

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

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Tent Chautauqua had a bit of everything
by Joe Getty

My grandmother, Henrietta Roop Twigg, used to enjoy telling stories about the tent chautauqua that visited Westminster at the end of each summer during the early 20th century. Her mother, Mrs. H. Scott Roop, was a member of the Westminster Chautauqua committee, and her sister, Isabelle Roop, was chairman of the Junior Chautauqua committee.

Her reminiscences described the chautauquas as a time of entertainment as well as education. The tent was set up in an open field west of Belle Grove Square in the vicinity where the houses along West Green Street now stand.

Many of the programs presented at the chautauqua were oriented towards self-improvement, with inspirational lectures and presentations mixed in with literary readings, sermons, concerts and recitals. In the era before radio, movies and television, tent chautauquas provided cultural stimulation and contact with a broader world of entertainment. In fact, many Carroll County residents saw their first "motion picture" at a tent chautauqua.

The chautauqua movement grew out of a summer school founded at Chautauqua Lake, New York, in 1874. The Chautauqua Institution began as a training program for Sunday-school teachers but quickly grew to include summer and correspondence school courses in language, religion, music and fine arts. The programs were so popular that a Chautauqua University flourished from 1883 to 1898.

The movement had a profound influence on popular culture and on the development of adult education and correspondence schools in the United States. Many early 20th century clubs and service organizations founded for social, arts, gardens, political and religious purposes find their roots in the late 19th century chautauqua movement.

The first chautauqua in Westminster was organized for the summer of 1912. In the 10th anniversary program, the following history about the establishment of the Westminster Chautauqua was recorded:

"Friday evening, April 19th, 1912, a small group of people attended a meeting at the High School building, Westminster, for the purpose of considering the advisability of holding a six day

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Chautauqua in Westminster. A representative of the Swarthmore Chautauqua Association was present and explained the plans, purposes and scope of Chautauqua.

"All were favorably impressed, but on account of the small number present, it was decided to call another meeting before accepting or rejecting the propositions.

"The second meeting was held at the Firemen's Building, Thursday evening, April 25th, and was attended by about fifty representative citizens.

"Dr. A.H. Turner of the Association made an interesting address and explained fully the details of the co-operative plan of the Circuit Chautauqua. At the conclusion of Dr. Turner's address, Dr. T.H. Lewis, president of Western Maryland College, made a motion that a committee be named to consider the question and nominated H. Peyton Gorsuch as chairman. The motion prevailed and Mrs. Laura Sellman was elected Secretary and George Mather Treasurer.

"The committee was given authority to name additional members and Dr. W.R. McDaniel, Mr. Charles O. Clemson and Miss Mary B. Shellman were added.

"Later Dr. McDaniel was chosen secretary and N.H. Baumgardner treasurer.

"The committee decided to canvas the town and try to secure sixty people who would be responsible for the sale of ten season tickets each, the contract requiring the guarantee of six hundred tickets. Ready response was given by a number of citizens, but not sufficient to warrant the committee signing the contract. A second effort was made but the number of tickets guaranteed was far below the six hundred needed.

"It was a disappointed little group that met at the home of the chairman one Sunday morning in June and decided to send Dr. Pearson a telegram that Westminster had failed.

"From early reports the Association felt assured Westminster would succeed and had included it in the schedule, contracts with the talent and for advertising.

"To abandon Westminster would have required a re-arrangement of the schedule and contracts and a financial loss.

"For this reason and believing Westminster would appreciate and enjoy Chautauqua. Dr. Pearson decided to come to town without a guarantee.

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

About a week before the opening date Miss Hershey came to sell season tickets. She was assisted in the canvas by the original committee, Mrs. H. Scott Roop, Miss Edna Erb, Miss Lillian Erb and others and about 300 tickets were sold. Many seemed to feel the committee and Miss Hershey were in a conspiracy to sell them a "gold brick" and separate them from two perfectly good dollars. It was refreshing and a revelation to learn how considerate some of the husbands and wives were for each other and they refused to spend such a large sum as \$2 without a joint conference, agreement and resolution. Many of the men when seen declined to buy without the consent of their wives, and the wives when approached declined to buy without the consent of their husbands.

"The opening day, August 31st, came, the big tent arrived and was erected by a jolly crowd of Swarthmore College boys, the superintendent, Dr. George H. Turner was busy meeting the people and assuring them that Chautauqua was neither a camp meeting or a circus.

"Perhaps the best description we can give of the opening day is an extract taken from an article published in *The Times* last year giving some reminiscences of our first Chautauqua.

'Then the opening day came and as the small audience gathered many of them had the expression of a man who had paid good money for a gold brick and some of them tiptoed into the tent and sat down as if they were ashamed to let anyone know they had been duped out of \$2. After the opening exercises Dr. Turner made an address and before he got very far everyone began to feel there would be some salvage and the \$2 would not be a total loss and when he had finished all had thrown their chins out and seemed proud they had invested in the little piece of card board. Then came a great band concert by Circill's Italian Band, perhaps the best band Chautauqua has ever had, and then you could not have bought the despised tickets of a few hours before at a premium.

'Each day the interest and attendance increased, but the sale of season tickets and single admissions left a deficit of several hundred dollars for the Swarthmore Chautauqua Association to provide for.

'For this reason it was a grave question whether it would be possible to secure pledges for 700 season tickets for Chautauqua in 1913.

'On the fourth evening the chairman invited the ministers of the town and Dr. Lewis, president of Western Maryland College, to meet Dr. Turner at a conference-supper and consideration it was decided to make an effort to secure pledges for a sufficient number of tickets to insure the return of Chautauqua.

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

'The matter was presented to the audience the last two evenings and the response exceeded the fondest hopes of the committee. Nearly 700 tickets were pledged, the contract signed and the return of Chautauqua assured.

'The program for Westminster's first Chautauqua was excellent. The musical events included Ciricillo's Italian Band, Bently Balls Concert Company, The Bell Ringers, Ernest Gable Concert Company and International Grand Operatie Company.

'Each day Dr. Turner gave an interesting and instructive lecture and Frank Dixon, Dr. N.M. Waters, Mr. Duryea and Dr. Pearson lectured during the week.

'Other interesting events were the debate on Socialism, Welburn with his wonderful scientific experiments and motion pictures each evening.'"

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: The tent at the first Westminster Chautauqua held in 1912 could seat 2,000.