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Lincoln Park Chautauquas

by Darrel Miller

[This article was submitted by Darrel Miller. In 2007, his history *Lincoln Park Chautauquas: Every Man's University* was published. He is a retired newspaper editor whose hobby is local history. His Lincoln Park Chautauqua book is available; contact him at PO Box 94, Downs, KS 67437. We are grateful he shared this timely story with us.]

A century ago, the Chautauqua movement was a major cultural and educational force in these United States, including Kansas. Many of the nation's well-known speakers and entertainers performed on these stages, and the Chautauqua at Lincoln Park, west of Cawker City, Kansas, drew the best of the nation's talent. This was one of the annual gatherings that exemplified the true Chautauqua ideals.

Lincoln Park was rare in another aspect. It was the only rural Chautauqua in Kansas, organized largely at Cawker City with some help from Downs, and drawing its patronage from many surrounding small towns. The most unusual aspect of this famous park was its luxuriant stand of aged oak trees which furnished shelter from the searing summer sun.

In its heyday, Lincoln Park was home to thousands of campers who lived there during the entire session. Its days and evenings were filled with dozens of educational and musical events, all of the highest class and widest variety. The fare ranged from religion to politics, from current events to philosophy, with training in homemaking, photography, art, literature, and many other subjects also on the agenda.

Thousands of people traveled on railroad trains, by horse and buggy, and in early automobiles to attend the Lincoln Park Chautauqua sessions. They enjoyed the rural setting under huge oak trees at a famous park on Oak Creek between Cawker City and Downs. The park, first known as Shady Bend and later named for President Abraham Lincoln, had been a popular stopping place for Indians, hunters, and the first settlers who ventured into northern Kansas. Early settlers went there for recreation, for church outings, and for gatherings of the Union soldiers who made up the Grand Army of the Republic.

The story of these unusual two-week summer gatherings, known as Chautauqua's, is largely forgotten now, but from 1897 to 1912 it grew from Methodist church sessions into one of the largest and best educational, cultural, and social Chautauqua events in Kansas and even across the nation.

Under the famous oak trees, it featured the camp life of 1,500 or more avid supporters who actually lived there in tents and cabins, along with extraordinary speakers and musicians, and huge crowds who enjoyed widely varied events that continued from morning into the evening. The best minds of that era spoke there, and the best musicians of that era performed there.

For instance, when the founder of the national Chautauqua movement, Bishop John Heyl Vincent, spoke at Lincoln Park in 1907, he described this park as the "nearest in keeping with the Chautauqua ideal" of any such gathering that he had seen in America.

"Send every child to school," the Bishop thundered. "The more boys and girls sent to college, the safer the country will be." He severely criticized ministers who sought larger churches. Instead of seeking a larger church, he added, ministers should make "the small church large."

But religion was only a part of Lincoln Park's programs. When Negro educator Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee Institute spoke about race relations in 1906, he commented on an effort to colonize black people on Western lands. It wouldn't work, he said. "You would have to build a great wall to keep the

Negro in, and five more to keep the white man out." The mostly white audience was impressed by his conclusions.

Crusading U. S. Senator Robert LaFollette held the rapt attention of his audience for four hours as he attacked corruption in government, and told how to eliminate it. "With the organizing of corporations," he said, "the three great laws of competition—supply, demand, competition—were eliminated from business life."

Another favorite was Kansas author Margaret Hill McCarter, who supervised the Women's Club hours and led the literature department. She also read original short stories that she wrote especially for this Chautauqua.

Those are only samplings of the programs. The Chautauqua-goers heard lectures by dozens of learned men and women from many fields, among them numerous senators and governors, and enjoyed concerts by the nation's most outstanding musicians. They also attended classes on literature, cooking, photography, elocution, and many other subjects. Lincoln Park was among Kansas' best Chautauquas, and was the only rural Chautauqua in our state. The large grove of oak trees, many of which were growing when Columbus discovered America, drew rave reviews from visitors.

A "town" of as many as 1,500 campers lived there in tents and log cabins during the sessions, and famous speakers such as Booker T. Washington and William Jennings Bryan drew crowds estimated at 8,000 or more.

Handsome permanent buildings were erected by the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs and by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. A large tabernacle tent housed the speakers and entertainers and their audiences, bands serenaded the crowds on the campus all day long, baseball tournaments were played, along with tennis and other sports, and the people's needs were supplied by a dining hall, residence tent, grocery and meat markets, a barber shop, shoe shine stand, refreshment stand, a newspaper, and much more.

When changing times brought this grand old Chautauqua to an end in 1912, it was superseded by traveling tent shows that featured programs in tents at Downs, Portis, Cawker City, Stockton, Osborne, and many other northern Kansas towns. But these weren't true Chautauquas. They were traveling stage shows and didn't include the wide variety of religious and educational sessions of the true Lincoln Park Chautauqua, nor the community life of the summer residents.

After the automobile and the competing tent shows killed Lincoln Park's Chautauqua, the park remained a favorite gathering place for picnics, church camps, band concerts, and many other types of family entertainment. In addition, Company G trained there in 1917 for World War I, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp was built there in 1934, and German prisoners of war were interned there during World War II and worked on area farms.

The aged oaks of Lincoln Park are dead now, having succumbed to the flood waters that filled Glen Elder Dam during 1993.