

“A Worthy Daughter
Ottawa Chautauqua, 1883-1983, Part III”
By John Mark Lambertson
Originally published in The Ottawa Herald July 1, 1983

In the years following its initial assembly in 1883, the Ottawa Chautauqua was improved and expanded to broaden its appeal to an even wider circle of people.

The earlier departments of music, church workers, temperance, literary, Biblical, boys’ and girls’ clubs, and physical culture were soon joined by classes in home economics, history, speech method, and a philosophy of teaching kindergarten. Still later, conferences were held for teachers on both the elementary and secondary levels.

Always careful to closely follow the example set by the original Chautauqua in New York, Ottawa’s instructional program was more highly developed than most in the country. At the time of the Ottawa assembly’s silver anniversary, one of the leaders of the New York Chautauqua called it “a true Chautauqua of the highest type.” He added, “Mother Chautauqua may well feel pride in the worthy daughter at Ottawa.”

The assembly’s classes and lectures were led by a parade of distinguished educators, politicians, churchmen, generals and others. In the area of politics, Ottawa played host to several former and future presidents of the United States—Rutherford B. Hayes, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

Clarence Darrow, Booker T. Washington, Gov. Robert LaFollette, Bishop Quayle, evangelist Billy Sunday and Charles M. Sheldon, who wrote “In His Steps,” all spoke at Forest Park. So did James Naismith of KU, the inventor of basketball. William Jennings Bryan drew huge crowds in two separate visits, as did Gen. John A. Logan, the founder of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Several women of not also came to Ottawa, including Jane Addams of the Hull House, Margaret Hill McCarter and Mrs. Noble Prentice. A special “Suffrage Day” in 1894 featured three of the nation’s foremost crusaders of women’s rights—Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt and the Rev. Anna Shaw. Frances Willard, the organizer of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, was impressed by the local WCTU work, and the local chapter named their building in Forest Park for her.

Music was an important part of every Ottawa Chautauqua. Besides the regular adult and children’s choirs, individual lessons in voice, instruments, and harmony were also available.

In 1887 a choir of 300 voices was assembled, but 10 years later that was outdone by what was billed “the greatest music festival ever given in the West.” A thousand-voice choir capped the festival by singing The Creation.” This festival was later described in glowing terms for a national music magazine.

Professor W.F. Sherwin was usually the leader of the music at the Ottawa Chautauqua. He wrote the hymn “Day is Dying in the West” and it was first sung at Ottawa.

Art also received attention through lectures and displays that covered the major historical periods of painting, sculpture and architecture in Europe and America. In 1906 the \$300,000 Collier collection was shown as part of the Ottawa Chautauqua. Previously it had only been displayed in the galleries of a few large cities.

The later Chautauquas had a wide array of entertainment, from a bird imitator and automobile parades, to the magic acts of “The Wonderful Maro.” The first motion picture in

Ottawa was reportedly presented in 1898 in connection with the Chautauqua, and was shown in the Rohrbaugh Theatre.

The facilities at Forest Park were continually enlarged and improved, with the grounds being electrically lighted as early as 1886. The recreation facilities soon included tennis, softball, bicycling, riding, boating, swimming and croquet.

The crowds that were drawn to the Ottawa Chautauqua continued to be impressive, especially in the early years before other Chautauquas offered competition. The average daily attendance in 1887 was 8,000 with 500 tents being rented. Ten thousand people gathered on several occasions, such as when William Jennings Bryan spoke on "free silver" in 1887. The largest crowd to assemble, however, was the 20,000 that came out in 1895 to hear McKinley. One of the New York Chautauqua leaders proclaimed that "The Ottawa assembly is the next largest to the New York Assembly."

To accommodate the crowds, the Tabernacle was repeatedly enlarged from its original 2,000 capacity to 10,000. An improvement in transporting the crowds was made in 1888 when street cars began to run from Ninth and Cedar to Forest Park.

The eventual demise of the Ottawa Chautauqua was due to several factors, including increasing costs and competition from other Chautauquas in the region. But the greatest blows were dealt repeatedly by the Marais Des Cygnes River. Floods covered Forest Park 13 times in the 32 years there was an Ottawa Chautauqua. They frequently damaged the assembly buildings, such as when the original boathouse was torn away and smashed against the Locust Street bridge in 1890.

In 1904 and 1915 the Chautauqua had to be cancelled completely due to flood waters. Two other years the programs were moved to local churches and the Rohrbaugh Theatre. The 1915 flood was the final blow. Although feeble attempts were made as late as 1930, the Ottawa Chautauqua was never again resurrected. The last Chautauqua-related building in Forest Park was torn down in 1951.

Nothing today can compare with the old Chautauqua assemblies for they attempted to fill so many diverse voids in the lives of our town's earlier citizens. The Chautauqua was the first serious, nationwide attempt at adult education.

Between 1883 and 1914, the Chautauqua made Ottawa a town of distinction. But more importantly, it enriched the lives of thousands of Americans, and enriched the heritage of all Ottawans.