THE EMERGENCE OF CHAUTAUQUA AS A RELIGIOUS AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION, 1874-1900

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“This place is simply marvellous,” exclaimed Edward Everett Hale when he first visited the Chautauqua Assembly in 1880. “It is a great college for the middle classes.” The opinion was shared by thousands who made the trek to Lake Chautauqua in the New York State. Within two years after the opening of the first Assembly, representatives from twenty-seven states, and England and Canada, were present for the summer activities. Before the end of the century, with visitors from every part of the country, Chautauqua liked to call itself “the most national place in the United States.”

The institution that impressed Hale had evolved from a small Sunday school encampment near Jamestown, New York. Chautauqua was founded in 1874 by John Heyl Vincent, editor of the Sunday School Journal and other Methodist Sunday-school periodicals, and later a Methodist bishop, and Lewis Miller, a businessman and Methodist layman. Both men had particular interest in the advanced training of Sunday-school workers which they decided to pursue through a short outdoor summer assembly. Vincent recalled:

For many years while in the pastorate and in my special efforts to create a general interest in the training of Sunday School teachers and officers I held in all parts of the country institutes and normal classes after the general plan of secular educators. In this work I had the sympathy and cooperation of Mr. Lewis Miller of Akron, O., an energetic and aggressive Sunday School worker . . . and it was at his suggestion that I consented to take one of my Sunday School institutes to Chautauqua. I gave it the name of “assembly” to distinguish it from the ordinary Sunday School conventions and institutes . . . . The camp meeting management of Fairpoint on the shores of Lake Chautauqua . . . allowed us to use their ground for two weeks in August, 1874.

The decision to conduct the opening session at Lake Chautauqua

2Chautauqua Assembly Daily Herald, 7 August 1876, p. 1.
3Ibid., 24 July 1897, p. 1.
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was based on the suitability of the location. There was no connection between the Assembly and the Methodist camp meeting that owned the property. "Sometime during the summer of next year," reported the newspaper of nearby Jamestown, New York, "a national Sunday School convention is to be held, and Dr. Vincent hearing of Fair Point and the Camp Meeting came here to ascertain if it was a suitable place for such a meeting. He was delighted with the grounds, and yesterday, at a meeting of the Executive Committee, presented a proposition to call the National S. S. Association for 1874 at Fair Point."5

The Assembly held its initial session from August 4 to 18, 1874, with Miller as chairman and Vincent as head of instruction. Their program allowed little time for frivolity or dawdling by the lakeshore.

At the first Assembly there were twenty-two lectures on the theory and practice of Sunday-school work; seven upon the authority of the Bible; nine sectional primary meetings; six intermediate; six seniors', superintendents', and pastors' meetings; eight conductors' conferences; twenty-five meetings of normal sections; two teachers' meetings; two model Sunday-schools; four Bible readings; three praise services; two immense children's meetings; six sermons, and other meetings of minor note; also prayer meetings, vesper services and temperance addresses.6

The program for the second Sunday School Assembly, August 3 to 17, 1875, resembled that of the first summer. Chautauqua's evolution from a training school for Sunday-school teachers into a popular educational institution began with the 1876 session, which was extended to three weeks and added a scientific congress, a temperance conference, and a church congress. Vincent, sensing the intellectual ferment of the seventies, began what was to become a progressive enlargement of purpose and program.

The original plan of the Sunday School Assembly at Fair Point has developed into something much larger and more complete as an educational agency than was at first contemplated. It was a Sunday-school Institute at first. It is now putting on the form and employing the methods of a much more comprehensive institution. It is a summer school in the interest of Religion, Temperance and Science as well of Biblical instruction. It aims in its new development to serve the cause of Social and Religious Reform. It has an educational, a reformatory and an ecclesiastical purpose.7

Chautauqua was thus transformed gradually into a national academy embracing a wide range of secular interests. The Assembly's formal work was carried out through three contemporary educational innovations: summer classes, home reading and correspondence study, and university extension.

5Jamestown Daily Journal, 13 August 1873, p. 4.
6Chautauqua Assembly Daily Herald, 10 May 1877, p. 2.
Before 1874 the summer season rarely was used for formal educational purposes. Occasionally a professor would lead students in field work in archeology, geology, or zoology, but comprehensive programs of summer study were unknown. Chautauqua's first course was instruction in Hebrew in the summer of 1875. Four years later saw the establishment of a School of Languages. The Chautauqua School of Arts and Sciences ultimately included departments of English, German, French, Latin, and Greek. The curriculum showed parallel growth in other academic fields. By 1895 the system of summer instruction, conducted by William Rainey Harper and a distinguished resident faculty, included courses organized into Schools of Arts and Sciences, Pedagogy, Sacred Literature, Expression, Music, Physical Education, and Practical Arts. Even after his appointment as president of the new University of Chicago, Harper continued to serve as principal of Chautauqua's College of Liberal Arts. He adapted many of Chautauqua's educational ideas to the requirements of formal higher education.

While summer classes were multiplying, another phase of Chautauqua's educational program — home reading and correspondence study — also experienced development. Prior to Chautauqua's venture into directed home study, there had been little activity in the field. In 1873 a Society to Encourage Studies at Home was organized in Boston. That same year Illinois Wesleyan University began to offer nonresident instruction; many of the students were candidates for the ministry. The program, which granted undergraduate and graduate degrees, was discontinued in 1906.

Chautauqua's central enterprise in directed home study was the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, organized on August 10, 1878. Vincent outlined the principles and methods of the Circle:

It aims to give the college student's outlook upon the world of thought, by the studies of primers of literature and science, by the reading of books, by the preparation of syllabi of books read, by written reports of progress, and by

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*The academic program is described in the *Chautauqua Year-Book for 1895* (Chautauqua, New York, 1895).

*This relationship is discussed in the chapter "Chautauqua Goes to Chicago," in Joseph E. Gould, *The Chautauqua Movement* (New York: State University of New York, 1961), pp. 55-71. Richard J. Storr provides additional details: "In 1898, Harper tried unsuccessfully to bring parts of Chautauqua within the orbit of the University. He proposed to move to Chicago the headquarters of the Chautauqua Reading [sic] and Scientific Circles and two publishing enterprises working under contract with Chautauqua, and according to one version of the plan, to associate them with University Extension and the University Press." *Harper's University: The Beginnings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 327-328.

correspondence with professors of the several departments. . . .

Probably the most influential of Chautauqua’s educational ventures, the C.L.S.C. offered a four-year course of directed home reading, leading to a diploma and graduation. The curriculum for 1890-91 was typical: English history and literature, geology, church history, and French literature. Supplementing the required textbooks, assigned readings were published in The Chautauquan, a monthly magazine devoted to the interests of C.L.S.C.

Course syllabi were developed by prominent university teachers; for example, Professor Woodrow Wilson of Wesleyan University guided the study of English constitutional history during the 1890-91 academic year.\(^\text{12}\) Up to 1899 two hundred and sixty-four thousand persons had enrolled for these home reading courses of the Circle. Forty-one thousand of this enrollment had graduated.\(^\text{13}\) It was estimated that 10,000 local circles were formed in the first twenty years of the C.L.S.C. Moreover, “25% of these were in villages of less than 500 population and 50% in communities of between 500 and 3,500 population.”\(^\text{14}\) For these communities with few, if any, cultural or educational resources for adults, "the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle was their library, forum and lyceum."\(^\text{15}\)

Another phase of activity in formal education was unfolded in 1889, with issuance of a Prospectus of Chautauqua University Extension. University extension lectures were originated in England in 1867 through the work of Professor James Stuart of Cambridge, who sought “to establish a sort of peripetetic University, the professors of which would circulate among the big towns, and thus give a wider opportunity for receiving such teaching.”\(^\text{16}\) University extension was well established in Britain when it came to Vincent’s attention:

A delegation of graduate students from Oxford and Cambridge, Edinburgh and Glasgow, visited Chautauqua in July, 1888. . . . One of the delegation had been actively engaged in the promotion of Cambridge Local Lectures, and communicated the results of his experience and observation to the friends of University-Extension at

\(^{11}\)Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 12 August 1878, p. 1.
\(^{12}\)“Editor’s Outlook,” The Chautauquan, 11 (June 1890), 344.
\(^{13}\)J. M. Buckley, “Anniversary Address,” Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 4 August 1899, p. 7.
\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 110.
\(^{16}\)Quoted in W. Fiddian Moulton, Richard Green Moulton: A Memoir (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 21. Richard Moulton, also a professor at Cambridge, was widely known as an extension lecturer. In 1892 Dr. Harper brought him to Chicago to serve as professor of literary theory and interpretation and to help build the extension program. Moulton’s original contract promised that he could lecture at Chautauqua in the summertime.
Chautauqua.17

Following this conference, Chautauqua made a formal announcement of its own plans. The university extension program of Chautauqua reached its peak about 1892, when the extension lecturers under its auspices numbered 168.18 Chautauqua also sought to adapt the university extension lecture method to the local work of the Circles. A course of six lectures on Greek social life was prepared by Professor Owen Seaman, after those he had delivered at Lake Chautauqua in 1892. The lectures were to be read before audiences assembled by the local C.L.S.C. groups. Nearly seventy courses of these lectures were given in the Fall and Winter seasons of 1892-1893.

By this arrangement as many as possible of the essential features of the university extension idea were carried out — namely, the lectures and syllabus prepared by a university extension lecturer, and opportunities for a quiz and an examination. The only essential feature that was lacking was that of the personal presence of the lecturer himself, and it was the elimination of this feature which made it possible for many small communities to reap the advantages of the university extension idea in other respects.19

The university extension movement received major impetus through Chancellor Harper's organization of the University of Chicago. In 1892, he established university extension as one of the five major divisions of the institution. For Harper and his colleagues, "University Extension was the secular counterpart of evangelism," commented Richard J. Storr. "The higher learning was to be carried across the land by the University as the Bible had been taken to the frontier by an earlier generation of itinerant preachers."20 By 1920 more than thirty major universities had initiated extension programs.21

By the 1890s Vincent's brief conference for Sunday-school teachers had become a summer-long festival of education, culture, and entertainment.

The program for this season shows 130 important lectures and addresses, of which 30 are illustrated, 10 musical recitals, 20 concerts and entertainments by musicians and readers, 2 superb tableaux, 4 evenings of fireworks, illuminations and illuminated fleets, 2 prize matches, beside baseball matches, bicycle and athletic exhibitions, and other minor entertainments without number. And this list of lectures does not include those by Dr. Harper and other members of the College faculty, any of the Missionary or Woman's Club lectures and addresses, any of the Round Tables, Girls' Club or Boys' Congress meetings; nor are the band concerts or services

17Prospectus of Chautauqua University Extension, p. 9.
18Chautauqua System of Education, Department of University Extension, Bulletin of Lecturers No. 2.
19Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 24 August 1893, p. 3.
20Harper's University, p. 196.
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of songs included. . . . The list, in fact, includes only the more noteworthy lectures and entertainments, and to all of them no admission fee is charged except the regular gate fee. 22

Such summer programs had for years led local reporters to speak wonderingly of "the regular tread-mill work and courses of study" and of "lectures and concerts in distracting numbers." 23

A principal feature of the annual assemblies was the platform, on which appeared prominent lecturers and speakers of the day. Although New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio were most heavily represented, listeners came from every state. 24 By 1885 Chautauqua was playing host to as many as 100,000 visitors—a cross section of Protestant, middle-class America who sustained the churches, supported the educational renaissance, and supplied the impetus for many social reforms of the day. Enthusiastically and repeatedly they filled the amphitheater, which could comfortably seat nearly eight thousand people, to hear addresses regardless of speaker or subject. The schedule for a typical two-month season included 130 major lectures and addresses. 25 No charge was made for attendance at events in the amphitheater other than the gate fee. Season tickets, which also included admission to lectures, concerts, and educational activities, were $5; tickets for the week were $1 in July and $2 in August, while the daily tariff was 25 cents and 40 cents. 26

While summer visitors listened at Chautauqua, the speeches they heard were accorded a national audience through the assembly's daily newspaper and press accounts sent regularly to leading newspapers. Often publishing verbatim reports of more than one hundred lectures a year, including all major addresses, Chautauqua's newspaper gained a substantial reading public. In 1881 about 50,000 copies were sent through the mails; 27 by 1884 this number had more than doubled. 28 From the beginning the nation's press was well represented at the summer assemblies. As early as 1878 no less than 38 newspapers had correspondents at Chautauqua, sending dispatches to their newspapers in

22Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 5 August 1892, p. 1. William James found the program magnificent but overwhelming, exclaiming after a week at Chautauqua in the early 1890s: "Ouf! What a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre, to set the balance straight again." See Talks to Teachers on Psychology (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1899), p. 270.

23The Democrat (Olean, N.Y.), 18 August 1881, p. 1.

24In 1881, for example, more than forty railroad companies advertised the sale of excursion tickets to Chautauqua. Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 30 July 1881, p. 8.


27Chautauqua Assembly Herald, June 1881, p. 1.

28Ibid., July 1884, p. 1.
New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, and Louisiana.\textsuperscript{29} To newspapers unable to maintain regular correspondents at the assembly, Chautauqua provided daily telegraphic reports.

Most of the issues engaging contemporary Americans were discussed at length by spokesmen for differing points of view. Chautauqua's conception of its responsibility to maintain a free platform accounted for its balanced attention to issues of current controversy. Within a single season the visitor might hear evolutionists and fundamentalists, protectionists and free traders, bimetallists and gold-standard advocates, suffragists and antifeminists, defenders of Darwinism and exponents of socialism. Even reformers with unsettling propositions for societal change were accorded a fair hearing in the amphitheater. No Chautauquan doubted that "every great message to humanity with the stamp of genuineness upon it gets at some time or other a hearing from the big rostrum."\textsuperscript{30} To those who resented this deliberate impartiality the Assembly leadership explained that it was "the duty and pleasure of Chautauqua to invite to this place the leaders of all forward movements in order that the people may judge of their merits after the case has been presented."\textsuperscript{31} Advocates of one position were often followed within a few days by spokesmen for the other side. Formal debates were frequently arranged — for example, women's suffrage (1881 and 1892), regulation of trusts and monopolies (1889), and free silver (1893).

From its earliest days Chautauqua showed keen interest in religious themes. Good sermons were prized. Chautauquans heard many of the great preachers of the day: Phillips Brooks, Lyman Abbott, Edward Everett Hale, S. Parkes Cadman, Russell Conwell, Washington Gladden, Matthew Simpson, and T. DeWitt Talmage. This was a period of swelling popular sentiment that the church must adjust itself and its message to the impact of scientific Darwinian thought as well as to the rise of an urban, industrial society. More than a dozen speakers discussed evolution between 1874 and 1900, with those opposing and defending the evolutionary hypothesis about equally divided. The Scottish evolutionist Henry Drummond presented his famous series of lectures, "The Ascent of Man," in July 1893. Stating that evolution is a demonstrable scientific fact, Drummond argued that the struggle for life has been accompanied by an equally strong struggle for the lives of others.\textsuperscript{32} The \textit{Nation} regarded these lectures as "the clearest index yet seen in this country of

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid., 7 August 1878, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{30}Jamestown Evening Journal, 10 August 1898, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{31}George E. Vincent, \textit{Chautauqua Assembly Herald}, 14 July 1900, p. 1. Vincent, son of Chautauqua's co-founder, later was president of the University of Minnesota.
\textsuperscript{32}"Professor Drummond at Chautauqua," \textit{Critic}, 23 (15 July 1893), 41.
the silent but sweeping change wrought in the religious world by the teaching of science in regard to the origin of man." Indeed, when "Chautauqua managers provide lectures in defense of evolution, and Chautauqua audiences gather to hear them with much pious edification and strengthening in their faith, it is a sign of the times which no observer can neglect."33

Another favorite subject was temperance and prohibition. The first Assembly had featured the noted temperance lecturer John B. Gough, with his powerful appeal for personal abstinence. During the early years legal prohibition was not mentioned, but after 1880 the Chautauqua temperance lectures were unanimous in their support of prohibitory laws. Audiences heard other orators of the temperance movement such as Mary T. Lathrop, Francis Murphy, Mrs. J. Ellen Foster, and Frances Willard, the first woman to lecture at Chautauqua. Shortly after Gough's appearance in August 1874, plans were drafted by a committee of women at Chautauqua for a nation-wide temperance campaign.34 As an outgrowth of their decisions, a national convention for temperance women was held in Cleveland several months later to organize the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

In the realm of public affairs, the appeal of A. H. Colquitt, Governor of Georgia, for restoration of national unity, Theodore Roosevelt's espousal in 1890 and 1894 of civil-service reform, and Josiah Strong's declaration of the mission of the ascendant Anglo-Saxon race — all were reflections of post-Appomatox thought. So was the message of Russell Conwell when he preached a gospel of wealth and stewardship. Conwell's four presentations at Chautauqua were variations of a common theme of Christianized capitalism: "A Jolly Earthquake" (1886), "Looking Downward" (1890), "The Angel's Lily" (1893), and "Acres of Diamonds" (1898).

While Henry Drummond defended the evolutionary hypothesis, T. DeWitt Talmage described the "Absurdities of Evolution." Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw upheld women's suffrage, but Horace Bushnell and John Buckley, editor of the Christian Advocate, objected (as did Bishop Vincent, who also opposed the involvement of women in politics). Richard T. Ely urged government intervention in economic affairs; but William Graham Sumner supported laissez faire capitalism, arguing that "you can get no equality except upon the level of the lowest" and that any effort to create a different situation would mean "survival of the unfittest."35 Other questions exciting platform controversy dealt with the status of the Negro, the single tax, and free silver.

34Jamestown Daily Journal, 8 August 1874, p. 4.
35Chautauqua Assembly Herald, 14 August 1886, p. 2.
Still, the most vigorous clashes were evoked by discussions of the relation of science and the evolutionary hypothesis to religion and by argument on the role of government in national economic life.

While interest in social, economic, and political issues of the day was great, more impressive quantitatively were sermons and lectures on religious, cultural, and education subjects. These speeches dealt with a variety of cultural and informative topics: personal improvement and success, travel experiences, history, literature, philosophy and psychology, science, and educational methods.

The record of public speechmaking for the 1895 season was typical: 17 courses of lectures; 10 sermons; 34 Biblical and religious lectures; 22 historical and biographical lectures; 32 lectures on literature and art; 10 pedagogical lectures; 10 scientific lectures; 23 sociological and economical lectures; 5 lectures on music; 25 miscellaneous lectures on such subjects as “Ships of Old,” “A Lesson in Delsarte,” and “The Nicaragua Canal”; and 24 illustrated lectures bearing such titles as “Denmark and the Danes,” “Central Africa,” “In and About Shakespeare’s Home,” and “Memories of the Lyceum.”

Chautauqua invited to its platform many of the foremost lecturers of the day to deliver single speeches, series of lectures, or to participate in formal debates. Approximately 850 speakers delivered more than 2,000 lectures, addresses, and sermons during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Most speakers were drawn from university faculties and the ministry. Of the handful of foreign speakers the majority came from Great Britain and were drawn from rosters of the lecture bureaus that also supplied the lyceums.

At the end of the nineteenth century Chautauqua had changed from a religious encampment in rustic surroundings to a small city with public parks, a water and power system, hotels and boardinghouses, municipal buildings, and the many halls needed to house its cultural and educational activities. Whereas lectures were delivered out-of-doors in 1874, they subsequently were presented in several permanent structures, the largest of which was the spacious amphitheater.

The Chautauqua Assembly continued to sponsor burgeoning educational and cultural activity, and other summer institutes calling themselves “chautauquas” were established throughout the country (often by persons who had visited the New York institution). These permanent assemblies, not to be confused with tent or circuit chautauquas launched by Keith Vawter and J. Roy Ellison in 1904, patterned themselves after the original institution. By 1900 nearly four hundred such assemblies were in operation. Iowa led the nation with 60,
followed by 40 in Illinois, 25 in Ohio, and 20 in Indiana. The New York assembly liked to contemplate a maternal relationship with scattered offspring; but beyond inspiration and endorsement there was no organic connection between the Chautauqua Assembly and community platforms bearing the same name. The latter groups conducted annual summer programs featuring lectures, sermons, dramatic readings, and musical entertainment as the home institution did, though for briefer periods.

While the scattered chautauqua assemblies dwindled in number (the circuits had expired by 1932), the enterprise at Lake Chautauqua flourished. The Literary and Scientific Circle continues to enroll members, performing artists appear regularly in the 6000-seat amphitheater, the Summer School offers courses that bear college credit, and renowned speakers present lectures and sermons that are mainstays of the program. For more than a century, Chautauqua has influenced as well as reflected American intellectual and cultural life. It has evolved from an idea into a national institution.

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