

The Romance of Small-Town Chautauquas

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Many of America's household names began in chautauquas. Edgar Bergen began there, honing his ventriloquist act. Lady Mary Heath of Ireland, an aviation pioneer, went on tour, as did other notable women. Dick Mallett, whose father was on the local chautauqua committee in Farmington, Maine, relates how, in his childhood, one afternoon lectureLife in the early twentieth century, particularly in small-town America, was vastly different from today: travel was difficult, work was pervasive, and people hungered for education and entertainment. For one exciting week, however, each summer from 1904 through 1932, towns across the country were treated to a gathering of edification and amusement that would raise the people's spirits for months to come.

This was the chautauqua, a traveling cultural experience, based on the lyceum circuit. They featured lecturers, musicians, adventurers, and some of the most famous public figures of the day. Explorers and politicians, actors and authors, clergymen and elocutionists traveled from town to town, performing under huge tents to sellout crowds of all ages, offering their talents and views of the world to people who looked forward to the five- or seven-day event all year long.

Chautauquas (named for the town in upstate New York where the lyceum phenomenon thrived and is still active today) were an outgrowth of the lyceum circuit for towns that could not support a full program—a series of lectures and performances by leading thinkers and artists. The word chautauqua, from the Seneca language, is variously interpreted to mean “a child,” “a bag tied in the middle,” “a place where fish are taken out,” or even “the place of easy death.” Since the lyceum and tent circuits began, chautauqua has taken on a whole new meaning.

The author, who has also written *The Long Way Home: A Pacific Odyssey of World War II*, here provides a truly delightful history of this American cultural phenomenon, drawing not only on vast existing resources and interviews, but also on his own personal history: both his father and uncle were chautauqua managers, and his aunt was a “story lady”—the young woman responsible for coordinating the children's program. His easy, comfortable narrative depicts an America long gone, but still so vividly present through ample photographs and recollections that one can appreciate the spirit of the experience.

Chautauquas did their best to provide uplifting and balanced programs to their audiences; they took themselves very seriously. Ida Tarbell, chautauqua lecturer and “muckraker whose book *The History of the Standard Oil Company* contributed to the breakup of the Standard Oil monopoly,” underscores its gravity: “Scoffing eastern friends told me that there would be bell ringers, trained dogs, and Tyrolean yodelers. I found no such entertainment, but I could hardly have fallen in with pleasanter company. I saw at once that what I had joined was not, as I had hastily imagined, a haphazard semi-business, semi-philanthropic, happy-go-lucky new kind of barnstorming. It was serious business.”

had been judged “too boring for children,” so an alternate activity was set up at a swimming hole. On the way there, says Mallett, he fell in with a gentleman who talked to him about his hopes for the future. They discussed music, says Mallett, and the man told him he played the alto horn and had played in a band. Later, his new friend ferried the child across the river on his shoulders to a corn roast because Mallett couldn't swim. That night, Mallett learned that his

friend was the evening's lecturer, presidential candidate Warren G. Harding. Mallett took up the piccolo and joined the school band the following year.

Schultz describes how important chautauquas were to their audiences: one chautauqua troupe arrived in the middle of the night because a washed-out bridge had sent them nearly a hundred miles out of the way. When they reached the town, they found that the tent had blown down, but their audience was still waiting for them, in a church "jammed to the doors." Despite the hour and their exhaustion, the troupe put on "what was probably the best performance of the season."

The demise of the chautauquas was a sad thing. With the advent of easier travel, radio programs, and the death blow of the Great Depression, the traveling cultural institution came to a halt at last. From time to time, however, there are attempts to revive it, and when one reads Schultz's lively and fond account of its heyday, it is easy to see why.

MARLENE SATTER (November / December 2002)

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