

TEXAS HIGHWAYS—CHAUTAUQUA SIDEBAR—MALLORY

Chautauqua Culture

“Mammy called it ‘She-Togger,’” Ann Frances Matthews Stodder wrote about growing up in Waxahachie.

Officially, it was the Chautauqua (shuh TAW kwa) Auditorium, an octagonal, open-air pavilion built in 1902 in Getzendaner Park. Each summer, families like Mrs. Stodder’s bought tickets and assembled here for a week of educational and entertaining programs. Of Texas towns (including San Marcos, Georgetown, Weatherford, Mineral Wells, and Glen Rose) with Chautauquas (also called assemblies), only Waxahachie’s remains.

Yet all were part of an adult education movement which began in 1874 in Chautauqua, New York. That’s where inventor Lewis Miller and Methodist minister John Vincent organized the Chautauqua Institution to train Sunday school teachers. The Institution added secular subjects, attracting thousands to its eight-week summer program..

Success at the Chautauqua Institution begat independent “Chautauquas” patterned after the original. Blending revival fervor and county fair excitement, by the mid-1880s these assemblies brought culture to rural communities coast-to-coast.

Promoters formed circuits to supply assemblies with popular speakers and performers. Held in permanent pavilions (such as Waxahachie’s) and circus-sized tents, these traveling Chautauquas staged renowned preachers, educators,

authors, statesmen, classical musicians, Shakesperean actors, orchestras, glee clubs, opera stars, and Broadway shows.

A number of Texans traveled Chautauqua circuits—including Houston criminal-defense lawyer Percy Foreman, Midland musician Louise Massey (called the "Original Rhinestone Cowgirl"), and Nannie Curtis, a lecturer and temperance reformer known as the "Queen of the Southern Platform."

Waxahachie's Chautauqua (which moved here from Glen Rose in 1900) booked its own acts until 1911. From 1912 until it folded in 1930, it booked speakers and acts through the Kansas City-based Redpath-Horner Bureau, a circuit which also booked for 29 other Texas towns. Renowned humorist Will Rogers and orator William Jennings Bryan addressed audiences at the Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium, but not during a summer assembly.

By the mid-1920s, circuit Chautauquas performed before an estimated 45 million people in 10,000 towns in 45 states, estimates University of Texas at Austin professor Charlotte Canning, who has studied Chautauquas.

Economic downturn during the Depression hurt ticket sales, as did the advent of radio and silent movies. Fittingly perhaps, Waxahachie's last Chautauqua included the radio broadcast of the Sharkey-Schmeling prizefight.

Most Chautauquas disbanded by the late 1930s, but 25 still exist. The original Chautauqua Institution thrives. So does an assembly in Boulder, Colorado, started in 1898 with help from University of Texas professors from Austin who were eager for a summertime mountain retreat. Several new

Chautauqua circuits even formed, beginning in the 1970s, featuring historical re-enactors.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and restored in 1975, Waxahachie's Chautauqua Auditorium opens during local festivals and will host an old-fashioned assembly on September 29. (For details, see "When, Where, How" on page XX.) Southwest Texas State University, which was founded on the site of San Marcos' Chautauqua, hosts an annual Chautauqua assembly. (For date and details contact T. Cay Rowe, director of Media Relations and Publications, Southwest Texas State University, 601 University Dr., San Marcos 78666; 512/245-2180.)

Chautauqua Institution co-founder John Vincent would be proud that Chautauquas still provide a place, as he put it, to "enlarge, refine, and ennoble the individual."