

Chautauqua: a distinctly American Institution Celebrates 125 Years

A sense of serenity descends upon me as I enter onto the grounds at the Chautauqua Institution. Of course, this is only May. Chautauqua is still a village of just 400 year round residents, and the frenetic pace of the summer season has yet to begin.

As I meander through the winding narrow lanes, taking in rows of charming Victorian cottages, and what I know will soon become a canopy of magnificent old trees, I am mindful of what brings me back year after year. Nestled in this gated community of 225 acres is a sense of history and a quality of life unknown to me anywhere else. Here, I can be quiet with my thoughts or engage in a number of interesting activities. This is where I have participated in numerous brown bag writing sessions at lunchtime, come to hear many thought-provoking lectures, come to see fine theatrical productions, and even attended Sunday mass service in the Amphitheater.

Chautauqua Institution is located seventy miles southwest of Buffalo, New York, on Route 394, near the middle of beautiful Lake Chautauqua. The lake runs for 18 miles north to south from Mayville to Jamestown and is about one mile wide. Due to its geographic location, Chautauqua is predominantly familiar to people in Buffalo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Southern Ontario, but each year it is visited by those from far corners of the world.

For over 142,000 visitors each year, Chautauqua Institution is a lakeside summer center for learning and the arts, a family destination and a vacation home. This National Historic Landmark has contained within its gates a concert hall, an opera hall, a theater, and an Amphitheater. It has established itself as a retreat for theological debate with a renowned lecture platform and has historically been a resource for current events, offering venues for discussion. It is an institution dedicated to the philosophy that learning never ends.

As I begin to wonder what it must be like to live here, to know Chautauqua as a resident, I notice a woman walking her dog near the lakeshore. "Hello," I say. She smiles and returns the greeting in a typically friendly Chautauquan way. "Do you live here?" I ask. "Yes, I do," she says, as she approaches my car with the kind of trust that can only come from years of living in a well-protected community.

After I reveal my purpose in asking the question, Linda Spaulding tells me the story of how she came to live in this

quaint little enclave. She fondly recalls her early days as a teacher, when she would come to Chautauqua to work a part time job at the Athenaeum Hotel, which she notes, "was electrified by Mr. Thomas Edison," as a minor point of interest. Indeed, this is said to be the first hotel in the world to have had electric lights installed. Originally from the Buffalo area, Linda became enchanted with Chautauqua; and today, working in Jamestown, cannot imagine living anywhere else. She swears that the winters are not as harsh as we might think, because although they "do get more snow than Buffalo, the winds are not nearly as severe."

There are undoubtedly numerous legendary accounts involving famous persons, and Linda has lived in Chautauqua long enough to know a few. She tells of one particular day when a prominent Chautauquan family was expecting company. Their teen-age daughter, who had been helping out, saw a woman approaching the stairs to her home. When the woman saw that the young lady was busy, she asked if she could help and the girl gladly obliged. When the teenager returned to the kitchen and mentioned this to the others, the girl's mother went out to welcome the helpful guest. The guest was Eleanor Roosevelt.

Linda is proud to be a part of the "tranquil" Chautauquan life and assures me that even the winters are filled with fun activities, where "you can act like a kid, sledding, and just doing silly things." She notes that the residents regularly meet for dinners-about twice each month in the off-season. Of course, Linda acknowledges that she looks forward to those nine weeks each summer, too, when she can revel in the stimulating environment of the season and visit with her "summer friends."

This stimulating environment includes highly respected, diversified programming in addition to numerous recreational opportunities. For nine action-packed weeks running from late June until the end of August, residency quickly climbs from 400 to approximately 7,500 people at the Institution. There are approximately 2,000 scheduled public events during this time. It is believed that most of the 142,000 visitors are repeat customers who are happy to meet with old acquaintances year after year.

The Chautauqua Institution has provided an abundant mix of educational, religious, artistic, and leisure possibilities to persons from all parts of the nation and all over the world for over a century. Originally founded in 1874 as a vacation school for Sunday school teachers by Ohio manufacturer Lewis Miller and the Reverend John Heyl Vincent, a Methodist minister from Pennsylvania, it was named the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School

Assembly. Once an educational experiment in out-of-school learning, it retains an element of ecumenical spirit and practice.

Chautauqua's founders had envisioned this unique place to be an enterprise guided by deep religious faith and a passionate belief in lifelong learning. An open-minded atmosphere of friendly inquiry is fostered by the people here. People who come here are part of the great American class who wants to know, people who intend never to stagnate, who seek information and knowledge. It is an atmosphere where courteous tolerance of opinion invites those with an inquiring mind. And although originally founded on Christian principles, today the Institution is nondenominational, offering a variety of religious programming.

Classes for young people, correspondence courses, and "great books" curricula were pioneered at Chautauqua. The oldest continuous book club in America, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), was started in 1878. It has enrolled more than a million readers and at one time sponsored 10,000 reading circles throughout the United States and foreign countries.

By the 1880s, the Chautauqua Platform became known as a national forum for open discussion on the most recent thinking in public affairs, international relations, economics, literature, religion, and science. Today this platform continues to enjoy worldly recognition with its Amphitheater lecture series each weekday. Considered the backbone of intellectual programming at Chautauqua, it encourages the active participation of Chautauqua audiences in lively question-and-answer sessions. Themes assigned to each of the nine weeks identify the context for the lectures, which feature nationally and internationally renowned speakers.

The Jehles, of Williamsville, New York, make Chautauqua their home for two and a half weeks every summer. Last summer, Dietrich took bridge lessons; Theresa loves the ballets. Their son, Christopher, has been participating in the Children's School Boys Club for the past few summers. Theresa and Dietrich had decided that they liked what they perceived to be a "throwback to what summer camp used to be," with activities such as canoeing, fishing, and swimming in the lake. The children, they observed, were able to create much of their own fun. From his first year, Christopher has been delighted with his involvement at the Club. Having started without knowing anyone, he looks forward to Chautauqua's program every summer because he meets "kids from all over the country." Indeed, The Chautauqua Boy's and Girl's Club is the oldest day camp in the nation, where many lifelong friendships have been formed. In fact, this year, they are celebrating their 106th year with their first reunion ever. This is an event that is set to take place on July 2, 1999, at 4:30 p.m., for all who attended or worked at the Club prior to 1990.

Theresa shares an anecdote that she feels captures the spirit of Chautauqua. She and her husband gave their boys money and allowed them to go to the bookstore on their own to purchase paper planes. When the boys came back with the planes it turned out they hadn't had enough money to buy them, but the shopkeeper let the boys have the planes anyway. It is this spirit of community that prevails at Chautauqua and makes it all that it is to the people who return there year after year.

It was the early 80s when Susan Russ, Executive Director of "Leadership Buffalo" (a program for existing and emerging leaders in Erie County), was invited to the Chautauqua Institution as a Hospice volunteer. She fell in love with the walking community and before she left that day, informed her husband that she had rented a cottage there for two weeks the following summer. The Russ family has been there every summer since, even purchasing a home on the grounds in 1992.

Residing in Williamsville, New York, with six year old twins had made the Russes feel somewhat trapped in the summer. Susan wanted her girls to experience the freedom of a small town environment where they could be safe. The children participated in the Girl's Club for years, and were actively involved in the summer programs at Chautauqua until their teen years. Today, in their early twenties, these young ladies are returning and introducing their friends to Chautauqua, valuing all that is offered, just as their parents do.

Susan describes the Chautauqua community as a balance between the friendly and the non-obtrusive. She characterizes her experience as feeling the "tension drain out of [her]" as she descends the hill into Mayville, the small town one passes just prior to arriving at the Institution. Intellectually stimulating morning lectures are a favorite with Susan, since she enjoys interacting with others who have similar interests to her. And she has no desire to vacation elsewhere, adding: "People there understand the complexity of human nature. Chautauqua feeds all aspects of the self."

The Russes have made good friends in Chautauqua, planning off-season gettogethers at least a couple of times each year. During quiet times alone at the Institution, they take walks, viewing the adorable Victorian cottages, and visiting the bookstore, which is open year round. Susan has also selected Chautauqua as the venue for her annual "Leadership Buffalo" retreat for two days in January, each time introducing another one or more people to the appeal of the Chautauqua Institution.

Many famous people have made their way to the Chautauqua Institution as well. Among them are nine U.S. presidents, including Bill Clinton, who prepared there for the presidential debate with Bob Dole in 1996. In addition, sixteen presidential candidates visited, along with a foreign head of state. It is known that George Gershwin composed a concerto here in 1925. Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, the son-in-law of one of the Institution's founders, Lewis Miller, also spent time at Chautauqua.

The Institution houses 1,200 structures, most of which are privately owned homes. In the open air is the Amphitheater, which holds 5,000 seats and hosts the symphony, ballets, and popular entertainers during the nine weeks.

In this last season of the century, being billed as the "season of renewal," Chautauqua Institution celebrates its 125th anniversary. In honor of this occasion, the topic selected for each of the nine weeks upholds the Institution's ecumenical spirit, with themes such as God, Knowledge, Re-Creation, Peace, Justice, and the Millennium. It is believed that the lecture themes express the "message and a mission for the times."

The 1999 special season is being celebrated with feature lecturers such as U.S. Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor, humorist Loretta Laroche, and Psychology *Today* radio host Robert Epstein. The Amphitheater program opens with Ray Charles and ends with a double performance on closing night by Bill Cosby. Entertainment by Wynonna, The Beach Boys, Dionne Warwick, and Marcel Marceau add to the special lineup this season. A complete calendar of lectures and performances for the 1999 Chautauqua Institution season can be obtained by calling (716) 357-6250.

The Chautauqua Opera is commemorating its 70th year, still presenting works sung only in English. From July through August, opera goers are invited to attend productions of *Two Widows*, a romantic comedy; *Don Pasquale*, billed as a "one-horse spaghetti western." *Hansel and Gretel*, the famous folk tale; and *Die Fledermous* (The Bat).

The historic Athenaeum Hotel, which sits in all its grandeur atop a treeshaded hill overlooking the scenic Chautauqua Lake, has served guests since 1881. Today, it is a charming blend of Victorian elegance and 20th century comfort. Known as La Grande Dame of Chautauqua, the hotel, which was originally built in 1881 at the cost of \$125,000, was restored in 1983 for about \$2 million. It is the only accommodation owned and operated by the Chautauqua Institution—all others are privately owned and operated.

A wide range of accommodations are available at the Chautauqua Institution, from new luxury condominiums to the rooming houses and inns reminiscent of Chautauqua's early days. Guesthouses and apartments can be rented. Commercial housing is available and may be arranged with private owners. For a Directory, write: Chautauqua Institution, P. O. Box 28, Chautauqua, N.Y. 14722, or call (716) 357-6250.

Having served for eight years on the Board of Directors for the Chautauqua Institution, J. Michael Collins is happy to discuss his affection for the place he refers to as "so unique that there is nothing else like it in the United States." You find "people with the same values, people interested in public affairs, those with a deep and abiding interest in cultural things," says Mr. Collins. Although he believes most people visit for intellectual and cultural stimulation, he admits one cannot discount the value of the recreational opportunities, such as tennis, golf, and lake activities, like swimming and canoeing.

When I mentioned the results of an awareness survey that revealed how Chautauqua Institution remains virtually unknown to at least 73 percent of Americans, Mr. Collins sadly acknowledged that fact. "It had much greater currency back in the late 1800s, early 1900s," he admitted. That was when the so-called "Chautauqua tents" brought concert and lecture programs into the various communities, helping to make it, Collins says, the public TV/radio of its time. This was part of the "Chautauqua Movement," which began in the 1880s and continued for forty years, encouraging development and expansion of popular education.

A gate ticket or pass is required of everyone 13 years of age or older, allowing access to the grounds, and admission to the Amphitheater and other events. Separate reserved seats are sold for operas and plays presented in Norton or Normal Hall. A one-week adult gate pass purchased after June 18, 1999, is \$190. For complete gate ticket fee information or to purchase a ticket, contact the Main Gate Welcome Center during the season or pre-season at (716) 357-6250, 6259, or 6300. You may also write to Tickets at Chautauqua Institution.

Commuter gate passes are available for those living outside the grounds who attend classes at \$2 per day, and these are valid from 7 a.m.-8 p.m. only. Daily parking is \$4, while a season parking pass is \$111. General information can be obtained by calling 1-800-836-ARTS or at www.chautauqua-inst.org.

There is another 525 acres beyond the Institution's gate that offers visitors golfing, fishing in its lake for walleye, muskellunge, calico bass, and other species, numerous antique shops and art galleries, plane and glider rides over the lake, and Amish farms and markets. Mayville is also the homeport for the "Chautauqua

Belle," a paddlewheel steamship available for individual or group cruises. The lake is busy all summer with sailboats, powerboats, windsurfing, C-Scow races and other kinds of personal water vehicles.

The typical Chautauquan is known to be educated, worldly, religious, active in causes, up in years, and white (a distinction many hope will soon change). While there is some recent notice of a small demographic change with more families coming to Chautauqua for the recreation it affords, the Institution continues to attract its traditional followers. Noted historian and author, David

McCullough, once said that there is no place like Chautauqua, not in the country, and not even in the world, and he says, "there's no place-no place-with anything like its history."

Just like so many others, I love the brick-paved walks, the quaint surroundings, the feeling of security, the intellectual stimulation, the thoughtful and civil discussion of contemporary issues, and the serenity of a picturesque lake. As a writer, I have immensely enjoyed the sharing of ideas and learning about my craft. I have used the Smith Memorial Library, which is open year round and serves as a research center for graduate students and writers. I respect Chautauqua's Christian roots, and its unconditional acceptance today of the many paths to God. But I know that what I love most, what keeps me coming back year after year, is the very philosophy of its founders, the pursuit of knowledge.

Each summer, I begin by selecting all the events I wish to attend during the season, and each year I end up disappointed because I can never do all I want to do. Each year I vow to plan better. The good news is there is always next year. One thing I can rely on is that not much will ever change in Chautauqua-it is truly a place like no other.

Dolah Saleh is an author, teacher, and career consultant. She is the author of two books, There's No Place Like Home and Dating and the Pursuit of Happiness. Ms. Saleh resides in upstate New York and is currently working on her third book.