

Lost from the Lexicon

Doing research through the microfilms of the Three Forks Herald, I occasionally see new words, or rather old words that are rarely used today. One of these is Chautauqua (pronounced sha-ta-kwa) which Merriam-Webster On-line defines as: any of various traveling shows and local assemblies that flourished in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that provided popular education combined with entertainment in the form of lectures, concerts, and plays, and that were modeled after activities at the Chautauqua Institution of western New York.

The start of Chautauqua can be traced to Methodist Minister John Heyl Vincent who began to train Sunday school teachers in an outdoor format at a campsite on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in New York. Two years later in 1874, he and Lewis Miller organized the New York Chautauqua Assembly.

The summer camp lecture and training format was widely copied and became the successor to the Lyceum (lecture series) movement of earlier years. From 1874 to the mid 20's, most of rural North America was craving entertainment, education and culture beyond what its own community could supply. Chautauqua troupes brought the world to their rural cousins.

But like our summers today, there were a lot of summer events for folks to attend in Three Forks during its early years; Town team baseball, Town Band concerts, Women's Temperance lectures, Brotherhood of Railroad Engineers dances, Ladies Aid socials, Odd Fellow events, bridge club, 500 club, high school and grade school plays, church programs, etc. as well as both the Ruby and Kidd Theatres. Fitting a five to six day Chautauqua into the summer, and still pay for it, was a difficult proposition.

Lecturers, some associated with Lyceum (Chautauqua's predecessor) had been sponsored by local organizations for a number of years. And Chautauquas played in Bozeman before World War I (1914 & 1915).

It wasn't until 1919 that the first Chautauqua was organized in Three

Forks. Twenty six volunteers and guarantors led by H. O. Frohbach organized the advertising and ticket sales for the six day event. Advanced season tickets for adults were \$2.75, \$1.65 for high school students and \$1.10 for grade school students. This fee included the "war tax."

Acts for the event included; Major Thorton A. Mills - Lecture on the war effort, Dr. William Rader - Lecture on travel and world affairs. Antonio Minervini - Piano Accordion recital, E.J. Kemme - Lecture on education, Mrs. A. C. Zeher - Lecture "Anglo-Saxon Ideals", Edna Lowe - Lecture on physical education, The Merrilees Entertainers - music and song, and The Metropolitan Artists - music and song. The closing acts of the event were the Royal Hawaiian Quintet and a travel lecture called "Rambling through Paradise," by Mildred Leo Clemens (a cousin to Mark Twain).

One of Chautauqua's most famous lecturers, William Jennings Bryan, came through Montana in 1920, and there is a notice in the Herald that he gave a lecture in Pony that year.

Chautauqua in Three Forks only lasted four years. In 1924, after 50 years of entertainment and education, the luster had worn off. The last Chautauqua troupe in Montana appeared in Plentywood in July 1928. With the advent of roads and radio, the popularity of Chautauqua declined and the word Chautauqua never made it into the lexicon of baby-boomers.

But there may be a resurgence of Chautauqua in the next few years. A Washington-based troupe called the "New Old Time Chautauqua" has been doing shows since 2002, one of which was in Troy, MT. The Chautauqua summer camp format is being used to train college teachers about class management. And if you look at it, the idea behind the new summer youth recreation program is "Chautauqua-like" - education and



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entertainment in an outdoor summer format - sounds like fun! Perhaps the word Chautauqua will be part of the next generation's vocabulary.