

Twin City's once hosted own Chautauqua

“The most American thing in America.” That’s what Theodore Roosevelt said of the Chautauqua movement, the popular, week-long outdoor gatherings in the late 19th and early 20th century that were part church camp meeting, part civics class and part county fair.

In the Twin Cities, there was a Chautauqua most years from the early 1890s into the late 1920s. City and country folk alike flocked to the local Chautauqua grounds to be enlightened by speakers, uplifted by musicians and entertained by various performers. Some attendees would spend the day there, while plenty of others pitched tents and made a week of it.

“The programs consisted of bands, orchestras, singing organizations, play companies, [African-American] jubilee singers, Swiss bell ringers, lecturers, impersonators, readers, magicians, and many other features,” observed Chautauqua promoter J. Oscar Hall of Bloomington in a reminiscence from 1950. “Religious services on Sunday, story hours for the children, nature study sessions, cooking demonstrations and health talks were featured on many programs.”

In 1874, Methodist minister John Heyl Vincent staged a new type of religious and educational gathering at Chautauqua Lake (hence the movement’s name) in western upstate New York. The “Mother Chautauqua,” as it became known, spawned many hundreds of “daughter” Chautauquas throughout the nation, including those in Bloomington-Normal.

It appears that the Twin City’s first full-blown Chautauqua was held in 1892. Organizers J.W. Haggard and James H. Shaw staged their ambitious sixteen-day affair, Jul. 23 to Aug. 7, on ten acres between Bloomington and Normal, along the streetcar line connecting the two communities. They called their temporary Chautauqua ground “Midway Park,” which was likely somewhere on or near what’s today the Advocate BroMenn Medical Center complex.

The lecturers and entertainers that summer 127 years ago included Gen. John C. Black, a Civil War regimental commander and Democratic congressman; Judge W.G. Ewing of Bloomington; temperance activist John Sobieski; The Alabamans, a “colored glee club;” the local DeMolay Band; and many others.

Christian living as a force for personal and societal betterment was a common subject for many a Chautauqua speaker. Temperance was another perennially popular topic. There were also inspirational talks, and those that specialized in travel, current events, and progressive reform

causes, the latter including child labor and welfare, women's suffrage and the humane treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners.

“Under pleasant surroundings and refining influences,” declared the organizers of the Bloomington Chautauqua., “those who attend have an opportunity to hear the great orators of the time and to come in touch with the best educators of the country, to improve themselves and to gain new ideas and inspiring thoughts.”

The Chautauqua returned to Midway Park the following year, with speakers including the suffragist Susan B. Anthony. “She must do her own work and vote her own belief,” Anthony said of American women, “and in that way act as a human being which she did not when she delegated these things to others to do for her.”

In 1895, if not earlier, the local Chautauqua picked up stakes and moved to Houghton Lake, a popular pleasure ground located just south of Bloomington (State Farm Insurance purchased these grounds in 1948 for use by its employees and their families.)

The big draw for the Jul. 26 to Aug. 4, 1901 Bloomington Chautauqua was William Jennings Bryan, populist leader and past and future Democratic Party presidential candidate. James Shaw, the organizer of this and the next half-dozen or so local Chautauquas, had a large tent erected on the Houghton Lake grounds to serve as the principal venue for the nine-day affair. Shaw also invited the public to campout near the lake.

“The park contains 40 acres of ground, is densely shaded with immense trees,” noted a Bloomington Chautauqua program, “[it] has a large artificial lake, suitable for boating, bathing, and fishing, towards which the ground gently slopes, making it a very desirable place of tenting, attractive and healthful in every respect.”

Railroads and streetcar companies, interested in boosting ridership, played an instrumental role in the promotion and success of the Chautauqua movement. Locally, the Bloomington & Normal Railway Co. extended its streetcar service to the Houghton Lake grounds. Not only that, but in time for the 1902 Chautauqua, the transit company built a wood-frame, open-air pavilion at the lake large enough to seat 2,000.

On the most crowded day of the 1902 Chautauqua, eight streetcars ran between the courthouse square and the park grounds, but even that wasn't enough to handle the crush of riders. One of the speakers that year was Carrie Nation, the hatchet-wielding temperance radical. “I tell you, friends, it is smash or be smashed, and I would rather smash,” she declared in Bloomington.

After he bought out Bloomington Chautauqua promoter James Shaw around 1908, James L. Loar partnered with J. Oscar Hall. The two of them operated Bloomington-based Loar Independent Chautauqua Co., which served as booking agents and promoters for not only the local Chautauqua, but for some 100 others throughout the Midwest.

For the Jul. 8-14, 1917 Chautauqua at Lake Park (as Houghton Lake was now called), there were two 50-cent days, three 35-cent days and two bargain 25-cent days (to put this in perspective, 35 cents at that time would be the equivalent of \$7 today, adjusted for inflation.)

The Twin Cities were without a Chautauqua for several years until James Loar and the Bloomington Kiwanis Club began staging smaller such gatherings on the Illinois Wesleyan University campus. A Chautauqua of this sort then continued at IWU into the late 1920s.

In the end, the Chautauqua movement could not compete for the public's attention and dollars against the onslaught of new forms of electronic mass entertainment—namely motion pictures and radio.

“It seems that almost everybody went to the Chautauqua,” recalled J. Oscar Hall in his 1950 reminiscence, “farmers came in their buggies and farm wagons,—the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated, the old men and elderly ladies, the boys with their girlfriends, and mothers with babes in their arms, all flocked to the Chautauqua.”

“It was,” he concluded, “truly ‘A Peoples’ Chautauqua.’”