

A Chautauqua Summer

E. EINAR KRON

Memories of that summer when I worked as a property man or "tent man" for a Chautauqua circuit in the Middle West are now very faint. It was in the year 1918, when I was 17 years old. It was a special summer in many ways, a period of time when I learned a great deal from personal experience.

I might explain that there were a number of Chautauqua circuits in those days that traveled from town to town and presented programs in tents. The one I worked for was Travers-Wick, with headquarters in Des Moines, Iowa. In those days arrangements were made in a city or town or village for Chautauqua to come for a period of five, six, or seven days. The name, of course, was taken from Chautauqua Institution on Chautauqua Lake in western New York near Jamestown. The name was used by all the traveling circuits that flourished at that time. There were usually two programs each day, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, with the same people putting on the two programs, but with different talent each day. The most frequent type of presentation was a musical event for half an hour or 45 minutes, followed by a talk or speech by some prominent person. The musical part of the program sometimes was a soloist, instrumental or vocal, sometimes a quartet, sometimes a number of players of musical instruments. Often on the last day a small orchestra or band presented the entire program.

I cannot tell you the size of the tent, but it had two tall center poles. When it came to the setting up of the tent, I had the help of a number of boys in the community, but there was also a man hired by Travers-Wick, who came and supervised the putting up of the tent. We had to hoist up the poles and anchor them with stakes, which required the pounding in of several stakes with sledgehammers. Then we had to unroll the canvas



and "sew it together" with ropes, then hoist it up the poles. Next, short poles had to be placed all around and a curtain-type canvas fastened all around the tent. Finally, the platform had to be set up and the chairs arranged in rows. The boys that helped were given "season tickets," good for all the programs. Before the programs began, season tickets had been sent to the local committee and sold beforehand. I do not recall the price of the season tickets but the cost was less than if one paid for each performance.

Among my duties were punching the season tickets and selling tickets for each program. When the tent was set up, the lighting system had to be installed. Wiring with bulbs attached was strung between the poles, around the tent, and above the platform. Each day when the baggage arrived it was my duty to put it in the dressing room. Each night after the performance, even though the weather was clear, the piano had to be moved to the center of the platform and covered. I had to see that there was a pitcher of water and a glass for the speaker. Among other duties, the side walls of the tent had to be put up every night and fastened well at the top and bottom. The platform and grounds had to be kept clean, so paper and litter had to be



picked up every day. The day after the last program the tent had to be taken down and with the chairs and other material loaded on dray wagons and brought to the railroad station, and there loaded on an empty freight car that had been secured beforehand.

The company also hired platform managers who were in charge of other details. They introduced all the speakers and the groups or individuals who played or sang and also arranged for their lodging and transportation. Speaking of lodging, there was a small pup tent erected near the big tent. After my first week in a community in Iowa, I purchased a cot in Mankato, Minnesota, and so did not have to pay for lodging in homes or hotels. As I remember it, I received \$17 a week and railroad fare. I might add that my older brother Luther was a platform manager that same summer for Travers-Wick, but as it happened we were never in the same community or even near one another.

In some Chautauqua circuits meetings for children were held on the mornings that the Chautauqua was in town. The person in charge would talk to the children, tell them stories, have dramatizations, and play games. As a boy I attended some of

these morning programs when the Chautauqua came to Dayton, Iowa, where we lived. Among other things there was a program about Indians, and we were taught an Indian yell, which I still remember.

My first assignment as a property man was in a small town in southeastern Iowa called Keswick. As I remember it, I had to change trains three times, and I did not make the last connection, either because the train I was on was late, or the train schedule had been changed. I stayed in a hotel in Cedar Rapids overnight. So when I arrived at my destination I found that the tent had been put up already, no doubt the day before, and they were having the opening program that afternoon. The platform manager was there and in charge. He explained to me what my duties were. I found a room in a private home, as there was no hotel there. I hadn't bought my cot yet.

So during that week I carried out my daily duties and faced the problem of taking down the tent after the last performance. It was not an easy task, but I had help, and having secured a drayman, had the tent and other equipment hauled to the railroad station, where I had secured an empty freight car in which everything was placed. Then it was sealed for its destination by the station agent and was on its way when the next freight train came through. I might mention that it was a horse-drawn dray that was used. Then I purchased my ticket for the train ride to the next location.

I cannot recall the name of the next location, but it was a small town in southeastern Minnesota, and the following place was Minnesota Lake, Minnesota, which is about 25 miles south of Mankato. Perhaps the most difficult task was seeing that the freight car that carried the tent got to its destination on time. This meant stopping at every junction point and checking to make sure that the freight car with that number had gone through. The period of time between two locations varied from one to four or five days, depending upon the distance. I might mention that the most difficult junction point was at the Twin Cities in Minnesota, which I visited several times that summer. The railroad yards were halfway between the two cities, and I

had to go by streetcar to get there and check on the location of the freight car. I spent several nights in hotels in Minneapolis.

Mention should be made of the fact that Travers-Wick had two sets of programs, with different talent in each, one a five-day circuit, and the other a seven-day circuit. I was with the five-day circuit in five communities and with the seven-day in four. The first week in July, I was in Aurora, South Dakota, then back to Minnesota for the rest of the month in Lester Prairie, Howard Lake, and Spring Grove. After that I was in Trumbull, Nebraska, and closed the season at Cromwell, Iowa.

There were two special experiences that I recall well, both of them in Minnesota. One was when the schedule required that I be at the next assignment the following day. The last program in Lester Prairie was on July 16, and the first in Howard Lake on July 17. It was a distance of from 12 to 15 miles. As soon as the evening program was over, the tent had to be taken down, then the tent and equipment piled into two drays, hauled by night to the next place, and set up in the morning in time for the afternoon program. It was a hectic rush, and it had to be done by lantern light in Lester Prairie. Fortunately I was able to get a drayman who was willing to work at night and haul all the material from one community to the next. What a rush to get that tent up and everything ready by two o'clock in the afternoon, when the first program was held. Of course there was no sleep that night.

The other special experience was more unusual. It took place in a community in Minnesota where Chautauqua was scheduled to be held. I arrived the day before the week of programs and found that the freight car had arrived. When I inquired at the railroad station where I could get information about Chautauqua, I was directed to a bank in the community. When I reached there and asked, I was told: "We're not having any Chautauqua here this summer. We wrote to headquarters some time ago and told them. Over there on that table you'll find all the advertising and the tickets. Not a single one has been sold." I might add here that I found out the reason why they canceled. The community consisted almost entirely of people from Germany or of German descent. That summer war was raging in Europe with the United States fighting against

Germany. The people of that community were sure that much of the Chautauqua program would be about the war; that they would hear bitter denunciations of the Germans and other things that they did not want to hear.

As it happened, I had found out at the last place I had been that the manager of the Chautauqua, one of the owners, Mr. Newton, was to be at a community nearby that week. So I found a telephone and called him to explain the situation and inquire what I should do under the circumstances. The answer he gave me was: "Go ahead! We will hold the programs as usual without local cooperation." So there was nothing to do except go ahead.

On inquiring at the bank, I found a man who was willing to assist me in securing a place to pitch the tent. He told me of a grassy area beside the local schoolhouse, where it had been planned to open a street, but as yet it had not been done. So at the city hall I secured permission to erect the tent there. A drayman was found and soon the tent and other materials were hauled to the site. As mentioned earlier, a man was sent by the company to be on hand and help me put up the tent. He had always come and taken charge of this task at each location. But when I went to the post office to inquire about mail, I found a communication from him telling me he would be unable to get to the town where I was. So there I was left to do it all by myself. I cannot remember if the platform manager came that day, but it seems to me he did not arrive until the next day.

Anyway, word had gotten around, and as the drayman was unloading, a few local boys showed up and were put to work. Later a few more came, so it was not long before the tent was up. I do not remember for sure, but it seems to me that we finished the job the next morning in time for the opening program in the afternoon. I went to the local bank and picked up the tickets, and on the first day and also on the second I sold a number of season tickets. But without any advance publicity and advertising, and since the word had gotten around that there would be no Chautauqua that summer, the number attending the programs was pitifully small. Also, for the same reason that Chautauqua was canceled, many who had attended other summers did not do so that year. I could not give

any exact figures, but there were less than a hundred, perhaps only three or four score attending the daily programs. So that was an unusual week.

It was an interesting, enjoyable, and educational summer. As mentioned earlier, I learned a great deal from the experiences. Many were in the nature of "first time in my life" experiences, as I was on my own for the first time and had to make many decisions in matters I had not encountered before. I look back upon that summer as a time of maturing, of growing up, as it gave me opportunities I had never had before and brought me in contact with a great many people and many helpful situations. I am glad that I could spend the summer when I was 17 as a property man for Chautauqua.

AUGUST 12-20, 1911

The Iowa City Chautauqua

STRONGEST PLATFORM TALENT



THE BIG TENT



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August 12



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August 12

Saturday, August 12

7:00 P. M. Harmon, Lecture: "Satan and St. Paul"

Sunday, August 13

7:00 P. M. Concert: English Opera Company

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "Edwin Wilson, Lanham"

8:00 P. M. Concert: English Opera Company

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "The Balance of the Budget"

Monday, August 14

7:00 P. M. Concert: English Opera Company

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "Saul, King of Israel"

8:00 P. M. Concert: English Opera Company

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "The Balance of the Budget"

Tuesday, August 15

7:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

8:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

Wednesday, August 16

7:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

8:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

Thursday, August 17

7:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

8:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

Friday, August 18

7:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

8:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

Saturday, August 19

7:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

8:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

Sunday, August 20

7:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

7:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"

8:00 P. M. Concert: "Star, Star, Quarter and the Star"

8:30 P. M. Lecture: "L. B. Welchman"



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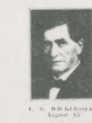
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A CORNER FOR MUSIC LOVERS

There is truly a great diversity of taste as to what kind of music will please the most people. We have here in this group, in this corner an assembly of artists whom we confidently offer as capable of winning the hearts of those who love music for its melody and also those who have an educated discrimination in things musical.



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LECTURES TO INSTRUCT AND ENTERTAIN

The names of Lou J. Beauchamp, Wick-ersham, Dr. S. M. Dick, Edwin Wilson Lanham, and Strickland W. Gillilan suggest to those acquainted with modern platform successes a veritable gamut of instructive entertainment and inspiration. They are all coming to bring their respective quotas to the Iowa City Chautauqua Program.



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August 12