

Hazel Cass and Tent Theater • Chautauqua in Clarinda • Television

The PALIMPSEST

Volume 75, Number 4

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

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Chautauque Auditorium, Clarinda, Iowa



Inside—

COURTESY LANDIS K. MAGNUSON

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of the

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Quarterly Bulletin of the Clarinda Community Club.

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Clarinda, Iowa, July, 1921

Number 2.

THE CALL



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TO CHAUTAUQUA

Heralding the annual Chautauqua, the July 1921 *Clarinda Magazine* previews the upcoming "Notable Speakers, Splendid Music and Clever Entertainment." This *Palimpsest* looks at Iowans' twentieth-century entertainment—from Chautauqua, to tent shows, to television.



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest (*PAL/imp/est*) was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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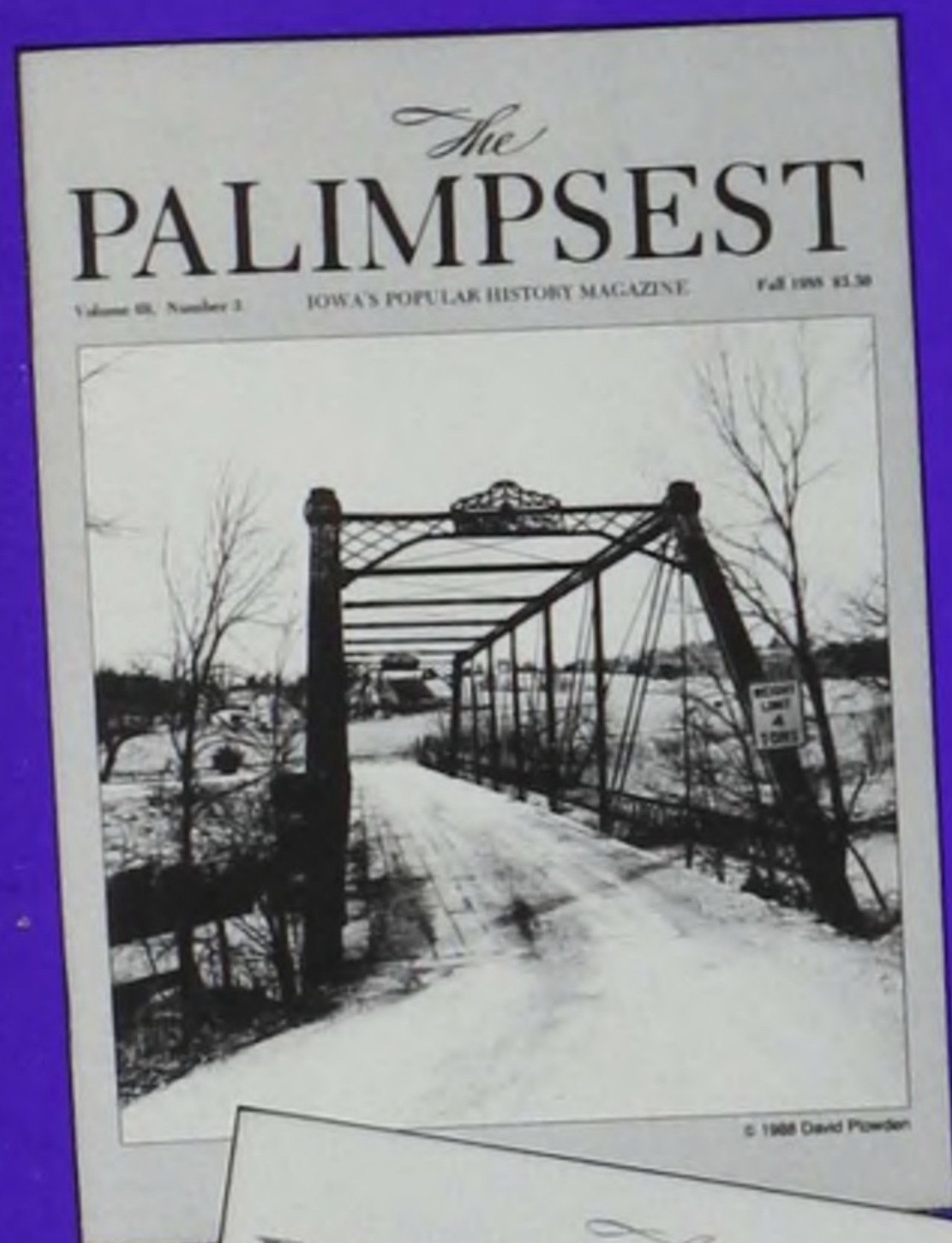
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The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Malie Swaim, Editor

NUMBER 4

WINTER 1994

**"to 1950s Culture": Accounts
of Television in Our Readers' Households**
Malie Swaim

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...mpsests in Day-to-Day Living
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of the
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TO CHAUTAUQUA

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The history of Iowa which holds the record deciphers these records and tell the stories which who write history.

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Cover: Performers such as Harry Davies (here as *Carmen's* Don José) brought opera and theater to Clarinda, Iowa, and its enormous Chautauqua auditorium (see postcard). For thirty-five years, Clarinda hosted annual Chautauquas. Cover photographed by Don Roberts, University of Iowa Audiovisual Center. Postcard and booster ribbon (on back) courtesy Nodaway Valley Historical Society, Clarinda; Davies photo courtesy Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries; shawl and hat (from recent production of *Carmen*) courtesy of University of Iowa Opera Production Unit, Costume Shop.

The PALIMPSEST

IOWA'S POPULAR HISTORY MAGAZINE

Ginalie Swaim, Editor

VOLUME 75, NUMBER 4

WINTER 1994

- 150 **"Our Ticket to 1950s Culture": Accounts of Early Television in Our Readers' Households**
by Ginalie Swaim

One fellow fiddled incessantly with the TV knobs. A woman threw balls of yarn at Milton Berle. A youngster watched test patterns for a quarter of an hour. What do we remember about early TV? Plenty!

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by Landis K. Magnuson

For thirty-five years, citizens in Clarinda, Iowa, sought education and entertainment from their annual Chautauqua assemblies. And for several of those years, dramas, comedies, and operas took center stage.

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by Michael Kramme

With red hair and rhinestone swagger stick, Iowan Hazel Cass brought midwesterners her style of entertainment—tent theater.

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'Our ticket to 1950s culture'

Accounts of early television
in our readers' households



by Ginalie Swaim, editor

The summer issue of *The Palimpsest* asked our readers to "help us write history" by sending in accounts of early television in the 1950s and 1960s. We're delighted to announce that to date we have received twenty-six responses. Although we wish we could print each in its entirety, we present here excerpts of all of these candid (and often witty) looks at television's arrival in the American household. The complete responses will be housed in the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa, where researchers can tap into them as they begin to document television history from the viewers' perspective.

One might ask: Does it matter why we bought a TV, where we placed it in our home, or who came over to watch it with us? Yes, it matters, because it provides insights and perspective on how American families in the Fifties and Sixties spent leisure time, arranged households, negotiated family issues, defined neighborhood, and adapted to new technologies. With something as pervasive as television today, it is useful half a century later to step back and consider American life pre-TV.

In the February 1994 *Vanity Fair*, Kevin Sessums writes about television today: "We treat it with intimacy. It is the third spouse." According to our readers, did the television become a member of the family? Here's what you told us.

We asked: Did your household own a TV in the 1950s and 1960s? In what year was it purchased? What brand, size, and description? What prompted the decision to buy, or not buy, a TV?

Many of our writers have a crystal clear memory of their first television set. For instance, Virginia Becker recalls that her husband, Robert, bought a set for Christmas in 1953 for their rural Plainfield farm family. "That Motorola TV cost \$430 plus tax of \$8.60."

Edwin Lowenberg also has precise details: "By the time I left Collins [Radio Company in Cedar Rapids], many of my co-workers had early TV sets and used to talk about programs and unusual events which then occurred on live TV. . . . I bought [my] first TV through one of the dealers on December 1, 1950. It

Loretta Young's Swirling Skirt

From Joy Neal Kidney and Doris Wilson Neal:

"We remember George Gobel's, 'Well, I'll be a dirty bird'; the McGuire Sisters singing 'Sincerely'; Betty Furness stating, 'You can be sure if it's Westinghouse'; Loretta Young's swirling skirt;

Tennessee Ernie Ford singing 'Sixteen Tons' and saying, 'Bless your little peapicking heart'; the excitement of *The Millionaire*; the haunting theme of Adam Troy's *Adventures in Paradise*; the 20-Mule Team Borax ads for *Death Valley Days*; and Bishop Sheen's blackboard being erased for him by 'an angel.'"

was a 17-inch Sylvania console. With my discount it cost \$253 including a one-year warranty that also included the picture tube. This was about one year before Sylvania came out with the 'halo light.'"

George W. Hinshaw, who was in law school in 1949/50, writes that his father purchased a 14-inch Admiral. "My dad was a state employee and they were purchasing a number of TV sets at a 'bargain price.' He was prompted to buy the television set because of the opportunity to watch sports events. We lived at that time in Marshalltown in the Iowa Veterans Home."

Joy Neal Kidney and her mother, Doris Wilson Neal, sent in their joint memories of early TV: "We were one of the last in our extended family and in our rural neighborhood to get a television. The neighbors' sturdy white farmhouses along Old Creamery Road in Madison County's Penn Township south of Dexter had sprouted antennas on their roofs. [My father] Warren Neal farmed and [my mother] Doris was busy with farm housewife chores and they were content with radio (WHO and KMA). But their daughters, Gloria and I, in grade school at Dexter, felt left out when the kids at school talked about things they'd seen on TV and we knew nothing about." Kidney continues, "But about 1954, [my parents] talked over their daughters' dilemma and decided to surprise us with a TV set. They drove to Ernie's in Earlham and picked out a 24-inch RCA television in a blond mahogany console. It was delivered while we were at school but we knew about the surprise as soon as we got off the bus. The sun glinted off the antenna on our roof. We ran up the steps to the porch and burst in the house wanting to see our ticket to 1950s culture, and to being 'in' at school."

We asked: Did people in your household watch television alone? With other household members? With other adults or children from outside your household?

Marlene Metzgar (then of Knoxville) answers: "Other household members. Interaction with neighbors was not as 'free' [or] 'acceptable' in the mid-50s."

Esther Charlotte Smith, who lived in Swea

Watching Grandparents' Sets

From Marvin Bergman:

"My family was probably the last on our block to purchase a TV. . . . The absence of a TV in our home [in a rural town in northwestern Ohio] in the late 1950s and early '60s does not mean the absence of TV-related memories for those years. Most of those memories are related to visits to my grandparents, both sets of whom had television sets. Among my most vivid preschool memories are of scrunching in front of my maternal grandparents' TV for hours on solitary visits, watching *Captain Kangaroo* and *Romper Room*. . . .

"My mother's parents lived 7 1/2 miles away, while my dad's parents lived a block away. We visited the latter every Sunday evening until my grandma died when I was six. The visit was timed so we could watch *Ed Sullivan*, though I remember more distinctly the box of cars and trucks at the end of the long hall in their house. . . .

"Once we got our own TV [about 1966], we stayed home on Saturday evenings so the whole family could watch *Lawrence Welk* (yes, even the kids) and *Hollywood Palace*, a variety show. We also watched Andy Williams's show as a family during the years it was on. Otherwise we watched singly or in pairs or threes. Despite my parents' fears that TV was a waste of time, they did not establish rigid rules about how much TV we could watch. The TV was in the basement, so it would not interfere with visiting. . . . The only rule was that we could not simply decide to watch TV; we had to choose a show intentionally that appealed to our tastes. . . .

"Gradually, even those rules loosened up, and as usual my younger sister reaped the benefits. The photograph of the boy sitting behind the TV tray [Summer Palimpsest, page 63] reminded me that my sister would get home from school, grab a large bag of potato chips, go downstairs, turn on one of the old movies (with Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, or Bob Hope), and eat a whole bag of chips while she watched. The rest of us would yell at her the next time we wanted a snack."

City, seems to agree: "We watched TV alone and together, but seldom with outsiders."

John A. Harnagel recalls that his Des Moines household normally "watched television as a family. Sometimes the dog was in the act but he would usually stand and stare, thus cutting out our view of the screen. We also watched with friends and relatives, though most of them had televisions, too."

Eleanor Otto of Storm Lake writes: "Our family did not watch TV too much at first as the pictures were not always very good. When Dad came home in the evening he would always turn on the TV just to see if there were any programs on that could be seen."

We asked: In what room did you place your first TV? Was furniture rearranged or moved out of the room to accommodate the TV set? Did you later move your first TV, or other sets, to other rooms? What rooms?

Betty and Henry Ankeny, who purchased their blond console in Atlantic, tell us, "We placed it in our living room, but it had casters on it so we could turn it around into the din-

ing room and watch during mealtime."

The Harnagel family kept their set in the living room, but moved it from one corner in the summer to another in the winter, "based on the location of the furnace thermostat." Harnagel recalls "the backs of TV sets being quite warm."

According to Joy Neal Kidney and her mother, Doris Wilson Neal, "Our TV was first in the dining room because the living room wasn't used during the winter. The rest of the year it was moved to the living room and eventually stayed there when we used an oil-burning stove in there." When the family built a new farmhouse in 1964, they designed it "with an area for the TV where it could be turned to be seen from the living, dining, or family room."

Eleanor Otto remembers "that we put it in the corner so that more of the family could watch it together."

Mildred F. Steele was "bedfast, due to a difficult pregnancy" when she and her husband, a clergyman, received a used Admiral TV as a gift from their parishioners in Stratford.

"Privileged Character" Picks Shows

From Margaret Hedges:

"It was peer pressure that produced our first TV in 1956: Day after day our five children, aged seven to seventeen, came home from their various schools saying, 'We've got to have a TV, Mom (Dad), because that's all the kids talk about at school. We can't talk with them; we're outsiders. We've got to have a TV.'"

"So in late fall a plan of action was made: It had been a miserable, cold, rainy fall in the Iowa farm county where we struggled to raise our family on a 'family farm' (1940s terminology) of 180 acres, about 60 acres of it in corn. The two-row picker had knocked over more wet, crumpled stalks than it had picked. So my husband, who was inventive when it came to chores for the children, told them that if they hand-picked the corn lying on the ground in those cold, sodden fields, they could have the money it brought for a TV set. That's all it took—the

magic words TV sent them out everyday after school for nearly two weeks, and, sure enough, there was enough money for a Sears TV set and a revolving stand to put it on.

"In our cramped six-room farmhouse, it stood in a place of honor in the living room, visible from almost every part of the room. A plan for choosing programs was devised by the children: There were seven of us and seven days in the week, so one night a week each person could be what they called 'privileged character' (PC) and choose the programs from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. They assigned Sat. night to Mom, who didn't much care what she watched, and Sun. night to Dad, who was busy most other nights. Also, the children made elaborate arrangements for trading nights with each other, and a lot of bargaining went on among them, but whoever was PC made the final decision on his night, and they settled it all among themselves.

"The TV was in our bedroom, since that was where I spent my time, of necessity. The television was placed on top of a chest of drawers. Later, after we moved, we continued to keep our TV in the bedroom, because we didn't want it to dominate living room conversations."

Miriam Baker Nye (who lived in Merville, Woodbury County) tells us, "In 1963 we added a 16x26 room to the farmhouse, and promptly christened it 'The View Room.' There we saw a beautiful view from our picture window, viewed TV, and expressed views. Since we ate at our dining table in this large room, it was our habit to watch the news as we ate."

We asked: Do you remember concerns or cautions about watching TV? What member(s) of the household decided what shows would be watched?

Several readers echo the warning that

James M. Otto recalls: "I can remember my parents advising us not to sit too close to the TV because it would hurt our eyes. Also, we always had to have a light on in the room for the same reason." Joy Neal Kidney remembers that "instructions cautioned us to stay ten to twelve feet from the TV." Kathy Waldo-Gilbert (raised in Eldora) remembers her parents' fears about blindness and radioactivity.

Most respondents indicated that no one in particular had this power (today this might be decided by who holds the remote control). Mildred R. Steele writes, "There were so few channels at first that there was little cause for friction."

John A. Harnagel recounts, "Our father forbade us to touch anything on the TV set except the On/Volume knob and the channel knob. Dad fiddled with the other knobs and that big thing sticking out of the back that had something to do with the pic-



"Dad worked a full-time job in addition to farming, and [I] had gone back to school to renew a teaching certificate, so the children watched what they chose with only one restriction—nothing with bad language (four-letter words, etc.), and that was an absolute. As I remember, they watched a lot of cartoons, *Road Runner* comes to mind; there were some nature shows; just a few sitcoms; the popular comedians, especially Red Skelton, Jack Benny, and The Three Stooges. And we all watched the classic movies like *White Christmas* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Occasionally, the children would be watching a World War II movie (with the sound turned way down so Mom and Dad wouldn't notice). And always we tuned in on local ball games if they were available.

"Definitely, TV in our family was recreational, and it always came after farm chores and homework were done, and done right. We never ate in front of the TV except for the occasional bowl of popcorn. Snacking and soft drinks were not

part of our life style, not even for teenagers. News for all of us came from the daily newspaper and from little radios in kitchen, barn, and workrooms. I can't even remember evening news, as such, on TV. It was entertainment and relaxation that pleased the children and gave them things to talk about with their friends. Actually, there were many evenings when they were busy with ball games, band practice, 4-H projects, regular chores, playing with friends, and it was only the youngest boy who watched very consistently.

"Family group watching on holidays was a real pleasure. We had the New Year's parade, Valentine specials, a July 4th spectacular, Halloween shows, Macy's parade at Thanksgiving, and all the various musical and other shows at Christmas. Oh, yes, we always watched the Rose Bowl games; Iowa went twice in the 1960s, I believe, and one son was there with the marching band."

ture tube. He would turn something and then walk across the room, look at the set, and then walk back and turn something else. We kids would laugh to ourselves. Our mother would become so frustrated with him that she would sometimes find something else to do during those times. What we watched was up to us during the daytime unless our mother wanted to watch something special. At night, our father determined what we watched. My mother's nemesis was Milton Berle. She would throw balls of yarn at the TV set when his show was on. She also threw things at Floppy when I was watching that show. I don't know whether I watched Floppy to enjoy his show or Mother's show!"



We asked: How did TV affect other leisure pastimes in your household? Did it replace certain activities?

Mildred Steele quips, "What leisure?"

Betty and Henry Ankeny note, "It did replace the old radio shows, and playing of family games." Kathy Waldo-Gilbert remembers

"less family discussion." George Hinshaw says, "I suspect that my father read fewer books because of the sporting events on TV." Olga Lutz (from Andrew, Iowa) recalls "less attention" to reading, games, and hobbies, although Miriam Baker Nye remembers TV as "an occasional pleasure," and that table games and reading books aloud continued.

John Harnagel writes: "We listened less to the radio once we had a television set. However, I was very fond of *Our Miss Brooks* and would sit in the kitchen and listen to it while the TV was blaring in the living room. Television was, in our family, an additional leisure pastime. It replaced nothing. It was simply added."

Eleanor Otto relates: "In our local paper (the *Pilot Tribune*) there used to be a section entitled 'Personal and Social News.' Many people wrote to that paper and told of their social events. Most always they said the evening was spent watching television. I think

Crowded KDPS

From John van der Linden:

"The first TV I saw, and many other people in Northwood, was at Doug and Florence Pangburn's gas station and sandwich shop on Highway 65. . . . Doug got a small TV and put it on a high shelf, and changed the name of his business to 'Doug's TV Grill.' Most everybody in town went up there sometime for a bit of lunch or supper and to watch the TV.

"...We used to drive around town and count the number of antennas sprouting from residential roofs, and we'd say, 'Well, so-and-so has succumbed and got TV now.'

"And finally about 1958...we also succumbed and bought an RCA set. . . . We moved to Sibley in 1960 and traded out for advertising in the *Sibley Gazette* [for which I was the editor] with

the local Gambles store a handsome Admiral 'home entertainment center' in a beautiful long maple cabinet, TV in the center, radio on one side, and LP record player on the other. It stretched clear across the room, it seemed!

"In 1967 the Iowa legislature voted to support an educational TV program in the state and created the 'State Educational Radio and Television Facility Board.' In September that year the board was created and I was appointed one of three 'public' members of the nine-member board by Governor Harold Hughes. (Three members were named by the Board of Regents and three by the State Board of Public Instruction.) . . . We bought KDPS from the Des Moines Public Schools. It was a tiny operation, crowded into a couple of rooms at Des Moines Tech High (the one-time Ford Assembly plant)."

that this was more of a prestige item. They were just showing the rest of the community that they had a TV set."

We asked: What was the reaction of children in your household to TV?

"They loved it!" Kathy Waldo-Gilbert says simply. "Couldn't watch too much!"

"It was exciting and puzzling to watch the set," John Harnagel notes. "I often wondered about the waves that sent pictures to our antenna in the attic (the attic because our father thought they were ugly on top of houses—a good reason I guess, for a man who did not like heights and would not have wanted to install one three stories up) and then to our TV in the living room. I was further puzzled when, while I was sick at home, Miss Frances of *Ding Dong School* inevitably and daily asked us how we were and I would say I was sick again and she would say, 'Well, that's nice.'"

Verl L. Lekwa (Columbus Junction) writes, "I first saw television in a man's front yard. WOC in Davenport had just gone on the air and our local radio repairman purchased a set from a hardware store. The antenna was in place when we boys came past, walking

home from school. The proud owner asked the installer if the picture would get fuzzy when the weather got bad, as AM radio crackled during storms. He was assured it wouldn't. Will the antenna attract lightning? He was assured it wouldn't.

"The antenna was wired to the set," Lekwa continues, "a drop cord gave it power, and we watched . . . test pattern. We stared at the screen for a quarter hour. There was no sound. Satisfied that it worked, the owner had moved inside. We boys went home, not convinced that television had much of a future."

We asked: What were the parental attitudes towards children's viewing habits?

"I was in high school when we got our first TV but watching TV became a reward for finishing homework [and] housework," writes Marlene Metzgar of her Knoxville household. She notes that television was allowed only after work was completed.

Virginia Becker, who recalls that their family appreciated "*Captain Kangaroo* for the children and Leonard Bernstein's explanations about music," writes that "watching television was limited to good programs, and chores

Cooking for the Camera

From Mary K. Riley:

"I worked in the Home Service Department of a utility company (then called Oklahoma Natural Gas Co.) from 1946 to 1952. It was about 1949 when the first TV station came to Tulsa. We were asked to put on a half-hour cooking program. It was called *Lookin' at Cookin'*—and they put a kitchen set up at the TV station.

"We did everything, from scrubbing floors to sending out recipe sheets to viewers. The girls practiced for the show at our office and then everything had to be cooked and carried several blocks to the TV studio. . . . Usually we timed the girls through the program once—then we had to add or cut depending on time. They also had to do the commercials as well as cook. It wasn't easy.

"No one had any experience because TV was so new. They had to learn how to talk and work at the same time and not move too fast or talk too fast and keep your head up—what to wear and not to wear—busy designs, etc. There were all sorts of rumors that TV made you look fat, that food had to be tinted blue to make it look white, etc. One girl would always have a case of nerves—she was tall and would break out in giant hives as soon as the cameras started rolling. So they had to avoid all close-ups. . . . [Another girl] was from Minnesota and when she first started, the southerners had difficulty understanding her because she talked so much faster than they were accustomed to and they'd call the studio and tell her to slow down.

"The weatherman existed on the food that was cooked on the program."

had to be finished first."

Verle Reinicke (who lived in Grundy Center) relates, "We were not allowed to watch *The Big Story* . . . with Patrick McVey. It was considered too violent, I think. Also there was bedtime for us, 9 p.m. later on. But I remember sometimes sneaking back downstairs to watch it through the keyhole in the hallway door."

Joy Neal Kidney says, "Because of the mainly wholesome programs, our watching wasn't restricted. We were in band and vocal, 4-H, youth choir, and had to spend time practicing the piano. Little was said about watching TV since we were on the honor roll at school."

We asked: In what ways did TV or its programs in the 1950s and 1960s influence children's leisure or what toys they played with in your household?

Kathy Waldo-Gilbert thinks TV affected children's leisure "tremendously," noting Mattel toys, GI Joes, and breakfast foods. Betty and Henry Ankeny relate that their children "wanted all the toys they saw adver-

tised, but of course, they didn't get all."

"I continually had an overwhelming urge to have Welch's grape juice, thanks to *Howdy Doody*," John Harnagel confesses. "Sometimes the neighborhood kids would assume roles from TV programs and act them out—Roy Rogers was a favorite." He recalls a Hopalong

Cassidy belt and holster as a gift, and a "plastic screen and erasable crayons to help a character named 'Winky Dink' in his adventures."

George William McDaniel grew up in Washington, Iowa. He comments, "I was eight years old when we got television so it is correct to say I grew up with it. It is difficult, however, to know the precise impact it had on my life. I liked news programs, documentaries and Walter Cronkite's *You Are There*. Did that influence my decision to

become a historian? Possibly. Did television become my sole source of entertainment? No. I remember great neighborhood games and adventures. And before we had sandwiches in the living room on Sunday evenings



Television Versus Clothes Drier

From Kenneth L. McFate:

"As an early 1950s Iowa State Extension Service agricultural engineer, I was 'performing' on WOI-TV long before our young family owned a television set. At that time, a majority of Iowa farm homes had no running water, which meant hours and hours of time-consuming housewife drudgery, especially on washday.

"With the help of WOI-TV Farm Director Creighton Knau, our agricultural engineering-home economics team was using this new educational tool to help Iowa farm families better understand how a pressure water system would allow use of an electric water heater, clothes

washer, and clothes drier, each of which could reduce drudgery and help the rural family live more like their city cousins.

"By 1955, our family (myself, my wife, and two children under three years of age) was one of the few in the ISU Ag Engineering Department without a television set. And one day, with a good offer and a snap judgment, I set out to change that. So, when I returned from an educational meeting near Waterloo, I proudly uncrated my newly purchased TV and 'presented' it to my wife. Having just finished a full, hard day of washing clothes, hanging on and removing from the line, folding, ironing, etc., when she saw the new TV set, her first and immediate comment was, 'I wish you had bought me something that would save my time instead of something that expends it.'

I probably had gone to the movies. Did television make us prisoners of our living rooms? No. I remember pleasant evenings with neighbors in the front yard."

For Joy Neal Kidney, "None of our toys were influenced by TV but *American Bandstand* taught us to dance." But for Miriam Baker Nye's son, television gave a nod to reading: "As a third grader [my son] Kent won the opportunity to appear on the *Book Bandwagon*, a program during which children discussed recommended books they had read."

An anonymous reader thinks viewers "spent more time inside," and "often bought what was advertised, within means." Virginia Wadsley (raised in Early, Iowa) recalls "practicing musical instruments" and doing "homework in front of TV." And Mildred Steele remembers the night her five-year-old ended his prayers with: "Amen. This has been a recording."

We asked: Did any household customs and habits develop around TV watching? At holidays or other special occasions?

Kathy Waldo-Gilbert "always watched Sunday night," and our anonymous reader "arranged other things to watch favorite shows."

For John Harnagel, eating crackers and cheese while "watching weekend afternoon TV" became a household custom. "Food in the living room," he adds. "What a treat."

"Watching *Wizard of Oz* became a tradition in our family," writes Mildred Steele. "Later as a university professor, I discovered that the film was the only thing that all my students could relate to, whenever I made a passing reference to it."

Verle Reinicke's mother and a "neighbor lady" always watched the girls' high school basketball tournament. Several readers recall special televised events, such as the Queen Elizabeth's coronation, Eisenhower's inauguration, and the Nixon-Kennedy debates. Such occasions didn't please all viewers; Joy Neal Kidney remembers the disappointment of coming home from school in 1954 "to find Mom watching the Army-McCarthy hearings. That meant our favorite after-school programs had been preempted."

We asked: Did your household purchase other furnishings or accessories to use with your TV, or devices to improve reception or enhance viewing?

"TV trays came into our lives in the 1960s," John Harnagel remarks. "That was it!"

"We purchased TV trays, as did most every-

"The TV set went back into the box without my even plugging it into an outlet. Later that evening, I telephoned one of my ag engineering associates who I thought might be interested in joining the TV-owner group. After all, I was planning to sell it to him at my good discounted price.

"Upon arrival at our home in Gilbert, Iowa, my fellow ag engineer, his family, and my family all gathered around for 'the great picture.' I plugged it in, turned it on, and the screen lit up—for all of ninety seconds when the picture tube blew up.

"With my wife's remarks cast in my mind, within days I arranged with a Des Moines appliance wholesaler to trade that TV for an electric clothes drier. And my wife lived happily ever after—at least for the thirty-year life of that drier, and as used in three different homes in two states.

"Our family had no TV set until 1956 when I moved to the University of Missouri in Columbia. While our family enjoyed the old family-oriented shows and the children's shows, that trouble-free drier outlasted our first three TV sets.

"There is a good deal of irony in this story. While I was using this new educational television medium to show and tell farm families how to reduce water-using and washday drudgery, it was my wife's denouncement of my TV purchase that led to [the] purchase and long-time use of her work-saving clothes drier. I must admit that her priorities were better than mine, especially at that point in the life of our family."

one we knew," writes Eleanor Otto. "People thought that they had to watch TV while they ate." In fact, she and her husband, Earl, sold them at their Storm Lake furniture store. "We sold TV trays at our store and sold lots and lots of these tray sets," she remembers. "These were metal trays with metal folding legs. Also many people had to have TV lamps. These would sit on top of the TV set and most of the time this was the only light that was used while the TV was on. We sold various TV lamps, such as glass blocks with artificial flowers in them and a light below. Some of these lamps had shades, others with partial shades, and some had revolving shades that went around by the heat of the bulb. TV lamps were a very popular item in our store for many years."

George McDaniel describes his neighbors' set: "The screen was round but you could turn a switch to make the image rectangular." George Hinshaw tells of his father "acquiring a wheel of some sort that was supposedly go-

ing to furnish color pictures by constant revolutions of the wheel, which consisted of red, green, and blue plastic inserted in lightweight cardboard." Verle Reinicke apparently has a "scanning disc" in his attic: "It's a big and cumbersome device and not so good looking, but it worked. It . . . goes over the front of the screen and spins, controlled by some electronics in a separate box that synchronizes it electronically so that a color picture results."

We asked: Did television affect housework—how, when, or where you did certain tasks?

Doris Wilson Neal "combined monotonous housework—shelling peas, snapping beans, ironing, folding clothes—with watching TV," and still does, according to her daughter Joy. "After supper she stacked the dishes to wash in the morning so she could watch the good evening programs with her family."

Miriam Baker Nye admits, "I can't say that

Freakish Atmospheric Conditions in Ames

From Irene Crippen:

Irene Crippen and her husband, Harold, were deeply involved in early television in central Iowa. Here she shares with us newspaper clippings and excerpts from her family records.

By 1945, Crippen Radio Service was "looking to the future," the *Ames Tribune* reported, and planning to "sell and service television and FM receivers when those services become available in this area."

"In April 1948," Irene writes, "General Electric Company in Des Moines telephoned Harold saying they had received a General Electric TV set. They didn't know what to do with it and asked Harold to come to Des Moines." Harold brought the set home to study it.

That June, according to the *Tribune*, "Ames had its first television reception last night because of an extremely freakish atmospheric condition that may not be repeated for weeks."

The article continued, "Two of the programs

[broadcast from Boston, New York, and another city] were commercial, one being sponsored by a cigarette company, the other by a tire company. The third program was a sports broadcast showing a diver in action from a high board.

"The programs were received at the Crippen home, 710 Carroll, where employees, relatives and neighbors gathered as quickly as word could be circulated that the television set was receiving clearly," the paper noted. "The set is a General Electric, 21-tube model 802."

Irene relates, "We had the set in our upstairs bedroom most of the time [the closest spot to the backyard antenna]. Some times ten to twenty neighbors and friends would be in the room watching the new miracle."

That summer the Crippens traveled to Canada, taking the set along so Harold could test reception at an earlier stop in St. Paul. "When crossing the border," Irene writes, "Harold told the customs officials that the object in the trunk of our

TV interfered with my teaching preparation, my housework, or my writing 'From the Kitchen Window' (a weekly homemaker column) for the *Sioux City Journal*, 1953-1981. Many programs I never saw in their entirety, but only in snatches as I went to and fro while others of the family were watching."

For Marlene Metzgar, television didn't interfere much with housework in her family's Knoxville home because "programming was very time limited in the 1950s in central Iowa." She adds, "The town we lived in was small and we had access to only one channel, which did not come on until 5:00 p.m."

Verle Reinicke tells us that he and his brother often arranged vacuuming and housecleaning duties "around certain programs. . . . Washing dishes was also often done on the fly or postponed briefly until a

certain dinner-hour program was over."

We asked: How did TV affect dining patterns? Cooking? Where and when people ate? Cleaning up? Snacking?



Betty and Henry Ankeny observe, "We snacked more at night." And John Harnagel writes, "All meals were eaten either in our breakfast room or the dining room, no exceptions."

For Mildred Steele, "TV had little effect on dining patterns at our house. Occasionally someone got excused from a meal if a particularly important program was on, but this was a rare occasion."

George McDaniel notes, "We rarely were allowed to eat in front of the television. The only exceptions I remember were during the World Series when my dad would eat dinner and watch the ball game. And on Sunday nights we would have a sandwich in

car was a television set. 'A what?' demanded the official in disbelief. He hadn't heard of the invention. We met the same response from the American officials when crossing the border at another city on our return."

Irene relates another TV episode that summer: The Crippens "traveled to Arlington, Wisconsin, to Harold's Grandmother Gundlach's funeral," Irene writes. "Milwaukee had a television station and Harold hoped to see what reception he could get. Television was hardly considered part of a German funeral. Harold's cousin, Robert Gundlach, had a room on the second floor of his home. Bob was interested as was Harold so they sneaked the set upstairs into a room to the back of the house—as it had a door out over a back porch and Harold could string a wire for his antenna on the roof. It was all supposed to be a secret. The evening of the funeral, the first political convention ever televised was of great interest to Harold. The large family had all gathered in Bob's home for food. Harold was certain senior members of the family would not appreciate or ap-

prove TV interest on the eve of the funeral.

"Secret, it was to be," she continues. "Harold and I went into the dark room and after a few minutes there on the small TV screen was the political convention from Philadelphia."

"In what we thought was an inconspicuous place, in an upstairs bedroom we saw the first televised convention. . . .

"One by one another person sneaked into the room. Soon the room was so full, we were afraid we would all fall into the kitchen. We had to get organized and take turns so everyone there could see the first television."

"The grandmother they buried that eventful day was born in Germany on November 16, 1855. She lived to be 92 years and 7 months. Even up to her last day, she cooked, she tended her big garden and she enjoyed life. I believe she would have approved the excitement of the TV event on the eve of her burial," Irene comments.

Harold Crippen helped found the Television Servicemen's Association of Iowa, and served as first state president in 1957.

the living room and watch *Lassie*."

Verle Reinicke mentions that a favorite show, *Captain Video*, "came on during the evening meal, and I can remember being frustrated that we had to eat at that time. I would watch around the corner from where I was sitting at the table, or I would get up and watch briefly and then return to the table."

Finally, in the Neal farmhouse, "when extra men came for noon dinner, the TV was turned on during the news and market reports, then turned off for conversation."

We asked: Did TV affect socializing—with others in your household, or with relatives or friends? In what ways?

"TV didn't affect our socializing very much," Eleanor Otto tells us. "We turned the set off if friends came as we couldn't watch TV and visit at the same time. This is one of the reasons that the TV was moved from the living room to the den—so that some members of the family could watch TV while the adults visited in the living room."

For John Harnagel, "socializing with friends and relatives was not affected by TV in our house. I think the doors on the Capehart [television set] helped—out of sight, out of mind. My young friends and I would often watch television after school together at one another's houses—usually the one with the best snacks."

Mildred Steele notes, "Occasionally we called on an individual who would let nothing interfere with the TV show she was watching. We thought this was odd."

For Joy Neal Kidney, this was part of family life: "We usually turned the TV off when someone came to visit, but if we visited Grandpa and Grandma Neal when their favorite game show was on, we'd have to watch it with them. At Grandma Wilson's, she and her mother hated to miss Art Linkletter's *House Party*, *Queen for a Day*, or the fifteen-minute 'soap operas' they watched mid-mornings."

We asked: Besides inside your home, where else do you remember watching early television?

Our anonymous reader says succinctly, "After we got our own, nowhere else." But Vir-

ginia Wadsley remembers watching TV in waiting rooms at stockyards, and Eleanor Otto of Storm Lake remembers watching the Rose Bowl parade in color at the local Cobblestone Ballroom and restaurant.

"My first view of a TV picture was [in] the spring of 1938," writes Edwin C. Lowenberg. "This was a demonstration using the old flying spot scanner in the Department of Electrical Engineering at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. There was an open house for the people who were taking the final tests in the Iowa Every Pupil Test Program." Lowenberg, who was from Donnellson, later enrolled in Electrical Engineering, was hired at Collins Radio in Cedar Rapids, and then was an electrical engineer at the university's Medical College. "The second time I saw a TV picture was walking with my older daughter down Market Street in Iowa City and looking in the window of a tavern," he writes. "A friend . . . from Collins came along and we talked about this new marvel."

Lowenberg, as well as D. L. "Lee" Wood, reminds us of the pioneering work of electrical engineering professor Edwin B. Kurtz in educational television and Station W9XK at the University of Iowa in the 1930s.

Genevieve Slemmons McLaughlin also had a connection to Kurtz: "His daughter, Jeanne Kurtz, was a friend of mine in high school at University High School [in Iowa City]," she writes, "and I will never forget seeing their television set in their home in the '30s. . . . My memory is that it was a large cabinet and a very small screen."

Joy Neal Kidney recalls an early TV at her sister's classmate's home: "We were invited in to admire the tiny nine- or ten-inch marvel." When she attended college in the mid 1960s, students "had radios in our rooms and some had stereos, but the only TV was in a room in the basement of the dorm."

Mildred Steele relates, "In 1949 (or 1948?) we were living in New England, and during the World Series, the city placed TV sets around the Boston Common so people could watch the game. During these years, we were occasionally invited to someone's house to watch *Perry Como* or *Jo Stafford* or *Ed Sullivan*, and there we would file in and sit in the dark

(people thought watching TV was like watching a movie) with little conversation. It was eerie. When we moved to [Stratford,] Iowa in 1951, a neighbor often invited me over to watch television while I did our baby daughter's diapers in her automatic washer. TV was such a status thing that some people who didn't yet have a TV allegedly installed a fake TV antenna on their roof—but I don't know of anyone who actually did this."

Steele adds yet another early TV-viewing location. "When our daughter was four, we drove to a funeral out of town. Soon we were seated in the funeral home, waiting for the service to begin, and the silence was heavy. At that point our daughter noticed a television set over in a far corner. She looked at her watch and whispered to me, 'Do you think they'd mind if I turned on *Howdy Doody*?'"

Finally, we asked: Who repaired your TV if it broke? Where was it repaired? When did you get a color TV? What prompted that decision?

For Verle Reinicke's family, repairs were convenient. "Within a year or two [after the family purchased our first television, my father] took a correspondence course from DeForrest Institute in Chicago and went into the radio/TV repair business." He had been an auto mechanic.

Esther Charlotte Smith tells us that the "repairman from the furniture store" that sold the set repaired it in her home. Her family



"got color TV about 1975—friends were buying, or already had bought, color sets."

Readers, thanks for "helping us write history." Your responses are important because they are detailed and candid first-hand accounts of domestic life at a pivotal point in mass consumerism and technological history. Housed in State Historical Society of Iowa archives, the complete surveys provide the raw material that historians can tap into when asking, "What was the impact of early television on American households?"

Several responses express appreciation for this personal opportunity to look at television historically and to share memories with other household members. As editor, I want to express my immense appreciation for the responses received. It's been great to hear from you, and as you can see from the photo below—I've been all ears. —The editor



COURTESY THE EDITOR

Television's influence on your editor's childhood is apparent in my headgear. While my brother Gary Bein obviously had work on his mind this summer day in the mid-1950s on our Scott County farm, perhaps I had other things on my mind, like: "Am I missing *The Mickey Mouse Club Show*?"



*Clarinda Seeks
“the Thrills
of Human Imitation”*

The Development of Theater
in an Iowa Chautauqua

by Landis K. Magnuson



SHSI (DES MOINES)

*The Chautauqua
Opens to day,
Down by the flowing river.*

*It's a big thing;
Hear'm talk and sing,
Regret it? Never! Never!*

Clarinda's open-air Chautauqua auditorium is packed on August 22, 1912, to hear orator William Jennings Bryan. Theatrical performances would also draw large audiences. Local attorney William Orr (white-bearded man in the front row, lower right) helped establish Chautauqua in Clarinda. (Photograph by J. Christensen of Clarinda.)

Citizens of Clarinda, Iowa, were greeted with this enthusiastic message on opening day, June 15, 1897, of its first Chautauqua. Beginning that year, Chautauqua assemblies in Clarinda would attract crowds for thirty-five years, making it one of the longest existing Chautauquas in Iowa. As elsewhere, the Clarinda Chautauqua clung to its original moral and educational tone. Yet a close look at the yearly programs and local newspaper cover-

age reveals a gradual introduction of theater into the Clarinda Chautauqua. Theatrical entertainment would eventually become the main form of presentations and provide the major financial support for the local assembly.

Yet in 1897, Chautauqua was still new to Clarinda—though not to Iowa (Clear Lake had had a Chautauqua since 1876) or to the nation. Founded in 1874 by John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller on the shores of



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What exactly was "Chautauqua"?

According to a 1913 Chautauqua brochure in Iowa City, "The Chautauqua is not a circus, although it is usually held in God's great auditorium, the open air. It is not a theatre, although it presents clean amusement features and elevating entertainment. It is not a summer lecture course, although men and women of national fame appear on its platform and deliver the highest type of inspiring addresses. It is not a camp-meeting, although its ethical, moral, and religious nature is everywhere evident. It is not a musical festival, yet it engages the best musical attractions at its sessions. It combines in the finest blending the attractions of the circus, the wit and wisdom of the stage, the religious zeal of the pulpit and the outdoor benediction of health, rest, and fellowship."

Chautauqua Lake, New York, the first Chautauqua was a gathering or assembly designed as a two-week educational encampment for the training of church school teachers. Although the founders first based "The Chautauqua Sunday-School Assembly" on devotional meetings, sermons, and illustrative exercises, eventually inspirational lectures and informational seminars on secular topics were added. Still, the name Chautauqua became steadfastly connected with morally correct and uplifting presentations of a cultural and informative nature.

Local promoters apparently felt it necessary to emphasize Chautauqua's lofty purposes to the townspeople in 1897. "The Chautauqua," they explained, "is for busy people who left school years ago and desire to pursue some systematic course of reading and study in History, Literature, Science, Art and Music." The article in the local *Clarinda Herald* continued, "It is the People's University. It leads to a broader culture and a higher

Wednesday, August 9. Grand Opening Day

- 1:30 p. m.—Form on the square.
- 1:45 p. m.—Parade starts for grounds, led by the 55th Infantry Band. Boys' Farm Camp and Girls' Home Camp, followed by citizens.
- 2:00 p. m.—Music, 55th Infantry Band.
- 2:30 p. m.—Opening of Assembly.
- 2:35 p. m.—Address of Welcome.
- 2:45 p. m.—Address, G. W. Bain.
- 7:30 p. m.—Music, 55th Infantry Band.
- 8:15 p. m.—D. W. Robertson, finest moving pictures ever shown in Clarinda.

Thursday, August 10. Children's Day.

- 9:30 a. m.—Music, Hruby Concert Co.
- 9:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Leon H. Vincent. "Hawthorne." This is the same subject that he used for the first lecture ever delivered at our Chautauqua.
- 10:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, T. H. McMichael, D. D.
- 1:45 p. m.—Concert, Hruby Brothers' Concert Co.
- 2:30 p. m.—Entertainment, Edmond Vance Cooke. "The Poet of Childhood."

- 4:30 p. m.—Round Table.
- 7:30 p. m.—Music, Hruby Concert Co.
- 8:15 p. m.—Entertainment, Robertson Projectoscope Co. par excellence.

Friday, August 11—Sunday Day

- 9:30 a. m.—Music, Hruby Concert Co.
- 9:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Leon H. Vincent. "Lowell, the Critic and Letter Writer."
- 10:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, T. H. McMichael, D. D.
- 1:45 p. m.—Music, Hruby Concert Co. and Miss Lynn.
- 2:30 p. m.—Address, W. A. Sunday, the world's greatest evangelist and cleanser of city civic life.
- 4:30 p. m.—Round Table.
- 7:30 p. m.—Concert, Hruby Concert Co.
- 8:30 p. m.—Grand closing entertainment D. W. Robertson and his great company "spectacular."

Saturday, August 12. Old Soldiers' Day.

- 9:30 a. m.—Music, Hrubys.
- 9:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Leon H. Vincent. "Emerson, a Personal Study."
- 10:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, T. H. McMichael, D. D.

standard of character. Non-sectarian—promoting fraternity and elevating the Home, the Church and the State.”

Whether the explanation was needed is uncertain, for Chautauquas had begun their phenomenal spread across the nation. The first to imitate the New York assemblies for Sunday School teachers were individual local assemblies that, in an attempt to claim separation from the original but also associate with its good name, came to be known as “independent” Chautauquas (also called permanent or community Chautauquas). Later, “circuit” Chautauquas, with packaged programming and coordinated scheduling for communities on an established circuit, would arise through booking agencies such as Redpath, Vawter, and others.

Since Clarinda represented an agricultural, economic, and population center in southwest Iowa, and could also provide the requisite pastoral—and therefore inspirational—setting, it was a logical site. J. L.

McBrien, reportedly a representative of the national movement, had first suggested that the town begin a Chautauqua. Correspondence between McBrien, local attorney William Orr, and county superintendent of schools H. W. Deater led to a meeting of civic leaders to discuss the idea. Although a \$3,000 guarantee was required up front, a committee of local ministers, eager to see this morally sound program offered to their community, raised the money before noon the following day. Such a quick and generous response (typical across the nation) obviously speaks highly of the reputation of the Chautauqua movement, and of the desire by community and business leaders to promote the

Programming in 1911 ranged from literary and Bible hours, to bands and motion pictures, to Billy Sunday (“world’s greatest evangelist and cleanser of city civic life”) and the Hiawatha Indian Company.

Tuesday, August 15.

American Day.

- 9:30 a. m.—Music, Lyric Glee Club.
- 9:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, Dr. McMichael
- 10:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Paul M. Pearson, Lecture Recital, “Riley.”
- 1:45 p. m.—Conc’t, Lyrics & Miss Lynn.
- 2:30 p. m.—Entertainment, Hiawatha Indian Co. This will teach you more about Indian life than you can learn in a year.
- 4:30 p. m.—Round Table.
- 7:30 p. m.—Concert, 55th Reg. Band.
- 8:15 p. m.—Hiawatha Play by the Ojibway Indians. Greatest spectacular production ever given.

Wednesday, August 16.

Women’s Day.

- 9:30 a. m.—Music, Lyrics.
- 9:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, Dr. McMichael
- 10:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Paul Pearson, “Edgar Allan Poe.”
- 1:45 p. m.—Concert, Lyrics.
- 2:30 p. m.—Isabel Garghill Beecher, America’s greatest woman.
- 4:30 p. m.—Round Table.
- 7:30 p. m.—Concert, Lyrics and Victoria Lynn.
- 8:15 p. m.—Illustrated Lecture, Frank R. Roberson, the peerless lecturer and traveler.

Thursday, Aug. 17—Stuart’s Day

- 9:30 a. m.—Reading, Victoria Lynn.
- 9:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, Dr. McMichael
- 10:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Paul M. Pearson, “Chanticleer.”
- 1:45 p. m.—Concert, Williams’ Jubilee Singers, America’s greatest colored concert company.
- 2:30 p. m.—Address, George R. Stuart. If you miss this address you will regret it all your life.
- 4:30 p. m.—Round Table.
- 7:30 p. m.—Music, 55th Infantry Band.
- 8:00 p. m.—Music, Williams’ Jub. Sing.
- 8:15 p. m.—Ill. Lecture, F. R. Roberson with the finest pictures ever shown by any lecturer.

Friday, Aug. 18—Labor Day

- 9:30 a. m.—Reading, Miss Lynn.
- 9:45 a. m.—Bible Hour, Dr. McMichael
- 10:45 a. m.—Literary Hour, Paul M. Pearson, “The Piper.”
- 1:45 p. m.—Williams’ Jubilee Singers.
- 2:30 p. m.—Address, Hon. John Mitchell, Vice-Pres. of the American Federation of Labor.
- 4:30 p. m.—Round Table.
- 7:30 p. m.—Concert, 55th Ia. Reg. Band
- 8:15 p. m.—Grand closing concert, Williams’ Jubilee Singers, Miss Lynn and others.

civic good and boost the local economy.

Once a community had agreed to develop a Chautauqua assembly, the next step was to find the speakers and performers—the “talent”—to fill the daytime and evening programs. Various booking agencies would send talent to the numerous assemblies, often arranging it so that an individual or group would perform a day or two in one town, then travel to the next town staging an assembly, and so on.

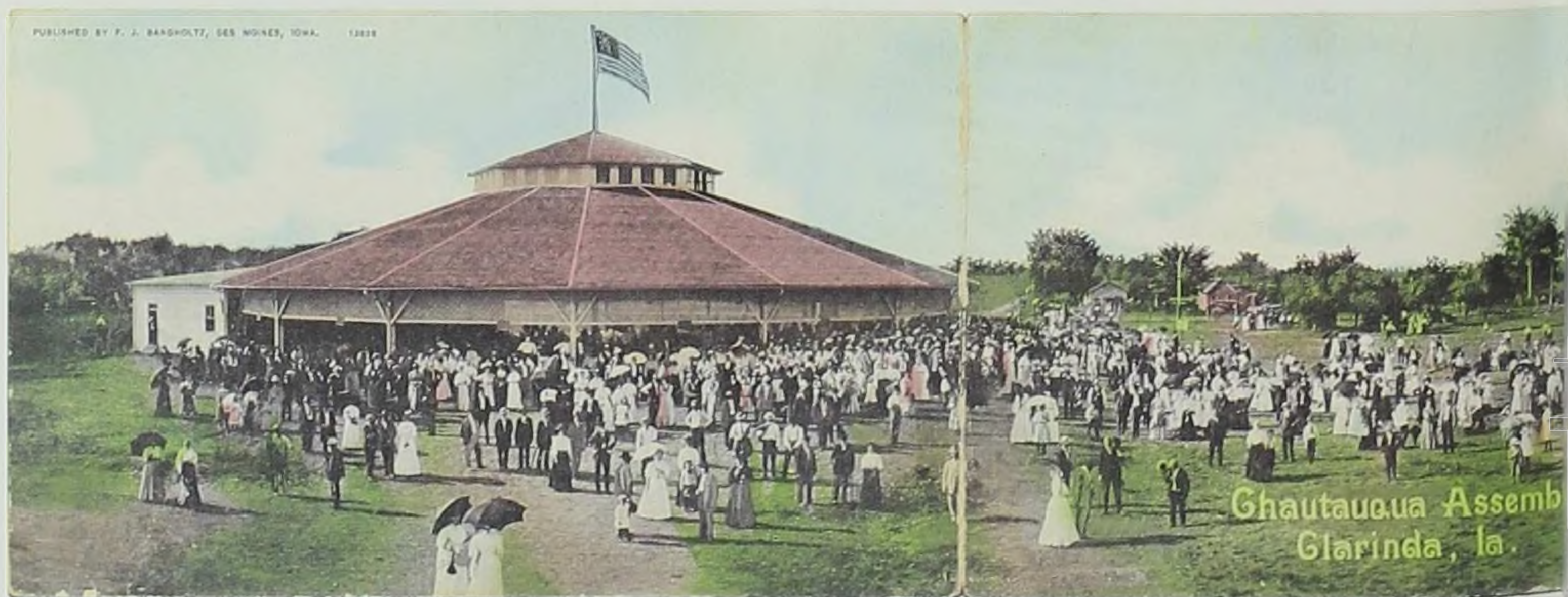
This routing of talent and the convenience of “packaging” certain acts for assemblies brought about the development of circuit Chautauqua, beginning in 1904 and largely perfected by 1910. At the height of circuit Chautauqua, this system of education and entertainment traveled to an estimated ten thousand small towns across this nation and reached as many as twelve million individuals each year. A community had only to be on the circuit to have all of its talent chosen and scheduled for its one- or two-week assembly.

Some communities, such as Clarinda, chose not to be on a circuit but to be independent Chautauquas, selecting their own talent and booking it through a variety of large and small booking agencies. By 1908, according to industry publications, as many as six hundred independent Chautauquas existed in America.

With the advent of independent and circuit Chautauquas, the movement truly thrived. Chautauqua concentrated and flourished in the Midwest, maintaining a long ex-

istence, especially in Iowa. In many instances the Chautauqua movement either introduced or fortified theater in rural America. Even though the traditional Puritan and midwestern work ethics had labeled theater evil, or at best, unnecessary, sponsorship by the socially and morally correct Chautauqua made theater more acceptable. As theater historian William Slout argues, “It is reasonable to assume that the acceptance of drama by the small-town Chautauqua audiences had a dampening effect on the formerly bristling antagonisms toward actors and everything theatrical.” Accordingly, Chautauqua must be understood as an important chapter not only in American intellectual and social history but in theater history as well.

Whereas current historians have focused largely on theatrical developments in metropolitan centers on either coast, they have neglected the theater of the great heartland of America. Standard theater history texts make little, if any, mention of theatrical events within the Chautauqua movement, and when they do they often disparage Chautauqua’s theater quality and value, in effect questioning the importance of the movement in the development of American popular entertainment. Because of Chautauqua’s long, independent existence in the midwestern county seat of Clarinda, we can trace the introduction of theatrical performances into local programming year by year as a way of gauging local acceptance of theater in an Iowa community. Furthermore, because Clarinda



always maintained an independent status throughout its history, this insured, in large part, that the annual assembly reflected and reinforced the moral, cultural, and artistic standards of the community, since the ultimate choice of talent always remained in the control of local committees. In the case of Clarinda, Iowa, theatrical entertainment was slowly and sporadically introduced until it held sway—in both content and financial concerns—over the Clarinda assembly.

Yet in the first twelve years of the Clarinda Chautauqua, there was little to suggest that one day the program would be dominated by theater—defined here as the performance of roles in play or operas (excerpts or full-length) using the traditional elements of costumes and make-up with selective scenery and lighting. Only occasional appearances by play readers or impersonators took place amidst the inspirational lectures, educational presentations, and musical concerts that filled the many days of a local assembly.

In 1906, for example, statesman and educator Booker T. Washington headlined the season, yet in a far less serious vein, the Boston Carnival and Concert Company also appeared. Labeling the Boston company's program "different" and "unique," the *Clarinda Herald* observed: "It held the large outdoor audience in close and interested attention from the beginning to the end." In its program of "music, pantomime, classic posing, butterfly dancing, and illustrated songs," the review continued, "Mrs. Dunne in her classic

posing won the enthusiastic admiration of all and the effects produced by the colored lights thrown from the lantern upon the butterfly dance were at once remarkably beautiful and quite novel. Every feature of the program showed a purity of art, refreshing and delightful. Sound, color and motion were brought into perfect harmony by the highest artistic skill."

Lecturers began to appear less frequently and less successfully. In 1907, for instance, Frederick Warde, "America's Greatest Tragedian turned Lecturer," drew only a small crowd, and local planners sought suggestions for insuring larger audiences for such worthwhile presentations. Mirroring a national trend, a varied fare of entertainment increasingly filled the talent schedules of the Clarinda Chautauqua.

Nearly all local news coverage of the 1908 Chautauqua focused on the building of a new auditorium. Local authorities boasted that "nothing to equal it of its kind [exists] west of the Mississippi." It replaced the tents or semi-permanent wooden structures that had served the Clarinda assembly to this date. The round, steel-framed structure measured 140 feet in diameter, with an added stage annex of roughly 60 by 40 feet. Although the auditorium was designed to comfortably seat 4,000 (about the entire population of Clarinda at that time), an additional 2,000 to 3,000 reportedly could stand under the eaves and still hear and see the performers. With scenery, footlights, dressing rooms, and an



Three-panel color "mail card" folds out to reveal Clarinda's new steel-framed Chautauqua auditorium, constructed in 1908 and here photographed by F. J. Bandholtz.

COPYRIGHT 1908
BY F. J. BANDHOLTZ
DES MOINES, IA.

COURTESY NODAWAY VALLEY HISTORICAL MUSEUM COLLECTION (CLARINDA)

civic good and boost the local economy.

Once a community had agreed to develop a Chautauqua assembly, the next step was to find the speakers and performers—the “talent”—to fill the daytime and evening programs. Various booking agencies would send talent to the numerous assemblies, often arranging it so that an individual or group would perform a day or two in one town, then travel to the next town staging an assembly, and so on.

This routing of talent and the convenience of “packaging” certain acts for assemblies brought about the development of circuit Chautauqua, beginning in 1904 and largely perfected by 1910. At the height of circuit Chautauqua, this system of education and entertainment traveled to an estimated ten thousand small towns across this nation and reached as many as twelve million individuals each year. A community had only to be on the circuit to have all of its talent chosen and scheduled for its one- or two-week assembly.

Some communities, such as Clarinda, chose not to be on a circuit but to be independent Chautauquas, selecting their own talent and booking it through a variety of large and small booking agencies. By 1908, according to industry publications, as many as six hundred independent Chautauquas existed in America.

With the advent of independent and circuit Chautauquas, the movement truly thrived. Chautauqua concentrated and flourished in the Midwest, maintaining a long ex-

istence, especially in Iowa. In many instances the Chautauqua movement either introduced or fortified theater in rural America. Even though the traditional Puritan and midwestern work ethics had labeled theater evil, or at best, unnecessary, sponsorship by the socially and morally correct Chautauqua made theater more acceptable. As theater historian William Slout argues, “It is reasonable to assume that the acceptance of drama by the small-town Chautauqua audiences had a dampening effect on the formerly bristling antagonisms toward actors and everything theatrical.” Accordingly, Chautauqua must be understood as an important chapter not only in American intellectual and social history but in theater history as well.

Whereas current historians have focused largely on theatrical developments in metropolitan centers on either coast, they have neglected the theater of the great heartland of America. Standard theater history texts make little, if any, mention of theatrical events within the Chautauqua movement, and when they do they often disparage Chautauqua’s theater quality and value, in effect questioning the importance of the movement in the development of American popular entertainment. Because of Chautauqua’s long, independent existence in the midwestern county seat of Clarinda, we can trace the introduction of theatrical performances into local programming year by year as a way of gauging local acceptance of theater in an Iowa community. Furthermore, because Clarinda

always maintained an independent status throughout its history, this insured, in large part, that the annual assembly reflected and reinforced the moral, cultural, and artistic standards of the community, since the ultimate choice of talent always remained in the control of local committees. In the case of Clarinda, Iowa, theatrical entertainment was slowly and sporadically introduced until it held sway—in both content and financial concerns—over the Clarinda assembly.

Yet in the first twelve years of the Clarinda Chautauqua, there was little to suggest that one day the program would be dominated by theater—defined here as the performance of roles in play or operas (excerpts or full-length) using the traditional elements of costumes and make-up with selective scenery and lighting. Only occasional appearances by play readers or impersonators took place amidst the inspirational lectures, educational presentations, and musical concerts that filled the many days of a local assembly.

In 1906, for example, statesman and educator Booker T. Washington headlined the season, yet in a far less serious vein, the Boston Carnival and Concert Company also appeared. Labeling the Boston company’s program “different” and “unique,” the *Clarinda Herald* observed: “It held the large outdoor audience in close and interested attention from the beginning to the end.” In its program of “music, pantomime, classic posing, butterfly dancing, and illustrated songs,” the review continued, “Mrs. Dunne in her classic

posing won the enthusiastic admiration of all and the effects produced by the colored lights thrown from the lantern upon the butterfly dance were at once remarkably beautiful and quite novel. Every feature of the program showed a purity of art, refreshing and delightful. Sound, color and motion were brought into perfect harmony by the highest artistic skill.”

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COURTESY NODAWAY VALLEY HISTORICAL MUSEUM COLLECTION (CLARINDA)



COURTESY NODAWAY VALLEY HISTORICAL MUSEUM COLLECTION (CLARINDA)

TENTS may be rented on the Assembly grounds as follows:
 10x12 wall tent, by the day, 75 cents; by the week, \$2.50; by the season, \$3.50; with floor, by the season, \$4.50; 12x14 wall tent, by the day, \$1.00; by the week, \$3.00; by the season, \$4.50; with floor by the season, \$5.75. 14x16 wall tent, by the day, \$1.25; by the week, \$3.50; by the season \$5.50; with floor, by the season, \$7.00. Bed springs, cots and chairs will be rented at low rate. Bedding should in all cases be brought from home or purchased on the grounds; it can not be rented. Large family compartment tents can be secured if desired. Write to C. S. McKee, superintendent of tents, remitting to him \$1.00 for each tent, and space will be reserved and tent ready for you on the first day. Be sure to state whether or not you wish a floor in your tent.

BOARD Meals and Lunches will be served on the grounds in the dining hall built especially for our assembly. Every arrangement will be made for the comfort and happiness of the campers and visitors generally.

Boys' Farm Camp. **Girls' Home Camp**
 150 boys, 150 girls. Practical instruction in farming and home making for 10 days by best instructors in State. Expense \$7.00 including instruction, board and tent. Address REN LEE, Char.

COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Families often rented tents to camp on the Chautauqua grounds so they could take maximum advantage of day and evening programming. To ease housekeeping burdens, one could rent beds and bedding and eat in the dining hall. Mail service was even provided. Above, Clarinda Chautauqua "campers." Left: Panel from 1911 program describes variety of rental tents.

attractive proscenium opening, certainly Clarinda's Chautauqua stage was set for increased theatrical activity.

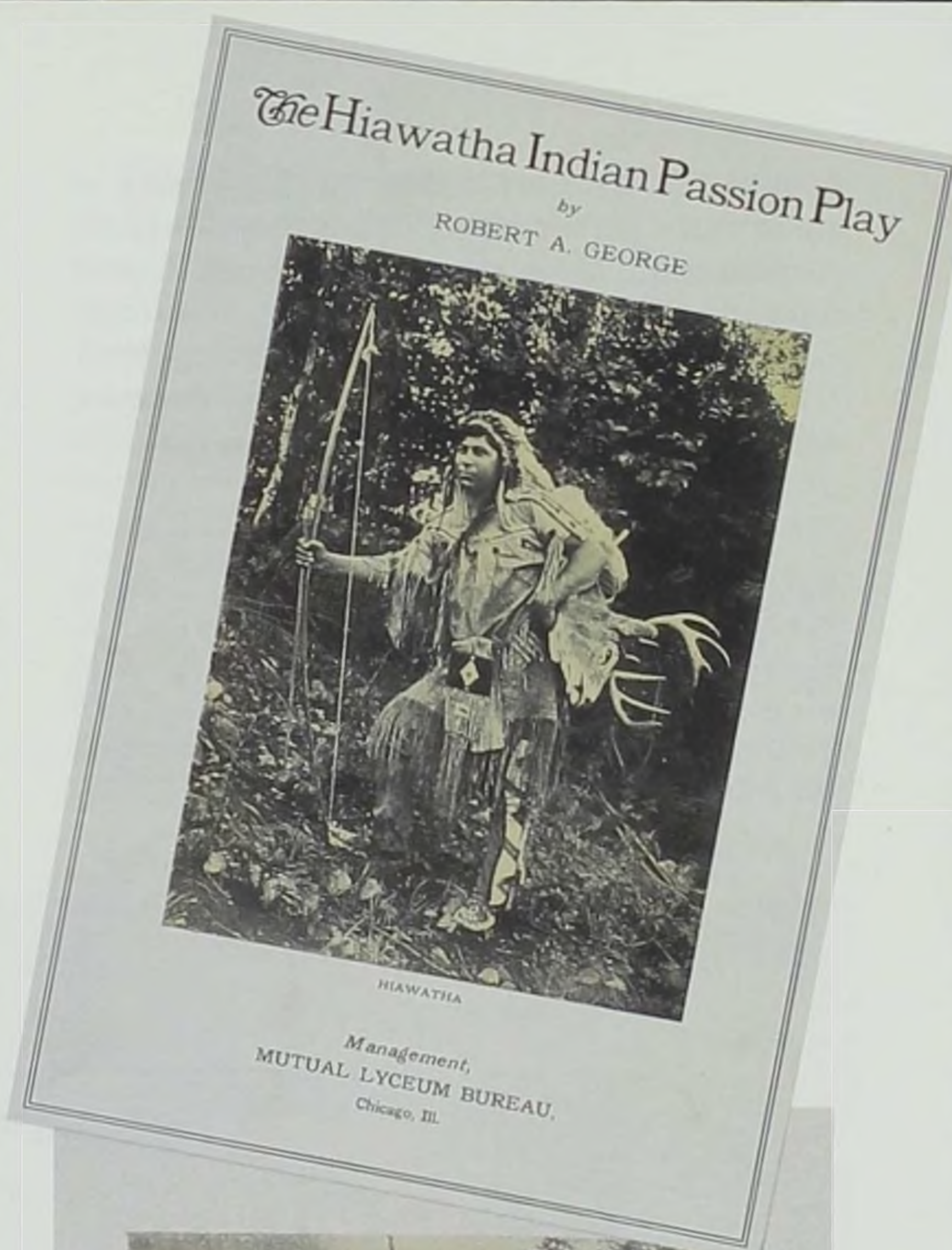
Clarinda attorney William Orr, the driving force behind the local movement, dedicated the building to "all that is true, beautiful, and noble." Calling it a "splendid Temple," Orr turned the facility over to the Chautauqua Board, emphasizing that the event foretold of "better things for Clarinda." For the youth of the community, here was an "opportunity for clean healthy pleasure and amusement," thus "shielding them from temptation." Clarinda's new structure did not set it apart from other assemblies; independent Chautauquas tended to eventually erect permanent auditoriums. (In circuit Chautauqua, the tent, stage, and seating were transported from town to town by an advance crew.) Clarinda's impressive structure, however, did

much to further the Chautauqua movement locally by embodying it in a very tangible manner.

The growth of Chautauqua in Clarinda no doubt also relied on the editorial support of the local newspapers, which consistently spoke out in favor of the assemblies. An August 1903 editorial in the *Clarinda Herald* crystallizes the prevailing attitudes: "There may be some who would really like to see the Chautauqua fail this year, but their numbers are very few in this locality and they are the ones who are always against the churches and every moral influence in the community. They want saloons and beer gardens and brothels and all kinds of immoral and disreputable resorts opened. We believe that the Chautauqua this year will be patronized to such an extent as to give these emissaries of evil a very serious backset in their desires to see our town in the hands of their crowd."

In light of such editorial support, one must recognize the obvious promotional interest that local newspapers would have in the continuation of annual assemblies. For example, even though the 1905 assembly netted less than \$50, a local editor reminded readers that half the gross income was "expended in Clarinda on advertising, printing, labor, lumber, light, water, etc." In addition, one should consider the expenditures by talent and patrons for hotel accommodations, food, transportation, and assorted merchandise. A healthy local economy (and Chautauqua) always bodes well for the community's newspaper. Even so, the same editor argued: "The value of the Chautauqua to Clarinda is not to be measured in dollars. It is a minister to the higher life of the community as are the church and the public school. It is education in a large, rich way." Such consistent praise for the Chautauqua movement continually characterized local coverage; nary a negative word is to be found.

Right: The Hiawatha Indian Passion Play was billed as "especially suited for churches and Chautauquas for it describes reverently this beautiful Messiah legend. . . . No one can hear it without receiving an impulse for a better life." A glass-lantern show or motion pictures often preceded the play performed by Ojibway actors.



Wickiup

LANTERN PAINTINGS

Mr. George is an artist in handling his camera and the views are pronounced by all to be the finest they have ever seen. We are indebted to Mrs. George, the gifted wife, for the artistic coloring which gives them the effect of beautiful paintings. She accompanies her husband part of the time and sings the songs of the Ojibways.

By 1909, we start to see the beginning of theatrical performances at the Clarinda Chautauqua. That year, the Hinshaw Opera Singers presented costumed opera "cuttings" (or excerpts). The *Clarinda Herald* reported: "In the evening the Hinshaw Opera Singers, who had made a favorable impression in

their short program in the afternoon, gave a full evening program, part of it in opera costume. Three acts of *Martha*, and some request numbers were given, the only objection to the program being that it was too short. The singing was highly artistic, and enjoyable to the large audience in attendance. The singers had to catch a train about 10 o'clock, or the program would have been longer."

Below: The Catha Woodland Players brought Shakespeare to Clarinda in 1912. The back of this flyer asserts, "Two years of successful Chautauqua work has proven that the Chautauqua is ready for high class entertainment. Wherever this Company went it proved the greatest drawing card of the program."

In 1911 the *Hiawatha Indian Passion Play* came to Clarinda. Publicity boasted that this small company of "trained and finished actors" from Canada carried its own "scenery and over a ton of outfits . . . converting the stage into a veritable Indian camp." The ten



Ojibway actors, according to a local newspaper, "are camped just North of the auto stand, next to the Washington Street fence. They do their own cooking and live their own home life as nearly as it is possible to do under present surroundings." (Generally, talent booked for more than one day stayed in local hotels or boardinghouses.)

As a thirty-minute prelude to the *Hiawatha Indian Passion Play*, "moving picture film" or hand-colored glass lantern slides were projected for the audience's enjoyment and education. Then, the twenty-nine scenes of the passion play unfolded as a narrator interpreted the action.

The passion play met with a mixed review. "It is altogether likely that the entertainment given by the Ojibways changed more notions in regard to Indians than would a month's reading or listening to lectures given by a white man," commented the *Clarinda Journal*. "Seeing is believing," and with the object before one, preconceived notions and idealizations must give way to the prosaic actualities. The Indians delighted the young." This positive response, however, was tempered by the conclusion that "with the older members of the audience the sensations ranged all the way from a keen and studious interest to a bored indifference, a half disappointed curi-



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osity probably being the prevailing one."

The year 1912 heralded the only full-scale production of Shakespeare ever to appear on Clarinda's Chautauqua stage. The Catha Woodland Players presented an afternoon program built around the playlet *A Proposal Under Difficulties* and an evening performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. As a rule, extra excursion trains to transport large crowds were arranged for only major Chautauqua attractions, such as William Jennings Bryan. Yet on this specially declared "Shakespeare Day," added trains of the Iowa and Southwestern Railroad brought audiences to see the Woodland Players and the Chicago Operatic Company.

Among the audience for *As You Like It* was a *Clarinda Herald* representative, "anticipating it as one of the greatest treats of the season." "It undoubtedly was," the reporter recounted, "but we in common with about 2500 of the vast audience of probably 5000 people, heard not a word of it. People who heard said that the entertainment was splendid. We believe it was. The stage was beautifully decorated with trees and plants to make the forest scenes and they were certainly beautiful. The players were dressed in costumes of the time, and the lights, the scenery and the perfect acting of the players made the scene not soon to be forgotten.

"It was a great opportunity for people of Clarinda and this part of Iowa," the *Herald* continued, "and because half of them, a great many our guests, who came from a distance, heard nothing and were simply disgusted with the order, we must utter indignant protest. Why does not the Assembly get busy and enforce order? Why not a few policemen on the grounds who will arrest people if they won't keep still?"

The *Clarinda Journal* also blamed "the incessant gabble, gabble, gabble that was going on all around, inside the auditorium and out." "Can't people who go to places of public entertainment understand that listeners have rights—paramount rights—in such a place?" the *Journal* asked. "Not so with the gabblers. Tennyson's 'Brook' which goes on forever, is a proper simile for them." To the dismay of many, a fully mounted Shake-

spearean production never again took stage at the Clarinda Chautauqua.

Three years passed before theater returned to the Clarinda Chautauqua. In 1916 the Hinshaw Light Opera's two-hour afternoon performance included piano solos, solo and group singing, the last act of *Faust*, and a sketch from *Madame Butterfly*. In the evening the company presented Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. Large audiences nearly filled the auditorium for this "very pleasing entertainment," the *Journal* reported. "A number of local hits inserted into the opera caused much laughter. Most of the parts were very well rendered and in doing the chorus work these trained singers made more music than the ordinary large chorus."

Local headlines in 1920 proclaimed that, despite possible negative reaction to the choice, the Clarinda Chautauqua would offer "grand opera," specifically Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, a short opera performed by the nine-member Van Grove Opera Company. The *Clarinda Journal* reported: "The bringing of grand opera to Clarinda was a tentative venture on the part of the Chautauqua management and [booking agent] James L. Loar . . . [but] a company of which Mr. Van Grove is the leader would of course stand high in [the] eyes of the musical world, and those who know and appreciate the best in music found the opera Friday evening something that they can look back upon as having enjoyed to the uttermost."

Although no theatrical performances appeared in the next two years (1921 and 1922), one can view 1909, when the Hinshaw company had first performed opera cuttings, to 1922 as a period in which the Clarinda Chautauqua increasingly experienced the financial and aesthetic impact of theatrical performances. Various cautious moves by the

Right: In 1923, opera came to Clarinda, courtesy of Harry Davies (see front cover) and his company. His company performed *Pinafore* and *Said Pasha*. In 1925, the company performed again in the community. From the Hotel Linderman in Clarinda, Davies wrote booking agent Harry Harrison in August 1925 that "I have a good company and first class operas, fine costumes and very reasonable."



G O O D S I N G E R S

	<p>DAVIES OPERA COMPANY in "PINAFORE"</p>	
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REDPATH CHAUTAUQUA COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES, IOWA CITY, IOWA

local talent selection committee had proven to be prudent, and the foundation was laid for theatrical performances to dominate the Clarinda Chautauqua in its remaining years.

After 1922, even though the demands of touring limited cast size and scenery, Clarinda audiences received play companies extremely well. Ticket sales, increasingly dependent on plays, enhanced the good fortunes of the local assembly. Beginning in 1923 a pattern developed: two companies each performed twice during the assembly. As a result, theatrical presentations became an essential and significant part of the Clarinda Chautauqua program. Whereas in the fourteen years before 1923, fewer than ten theater performances appeared (most were full-length operas and cuttings), in the following nine years over thirty productions took stage.

Since each year Clarinda's Chautauqua organizers selected the talent from that offered by various buying cooperatives, did this shift to theater represent a change in the organizers' attitudes and choices, or in the availability of theatrical talent? The evidence suggests that organizers and the public had overcome any reservations and now desired theater, and that theatrical performances, in fact, generated needed income for the assembly. Similar tendencies appear throughout the Chautauqua movement nationally, independent and circuit alike.

In 1923, the Harry Davies Opera Company presented the comic operas *Said Pasha* and *Pinafore*. Unlike earlier groups that had performed only cuttings, the Davies company presented complete productions of light operas without the chorus but with elaborate costumes and stage settings. *Lyceum Magazine* of November 1919 noted: "Harry [Davies] says Caruso sings better than he, but he don't dress his part any better." [See Davies as Don José in *Carmen* on the front cover.]

Along with careful attention to technical elements, the Davies company went to lengths to "localize" their performances, typical of touring Chautauqua performers. "Evidently they were on the job all day," the *Journal* noted, "and the Farm Camp, and the Chautauqua board, Billie Ward's bus, and *The Herald* and *The Journal* were all in line for

good natured banter which fitted into their play. Every one seemed musically and dramatically an artist and it was good. We are only sorry for those who missed them."

The second company in 1923 was headed by actor, director, and playwright L. Verne Slout, who boasted, "Each play is built around some message that we wish to bring to the people. They don't realize we are preaching to them, tho, till they reach home and start thinking of the plot." The *Page County Democrat* thought the company "was of the highest order of merit and many have requested more of the same kind next year."

Although little is known about the Metropolitan Players who appeared in 1924, they presented two of the "classics" of the Chautauqua stage: *The Bubble* and *Cappy Ricks*. Edward Locke's *The Bubble* had run for 176 performances on Broadway (an average length for Broadway imports presented in Clarinda). While this run is certainly a respectable one, the play was clearly being puffed for Chautauqua audiences when claiming "an unusually long run in New York City," and that the play "convulsed New Yorkers for a solid year."

The second play presented by the Metropolitan Players—*Cappy Ricks*—had enjoyed a Broadway run during 1919 before many years on the Chautauqua circuit. After its presentation, the *Clarinda Herald* editorialized: "'Are we coming back to plays again?' is a question some were asking last week, following the success of two plays given at Clarinda Chautauqua, when crowds turned out both afternoon and evening. The Play was a good one, as good as could be expected under Chautauqua conditions and given by five people. . . . We make the guess that the stage will remain, and gain in importance from now on, rather than become less popular and influential. Acting has not died out, and it will not die out, so long as human nature enjoys the thrills of human imitation."

In 1925 the Harry Davies Opera Company

Right: The L. Verne Slout Players performed in Clarinda in 1923. Their publicity materials promised versatility: "Classic Dramas, Biblical Plays, Modern Comedies."

THE L. VERNE SLOUT PLAYERS

"Lyceum's Foremost Dramatic Company"



R. Slout and Miss Whitworth might be termed the 'Sothorn and Marlow' of the lyceum world. They are doing for the lyceum and chautauqua what the above mentioned stars did for the legitimate theatre." The play used in their present tour is a Modern Comedy from the pen of Mr. Slout, who is the author of four other successful plays and many sketches.

Those who are interested in and desire the Better Art of the Theatre will find any production, whether Modern or Classical, made by Mr. Slout and Miss Whitworth, carefully mounted with special scenery, correctly costumed, acted with spirit, and finished to the minutest detail.

Our publicity service comes free to committees.

DESIGNED AND PRINTED BY
THE W. M. KING SERVICE, CHICAGO

REDPATH CHAUTAUQUA COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES, IOWA CITY, IOWA

The Tooley Opera Company



COMPLETE
SCENERY &

GORGEOUS
& COSTUMES

THE COMPANY DE LUXE
Presenting OPERA in English

again received enthusiastic support in Clarinda. Minutes of the Chautauqua Board of Directors reveal the unanimous request that the Davies Opera Company be the opening night attraction in order to attract large crowds. The *Page County Democrat* energetically proclaimed, "The men who plan the program could date them here for five years to come without any fear of disapproval." Yet, with the reduction of the assembly from ten to eight days beginning in 1925, it is evident that decreasing attendance and revenue were forcing organizers to curtail the annual event. Despite efforts to bolster support, Chautauqua's slow yet inevitable decline had quietly begun.

The 1926 Chautauqua Board quadrupled its advertising in area newspapers, reminding readers of "the happy plays" given in previous years and detailing the upcoming productions. Previews of one show emphasized the wholesome quality of plays that "come right out of the soil of this country where your potatoes and wheat for your bread come from." John L. Golden, producer of several successful productions, championed his own down-to-earth style as the "formula followed in all [of my] comedies." "My comedies," he continued, "are clean like the people and earth they come from. It's a rotten civilization that has to be filthy to be amused. . . . The American people want cleanliness."

Certainly the qualities espoused by Golden were those expected by the Chautauqua audiences, and which in turn strengthened support for theatrical companies such as the Elwyn Dramatic Company in 1926. Their opening afternoon performance in Clarinda was enthusiastically received, and later in the day, "people vied with each other in getting the seats close up . . . for fear that they would

miss something in the play of the evening."

Also appearing in 1926 was the Tooley Comic Opera Company, presenting Robert Planquette's *The Chimes of Normandy*. According to a company brochure, "It is the aim of the company to give every community a chance to have an 'opera season.' This company will not only sing the standard classics of Grand Opera but will also give revivals of the Comic Operas that are dear to the hearts of all laymen of music. The Company has for its purpose Opera 'for and of the people'; therefore all performances will be given in English and it will delight the reader to know that the Company is so well trained in diction and enunciation that almost every word will be understood with a remarkable clearness." For Chautauqua, Tooley adapted operas "to keep them within a two-hour time limit" and often rearranged the dialogue to "meet present-day conditions, so the audience will better understand the story."

Tooley typically used considerable scenery, pleasing audiences and impressing *Lyceum Magazine*, which remarked on Tooley's "780 pounds of scenery" as not "quite as much as the Chicago Civic Opera Company has in the Auditorium, but it's a lot to lug on the road, and they do wonders with it. They get to the [performance site] at 6 and get it set up by 7:30, then get into their costumes and warpaint by 8. Two hours of artistry, and then the teardown. Tooley says he has caught a 10:30 train, but Little Buttercup wiped off cold cream when the conductor punched her ticket."

Although scenic and lighting effects are seldom mentioned in local coverage, one reviewer commented about the Inskeep Players in 1927 and how their "thunder and lightning of [*The Mender*] seemed very realistic and as it had rained earlier in the evening, one could scarcely tell it from the real article." Yet while effective technical support undoubtedly was appreciated, the story and its ability to win and maintain an audience reigned supreme. A Chautauqua brochure for *The Mender* noted, "The plot runs smoothly and is not so complicated that events cannot be foreseen. It finishes with a great climax. . . . Two beautiful love stories

Opposite: Audiences loved the Tooley Opera Company's elaborate scenery and costumes. Tooley's *Chimes of Normandy*, performed in Clarinda in 1926, was billed by Tooley as "the most tuneful of all comic operas. An opera that has tunes that everybody can and does whistle." Tooley advertised that his company "has for its purpose Opera 'for and of the people.'"

The CLARINDA CHAUTAUQUAN

Published By The Chautauqua

AUGUST 7-14--1929



WHERE CLARINDA EXTENDS A CORDIAL WELCOME
Artists, Musicians, Teachers, Orators, Entertainers
Bible Class Each Day

A PROGRAM OF EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

Tuesday, August 7

- 7:30 p.m.—Prelude by Chief Red Fox.
- 8:00 p.m.—Bessie Larcher Trio with Frances Sellers, the Indiana Mockingbird.

Thursday, August 8

- 10:45 a.m.—Bible Lecture by Rev. Franklin R. Beery: "Pilate's Inscription Over the Cross: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'."
- 2:30 p.m.—Bergman Players present comedy: "New Brooms."
- 7:30 p.m.—Bergman Players present "Smilin' Thru."

Friday, August 9

- 10:45 a.m.—Bible Lecture by Rev. Beery: "The Beneficent Malefactor, Who Saw the Dying Christ, the King."
- 2:30 p.m.—Carolina Jubilee Singers Concert.
- 7:30 p.m.—Prelude by Carolina Jubilee Singers.
- 8:30 p.m.—Lecture by Agnes Campbell Macphail, Canadian Woman in Parliament.

Saturday, August 10

- 10:45 a.m.—Bible Lecture by Rev. Beery: "The Reed in His Hand."—The soldiers in mockery, stumbled onto the fact of the Kingship of Christ.
- 2:30 p.m.—Concert by Philharmonic Ensemble.
- 7:30 p.m.—Prelude by Philharmonic Ensemble.
- 8:00 p.m.—John B. Ratto with Ensemble.
- 8:30 p.m.—Ratto on "Leading Characters in History."

Cover from 1929 program of Clarinda Chautauqua overlays eight-day schedule. The Bergmann Players performed on Thursday; the Salisbury Players, the following Tuesday and Wednesday.

REDPATH CHAUTAUQUA COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES, IOWA CITY, IOWA

a Assembly

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unday Program Free

ounds

Sunday, August 11

No Admission Charge

- 2:30 p.m.—Prelude: Rhythm Music by pupils of Helen Hall-Hoskinson; Singing and Whistling by Alice and Agness Scroggs of Indianola; Reading by Alice Cline, Clarinda.
- 3:00 p.m.—Lecture-Sermon: Dr. I. B. Schreckengast, Chancellor Nebraska Wesleyan College, Lincoln, Nebr.
- 7:00 p.m.—Rhythm Band; Scroggs Twins of Indianola; Alice Cline.
- 8:00 p.m.—Lecture-Sermon, Dr. John L. Hillman, President of Simpson College, Indianola, Iowa.

Monday, August 12

- 10:45 a.m.—Bible Lecture by Rev. Beery: "Joseph of Arimathea"—who was given official permission to remove the body of Christ.
- 2:30 p.m.—Concert by Maude Buschlen's Music Party.
- 7:30 p.m.—Concert by Maude Buschlen's Music Party.
- 8:30 p.m.—Lecture by Judge Fred G. Bale.

Tuesday, August 13

- 10:45 a.m.—Bible Lecture by Rev. Beery: "Barabbas"—whom the people preferred to Jesus—released in the place of Christ.
- 2:30 p.m.—"Great Moments from Well-Known Plays" by Salisbury Players.
- 7:30 p.m.—"Adventurous Ann" presented by Salisbury Players.

Wednesday, August 14

- 10:45 a.m.—Bible Lecture by Rev. Beery: "Pilate's Question: 'What Then Shall I Do With Jesus?'"
- 2:30 p.m.—Program by Salisbury Players.
- 3:30 p.m.—Lecture by Ruth Bryan-Owen, Florida Congresswoman.
- 7:30 p.m.—"The Fool" presented by the Salisbury Players.

are woven into the plot of the play. It is funnier than most plays and a good health tonic."

The 1927 assembly cleared a profit of approximately \$200. "Monday, August 8 was the high mark, the front gate receipts amounting to \$215.00 while on the following Wednesday, the closing day of the assembly, the receipts were \$138.50," the secretary reported. "Plays and [motion] pictures were shown on both Monday and Wednesday, indicating that the average person likes that kind of a combination." These popular combinations would continue in following years.

In 1928, theatrical presentations again drew large audiences, generating significant income. And as should be expected, play companies accounted for a major part of the total expenditures for talent. At \$225 the Elwyn Dramatic Company represented the single greatest talent expense for that year, closely followed by the National Opera and Dramatic Company and "Motion Pictures," both of which cost \$200.

The number of theatrical presentations at the Clarinda Chautauqua peaked in 1929 with the Bergmann Players presenting two Broadway successes, *New Brooms* and *Smilin' Through*. Additionally, the Salisbury Players presented the Broadway product *The Fool*, the play *Adventurous Ann*, a variety program, and a program of scenes titled "Great Moments from Well-Known Plays."

"Great Moments" entailed "crowding into a two-hour program the high spots and thrilling episodes from . . . well-known and popular plays. The names of the plays from which these episodes are taken are purposely withheld. One of the features of the program is the surprise the selections of the plays brings to the audience. Each play is well-known and a favorite. Every play has its dull moments and its great moments. By selecting the latter only, the audience gets the gist of the entire play, with the thrills and excitement of complete production." Obviously, the success of such a program relied upon a knowledgeable audience familiar with numerous plays. By this time, such an audience was to be found in Clarinda and countless other Chautauqua communities.

Despite the increasing dominance of motion pictures in the community, a 1930 *Clarinda Journal* editorial pleads for local support of live dramatic presentations, especially "traditional" theater pieces: "We have heard many persons recently remark that they longed to hear the real people in drama once more, and that it would be a pleasure to hear again even *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *East Lynne*, or some other old timer, just anything so that they could see and hear the actors, themselves." The *Journal* continued, "At last year's session, the largest crowds were present when the program consisted of dramas, and this year will be no exception."

By now, across the nation and locally, Chautauqua organizers were struggling to control costs and appeal to increasingly diverse tastes. In response, booking agencies offered more varied fare, such as the Randall Entertainers, who took stage in Clarinda in 1930. This company of five used vocal and instrumental music, dramatic sketches, and readings for their three concerts (two sacred and one operatic) and standard two plays.

Acknowledging the rise of such versatile groups, a 1930 editorial recognized that these changes were necessary for Chautauqua to survive: "Certainly the program is desirable, for varied entertainment. Of course we must have some 'whoopie.' But along with this came lectures, musical programs and the popular player companies. We do not know that brother [and local Chautauqua organizer] Wm. Orr would approve of every number, if he could be with us as of yore. But it's the kind of program which sells the tickets and causes people to come again."

Even though the assembly was shortened in 1931—this time from eight to five days—two theater companies each performed twice that year. While the Bergmann Players and the Bennett Players received considerable advance newspaper coverage, so did Chautauqua in general. "You will be glad to know, I am sure, that with all of the hard times and depression, the people are now turning more to the serious forms of entertainment," Harry Harrison, secretary of the Redpath-Loar Independent Chautauquas, assured local organizer Francis J. Rogers in a letter



Booking agent James Loar was a driving force behind independent Chautauquas such as Clarinda's.

quoted in the *Clarinda Journal*. "Chautauqua seems to be staging a real comeback."

The *Clarinda Daily Herald* agreed: "There are indications of Chautauquas staging a comeback this season, after having been more or less affected by the multiplicity of entertainment vying with each other for a share of the family purse."

Such sentiment remained, however, only wishful thinking as community support continued to wane. In response to the performance of *The Big Pond* in 1931, a "combination of laughter and absolute stillness spoke the interest of a crowd of about 750 persons." Such attendance is telling, for during the first years of play performances (1909 to 1912), audiences of 2,000 to 5,000 might well have been expected for an event, especially a play performance.

The day after the 1931 assembly ended, the *Herald*, while optimistic that Chautauqua would continue, perhaps unwittingly wrote an appropriate eulogy: "Since the days when profits from Chautauqua purchased the present property and erected a fine auditorium, competition in the amusement business has increased many fold. Staying at home, the radio brings excellent programs of music, many of them 'canned,' but affording a selection to suit the hearer's taste, all the way from classical selection to the Hay Mow Five.

"Motion pictures came," the editorial continued, "added to them being the talkies. The highest grade of pictures are shown at the Armory theatre, combining the plot of a story, the acting of the greatest living tragedy actors, and comedians with the spoken word. Women take their fashions from what the movie actors wear, even the fashion magazines having grown old fashioned. News reels bring the latest features—greater than magazines, for there you have the action as well as the story.

"But most important of all, perhaps, the family car and improved roads are taking us places we never could go before. It forms habits of going that are hard to break. Sitting through ten or a dozen Chautauqua sessions is different."

In April 1932, the Clarinda Chautauqua contracted with Redpath-Loar for a five-day assembly featuring the Freeman-Hammond players. But advance ticket sales were weak, and the package price of \$1,200 posed too great a risk for local organizers in such difficult financial times. After an outstanding unbroken record of thirty-five years, the Clarinda Chautauqua fell silent.

To what can we attribute the Clarinda Chautauqua's long existence? Of considerable importance, certainly, is the alliance begun in 1920 with James L. Loar, owner and manager of then-named "Independent Co-operative Chautauquas" of Bloomington, Illinois. By the height of his career, Loar had built up his Chautauqua service to include three hundred towns, thus dominating the independent Chautauqua business. (Later, due to the general collapse of the industry,

energetic competitors joined forces to survive, as seen in the creation of the Redpath-Loar agency.)

Until 1927, when he died at age sixty-three, James Loar maintained a keen business interest in independent Chautauquas and a sensitivity to community morals. His contracts with talent include three items (as quoted by *Lyceum Magazine*) that demonstrate his principles: "The first requires Sunday programs to be definitely suitable for the day. The second requires that personal conduct of the talent both on and off the platform must be above public or private criticism. The third prohibits cheap jazz music in any form."

While known for his kind manner, buoyant spirits, and undying enthusiasm, Loar fought tenaciously for what he thought was fair and just. Priding himself on not merely "selling" Chautauqua, but "building" it as well, he sometimes helped protect assemblies against deficit in their early years—and he protected his turf. For instance, in July 1926 he wrote then-competitor Harry Harrison of the Redpath-Chicago office, vehement over Harrison's Redpath agents soliciting in one of his "towns": "The platform superintendent at the Delaware Chautauqua writes me that one of your men was in Delaware trying to break down my hold on that town. I took Delaware when it was a dead and defeated Chautauqua town. I have underwritten them against loss, and lost money there year after year until now it is in the best shape it has ever been. . . . You surely can not expect me to remain passive and smiling, and gentle and sweet, and have your men go to my towns and try to hit me in the face and bloody my nose. Any man that has any red blood in him at all can not possibly be expected to stand for such unethical matters long without trying to do something to protect himself, and even doing things that he wished he did not have to do."

This characteristic pride and fervor helped Loar build his business, and it also helped communities such as Clarinda maintain their status as independent Chautauquas. In the twelve years (1908-1919) before Clarinda contracted with Loar's buying coop-

eratives, the local assembly's deficits totaled nearly \$5,800, primarily due to costly and uncoordinated routing problems and travel expenses of talent. For example, film projectionist D. W. Robertson once performed in a town only twenty miles from Clarinda, then traveled across the state to Illinois for his next engagement, then back to Clarinda in western Iowa.

Loar's system simplified schedules and passed the savings onto local assemblies. "I am independent in the respect that all the attractions are selected by the local committee," Loar explained. "I am a circuit only in the sense that they waive any personal choice that they might have that these attractions they select will appear on their program [on a certain date]. In other words, they may need to take the Davies Opera Company on Friday instead of Monday, for if I got them to them on Monday they might have to go two or three hundred miles extra railroading, while by Friday I could take them right through the towns without additional jumps." Thus Loar provided local control plus the power of a buying cooperative.

The system paid off for Clarinda, as noted by Loar's successor, Oscar Hall: "Clarinda is to be congratulated on sustaining such a successful Chautauqua in these days of financial depression and when everything in a similar line has slumped heavily. There are a few towns like Meadville and Plattsburg, Missouri; Lincoln, Nebraska; Washington, Fairfield, and Mediapolis, Iowa that, like Clarinda, are making a success of their Chautauquas these days and they are all to be congratulated." While under the guidance of Loar and Hall (from 1920 to 1932), the Clarinda Chautauqua posted a loss only once—amounting to less than sixty dollars—a pittance compared to the \$5,800 deficit before the town worked with Loar.

Undeniably, Loar secured the financial stability of the Clarinda Chautauqua. Yet the part that theater played in prolonging the assembly's existence must not be overlooked. Consider that as "Play Night" became the Clarinda Chautauqua's major cultural attraction by the mid-1920s, it also became its major financial support. Records show that at-



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On the back of this 1908 postcard of Clarinda's Chautauqua, one "Bertha" wrote to her friend "Alma" this message: "On the other side is the crowd I saw today. Can you tell which one is me? I wish you could have been here today. I am sure having a swell time." By 1932, Clarinda's Chautauqua no longer meant a swell time. Americans were now amused by motion pictures, automobiles, and radio—and beleaguered by the Great Depression.

tendance and profits on the days of play performances were rivaled only by the appearance of a personage of the stature of William Jennings Bryan. But even though all of these factors kept the Clarinda Chautauqua on solid financial ground for many years beyond the demise of neighboring Chautauquas in Iowa and throughout the nation, they could not stem the inevitable.

Numerous reasons have been proffered concerning the collapse of Chautauqua. Based upon years in the business, Harry Harrison poetically concluded: "It died . . . under the hit-and-run wheels of a Model-A Ford on its way to the movies on a new paved road. Radio swept it into the ditch, and the Wall Street crash and the subsequent depression gave it the *coup de grace*." Chautauqua historian Joseph Gould was more critical: "Chautauqua began to die when the great issues disappeared. Aside from the serious political speakers and the dedicated reformers,

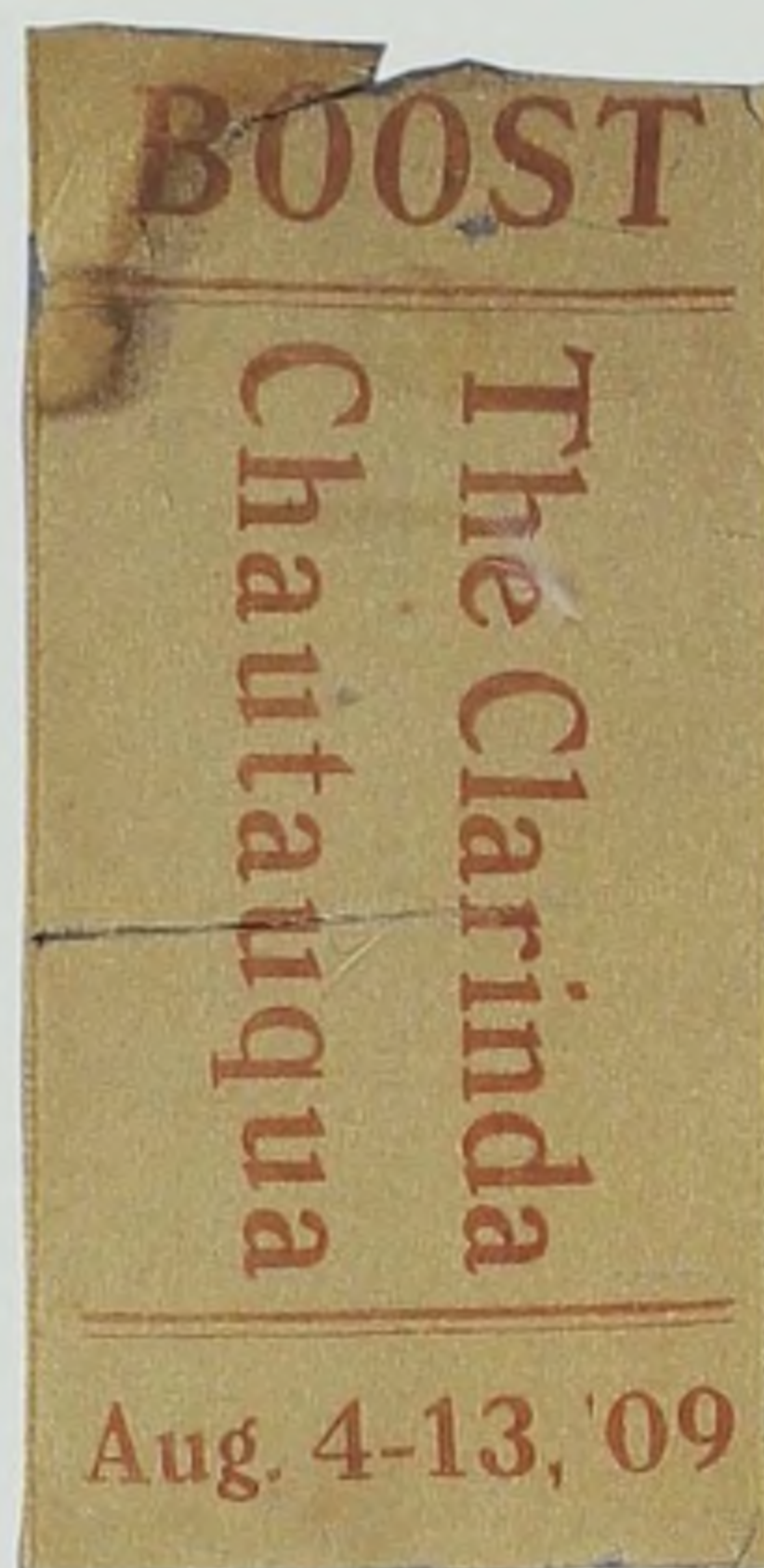
the circuits had relatively little of lasting value to offer. Dramatic offerings, although frequently presented by skilled performers, were innocuous bits of sunshine or foreshortened versions of Shakespeare."

Locally, the *Clarinda Herald* remarked: "Many people regret that no session of Clarinda Chautauqua is to be held this year, after an unbroken record of 35 sessions, this summer's session to have been the 36th. But of course it could not be helped. The time to decide yes or no as to the session came right in the middle of our recent 'bank holiday.' The important job of selling tickets, to insure financial success to the undertaking had not been accomplished. The Loar Redpath association, furnishing the program, could not be expected to take all financial responsibility. Hence Clarinda folks who have been accustomed these many years to have ten days of entertainment in Chautauqua auditorium will have to forgo that privilege one year.

"Now that the present generation have let Chautauqua drop," the *Herald* continued, "the question is pertinent—whose fault is it that the sessions continue no longer? Looking elsewhere, we see that the 'independent' Chautauquas have all been dropped. The days of the Booker T. Washington and Carrie Nation crowds have gone. People demand things differently now. Political orators have to 'cut it short.' Even the picture shows must simply hint at a truth, then jump to the next scene. The best that Chautauqua lovers can do is to wait, and hope for return of Chautauqua next year."

But hope as one might, the Clarinda Chautauqua had run its full course, as had most in the state. Whereas as many as forty-seven independents operated in Iowa in 1906, only a handful of Iowa community assemblies, independent and circuit alike, continued as long as Clarinda's. (Mediapolis, which maintained an assembly into the mid-1940s, claims to have been the last Chautauqua west of the Mississippi.) Nationally, the decline was similar. In 1920, approximately twenty-five Chautauqua bureaus managed nearly one hundred circuits; in 1932, only four bureaus managed five circuits.

For all real purposes, the national Chautauqua movement was dead and buried the year the Clarinda assembly folded. The deepening economic depression made any attempt to resurrect the Clarinda Chautauqua



COURTESY NODAWAY VALLEY HISTORICAL MUSEUM COLLECTION (CLARINDA)

Booster ribbon from Clarinda's 1909 Chautauqua

a futile one. Never again would the massive auditorium fill with expectant audiences seeking culture, entertainment, and education. Never again would "Play Night" bring laughter and excitement to the Clarinda assembly. Yet the Clarinda Chautauqua left us the proud heritage of theatrical presentations from the Chautauqua platform, helping pave the way for the acceptance and support theater receives today in the great heartland of America.□

NOTE ON SOURCES

The *Clarinda Herald*, *Clarinda Journal*, and *Page County Democrat* provided a wealth of information. Local Chautauqua materials (such as board minutes and correspondence) were found in the Clarinda Public Library. Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa, holds the enormous Redpath Chautauqua Collection and bound volumes of *Lyceum Magazine* and *Platform World*. Other sources include the Chautauqua Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City), and the collections of the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

Major secondary sources include: Victoria Case and Robert Ormond Case, *We Called it Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948); Joseph E. Gould, *The Chautauqua Movement; An Episode in the Continuing American Revolution* (New York: State University of New York, 1961); Harry P. Harrison, as told to Karl Detzer, *Culture Under Canvas: The*

Story of Tent Chautauqua (New York: Hastings House, 1958); R. Alan Hedges, *Actors Under Canvas: A Study of the Theatre of the Circuit Chautauqua, 1910-1933* (diss., Ohio State University, 1976); Charles F. Horner, *Strike the Tents: The Story of the Chautauqua* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1954); Jesse L. Hurlbut, *The Story of Chautauqua* (New York: Putnam, 1921); Gay MacLaren, *Morally We Roll Along* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938); Hugh A. Orchard, *Fifty Years of Chautauqua* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1923); William L. Slout, *Theatre in a Tent: The Development of a Provincial Entertainment* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972); and James S. Smoot, *Platform Theatre: Theatrical Elements of the Lyceum and Chautauqua* (diss., University of Michigan, 1954).

I would like to thank Pat Cassat and Bill West in Clarinda for assistance with visuals and Jane Daly of Saint Anselm College for secretarial assistance.

An annotated version of this manuscript is held in the *Palimpsest* files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).



"If it's a Cass show it's a good show"

by Michael Kramme

The attractive redhead pulled into town in her 1920 white Packard convertible with white upholstery, accompanied by two large white Russian wolfhounds seated beside her. With her name emblazoned in gold on each door, there could be no mistaking the driver. Hazel M. Cass had arrived.

One of Iowa's most flamboyant businesswomen, Cass owned and managed tent theater companies from 1919 to 1938. Earlier in this century, tent theater was a popular form of entertainment across the nation, but especially in the Midwest. At least 167 companies are known to have played in Iowa between 1890 and 1940. In the early days, traveling shows played in town halls, theaters, or opera houses for nine months, and then performed in enormous tents during the summer when non-air-conditioned buildings became unbearable in midwestern heat. Later, as motion pictures took over the stages of many theaters and opera houses, the shows only played in the summer months.

The arrival of a tent show by railroad or by car-and-truck caravan was looked forward to by the citizens of most communities. Companies often returned to the same towns year after year, and their annual visit became a highlight of the summer. Children helped erect the tent and move chairs and equipment into place in exchange for free tickets. Most com-

panies prepared six plays that they would perform during the week before moving to the next location. Because many audience members returned for every show, a company could perform in towns with small populations and still count on an audience each night.

Hazel Cass was perhaps the only woman in the tent-show business who was primarily a manager. Other women like Hazel McOwen and "Iowa's Little Sweetheart," Hila Morgan, owned their companies, but they were primarily actresses and had others fulfill management responsibilities. Some shows such as the Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company, based in Sabula, Iowa, and the Neil and Caroline Schaffner Players, based in Wapello, Iowa, were husband-and-wife partnerships with shared managerial duties.

Hazel Cass's background was not typical for a show business manager. Most managers were either born into show business families or worked for years in several different companies, learning the trade in a variety of jobs. Cass, however, was born October 20, 1889, into Sumner's most prominent family. Her grandfather S. G. Cass founded the Sumner bank and built the Cass block building. Her father, Joseph F. Cass, was also a banker. He and his brothers C. D. and L. C. Cass built the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern Railway and owned the Electric Park in Waterloo. (Electric parks were turn-of-the-century amusement parks often built by streetcar companies at the end of their lines to encourage weekend use of the streetcars.)

Hazel Cass was a fervent believer in tent theater and a self-confident owner and manager of traveling companies in the Midwest (photo circa 1920s).



Raised in this house, Cass was the daughter of a prominent family in Sumner, Iowa.

Cass had the typical upbringing of a young lady of her family's wealth and stature. She studied elocution, music, dancing, and equestrian skills in private schools with the finest teachers. She and her family traveled extensively and spent summers in San Antonio, where she became acquainted with General Pershing, impressing him with her horse-riding skills. While in San Antonio, she met John C. Koeneke, whom she married in 1909.

Cass, however, was not interested in becoming a society wife. She had something more interesting in mind and soon announced that she was going into show business.

Her family's precise reaction is not recorded, but a news story of the time recounted: "When she decided she would establish an independent career in the show business there was serious objections and some 'fireworks' around the old home. She tried to convince her family that she could have just as respectable, moral and honorable a career in that business as in any other, if the right methods were pursued. She insisted on following her ambition. While her family put no obstacles in her way after her start, she got no help or encouragement from any of them."

Cass joined a stock company and played a variety of roles as well as singing and dancing

in vaudeville. Her performing career was short lived, however, and she soon was involved in management. In 1918 the Parker-Rachford Shows, Inc. was organized; Cass was vice-president. Their first performance was in a tent in a Waterloo amusement park, most likely the family-owned Electric Park. The venture was successful, and the company took to the road.

Because actors and the theater in general had a tarnished reputation in the minds of many Americans, and because outsiders were automatically suspect in many communities, most traveling shows took extra care to establish a high moral atmosphere. Plays judged appropriate for families were performed, and the private lives of the performers were carefully monitored. Cass and her partners knew this, of course. In one of their "heralds" (printed advertisements tacked on telephone poles or sent to patrons) they reassured their audience: "The Cass, Parker, Rachford Shows (Inc.) was organized on strictly business lines to give the public full value in Amusement for every cent paid them. They employ only people and artists who are ladies and gentlemen of the best reputation and ability in their respective lines, all having appeared at various times in the largest city productions. The management will consider it a favor if their patrons will report anything that is not

entirely satisfactory to them. They will also appreciate any applause or favorable comment."

Cass soon bought out her partners' interest in the company and renamed it "The Hazel Cass Players." Her company performed in a tent from the first of April through the second week of September. Unlike most traveling companies, they did not have a winter season in opera houses. This left Cass free to pursue other interests: managing the Sioux City Playhouse for the 1928 winter season; spending time in San Antonio; appearing in small roles in Hollywood films; and selecting plays for her own actors, planning routes, and hiring personnel.

At the height of her career she ran four tent shows. She personally managed the original company, "The Hazel M. Cass Players." The other companies were "The Hazel M. Cass Comedians," "The Hazel M. Cass Stock Company," and "Davidson's Comedians," managed by her second husband, S. G. Davidson. All four companies shared one motto: "If it's a Cass show it's a good show."

Cass's own company—The Hazel M. Cass Players, or sometimes called the Number One Unit—was perhaps the most elaborate traveling tent theater in the country. Troup-

ers often referred to it as the "Cadillac of tent shows." Like most companies it traveled by railroad in the early years, but even in that respect Cass's company distinguished itself: it had a private baggage car. The company's tent was the largest in the Midwest (80 x 100 feet), costing more than ten thousand dollars in the early 1920s. It could hold an audience of 1,200.

The eager audience entered through the "lobby" in the front of the tent, and purchased tickets at the box office, set up on a raised platform. The prices charged by the Cass shows were similar to those of other companies. Adult tickets cost 25¢ (later raised to 35¢, and then 50¢) and children's cost 15¢ (later 25¢). Women were admitted free when accompanied by one paid ticket, a common practice of the time. An extra dime bought one a reserved chair (perhaps a box seat on a wooden floor), rather than a seat on the "circus blues." These bleachers, which lined the back and sides of the tent, were later replaced by chairs, reducing audience capacity but adding comfort. In fact, an advertisement reminded patrons: "Don't be afraid of the weather as the tent is as dry and comfortable as your home." On cooler evenings, coke-burning furnaces heated the

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF REPERTOIRE AMERICANA (MOUNT PLEASANT, IA)

Cass-Parker-Rachford Shows
INCORPORATED
Operating

H.R. PARKER
PRES.

HAZEL M. CASS
VICE-PRES.

J. A. RACHFORD
SEC. & TREAS.

*Electric Park
Waterloo, Iowa
Largest and Finest
Amusement Park.*

*Dramatic Tent
Road Shows
Home Office
Waterloo, Iowa.*

Cass found her strength in managing rather than performing, and soon became a partner in the Cass-Parker-Rachford Shows, which played in Waterloo. (Advertisement circa 1919)



"There always have been tent shows and always will be, I fancy," Cass said in a 1927 interview.

tent, reportedly an innovation in tent theater.

"I'm going to have the best company of players, the best plays, the best vaudeville, the best music and the best tent theater in America," Cass once told an interviewer. She did hire the best talent available, and paid the highest salaries of her era to achieve that goal. Leading actors made \$125 weekly.

In 1921, her Number One Unit was not particularly large—herself, eight cast members, and four orchestra members playing violin, piano, cornet, and drums. It was common for traveling companies to have this sized cast and a separate orchestra, which played a concert before the show and provide music for vaudeville specialties between acts of the plays. (Smaller shows sometimes had the actors "double in brass"—playing roles in the play and instruments in the orchestra.) But Cass didn't stop there. Her Number One Unit would eventually have a maid for the ladies' dressing room. She began hiring an advance agent to go to the towns ahead of the company and secure publicity and necessary licenses, a general agent to handle financial aspects, and another to help with logistics. Three men on regular salary set up and maintained the tent and equipment. When all four companies were at their prime, the Cass enterprises employed more than 120 workers.

The companies traveled by train, and later, when there were more hard-surfaced roads, by car-and-truck caravans. Although the Number One Unit played in some small towns such as Hawkeye and Postville, it focused primarily on larger ones such as Waterloo, Estherville, and Webster City, leaving the smaller towns to the other three companies. Each had a repertoire of six or seven plays, which enabled them to perform a different play nightly to encourage audience members to return. In the large towns, they could stay two weeks and present two performances of each play.

The Cass territory included Minnesota, Wisconsin, and northern Iowa. Her more popular Iowa towns span the alphabet—Algona, Britt, Clear Lake, Clarion, Cresco, Decorah, Eldora, Estherville, Guttenberg, Hampton, Hawkeye, Manchester, McGregor,

Mt. Vernon, New Hampton, Northwood, Osage, Postville, Rock Rapids, Waterloo, Waverly, Waukon, Webster City, and West Union.

"The shows are all of the same high quality and management," Cass bragged, "and will give more value in good clean amusement than any other tent show on the Road." The plays performed were typical of other traveling shows; many were Broadway hits and some were written especially for midwestern audiences. Everything from serious drama and sentimental melodrama to drawing-room comedies and farces appeared on stage. Nevertheless, great care was taken to select plays that provided "good, clean, family entertainment" and a variety of subject matter. A company often opened with a play with a religious or highly moral theme. These "preacher plays" established the entertainment as a positive experience in the eyes of the community leaders. The end of the week's run might conclude with a farce. Several had racy or suggestive titles, but nothing questionable actually happened in the performance. Among the hundreds of plays performed by the Cass organization include titles that pulled in crowds in the Twenties and Thirties (and amuse readers today). Consider, for instance, *Oh, Johnny Oh*; *Turn to the Right*; *The Fatal Card*; *Which One Shall I Marry?*; *The Divided House*; *Confessions of a Wife*; *Her Step Husband*; *Dancing Mothers*; *Any Men's Daughter*; *Other People's Business*; *Mary's Ankle*; and *Up in Mable's Room*. In 1925, a typical season, The Hazel M. Cass Players performed *It's A Boy* (on Monday), *Modern Cinderella* (Tuesday), *The Unkissed Bride* (Wednesday), *Smiles* (Thursday, replaced mid-season by *Where the Shannon Flows*), *Why Men Leave Home* (Friday), and *The Girl of the Flying X* (Saturday).

Each evening Cass appeared on stage. With her trademark red hair and rhinestone swagger stick (a thin walking stick), the glamorous mistress of ceremonies and hostess wore the latest Paris fashions purchased for each season at Marshall Field's in Chicago.

One of the keys to her success was that she was able to give her audiences what they wanted. "People want good clean shows," she explained. "That is what we are giving them



Inside one of Cass's tents, "circus blues" (or bleachers) edge the audience area and local advertisements surround the stage.

and that is the reason, I believe, why we draw the crowds we do and can return to the same towns and find friends and a welcome waiting for us every summer." She was indeed welcomed back, year after year. When her only child, Virginia, married, the wedding was held in the tent after a performance in McGregor, and the audience was invited to stay and see the wedding.

Only occasionally did she have problems in the towns in which she played. Once in Clear Lake, the authorities refused to allow her to perform on a Sunday. A local editorial

soon appeared: "A few Sundays ago a ban was placed upon the Hazel Cass tent show giving a Sunday entertainment as had been their custom on Sunday nights in their previous engagements here. Someone 'holier than thou' filed information with the mayor and there was no other alternative than to enforce the 'blue law' statute." (Blue laws prohibited certain public entertainments on Sundays.) The editorial continued: "In this day and age the greater part of the population of this country turn to Sunday as a day for recreation and amusement. It may be a violation of the Bible injunction, but it is a truism, nevertheless, and all must face it whether it agrees with their code of habits of living or not.

"Why should there be any discrimination,"



ways have been tent shows and always will be, I fancy. The high-class tent theater is a new thing, but I believe, it has a great future before it."

She was mistaken. Throughout the 1930s, show after show closed. Like Chautauquas, they were victims of competition from motion pictures and the Great Depression. During the early Thirties, three of the Cass shows were closed. Finally in 1938, The Hazel M. Cass Players toured their last.

Cass returned to her hometown of Sumner, Iowa, and with Clem McNally, her third husband, operated the family's Cass Opera House as a motion picture theater from 1938 until 1940. Not much more is known. In 1950 she organized and directed the Lion's Club Minstrel Show. About then, her friends, the Tiltons, persuaded her to return to the business she loved. They invited her to manage their Mid Tilton Shows, which she did for five years. By now in her sixties, she was fondly greeted by former audience members in each town she visited.

Cass eventually moved to Greene, Iowa, to live with her daughter and son-in-law. When she was ninety-one, the final curtain fell, on February 22, 1981. She was buried in the Union Mound Cemetery at Sumner.

Hazel Cass is still remembered as a glamorous and capable businesswoman by the few remaining performers with whom she worked, as well as by those who saw her shows. Deserving of the ultimate accolade in tent theater, she was, one might honestly say, "a real trouper." □

the writer reasoned, "when an entertainment, clean and respectable, is denied the privilege of opening its door on a Sunday night, whilst others of a like kind are not molested?" Remarking that the local Bayside amusement park, swimming, and motor boating were allowed on Sundays, the writer concluded: "We have an idea that local residents own most of the above mentioned amusement devices and in that case it would be a breach of friendship for the mayor to declare them disturbances of the peace. It makes a difference whose ox is gored."

Cass believed fervently in the tent theater business. Interviewed for a 1927 *Christian Science Monitor*, she predicted, "People in summer like to take their entertainment out of doors where they get the breezes. There al-

NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based on newspaper articles and publicity materials about Hazel Cass in the collections of the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. These include clippings from *The Greene [Iowa] Reporter*, *Amusement Reporter*, and *Sioux City Daily Tribune*. The photographs used also come from the museum's collections, which represent significant holdings on traveling theater and Chautauqua in America. Annotations to the original manuscript of this article are held in the *Palimpsest* files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).



Inside one of Cass's tents, "circus blues" (or bleachers) edge the audience area and local advertisements surround the stage.

and that is the reason, I believe, why we draw the crowds we do and can return to the same towns and find friends and a welcome waiting for us every summer." She was indeed welcomed back, year after year. When her only child, Virginia, married, the wedding was held in the tent after a performance in McGregor, and the audience was invited to stay and see the wedding.

Only occasionally did she have problems in the towns in which she played. Once in Clear Lake, the authorities refused to allow her to perform on a Sunday. A local editorial

soon appeared: "A few Sundays ago a ban was placed upon the Hazel Cass tent show giving a Sunday entertainment as had been their custom on Sunday nights in their previous engagements here. Someone 'holier than thou' filed information with the mayor and there was no other alternative than to enforce the 'blue law' statute." (Blue laws prohibited certain public entertainments on Sundays.) The editorial continued: "In this day and age the greater part of the population of this country turn to Sunday as a day for recreation and amusement. It may be a violation of the Bible injunction, but it is a truism, nevertheless, and all must face it whether it agrees with their code of habits of living or not.

"Why should there be any discrimination,"

the writer reasoned, "when an entertainment, clean and respectable, is denied the privilege of opening its door on a Sunday night, whilst others of a like kind are not molested?" Remarking that the local Bayside amusement park, swimming, and motor boating were allowed on Sundays, the writer concluded: "We have an idea that local residents own most of the above mentioned amusement devices and in that case it would be a breach of friendship for the mayor to declare them disturbances of the peace. It makes a difference whose ox is gored."

Cass believed fervently in the tent theater business. Interviewed for a 1927 *Christian Science Monitor*, she predicted, "People in summer like to take their entertainment out of doors where they get the breezes. There al-

ways have been tent shows and always will be, I fancy. The high-class tent theater is a new thing, but I believe, it has a great future before it."

She was mistaken. Throughout the 1930s, show after show closed. Like Chautauquas, they were victims of competition from motion pictures and the Great Depression. During the early Thirties, three of the Cass shows were closed. Finally in 1938, The Hazel M. Cass Players toured their last.

Cass returned to her hometown of Sumner, Iowa, and with Clem McNally, her third husband, operated the family's Cass Opera House as a motion picture theater from 1938 until 1940. Not much more is known. In 1950 she organized and directed the Lion's Club Minstrel Show. About then, her friends, the Tiltons, persuaded her to return to the business she loved. They invited her to manage their Mid Tilton Shows, which she did for five years. By now in her sixties, she was fondly greeted by former audience members in each town she visited.

Cass eventually moved to Greene, Iowa, to live with her daughter and son-in-law. When she was ninety-one, the final curtain fell, on February 22, 1981. She was buried in the Union Mound Cemetery at Sumner.

Hazel Cass is still remembered as a glamorous and capable businesswoman by the few remaining performers with whom she worked, as well as by those who saw her shows. Deserving of the ultimate accolade in tent theater, she was, one might honestly say, "a real trouper." □

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Finding palimpsests in day-to-day living

This fall we asked readers to help celebrate the 75th anniversary of *The Palimpsest* magazine by using that most unusual word: palimpsest. (Remember: the word is defined on the inside front cover.) These six readers found its meaning in their immediate lives. —The editor

"I saw in his face a palimpsest of Iowa farming, the lined brow from a dozen dry years, the red, rough skin from fifty harvests."

Gordon Marshall (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

"My workbench has become a palimpsest of twenty years of woodworking. Every time I go to make another full-scale drawing or mix another custom stain, the lines and colors that cover the work surface evoke memories of pieces of furniture that long ago found new homes."

Russell Karkowski (Solon, Iowa)

"James Walter Shannon probably never knew the word 'palimpsest' but might well be one of the greatest of American palimpsests, in that while living in western Nebraska he searched for and collected Indian arrowheads and artifacts as he became a top authority on the Oregon Trail that passed through the area. Interested in all early 'imprints' he also collected antiques important in early agricultural American life, sharing always his passion, and delight, with grandchildren and friends."

Latha Shannon Bonnewell (Dubuque, Iowa)

"My grandma's patchwork quilt was a palimpsest—memories sewed together, to keep me warm."

Virginia C. McCammon (Des Moines, Iowa)

"The layers of dirt and soot on my torn jeans are a veritable palimpsest, revealing my encounters with the fresh morning grass and dew, with a big, beat-up, yellow 1977 Ford LTD and its monster 351 Cleveland oil-burner, with an old chair stained with grease, and finally, with the forests and wetlands of northern Johnson County."

Kurt Berge (Iowa City, Iowa)

"My mother, Beth Coon, is an antique dealer and furniture restorer. I have grown up watching her lovingly hand strip antiques of all varieties, working through the palimpsest the years have left. From eight or nine coats of paint in as many colors on a mission-oak table, to the dull patina on brass knobs, to badly damaged veneer on the drawers of a possum-belly cabinet, the layers are a testament to the lives of the furniture. With infinite patience and the joy of discovery, she strips away, bit by bit, all that obscures the natural beauty of the fine craftsmanship of ages past."

Stephanie Coon (Ames, Iowa)

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compiled by Stephanie Coon

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Landis K. Magnuson, a former resident of Clarinda, is an associate professor of English (theater specialist) at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. Chautauqua, opera houses, and the traveling repertoire companies of the Depression era are his particular research interests. McFarland Press soon will publish his book-length study of popular theater and entertainment entitled *Circle Stock Theatre: Feeding the Body and Soul*.

LETTERS FROM READERS

Fred Kent snares action shots

In the late Twenties Fred Kent came to Wellman to photograph one of my dad's fine saddle horses. In order to get the horse to stand at attention for the perfect picture, Kent had me hide behind a tree with my snare drum and then, on his signal, come out from behind the tree and start playing—or racketing, if you prefer.

I recall that on that occasion Mr. Kent told me how pleased he was with the Wellman High School Band at the state band festival at Iowa City.

The bands marched up Melrose Avenue to the fieldhouse for a massed band performance. Mr. Kent said that he noticed that the Wellman band was the only band playing while it marched up that hill.

Later, as I recalled this statement of his, I realized that Photographer Kent wanted to photograph a band *playing* and not just *marching*. Wellman provided him with that opportunity.

That was an excellent article about Fred Kent.

Fran Coffey
Tucson, Arizona

Counting stars—and correcting us

It appears to me that the photo caption on page 92, Summer 1994 *Palimpsest* is incorrect. 1894 is given as the date of the photo yet a 48-star flag shows in the window [of Adelbert Riepe's pharmacy in Davenport]. It was more than 20 years later that the 48-star flag came into being. I thought a correction might appear in the current issue.

Surely I was not the only one to note this.

Keep those good articles coming. I find much in each issue that is most interesting. How great it is to have the great photo history contributed by the Kents.

Edgar H. Holden
Bettendorf, Iowa

Thanks for the correction, Mr. Holden. Because the 48-star flag was not designed until 1912, the use of the German language and lyrics in the storefront window seems all the more significant. —The editor

Floppy fan

Enclosed please find a check to cover the cost of an additional Summer 1994 *Palimpsest*. Having grown up on Floppy, I MUST have an extra!!

I have enjoyed receiving *The Palimpsest* for years. However, I was particularly thrilled to see a big part of my childhood on the cover of the summer publication. Thanks for the great story and stirring up wonderful memories.

Lynn Alan Peterson
Kansas City, Missouri

"Innovative approach to local TV history"

Thank you so much for sending your [summer 1994] issue of *Palimpsest*. I thoroughly enjoyed your photo essay and survey about the local practices of TV reception. It's a wonderful idea, and so gratifying to know that you felt in part inspired by my research. Please keep me posted on your survey responses, etc.

Thanks again for your kind interest in my work and for letting me see your very innovative approach to local TV history.

Lynn Spigel, Associate Professor
School of Cinema-Television
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California
[and author of *Make Room for TV:
Television and the Family Ideal
in Postwar America*]

CORRECTION

The Summer 1994 *Palimpsest*, page 66, misidentified the young man as the son of Virginia and Richard Evans. He is the son of Virginia and Renald Evans. We regret the error.

For manuscript submission guidelines, write: *Palimpsest* Editor, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52240-1806. Phone 319-335-3932.



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