

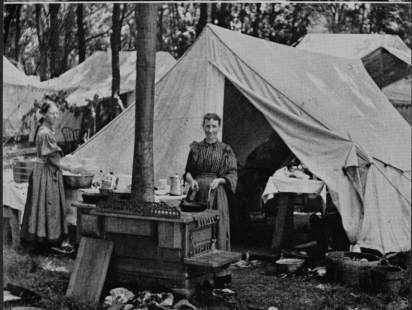


THE OTTAWA CHAUTAUQUA ASSEMBLY IN 1886

Upper: Sketch of a portion of Forest Park, Ottawa, showing the tabernacle and the Marais des Cygnes river. From L. H. Everts' *Atlas of Kansas* (1887).

Center: A bit of the easy living in the tent city.

Lower: Gen. and Sen. John A. Logan, left, with Gov. John A. Martin and B. F. Flenniken. This photo courtesy Miss Clara Kaiser and F. W. Brinkerhoff. The remainder are from the Historical Society files.



SCENES OF THE ASSEMBLY GROUNDS IN 1897

Information on the original *upper* photo did not disclose whether it was simply rain-water underfoot or the unpredictable Marais des Cygnes flexing its muscles, or both.

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The Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly

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N EARLY half of the century of Kansas statehood we are celebrating this centennial year has passed since the final curtain was dropped on the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly. So it is not odd that mention of the word Chautauqua recalls to those on whom the word registers at all a tent erected in a town park, or more likely, in a vacant lot or in a near-by pasture. They have in memory the tent or traveling so-called Chautauquas which swarmed over the country as late as three decades after this century began. They represented an ambitious plan to cash in on culture—or more accurately stated, the desire for culture. Those who set them up and carried them on were engaged in a legitimate enterprise. They found their inspiration in the proven appeal of the immobile Chautauquas—the Mother Chautauqua in New York, the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly and others that followed and used the same pattern. They proposed to package a program of lectures and music and various kinds of entertainment and put it on the road in a fresh air circuit. Thus they utilized in a limited way an attractive feature of the real Chautauquas which combined physical pleasure with intellectual uplift.

The religious camp meeting had long been a colorful American institution when the original Chautauqua was devised. The traveling Chautauqua was based businesswise on the financial support of co-operative communities. It was presented as a civic project with a high moral objective. Failure to provide the necessary support was held to be proof that a community was not interested in culture, self-improvement, and the better things of life. The

FREDERICK W. BRINKERHOFF, long-time editor of the *Pittsburg Headlight and Sun*, and former president of the Kansas State Historical Society, gave this address before the Franklin County Chautauqua Days centennial celebration at Ottawa, May 3, 1961. It is published here with slight changes and the addition of footnotes.

traveling Chautauquas contributed to the fiscal unhappiness of the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly and its contemporaries. But they lingered a while. And there were many of them. These facts and another one, that most of the literature of one sort and another has dealt with the traveling Chautauqua, have brought about an innocent ignorance. It is distressing to one who saw the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly in operation during a great part of its 34 years, including its days of greatest glory.

There are those who recall the day in mid-June, 1897, when a vast crowd assembled in Forest Park to see, hear, and cheer for William Jennings Bryan. Eight months earlier the "boy orator of the Platte" had swept Kansas at the close of his free silver and sixteen-to-one campaign for the Presidency. In defeat he had retained the shouting loyalty of his followers in Kansas. Moreover, he held the interest of those who voted against him. His fame was at its height. The Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly managers, most of whom were stalwart Republicans, were happy to book him as the star of their program. They did well to do so. The gate receipts confirmed their judgment.

When Bryan came to Ottawa that day the Marais des Cygnes was demonstrating. Flood waters rose into the old tabernacle. The front rows of seats could not be used. And Bryan was carried through a foot of water to the great platform. Over water Bryan spoke to the throng about the "first battle" and Free Silver. The records must have contained the figures showing more than an estimate on the size of the audience that heard with ease the mighty voice of the orator. There was no agreement on that point. But there was agreement that it was a tremendous audience.¹

Eighteen years later at a small southeastern Kansas city, Bryan talked to me of that day in Ottawa. In the intervening years he had twice been the Democrat nominee for President, had brought about the defeat of Champ Clark and the nomination of Woodrow Wilson at Baltimore and had served two years as secretary of state. He was then on a traveling Chautauqua circuit. He addressed an audience of 150 persons under a tent in the edge of a pasture. That was the year when the Marais des Cygnes put an end to the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly. The tent Chautauquas were to vanish in a few years.

While the impressive name, Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly, appears on the programs and other literature, nobody in Ottawa through the years referred to it as the "Chautauqua." Everybody

1. *Ottawa Daily Republican*, June 26, 1897.

called it the "Assembly." This term was recognized not only in conversation and in the newspapers but one of the buildings erected for its use was "Assembly Hall." The official publication was the *Assembly Herald*. So to the survivors let us say, "Assembly" is still the name.²

In 1874 Lewis Miller, an Ohio businessman and Dr. John H. Vincent, a New Jersey preacher, decided to start an institution for the training of religious workers, specifically Sunday School teachers. They planned to combine cultural advancement, entertainment, and recreation. They started their project on pretty Lake Chautauqua in New York. The combination proved popular. As a phase of the program of operation there was established the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, a continuous home reading system. Persons could enroll for this guided study and receive appropriate recognition. Programs of lectures, music, and many kinds of entertainment were mingled with instruction sessions covering religious and educational work.

Miller and Vincent became more and more pleased with their "Sunday school assembly" as it grew and hundreds of persons enrolled to live in the pleasant camp or village for several weeks of the summer, enjoy serious lectures and high-grade entertainment, participate in the C. L. S. C., and at the same time have the recreation fun the attractive surroundings, the water, and the woods, made possible. Steamboats rode the placid waters of Lake Chautauqua, providing not only pleasure rides but a connection between the culture camp and the town of Chautauqua and railroad service. An electric railroad also furnished transportation between the village and the town. The county, the town, and the lake bore the same name. From them naturally came the name for this Miller-Vincent enterprise for the advancement of religious education which undoubtedly borrowed ideas from the time-honored camp meeting with modified and refined religious fervor, recognized the helpful influence of a balanced intellectual diet and added the facilities for physical relaxation from the heavy mental work the program required.

The success of this combination of vacation, education, entertainment, and religious advancement enthused Miller and Vincent. They were inspired to attempt to give other parts of the country the advantages of their idea. Vincent was to be a Methodist bishop and one of the nation's most prominent clergymen. He came on a

2. In the early years the Assembly was known as the "Sunday School Assembly of Kansas and Missouri," the "Inter-State Sunday School Assembly," and the "Ottawa Assembly" before assuming the final title "Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly."

lecture trip to Kansas and was to meet an Ottawa Presbyterian preacher who quickly accepted Vincent's suggestion that a Chautauqua be organized in Kansas.

The Ottawa clergyman was Duncan C. Milner. Milner was an Ohio soldier in the Civil War who survived what was believed to be a fatal wound. He trained for the ministry in a New York theological seminary, met Horace Greeley at a temperance meeting and was told in person by Greeley to go west, decided on this section and eventually found himself in Ottawa. Milner followed Vincent's suggestion and was instrumental in organizing the movement in Kansas. Two meetings were held at Bismarck Grove north of Lawrence and another in Topeka. Milner was made president of the organization in 1882. The sessions had not been very successful. There were factors, including some commercial ones, that interfered. Milner immediately started a campaign to bring the Chautauqua to Ottawa. He had effective assistance.

First, remembering the natural setting at Chautauqua on the lake with its steamboats and the park and trees, Milner emphasized that Forest Park in Ottawa was the finest park in Kansas and was shaded by a natural forest of magnificent trees. It was alongside not a sparkling lake but the Marais des Cygnes river and above a dam. On the river was a steamboat, the *Gertie*. The *Gertie* with its Pier One at the foot of Elm street, carried 40 persons, the *Daily Republican* reported, and offered excursions as far as "Big Island."³ No other Kansas town had such a park or a steamboat. Then Milner could and did maintain, railroads made Ottawa easily accessible from all directions and this was to be a Kansas institution, not a community project. And, too, Milner could contend Ottawa was a town of religious people, of churches and a college and good schools and culture brought in by refined citizens who came from states stretching from Maine to the Mississippi. Some of them were from New York areas near the Chautauqua of Vincent and Miller.

Milner won aggressive support from Ottawa folks. He had his way. In 1883 the Assembly became the second Chautauqua, and for a quarter of a century the most conspicuous offspring of the Mother Chautauqua. Trials and tribulations of its last half dozen years, including deterioration of interest, the competition of other forms of entertainment, and the ribald misbehavior of the Marais des Cygnes may blur the memory but they cannot efface the record of the glamorous 25 years.

3. *Ottawa Daily Republican*, June 8, 1883.

The Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly built for its operation from the pattern of the Mother Chautauqua. It could not run all summer. The sessions were set at two weeks. The schedule of lectures and studies and training courses followed the line of the original. The C. L. S. C. was adopted. Instructors and other helpers came out from the Mother Chautauqua to assist. But the Ottawa institution was on its own in the sense that it was not connected with the original institution except as it used its plans and had the counsel and sincere encouragement of Vincent and his staff. Milner and his associates enlisted the lecturers and others on the program. They may have had—probably did have—the services of some talent booking agent or agents. But they went it alone for the special days and occasions. They invited speakers—famous statesmen and soldiers, preachers, humorists, literary figures, scientists, artists—to the platform of a tabernacle they constructed similar to the one on the shore of Lake Chautauqua.

In the 30 years that followed the initial session in 1883 the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly brought to the platform in Forest Park literally scores of the most notable men, and some of the most notable women, on the American scene. These included one man who had been President and two who were to be, one who missed the Presidency by the narrowest of margins, one who three times was the Presidential nominee of his party, and several others who played on the first team of Presidential aspirants. It presented practically every Kansas public man of those years. The most noted clergymen of the nation were here. Men of science and philosophy considered a date at Ottawa a recognition of distinction. The name of dozens of others widely known in various fields of activity appeared on the programs. Milner and his associates and their successors down through the years arranged their own programs, negotiated contracts with the professionals and administered the business of the corporation judiciously.

In spite of the popularity of the assembly and the generally low cost involved in the appearances of many of the greatest audience producers and the carefulness of the management, the financial position was seldom such as to eliminate anxiety on the part of the responsible authorities and the stockholders. Season tickets ranged from 75 cents in 1883 to \$1.50 in 1911 and single admissions from 15 cents to 25 cents. They yielded sufficiently to create a happy condition in the treasury through earlier years of great special-day crowds and 400 or more tent homes. Those also were the days when the Chautauquans could enjoy a big dinner at the Assembly

dining hall for a quarter. Times changed, costs increased but the price of the tickets remained reasonable. Stockholders were determined to prove that the Assembly was not a profit-seeking corporation and they succeeded.

From the first the rule was laid down that there would be no admission charge on the Sunday that fell midway in the session—Assembly Sunday. It was held that it would be a desecration of the Sabbath and a repudiation of the ideals the Assembly was established to advance, to close the gate and take money for entrance. As receipts and expenditures began to get out of balance, some of the leaders started proposing that a more elaborate program but with an overtone of religion be arranged for Sunday, that an admission fee be charged and that excursion trains be arranged to bring in throngs from the many cities for the day. But the sturdy stockholders stood steadfast until June 27, 1906. Looking a deficit straight in the face as that year's session moved toward the end, the stockholders voted 41 to 26 to close the gates.⁴

This was not the first rumpus about entrance charges. Before the Assembly could open its first session, there was a violent row. The Fourth of July fell in the Assembly period. The city owned Forest Park and the Assembly leaders negotiated the contract with the city for the use of the park. The Assembly had been made a civic project and there was a large amount of public enthusiasm. The Assembly officials wanted to charge an admission on the Fourth. There was a wrangle when the mayor turned up in opposition and the contract as approved by the council was revised by somebody changing the provision concerning the Fourth. Publication of a news story about the confusion led to a bitter exchange over truthfulness or the lack of it between the mayor and the publisher of the *Daily Republican*, A. T. Sharpe. Sharpe was a leading spirit in moving the Assembly to Ottawa. The mayor, thoroughly aroused, offered to give the Assembly \$500 if Sharpe could prove he was a liar. But the council moved in to declare for the Assembly and the incident was ended.⁵ The Assembly had weathered its first storm over closing of the gate.

The men who managed the Assembly were not showmen but they displayed continuously the inclinations and often the talents of showmen. They appreciated the advantages of big names on the program. They could see the appeal to groups that some men had. The long list of famous persons who came to Ottawa is

4. *Ottawa Daily Republic and Evening Herald*, June 27, 1906.

5. *Ottawa Daily Republican*, June 11, 13, 1883.

proof of the skill of Assembly managers, both in determining the speakers to get and then in getting them. Considered from this distance in time, their accomplishments were amazing.

The tabernacle, as first built, reportedly had seats for 2,000. Then it was enlarged. It was generally understood that it could seat 5,000 with another 300 on the huge platform. But some whose powers of precise recollection may be mildly challenged place the capacity at 10,000. To prevent any threat to peace, should we not agree that the old tabernacle, which was largely enclosed at the back and the front but no sides, had elasticity no end. Whatever the actual number of available seats, undoubtedly there was no meeting place with a roof maintained in Kansas that was its equal. Since its basic function was for the summer Assembly it was not designed for heating. It had no air conditioning and the cooling came from the busy individual fans, augmented by vagrant breezes that came in across the river. It had no amplifying equipment and speakers were on their own. Those who had gentle voices were at a disadvantage but audiences helped speakers by maintaining quiet. They paid to hear and they wanted to get their money's worth.

The first big day the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly enjoyed came in 1886. Kansas was full of Union veterans of the Civil War. Twenty thousand of them were Kansans who went away to fight and then came home. About 100,000 were men who came to Kansas after the war had ended. They comprised in 1886 a very large part of the population. So the assembly met this opportunity by inviting one of the great Union heroes to come to speak at the Assembly. A Grand Army of the Republic day had been established to honor the veterans. Gen. John A. Logan of Illinois, then a United States senator, came to the Assembly.⁶ The crowd that Logan addressed was conceded to be the largest ever assembled in Kansas to hear a speaker up to that time and for an indefinite number of years afterward.

The Civil War was not exactly over in Kansas when Logan was in Ottawa. But peace was gradually being established. Ten years after Logan spoke at Forest Park, a Confederate hero, who also was a senator, came to speak. He was Gen. John B. Gordon of Georgia, who fought at Gettysburg under Lee and was one of Lee's commanders in Virginia on the road to Appomattox. In two speeches his Kansas audiences in the tabernacle were told of the first and last days of the Confederacy.⁷

6. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1886.

7. *Ibid.*, June 19, 20, 1896.

A former President and a future President, both from Ohio, soldiers in the war, spoke from the tabernacle platform. Rutherford B. Hayes was one, the former President.⁸ Maj. William McKinley, then governor of Ohio, came in 1895.⁹ The next year he was elected President.

The archives reveal that numerous other noted veterans of the Civil War were scheduled speakers, including Gen. Oliver O. Howard, a Gettysburg commander, Cpl. James Tanner,¹⁰ the most widely known noncommissioned officer of the Union army, and Gen. W. H. Gibson, an Ohio veteran and famed spellbinder, who was a regular visitor to the Assembly for years. At the turn of the century Grand Army Day disappeared from the program and "big days" speakers succeeded them.

There was the day in 1900 when Jonathan P. Dolliver, then a representative in congress but a day or so later a United States senator from Iowa, and Champ Clark, the Missourian who a dozen years later was to be speaker of the house and leader with a clear majority on many ballots for the Democrat Presidential nomination, were scheduled to debate on "Expansion and Imperialism." Afternoon came and Dolliver appeared alone on the tabernacle platform before a full house. Clark reached Ottawa but was ill in his room at the Centennial Hotel. Dolliver, who rose to dizzy heights in the senate within the decade, had the afternoon to himself and made the most of his opportunity.¹¹

Then there was William Howard Taft who was secretary of war when he came to the Assembly in 1907, the choice of Theodore Roosevelt as his successor and therefore considered the certain Republican nominee the next year. Bryan, also certain to be the Democrat nominee in 1908, was on the tabernacle platform the day before and made a political speech and had some unnice things to say about Taft and challenged Taft to answer when he spoke. Taft said as he started that he had heard about Bryan's remarks. He said that in proper time he would discuss politics. Then he proceeded to deliver a long discussion, from text, about the building of the Panama Canal, with detailed attention given to the control of the mosquito which interfered with the construction work by

8. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1890; Hayes spoke on G. A. R. day, June 27.

9. *Ibid.*, June 20, 1895; McKinley spoke on G. A. R. day, June 20.

10. James Tanner was most widely known for his stenographic recording of the first examination of witnesses to Lincoln's assassination. Tanner, a Civil War veteran and double amputee, lived next door to the room where Lincoln died. In later years he was active in the G. A. R. and served as commissioner of pensions under Pres. Benjamin Harrison.

11. *Ottawa Daily Republican*, July 17, 1900; *Ottawa Evening Herald*, July 17, 19, 1900.

spreading malaria. The great audience indicated something less than deep interest.¹²

Bryan held the record for repeat performances at the Assembly, as he did as an unsuccessful Presidential nominee. Four times his name and picture adorned the printed programs. Loyal supporters saw to it that he had a welcome and entertainment. The great "Commoner" always was critical of the "money power." On one of his visits he was met at the train by a small committee with one of the town's few motor cars. It was a small open vehicle, with a rear seat in which the occupants sat with their backs to the driver. He rode along Main street to the home of an ardent supporter. The owner and driver of the car was a Democrat banker.

Those who managed the Assembly did not show interest in the sensational for long years. But in 1905 they yielded to temptation. Thomas W. Lawson, Boston stock market operator, had shaken the country with his "frenzied finance" magazine articles. His name and his charges got big headlines and in newspapers all over America. Everybody talked about Lawson. The Assembly managers were deeply impressed. They invited him to speak at the Assembly. He accepted and the national spotlight followed him on his private car to Ottawa. The magazine publisher came with him as manager of the show. Lawson was not a speaker and he was no judge of distances in speech writing. He read and shouted himself into exhaustion. Late in the afternoon it was decided to take a recess and complete the delivery at the revised night session. Lawson was no more exhausted at the close than those who sought to stay through to the finale.¹³

Lawson was not the whole show that year, however. Considered with respect to contemporaneous fame it was undoubtedly the outstanding program in Assembly history. On the tabernacle platform one day was Clarence S. Darrow, the great Chicago lawyer and Socialist, who told a big audience that listened attentively—and quietly—why it would not be possible in that day to write the constitution.¹⁴

Next came Robert M. LaFollette, then governor of Wisconsin, whose subject was "The World's Greatest Tragedy." LaFollette had been stirring up vast trouble for Republican leaders with political speeches that contained advanced views. Everybody expected a political speech although the subject was puzzling.

12. *Ottawa Daily Republic*, June 19, 20, 1907.

13. *Ibid.*, July 8, 1905; *Ottawa Evening Herald*, July 8, 10, 1905.

14. *Ottawa Daily Republic*, and *Evening Herald*, July 5, 1905.

LaFollette delivered a dramatic lecture on "Hamlet" and drank a few pitchers of lemonade as he spoke.¹⁵

Then there was William Travers Jerome, district attorney of New York. He had achieved national prominence for his effective work in prosecuting wrongdoers, big and little. He was to add to his laurels the next year by his prosecution of Harry Thaw. Jerome was a symbol of clean government. He gave a good performance, including sitting on the piano while he discussed good government. But Jerome did not like prohibition and he was in real prohibition territory and speaking to thousands of dedicated drys. He spoke with refined but devastating scorn about "the moral yearnings of rural communities." Hundreds considered the Jerome sentiments outrageous. The New Yorker must be answered. The solution almost suggested itself. Over in Missouri was Gov. Joseph W. Folk. He was governor because he had fought for good government as district attorney of St. Louis. Folk was appealed to by the Assembly to come over and answer Jerome, and through his popularity to help ease the deficit. Folk was inserted into the program and defended the yearnings of rural communities. The indignation died down, peace returned, and the flood waters of the Marais des Cygnes, which had been demonstrating again, receded.¹⁶

To the Assembly came the ablest clergymen of their days. T. DeWitt Talmadge, Bishop Vincent, Bishop Quayle, Dr. Frank W. Gunsaulus, Thomas Dixon, Sam Jones, Russell Conwell, DeWitt Miller, Robert McIntyre, and Josiah Strong were here. Booker T. Washington's name was on the list one year. Carrie Chapman Catt and Susan B. Anthony and Anna Shaw were among noted women at the Assembly. Governors and senators and men of humor and science and artists and musicians and travelers and explorers and educators made their appearance in Forest Park and a contribution to the spirit and the character of Kansas.

When the Assembly started, Kansas was only 25 years removed from the day of the border ruffian who reached the crest of his bloody rampage down the Marais des Cygnes at Trading Post on May 19, 1858. The struggle for free statehood was fresh in the memories of thousands of citizens. But schoolhouses and churches had been erected in hundreds of communities and more were being built continuously. The early colleges had been growing. Towns and small cities were increasing in size and providing more human

15. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1905.

16. *Ottawa Daily Republic*, July 7, 14, 1905; *Ottawa Evening Herald*, July 8, 14, 1905.

conveniences. Libraries were being established for public use. Organizations to provide for lectures by noted authorities on various subjects of public concern were formed. Towns built "opera houses" so that they might enjoy the dramas of the day by traveling companies and concerts and other musical presentations. Communities sought to improve the schools by obtaining more competent teachers and administrators. Talented ministers were sought for churches. University degrees made a deep impression.

Everywhere there were demonstrations of a desire for cultural advantages by those who had found such missing in the processes of pioneering. The hardships of territorial days and the handicaps of war had passed and the demands that the development of the new state made on its citizens were easing. Folks had more time and inclination to think beyond the day's work.

And then thousands of new families had come to Kansas from states to the eastward. They had left old towns and communities which had books and lecture courses and music and entertainment. They had the benefits of fine public schools and of colleges. In their new homes they did not find the things they had enjoyed in such abundance.

So the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly came into this situation. There was hunger for just what the Assembly offered. Milner knew this. Vincent knew it. Not just to the thousands who came to Ottawa from over eastern Kansas was the Assembly the relief needed. They spread the word in their homes and communities. The newspapers reported on the proceedings at Ottawa, what some of the noted speakers and lecturers said. Ministers in their pulpits discussed topics at Ottawa. The Assembly lasted only two weeks a year but the discussions it stirred continued throughout the year. Thus was the influence of the Assembly programs on Kansas shown.

It was a good influence. No bad ideas ever went out from Forest Park. The Assembly program makers and those they put on the programs believed in America. There undoubtedly was criticism of policies, trends, and practices in government, in economic fields and in other phases of American activities. But nobody ever condemned the requirements for pledges of allegiance or a salute to the American flag. Nobody ever portrayed some other country as being better than ours. Nobody ever sought to arouse dividing prejudices. It was a wholesome American influence the Assembly exercised.

Here in this day, in our Kansas centennial year, we can obtain from the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly a sound suggestion. We

are living not merely in a confused world. It is a dangerous world. The hope of the world may or may not lie in America. But most certainly the hope of America lies in America. Yet in too many public places a word of pride in America or praise for American institutions never is heard. On the other hand, speakers, many of them on the public payroll, spend time pointing out what they insist are bad things in America and never have a word of honest praise for the good. This is a day to talk America up, not down, to tell the truth—the plain truth—and the plain truth is gorgeous.