

THE MUSIC OF CHAUTAUQUA AND LYCEUM

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[Editor's note: Between 1874 and 1934, black performers traveled the Chautauqua and Lyceum circuits, entertaining millions of Americans. The extent to which black musicians participated and the nature of their participation remain to be determined; Professor Crane's discoveries should serve as the basis for the research. The following description of the movement is extracted from his unpublished manuscript, "The Music of Chautauqua and Lyceum." It discusses the movement in general and suggests the nature of its black participation.]

For millions of Americans who lived outside the big cities in the first part of this century, Chautauqua was one of the biggest events of every year, with its combination of adult education, moral uplift, entertainment, and a community-wide social gathering of a sort that we no longer experience. The Chautauqua idea and name came from the original Chautauqua Institution, founded in 1874 on the shore of Lake Chautauqua in western New York State and still going strong. The original Chautauqua and its early offshoots were summertime retreats of two weeks duration or more, during which adults could continue their educations with informative and inspirational lectures and performances of good music. There were also participatory exercises, such as choral singing, and special activities for the youngsters.

The Chautauqua idea spread quickly, with similar assemblies established around the country in the next years. By the turn of the century, scores of Chautauquas were being held each summer. These early Chautauquas were of the so-called "independent" variety—that is, they were organized and managed locally, and the speakers and other talent were chosen and engaged by the local committee.

It was in 1904 that the organizational genius of Chautauqua, Kieth Vawter, first tried out his great innovation—circuit Chautauqua. This was a plan to bring Chautauqua to the greatest number of communities at the least cost. The system worked as follows. Each community on the circuit had exactly the same program. This program lasted usually four, five, or six days, sometimes three in the smaller communities, or seven

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in the larger ones. On the day before the assembly was to open in the first town on the circuit, a crew would go to that community and put up the tent. With the crew was a platform superintendent, who would stay in the town for the duration of the Chautauqua. He was in charge of the tent, chairs, and equipment; he looked after the talent while they were in town, acted as master of ceremonies, and had the responsibility for getting the community pledged to participate in the circuit again the next year.

On the first day of the assembly, that day's talent would appear in town, give afternoon and evening programs, and then move on to town number two, to number three the next day, and so forth to the end of the season, making a series of one-day stands. The second day's talent would begin the circuit a day later and then follow the first day's talent all the way to the end. Each day's talent would follow until the whole program had been presented in the first town, after which the platform superintendent took the tent to a new town, where the cycle was repeated.

The advantages of circuit Chautauqua were very great. The talent could be better, being picked by the bureau to give maximum satisfaction. They had uninterrupted jobs for the summer and could be paid weekly wages at an agreed-upon rate. And the circuits could be designed so that each town was close to the next one in order, and transportation costs and travel time could be kept down. The bureau provided a standard tent and all the management, so that the local committee had a minimum of responsibilities. They had only to advertise and to sell tickets, and sometimes to pledge to make up any deficit. In 1920 there were reported to be 8,581 Chautauquas, organized in 93 circuits, using 525 tents. The peak year was probably 1923, with between 9,000 and 10,000 assemblies and an audience of over 35 million.

Beginning in 1924 Chautauqua declined rapidly. The decline in interest was commonly blamed on the radio, the motion pictures, and the automobile, all of which ended the isolation of the smaller communities. After 1929 the Depression helped kill the business. The last circuit operated in 1934, by which time only a few towns still had Chautauqua.

I should add just a word about the less glamorous Lyceum. This was the winter version of Chautauqua. Many of the same performers continued to tour right through the fall, winter, and spring in Lyceum series throughout the country, often managed by the same bureaus that managed the Chautauquas in the summer. Actually, Lyceum was a much older adult-education movement than Chautauqua, dating back to 1826. Lyceum differed in several respects. The events were scattered throughout the season, rather than concentrated as in Chautauquas; and the lectures or entertainments were held in permanent halls, such as schools and opera houses.

A season ticket to Chautauqua was an amazing bargain. It cost two or three dollars, which amounted to ten or twenty cents for each performance, for events that would cost five or ten dollars or more today.

The speakers made up the nucleus of the Chautauqua talent. Some were educational, some inspirational, some humorous, some were promoting a cause. The most famous were William Jennings Bryan, who made a fortune every summer, often speaking in two different towns a day for weeks on end, and Russell Conwell, who gave his inspirational "Acres of Diamonds" over six thousand times.

Then there were the readers of poems, stories, dramatic episodes, and so forth. Plays were popular—they included much Shakespeare in the early twentieth century and mostly Broadway hits in the later time when Chautauqua emphasized entertainment more than education. There were magicians and ventriloquists—Edgar Bergen got his start in Chautauqua as a teenager around 1920. There were chalk talks and lantern-slide shows, and many communities had their introduction to motion pictures in the Chautauqua programs.

But the musical attractions are my main subject. These commonly rivaled the speakers as headliners. Before the days of radio and television, Chautauqua and Lyceum provided the best opportunity for people outside the cities to hear good music. There were those who questioned the quality of Chautauqua music, mainly highbrows who pointed to the lack of the highest-class types—symphony concerts, classical chamber music, opera in its full form. But these did appear, at least the popular classics and perhaps in excerpts only, so that the audience would not be forced to sit through too much of the heavy stuff.

Versatility was the rule for Chautauqua performers. Whatever the special character of the group, it seldom remained static through the program. If it was a string ensemble plus piano, it could quite literally double in brass, and perform as a brass quartet. And very likely some or all members would sing as well, and one would give readings. The whole ensemble could also split into various duet and trio groupings. Thus the program never suffered from the monotony of an unvarying performing group.

Black singing groups, usually called Jubilee Singers, were among the most popular performing categories throughout the life of the Chautauqua movement. The Tennesseans and The North Carolinians appeared at the original Chautauqua Institution in the early years. In the following years numerous groups were formed and became mainstays of the program of the independent and circuit Chautauquas, as well as of the Lyceum programs.

The groups usually comprised from four to eight men and women, commonly including a pianist. A few of the groups were male quartets. A few doubled on instruments, such as The Southland Jubilee Quartet, a

mixed quartet active around 1914, the Southland Singers, and the Ethiopian Serenaders, both male quartets active around 1912.

The programs of the Jubilee Singers groups were greatly varied. The Old Southland Sextette, for example, active around 1910, sang "Plantation Songs, Negro Melodies, Camp Meetin' Songs, Negro Lullabies, Songs of the Old Southland Slavery Days, Choruses, Quartettes, Trios, Duos and Solos." An occasional coon song appeared on the programs during the time when those infamous songs were popular with white audiences. The programs were by no means limited to black music or southern songs, but often included opera and oratorio selections, folk music of various parts of the world, classical choral music, and popular songs of the day (but not including the Tin Pan Alley types). One member of the troupe commonly also did readings, and the whole ensemble might present skits, sometimes changing from the usual evening dress into "plantation costume."

As far as I know, the only Jubilee Singers group whose singing voices are preserved in recordings from the heyday of Chautauqua is the Fisk University Jubilee Singers, and it was a male quartet, rather than the usual mixed group, that made records. The Fisk quartet that recorded for Victor from about 1909 into the 1920s was a very distinguished group of men, including the scholar John Wesley Work II and the Rev. James A. Myers, whose wife was musical director of the quartet for many years.

The performances of the Jubilee Singers were greatly loved by the Chautauqua and Lyceum audiences. But the appreciation did not keep them from being the object of shameful indignities. In many northern communities they could not stay in the hotels or eat in the restaurants. If the platform superintendent could not find sympathetic private homes, they often were forced to leave after the evening's performance for another town where they could find accommodations, or sometimes to sleep as best they could on railroad-station benches. And these were merely the physical indignities.

The history of the black groups in Chautauqua and Lyceum has, to the best of my knowledge, not yet been written. The groups, and the individuals that made them up, present an important subject for research. The most urgent task is to seek out the surviving performers and record interviews with them.



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