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My Chautauqua Memories

On the shore of charming Lake Chautauqua, in the southwestern corner of the state of New York, is a wooded area in which the Methodists held seasonal camp meetings during the years shortly after the Civil War. But by the mid-seventies, those old shouting and praying outdoor "revivals" under canvas were petering out; and the Lake Chautauqua grounds were taken over in 1874 for something new in the world — a Sunday School Assembly.

John H. Vincent, later a Methodist bishop, was at this time engaged in working out a system for the training of Sunday School teachers; and Lewis Miller, a wealthy and religious manufacturer, was his enthusiastic supporter. These two were the founders of what came to be known as "Chautauqua." The first Assembly, designed to impart Biblical lore and religious teaching to those who came to the lakeside to camp for two or three weeks, was a great success; and the number of those attending grew year by year. Soon the Assembly

had outgrown the bounds of its original pattern — in scope of study, in entertainment features, in length of program, in equipment. An amphitheatre was erected; good dining rooms were provided; small frame hotels offered accommodations for those who did not wish to live in canvas dwellings during the sessions.

But the great development was in the breadth of the program, which burst sectarian bounds from the start and became thoroughly interdenominational. Sunday School work, though not abandoned, was soon overshadowed by courses in secular history and literature. William Rainey Harper, later to become president of the University of Chicago, was brought in to direct the cultural courses. John Vincent, a promoter of genius, induced President U. S. Grant to visit the Assembly and address it in 1875. That gave the institution on the shore of Lake Chautauqua a national standing, and it also made it easier to get men like General James Garfield, Schuyler Colfax, and President Rutherford B. Hayes in later seasons. And hundreds of famous preachers, authors, and educators were proud to be invited to speak at Chautauqua in the eighties and nineties.

The spectacular success of the Assembly on the lake with the romantic Indian name led to imitation; and soon other institutes of the kind were being established all over the country, all calling themselves "Chautauquas." Each of them had its

barn-like "pavilion," or auditorium, its cottages, its tents, its rude classrooms, and its inn or dining room. And each, of course, had its own program of lectures by famous men and women, its concerts and entertainments, its courses of study, and so on.

But an even greater expansion of this adult education project in a different direction followed. It was in the fourth year of the Chautauqua Assembly that Vincent promulgated an idea designed to spread the blessings of higher education far and wide. He himself had not been able to attend college as a young man, and he felt a keen sympathy for all who had been denied that opportunity. What he now proposed was a four-year home-reading course dealing with the chief civilizations of the world. His first list included seven very solid books, and the prescribed work ended with examinations and what was called "recognition" for those who passed. This new system was called the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, and it soon became immensely successful. By the end of the century some fifty thousand men and women had been "recognized" for their completion of the four-year course, and a quarter of a million had been enrolled for some period, long or short. A new reading list, with books in special binding, was provided each year. History, literature, sociology, and science courses furnished the chief materials for the studies outlined during

some fifty years; and the great civilizations of mankind were covered by those courses.

When I was a young boy at Tipton, Iowa, I was charmed and fascinated by that exciting thing which we knew as "Chautauqua." My parents were among the organizers of the Tipton Circle; and every Monday night they would depart for the meeting, each carrying a C. L. & S. C. book or two and a folding chair. Since the meetings were in private homes, members saved hosts the trouble of borrowing chairs from the neighbors by bringing their own. To me there was something enchanting about those folding chairs, which were kept upstairs in the spare room except when Father and Mother carried them off on Monday nights. Once when our parents left us alone in the house to attend a funeral out in the country, we children fetched those folding chairs downstairs and set them up in the sitting room, intending to replace them long before Father and Mother got back. But their return was unexpectedly early, and I was sitting in one of the magical contraptions when they walked into the house.

"Why, how did that chair ever get down here?" asked Mother.

"I brought it down, Mamma," I confessed.

"But why did thee bring it down here?"

"I don't know, Mamma."

"Well, thee can just take it right back upstairs, and the other one, too!"

Mamma did not know the reason those chairs fascinated me, and Frankie did not know, and I am not sure that I can explain it satisfactorily at this late date; but I think that our parents' enthusiasm for Chautauqua had been communicated to us children, and that we felt a kind of sorcery in everything connected with it. Thus the folding chair was a true fetish. But even if we were forbidden to handle the folding chairs, we were allowed to read the books and the *Chautauquan*, the Circle's excellent monthly magazine. Some of the books were beyond our capacities; indeed, I suppose all of them were, but I remember with affection Henry A. Beers' *Initial Studies in American Letters*, and I recall puzzling over W. C. Brownell's *French Traits*. Also we children had a "Chautauqua Desk," which was a combined blackboard and wall-desk with a revolving scroll at the top, and which afforded us endless delight and instruction.

Many years later, Chautauqua again affected my life significantly, through a new development of the old system that Vincent and his colleagues had originated in the seventies. I have pointed out how hundreds of Assemblies had sprung up throughout the land, each with its own plot of ground and rude buildings, and how each was offering a program for both visitors and campers. Toward the end of the Nineties, many Chautauquas were depending more upon season-ticket

holders from their own communities than upon campers. Though these Assemblies were all the progeny of the pioneer venture on Lake Chautauqua, the management there never made any attempt to organize them into one interdependent system. The common need for inspirational and instructive speakers and good concert companies did, however, produce a certain amount of cooperative effort in program building; and soon the lyceum agencies, which furnished talent to Lecture Courses the country over in the Winters, began to serve these Summer programs also, thus giving their speakers and musicians work in both seasons.

Then, just after the turn of the century, it occurred to several men in the lyceum business that many more towns could be served far more cheaply if the agency furnished not only the talent but also tent auditoriums, as the circus did; in such a system they would ask local help only to sponsor the Chautauqua by guaranteeing the sale of a certain number of season tickets, as was done in connection with the Winter lecture courses. Such an arrangement could keep talent busy every day of the season, reduce "jumps" on the average from five hundred to fifty miles, and enable a town to have a full week's cultural debauch without any permanent investment or any exertion beyond that of ticket-selling campaigns. Leader in this momentous shift of emphasis in the Chautauqua sys-

tem was Keith Vawter, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a lyceum operator who founded the tent circuit named after him in 1904. Ten or fifteen years later, when the tent Chautauqua reached its height, over seven thousand towns were being served by circuits operated by a score or more of agencies.

Urban critics sometimes satirized the tent Chautauqua. They made fun of William Jennings Bryan, Robert La Follette, and Champ Clark for "hitting the Chautauqua trail" every Summer; but the good old *Baltimore Sun* was right when, in discussing Secretary of State Bryan's speaking tour of the Summer of 1914, it declared that no prominent public official could afford to neglect the Chautauqua platform. Certainly many of them spent a few weeks in such work each season for a number of years. Senator Warren G. Harding, of Ohio, was a familiar figure at the Chautauquas, as were Senator Irvine L. Lenroot, of Wisconsin; Senator George W. Norris, of Nebraska; Governor Joseph W. Folk, of Missouri; and "Uncle Joe" Cannon, of Illinois. Among headliners were Judge Benjamin B. Lindsey, of Colorado, on the youth question, and Captain Richmond P. Hobson, a Spanish-American war hero, on military and naval preparedness. Audiences were made to forget the heat and hard benches by such humorists as Strickland Gillilan, Opie Read, and James Whitcomb Riley. Choirs, orchestras, bands, string

quartets, voice quartets, bellringers, interpretive readers, chalk-talkers, violinists, pianists furnished rich variety. Every good program had at least one dramatic company, offering a full-length play.

Talent's lot was not easy. Nightly "jumps," often on the inferior trains that served the small towns; daily appearances, excused only in cases of serious illness; all kinds of weather, including torrid midsummer heat, rain beating on tent tops, wind that often made the quarter-poles dance a frightening jig; country hotels and irregular meals — such were the hardships of the Chautauqua troupers. But season tickets had been sold on the basis of an advertised program; to coin a phrase, the show had to go on.

I remember one blistering hot afternoon in a small Iowa town when Bryan was on the platform, and the orator was drenched with perspiration. He stopped in the middle of one of his rounded periods, dipped both hands into a large pitcher of ice-water that stood on the table before him, and came up with two handfuls of crushed ice, which he held to his throbbing bald head for a minute or two. There was no laughter; I think we all felt sympathetic with the old man.

One season Congressman Victor Murdock, of Kansas, an excellent platform man, suffered for a couple of weeks with what we called "summer complaint." His lecture was an hour and a quarter long; and one afternoon, finding it impossible to

postpone relief until his address was over, he stopped suddenly in the midst of a sentence and said: "Friends, this is a hot afternoon, and I must not keep you sitting on those hard planks for another half-hour without change of position. I am going to give you five minutes' intermission so you can stand up and stretch your legs." The audience was surprised and pleased by the speaker's thoughtfulness; but before it had "stretched its legs" very much, Vic had slipped through the curtains at the back of the platform, had made a bee-line for the barbed wire fence that separated the Chautauqua lot from a nearby cornfield, and was out of sight of even the tent-boys among the green stalks of the growing corn. When the five-minute intermission was over, the speaker was back on the platform, composed and refreshed, and ready to continue his vigorous and entertaining lecture. Such was the life of a follower of the Chautauqua trail.

In the Summer of 1916, when I was editing and publishing a weekly paper in Grand Junction, Iowa, I added to my various business, civic, and church responsibilities the duties of local manager of the town's Chautauqua. In fact, I not only performed the duties of that functionary but also acted as platform manager for the Grand Junction program that year. The next Spring, having sold my newspaper in order to begin graduate work at Columbia University the next Fall, I was ready to

accept Sam Holladay's offer of an all-Summer job as a platform manager on Circuit A of his Midland Chautauqua System, of Des Moines. I liked the work so well on first trial that I returned to it for the three succeeding Summers.

This Circuit A had seven Chautauqua programs running at once, a new one beginning every day. There were eight tents and eight crews in order to allow a day between set-ups to transport and erect the tent and get ready for a new opening. The crew consisted of the platform manager, who was really a general superintendent; two tent-boys, usually college students on "vacation," who had the care of the big tent and the canvas yard-walls and lived in a small utility tent on the grounds; and the junior supervisor, who conducted the morning play hours for the children and usually trained them for a "pageant" that was staged the last day of the session.

The first thing the platform manager had to do on arriving in a new town was to look up the local manager and learn how the season ticket sale had gone. The entire circuit Chautauqua system was built on the season ticket. No town was served by the Midland without a contract guaranteeing the sale of a thousand dollars' worth of season tickets, signed by a group of public-spirited men. Alas, the sale sometimes fell short, and in such a case the local manager was naturally inclined to avoid the unpleasant business of collecting the guarantee

from his neighbors, and the platform man had to take up that task. More than once I had to make the rounds collecting the guarantee, and then to follow up those visits with a campaign to enlist signers for the next year's contract. That, gentle reader, was what is known as an Herculean task. Sometimes I succeeded, and sometimes I had to give it up and mark the town off the list. The Bureau sent out a clean-up man to help with business affairs on the last day, but I usually had the contract all signed up for him, or else was ready with conclusive evidence that the place was no longer what we called "a good Chautauqua town."

The public knew the platform manager chiefly as the fellow who introduced the talent. A short and sharp introduction, with a wisecrack or two and a flattering résumé of the record and reputation of the speaker or artist, was called for. Sometimes the speaker, who loved the flattery, would use it to serve the double purpose of a pretense of modesty and a laugh-provoker with which to begin an otherwise rather heavy address. I remember a certain famous New York pulpit orator who got into the habit of quipping about my introductions and (as I heard from the grapevine circuit) about those of all the other platform managers. One afternoon, after I had introduced this speaker in my best manner, and the greeting applause had subsided, he looked over to the wings into which I had disappeared from audience view and asked,

"Why hasn't somebody shot that fellow in the leg before this?" After the lecture, I waylaid the great man, who was at the time in company with a Bureau representative, and though I did not shoot him in the leg, I fired a barrage of rebuke and objurgation at him point-blank. He seemed genuinely surprised that I had been offended, and was so apologetic that he almost wept. He had regarded the banter, I found, as part of his show, and had not stopped to think that the platform man had to live with the people of a town, and deal with them, throughout a week, and needed to preserve some modicum of respect and standing. That was my first season, and I suppose I was too sensitive.

The platform manager had to be a kind of guide and shepherd to the talent. I met them on the arrival of their trains whenever I could. I gave them advice about hotels, eating places, travel arrangements, location of the tent, how to please local audiences, cures for headache and stomach-ache, how to get along with their traveling companions, what to write to the family at home, and a hundred other things. Relaxed somewhere after the evening program, a speaker or musician would amaze me by taking me into his confidence about his marital difficulties, or troubles he was having with his publisher, or his anxieties about his lyceum contract, or the exciting details of his recent surgical operation.

I had some odd characters on my platform during the four Summers in which I was engaged in this work, including some who were "phonies," some who were too temperamental to endure patiently the rigors of the Chautauqua circuit, some who were everlastingly flirtatious, and some who never did find out exactly what it was all about.

I remember one lecturer on big-game hunting who began his Summer's work by devoting his hour mainly to a great lion-hunt in which he had engaged. He did not last out our season; but before he was replaced, he had built up his story to where he was slaughtering half the wild life of the South African veldts single-handed. That sort of accretion of sensation was easy for a speaker who was naturally a fluent liar and was daily subjected to the challenge of a thrill-hungry audience. On the 1917 program we had a male quartet made up of disabled Canadian soldiers returned from the European war. They sang the songs then becoming popular — "Tipperary," "The Long, Long Trail," "Over There" — and did them very well; and in between, one of them told something of their experiences in the war. This narrative contained, at the very first, something about the crimes committed by the "Huns"; and as the season progressed, these atrocity stories grew. Since I listened to the program every week, I could see this development clearly, and was shocked by what appeared to be a singularly repulsive variety

of mendacity. So I complained to the Bureau, and soon the boys mended their ways and cleaned up their story and sang "Over There" with more verve than ever, and less sadism.

One of the most temperamental lecturers I had on my platform was an English lieutenant, also a war hero. In his voluminous luggage he carried a hammock, because, he insisted, he could not sleep in hotel beds. He had an injured knee and walked with a cane, so his traveling companions had to assist him with his luggage; and they came to resent that hammock so much that several times they tried to lose it by forgetting to bring it off the train, but the lieutenant always recovered it. If he had come to us from His Majesty's Navy, we might have understood this peculiarity; but he came from the Army. Every night he would swing that hammock, usually in his hotel room, but sometimes outdoors.

The lieutenant was always full of complaints about the way the Chautauqua was run, and I regret to record that I quarreled with him almost continuously the whole season long. He may have been suffering all the time from his wounds, though I thought then it was sheer ill temper. He had a rough, unpleasant voice, a fine sense of his own importance, a very British manner of speech, and a monocle. The last of these appurtenances he used but rarely, bringing it out only to emphasize some particularly insulting observation. One

night in Mankato, Kansas, when our tent had blown down and we had to give our show in the open, the lieutenant refused until the last minute to go on. Speaking without benefit of canvas would hurt his voice, he argued. I threatened him with all the condign discipline I could conjure up in the name of the Bureau, but I was not sure until I had actually introduced him and he limped forward from the front row of the audience that he would speak that night.

The "leftenant" was supposed to be writing a book about his American experiences, and he once told me that I would be surprised to know what he had in his notes about me. I do not know whether he ever published his book or not, or whether I was in it if he did; but here he is in mine, complete with hammock, raucous voice, limp, and monocle, though without name.

But there were many great troupers on the old Midland Circuit A, and some really distinguished personalities. With some of the talent I made lasting friendships, and I looked forward to my weekly reunions with them in happy anticipation of little parties and much good talk. Strickland Gillilan, the humorist — author of the famous "Off ag'in, on ag'in, gone ag'in, Finnegin" verses — was a rare soul and a good companion. Chancellor Henry A. Buchtel, of Denver University, former Governor of Colorado and one of our top lecturers, virtually adopted me as a grandson for a

season. Governor Leslie M. Shaw, of Iowa, was an inexhaustible treasury of homely wisdom. Theodore Roosevelt had appointed him Secretary of the Treasury partly, it was said, because of the national reputation as a campaign speaker that he had made when he had spoken from hundreds of platforms in the canvas of 1900; but I noticed that he was always nervous before he went on for his Chautauqua lecture. One evening when I saw him pacing back and forth behind the curtain, I bantered him a little about his obvious tenseness.

"Governor," I said, "I should think that a seasoned stump-speaker like you would take this sort of thing in stride — just one more talk to an audience, you know. But here you are, nervous as a kitten!"

"My boy," said the Governor, "you talk like a tyro, as you are. No man ever yet made a speech that was worth hearing without getting wound up tight enough to bust a spring before he went on. Remember that."

I have, indeed, remembered that. I accepted it then, and I accept it now, as basic in the psychology of address.

Occasionally I had William Jennings Bryan on my platform. His fee was always half his gate receipts. I never got through to him personally; he was kind to Chautauqua personnel but uninterested in us. It was once necessary for me to travel about fifty miles in an automobile with him, and

that was in the days when such a trip required nearly two hours. I had looked forward to listening to some personal words of wit and wisdom from the great man on this occasion, but he was apparently saving them for his audience at two bits a head, for as soon as he settled himself in his seat and we got under way, his head drooped, and he was asleep. All I heard from him on the whole journey was an occasional gurgling snore. Like a good trooper, he was getting his rest where he could.

Memories of my Chautauqua Summers are compounded chiefly of meetings with interesting people, campaigns for contracts, and weather. Weather was a constant hazard. Windstorms were especially to be feared. Sizzling heat under the big top, light showers and drumming rains we could cope with, but high winds might do great damage to tents and were sometimes a potential danger to the lives and limbs of audiences. The worst experience of that kind that ever came my way was the baby cyclone at Mankato, Kansas.

We came to Mankato that year doomed to misfortune. Kansas had been suffering from a Summer-long drought, the fields were dead, and neither farmers nor townspeople had money for Chautauqua. The town had not met its contract guarantee, and we had only small audiences at our programs. One afternoon, a blessed black cloud appeared in the West, and ahead of it moved

white wind-puffs. The talent were alarmed; but I told them to go on when introduced, and I would warn them in time if there was danger. Then, as I watched the cloud, I saw it part, half going north of us and half south, leaving Mankato as parched and dry as it had been all Summer. The next day Dr. Lena K. Sadler was on the platform with her excellent health lecture when the same thing happened: the menacing bank of clouds came out of the West, with wind in front of it. But this time it did not part; the black wall seemed to rush straight toward our tent, and the wind was upon us.

I bounced on to the platform and asked the audience to get out. "It is my duty," I cried, "to warn you that this tent will not be safe in five minutes! We'll give you the rest of this program later if we can, but for now you must find shelter somewhere else!" But the small audience was not much alarmed by the antics of the frightened young fellow on the platform. The tall Kansan who was our local manager rose in the rear of the tent and drawled, "Oh, we're used to these winds here in Kansas, Mr. Mott. We're not afraid of them. We'd love to have a little blow and a big rain!" But I argued that nobody would be safe in that tent when the wind lifted the quarter-poles; and nearly all the audience drifted out, more amused than alarmed.

The tent-boys had, of course, begun to tighten guy ropes and tie down the canvas walls. In a few

minutes the wind was whistling under the top, making it billow and pull on the ropes. The quarter-poles were attached to the canvas; and when the top rose they went with it, and then came crashing down upon the seats and benches and everything beneath them. This infernal dance of the quarter-poles was now accompanied by the roaring of the wind, the tearing of the canvas, and the perilous swaying of the big center-poles. Suddenly one of these poles cracked with a noise like artillery, and the big tent came down.

Nobody was hurt. The wind and the rain were soon past. But the tent was ruined, and that night we gave our show under the stars. We had the largest crowd of our Mankato week that night. For the remaining two days of our session, we held forth in the high school assembly hall, which was large enough for our audiences, with space to spare. But we could not collect our guarantee in Mankato; we failed to get a contract for the next year; and after the last program, when the borrowed piano was being returned to its owner, it slid off the back of the dray and lost most of its imitation mahogany case in the ditch. Thus ended a week of disasters.

I recall a more amusing experience with a storm in Waseca, Minnesota. There the tent was pitched in the public park; and since the space between the trees was a little cramped for a tent, the boys had tied their guy ropes to trees in many cases and had

not been able to get an evenly stretched top. However, it did well enough until a thunderstorm came along one afternoon with a few puffs of wind before it. These made the canvas billow and flap more than it would have done with a tight set-up. I had been watching the clouds and took the responsibility of telling the audience there was no danger and they had better remain in the tent, where it was dry, instead of rushing out into the rain. They agreed, but with the talent it was a different story. We had a ladies' orchestra with a male director on the platform that afternoon, and the Major had, I believe, undergone some harrowing experiences with a wind-wrecked tent in a former season; at any rate, he shouted a *sauve qui peut* to his girls and he himself, a big round man, dived under the platform, trying to drag his big round bass drum with him. It took half an hour to restore order and set the harmonies and rhythms of the orchestra to competing with the beat of the rain on the canvas roof.

But on the whole, my four Chautauqua Summers were pleasant and rewarding. The emotional galvanism characteristic of all show business, the weekly change of scene, and the constant association with lively-minded people combined to create a rich experience for me.

Now the Chautauqua circuits are all gone, and of course the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle dropped into oblivion years ago. All that is

left of the grand old institution of Chautauqua is a small, scattered group of die-hard independent Assemblies, mostly occupying their own "pavilions" and situated in various resort areas — and the mother of them all — at Lake Chautauqua in New York. That great institution now flourishes more grandly than ever, with fine buildings and elaborate programs, on the shore of the beautiful lake with the Indian name.

FRANK LUTHER MOTT