

## The Washington Chautauqua

An advertisement in a Washington newspaper of June 24, 1903, announced in large type: "Grand Opening of Washington Chautauqua, Tuesday, June 30. Opening Exercises at 9 a.m. At 2 p.m. Hear the Matchless Orator, W. J. Bryan." Season tickets for the "Ten Days' Feast" were \$1.50 and \$2.00. Thus was heralded the opening of the first Chautauqua held at Washington, Iowa.

There were seventy-two tents in beautiful Townsley Park, including the assembly tents and the family tents. Ten organizations, including several churches, the Reading Circle, the Cooking Club, and Parsons College, had tents on the grounds. The camping sites were laid out in streets, with tennis and croquet courts and ample playgrounds for the children. A central telephone system, a 200-foot well that furnished cool water which the physicians declared "absolutely pure", rest rooms, a sanitation system, a dining tent where meals could be purchased for 25 cents, and hitching grounds were conveniences which were enjoyed the first season or added during the early years. Amphitheatre seats in the auditorium, ac-

ording to a newspaper comment, "were made of *hard* pine. They should be soft pine." After one or two experiences those attending the meetings brought cushions, which "saved on arnica".

For those who wished to camp on the grounds, a 14 x 16 foot wall tent could be rented at the price of \$5.00 for the season. Single cots were 50 cents each, pillows 25 cents, and double blankets 50 cents per pair for the season. It was estimated that the entire cost for a party of six who wished to stay on the grounds during the entire Chautauqua season would be \$43.30. This included meals and the season tickets. The park was patrolled day and night and the authorities promised "nothing but the best of order and conduct on the grounds."

Both the Rock Island and the Burlington railways attached extra coaches to accommodate the crowds, and a special rate for the round trip was granted throughout the season. A hack line starting at the Eichelberger Grocery carried patrons to the grounds for five cents each.

The opening day of this first Chautauqua, June 30, 1903, was "Bryan Day". In addition to the season tickets, 1783 single admissions were sold. At 2:00 P.M., every seat in the tent was occupied, the aisles were filled, and standing room at the entrances and about the speaker's platform

was at a premium. William Jennings Bryan spoke for seventy-five minutes on "Ideals", stressing the need of ideals in individual, domestic, business, and professional life. According to the comment of a Republican editor, "Bryan told how much money a man shouldn't have, but was somewhat surprised that his share of the gate money usufruct was under \$250. Still an average of \$200 a day tends to draw, one by one, the teeth from the jaw of the wolf that howls at the door."

The "big" day, however, was July 4th when 3702 single admissions were sold. The orator of the day was General John C. Black, who spoke on "American Imperialism". Not even one-third of the people on the grounds could get into the tent to hear General Black. The speakers for this initial Chautauqua included two other famous lecturers — Richard P. Hobson who drew 1965 single ticket purchasers but failed to kiss any of the ladies, and "Sam" Jones who was criticized for vulgarity. All the "Big Four" were Democrats.

The program included sermons, lectures, music, Bible lessons, and a cooking school. It was, as one newspaper reported it, "a blending of camp meeting, camping, instruction, entertainment, amusement". S. D. Gordon who gave the Bible lessons was described in one newspaper as "the

best talent on the ground. . . . Cut out, next year, whom you please, but bring Gordon back, and give him a better hour." Mothers could not always attend the nine o'clock Bible study meetings. Reverend Dr. J. M. Buckley, editor of the *Christian Advocate*, was characterized as the "Teddy Roosevelt of Methodism".

Six women were on the program. Among them was Jane Addams who had "a sad, interesting face, sort o' Madonna-ish, as if saddened by the woe she seeks to relieve." Miss S. W. Landes ran the cooking school and "captured the house wives, all eager to learn how to cook for the beast at home". Eva Shontz, a temperance advocate, was too critical. According to one editor, she "did all the scolding. Cut her out next time."

The first Washington Chautauqua closed on July 10th. The finance committee reported that although the receipts did not cover the expenses, the shortage was not much over a dollar a share on 300 shares. Lack of profits the first year did not discourage the board, and the Washington Chautauqua continued season after season for more than a quarter of a century, bringing to the citizens of the county high class entertainment and enjoyable vacations.

Their Chautauqua, the citizens of Washington and Washington County insisted, was not just

another Chautauqua. Katherine Buxbaum, writing in *The Prairie Schooner Magazine* some years ago, declared: "It was different. For one thing, it was what was known as an Independent. The talent was mostly hand-picked, and the picking was good in those days."

This statement appears conservative as one examines the list of outstanding speakers and entertainers brought in by the directors of the local Chautauqua. The second year, Chautauqua ticket holders heard a debate between Champ Clark and C. H. Grosvenor. Other political leaders followed in later years, among whom were Robert LaFollette, Benj. R. ("Pitchfork") Tillman, James E. Watson, and blind Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma.

Preachers, reformers, and professors were not overlooked. Samuel P. Jones, Billy Sunday, and Gypsy Smith, as well as Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes, Charles R. Brown, S. Parkes Cadman, and Newell D. Hillis, edified and inspired their audiences. Professor W. C. Wilcox from the History Department of the State University of Iowa appeared annually for ten years to present his popular history lectures. He was described as "clear, candid, eloquent." Carrie Nation, Judge Marcus Kavanagh, Edward A. Steiner, Ruth Bryan Owen, and Lorado Taft gave variety to

the programs. To balance the heavy intellectual diet offered by these famous speakers, Strickland W. Gillilan, "a real-for-sure humorist", appeared on the program four seasons. Musical organizations such as the Columbus Junction Band, the Tyroleans, and the Dixie Jubilee Singers entertained from year to year.

There were several reasons for the success of the Washington Chautauqua. Howard A. Burrell, in his *History of Washington County, Iowa*, wrote of it in these words: "And for this source of profitable pleasure, Washington is most largely indebted to the good offices of Alex R. Miller, editor of the Democrat." Mr. Miller served as the secretary of the Chautauqua from the time of its organization on October 7, 1902, through 1926. He was familiar with Chautauqua work from the inside; for several years he lectured under the Redpath-Vawter management.

Another reason for the success of the enterprise can be found in the nature of the Chautauqua site. Townsley Park, a tract of several acres of timber land along the Sigourney Road, just outside the corporation limits of Washington, was a beautiful, restful place where all could get "the benefits of camp life with scarcely any of the trouble which is generally necessary to go camping."

Best of all, the annual Chautauqua satisfied a

real need in the social life of the community. It furnished the "annual outing festivals" which the county fair earlier had provided. Now, said one writer, "instead of looking at the crazy bed-quilt of 1976 pieces, as it was annually produced for inspection, we look at Sam Jones, who is much more picturesque. In lieu of the mastodon pumpkin, we hear Hobson. . . . Lectures on art, and the Bible lessons are pleasing substitutes for the agricultural hoss trot. There is now more variety. People tired of the fair. It was so tame it went extinct, and just in the nick of time the Chautauqua came to fill the gap."

Judging from the record attendances at the early Washington Chautauquas, the public must have agreed with Howard A. Burrell, who said: "This is one of the jolliest things yet invented. For ten days each year in August, we hark back to nature, and tent in a grove, do house work at an amusing disadvantage, learn the virtue of a garbage barrel, dispense with private bath, grab a cushion or two and a rocking chair and rush to a big tent and start a fan in a crush of sweating humanity, and listen to things grave or gay, to music, to jokes with chin whiskers more or less gray."

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