

1905 Photo Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium



What is Chautauqua?

Chautauqua Institution cofounder John Vincent said “Chautauqua is an idea, embracing the ‘all things’ of life - art, science, society, religion, patriotism, education – whatsoever tends to enlarge, refine, and ennoble the individual.” He wrote that it was the aim of Chautauqua “to take people on all sides of their natures and make them new, more intelligent and thoughtful in a world of ideas.” (The Chautauquan, Fall 1999)

The Chautauqua movement began at Lake Chautauqua, New York in 1874 as a summer retreat for the training of Sunday School teachers. From the first year onward the Chautauqua idea was all-denominational and blended study and recreation in a pastoral setting. It broadened almost immediately to include academic subjects, music, art, humanities, and physical education. By 1880 the Chautauqua platform had established itself as a national forum for open discussion of public issues, international relations, literature, and science.

Soon after the founding of the original Chautauqua in New York, numerous independent Chautauqua assemblies were established throughout the country, based upon the ideals of the original. Additionally, in an effort to reach those who could not attend the established Chautauqua assemblies, travelling circuits or “tent Chautauquas” sprang up and continued until the early 1930s.

The Chautauqua idea currently thrives at Chautauqua Institution in New York and at its surviving “independents” around the country. In addition, some Chautauquas which became inactive in the 1930s are now being revived. Even a new Chautauqua circuit has recently started up which travels to cities across the country bringing historical re-enactors to lecture, teach, and entertain.

Chautauqua has grown to represent life-long learning in its fullest sense – educational and cultural opportunities for the total person. It has been one of the major influences in adult education in this country and remains true to its founders’ ideal of “embracing the ‘all things’ of life.”

Some Interesting Chautauqua Facts

WAXAHACHIE / TEXAS

The Auditorium

- The Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium is the second building built in the West End Park (now called Getzendaner Memorial Park) for the Chautauqua Assemblies. The first building was a Pavilion built in 1900 for the first Chautauqua Assembly which would accommodate 1200 people. In 1902, after the new Auditorium was built, the Pavilion served as a dining hall.

The “Little City”

- In 1900 the West End Park became a little city during the 10 days of the first Assembly.
- It was surrounded by a board fence, which also served as hitching rail for livestock.
- Along with 75 tents erected in the Park, one could find a restaurant, a barber shop with two chairs, a telephone booth, a post office, a newsstand, a cold drink establishment, and a night watchman.

The Circuit

- The Waxahachie Chautauqua was held from 1900 until 1911 as an “independent” Chautauqua (that is, they secured their own lecturers and talent).
- Beginning in 1912, a tent circuit (the Redpath-Horner Bureau) provided programs and talent, which continued until the end of the Waxahachie Chautauqua around 1930.

Texas Chautauquas

- Our ongoing research has so far uncovered the following independent Chautauquas in Texas history:
 - San Marcos (1885-1895)
 - Georgetown (1888-c1897)
 - Weatherford (c1891-c1898)
 - Glen Rose (1898-1899)
 - Waxahachie (1900-1930)
 - Mineral Wells (c1905)
 - Dallas (1906-1907)

NATIONAL

New York

- The New York Chautauqua sits in a 225-acre community with about 1200 buildings, including an open-air auditorium, hotel, restaurants, classrooms, and private residences.
- It has held its Summer Assembly every year since 1874. Its 9-week sessions currently attract 180,000 people each summer.

Independent Chautauquas

- Approximately 25 Chautauquas across the country have produced Assemblies annually for more than 100 years. Typically these have a park-like summer community with many original buildings, including open-air auditoriums, dining halls, and residences. (Simpson, J., Chautauqua: An American Utopia, 1999)

Boulder, CO

- One of these independent Chautauquas with an important Texas connection is the one at Boulder, Colorado. It was founded in 1898 by University of Texas professors from Austin who wanted a break from Texas summers. It continues its tradition of Summer Assemblies now in its 102nd year. Some of the cottages there are still owned by descendents of those founding UT professors.

Tent Chautauquas

- The first traveling tent Chautauqua started in 1907 out of Iowa. It provided programs, speakers, and talent to towns around the country. The popularity of these circuit Chautauquas grew until, at their height (1920-1924), there were 21 companies operating around 100 circuits in over 8500 towns and cities. In 1924 an estimated 40 million people attended a circuit Chautauqua. (Horner, Charles F. Strike the Tents: The Story of Chautauqua, 1954)

The Story of The Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium

The Building

In 1901, it became obvious to the organizers of the Waxahachie Chautauqua that the newly erected pavilion in West End Park could not accommodate the throngs of people attending the Chautauqua programs at the Summer Assemblies.

And so, on August 9, 1901, a group of citizens met in the District Courtroom of the Ellis County Courthouse and decided to build a new 2500-seat new auditorium in the park. It is unclear who was responsible for the octagonal building's unusual design. Many believe that the structure was planned to resemble a tent, but it seems more likely that it is a copy of the original octagonal roofed platform of the open-air auditorium at the Chautauqua Institution in New York.

E.S. Boze, a local contractor and architect, was in charge of the project. Although construction did not begin until June 1902, the large and impressive building was completed in time for the Summer Assembly held July 22-31, 1902. The cost of construction was \$2750.

Built entirely of wood, the Waxahachie auditorium had large "wooden windows" which would slide upward into the upper portion of the walls, making an open-air structure. The stage, with dressing rooms below, was inset in the south side of the building. A large water tank was erected near the auditorium to furnish drinking water. Electric lights were installed. Plans to gravel the floor near the stage gave way to "planking" the entire floor.

The Venue

The Chautauqua Auditorium provided a stage for the lectures, concerts, and performances for the Chautauqua Assemblies from 1902 to 1930. During the most popular presentations, it was filled to standing-room-only capacity. In addition, with the windows open, spectators could crowd around the outside and still view performances. Sometimes buggies pulled up around the auditorium, becoming extra seating. At least once, tents were erected at the windows to accommodate the overflow crowds while keeping them out of the summer sun. Estimates of crowds in and around the auditorium reached 5000-7000 at times.

When not in use by the Summer Assemblies, the auditorium served as a venue for various other performances, reunions, conferences, and celebrations.

After the Chautauqua Assemblies ended in the early 1930s, the auditorium continued to be used for some civic and educational events, including high school graduations.

The Decline

Eventually, with lagging interest and use, the wooden structure began to decline until it was closed by the city in 1971. Due to its deteriorated and termite-ridden condition, there were plans then to tear down the auditorium.

The Restoration

Despite the gloomy forecast for the Chautauqua Auditorium, some citizens had a vision that this noble 75-year-old building could not only survive as a reminder of its role in the Chautauqua movement, but also continue to offer education, culture, and entertainment for North Texans of the future.

At a Waxahachie City Council meeting in August 1971, Josephine Ruskin, Dr. Ford Lane, and Forest and Ola Upshaw pleaded for the preservation of the Chautauqua Auditorium and were rewarded with the decision that the Chautauqua Auditorium would be restored. By the end of 1971, a Texas Historical Marker was applied for and received. There followed several years of intense planning, publicity, and fund-raising, resulting, in 1974, in the auditorium being placed on the National Register of Historic Places and construction beginning on the restoration work.

In a joyful celebration on July 4, 1975, the restored Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium was rededicated. In remarks during the ceremony, speaker Dr. Ernest Connally from the U.S. Department of the Interior, said that a historic building like the Chautauqua Auditorium was "a link between generations bearing a message in three-dimensional tangible form of human aspirations and endeavor."

That was 25 years ago. Since then, one more generation has come of age and become part of the link. We are all fortunate recipients of the legacy of the Chautauqua Auditorium and the messages it brings to us.

Tent Circuits Provided Chautauqua Talent Around the Country

By the turn of the century, independent Chautauquas had appeared in various parts of the country, each having their own campgrounds, lectures, musical events, and religious exercises. As the organizers struggled for greater attendance at their summer assemblies, they became eager to attract “big name” performers for their programs. Often multiple assemblies were held at the same time of the summer, causing conflicts in scheduling. Great competition among assemblies for the same performers resulted in high costs for the independent Chautauquas.

The Circuit provided the solution

In 1904 Iowan Keith Vawter attempted a solution to this problem when he launched the circuit or tent Chautauqua. He proposed the grouping of towns with the lecturers moving on a specified course from town to town. Lecturers could work full time, open dates would be eliminated, talent costs would be reduced, and the railroad trips would be shorter. This first circuit consisted of 15 towns in Iowa and Nebraska.

In 1907 Vawter ran a circuit of 33 towns. He provided not only the talent, but also the tents, advertising, and work crews. By 1910 the circuit assigned each performer a specific evening on the 7-day program and they always performed in that sequence throughout the summer season.

The Redpath-Horner circuit

Promoter Charles F. Horner helped Vawter refine this system. In 1912 Horner established the Redpath-Horner Bureau circuit in Kansas City. His territory was Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota. This was the year that the Redpath-Horner circuit first provided talent for Waxahachie. (Unlike many Assemblies, however, the Waxahachie Chautauqua did continue to arrange some of its own local programming.)

Charles Horner was notable for encouraging amateurs to enter Chautauqua work and even set up his own school to train talent, the Horner Institute of Fine Arts. Of course, there were other companies that operated circuits such as Acme Chautauquas and Jones Chautauqua System.

When the train carrying the circuit's first day's talent

and baggage arrived in a town in the morning, there was usually a parade to the Chautauqua grounds. Although the evening program provided by the circuit consisted of both music and lecture, the lecture was considered to be the “backbone of Chautauqua.” It could be classified as a challenge lecture, an informative lecture, or an inspirational lecture. Horner favored the inspirational.

The circuit Chautauquas reached their peak in the early 1920's. There were 21 circuits operating 93 circuits in the US and Canada with an attendance of approximately 35 million people.

Decline of the Circuits

Some of the reasons that have been suggested for the decline of the circuit around 1930 are:

- φ The vast increase and the oversupply of Chautauquas With such popularity, the balance between education and entertainment shifted toward entertainment, and the quality decreased.
- φ Technological advances – the automobile, the radio, the telephone, talking motion pictures, golf courses, and summer vacation trips
- φ The economic hardships of the Great Depression

The final circuit folded its tents in 1932 and the splendor of tent Chautauqua was over.

The following Texas cities were on the Redpath-Horner Bureau Circuit:

Abilene	Denton	Marlin
Amarillo	El Paso	Mathis
Austin	Fort Worth	Nacogdoches
Burnet	Hereford	San Antonio
Canyon	Hillsboro	San Marcos
Chillicothe	Houston	Sweetwater
College Station	Huntsville	Temple
Commerce	Kelly Field	Texarkana
Corsicana	Kingsville	Waco
Dallas	Lubbock	Waxahachie

*Excerpted and edited from “Records of the Redpath Chautauqua” by Robert A. McCown, 1973
(<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/specoll/Bai/redpath.htm>)*

Chautauqua's Literary Roots Produced America's First Book Club

"Reading, reading, reading, page after page, chapter after chapter, book after book, one may gradually become absorbed in elevating themes, gain knowledge and power, brighten life, strengthen character, broaden one's world, and come into fellow kinship with noble souls." (Francher, Pauline, *Chautauqua: Its Architecture and Its People, 1978*)

In Waxahachie in 1889, some "young ladies who hoped to derive mutual benefits from a course of systematic reading" organized the Sappho Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC). They expected to complete a thorough four-year course in June 1892. The officers were: Miss Willia Getzendaner, President; Miss Zephie Trippet, Vice-President; Miss Mary Siddons, Recording Secretary; Miss Flora McMillan, Corresponding Secretary; Miss Scotta McMillan, Treasurer; and Miss Ruth Wyatt, Critic. (*History of Ellis County, Texas, Ellis County Historic Workshop, 1972.*)

What is CLSC?

This same type of society was being organized all around the country as a result of the formation of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in New York 11 years earlier by Chautauqua founder Reverend John H. Vincent. This was a four-year home study course whose participants read certain prescribed books, thus becoming the first reading club in America.

After the four years of reading the book list, participants became eligible to attend a Recognition Ceremony during the summer assembly in Chautauqua, New York to celebrate their completion. The ceremony consisted of graduates marching behind a banner through the Grounds to a Golden Gate to the white-pillared Hall of Philosophy. Small children led the way

with baskets of flowers, dignitaries spoke, and the graduates received diplomas.

Why start CLSC?

Vincent said, "The aim of CLSC was to promote habits of reading and study in nature, art, science, and in secular and sacred literature..." The CLSC helped give people a sense of belonging as society resurrected itself after the Civil War. During a visit to the Chautauqua Assembly in New York in the summer of 1880, Presidential candidate James A. Garfield stated "It has been the struggle of the world to get more leisure, but it has been left to Chautauqua to show what to do with it."

Who joined CLSC?

During the 3 days after Vincent first announced the CLSC on August 10, 1878, over 700 people signed up. The first year's class had 8000 participants registered. By 1891, 180,000 people enrolled and by the 1920's there were more than 300,000. In the first 20 years, 10,000 circles were established (one quarter of which were in villages of less than 500 population.) Although this organization was chiefly aimed at those who would otherwise not have an opportunity for an education, it also attracted college graduates right from the beginning. The participants came from all walks of life, from high society to low society, from rural areas to large cities, from socialites to farmers, factory workers, and prisoners.

CLSC today...

Today the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle is still centered at Chautauqua Institution in New York and is still active throughout the country. After paying a nominal fee for the 4-year program and reading 13 books from the CLSC list (composed of 700 books, chosen from 1878 until the present), students are eligible to graduate at the Recognition Day ceremony. After graduation, alumni are encouraged to stay active in their class and to continue their education.

(Simpson, Jeffrey., *Chautauqua: An American Utopia, 1999* and <http://www.chautauqua-inst.org>)

Waxahachie Memoir Tells Of Old Chautauqua

The following childhood reminiscence of the early Waxahachie Chautauqua was taken from the memoir of Ann Frances Matthews Stodder. She was born in 1894 and lived the first 12 years of her life at 1121 West Main Street in Waxahachie, currently the home of John and Frances Farley. The Dunlap family to which she refers was her next door neighbor at 1203 West Main Street, the current home of Max and Earlane Simpson.. This excerpt was sent to us by Mrs. Matthews Stodder's cousin's daughter, Mary Hartshorne from Massachusetts. The entire manuscript is at the Ellis County Museum.

"We never had a tent to camp at the two week summer session of Chautauqua. Mammy called it She-Togger. But the Whites had a tent. Of course we lived only a short distance from the Chautauqua Grounds, really just a pecan grove where Waxahachie Creek, Cow Creek that meant, went through. We could walk there. But the Whites thought it "worth the trouble" to set up a tent, move out an oil stove and housekeep. We would go home in the early afternoon to have our baths, but what fun to spend the night and wake to the sounds and smells of the tent colony. Country people camped from all over Ellis County and further, many town folk had tents, too, of varying elegance.

Next to the Whites, Miss Stell had a canvas of Oriental splendor, a reception and dining tent, a sleeping one as well for her visiting young ladies... Both tents had wooden floors, there was an awning sheltered kitchen. From the Whites dirt floor tent, always room for us to sleep, we were quiet so as not to wake the young ladies in the morning, we tip-toed so as not to disturb their afternoon naps while their freshly Blanched white slippers were rowed up in the sun. Miss Alice had such tiny ones, not just canvas but embroidered linen. Lucy, the extra maid Ellen had got in, pressed the white ribbon ties in the kitchen tent where the flounced dresses were spread over the ironing board.

Light came earlier in a tent. I was awake, longing to run to the creek, but Ruth and Martha were still sleeping. Flies were plentiful, I put my head under the sheet to wait. Next door Lucy was soundlessly lowering the flaps, rolled high for the night breeze... Sid was bringing buckets of water to fill the kettle, later the pitchers on the wash stands. He had driven from the Dunlaps house with a block of ice for the refrigerator. Soon Mrs. White with a quick lick to her hair, stole out, her finger to her lips as she gave me a pat in passing. Into a skillet she sliced the thick farm

bacon. Ruth and Martha squirmed, hitting at flies, opened an eye. At last! We could get up, I heard eggs break and sizzle. We'd be on time for the first program, a chalk talk, in the Auditorium.

Between lectures, concerts, elocutionists, we wandered about, calling on those lucky enough to have tents. We watched the boys dive from the high limb that hung over the Deep Hole in the Creek. Much time we spent in the Young Men's Tent which the town beaux and blades had flung wide in hospitality. This was almost circus size with scalloped flaps, rugs on the floor, tables for whist and dominoes, an overflowing water cooler with a puddle to avoid. During the day this club was fairly empty, we could while away long afternoon hours at the free gaming tables with our dominoes choice, forty-two. We skipped all political and philosophical offerings in the Auditorium.

After the trip home to dress for the late afternoon we waited by the gate to see the little mule cars unload the crowds hanging on the steps, the buggies drive up for the Evening Entertainment. Miss May Conner was laughing as she dropped from her hand the ruffles of her skirt, she let them trail in the dust. How gloriously careless, if ever I got to be a young lady I wanted to be just like her, resolving to let my ruffles sweep the dust no matter what anybody said. She had a beau from Out of Town, Cincinnati no less. I had not seen him since winter when he was on the street car with her, in a covert cloth overcoat, a garment not worn by the young men in Waxahachie... Miss May paused to introduce him, we couldn't stop longer, though we were impressed with his white flannels and striped blazer. We wanted front seats, grown ups were slow and lingering, we raced to the Auditorium. The farm families were long since in their places, rows of children, the littlest ones already asleep on pallets in the aisle, a jug of water and a box of crackers handy under the seat. Whatever was offered, we scanned the program, Funny Men preferred.

Afterwards there was high life in the Young Men's Tent. Mrs. White let us stay up late, we circulated, watching the card games, rushing outside to clutch each other and giggle at a tender passage we had overheard as Mr. Bob Griffin whispered to Miss Roberta Conner, leaning over to pull out her chair. Back to the water cooler, Mr. Bob Carlisle was there, laughing very loud. His face was freckled, tobacco juice oozed from the corners of this mouth. He teased us but he treated us to soda pop."

Will Rogers Performed for Enthusiastic Waxahachie Audience in February 1927

Internationally famous cowboy humorist Will Rogers arrived in Waxahachie by train on Saturday afternoon, February 26, 1927 to the city's excitement and praise and anticipation for his performance at 8:30 that evening at the Chautauqua Auditorium. In the week leading up to Rogers' arrival, the *Waxahachie Daily Light* had daily articles, photos, and advertisements announcing his upcoming program and describing his life, career, and character. Several articles and ads indicated that he would close out his show with some of his famed lariat tricks. One article stated that early ticket sales indicated that a capacity crowd was expected.

At the Chautauqua Auditorium that evening, while the audience waited for Will Rogers to appear, "a radio program was received and amplified to fill the air with music through a receiving set up through the courtesy of the Walter Music Company." Following this, the entertainer appeared and provided the audience "one hundred and one minutes of

engrossingly entertaining comments and crossfires on topics of the day." The following day's *Waxahachie Daily Light* described his discussion of his trip to Europe, Mussolini, U.S. foreign policy, the League of Nations, disarmament, the plight of the farmer, former Texas Governor Jim Ferguson, college students, prohibition, airplanes, automobiles and bad roads.

Rogers performed to an enthusiastic crowd at the Chautauqua Auditorium. However, their "one disappointment came when he closed his act without displaying his skill at trick roping, at which his dexterity gave him his first attention in vaudeville and the name of 'poet lariat'." After finishing his show "and adding a fresh stick to his unwieldy chew of gum, he walked out where a waiting car took him to the train for California."

Rogers' February 1927 visit to Waxahachie was his only appearance in this part of the state that was scheduled for that year. He had just returned from a trip to Europe and

was now on his third American tour.

Will Rogers died in a plane crash on August 15, 1935 with his friend and pilot Wiley Post (who himself had visited Waxahachie in 1932). The *Waxahachie Daily Light's* large bold headline on that day said: "CRASH KILLS ROGERS AND POST". The page included Rogers' photo and two lead articles retelling the story of his 1927 visit to Waxahachie.

On September 19, 1975, Will Rogers, Jr. followed his father's footsteps to the Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium, just two months after its restoration. He spoke on "My Father's Humor", discussing the life, influences, and career of Will Rogers, Sr. He said that he had heard the term "Waxahachie crowd" from his father and understood it to mean "a warm and friendly audience." He said that Waxahachie had "a wonderful auditorium but all you need is some soft seats."

(Source: *Waxahachie Daily Light*.)

Waxahachie Wins 1900 Chautauqua Assembly

The following report from the Texas Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church is reprinted in its entirety from the Waxahachie Enterprise, November 10, 1899. It tells about the decision to move the Chautauqua.

THE ASSEMBLY.

Location of Grounds, Water Supply and Accessibility.

Following is the report of the Chautauqua location commission:

The Commission appointed at the late meeting of the Texas Synod to settle the question of the re-location of the Summer Assembly met in Waxahachie on Tuesday, October 17. Four members of the Commission were present, viz: Revs. W.B. Preston and L.C. Collier and Elders W.A. Stewart and Eli Smith. Elder J.N. Rushing was absent, but sent sentiments by letter. After careful consideration, it was decided to remove the Assembly from Glen Rose for the following reasons:

1. The inaccessibility of the place, and the inconvenience of reaching it.
2. The lack of local sympathy and patronage, the citizens of Glen Rose, with a few exceptions, taking no interest whatever, in the Assembly.
3. The existence of a growing sentiment unfavorable to Glen Rose as a location, this sentiment being so deep and widespread that it was felt to be impossible to make headway against it.

From these and other considerations which might be named, it was felt that removal was necessary.

A careful study of the original contract between the synod and the Glen Rose people showed that in case of removal the property simply reverted to the donors, so rather than have the Assembly continue to what seemed like inevitable failure at Glen Rose, it was unanimously decided to remove it.

Definite propositions for its location were before us from Waxahachie, Thorps' Springs and Rockport. Other places wanted to bid, but were not quite ready.

After carefully weighing all the facts we decided upon

Waxahachie as the place offering the greatest number of advantages. Twenty acres of ground in the suburbs of the city and more, if needed, are put at our disposal. The grounds are accessible by street car from the city and two railroads cross within a few hundred yards of the entrance.

The grounds are beautifully shaded and are to be abundantly supplied with artesian water, laid off with gravelled walks and drives and lighted by electricity. A comfortable auditorium and other necessary buildings will be provided and undisturbed use of all these improvements granted to us for such time as we may choose each year. The citizens of Waxahachie, irrespective of denomination, are taking a deep interest in the movement and the assembly will not lack for local sympathy and encouragement. We have put the matter into the hands of the Board of Directors, who are to act in conjunction with the citizen's committee of Waxahachie in arranging and improving the grounds and we confidently expect a glorious success for the Assembly of 1900.

From the Waxahachie Enterprise, Sept. 22, 1899:

"Of course Waxahachie wants the Chautauqua. The town that has too many enterprises can not be found on the map of Texas, and when we are offered a new enterprise it is our duty to take it in."

From the Ennis News, October 1899:

"Waxahachie Gets the Cumberland Presbyterian Chautauqua.

We are glad of it. There is no place outside of Ennis that would appreciate such an institution more, nor do a better part by it than Waxahachie.

Waxahachie got it by going after it. We have all sorts of assurance that Ennis could have had it, had her people rallied to the assistance of Bro. Phillips; however, the matter is settled and our people who want the advantages of the school will go to Waxahachie."

Old Waxahachie Chautauquas Celebrated Shakespeare

The *Waxahachie Enterprise's* accounts of the Chautauqua Assemblies of the early 1900s show that Shakespeare was a favorite topic for lectures and programs.

During the 1905 Assembly, the Chautauqua Auditorium was “jammed with humanity” to greet Frederick Warde, the eminent actor and speaker, and to hear his lecture Shakespeare and His Plays. “A cultured, refined, and appreciative audience” gave undivided attention for a little more than one hour to his discussion and his “artistic readings” of Shakespeare. (*Waxahachie Enterprise*, 7/28/1905)

Later, at the 1908 Chautauqua Assembly, “Dr. F. Hyatt Smith delighted a large audience at the auditorium” with his lecture Shakespeare and His Times. “The lecture was heard with much pleasure by many members of the Waxahachie Shakespeare Club. Dr. Smith is one of the foremost lecturers on literature in this country. His diction is pure and he treats his subject in a popular fashion. No one can listen to him without being benefited.”

Part of Dr. Smith’s lecture was recounted as follows: “Untraveled, Shakespeare travels the world; unread, he is read by all mankind; untaught, he teaches all. His works are the best English history and the finest biblical commentary. Customs change, habits alter, traditions die, but he remains. His characters do not resemble life, they are life itself. Hamlet is the tragedy of the will; Othello is the tragedy of jealousy; Macbeth is the tragedy of retribution; Julius Caesar is the tragedy of politics; Lear is the tragedy of ingratitude; The Tempest is the colossal picture of the supernatural world.” (*Waxahachie Enterprise*, 7/17/1908)

Chemistry Demonstrations Will Follow Chautauqua Tradition

When George Hague presents his chemistry demonstrations at the Waxahachie Chautauqua Assembly this fall, he will be following a tradition that started at the first Assembly in 1900.

The *Waxahachie Enterprise* (August 3, 1900) described the discussion and demonstration of “The Air We Breathe” by Professor S.L. Hornbeak of Trinity University. It stated “...he showed the audience what the elements of the air could be resolved into and what could be done with the ingredients. He presented some beautiful experiments and some startling ones.” The article went on to describe some of the experiments. “When he burned a steel watch spring like a rich kindling splinter it was startling and beautiful, when he applied a lighted match to a portion of sulphate of magnesium it was startling.”

Later, at the 1906 Waxahachie Chautauqua Assembly, there no standing room left in the auditorium when Professor W.B. Patty gave “demonstrations in liquid air, wireless telegraphy, and other scientific subjects.” (*Waxahachie Enterprise*, August 3, 1906)

New Chautauqua Circuits Bring History to Life

The Waxahachie Chautauqua Assemblies ended around 1930, as did other Chautauquas across the country that depended on tent circuits to bring in talent. The Great Depression and changes in technology (radio, movies, and automobiles) sealed the demise of the traveling tent Chautauquas. While the "Mother" Chautauqua in New York and other independent Chautauquas around the country survived, the final circuit folded its tents in 1932.

In the mid-1970s, some 40 years after these travelling Chautauquas ended, a new circuit was created. It began when a history professor in North Dakota gave a lecture about Theodore Roosevelt to a very sparse audience. At the suggestion of a colleague, he tried actually portraying Teddy Roosevelt instead of simply lecturing. He took on Roosevelt's mannerisms, dress, speech, and ideas and interacted with the audience while in the character. Subsequent performances were advertised as historical characterizations and he gave his program to full houses.

This was the beginning of the Great Plains Chautauqua, a travelling tent circuit that continues today. Scholar/performers are engaged to study and portray important historical figures related to a common theme. In addition to their performances, the scholars also conduct workshops about their characters and the influences and events that helped shape history. Since this revival for the humanities is conducted in tents and outside of the university setting, it allows the public to interact with scholars in an open accessible forum.

The Great Plains Chautauqua Society and the Tulsa Chautauqua (which started in 1991) are two of the organizations that conduct circuit Chautauquas today. This summer the Great Plains Chautauqua is taking its five-day program to ten cities in five midwestern states. The Tulsa Chautauqua presented its program to three Oklahoma cities in early June.

2000 Florida Chautauqua Carries On Its Tradition

A weekend Chautauqua Assembly in DeFuniak Springs, Florida on February 25-27, 2000 provided an educational and cultural experience for locals and visitors alike, thus continuing a tradition that first began in 1885. DeFuniak Springs sits in the Florida Panhandle on the shores of Lake DeFuniak, a clear, nearly round spring-fed lake about one mile in circumference. This was the place chosen for a winter Chautauqua in 1884 by a party of scouts from the Chautauqua Institution in New York.

From 1885 to 1920, the Florida Chautauqua and the city of DeFuniak Springs grew and developed together, providing warmth and culture for the northerners while offering educational opportunities for Floridians. The annual 4-week February event was expanded to 9 weeks by 1906. Its season of lectures, classes, and performances was based on the model of the New York Assembly and became known as the "Winter Assembly in the Land of Summer." Its buildings included a hotel, amphitheater, college building, residences, and auditorium. A picket fence went all the way around the lake, encompassing not only the lake but also the Chautauqua Assembly and buildings located along the shores.

DeFuniak Springs native, Diane Pickett, has been the driving force in reviving the Florida Chautauqua. In 1990, she established an Elder Hostel there and in 1995 the event expanded to include the resurrected Chautauqua Assembly. Now it is an annual 3-day Assembly in February.

The weekend of the 2000 Chautauqua included an ambitious schedule of classes, lectures, performances, and re-enactments, ranging from computer classes to opera. Other presentation topics included: storytelling, art of Monet, history of toast, photography, conservation, Old Testament, and history of baseball. There were approximately 60 different offerings in total, sometimes with 8 to 10 activities going on at once.

The only remaining one of the original Chautauqua buildings is a domed auditorium whose rooms offer expansive views of the lake. In fact, Lake DeFuniak served as a background for the entire 2000 Assembly as participants made their way from class to class, strolled around the lake or fed the ducks. Others toured the Victorian lakefront homes that had been built for some early Chautauqua residents. The original 1885 "Winter Chautauqua" was ever present in this latest version, both in the picturesque lakeside setting and in the varied cultural and educational programs.

Historical information from "The Florida Chautauqua" by Dean DeBolt, 1985.