

# Chautauqua: Then and Now

*by W. Stitt Robinson*

**H**ave you attended a Chautauqua program recently? The Kansas State Historical Society sponsored one on August 30 at the grand opening of the Adair Cabin–John Brown Museum State Historic Site in Osawatimie. With this revival of interest in the Chautauqua, let us look first at the “then” of this movement with its beginning in the nineteenth century. One significant antecedent to the emphasis on adult education was the American Lyceum organized by Josiah Holbrook in Millbury, Massachusetts, in 1826. Sponsoring lectures and discussion, it attracted many of the leading intellectual figures of its day with Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, speaking at least one hundred times. James Redpath, an abolitionist who had spoken in Lawrence in the territorial crisis of 1856, continued the lyceum tradition by organizing the Boston Lyceum in 1868.<sup>1</sup>

Six years later in 1874 two Methodist men, interested in promoting more effective Sunday schools, were the co-founders of the Chautauqua as a training seminar for their teachers. Lewis Miller, father-in-law of Thomas A. Edison and an inventor with several improvements in the manufacture of mowing machines and binders, was influential in locating the program in the picturesque setting of the shores of Lake Chautauqua in southwestern New York. Miller issued a universal appeal as he stated: “WE ARE ALL ONE on these Grounds! No matter to what denomination you belong; no matter what creed, no matter to what political party of the coun-

---

*W. Stitt Robinson was the 1998 president of the Kansas State Historical Society. He is an emeritus professor of history at the University of Kansas, where he taught for thirty-eight years. His research and publication interests have focused on the history of the American frontier and Native Americans.*

1. Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum. Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Charles F. Horner, *The Life of James Redpath and the Development of the Modern Lyceum* (New York: Barse and Hopkins, 1926), 76.



*Children and adults alike loved the Chautauqua. These youngsters pause for a photograph while wading in rain puddles at the 1897 Chautauqua in Ottawa.*

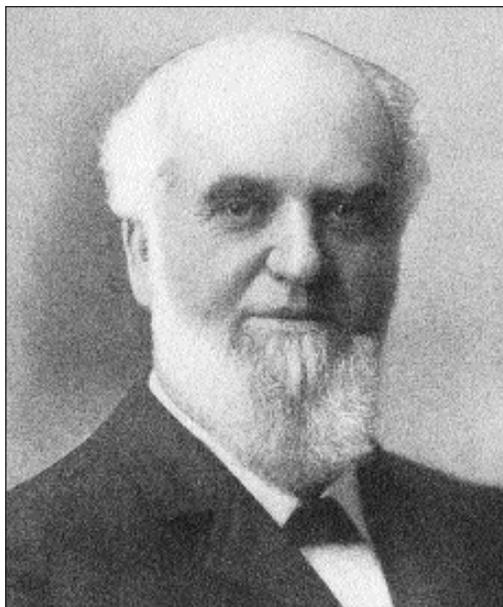
try. You are welcome here, whether high or low.” John Heyl Vincent, a Methodist clergyman and later Methodist bishop who served in Topeka from 1888 to 1900, was the other founder. Using the term “man” in its generic sense of relating to all humankind, Reverend Vincent proclaimed: “The doctrine which Chautauqua teaches is this, that every man has a right to be all that he can be, to know all that he can know, to do all that he pleases to do—so long as knowing what he can know and being what he can be, and doing what he pleases to do, does not keep another man from knowing all that he can know, being all that he can be and doing all that he pleases to do. And the Christian idea of the Chautauqua movement sees that the Christian element enters into it as one of its essential features. . . . That is Chautauqua!”<sup>2</sup>

In its second year Chautauqua leaders invited President Ulysses S. Grant to speak, the first of seven presidents who would later visit. The meeting was successful with attendance estimated as high as thirty thousand as the idea began to expand. “Mother Chautauqua,” as the New York Assembly became known, introduced new activities and constructed several architectural buildings, which became the model for many Chautauquas throughout the nation.<sup>3</sup> These included especially the Hall of Philosophy and the tabernacles or pavilions used for lectures, religious services, reading groups, and musical programs. Mother Chautauqua was even

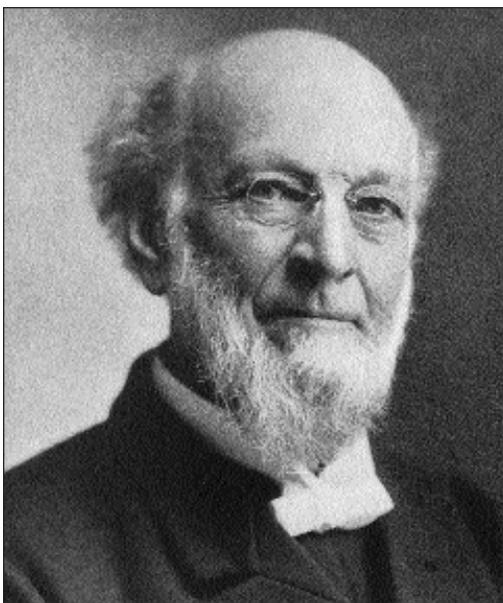
2. Alfreda L. Irwin, *Three Taps of the Gavel: Pledge to the Future. The Chautauqua Story*, 3d ed. (Chautauqua, N.Y.: Chautauqua Institution, 1987), ix.

3. Theodore Morrison, *Chautauqua: A Center for Education, Religion, and the Arts in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 41–42. The Franklin County Historical Society, Ottawa, Kansas, with assistance from the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Design, has produced a model of the Ottawa Chautauqua at Forest Park.

authorized to grant university credit for some of its reading programs, but this activity was soon passed after twelve years to private or public colleges and universities in the state.



Lewis Miller (above) and John Heyl Vincent, co-founders of the Chautauqua movement.



In 1878 Reverend Vincent introduced a new four-year reading plan in the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, commonly referred to as the CLSC. Its comprehensive purpose, Vincent stated, was to be

a school at home, a school after school, a 'college' for one's own house. It is for busy people who left school years ago, and who desire to pursue some systematic course of instruction. It is for high-school and college graduates, for people who never entered either high school or college, for merchants, mechanics, apprentices, mothers, busy house-keepers, farmer-boys, shop-girls, and for people of leisure and wealth who do not know what to do with their time.<sup>4</sup>

This program involved reading selected books on such subjects as history, religion, science, and literature that were either published by the Chautauqua Institution or obtained from scholars in these respective fields. Upon completion of the four-year program, successful participants received certificates or diplomas with seals in a graduation ceremony that resembled the collegiate tradition. The Chautauqua, however, did not pretend to be offering college degrees. This reading program proved to be very successful and extended beyond the United States to claim one million participants by 1924.<sup>5</sup>

Kansas responded immediately to this new program as both Oswego and Ottawa formed reading circles in 1878 and witnessed the graduation of the first national class four years later. By 1886 Kansas could claim that it carried "the banner for the largest number of new circles in any state west of the Mississippi."<sup>6</sup> By 1900 about two hundred Kansas communities participated with at least one circle, and

4. John Heyl Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement* (Boston: Chautauqua Press, 1886), 75.

5. Samples of the institute's books may be found in the Library and Archives Division of the Kansas State Historical Society or in the collections of local historical societies such as the Franklin County Historical Society. Several examples of Chautauqua diplomas are in the Cowley County Historical Society, Winfield, Kansas. The most comprehensive examination of the Chautauqua in Kansas is Roland M. Mueller, "Tents and Tabernacles: The Chautauqua Movement in Kansas," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1978), 1:61.

6. *Chautauquan* 6 (January 1886): 232.

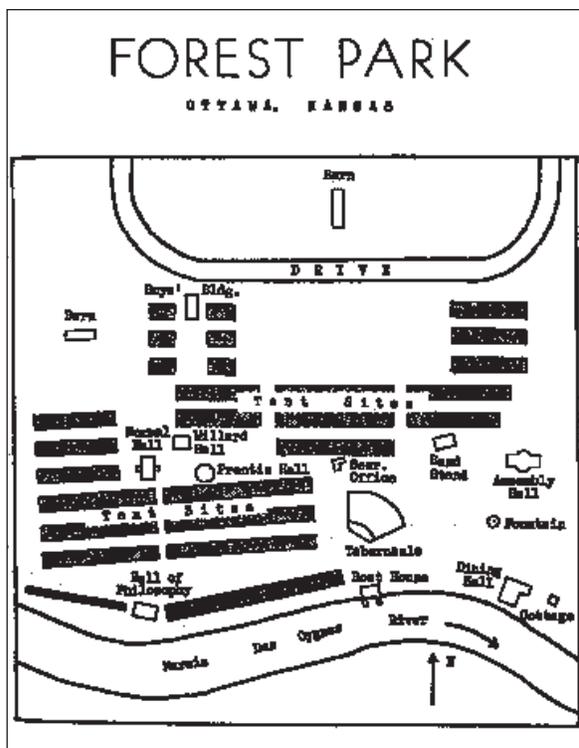
some had as many as seven or eight. The average recommended size for circles was twenty-five, although a few of the larger cities expanded sometimes to as many as sixty. Weekly meetings were recommended, but local groups could set their own schedules, including social outings as desired.

The second agency of the Chautauqua movement, the Independent Assembly, helped promote the reading circles. These independent assemblies spread throughout the nation with the most significant growth from 1880 to 1910. They used models that imitated Mother Chautauqua in New York, but they were independent units and free to organize their own programs and financing as they deemed most advantageous for their own communities. In Kansas from 1880 to 1917, fifteen cities sponsored annual independent assemblies at some time. Ottawa had the largest number with thirty-two years; Winfield a close second with thirty-one; Lincoln Park (Cawker City and Downs) seventeen; Wathena sixteen; Clay Center eleven; Topeka ten; Sterling nine; Beloit, Olathe, and Salina each with six; Lawrence five; Coffeyville four; White Cloud and Emporia each with two; and Pittsburg one.<sup>7</sup> Other cities such as Hiawatha had Chautauqua assemblies, but they were more directly related to the circuits, which will be discussed later in this article.

Ottawa began its successful independent assemblies in 1883 at Forest Park along the Marais des Cygnes River just one block west of the Santa Fe railroad station. Following in part the model of Mother Chautauqua, Ottawa built a Hall of Philosophy and a Tabernacle, which was increased in 1886 to seat five thousand visitors. The visit in 1895 of Governor William



Ottawa was one of the first Kansas towns to respond to the Chautauqua movement. This 1886 photo was taken in Forest Park, detailed in the map (below).



7. Mueller, "Tents and Tabernacles," 1:131.

McKinley of Ohio, later United States president, expanded the crowd to a much larger number. Other well-known speakers included William Jennings Bryan appearing at least four times and William Howard Taft in 1907.<sup>8</sup> I found an intriguing note in the Franklin County Historical Society archives from a woman who wrote that when Bryan visited Ottawa, she thought he was

a very big man; but when Taft came later, she exclaimed that he was even bigger!

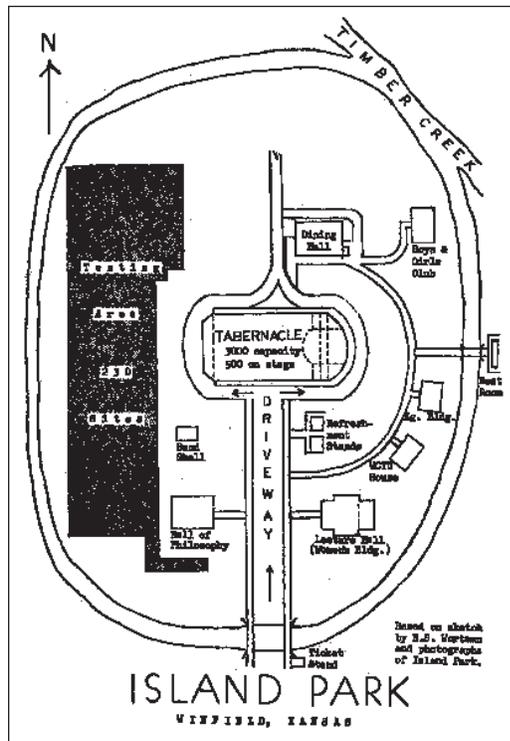
Families came to the Chautauqua by wagon, buggy, train, or later by automobile. Many lived in tents rented in Ottawa, for example, for three to five dollars per week with two dollars added if a wood floor was included. In 1887 five hundred of these tents were rented during the summer. Family circles were maintained, and sometimes they brought a wood

stove for cooking during the week or two of their vacation stay. Early summer participants may have even witnessed a May Day ceremony complete with the May Pole. The independent assemblies in Ottawa continued successfully until 1915 when river floods forced its cancellation. Subsequent assemblies turned to circuit programming.

Winfield began its successful series of independent assemblies in 1887 with its location on Island Park, a twenty-five acre plot near the center of Winfield. There the local Chautauqua association with some cooperation from the city built the familiar Hall of Philosophy and a Tabernacle that was increased in 1904 to seat thirty-five hundred. The appearance of the Chautauqua favorite, William Jennings Bryan, who came to Winfield at least four times, expanded the crowd to more than ten thousand visitors.<sup>9</sup> Winfield today still maintains Island Park as a city park.



A Chautauqua gathering at Winfield's Island Park in ca. 1890. The map (below) illustrates the park's Chautauqua plan.

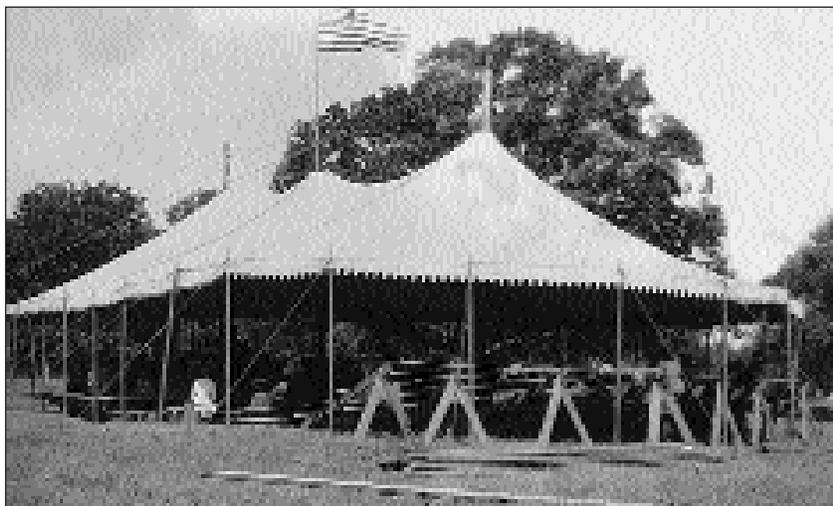


8. F. W. Brinkerhoff, "The Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 27 (Winter 1961): 463-64.

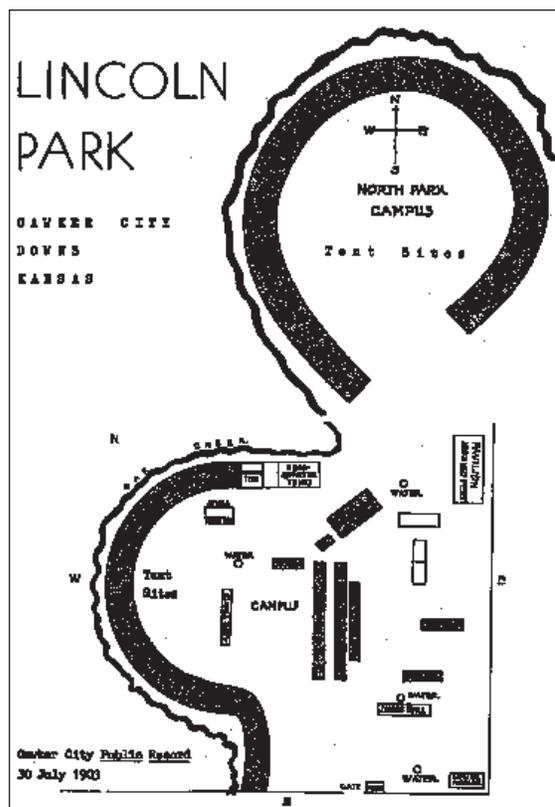
9. Roland Mueller, "The Chautauqua in Winfield, Kansas," *Kansas Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1983): 15-19.

Lincoln Park serving Cawker City and Downs devoted much of its space to two circles of tents for its seventeen independent assemblies.

While these independent assemblies continued, the Chautauqua movement entered a new phase in 1904 with the introduction of the circuits of traveling tents. These provided set programs of education and entertainment for four to nine days that moved from town to town on a tight schedule. Some independent assemblies gave up their locally organized programs to sign a contract for the circuit. Many other towns were also then able to participate. Keith Vawter of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was one of the promoters who has received credit for initiating the circuits. As a partner in the Redpath Bureau in Chicago, he organized a nine-day program and later agreed to share responsibility for areas west of the Mississippi River with Charles F. Horner of Nebraska. Kansas thus fell within the area of the Redpath–Horner circuit and enjoyed vigorous summer schedules.<sup>10</sup> The secret of success in this plan was a leap-frog method of moving from town to town. With a seven-day program, the participants in the first day would move on immediately to the next town with extra tents having been set up for their arrival. This schedule would be followed for each of the successive days. Thus for 1921 the Redpath–Horner Premier Circuit entered Kansas on August 5 and continued with its leap-frog programs throughout much of the state until September 6.<sup>11</sup> The circuit



Cawker City's Lincoln Park during a ca. 1900 Chautauqua. The Chautauqua layout is illustrated in the map (below).

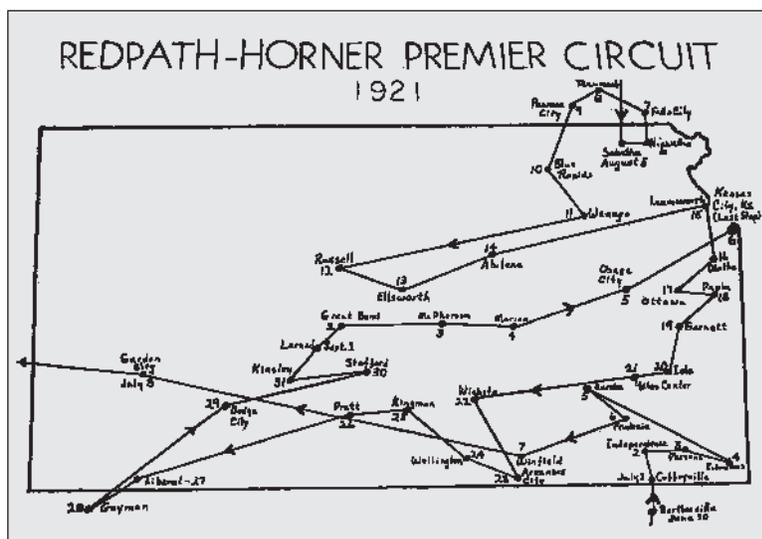


10. Loren E. Pennington, "Chautauqua: An American Tradition," in *The Kansas Chautauqua: Understanding America. Land, People, and Culture* (Emporia, Kans.: Center for Great Plains Studies, 1988), 2–3; Charles F. Horner, *Strike the Tents: The Story of the Chautauqua* (Philadelphia: Dorrance and Co., 1954), 49, 55, 62–66.

11. Mueller, "Tents and Tabernacles," 2:468.

started at Sabetha, then moved southwest to Russell by August 12, back to Leavenworth on August 15, down through eastern Kansas to Iola by August 20, west to Liberal on August 27 with a dip into Oklahoma, and finally back to Kansas City on September 6. What an impressive month with seven days of not only education and entertainment in each of the towns but also attractions for interested persons in neighboring areas for each of the locations.

Rain storms may have created problems on these circuits, but hot weather probably was more critical. At least one circuit worker from Mankato, Kansas, thought so. He was employed by the Midland Bureau of Sam Holladay, who also is credited with initiating Chautauqua circuits. The circuit worker complained bitterly about hot weather in the following doggerel:



The Redpath-Horner Chautauqua circuit in Kansas, 1921.

We have the honor to relate  
That these hot winds of Kansas  
Have burned the corn and  
scorched the oats  
And at last succeeded in getting  
our goats,  
A little breeze . . . ain't so bad,  
Or even a cyclone or two, egad;  
But when a hot wind starts to  
blow  
And keeps it up for a week or  
so,  
It's torture such as no tongue  
can tell.  
These blasts are blown from the  
pits of hell  
O'er fields that burn for lack of  
rains  
To punish lost souls on the  
Kansas plains.<sup>12</sup>

Many outstanding participants took part in these circuit programs. William Jennings Bryan was a favorite with his presentation of "Prince of Peace" that included the life of Christ. This was very much a part of the general theme of "Mother, Home, and Heaven," which the circuit promoters liked to emphasize.<sup>13</sup> Many of the programs also gave attention to youth, and a designated staff member of the team would organize special activities for them. The Redpath Junior Boosters provided a red beanie for young participants. With the enthusiasm of youth, they also developed cheers for their pep rallies such as the following:

We've got pep! We've got pep!  
We've got oodles and gobs of pep,  
If you have pep like we have pep,  
You'd have oodles and gobs of pep.<sup>14</sup>

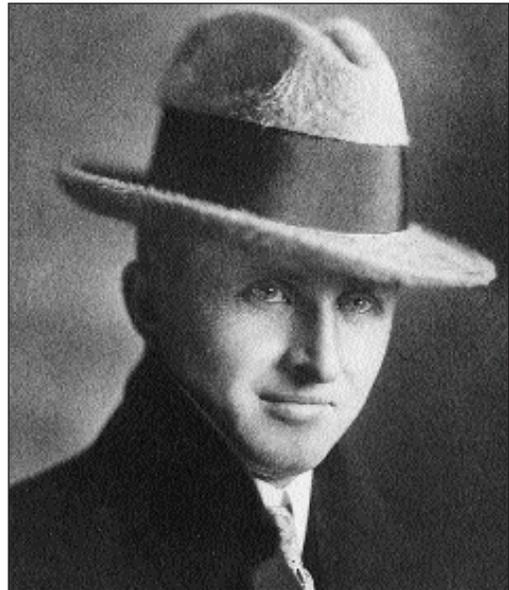
12. Ibid., 2:487.

13. Victoria Case and Robert Ormond Case, *We Called it Culture: The Story of Chautauqua* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1948), chapter 8.

14. Mueller, "Tents and Tabernacles," 2:575.

Charles Benjamin Franklin of Topeka, a graduate of Washburn University, organized the Cadmean Chautauqua in 1916 and continued as one of the last promoters of circuits. These circuits reached their peak year in 1921 with around twelve thousand communities being served by about seventy circuits. As a gradual decline began in the 1920s, Franklin nonetheless continued optimistically in acquiring a series of circuits until he had ten in 1928 that were described as “The Largest Chautauquan Organization in the World.” Franklin offered investments in stock in these associated Chautauquas with certificates, and he promised a good rate of return of 8 percent on this speculative investment. He had only limited success in these offerings. In 1940 Franklin married Margaret Barnum who had been a singer in such Chautauqua women’s quartets as the Marine Maids. She had also served as a junior supervisor in Chautauquas and as an advance representative.<sup>15</sup>

As interest in the Chautauquas waned in the 1920s with competing activities, the circuits increased their advertising appeal with brochures such as the one featuring a “Road Map to the Happiest Week of the Year.” They also included more popular programs such as dramatic productions and additional musical numbers. The “Road Map” included the drama entitled *Applesauce*. It was described as “The whole wide world loves applesauce. Here it is—a hilarious drama of American youth, American love, and American homes. Admission 75¢.” A second drama, *New Brooms*, also was featured. The brochure stated that “The ‘piece de resistance’ as the French say is the last night play. Frank Craven’s new hit of love and business fresh from Broadway and starring Ernest R. Misner. Admission 75¢.” Still another three-act comedy had the intriguing title *Putting Pep in Papa*, whatever that involved. These moves to emphasize entertainment over the education of past years led to criticisms of their having become “sanitized vaudeville” and “a tinselled commercialized show.”<sup>16</sup>



Charles B. Franklin

The trends of the times continued to contribute to the decline of the Chautauqua movement in the 1920s. The technology of the radio, sound movies, and the increased number of automobiles provided other attractions for the American public. While the automobile at first brought people to the Chautauqua week, they eventually made it possible for individuals to travel greater distances to seek new experiences, often in larger metropolitan areas. The depression of the 1930s further added to the decline of both circuit and independent Chautauquas, although Mother Chautauqua and a few isolated ones continued.

15. Margaret B. Franklin Collection, 1883–1992, box 4, folder 2, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society. For an example of the certificates, *see* *ibid.*; for a brochure for investments, *see* *ibid.*, box 3, folder 9. Margaret survived her husband, and before her death in 1997 she donated the extensive and very valuable Chautauqua collection to the Kansas State Historical Society. For a biographical sketch of Margaret B. Franklin, *see* *ibid.*, finding aid.

16. *Ibid.*, box 2, folder 13; *ibid.*, box 7, folder 6; Harvey Wish, *Society and Thought in Modern America* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), 114–16.

My wife and I visited the Chautauqua Institution in New York in 1997 for three days and were surprised to observe the vigorous programs still being conducted. For nine and one-half weeks from June 21 to August 24, thirty or more daily activities were available from which to choose. The summer programs were organized with different themes each week as follows:



*The Presbyterian House in 1997 at the Chautauqua Institution in New York.*

### **1997 Overarching Theme**

Toward 2000: The American Agenda

Vertical Theme: Women in America

WEEK ONE Leadership in America June 23–27

WEEK TWO The Politics of the Environment June 30–July 4

WEEK THREE Voices of African American Community July 7–11

WEEK FOUR Business and Ethics July 14–18

WEEK FIVE Regaining Community in America July 21–25

WEEK SIX Science Education and Invention July 28–August 1

WEEK SEVEN The Mystery of Good and Evil August 4–8

WEEK EIGHT Arts and Humanities: Documenting our History August 11–15

WEEK NINE Health and Wellness in America August 18–22<sup>17</sup>

Religion still played an important role with a sermon each day open to all. A series of religious services was offered in the separate Protestant chapels, a Catholic mass, a Unitarian seminar, and a Jewish service. There were lectures on public affairs, and special interest groups included nature studies, golf, duplicate bridge, writers' workshops, and bowling on the green. Drama and music featured almost daily presentations of Shakespearean plays, a symphony orchestra, a ballet, and opera including Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Reading groups of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles continue with meetings in its headquarters at Mother Chautauqua. A recent article in the *New York Times* stated that 127 persons completed the graduation requirements in 1998.<sup>18</sup> The grounds hold the familiar architectural buildings of the Hall of Philosophy and the Tabernacle or Pavilion as well as the refurbished Athenaeum Hotel with 158 rooms and the Smith Library in the center mall.

Kansas also has participated in the revival of Chautauqua programs. In addition to the individual portrayals sponsored by a variety of groups, two systematic plans have been available throughout the state. The Kansas Chautauqua, initiated by Professor Loren Pennington of Emporia State University, offered programs from 1985 to 1990 with support from the Kansas

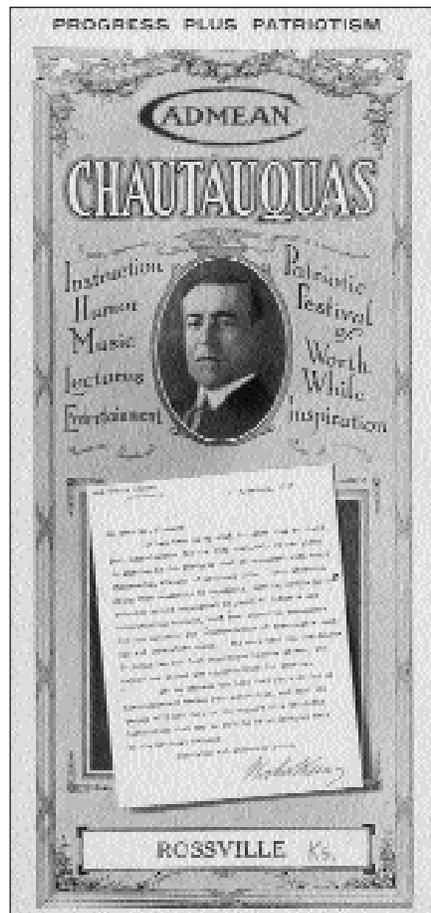
17. "Highlights, 1997. Summer Season, Chautauqua Institution," 8, private collection of W. Stitt Robinson, Lawrence, Kans.

18. Dinitia Smith, "A Utopia Awakens and Shakes Itself: Chautauqua, Once a Cultural Haven for Religion Teachers, Survives," *New York Times*, August 17, 1998, B1, B3.

Humanities Council. These included presentations of leading Kansas figures such as William Allen White, Alf Landon, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Carry Nation, and John Brown. The Kansas Humanities Council also joined the Great Plains Chautauqua that now includes, in addition to Kansas, Oklahoma, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa.<sup>19</sup> Since 1983 this group has provided one or two summer programs of five or six days in each of the participating states. In Kansas, Hiawatha was selected in 1994, Fredonia and Larned in 1995, Arkansas City and Colby in 1996, Garden City in 1997, Hutchinson in 1998, and Meade and Clay Center in 1999. I had the pleasure of visiting Hiawatha twice in 1994 to discuss the history and significance of the Chautauqua prior to the scheduled week for the city. It was impressive to observe how many of its citizens were reading the books of the writers who were to be portrayed. Past programs have featured "Writers of the Gilded Age" including Mark Twain, Jack London, and Stephen Crane; and "Writers of the American Renaissance" with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott.

In retrospect, it is evident that the original Chautauqua movement made a significant impact on the social and cultural life of Kansas communities. Programs were most successful in towns and communities with populations of six thousand or fewer, although the reading circles also thrived in larger cosmopolitan areas. Adult education was the key to the reading circles, and other programs provided for the participation of youth. Religion received important attention as evidenced by the fact that Reverend Vincent copyrighted for all vesper use the hymn "Day is Dying in the West" with its refrain "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts." Public lectures provided opportunities for discussion of the political, economic, and social issues of the time. Theodore Roosevelt called the Chautauqua "the most American place in America" and also stated it was "A gathering that is typically American in that it is typical of America at its best." Even in war time the Chautauqua continued. President Woodrow Wilson in a Patriotic Festival of Worth While Inspiration in World War I proclaimed it as "a patriotic institution that may be said to be an integral part of the national defense."<sup>20</sup>

The significant role of the Chautauqua in Kansas from the 1870s to the 1930s deserves more attention in the printed histories of the state. And today we can still enjoy Chautauqua programs and benefit from them in the revival of interest that has occurred.



President Woodrow Wilson endorsed the importance of the Chautauqua, proclaiming it "a patriotic institution."

19. See, for example, the brochure "Chautauqua 98: Behold Our New Century," Kansas Humanities Council, Topeka, Kans.  
 20. Franklin Papers, box 8, folder 1. For a copy of Vincent's song, see *ibid.*, box 3, folder 5. For Roosevelt's comments, see Morrison, *Chautauqua*, 235; Irwin, *Three Taps of the Gavel*, 11.