muss crisply starched shirts and dimity dresses. Oldsters rushed about with palm fans, colorful parasols, and white linen handkerchiefs. Horses, wagons, and Model T Fords, filled with rural families and brimming picnic baskets, crowded dusty streets awaiting matinee and evening performances. Excitement reigned in little country towns such as Sayre, Elk City, Clinton, and Weatherford when the Chautauquas (pronounced Sha-'ta-quahs), arrived by Rock Island train in the late 1910's and 1920's.

Chautauqua troupes provided high-class entertainment for early pioneers and their families who starved for beauty, music, plays, enlightening philosophical lectures, or anything the traveling entertainers presented during three- to five-day stands in any given town. Saturdays especially gave rural people from surrounding communities opportunity to forget toils and hardships they suffered while attempting to eke out a meager existence from the scorched plains of western Oklahoma.

People sold eggs and cream, then escaped into the imaginery Chautauqua world under the huge tent with its heavy canvas flapping precariously in gusty, hot winds. Cooled now and then by a breeze reaching under the gaping bottom, country folk sat entranced on hard, backless wooden benches, sometimes forgetting the purpose of fans and handkerchiefs. Professional actors and musicians, oblivious of heat and exhaustion, lured the audience of two or three hundred sweltering people into their make-believe world with gorgeous costuming, brilliant lighting, and delightful entertainment.

Each person in the receptive audience greeted the entertaining troupe with traditional Chautauquan salute, a fluttering and waving of white handkerchiefs. They absorbed every moment of refinement since there would be nothing like it again until another troupe returned the following summer. Many a rural family spent the day in town attending both Chautauqua matinee and evening sessions. Delicious contents of picnic baskets supplied additional festivities as neighbor joined neighbor under a shade tree on the street or in City Park. Town people returned home between performances, but rural families remained until the end of the night show, unless they lived close enough to go home, did evening chores, and then drove back to town again.

Chautauqua entertainment was fully as popular as the circus. Actually the Chautauqua reached out to more rural people than did the circus since they presented their culture and enlightenment to smaller and more remote locations. Most towns the Chautauquas visited were those with two to six thousand population. At one time there were more than two hundred separate Chautauquas, independent of each other. Each carried its own tent, seats, equipment, lighting, speakers, and entertainers. All troupes, which traveled throughout the United States holding town or mass tent meetings, were basically similar in entertainment techniques.

Prior to arrival of the traveling troupe in a town, a representative from the organization met with city fathers to gain approval of their particular type of entertainment. City officials underwrote or guaranteed the group a certain financial amount, usually two thousand dollars, if they decided the entertainment was worthwhile for the locale. The Chautauqua scout provided illustrated placards

for store windows and advertisements for the local newspaper denoting arrival of the coming week's festivities.

Traveling Chautauquas always pitched open-air tents near the railroad even though troupe members stayed at local hotels. They spread gaily-colored banners with the huge lettering of C H A U T A U Q U A across the front and around the top of the tent. Another sign at the entrance informed local people of performance time and the type of entertainment. Each tour group provided different types of enlightenment such as symphonies, concerts, plays, philosophical lectures of hearth, home, and heaven variety, and campaign speeches by political officials.

Chautauquas always entered a town in the same manner. First, the tent, tent crew, and equipment arrived with the show manager. The manager collected season ticket money from city officials who sold them in advance; no season tickets were available after the entertainment arrived. The tent crew cleared and staked the location for the enormous affair. Then they erected the tent, set up the stage platform, complete with bunting, curtains, rostrum, piano, and lighting. Last of all, they placed the benches and reserved chairs, filling the tent.

Entertainment troupes arrived by train each day as the season progressed. One day's group of performers replaced the preceding day's entertainers, who caught the train bound for the next day's show in another town. A typical summer circuit contained from sixty to one hundred-twenty consecutive days: torturous days of blistering sun and burning sand becoming progressively more unbearable, with no holiday or relaxation time. Only the most dedicated performers survived more than one summer's circuit. The tent crew and show manager led the easiest lives of the Chautauqua circuit. They remained in one particular town until that season was completed. They then dismantled the tent, cleared the grounds of all debris, and loaded all equipment onto their railroad car. Last of all, they boarded the passenger train for the next assigned location and again went through the same procedure.

Any number of prominent political figures found the Chautauqua circuit an ideal conveyance for campaigning: a means for providing small communities with cultural stimulation and an excellent means for politicians to gain votes. United States Presidents using Chautauquas for political advantage were Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Three reformers also spoke at Chautauqua sessions: Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Nation, and Jane Addams. Writers Mark Twain and James Whitcomb Riley were also popular speakers. Senator and later Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, called "The Voice" and "The Silver-tongued Orator," evidently toured all western Oklahoma towns. He labored diligently for many progressive measures including direct election of United States senators, graduated income taxes, and women's suffrage.

Bryan presented a striking appearance in a black, swallow-tailed frockcoat, a gleaming white shirt with a black string tie, and his long silver hair tucked inside and under a huge wide-brimmed white hat. His home while he was in western Oklahoma was always room number 30 at old Story Hotel in Elk City. Spending nearly twenty-five years as top attraction on the summer circuit,

he was the greatest and most famous Chautauquan of all.

William Jennings Bryan could talk for hours without ever showing fatigue, malice, bitterness, or resentment. The grueling routine never changed him; he always remained even-tempered, uncomplaining, and kindly. He had no secret vices; he did not drink, smoke or swear. He asked for only two things: a good meal and a good audience, in that order. His record performance for one summer's six-week tour occurred when he presented seven speeches daily, making an unbelievable total of nearly three hundred orations during this summer circuit.

He reputedly addressed one hundred thousand people in San Francisco and could be heard plainly three blocks away without any type of mechanical assistance. Bryan insisted that regular admission to his lectures be twenty-five to fifty cents and no more than one dollar for reserved seats for the elderly. He preferred that sides of the tent be rolled up so as many children as possible might hear and see him even though they paid no admission.

"Prince of Peace" was the most popular of his three main lectures. He delivered it more than two thousand times. Chautauqua gave Bryan his motivational power. It supported him, and it was his life. It made him millions of friends and admirers. It loaded him with gifts and achievements even though the context of his memorable oration now seems empty when reading the written word without his compelling golden voice. Bryan was no politician; he was a Chautauquan. During his funeral cortege to Arlington Memorial Cemetery, friends gave him his final Chautauquan salute with fluttering white handkerchiefs, dampened with their mournings.


Every Chautauqua session during the troupe's stay in a town was entirely different. The larger casts contained fifteen or twenty adult members; no children ever performed. Local people purchased a season ticket in advance, usually costing two and one-half dollars for all performances, or they selected one or more favored sessions if they were unable to attend the entire season. Small children, not accompanied by adults, were allowed at matinee sessions. A pretty, vivacious Chautauqua Girl, who was especially skilled at appealing to small fry, directed these events. Chautauquas were synonymous with culture in remote communities, and parents willingly provided their children with opportunity to attend every possible performance even though they themselves were unable to be at all sessions.

The Chautauqua Cultural Movement originated in 1874 at Chautauqua Lake, New York, which was four-hundred-fifty miles northwest of New York City. Reverend John H. Vincent and Lewis Miller, a New York businessman, organized the first meeting at the lakeside resort to discuss problems relating to Sunday School methods and management. The session proved highly successful and popular even though only forty students attended. Succeeding summer studies expanded into a variety of adult education programs: religion, public affairs, concerts, courses in science, literature, and domestic arts and crafts.

The original Chautauqua incorporated in 1902 in New York, becoming Chautauqua Foundation. William Rainey Harper, later president of the University of Chicago, served as principal of the Chautauqua summer schools from 1887 until 1898. His endeavors became the fore-runner of summer-school sessions held at all American colleges and universities. These original Chautauqua

ILLUSTRATION BY TONI TAYLOR





studies also initiated the basis for succeeding home-study correspondence courses, but they were discarded when the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle developed a four-year reading program.

Little did country folk of western Oklahoma realize that the original Chautauqua Movement originated at a beautiful wooded retreat with a campus covering over two hundred acres. Students could both study and vacation simultaneously. At the beginning of the movement, the campus could be reached only by Pennsylvania and Erie Railway, but later roads were constructed to enter the area. Numerous school buildings were built on hill-tops and upland terraces, and several thousand cottages were hidden in woods surrounding spacious campus structures.

A large hotel called Athenaeum and forty smaller houses also provided summer boarding accommodations. Nearby were small shops and stores for seasonal guests. A Hall of Philosophy, complete with architecture depicting a Greek temple with supporting white columns of masonry, had an open-air seating capacity for three thousand people. An enormous well-lighted amphitheater located on the side of a hill seated an audience of five to six thousand people. During nine months of the year, five hundred permanent residents lived in the Chautauqua area, but during the three summer months the population ranged from twenty to fifty thousand people while classes were in session.

The Chautauqua institution became a very important educational center with open-air assemblies which developed into the form of American mass meetings or town meetings, which President Carter revitalized. New York State brochures summarized the learning sessions into three categories: (1) popular lectures and entertainments, (2) philosophical, scientific, and literary lectures, and (3) intensive and in-depth studies conducted by competent and well-known instructors.

The Schools at Chautauqua Summer Institute were much like the university curriculum of today from which a student selected his indepth, concentrated training. The Chautauqua Schools included: (1) English Language and Literature, (2) Modern Language, (3) Classical Language, (4) Mathematics, (5) Pure Sciences, (6) Library Training, (7) Social Science and History, (8) Education, (9) Economics, (10) Music, (11) Arts and Crafts, (12) Expression, (13) Physical Education, and (14) Practical Arts.

In 1878 Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle began offering home study courses which provided an important impact upon urban areas of the United States. Local reading circles similar to Great Books study clubs of today's modern society carried forth this educational system. The Round Table, a monthly bulletin published by Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Reading Circle, recommended and directed the organization for this system of study.

This four-year course of reading devoted one entire year to one particular nation, namely (1) Modern European Year, (2) Classical Year, (3) English Year, and (4) American Year. This study system made no attempt to teach any languages or pure sciences through reading circles. However, literature, art, sociology, and natural science were combined with regular courses of a country's history. The American Year of study included American history, literature, government, diplomacy,

and sociology. The best of writers representing American colleges and universities prepared all textbooks studied: European, Greek, Roman, and American.

Chautauquans carried forth assigned reading courses at home. Once a week study groups met in social circles in both large and small towns or wherever a group was organized. Leaders were the best to be found in that particular area. Members devoted weekly meetings to oral discussions of topics suggested and recommended by Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Reading Circle.

The total enrollment of Chautauqua Readers was four hundred thousand. Most of the enrollment failed to complete the entire four-year study, but at least fifty percent studied recommended readings for two years. At least seventy-five thousand completed the entire course of study and received well-earned diplomas. The Circle encouraged Chautauquan graduates to form other educational clubs and to influence other people to join study groups.

None of the programs of the original Chautauqua Movement ever organized as a profit-making concern; Chautauquans were primarily interested in education of humanity. However, many later tent shows were mere pseudo-Chautauquas and were actually enterprises far more concerned with profit than with education. Some of the town meetings degenerated into commercial circus-like atmospheres, political chicaneries, evangelical oratories, and popular slap-stick entertainments. With the advent of the Depression, radio, and movies, traveling tent-Chautauquas lost popularity and no longer toured the United States. However, a few local troupes did continue entertaining rural areas, using techniques of the original Chautauqua.

The founder of the Chautauqua Movement, Reverend John Vincent later to become Bishop Vincent, best summed the Chautauqua Idea as:

"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. . . 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 life, a college which trains men and women everywhere to read and think and talk and do. . . this is the Chautauqua Idea."

Perhaps Bishop Vincent's philosophy seems an unattainable Utopian ideal today. Perhaps though, some day soon another Bishop Vincent will successfully resume those original achievements. But if not, Chautauquan influence left indelible imprints upon culture and education of both rural and urban American people. Tent shows provided enlightenment and enrichment for starved-for-culture settlers of remote areas like western Oklahoma; study sessions, both on campus and through home study, exerted a tremendous impact upon American colleges and universities. All combined efforts of the Chautauquans merged in their own special, separate ways to become vital and permanent in our unique American culture. ■

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