

Reinventing Chautauqua

Correspondent MARLENE CHAN investigates the 19th-century origins and 21st-century rebirth of an important cultural movement.



Historian Patrick Boyer demonstrates the chautauqua salute.

THERE WAS A TIME when Canada was bound by a band of iron tracks running from sea to sea, a time before the Internet joined discrete cells of humanity into the fragile tissue of the nation's body. In this time before television, when the enrichment travel afforded was beyond the means of the average person, the institution known as the chautauqua buffered rural communities against the deadening effects of isolation.

A source of civic pride, the chautauqua fostered a unique Canadian cultural identity and was a popular venue for live entertainment and educational experiences. At the peak of this cultural phenomenon in the 1920s, 21 companies operated 93 chautauqua circuits in the United States and Canada. Chautauqua programs were presented in 8,580 towns to 35,449,750 people across the continent.¹

"Circuit Chautauqua" or "Tent Chautauqua" linked communities across much of the United States, along the USA-Quebec border, and in Western Canada, Southern Ontario, the Maritimes and Newfoundland through sophisticated interlocking train schedules

and automobiles that transported the paid performers, lecturers, writers, technical support team and young administrators. Large tents were erected as venues when the road show arrived for approximately one week (or less) in a community, creating a distinctive learning experience in a carnival-like atmosphere.

From its inception as Dominion Chautauquas, the Canadian branch of the Ellison-White Chautauqua System had headquarters in Calgary under the direction of John and Nora Erikson from the States. Ellison-White brought the first travelling chautauqua to Canada in 1917, a welcome diversion during wartime, booking tours in all four Western provinces. In that first season events were staged in 40 towns during the summer and 108 towns in the autumn. In 1918, chautauquas took place in 294 Canadian towns in the West. In the Maritimes and Newfoundland, the U.S. company known as Swathmore Chautauqua served over 50 towns.²

Greg Ellis, archivist, Galt Museum and Archives (Lethbridge), writes that typical chautauqua entertainment was not of the

vaudeville variety but “a mixture of educational speakers, theatrical performances, political and religious commentary overlaid with lots of music of various styles.”³ The transmission of culture to the citizenry, especially the next generation, was seen as a means to provide moral, ethical and intellectual education and instill civic pride. Citizens were to be inspired by exposure to the great statesmen, writers, reformers, leaders, musicians, orators and teachers of the day.

ORIGINS IN THE LYCEUM MOVEMENT

As a concept, the chautauqua movement originated with the lyceum movement that began in Massachusetts in 1826 as part of a broader movement to educate and enthrall the working class, including Mechanics’ Institutes and agricultural societies. The purpose was self-improvement through lectures and discussions on literary, scientific and moral topics, and the movement was credited with promoting the establishment of public schools, libraries and museums in the United States.

The lyceum speakers included such noted Americans as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain and P.T. Barnum as well as activist Susan B. Anthony. After the Civil War, the educational role of the lyceum movement was taken over by the chautauquas.

The first chautauqua (1874) was held at a campsite in Upstate New York on the shore of Lake Chautauqua, initiated by the Methodist minister John Heyl Vincent, editor of the *Sunday School Journal*, and the businessman Lewis Miller. It was born in response to the popularity of training sessions for Sunday School teachers held at this natural outdoor setting and became the Chautauqua Institution. By 1900, there were 200 venues in 31 states.⁴ In 1901, Melvil Dewey founded the Chautauqua School of Library Science, a separate department of the Chautauqua Summer Schools designed to teach workers in small libraries.⁵

Chautauquas were founded on four pillars: entertainment, education, recreation and reflection. Books and reading emerged as the strongest tradition, and the New York Chautauqua (“Mother Chautauqua”) published many titles under its own imprint. The Boys

and Girls Club network in North America grew out of a chautauqua tradition, of excellence in sports and physical education, and Lake Chautauqua continues to host events to this day.

MUSKOKA CHAUTAUQUA RENAISSANCE

In Canada, the Muskoka Chautauqua Assembly began in 1916 at Windermere House in Muskoka, Ontario,⁶ and has the distinction of being the only chautauqua with a permanent structure. It was primarily devoted to supporting the evolution of Canadian culture through its indigenous literature and authors. The founder, Charles Sinclair Applegath, was a vibrant and visionary young Methodist minister of liberal views. He shifted the Muskoka gatherings from the Methodist Church jurisdiction to the more ecumenical approach accommodated under the chautauqua umbrella.

Muskoka Chautauqua did for Canadian literature what the Group of Seven did for Canadian art.

The Muskoka Chautauqua Assembly, situated in the heart of Ontario’s cottage country on Tobin Island in Lake Rosseau, distinguished itself from the touring chautauquas by establishing a summer-long event that became known as “Canada’s Literary Chautauqua.” Emphasis was placed on the Reading Circle, paving the way for programs to study Canadian authors in schools and universities. The leader of this initiative was the first Canadian woman to earn a doctor of laws degree, pioneering educator Aletta Marty.

Muskoka resident and local historian Patrick Boyer claims that the literary bent of the Muskoka Chautauqua “did for Canadian literature what the Group of Seven did for Canadian art.”⁷ Part of a cultural shift in Canada’s conception of itself, exemplified by popular writers such as Lucy Maud Montgomery and Robert W. Service as well as the literary icons it attracted, the Muskoka Chautauqua helped place homegrown authors alongside their British and American authors as people worthy of study.

The poets Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss



.....
*Authors of books on the Muskoka
 Chautauqua Reading Circle 2010 book list (top);
 Patrick Boyer and Bob Coghill talk chautauqua
 overlooking the original Muskoka Chautauqua
 site on Tobin Island (bottom).*

SEARCHING FOR THE HIDDEN MYSTERIES OF THE BOOK

Chautauqua was founded for an enlarged recognition of the Word. What more appropriate than to find some beautiful plateau of nature's own building for its rostrum, with the sky for its frescoed ceiling, the continents for its floor, the camp-meeting spirit of prayer and praise for its rostrum exercises, the church-school for thought and development? It was, at the start, made catholic as to creeds; not undenominational, but all-denominational, —a place where each denomination or organization, as at the great feasts, brings its best contribution which the particular order would develop as a consecrated offering for magnifying God's word and work; and, when gathered, each to bring its strongest light, and with the lights blending and the rays strengthened and focused, with square and plumb, with compass and sun-dial, with telescope and microscope, with steam-engine and telegraph, with laboratory and blackboard, with hammer and spade, search out the deep and hidden mysteries of the Book.⁸

Lewis Miller, 1886

Carman and E.J. Pratt, the flying ace Billy Bishop and women writers Mabel Powers, Dorothy Livesay, Jean Blewett and Katherine Hale all participated in the Muskoka Chautauqua. Margot Gordon even wrote plays specifically for the chautauqua, directing "The Little Theatre in the Woods" that featured university student actors in open-air dramas, concerts and lectures.

The Muskoka Assembly, of the Canadian Chautauqua thrived from 1912 to 1932. By the 1930s, hard-surface roads, rural electrification, the telephone and radio were diminishing the appeal of chautauquas. The financial crash of 1929 and ensuing economic depression also limited the resources available to support chautauquas.

MODERN-DAY REVIVAL

But eight decades on, Gayle Dempsey (Arts

Muskoka) and Garry Froude (Muskoka Lakes Music Festival) have played a leadership role in reinventing the chautauqua adventure for a new generation, with active participation from all levels of the community. Tourism and respect for the local environment (including Muskoka, Parry Sound, Algonquin Park and Almaquin Highlands) are an integral part of future development.

To date, the plans have yielded a renewed Muskoka Chautauqua Reading Circle, chaired by Andrea Binkle, with a base camp at the JW Marriott Resort on Lake Rosseau. In 2011, the Muskoka Literary Trail will be launched and the region will represent the country as the only Canadian chautauqua on the "Chautauqua Trail," which will be officially launched in June 2011. Muskoka will be the only community in Canada on the circuit, which includes 12 U.S. members: Bay

View, Michigan; Chautauqua, New York; Colorado Chautauqua Association; DeFuniak, Florida; the Florida Chautauqua; Lakeside, Ohio; Monteagle, Tennessee; Mount Gretna, Pennsylvania; New Piasa, Illinois; Ocean Grove, New Jersey; Ocean Park, Maine; Waxahachie, Texas.

The goal of reviving the Muskoka Chautauqua Assembly is to again establish Muskoka as Canada's "Summer Literary Capital" and ultimately strengthen Muskoka's profile as a year-round arts and culture destination. To this end the assembly has adopted a contemporary, interdisciplinary, multi-platform approach to the original four pillars of education, recreation, entertainment and reflection. It will favour face-to-face engagement while attempting to capture a 21st-century audience.

.....
 ~ Marlene Chan is a contributing editor of *Amphora*. She lives in Montreal.

1. Robert A. McCown, "Records of the Redpath Chautauqua," *Books at Iowa* 19, November 1973, <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/bai/redpath.htm>.
2. Nancy McGregor and Patricia Wardrop, "Chautauqua," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=U1ARTU0000682>.
3. Greg Ellis, "Chautauqua: How the World Came to Southern Alberta," *ArtsBridge* 3, November 2008 [Allied Arts Council of Lethbridge], <http://www.artslethbridge.org/publications/issue-3-november-2008/2010-06-17-20-57-34.html>.
4. McGregor and Wardrop, "Chautauqua."
5. Kathleen Crocker and Jane Currie, *Chautauqua Institution, 1874-1974* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2001), p. 66.
6. Patrick Boyer, "Reviving Chautauqua," *Muskoka Magazine*, August 2010, 83, http://www.muskokachautauqua.ca/uploads/6/2/5/0/6250805/reviving_chautauqua_-_muskoka_magazine.pdf.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
8. Lewis Miller, Introduction, in John Heyl Vincent, *Chautauqua Movement*, Vol. 3 (Boston: Chautauqua Press, 1886), p. v.

CBBAG Ottawa Book Arts Show & Sale

Saturday, June 11, 2011

10:30 AM - 4:30 PM

Library and Archives Canada
395 Wellington Street, Ottawa
Ontario, Canada

ADMISSION FREE

Information: www.cbbag.ca
Organized by the Ottawa Valley Chapter of CBBAG