



~ Part 36 ~

Reflections on a Common Theme

Chautauquas

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ROOKS COUNTY

Chautauquas

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In discussing Chautauquas, it would be a good idea to have some idea of what a Chautauqua was. Before the Chautauqua Movement there was the Lyceum Movement. Both were concerned with education, the notion being that democracy and the republic could only survive and indeed thrive with an educated public. The Lyceum Movement became popular before the Civil War and was succeeded by the Chautauqua Movement after the war. The target audience was the young American farm wife, since she was in charge of raising the next generation and "if she herself was uneducated, how then could she educate the next generation?"

The Chautauqua Movement was started by two men, Bishop J. H. Vincent and Attorney Lewis Miller. They created the largest adult education movement in the United States to that date (1874).

The two men wanted to provide a college education to those who could not go to school. The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) was established in 1878 and course work was made available. Tests were administered on a periodic basis to ensure adult learners comprehended and understood the material provided in the reading lists. The CLSC was not the first to provide correspondence courses, but it was the first to apply the concept to such a wide range of subjects. Reading circles were established, reading lists distributed. One county in a region would be selected and final exams would be given. The diplomas from the CLSC were truly earned.

A "curriculum" for 1878-1879 included the following topics to select from for study: English History and Literature, Bible History, Human Physiology, Studies of the Stars, Recreations in Astronomy, "How to Get Strong and How to Stay So," Science of Life, Greek Literature and History, A Primer of Latin Literature, A General History of Rome from the Foundation of the City to the Fall of Augustus, and others.

The first Chautauqua in New York became known as the "Mother Chautauqua" because it provided the blueprint for others that followed. The independent Chautauquas were "Daughter Chautauquas" and operated at permanent facilities either patterned after the facilities in Chautauqua, New York, or at amusement parks and other like facilities that were rented for the presentations. Between 1874 and the peak in the 1920s there were nearly 500 locations throughout the country associated and/or affiliated with the movement having over ten thousand reading circles and tens of millions of American adults participating in their programs. People within the circles started discussing the idea of bringing in experts to speak on what they were reading.

"Circuit Chautauquas" or "Tent Chautauquas" were founded by Keith Vawter and Roy Ellison in 1904. Their first attempts were met with failure; however, by 1907, they had found the formula for success: the programs would be presented in tents pitched on the outskirts of a town, and then, after several days, would strike those tents and move onto the next town. These "Circuit Chautauquas" were met with mixed reactions for various reasons. Those involved in the initial movement were quite simply appalled; there were accusations these two men "were ruining and cheapening the Movement."

During the 1890s both the Chautauqua Movement and vaudeville were gaining in popularity, and vaudeville at least was proving to be an important form of entertainment. However, there was one big difference and therefore two different audiences: The Chautauqua Movement focused on educating the public while vaudeville was about entertainment. Vaudeville was a wild and wonderful combination of minstrel shows, variety acts, and crude humor. The Chautauquas, on the other hand, valued Sunday school and morality and were considered wholesome family entertainment, suitable for both the educated folks and

the religious people in their audiences while vaudeville was anti-intellectual and appealed to less educated folks.

Around the turn of the century (1900) vaudeville managers started cleaning up their acts and the Chautauqua Movement began to loosen the constraints of Victorian morality. As vaudeville became more respectable, Chautauqua became more secular and liberal. It was perhaps the American genius of compromise that began to blur the boundaries between the two popular movements. Soon the booking agencies were booking their clients for both types of shows. By broadening their appeals, the Chautauqua speakers and/or performers hoped to become more famous and earn more money.

The majority of the Chautauquas were in the Midwest region of the United States. The biggest growth of the movement occurred in states which did not have a permanent college or university at the time. For example, there were 19 Chautauquas in Montana, 12 in the Dakotas, and 15 in the state of Nebraska.

Chautauquas never totally lost their "intellectual bent;" they engaged in "political activities" – but on all sides of any given issue. They presented speakers from all sides of issues like temperance (even prohibition), women's suffrage, and child labor laws. As an example, the 1936 season at the Chautauqua Institution in New York featured addresses by Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Republican challenger Alf Landon, and from two third-party candidates in anticipation of the national presidential election of that year. Jane Addams spoke on social problems and her work at the Hull House in Chicago. Other speakers included "Fighting Bob" LaFollette (governor of Wisconsin at the time).

Religious expression found its way into the movement, also, and continues to some extent to this day. For example, in 2006 the Lakeside Chautauqua was privately owned but affiliated with the United Methodist Church while, on the other hand, the Colorado Chautauqua was entirely nondenominational and mostly secular in its orientation.

So how does all of this fit in with Rooks County specifically, and more generally, the region covered by the SV24 Heritage Alliance?

The Rooks County Museum has in its collections a "newspaper" called Woodston Chautauqua Herald, dated "Woodston, Kansas Season of 1917" which is nothing more than a huge advertising circular. It looks like a regular newspaper until one begins to read it. This publication presented a program for the 1917 Woodston Chautauqua which featured the following: Rozita Music Makers, Emily Waterman Company, Arcadian Symphony Sextet, Beverly Entertainers, and the Cecilian Choir, among other acts. Lecturers included Joseph G. Camp, "the South's most finished orator" on "The American King" (or, to quote the paper directly: "lecture makes a very practical and serious plea for the right kind of American citizenship"). There was a lecture on "Electricity-carrier of light and power; devourer of time and space; bearer of human speech over land and sea; greatest servant of man, itself unknown," by Harry S. Starnes. E. A. Boyl spoke on the "Seen and Unseen," and Father Austin Fleming lectured on "The New Patriotism."

Music was a very important part of the Circuit Chautauquas. Spirituals (with African-American performers) were quite popular, along with instrumental groups. Even opera was included at one point.

While researching the Woodston Chautauqua some information was found about the Stockton Chautauqua of 1917. The Stockton Review, August 2, 1917, carried a follow-up article about Stockton's Chautauqua, apparently held sometime in July, but not the same as what was presented in Woodston.

The Stockton program started out with music by the Hawaiian Singers and players. The Honorable Victor Murdock delivered a lecture on "National Remedies for National Ills." Harriette Gunn Roberson spoke on "Success Where you Are." The Hugh Anderson Operatic Company provided the "usual high class entertainment as in former years," indicating at least this group was a repeat performance. Rev. Zimmerman, gave an address on Sunday, and Governor Buchtel of Colorado gave two inspiring lectures on Sunday afternoon and evening. The Clara Vaughn Wales Company entertained with short plays. On Tuesday of that week Dr. Lena Sandler lectured in the afternoon. Her Husband, Dr. William Sandler spoke on "Fear and Faith." The African-American Mason Jubilee Singers entertained in the evening.

Current events were included. On the final day of the Stockton Chautauqua a talk by Lieut. Lee Nichols of the British army on the war in France as it actually is. Remember, the United States entered World War I in 1917.

Chautauquas hit the peak of their popularity in the mid-1920s and then started to decline for several reasons but primarily because of the development of the radio and, later on, television. A parallel might possibly be drawn to what has happened to television with the development of the Internet and all the interesting consequences to the cable business as a result. But the need for both education and entertainment still remains, regardless of the mode of delivery.