

Chautauqua: Five Days of Joy and a Life Time of Learning

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Chautauqua is a name derived originally from a lake in northwestern New York State. It is the name of an assembly ground, a concept integrating fellowship, education, recreation, entertainment, and a social movement. From the founding of the first Chautauqua in 1874 to its heyday in the mid 1920's, Chautauqua spanned North America in numerous permanent meeting grounds and resorts. Chautauqua "Circles" provided thousands of adults with mail-order scientific and literary self education courses, and circuit Chautauquas brought their benefits to millions more. The forms and elements of the Chautauqua movement coalesced around founder John Vincent's ideal "to transform and enoble the common life" by providing exposure to literature, science, oratory, music, and wholesome entertainments.

Chautauquas took at least four distinct forms. They were: 1) the original permanent site in northwestern New York State, known as Mother Chautauqua, 2) the independent offshoots, that are also permanent sites, 3) the five to fourteen day travelling circuit, or tent, Chautauquas emphasized in this paper, and 4) two and three day Chautauqua Festivals, many of which are presently being conducted.

There is a sizable body of literature pertaining to Chautauqua and Chautauquas. Most of the literature focused either on histories of particular Chautauquas or analyses of the movement as it relates to adult education. The role of the Chautauqua movement in expressing and shaping the leisure pursuits of the middle class and common people has yet to be explored. This was the first paper in a series that will examine the elements of the Chautauqua movement as they relate to the evolution and expansion of leisure for the emerging middle class of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The emphasis in this paper was on the Circuit Chautauquas because of their extensive influence on rural and small town North America.