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CHAUTAUQUA

Poster announcing appearance of Ruth Bryan Owen at Chautauqua.
Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.

**"LET THE GOLDEN GATES BE OPENED":
CHAUTAUQUA AND THE QUEST FOR SUBCOMMUNITY
IN NEBRASKA, 1882-1900
by James P. Eckman**

Commenting on the power and appeal of voluntary associations in early nineteenth century America, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations."¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, this search for a sense of belonging, in ethnic, educational, occupational, and religious areas, characterized American life and took many forms.

With the rise of industrial urban centers, the emergence of voluntary associations often satisfied the sense of belonging that people had felt in the old village community.² This also applied to rural areas on the plains of Nebraska where fewer opportunities for culture and contact between people existed. Reading societies, oratorical clubs, and numerous lodges served as major outlets for social pleasure. Barns served as the centers for dances in farming settlements. Many Nebraska communities also constructed opera houses, which served as the cultural centers of these rural communities. Here, temperance lectures, dramatic productions, operas, concerts, political debates and rallies were held. Town opera houses thus satisfied the quest for subcommunity in rural Nebraska. Normally, the only other places where rural people could experience a sense of belonging were in churches and, sometimes, schoolhouses.³

With the rise of the Chautauqua movement, an additional option for association emerged. Founded by Methodists John Heyl Vincent (1832-1920) and Lewis Miller (1829-1899) in 1874 on Chautauqua Lake in western New York, the Chautauqua movement had evolved from an institution committed to training Sunday school teachers to a religiously-oriented resort that championed politeness, respect for learning, appreciation for the arts and science, recreation and an affection for literature. From 1874-1900 throughout the United States Chautauqua assemblies sprouted, each one modeled after Vincent's Chautauqua.

From 1882 to the late 1890s Chautauqua in Nebraska satisfied the quest for subcommunity through the summer assemblies that dotted the state and the local Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles (CLSC) that met throughout the year. Each contributed to satisfying a sense of belonging that was frequently absent in rural Nebraska. Within the Chautauqua subcommunity, Chautauquans found an association that offered them intellectual and cultural uplift, respectable recreation, and a sense of belonging and purpose. Since the whole family normally experienced Chautauqua together, the assembly also strengthened family ties for the thousands who devoted themselves to this phenomenon.⁴

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Nebraska's Chautauqua advocates created major summer assemblies at Crete, Beatrice, Lincoln, Long Pine, Nebraska City, Salem, Fremont, Fullerton, Orleans, Tecumseh, and Omaha. (The Omaha assembly was actually a part of the Omaha-Council Bluffs assembly, centered in Council Bluffs). Each was unique, yet all shared a common framework patterned after the program as it existed in its Chautauqua, New York birthplace.⁵ The following summarizes the commonality of the assemblies.

Most Chautauquas were located in wooded areas near a body of water (usually a river or creek) and facilities for camping. In fact, Chautauqua exemplified the institutionalization of the older camp meeting model. Through its Protestant emphasis, programs, recreation and featured speakers, Chautauqua reflected a quest for respectable leisure in a resort-like atmosphere; a respectability insured by championing the Victorian values of self-restraint—for example, temperance, self-improvement, and millennial progress. Emily Richmond, one of the early supporters of the New York Chautauqua, characterized Chautauqua "as a place of unique attractions. It offers a school, a summer resort, a sanitarium, and a sanctuary." A Chautauqua vacation could be enjoyed without guilt, because beneath the fun and relaxation lay a serious purpose—self-improvement. The emphasis was not merely on healthful and pleasurable exercise, but on developing the mental powers as well. Before he became president, James Garfield said of the Chautauqua movement, "It has been the struggle of the world to get more leisure time, but it was left for Chautauqua to show how to use it."⁶

The natural impulse to create some form of subcommunity was clearly enhanced by the commonality of shared values evident in Chautauqua. Victorian respectability and emphasis on self-improvement permeated the Chautauqua phenomenon. Representative of the summer assemblies was a statement in the *Nebraska Chautauqua Assembly* program for 1889 which maintained that

The Summer Assembly is coming to be a felt necessity. The busy, work-a-day life which most of us live affords little time for reading and thinking in the higher realms of literature and science and art. The mid-summer vacation weeks, so needful, and now so generally demanded, are more and more being turned to literary and thoughtful account by the thoughtful. For the best recreation we do not need absolute repose or merely idle amusement; we need a change of occupation, and air, and environment. This we get at the Assembly, and, at the same time, we get what the minds and hearts of all thoughtful people crave—knowledge and inspiration. Many understand this and attend the Assembly for both rest and profit, and gain both, and are great gainers.⁷

Recreational choices—boating, bathing, croquet, lawn tennis, and organized games—all enhanced Victorian respectability. Simply living in the outdoors in

tents was itself recreational and healthy. "Tired mothers will find relief in pleasant, social chat with friends and neighbors, free from the cares of home life. the little ones can enjoy a romp in the fresh air. All will feel better for such an outing," Nebraska's *Beatrice Daily Express* explained.⁸

Victorian respectability likewise shaped entertainment choices at summer Chautauquas where, every evening during the assembly, some form of entertainment occurred on the grounds. Chalk artist and cartoonist Frank Beard of Chicago and impersonator Charles Craig, also of Chicago, typified the respectable humor typical of these sessions. But music, in all of its diversity and variety, constituted the dynamic of Chautauqua entertainment. Traveling orchestras, bands, singing groups, and operas frequented the Nebraska gatherings.⁹

The Nebraska conclaves also concentrated on Victorian considerations of personal morality and order. In 1888, for example, Crete's *State Vidette* saw the Crete Chautauqua as endeavoring

to bring about a popular gathering where people can be drawn together to employ the bounty of nature and to find relaxation from business cares in physical and mental culture. Its aim is to imbue everyone with lofty ideas, to instill morality, education and thought in mind, and to make life a more harmonious entity.¹⁰

Similarly, the 1890 Crete Chautauqua program called for the "cooperation of our state to make the assembly more and more helpful to those who wish to grow into power and grace of the noblest type of character, and consecrate their gifts and attainments to the noblest ends of living."¹¹

The final shared value that defined the Chautauqua subcommunity was a commitment to an accommodational Protestantism, a transitional form of Protestantism in the latter nineteenth-century. The goal of this movement was to accommodate and identify Christ and his teachings with the changing American culture in all of its forms: the home, government, economy and so on. As a result, theological orthodoxy and denominational distinctiveness received less emphasis at Chautauqua than what otherwise might have been the case. Within the Chautauqua movement, Christian life revolved around both the church and the culture; a Christian was expected to render allegiance and commitment to both.¹²

Chautauqua in Nebraska, indeed throughout the nation, became a distinctly American institution committed to an ideology of culture that championed this form of Protestantism and stood for politeness, respect for learning, appreciation for the arts, the pursuit of science, "respectable recreation," and affection for literature. To Chautauqua's founder, John Heyl Vincent, this ideology encompassed regenerative powers. So much so, that it constituted the glue which

held the movement together and provided the energy required for the formation of the summer assemblies and local CLSCs across Nebraska.¹³

The quest for subcommunity was likewise evident in the local CLSCs which emerged throughout Nebraska. The desire for closeness and belonging that permeated the changing culture of the late nineteenth-century America supplemented the yearning for self-improvement, uplift and personal order of Gilded Age Nebraskans. In an age before civic and country clubs became symbols of prestige and honor, membership in a CLSC made one part of an elite corps of people with shared slogans, mottoes, values, and agendas. These little subcommunities strove for balance: on one hand, accommodating to the changing culture of fin-de-siecle America, while finding in the CLSC the security and purpose so necessary for a well-ordered life.¹⁴

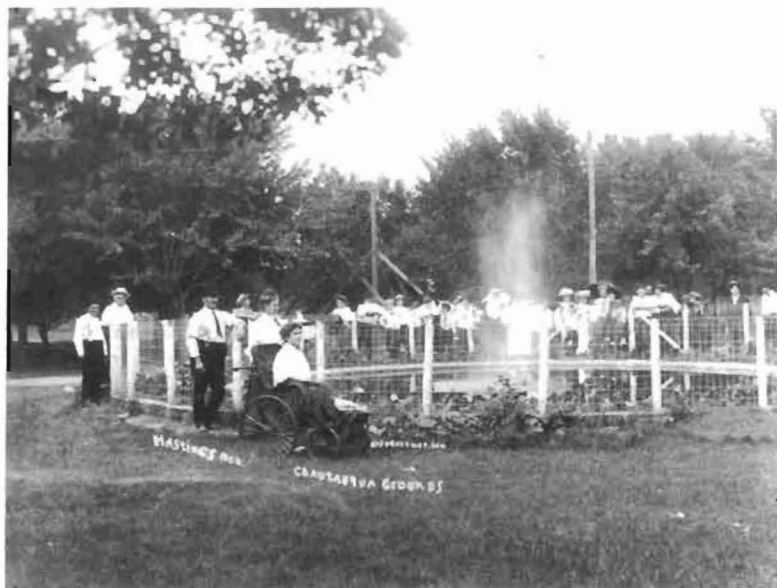
The constitutions and by-laws of the local Chautauqua literary circles in Nebraska are high instructive, for they institutionalized the rituals and ceremonies that legitimized and gave authority to those who enjoyed the privilege of entering the CLSC. Formed in 1894, Beatrice's CLSC was open to persons of "good moral character" who could sign the constitution and received majority approval of the members present. In 1897 the circle's members amended the constitution, requiring that the vote for approval be three-fourths. In addition, the new constitution restricted membership to about thirty, called for annual meetings in September, and for weekly meetings to be held each Monday from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. When the weekly meetings opened with a roll call, members responded with memorized quotations on subjects chosen by the circle program committee.¹⁵

These weekly meetings reflected a desire for precision and order, epitomized by the established time schedule:

1. Roll Call and Invocation	not exceeding 5 minutes
2. Business	" " 10 minutes
3. Textbook lessons	" " 60 minutes
4. Chautauquan magazine	" " 20 minutes
5. Special programs	" " 20 minutes
6. Critic's report	" " 5 minutes
Total time	120 minutes

The invocation consisted of a devotional conducted by someone selected by the presiding officer, who also chose the evening's critic. The critic assessed the accuracy and grammatical precision of the lesson presentations by members whom the program committee selected for that night. However, with only five minutes devoted to the report, it is doubtful this ever amounted to much. "Special programmes" usually involved a vocal or piano solo, poetry reading, or special tribute to some notable historic or literary figure.¹⁶

CLSC membership in Nebraska came largely from Protestant, old-stock people engaged in urban middle class occupations. The membership consisted largely of the professional people of the communities—lawyers, doctors, teachers, bankers, and businessmen. Although a few came from New York and New England, most CLSC members, or their parents, came from states directly east of Nebraska—Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania—intent on building a new, more prosperous life. Their homes revealed a penchant for as much refinement and status as the small Nebraska communities could offer. Membership in a local CLSC reflected partial fulfillment of that desire.¹⁷



Chautauqua participants in Hastings, Nebraska.
Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society.

In order to pursue further study in an atmosphere of collegiality and support, CLSC veterans throughout America in the 1890s started gathering together in "Hall in the Grove" societies. (The name, "Hall in the Grove," came from a society John Heyl Vincent formed in the early 1880s, one that honored all CLSC graduates). On September 21, 1888, graduates of the four CLSCs in Lincoln, Nebraska formed the Lincoln "Hall in the Grove" society. The most famous members of the new society were Mr. and Mrs. William Jennings Bryan.¹⁸

The new organization exhibited the same desire for structure, order, and exactness evident in the CLSCs. Beginning in October 1888, the new Hall in the Grove society met in private homes once every two weeks. Each gathering

opened with the Lord's prayer, followed by the roll call to which members responded with quotations from Homer. Common to each program was a map exercise in which the leader, local educator, T. C. Stevens, led the group in a world geography lesson. By a unanimous vote at its first meeting, the society agreed to pursue studies in the special CLSC review course in Greek history and literature, which featured material on the Dorians, Athens, Sparta, and Greek mythology.¹⁹

The CLSCs also served as places of social status. For example, social gatherings at the Lincoln Hall in the Grove society included picnics at a member's farmhouse and annual banquets held at various devotees' homes. Bishop John H. Vincent's visit to the Lincoln society on October 5, 1889 may have been the most significant social event of the early CLSCs in Lincoln. He came to Lincoln to appraise the CLSC that Hall in the Grove members had earlier established in the state penitentiary.²⁰

For members of the CLSC, the highlight of the annual Chautauqua assembly was Recognition Day. The epitome of ritual and ceremony, Recognition Day suggested significance and legitimacy to those who had finished the four year program of reading and study. Modeled on the Recognition Day program of the mother Chautauqua in New York, this ceremony was richly layered in pomp and circumstance. As the CLSC graduates walked across the assembly grounds, they moved through arches of grapevine, evergreen, and elderberry, and up the pavilion stage to receive their CLSC certificates.

Some of the assemblies featured an additional arch: the golden arch. As the graduates stood at the gate's entrance, they engaged in a responsive reading:

Surely there is a vein of silver and a place for gold where they find it.
But where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of
understanding? It cannot be gotten for gold neither silver. The gold and
silver cannot equal it.

The speaker of the ceremonies then intoned, "Let the golden gates be opened." As children dropped blossoms across their path and a choir sang, the graduates filed through arches representing faith, science, literature, and art before ascending to the pavilion's stage. For many, receiving the CLSC certificate, amidst all the trappings of pageantry in an atmosphere heavy with solemnity, constituted the symbolic equivalent of a college graduation and a college degree.²¹ Finally, irrevocably and beyond question, these Chautauquans shared the sense of belonging to a special favored caste—a subcommunity of common purpose within the larger, more forbidding community.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Chautauqua in Nebraska, both in its summer assembly and CLSC forms, represented the fulfillment of a desire for a sense of belonging and purpose in a society undergoing enormous change. Through the ritual, ceremony, and privileged

status associated with Chautauqua membership, many Nebraskans experienced a welcome and reassuring sense of legitimacy and resolve. Their quest for subcommunity satisfied, the Chautauquans represented a cultured elite that found its self-reliance, independence, and ambitions for self-improvement immeasurably enhanced.

NOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner, ed. (New York: Harper, 1966), 485.
2. Benjamin G. Rader, "The Quest for Subcommunities and the Rise of American Sport," *American Quarterly* 29 (1977): 355-69. Also see Eldon E. Snyder, "The Chautauqua Movement in Popular Culture: A Sociological Analysis," *Journal of Popular Culture* 8 (1985): 82-83.
3. On the opera houses of Nebraska, see Douglas O. Street, "Baud's Opera House: The Cultural Hub of Crete, 1877-1900," *Nebraska History* 60 (1979): 58-76; Robert A. Schanke, "Fremont's Love Opera House," *Nebraska History* 55 (1974): 220-53, and Pat M. Ryan, "Hallo's Opera House: Pioneer Theatre of Lincoln, Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 45 (1964): 323-30. On the function of Midwestern school houses as cultural centers, see Ronald E. Butchart, "Education and Culture in the Trans-Mississippi West: An Interpretation," *Journal of Popular Culture* 3 (1980): 364-65.
4. Hugh Orchard, one of the leaders of the national Chautauqua, shows that the appeal of the independent Chautauqua assemblies was largely rural. In fact, of the 287 Chautauquas in 1906, not one of them was in any of the 25 major American cities. Hugh Orchard, *Fifty Years of Chautauqua* (Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1923), 45-46.
5. For a history of these summer assemblies and their connection to the mother Chautauqua, see James Paul Eckman, "Regeneration through Culture: Chautauqua in Nebraska, 1882-1925" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1989), 33-134.
6. On the Chautauqua approach to leisure, see James P. Eckman, "Respectable Leisure: The Crete Chautauqua, 1882-1897," *Nebraska History* 69 (1988): 19-29. For the Garfield quote, see John Heyl Vincent, *The Chautauqua Movement* (Boston: The Chautauquan Press, 1885), p. vii, and for the Richmond quote see Frederick Stielow, "Grand Isle, Louisiana, and the 'New' Leisure, 1866-1893," *Louisiana History* 23 (1982), 246.
7. *Nebraska Chautauqua Assembly*, 1889, p. 21.
8. *Beatrice Daily Express*, 13 July 1889.
9. See Eckman, "Regeneration through Culture," pp. 90-92.
10. *State Vidette*, 31 May 1888
11. *Nebraska Chautauqua Assembly*, 1890 introductory page—"The Outlook."
12. For a more thorough analysis of this perspective see Eckman, "Regeneration through Culture," pp. 9-10, 16-20, and my paper "John Heyl Vincent, Chautauqua, and An Ideology of Culture, 1874-1900," read at the 1991 Mid-America American Studies Association meeting in Little Rock.
13. On the concept of an ideology of culture, see Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), pp. 263-76 and Henry May, *The End of American Innocence. A Study of the First Years of Our Time, 1912-1917* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964), pp. 31-51. The argument that Chautauqua represented a commitment to an ideology of

culture constitutes one of the major themes of my dissertation, "Regeneration through Culture."

14. On background to the founding of the CLSC concept by Vincent and the organization of the local CLSCs, see my dissertation, "Regeneration through Culture," pp. 135-73, and my article, "Promoting an Ideology of Culture: The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles in Nebraska, 1878-1900," *Nebraska History* 73 (1992): 18-24.

15. The 1894 and revised 1897 editions of the constitution and by-laws of the Beatrice CLSC are found in the Nebraska State Historical Society archives under "Beatrice CLSC." The Lincoln "Hall in the Grove" constitution and by-laws are also in the SHS archives under "Hall in the Grove." The weekly meeting of the Beatrice CLSC changed to Tuesday, instead of Monday, on 12 December 1898.

16. See the 1897 Beatrice constitution and the minutes of the Beatrice CLSC, which are also in the SHS archives. The minutes contain the records of the CLSC meetings from 1894-1899.

17. The geographical origin of many of those listed in the appendix can be determined by consulting Andreas's *History of the State of Nebraska*. Under the communities of Lincoln, Crete, and Beatrice, biographical sketches of prominent people of the town, as well as woodcuts of their prestigious homes, are provided. Cf. Frederick C. Luebke, "Nebraska: Time, Place, and Culture," in James H. Madison, *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 231-32.

18. Minutes of the "Society of the Hall in the Grove," found in the SHS archives.

19. "Minutes of the Society of the Hall in the Grove," 21 September and 12 October 1888.

20. The Vincent visit is recorded in the minutes of the society for 1889. See also *Sunday Journal and Star*, October 3, 1937. On the CLSC in the state penitentiary, see James P. Eckman, "Missionaries of Culture: Chautauqua in Nebraska's State Penitentiary, 1889-1894," *Nebraska History* 71 (1990): 142-50.

21. *State Vidette*, July 12, 1888; July 20, 1893; July 11, 1889; *The Crete Chautauquan*, July 9, 1897. A copy of the entire Recognition Day procedure is in the "Society of the Hall in the Grove" file in the SHS archives. For a charming account of the 1887 Recognition Day ceremonies at the Crete Chautauqua, see Anna Hahn, *Summer Assembly Days* (Boston: Congregational Sunday-Sunday and Publishing Society, 1888), pp. 197-221.