Culture on the Prairie: The Big Stone Lake Chautauqua

MICHAEL R. SCHLIESSMANN

In titling their book on the Chautauqua movement *We Called It Culture*, authors Victoria Case and Robert Ormond Case echoed a sentiment that millions of Americans at the turn of the century shared. Frances Tippett, a resident of Big Stone City, spoke for many South Dakotans who experienced firsthand the excitement of annual Chautauqua gatherings when she said simply, “Oh, we loved it!” Affection for the Chautauqua has reemerged on the Northern Great Plains with the revival of this old form of entertainment, enlightenment, and education. However, the popularity the modern Chautauqua enjoys is only vaguely reminiscent of that of the phenomenon that was born in New York State in 1874 and spread throughout the country to peak in the golden jubilee year of 1924. Over those fifty years—a time when transportation and communication technologies were still fairly primitive—the Chautauqua played a vital role in filling an information void in the lives of Americans, especially those in rural areas like South Dakota.

1. The Cases’ book (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1948) chronicles the development of the Chautauqua movement and has helped to form the basis for subsequent studies.

John H. Vincent of Camptown, New Jersey, and Lewis Miller of Akron, Ohio, established the Chautauqua in 1874 as a two-week training session for Methodist Sunday School teachers. Held in the summer at a former religious camp-meeting site on Lake Chautauqua in southwest New York, the gathering gave teachers an opportunity to escape the classroom and learn in concert with nature. The Chautauqua soon took on a broader scope as its founders laid aside the denominational aspects for a more general program of morality, inspiration, and culture. "Rooted in a thirst for knowledge," the Chautauqua grew rapidly and soon became synonymous with "study, music, dramatic interpretation, lectures and oratory," all conducted in an atmosphere of fun and respectability.

During its heyday, the Chautauqua filled a communication gap in the rapidly expanding industrial society of the United States, which was flirting with internationalism and adjusting to the effects of the suffrage and temperance movements. Information was at a premium, but the newspapers of the time often consisted solely of boiler-plate print, local gossip, and advertisements. The treatment of national, international, or state news was extremely general in nature, especially in the smaller weeklies, and the electronic mass media were only in their infancy at the end of the Chautauqua's prominence. Even though the Chautauqua could not guarantee timely discussion of some matters, its lectures, orations, and forums covered many topics of a broader political, social, moral, or religious scope. America's Chautauqua platforms were home to speakers and showmen alike, and Chautauqua-goers were privileged to receive information and entertainment firsthand.

By 1900, approximately two hundred permanent assemblies modeled on the New York gatherings had been established. In addition, hundreds of tent or circuit Chautauquas crisscrossed the nation, using the railroad to bring culture and entertainment to towns that could not host a permanent Chautauqua. At the height of the movement in 1924, twelve thousand towns held Chautauquas, drawing a total audience estimated at thirty million. Iowa alone had assemblies in 503 towns in a single year. Fortunately for South Dakotans, the state partook in the phenomenal growth of the movement. The first permanent assembly in eastern South Dakota began in 1891 on the shores of Lake Madison, with another established in 1899 on Big Stone Lake in the state's northeastern corner. As did many

4. Ibid., pp. 12, 17.
others, these assemblies sprang up in wooded glens near glittering lakes. Their appeal undoubtedly enhanced by the life-giving water, both assemblies mirrored the larger Chautauqua movement in their form and content.5

In a report on an organizational meeting of the Big Stone Lake Assembly Association in 1889, the Grant County Review stated, “The purpose of such an association is to provide a place on the banks of the finest lake in the northwest for a summer meeting where the best talent in the world can be gotten together for a few days enjoyment and enlightenment for literary [sic] inclined people.”6 The assembly association, chartered in 1889 and made up of religious and civic leaders from the surrounding area, was the driving force behind the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua. The mission of the group included the promotion of “religious, educational, benevolent, sanitary, and charitable interests” and the maintenance of “an attractive and morally safe summer resort.” The group's charter also authorized the buying and selling of real estate.7 To these ends, the association bought and maintained Simpson Park, located on the southeast corner of Big Stone Lake and often referred to as Chautauqua Park.8

The aims of the association clearly coincided with those of the larger Chautauqua movement and its religious origins. The charter for the Big Stone Lake group, for example, required that five of the seven directors “be members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in good and regular standing.” Whether or not the association had planned to host a permanent Chautauqua is subject to speculation, for the formation of the group preceded the first actual program by a decade. When the Chautauqua finally took root at Simpson Park in 1899, the site was ready. To ensure a fitting start for the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua, the association hired as its first superinten-

7. Big Stone Lake Assembly Association, Articles of Incorporation, 26 Mar. 1889, Office of the Secretary of State, Pierre, S.Dak.
9. Big Stone Lake Assembly Association, Articles of Incorporation.
dent Reverend C. E. Hager, who had performed the same function for South Dakota's other permanent Chautauqua at Lake Madison.  

An early observer described the Simpson Park grounds as "diversified by noble bluffs, intersected with romantic dells, with cool and shade rambles, no finer ground to be found in the Northwest." Embellished though this description may have been, the grounds were impressive enough to inspire Nellie Cleveland Voss, a landscape painter whose family had homesteaded near Milbank, to paint Chautauqua Park Road, Big Stone Lake, a treatment of the site that is now part of the permanent collection of the South Dakota Art Museum. Skirting Big Stone Lake, often no more than a few feet from the water's edge, the road provided the first land access to the park. Another road opened in 1922, about forty yards west of

11. Quoted in Black, History of Grant County, p. 52.
the original. It curved around the main pavilion as it entered the park proper. The original road is the one most used today, and it still retains much of the flavor Voss captured on canvas. The Chautauqua Park grounds also had existing structures—mostly small, privately owned cottages—prior to 1899. In that year, workers constructed a pavilion estimated to seat three thousand. Tom Tippett, a long-time resident of Big Stone City, recalled that the pavilion was covered so that programs could proceed in adverse weather. Newspaper accounts of the twenty-seven years of the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua reveal that no program was ever “rained out.”

Since the avowed purpose of the assembly association was to establish a resort and an implied purpose was to make a profit, it is not surprising that plans called for the building of a hotel. Workers completed the three-story, seventy-five-room Minnewarmett by the end of May 1901. They also built quarters to accommodate teachers attending the summer-school institutes held in conjunction with most Chautauquas. Located across the road from the pavilion was a dining facility built out over the water. The thirty-two-acre grounds also contained sixty cottages, complete with garbage removal service, that rented for between two and five dollars per week. Wealthier Chautauquans could buy a thirty-by-forty-foot lot on which to build a cottage for between one hundred and one hundred fifty dollars. The less affluent could rent tents, springs and mattresses, and gasoline stoves for the duration of their stay. A lunch counter also sold such provisions as vegetables, ice, and milk.

In the early days of statehood, when accessibility could mean the difference between success and failure for an enterprise, the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua was fortunate to have several modes of transportation to the grounds. Railroads served both Big Stone City and Ortonville, Minnesota, directly across the lake. A supplement to the 30 May 1901 Grant County Review noted, “Reduced rates are given from all points on the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway within a reasonable distance.” The newspaper published rate tables that included such towns as Aberdeen, Eureka, and Woonsocket, South Dakota; Fargo, North Dakota; and Bird Island, Minnesota. Rail-


roads based their prices on the length of time an excursion lasted. A round-trip ticket from Aberdeen, for example, could range from $3.25 to $4.50, depending upon the number of days elapsing between trips.¹⁴ Those who arrived at Big Stone City by train could take the Simpson Park Bus Line, owned by Charles Whipple, to the Chautauqua grounds. Advertised in the 1901 Chautauqua supplement to the Grant County Review as being "the only regular bus service to the park," the horse-drawn vehicles had seats along the sides and lug-

¹⁴. Grant County Review, Chautauqua supplement, 30 May 1901.

John DeGreef drove the bus between the train depot and the Chautauqua grounds from 1905 to 1909, when lightning struck his vehicle.
By 1901, private cabins rimmed the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua grounds, and Hotel Minnewarmett (far right) had been built. The pavilion is located in the trees at left.

gage space on top. Those who disembarked at Ortonville could take a steamer to the Chautauqua grounds. The 1916 schedule indicated that boats either left or returned to Ortonville at least five times each day, beginning in the morning and stopping after the evening performance. A twenty-ride ticket cost one dollar and fifty cents; a single-ride ticket could be had for twenty cents.15

15. Ibid.; Grant County Review, 26 July 1972; Big Stone Headlight, undated supplement, 1916.

These Chautauqua-goers probably economized by renting tents and mattresses for the duration of their stay.
While commercial transportation made the Chautauqua available to people from a variety of locations, many participants made it to the park by their own means. As transportation became more mechanized, Chautauqua-goers increasingly arrived by automobile. Spending several hours in a horse-drawn buggy or Model-T Ford sounds primitive until viewed in perspective. According to one traveler, "A ten-mile ride in a springless 'flivver' to the Chautauqua seemed like the poetry of motion after . . . riding a disk harrow for days." Such was the lure of Chautauqua.

The Big Stone Lake Chautauqua, however, was more than boats and buses, scenery and relaxation. It offered an abundance of entertainment and enlightenment in assorted forms, all designed to uplift those who attended. Through lectures, moving pictures, and social and political forums, the Chautauqua played an important part in providing participants, many of whom had only a grade-school education, with information on a variety of subjects. The illustrated lectures of world traveler Frank R. Roberson, a prominent Chautauqua feature, helped people become knowledgeable on a broad variety of topics, many of them exotic. In 1899, Roberson lectured on Manila and Norway. The subjects of his 1900 lectures included Japan and the Boer War. When he returned in 1902, Roberson discussed the eruption of Mount Pelée in the West Indies. Two years

16. Quoted in Black, History of Grant County, p. 53.
later, he presented an updated version of his Japan lecture and also discussed Russia. The Panama Canal and Arctic travel were the subjects of his 1910 lectures. Over the years, Roberson delivered eleven presentations at the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua, supplementing them with a variety of visual devices, including motion pictures and "colored views," that enhanced the learning experience for the audience. As the topics mentioned here demonstrate, Roberson conveyed current information that explored the expanding interest of the United States in international affairs.

Other lecturers also used illustrative devices. H. V. Richards presented a science lecture on wireless telegraphy in 1901, a time when such technology was novel in South Dakota. Louis Williams talked on the subject of electricity in 1914, demonstrating new technological concepts such as x-ray production. Thus, the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua exposed the people of the surrounding area to the new ideas that would ultimately change the way they lived.

Some presentations dealt with subjects of immediate concern to Chautauquans. Two lectures on Mexico in 1916 came at a time when United States troops were involved in that country's civil rebellion. During World War I, lecturers brought to the platform issues of international involvement. In 1915, before the United States entered the war militarily, Ellwood C. Perisho, president of South Dakota State College, presented a lecture entitled "The European War." He returned in 1916 to lecture on the duties of a patriot. The year 1917 saw four lectures about the war, including one by a Lieutenant Nichols, who related his wartime experiences. President Perisho also spoke, this time on the production of war materials. The year following the end of the war brought Maj. Arthur S. Libby, who discussed his experiences as an attaché in Frankfort, Germany, and Lyman P. Powell, who explained educational matters stemming from the war. Lt. A. J. ("Andy") Nielson demonstrated the airplane, which had come of age in wartime combat, and James T. Nichols drew on his experiences as a peace-conference correspondent to speak about a world without war. These lectures, which took place generations before the instantaneous battlefield reporting we now experience, played a vital role in informing people about current events. Such

18. Grant County Review, Chautauqua supplement, 30 May 1901; Big Stone Headlight, 9 July 1914.
RUSSELL -- HILL DEBATE
ON SOCIALISM

CHARLES EDWARD RUSSELL

We are living in a transition period. Everywhere are signs of a changing world. The social problem is of vital interest to all, and no one is better able to throw light on this subject than Charles Edward Russell.

The American public has awakened to the fact that the question of how the other half lives is more than a matter of curiosity. The laboring element of the population is now understood to be a vital matter in the development of the entire country. Hence, when a message comes from one who knows modern conditions, the whole world is ready to listen. Russell is known to be especially well fitted for the bringing to light present conditions of labor and poverty wherever they may be found.

There are but few speakers that can bring to the platform the ripe experience as can Russell, nor who can speak more authoritatively upon this most important question. It was a great privilege that we were able to secure a lecturer of such genuine ability as Charles Edward Russell.

DR. JOHN WESLEY HILL

Peace is the keynote of the age. John Wesley Hill is its champion. In one of his London, Eng., addresses he said: "The days of war and barbarism ought to be over. The sight of same and civilized men bickering and snarling like beasts; puzzles as much as depresses the lover of his kind."

As president of the International Peace Forum with headquarters in New York, Dr. Hill has been delegated by the President of the U. S. to many foreign countries in the interests of peace, and he commands a centre of influence that places him in touch with all the great intellectual movements of the day.

Dr. Hill has the power of eloquence to draw the masses; to interest them by his sympathy; to uplift them by his moral insight, to live a clean, conscientious life; to instruct them by his worldly wisdom. He is a strong man and a serious one, who goes breast forward against the foes of God, but his sense of humor is ever with him and his conversation, his pulpit and platform efforts sparkle with truth, wit and vivacity.

Lectures and debates helped to fulfill the Chautauqua mission of providing education and enlightenment.
firsthand information carried a vitality about it, a vigor that supple-
mented the boiler-plate national news available to most newspaper
readers.

At Big Stone Lake, Chautauqua-goers also kept abreast of issues
and events occurring on the domestic scene. William Jennings Bryan
delivered an address in 1902, and while his speech was not entirely
political in nature, the Milbank Herald-Advance reported that he al-
luded to his long-time personal crusade, the fight for silver currency.
Carrie Nation, the tireless temperance campaigner, brought her anti-
alcohol message to Big Stone in the same year. In 1904, John Z. White
expounded on the advantages of a single tax. Robert M. LaFollette
spoke about the Progressive movement at Big Stone in 1905, just
a few years before announcing his candidacy for president. Express-
ing the Socialist viewpoint were Eugene V. Debs, who impressed
the 1901 Chautauqua audience with a two-hour lecture, and Charles
Edward Russell, who debated the topic with John Wesley Hill in
1914.20 The Big Stone Headlight reported “an unusually large crowd”
for a 1916 debate in which three women argued the suffrage ques-
tion, an issue of immediate concern, for the United States was on
the verge of adopting nationwide suffrage.21 The Big Stone Lake
Chautauqua also opened its platform to less well-known political
figures—congressman, senators, and governors of the past, present,
and future. Every program exposed Chautauquans to different po-
litical ideologies and gave them a glimpse of the people making im-
portant decisions for the country.

Other programs touched on things even closer to home. As could
be expected in a rural state, the Chautauqua presented a number
of programs on agriculture. In 1913, the West Central Minnesota De-
velopment Association held a forum dealing with agricultural in-
novation. The next year, three University of Minnesota extension
professors each gave short lectures on agriculture and other rural
matters. Presentations on personal health—as much a concern then
as it is today—also drew interested audiences. In 1913, Edna Lowe
gave health-related lectures on four consecutive mornings. One year
earlier, Lena K. Sadler and her husband, William S. Sadler, had con-
ducted courses in sanitation, pure food and drink, and infant care.
Lena Sadler frequently lectured on children’s health as well.22

20. Milbank Herald-Advance, 27 June, 4 July 1902; Big Stone Headlight, 30 June 1904,
18 May 1905, 9 July 1914; Grant County Review, 18 July 1901.
22. Big Stone Headlight, 13 June, 4 July 1912, 3 July 1913, 2 July 1914.
All the above programs were designed to meet the educational goals of the larger Chautauqua movement. Because the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua used its forums specifically and principally to educate, Grant County began in 1899 to hold annual summer-school institutes in conjunction with the Chautauqua to instruct its public school teachers. State law covering teacher certification required counties to hold annual summer institutes lasting at least five days. Strict procedures for teacher certification granted county superintendents the authority to revoke teaching credentials for "refusal or neglect to attend a county institute." Teachers received no credit for attending but had to complete closing examinations. In planning their summer-school institutes, Grant County educational officials capitalized on the nature of the Chautauqua. Holding the two events concurrently allowed teachers returning for certification to participate in the Chautauqua programs, which included material that could be taken directly to the classroom.

The first summer-school institute held in conjunction with the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua in 1899 had several faculty members,

The summer-school institutes held in conjunction with the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua in the early 1900s became a popular way for teachers to fulfill their own educational requirements.
including one from Duluth, Minnesota. The course of study consisted of English, physics, botany, zoology, and higher mathematics as well as instruction in primary methods. The institutes quickly became popular, growing to three and even four weeks in length. With the instructional period held in the forenoon, teachers had time to attend the afternoon and evening Chautauqua programs. Reporting on the 1900 institute, the *Milbank Herald-Advance* stated, "The entire session has been a most helpful and harmonious one to all attending, and will undoubtedly result in improved methods and better work in the school-rooms." The 1901 institute drew three hundred teachers from Big Stone and Lac Qui Parle counties in Minnesota and Grant and Roberts counties in South Dakota. Six instructors taught courses in Latin, history, music, math, pedagogy, drawing, botany, physics, and geography. Enrollment in the 1903 session grew to over four hundred students and twenty faculty, prompting the *Big Stone Headlight* to assert that it "has a larger enrollment than any Normal School in Minnesota or South Dakota."28

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25. Grant County Review, 15 June 1899; Milbank Herald-Advance, 23 June 1899.
27. Grant County Review, Chautauqua supplement, 30 May 1901, 25 July 1901.
As the summer-school institute became established, the Milbank and Big Stone City newspapers paid less attention to it, reporting little more than enrollment estimates and occasional listings of instructional programs and faculty. In 1914, the institute met for only six days, even though the instructional program remained large and numerous faculty from across the state presented programs. While the reason for the shortened time frame is not clear, it is possible that the summer-school institute, like the Chautauqua itself, was an idea whose time was passing. Although the institutes continued well into the 1920s, by 1925 state law, which now allowed other avenues for certification, had reduced the time requirement to just two days. Grant County held its last institute in conjunction with the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua in 1919, only a few years before the Chautauqua itself ended. This final session lasted only four days and attracted just one hundred seven teachers.29

The fading of the summer-school institute coincided with a new emphasis in Chautauqua programs that intended to entertain rather than enlighten. Entertainment had always shared the platform with learning. In July of 1902, for example, the South African Boys Choir and the Dunbar Bell Ringers appeared on the Chautauqua stage. For the 1905 program, the Anna DeLoney Marten Company presented a play that delighted the local press. The Chautauqua platform of the early 1900s was also home to the "Matchless Moving Pictures" of "Edison's Marvelous Projectorscope." D. W. Robertson and Company presented these moving pictures, which remained a popular feature of the Chautauqua for some time.³⁰ As other forms of entertainment developed and became available to larger numbers of people, they too became part of the Chautauqua at Big Stone City. Enlightenment, the original focus of the larger Chautauqua movement, eventually took on a lesser role. Following the end of World War I, when the informational programs became liberally interspersed with amusement, Chautauqua presentations became largely entertaining. This period marked the beginning of the end for the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua.

Today, few who drive from Big Stone City along the edge of the lake to the end of the road would suspect what existed there decades ago. The drive is still beautiful and the lake splendid, but one's imagination must stretch to envision thousands of Chautauqua-goers populating the upper reaches of the road. Enclosed by water on one side and bluffs on the other, the Big Stone Lake Chautauqua grounds would have looked as congested as a small city park during an Independence Day celebration. Indeed, the Chautauqua could be viewed as a celebration—one of the awakening of the American mind to a vast array of information and entertainment. While the Chautauqua lagged behind westward expansion, it followed a similar pattern. As farms and businesses stabilized and the dissemination of information became more efficient, America's thirst for information and enjoyment increased. Throughout the nation, the Chautauqua filled this information void.

Like other forms of information diffusion, however, the Chautauqua simply lived out its time to be replaced with new forms of communication and entertainment. The 1925 Big Stone Lake Chautauqua program included no lectures. This twenty-seventh—and last—program was strictly one of entertainment.³¹ Like its companion, the

³⁰ Milbank Herald-Advance, 27 June 1902; Big Stone Headlight, 6 July 1905; Grant County Review, Chautauqua supplement, 30 May 1901.
³¹ Big Stone Headlight, 2 July 1925, 25 Mar. 1926.
summer-school institute, its usefulness had passed. The national Chautauqua movement itself would last only a few more years, until 1932. The resurgence of the Chautauqua on the Northern Great Plains in the past ten years pays strong tribute to its earlier importance in the life of the region. While we can only hypothesize about the actual impact of the Chautauqua at Big Stone Lake, the few words that survive about the feelings of participants like Frances Tippett assure us of one thing; those early Chautauqua-goers "loved it."
