THE ENDLESS SUMMERS OF

Chautauqua

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Chautauqua...

A library class led by Melvil Dewey in 1901 (far right).

Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent

It began with two men who shared common values, complementary resources, and a vision to create "a place, an idea, and a force." In 1874, their vision became reality: a summer community dedicated to education, religion, science, and the arts. 128 years later, the Chautauqua Institution still embodies that vision and the ideals of American education.

Lewis Miller, a successful manufacturer of farm equipment for the developing Midwest, was a devout member of the Methodist Episcopal Church and superintendent of the Sunday school at his church in Akron, Ohio. He was also a member of the Sunday School Union, an organization that directed development of the church's Sunday schools. Miller's unique concept was to divide group Sunday school instruction into grades, and he designed a new building to accomplish this. He invited his friend John Heyl Vincent to speak at the building's dedication in 1868. Vincent, from New Jersey, was a Methodist minister, secretary of the Sunday School Union, and editor of the Sunday School Journal, who counted among his friends members of the clergy, bishops, and college presidents.

The two men discussed how they might establish a community where, during the summer, Sunday school teachers of all denominations could both improve their knowledge of the Bible and have an opportunity to broaden their education in literature and the new field of science. Vincent thought that a growing urban environment would be a promising setting for their summer experiment, but Miller preferred the grounds of the Chautauqua Lake Camp Meeting Association (of which he was a trustee), located on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in western New York State.

A Summer Experiment

"Camp" or summer meetings were begun early in the century by Methodists and Presbyterians as places to hold evangelistic services. They were often interdenominational, and wooded areas were the location of choice when crowds became too large to fit into a single church building. The week-long Methodist camp meetings were particularly known for their fervor, and Miller and Vincent saw the possibility of extending the length of such a program, reducing the emotionalism of the experience and instead focusing on the importance of a broad-based religious education to sustain the commitment of new converts.

Miller's instinct for the countryside prevailed, and the two men leased the wooded Chautauqua Lake camp meeting grounds, already laid out with "streets" named after bishops and others who had shaped American Methodism. A central outdoor "auditorium" for group meetings and lessons was surrounded by rows of numbered 40' x 50' lots that could be used either for building small cottages or for renting family-sized canvas tents.

Thousands Flock to First Assembly
The first Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly attracted about 2,500 participants for a two-week meeting in August, 1874. It was rugged instruction. Participants sat on wooden plank benches in the outdoor auditorium; on an upper plateau, a large tent provided shelter during rainy weather. Vincent, as superintendent of instruction, arranged for the construction of a scale model of the Holy Land—Chautauqua Lake represented the Mediterranean Sea—as a visual aid to make Bible stories come alive for the first Sunday school teacher-training class. The several hundred participants who were successful in completing a written examination at the end of the course received a diploma attesting to their new level of knowledge.

An outdoor children's class

As plans for the third Assembly in 1876 took shape, the Philadelphia Exposition, with its advertised demonstrations of new inventions, threatened to draw off the New Yorkers. But Miller and Vincent added science demonstrations to the upcoming program so that attendees could experience yet another component of the "amazing universe." There was no reason, the two men felt, to separate science and religion; there was room for both in the schedule.

Star Power
President Ulysses S. Grant, once a parishioner of Vincent's in Galena, Illinois, was the featured attraction at the 1875 Assembly, and despite competition from the Philadelphia Exposition, attendance increased significantly. Grant's appearance launched Chautauqua as a place where people of significance could be seen and heard by the general public, and as a forum for new ideas to reach large audiences. Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Presidents McKinley, Garfield, and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt; Amelia Earhart, John Philip Sousa, Marian Anderson, the New York Symphony, Eleanor Roosevelt, (Rise Stevens), Peter Martin, Judy Collins, Sandra Day O'Connor, Mark Russell—the speakers' list of notables continues to this day, drawing thousands to Chautauqua each summer.

Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle
In 1876, the Chautauqua Lake Camp Meeting Association formally became the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly. At the 1878 Assembly, Miller and Vincent decided to expand their vision of adult education by announcing a new program, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC). Vincent said he hoped that at least ten people from the Assembly would "seed" the new offering. But because public higher education, in the form of high school or college, was unavailable to the majority of people at the time, there was a groundswell of interest. The CLSC course required four years: reading a prescribed set of books on history, culture, science, and literature; completing study guides; and meeting in small circles for discussion. A member was then entitled to graduate during the August Assembly. There were 1,800 graduates in the first "pioneer class" of 1882. By the end of the century, over 100,000 would enroll in the CLSC and pay their membership dues of fifty cents per year.

(L-r): Mrs. Clara Adams (passenger), Amelia Earhart, and Arthur Bestor.

Pioneer of Public Education
In addition to the CLSC, Vincent and Miller established two specialty schools: a school for ministers to learn Biblical languages, and a school of pedagogy, which set the stage for modern summer school courses for teachers. In 1883, the men combined the programs of the Schools of Pedagogy and Languages, the summer Assembly, and the CLSC with the Chautauqua Press to create Chautauqua University, a year-round degree-granting institution responsive to the growing need for universal adult education at a time when public universities were just getting underway. Here were the seeds for the now-familiar correspondence courses, as well as extension and non-traditional education. In 1892, the university was abandoned in favor of the focus on summer learning, but by then Chautauqua itself had been redefined as a process, the "Chautauqua System of Popular Education."

Access to the Assembly was by steam yacht and lake steamer, but Vincent and Miller soon discovered that they could take advantage of the new and proliferating train lines. They arranged with the railroads for direct connections (to local trolley lines) from Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland to local trolley lines, also making it possible for travelers from Chicago and New York to reach Chautauqua by rail alone. Special train

Mischakoff Quartet

fares were offered to teachers, with the additional benefit of inexpensive excursions to Niagara Falls and Canada.

Starting as early as Chautauqua's second summer, similar assemblies began to spring up throughout the United States, Canada, and other countries as a result of the inspiration—and often the direct assistance—of John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller. The traveling "tent chautauquas" that later spread throughout America represented yet a third level of development of the Chautauqua Movement: independent entities that nevertheless carried on the institution's dream of universal adult education.

In 1900, Melvil Dewey, Librarian for the State of New York, conducted a summer course at Chautauqua to train school and community librarians. Syracuse University, New York University, and the State University of New York at Fredonia followed over the years, holding credit programs for adults on Chautauqua's grounds. In 1902, the organization was formally chartered as the Chautauqua Institution, and since the 1950s Chautauqua itself has sponsored a unique program of studies that promote lifelong learning.

From its inception to the present, Chautauqua's reputation has arisen from the excellence of the programs held in the large outdoor amphitheater. The arts in particular have always played a central role. A small band of wind instrumentalists and vocal groups, formed in the early days, led to the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, a school of music, an opera company, and a ballet company. A school of fine and performing arts and a theater company have also nourished talent and provided top-quality performances through the years.

Children's programs have always existed at Chautauqua. Original classes included the Bible, obedience, and "good manners"; a kindergarten was then established as a demonstration program that drew many pre-school education students in the 1880s. The Children's School, directed by John Dewey in 1900, is still influenced by his philosophy. Chautauqua also established the first known day camp, and by 1902 both the Boys' Club and the Girls' Club had their own buildings on the grounds.

Even physical education has a history at Chautauqua. Many of the earliest instructional models for physical education were taught in the summer courses. Tennis courts were constructed after Vincent saw the game played in England. There were roque (croquet) courts, and lawn bowling is still played. Chautauqua Lake attracted sailing and other water sports enthusiasts, including, at one time, a rowing team.

Chautauqua's architecture has become another treasure. Early in the twentieth century, architects from Buffalo, Chicago, and Washington were engaged to design many of the large public buildings. Now inclusive of tent sites, small wooden houses, hotels, boarding houses, and winterized year-round homes, the entire Chautauqua Institution is a National Historic Landmark. Generous private gifts have recently made it possible to restore and/or update these structures.

John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller's vision continues at Chautauqua. Set apart from the frenetic pace of modern life, this legendary summer community still provides a forum for learning, discussion, and reflection to help twenty-first-century Americans define values and a philosophy of learning at the intersections of religion, education, recreation, and the arts.

Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle parade before graduation 1930.

Courtesy of the Chautauqua Institute Archives