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A HISTORY OF CHAUTAUQUA

By David M. Oberg



The Auditorium at Harlem Park seated 5,000 and was the main site for the Chautauqua in Rockford.

Postcard provided courtesy of Midway Village & Museum Center, Rockford, Illinois.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an article by David M. Oberg on the Chautauqua movement that spread throughout the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This movement has a link to Rockford that is very interesting.

David M. Oberg is the Education Resource Manager at Midway Village and Museum Center. He is a Rockford native and a graduate of Rockford Public Schools, with a B.A. in History and Political Science at Rockford College and an M.A. in History at Northern Illinois University. He is the author of Robert Tinker's Rockford and Past Meets Present and serves as the Vice President of the Illinois Association of Museums. He is also a member of the Board of the Rockford Historical Society.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 885-1740.

Thomas Powers, Editor

UPCOMING EVENTS

Please join the RHS on October 2, 2004 for a fall bus trip to the Elwood House in Dekalb, and Garfield Farms near Geneva, IL. Elwood house was home to the Glidden family, inventors of barbed wire. Garfield Farms is a living history museum showing how Midwesterners lived a century ago. This weekend will be their annual fall harvest featuring many activities and demonstrations. All members should have received an announcement with an itinerary and registration form.

The Rockford Public Library is hosting a series of events to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition. There are several programs for both children and adults. On the next page are details on three of the programs. For more information on the others call 965-6735 or visit the library.

The annual History Fair will be at Midway Village on January 22, 2005.

Sampling Lewis and Clark

Tuesday, October 5, 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.

Main Library Auditorium, 215 N Wyman St. (use Mulberry St. entrance)

Gary E. Moulton, editor of the Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Professor of American History at the University of Nebraska, will read excerpts from the journals, highlighting the highs and lows of the journey, the context of the events and the larger issues. You'll feel like you're right there! **Registration is not required.** For more information, call 965-6735.

Biography: Gary E. Moulton is Thomas C. Sorensen Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and editor of the Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Moulton began the editing project in 1979 with support from the UNL Center for Great Plains Studies, the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C. He completed the thirteen volume edition in 1999. Moulton's research interests are historical editing, the exploration of the American West, and American Indians.

Lewis and Clark Arrive on the Rock River

Saturday, October 9, 11:45 – 2:00 p.m.

Main Library, 215 N Wyman St. (Outdoor bike path)

Want to really experience the adventures of Lewis and Clark? Then you don't want to miss this! Be there as the "birch bark" canoes carrying several explorers and Sacagawea pull up to the dock behind the Main Library. Watch as activities typical of this historical period and expedition are reenacted in front of your very eyes by the Illinois Brigade. Fun for the whole family! **Registration is not required.** For more information, call 965-6735.

Lewis and Clark Community Mural with Artist Stuart H. Morse

Saturday, October 9, 10:00 – 11:45 a.m.

Main Library Auditorium, 215 N Wyman St. (use Mulberry St. entrance)

What was it like on the trail with Lewis and Clark? What do you think they saw? Paint a picture to put on our huge Lewis and Clark Community Mural. Artist Stuart Morse of Chesterfield, Missouri will lead us on our journey of artistic discovery in this special One Book, One Rockford program for kids, made possible by a grant from the Rockford Area Arts Council. All ages. **Registration required.** Call 965-6732.

A History of Chautauqua

By David M. Oberg

In the sultry days of August 1902, Rockford's Harlem Park played host to a revolution in education. A cavalcade of politicians, reformers, divines and performers traveled by land and sea to take the stage at Rockford's first Chautauqua. They found a willing throng of participants, eager to learn, debate and grow as people. For over two decades, men and women would travel by wagon, train, streetcar, steamer and automobile for two weeks of learning for all ages. They were part of a nationwide Chautauqua Movement, a sort of summer camp for adults aimed at educating mind, body and spirit. This movement revolutionized education, giving birth to the concept of life-long learning, and exposed millions of Americans to the greatest minds of their generation.

The Chautauqua Movement began in the fertile imagination of two men who would change the very history of education itself. The first was the Reverend John Heyl Vincent, formerly a pastor at Court Street Methodist Church in Rockford, Illinois. Rev. Vincent was born on February 28, 1832 to John and Mary Vincent in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. A precocious student, he became a Methodist preacher by the age of 18, a deacon by the age of 23 and the Elder of the Rock River Conference in 1857, at the age of 25. For the next 15 years he would hold pastorates throughout Northern Illinois, including Joliet, Mt. Morris, Galena, Chicago and Rockford.

While at Court Street Methodist Church, Vincent developed and taught a course to local citizens titled, "The Geography of Palestine." This class would reappear at Vincent's first Chautauqua program in 1874. At this time, Vincent also became deeply involved in the Sunday School Movement, a non-denominational Protestant movement dedicated to developing a uniform and international system of lessons for all ages. Vincent soon became a leader in this movement, noting, "I regard the modern International Sunday School Movement as the promoter of Christian unity such as the world has never known. We find, as we study...how little real difference there is between us, and as we walk with Him and commune with Him, we find our hearts burning within us and we are thus drawn towards each other through the love we have for our common Master."

Vincent made plans to attend a General Sunday School Conference in London as one of 13 foreign delegates, with a grand tour of Europe and the Holy Land thrown in for good measure. His friend, Robert Hall Tinker of Rockford, was to be his traveling companion. The tour included stops in Ireland, Scotland, England, Italy, Egypt and Palestine. Yet for all his travels, it was a conversation with the young Mr. Tinker that had the greatest impact on Vincent's future.

Tinker's boyhood home was in Chautauqua County, New York. He spoke of the tremendous beauty of the area and the gorgeous countryside near Chautauqua Lake. In later years, Vincent would credit that conversation for prompting him to choose that site for his Chautauqua program.

Upon his return to Rockford, Vincent began working on a system of printed Sunday School lessons that could be distributed to lay people far and wide. The lessons, titled the *Sunday School Teacher*, are estimated to have reached 2.5 million people by 1910 and served as the prototype for later correspondence courses that would become associated with the Chautauqua Movement.

Vincent left the Rock River parish and eventually relocated in Chautauqua County, New York in 1872. There, he began working in earnest on a program to train and educate Sunday School teachers through programs in religion, with supplementary lectures in art, science, politics and more. While Vincent had the vision for the program, he lacked the funds to begin the project.

Lewis Miller, a native of Greentown, Ohio, would help transform Vincent's dream into a reality. Miller was born to John and Elizabeth Miller in 1829. The recipient of a modest country education, Miller nevertheless demonstrated a thirst for knowledge that would remain for his entire life. At the age of 16, he began teaching in a small country school and worked for a time as a plasterer. Then, at age 20, he went into business with several partners in Plainfield, Illinois to manufacture reapers and other farm implements. Returning to Ohio in 1855, Miller perfected and patented a more efficient reaper that he dubbed the *Buckeye Mower and Reaper*. It would make his fortune.

In 1863, Miller relocated to Akron, where he soon became involved in the Sunday School Movement. It was through this movement that he would become acquainted with Rev. Vincent. In 1873, the two men visited Fair Point in Chautauqua County and arranged with the Chautauqua Lake Camp Meeting Association to use their grounds the following year for their program. With Vincent's education and oratorical skills and Lewis' organizational expertise and financial backing, the two were bound to succeed in their venture.

The following year, they debuted the Fair Point Sunday School Assembly, a 15-day program, designed to train and educate Sunday school teachers. As envisioned by Vincent and Miller, the program focused mainly on religion, with supplementary lectures in art, science, politics and education. It was an immediate success and the two men teamed up with the Chautauqua Lake Camp Meeting Association to make it an annual event. The following year, Rev. Vincent's friend and former parishioner President Ulysses S. Grant attended, attracting throngs of new visitors. Since then, eight other Presidents have attended the Chautauqua, including James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Bill Clinton. President Theodore Roosevelt called Chautauqua, "the most American thing in America."

Soon afterwards, Vincent and others threw the doors open to welcome the general public to their "Chautauqua" assembly. It quickly evolved into a broad program designed to educate visitors of all ages. Classes, lectures and group activities ran the gambit from exercise (then called physical culture) to art, Shakespeare to science, politics to pop culture. Choirs, musicians, dancers, magicians, bird warblers and more crowded the

Chautauqua stage. Despite these more earthly forms of entertainment, however, the Chautauqua still had a strong religious and moral character, with many lectures taking their cues from Biblical sources, a plethora of preachers mounting the stage and a number of classes sponsored by organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union. As the number of speakers and performers grew, so too did the original Chautauqua until the calendar expanded to 60 days of education and entertainment.

In 1878, Vincent and Miller further expanded the reach of their innovative program by adding the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, a course in home reading that included World History, Art, Travel, Literature and Science. Members of the circle shared a common syllabus and could receive a diploma at the Chautauqua Assembly upon completion of the readings. Here was born the correspondence courses millions of Americans enjoy to this day.

The Fair Point Sunday School Program and Fair Point itself quickly changed their names to the more familiar Chautauqua. In the 1880s, the movement was incorporated briefly as a University, dubbed the Chautauqua Institute. In various forms, Chautauqua continued in its original location and survives to this very day.

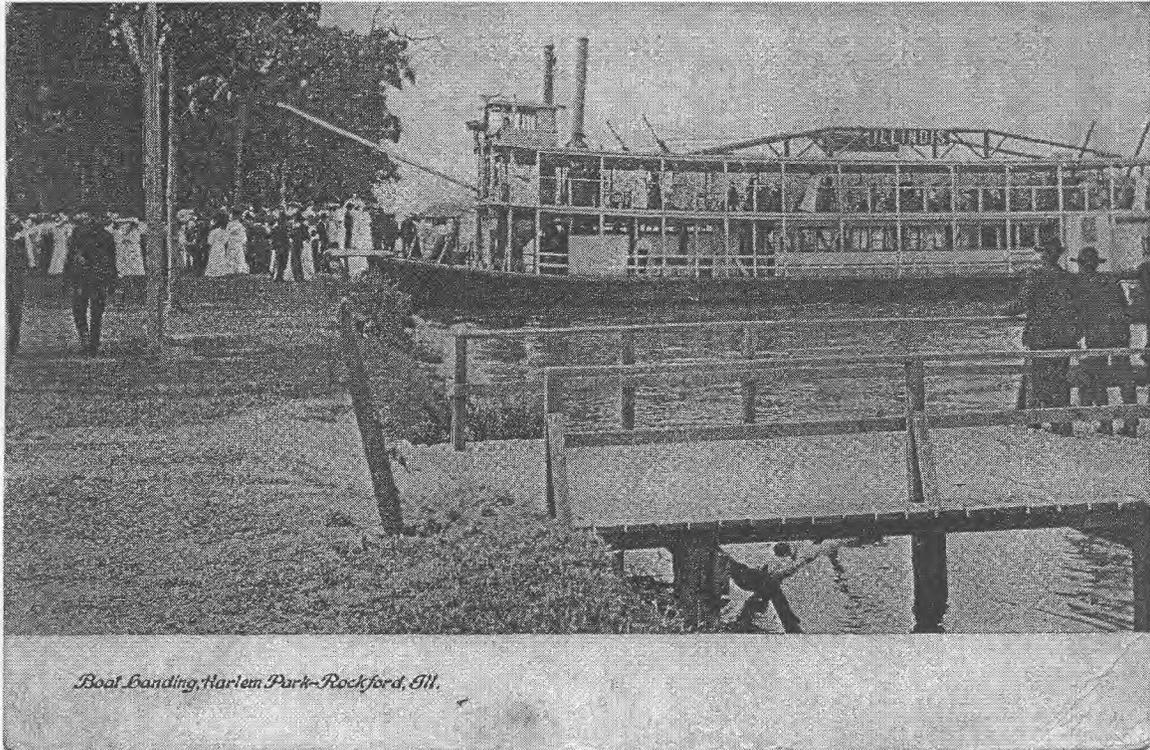
Imitation "Chautauquas" soon grew in other communities. By 1900, roughly 200 existed throughout the nation. In addition, several "tent Chautauquas" soon emerged, with a cadre of traveling speakers and performers riding the rails to bring culture to remote corners of the country. Rockford soon joined the ranks of communities that launched their own Chautauquas.

Rockford's Chautauqua would take root at Harlem Park, the brainchild of R. N. Baylies. This clever entrepreneur purchased 47 acres with a group of investors to create a destination for local tourists. The park, which first opened in 1891, featured a switchback railroad (a primitive rollercoaster), dance pavilion, laughing gallery, penny arcade, carousel and modest zoo, as well as a wharf for the steamer *Illinois* and a fleet of rowboats. It was no coincidence that the Rockford City Railway's electric streetcars, also owned by Baylies, made regular stops at the park.

In 1902, a group of 100 well-to-do businessmen and farmers pooled their resources to bring the excitement of Chautauqua to Harlem Park. Throughout the spring and summer, they sought out speakers, educators and performers, while local carpenters worked to complete a massive auditorium at the park, capable of housing as many as 5,000 people. An 11th hour strike threatened to derail the entire project, but a speedy resolution ensured the auditorium's completion. The Chautauqua Assembly Hall and Harlem Park stood ready on August 14, 1902 to welcome the visitors to Rockford's inaugural season.

And what a season it was! For two weeks, visitors thronged to see politicians, reformers and labor leaders. Reformers such as Wisconsin Governor Robert M. "Fighting Bob" LaFollette, a leader in the Progressive Movement, commanded vast crowds during the first season. The following year proved even better. Former Democratic Presidential Candidate William Jennings Bryan, one of the leading orators of his age, took the podium

to dazzle onlookers with his speech, "The Value of an Ideal." Bryan challenged his audience to, "...make ours the best government and let it be our endeavor not to make our flag fly everywhere, but that everywhere it flies it shall stand for justice and equal rights to all beneath its folds."



Boat Landing, Harlem Park, Rockford, Ill.

The steamboat *Illinois* traveled the Rock River from downtown Rockford next to the library, up to Harlem Park and back.

Postcard provided courtesy of Midway Village & Museum Center, Rockford, Illinois.

Many of the speakers and programs in the initial years reflected the strong religious and moral character of the mother Chautauqua in New York. Both the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Temperance Workers' Congress held daily meetings and sponsored speakers throughout the program. There was also a daily ministerial conference addressing such topics as, "How to Make a Church Go and Grow" and "The Evangelistic Possibilities of the Sunday School of Today." Each day began with morning devotional services. No less than eight divines took the podium as featured speakers. None, however, could hold a candle to the Rev. Sam P. Jones, who shattered attendance expectations with his unique style of preaching. Jones, a recovering alcoholic and revivalist preacher, held the crowd spellbound with his earthy sermons and physical demonstrations, which earned him the nickname, "The Sledgehammer." He would become a crowd favorite, returning to several Rockford Chautauquas.

Other speakers and programs represented a fascination with a rapidly changing world. The Industrial Revolution quickly transformed the United States into a world powerhouse, and technological innovation promised ever greater possibilities for Americans. No speaker at Rockford's Chautauqua better exemplified the promise of technology than Professor J. Earnest Woodland. Woodland's program, titled "A Message from Mars," demonstrated the brand new technology of wireless telegraphy. Part scientist and part P. T. Barnum, Woodland used wireless telegraphy to explode mines, ring bells and illuminate lights seemingly by magic. Audiences also thronged to see the Edison Projectoscope, an early film projector that brought the wonder of motion pictures to thousands for the first time.

The price of America's rapid progress proved high, however. Widespread poverty, child labor and clashes between strikers and Pinkerton guards raised the specter of a darker future. It was fitting, then, that Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor and the leading proponent of collective bargaining between workers and employers should take the podium. Other social reformers, including "Fighting Bob" LaFollette, and William Jennings Bryan continued the trend towards directly addressing the problems America faced.



This view of Harlem Park shows it as it was in the early 1900s.

Postcard provided courtesy of Midway Village & Museum Center, Rockford, Illinois.

This is not to say that Chautauqua did not possess a lighter side. For each preacher at the pulpit, there was a magician or impressionist there to entertain. Music rang out through the Chautauqua grounds each day, with featured performers including the Third Regiment Band, the Slayton Jubilee Singers, the Dunbar Hand Bell Ringers and the Anderson-Reohr Concert Company. Community members could participate directly by joining the Assembly Chorus, under the direction of Dr. Eugene E. Davis of Texas.

Participation proved a hallmark of both the Rockford and national Chautauqua programs. Chautauqua represented the birth of life-long learning, the concept that one's education does not end at the schoolhouse door. Adults could expand their knowledge of a host of topics through the Art School, Nature Study Club, School of Health, Women's Council and the Chautauqua Round Table, which invited public input on a variety of discussion topics. The Free Kindergarten, Young Ladies' Outlook Club and Boys' Club ensured that children would learn in a safe and wholesome environment while their parents participated in the daily Physical Culture regimen or hotly debated the issues of the day at the Reform Congress.



This view of Harlem Park is taken from the Rock River. The Switchback Railroad can be seen on the left side of the picture.

Postcard provided courtesy of Midway Village & Museum Center, Rockford, Illinois.

For over two decades, men and women from Northern Illinois flocked to the Chautauqua to take advantage of this grand and ambitious summer camp for all ages. Inexpensive

season tickets (\$2 for adults, \$1 for children in 1902), facilities for camping and cheap tent rentals ensured that thousands could gain access to the greatest speakers, performers and thinkers of their age. Pleasant diversions, including rowboats for rent, excursions on the steamer *Illinois* and of course the fabulous attractions of Harlem Park itself guaranteed a healthy mixture of leisure and education. But, as the years wore on, the spirit of Chautauqua underwent a startling change.

The growth of leisure and entertainment in America transformed both the national and local Chautauqua movements. The bird warblers, magicians, impressionists and actors began to crowd out more serious speakers. The strong moral and religious tone of earlier years nearly vanished by the 1920s. An examination of Rockford's Chautauqua program from 1922 reveals a far sparer program of events, with a strong emphasis on plays, concerts and impressionists. A few classes and speakers still dot the landscape, but they are overwhelmed by lighter fare. This transformation invited jeers from many American intellectuals, who echoed the sentiments of Sinclair Lewis that Chautauqua had become, "Nothing but wind and chaff...and the laughter of yokels."

The laughter died in the 1920s. Mass-produced automobiles offered millions of Americans the option of exploring the continent and seeking new and previously undreamed of opportunities for learning and leisure. Radios brought speakers, performers and musicians directly into American homes and motion pictures made them available at the local marquee. Local Chautauquas began to totter and fall in cities across America, including Rockford. Those that survived the onslaught of technology folded in the wake of the Great Depression. Only a handful, including the Mother Chautauqua in New York, survived.

Today, Americans are once again becoming familiar with the word "Chautauqua." The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Illinois Humanities Council are helping communities, including Rockford, bring high-quality education and entertainment to audiences of all ages. For two years, Midway Village & Museum Center has hosted a Chautauqua program, blending education and entertainment. Plans are already underway for a third program in 2005. It is my sincere hope that Chautauqua is a word that will once again become a regular part of our vocabulary.

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Photographs courtesy of Midway Village & Museum Center

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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