"The Creation of a 'Mecca'
Ottawa Chautauqua, 1883-1983, Part I"
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It was culture for isolated, culture-starved communities. It was education for a people too burdened with daily survival to have spent much time in school. It was entertainment and recreation, that rare vacation, for rural America that worked long hours six days a week.

"It" was Chautauqua, an intellectual festival that enriched the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

This week marks the 100th anniversary of the first Chautauqua to be held at Ottawa. That fact is worth noting not simply because it is a part of our local history, but because the Ottawa Chautauqua became such a major event in the Midwest. Hundreds of Chautauquas sprouted all across the country between the 1870s and 1930s, especially in the Midwest. Yet few grew to the size and prominence of the Ottawa assembly.

"Chautauqua" was originally established as an interdenominational assembly for training better Sunday School teachers. Daily Bible study was to be united with healthful recreation in a pleasant vacation atmosphere. This enlightened idea was first planted in 1874 on the shore of Lake Chautauqua, New York, by Rev. John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller. Their "Sunday-school Teacher's Assembly," quickly blossomed to include scientific, aesthetic, literary, and recreational as well as theological topics and activities. Political and more controversial subjects came still later.

This first Chautauqua seedling grew rapidly and soon was scattering hundreds of seeds across the nation. One of those seeds landed at Ottawa, and grew into one of the largest Chautauquas in the country.

What was to become the Ottawa Chautauqua originally began in 18879 in a grove of trees north of Lawrence. But three years of disappointing attendance, largely due to the indifference of Lawrence residents, moved the assembly to Topeka in 1882. There, alcohol related incidents marred the meeting and disgusted the assembly's president, the Rev. D.C. Miller of Ottawa. He suggested his community as a better location, and was the primary factor in bringing the Chautauqua here in 1883.

Led by the local churches, and the Ottawa Daily Republican, the city enthusiastically welcomed the assembly by offering free use of Forest Park and by erecting buildings for the assembly's use. Thousands of Ottawans took part in donating money and labor to equip the park.

The setting was truly ideal. Tall shade trees canopied the 50 acres of lawn, which sloped down to meet the Marais Des Cygnes River. The river at that time was more like a slender lake due to a small dam located near Locust Street. Couples in rowboats shared the water with a small steamer, the "Gertie," that took picnickers upstream to Wheeler's Grove on the "island."

A more important source of transportation, the railroad, was only a block away, providing easy access for out-of-town visitors.

Through the years, eight major buildings were erected as well as several smaller ones. These included the Tabernacle, Assembly Hall, Dining Hall, Normal Hall, Hall of Philosophy, Willard Hall, Prentis Hall, a boathouse, bandstand and others.

The Ottawa Chautauqua was so closely patterned after the one in New York that is Tabernacle and Hall of Philosophy were modeled after those back East. The latter structure resembled a Greek temple, but most of the other buildings were of the popular "Victorian" style.

The original ornate ticket booth and wooden arched gate were replaced by the present stone gates in 1900 as a memorial to Spanish-American War dead. The park also boasted a handsome fountain.

In all, Ottawa's Forest Park came to be one of the finest Chautauqua facilities in the Midwest. As one of the city's residents later said, "Ottawa had a cultural background, wanting to have the best of everything."

June 26, 1883, was the opening day of its first Chautauqua, and Ottawa waited in a state of readiness and anticipation of what was to come. On the eve of this major cultural and educational advancement for both Ottawa and Kansas, the Daily Republican reflected on Kansas' attributes and called it "a true Mecca."

Mixing pride, poetry, and prophecy, the writer concluded: "For her geographical centre shall be her magnet, and her twin stars of Temperance and Freedom shall not only lure the wise men from the East but from every point of the compass as well."

The prophecy soon proved surprisingly correct.