

Student Handout 3- Progressive and Populist Reform Through Chautauquas

While Chautauqua meetings often occurred outdoors in the summer months, the events were more than fun and games: they also served as platforms for **Populist** and **Progressive** concerns. The Populists and Progressives wanted to *reform* or change the United States. While Populists were focused on reforms for *rural* (agrarian/farming) America, Progressives sought to change the problems in *urban* (city) America. Both groups wanted to improve the United States.

William Jennings Bryan began his political life as a congressman in Nebraska. In the mid 1890s, he traveled the Chautauqua circuit speaking to Americans across the nation. He is famous for the “Cross of Gold” speech where he urges the government to back money with silver, not gold, so poor farmers could get cash. He fought for populist and progressive issues like *women’s suffrage* (vote) and *temperance*. Bryan was very religious, and he wanted to improve society by prohibiting or stopping the use of alcohol.

Although women did not have the right to vote, there were several females invited to speak on the Chautauqua stage. One such woman was famous progressive **Susan B. Anthony**, who fought along with Bryan for *women’s suffrage* and *temperance*. An additional public figure in the Chautauqua and *temperance* movement was **Carrie Nation**. She was so opposed to alcohol, that she was known to destroy saloons with an axe in hand. A third woman invited to speak to Chautauqua crowds, **Jane Addams**, wanted to improve life for immigrants and families in filthy cities by offering jobs and clean shelter in *settlement houses*, like the *Hull House* in Chicago. Addams also spoke for the rights of children by pressing for labor laws.



Jane Addams of Hull House, Chicago, Ill. Photographed by Lewis Wickes Hine. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division*

Senator Robert LaFollette spoke mostly on *representative government*. This was a favorite goal of the Progressives: to elect senators directly by the people rather than by state legislature. Some historians argue that LaFollette’s magnetism as a speaker made many progressive issues known throughout the nation.



Governor LaFollette of Wisconsin addressing Chautauqua assembly, Decatur, Illinois. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division*

President Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt saw Chautauqua as “the most American thing in America.” In response to Upton Sinclair’s book, *The Jungle*, which described the filth in meat factories, Teddy passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and Meat Inspection Act. Factories were forced to keep clean up conditions and label their products. Teddy was a progressive guest and speaker of Chautauqua.



Portrait photograph of Theodore Roosevelt
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

While most progressives cared little for racial equality, speakers like **Booker T. Washington** were sometimes invited to the stage, as were musicians from his Tuskegee Institute. He was known as the “Great Accommodator” since he advocated giving time for African Americans adjust to society and learn certain professions before deserving full equality. He saw the races as separate groups living in one nation (like fingers on a hand).

Famous Pennsylvanian Chautauqua Speakers

John Brophy was a key figure in the labor movement. A coal miner at an early age, Brophy experienced the working conditions of miners first-hand and sought to make improvements. Brophy became president of District 2, United Mine Workers of America, 1916–1926, and missed becoming its national president in an election that was highly disputed as corrupt. He was nationally known for his “Miner’s Program,” calling for a shorter work week, nationalization of the mines, and a labor party.



In 1922 John Brophy had District 2 of the United Mine Workers of America create a fund to support worker education. After running popular classes through District 2’s educational department, Brophy then initiated labor Chautauquas, which staged week-long programs of entertainment, lectures, and discussion of public issues, in larger mining towns. The programs helped build worker morale and improve their understanding of the problems they were all facing. Here John Brophy speaks at a labor Chautauqua at Six Mile Run, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1924.

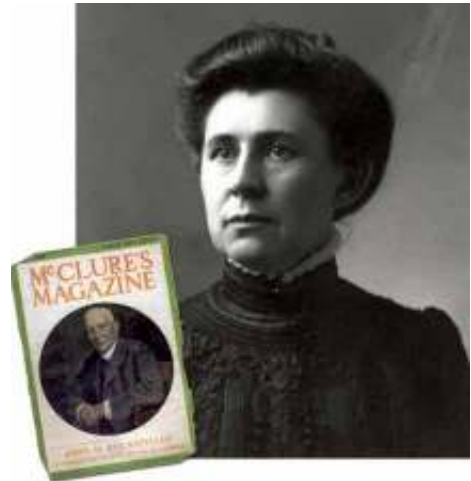
Courtesy of The Catholic University of America, Department of Archives, Manuscripts, and Museum Collections, <http://libraries.cua.edu>



Another guest of Chautauqua was former Pennsylvania **Governor Gifford Pinchot** – a respected *conservationist* or someone who focused on preserving the environment. “I have been governor every now and then, but I am a forester all the time” were his famous words. It disturbed him to see the thinning woods in Pennsylvania, and he fought to protect nature throughout the country.

Gifford Pinchot, Pennsylvania's reform minded Governor and conservationist. He is shown here with his wife, Cornelia, and their children.
Courtesy of Duke University, Special Collections Library

Native-born Pennsylvanian **Ida M. Tarbell** also was an integral part of the Chautauqua circuit. She spent her childhood in Chautauqua and called it a “typically American” activity. Chautauqua was as much a part of Tarbell's background as was her father's small oil business. After graduating from college as the only female in her class, Tarbell was employed by the Chautauqua Assembly to edit their magazine, published ten times year. She later worked for another magazine and wrote of the unfairness of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Trust. Because Rockefeller owned much of the nation's oil, a small businessman like Tarbell's father found it impossible to compete. Tarbell was a “*muckraker*” or someone who uncovered the lies and harmfulness of businesses at the turn of the century. In a way, she “dug up the dirt” on big business and made the oil company's tactics well-known and disliked.



Ida Tarbell took on John D. Rockefeller in an exposé of his business practices and ethics that first appeared in *McClure's*, a popular magazine of the times.
Portrait Courtesy of Library of Congress; Inset Courtesy of Allegheny College.