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Mark Woznicki

University of Wisconsin Stevens Point

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Preaching to the Choir: Circuit Chautauqua and Small-Town Wisconsin

Mark Woznicki

University of Wisconsin Stevens Point

Abstract

The early 20th century saw the rise and fall of travelling ‘circuit’ Chautauquas in the American Midwest. A marriage of showmanship, education, and politics, these touring companies made ‘Chautauqua Week’ a staple of American entertainment. A new class of lecturers, actors, impressionists, and activists formed under the canvas tents of Chautauqua. Since its visible decline in the 1930s, historians have looked to better understand the phenomenon, closely examining its influence on ideas of politics, religion, ethnicity, and gender. The scope of prior research often incentivizes looking at a broader midwestern identity, following companies and their entertainment circuits across state borders. The research attempts to better understand circuit Chautauqua by synthesizing this big-picture analysis with a deep-dive into travelling Chautauqua’s relationship to early 20th century communities in Wisconsin. Special attention is paid to the impact of the First World War on Chautauqua’s legitimacy in Wisconsin. Chautauqua organizers had to navigate wartime politics and the end of the Progressive Era, working to maintain relevance in America before, during, and after the First World War. Using firsthand accounts, lecture transcripts from local and national speakers, personal correspondence, and later academic discourse, this research points to circuit Chautauqua becoming an essential tool of American myth-making in an era of strong populism.

Keywords: Chautauqua, Entertainment, Progressive Era, Wisconsin History

The history of 20th century America can often be understood through its interaction with popular forms of communication. One such medium was Circuit Chautauqua, a form of ‘infotainment’ that saw travelling tent shows of lecturers, musicians, and actors draw crowds throughout the American Midwest. A flash-in-the-pan, Circuit Chautauqua became a pop-culture fixture for only about a quarter of a century,¹ with its legacy enduring thanks to the interest of select historians of American education, theatre, and popular culture. Most notable about Circuit Chautauqua is the way the travelling shows navigated key turning points in American history. Chautauqua was born into the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, survived the Great War, and competed with the emerging spectacles of film and radio into the Great Depression.²

After its disappearance, academics have worked to make sense of Circuit Chautauqua’s place in American society. From this existing historical discourse around Circuit Chautauqua, several narrative threads emerge. These include a higher ‘Chautauqua movement’, the development of American identities (especially during World War I), and an ambiguous decline. These trends paint with a broad brush. While historians have examined Chautauqua’s role in 20th century Midwest society, they tended to focus on a more generalized regional identity, leaving the unique experiences of each state population to be covered by amateur historians and local historical societies. Wisconsin is one such state.

Given Chautauqua’s overlap with the Progressive Era, World War I, and ideals of education, Wisconsin’s absence from any clear analysis of Chautauqua is glaring. After all, Wisconsin had been a stronghold of the Progressive influence throughout the 20th century, with constant popular support for Progressive leaders like Robert M. La Follette throughout the early 20th century. Additionally, nationalist sentiment during World War I challenged Progressive movements and immigrant groups, including Wisconsin’s historically disproportionate German populations.⁴ These connections uniquely situate the state for research on the ideological influence of Chautauqua on Wisconsin populations from the mid 1910s through the early 1920s.

Analysis of Wisconsin’s relationship to Chautauqua through this period has helped illustrate the power of popular culture to reinforce and amplify values. Stevens Point, a town in Central Wisconsin, serves as a particularly good sample of this effect. Rather than directly catalyzing ideological development in Wisconsin communities, Chautauqua sought to reflect already popular ideas back to the people. This betrays a powerful intersection between the spread of information and American capitalism. However, before dissecting primary descriptions of Wisconsin Chautauqua, one must first get a clear overview of the medium’s history.

In the 19th century ‘Chautauqua’ existed primarily as a group of sedentary academic and religious summer programs, the most important of which was an institution founded in 1874 by

¹ George S. Dalgety, “Chautauqua’s Contribution to American Life,” *Current History* 34, no. 1 (April 1931), 1.

² Joseph E. Gould, *Chautauqua Movement* (State University of New York, 1961), 50.

⁴ Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin Volume V: War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1990), 44.

Methodist Bishop John H. Vincent on Lake Chautauqua in New York.⁵ His Chautauqua ideal was simple: if adults sought greater educational opportunities, they could not only become better American citizens, but better Christians.⁶ Audiences were likewise treated to lectures on natural science, scripture, and philosophy, as well as recreational lakeside activities. Through the ensuing decades, others noted the popularity of and prestige of the institution, leading to similar programs in other states.⁷

The new century saw the Chautauqua brand warp, the name now attached to flashy travelling lecture shows that capitalized on the academic prestige of lakeside Chautauquas. Starting in 1904 with the *Redpath* company, these programs boasted lecturers, musical acts, and outdoor theatre. What the original Chautauquas had in intellectual rigor, the Circuit Chautauquas made up for in accessibility; travelling tent programs regularly greeted a variety of rural Midwestern communities. A “Chautauqua Movement” supposedly looked to encourage an appeal for cultural and intellectual enrichment. It pushed the idea that popular education could heal societal ills and prompt change. This sentiment aligned with ideals of the Progressive Era from the late 19th century through the First World War.⁸ Circuit Chautauqua outlived this moment, continuing through the 1920s and dying with the Depression.⁹

Stevens Point had regular Chautauqua visits in the 1910s, described by advertisements in late July 1917 issues of the *Stevens Point Journal*.¹⁰ The regularity of these shows, though likely emphasized by local companies to build the narrative of local tradition, is believable. This puts the Chautauqua experience of Stevens Point in an interesting position, as it offers a look into pre-war and inter-war Chautauqua to understand the Circuit’s relationship to the Great War. A surviving program from the 1916 season of *The Wisconsin Chautauqua* offers a glimpse into this period.

Tonally, much of the leaflet connects Chautauqua to the Progressive Movement, promoting its program as a “social equalizer” and an “intellectual clearing house.” It reflects common Progressive goals to ameliorate class conflict and build better societies. This ideological element is present in the majority of lecturers and acts. Herbert S. Bigelow, an Ohio socialist Democrat, is advertised on the third day giving the lecture “Old Institutions and New Ideas,” in which the leaflet proclaims, “the attitude of the reactionaries who oppose progress because of their stupidity is treated caustically.”¹¹ This paints a picture of passionate, partisan speeches intended to move audiences. The economic incentives of running a Chautauqua would have discouraged any speech that could alienate Wisconsin audiences. More likely than not, the Chautauqua managers counted on Bigelow to speak to existing desires for reform and

⁵ Joseph E. Gould, *Chautauqua Movement* (State University of New York, 1961), 1.

⁶ Joseph E. Gould, *Chautauqua Movement* (State University of New York, 1961), 12.

⁷ Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 47.

⁸ Steven J. Diner, “Linking Politics and People: The Historiography of the Progressive Era,” *OAH Magazine of History* 13, No. 3 (Spring 1999), (Oxford University Press), 1.

⁹ John D. Buenker, *The History of Wisconsin Volume IV: The Progressive Era, 1893-1914* (Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1998), 324.

¹⁰ *Stevens Point Journal*, July 23, 1917, 1.

¹¹ *The Wisconsin Chautauqua* – July 10-15, July, 1916.

progress in an aggressive, comedic delivery. It is worth noting that, with “community singing” filling every transition slot in the program, every figure would likely find themselves preaching to a literal choir. Another speaker, University of Wisconsin professor Arnold B. Hall, is marketed solely on his connection to the Wisconsin capitol, specifically as they pertain to the “practical politics of reform campaigns”.¹² Despite likely aligning with Bigelow, Arnold’s lectures are described as “practical” and “logical”. This represents a potential divergence in Progressive appetite. Similar currents are delivered with superficial differences.

Arnold’s first lecture, titled “America and the World War” opens the lecture portion of the first day. He is far from the only presenter to broach this topic. Several of the speakers seem to carry an anti-war message, reflecting popular sentiments against US intervention amongst Progressive spheres.¹³ Ripon College president Silas Dean, billed as “one of the educational leaders of Wisconsin”, is advertised giving two lectures to close the week.¹⁴ The first lecture is titled “A Plea for Peace” and the second “The American Home.”¹⁵ The last speech Stevens Point audiences would have heard would have likely urged them to support neutrality, once again indicating, at the very least, tolerance toward anti-war rhetoric in 1916. The promotion of performer Waldemar von Geltsch’s renditions of German classical and folk music also indicates a tolerance of German identities in the Chautauqua visiting Stevens Point.¹⁶

Historian Charlotte M. Canning notes in her 2005 book *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* that the role of minorities and women in Chautauqua was complicated and nuanced, with programs offering unique opportunities to work and educate while simultaneously promoting condescending and harmful stereotypes.¹⁷ In many ways, this program supports her analysis. The *Wisconsin Chautauqua* schedule for Stevens Point reflects the Progressive Era, not just in its platforming of Progressive causes, but in its difficult relationship with issues of race and gender.

Closing the Chautauqua week (after Silas Evan’s lectures) was the Hampton Quartette, a group of black singers expressly billed, not as an entertainment spectacle, but as a group of cultural ambassadors intended to educate white audiences.¹⁸ The program states: “These songs are music representing the history and poetry of a people and are not merely presented to amuse or entertain.”¹⁹ The publicity still also notably arranges the singers in a straight, formal lineup, avoiding the comical imagery evocative of minstrel shows.²⁰ While this appears to align Chautauqua values with racial tolerance, other performances contradict the push for progress. “Traveler, Explorer, and Lecturer” Dr. Gabriel Maguire is advertised giving two lectures on

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Howard De Witt, “Hiram Johnson and World War I: A Progressive in Transition,” *Southern California Quarterly* 56, no. 3. 1974, 4.

¹⁴ *The Wisconsin Chautauqua Program* – July 10-15, July, 1916.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Charlotte M. Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance*, 221.

¹⁸ *The Wisconsin Chautauqua* – July 10-15, July, 1916.

¹⁹ *The Wisconsin Chautauqua* – July 10-15, July, 1916.

²⁰ Ibid.

“Darkest Africa.”²¹ Among his credentials, the program describes how he “Christianized a community of barbarians.”²² The limitations of a movement seeking to appeal to a Progressives and predominantly Christian audiences is on full display with this lineup. Just four days after applauding a lecturer’s ‘civilizing’ efforts, audiences were expected to empathize with the historical treatment of black populations. The program was not virulently hateful like the 1920s “Klantaquas” described by historian Andrew C. Reiser in his 2003 book *The Chautauqua Moment*, but it represents the difficult balancing act necessary to promote ‘Progress’ to rotation of separate communities, especially where religious ideology and ethnic makeup remains a factor.²³ The multifaceted messiness of a movement loosely connecting every contemporary reform effort is on full display.

The relationship between the 1916 *Wisconsin Chautauqua* and women further represents this complexity. Mrs. C. P. Cary is billed beside seven male lecturers inside the program.²⁴ Her expertise in child psychology and development is praised, and the program maintains “Every individual who is interested in the improvement of the education of our boys and girls will hear Mrs. Cary’s wonderfully instructive lecture.”²⁵ It can be surmised, given the social roles of the time, that Stevens Point women were among those encouraged to attend. Though the subject is childcare, it is notable to see a woman platformed for more than just entertainment (the other women are billed solely as singers and musicians). With the content of her lecture lost, only the title “The Exceptional Child” remains to contextualize her work. Similarly lost is any record of audience demographics; however, the presence of a daily “play hour”, listed at 3:30 PM, offers potential clues.²⁶ At a time when many of the most respected lecturers would have appeared onstage, a program stood in place to watch “all children under ten and twelve years of age.”²⁷ This more than likely could have temporarily freed community mothers to attend lectures.

The 1916 *Wisconsin Chautauqua* experience of Stevens Point, based on information from the surviving program, reinforces the idea that Chautauqua programming served to reinforce Progressive populist attitudes, rather than introduce them. This indicates that, although the Chautauqua of Stevens Point was undoubtedly Progressive in ideology, this leaning could possibly be extrinsic rather than intrinsic. Broader narratives of a “Chautauqua Movement”, pushed by historians like George S. Dalgety are challenged by the analysis.²⁸ The “Chautauqua Brand” is perhaps more accurate; from the beginning in 1904, business owners used this name to draw continuity with and sell the original lakeside vision. This is not to call the lecturers, organizers, or even company managers plastic progressives or money-hungry

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Andrew C. Reiser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 280.

²⁴ *The Wisconsin Chautauqua Program* – July 10-15, July, 1916.

²⁵ *The Wisconsin Chautauqua Program* – July 10-15, July, 1916.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ George S. Dalgety, “Chautauqua’s Contribution to American Life,” *Current History* 34, no. 1 (April 1931), 3.

cynics; rather, it is to reframe Chautauqua as pre-existing popular movements – ideas already popular enough to conquer the Wisconsin state government wrapped in canvas.

Evidence can be found to support this position in La Crosse, a town in Eastern Wisconsin. Chautauqua week came to La Crosse on July 10, 1916, and the July 1 issue of *The La Crosse Tribune* describes a very different experience for these Chautauqua-goers. While the program in Stevens Point emphasized a message of Progressive-style education (including anti-war values), a newspaper write-up for La Crosse sells the program's dedication to "Americanism and military preparedness," with one of the top billed speakers being a Major General Leonard Wood.²⁹ This sets a different tone with a Progressive anti-war agenda was seemingly not as welcome. The article promoting Chautauqua is located under "Church News," which may point to religion as an important influence on the La Crosse community's relationship with Chautauqua. This is supported by the article attempting to tie higher attendance numbers to "this season of inability of ministers and others to go to Europe."³⁰ While it appears this Chautauqua was of a different company; some lecturers and musical acts overlap with the Chautauqua program of Stevens Point, hinting at a looser association of lecturers and performers with individual companies. Although specific information on the acts is scarce, what remains portrays a different Chautauqua aligning with the values of another community. After all, Stevens Point and La Crosse occupy completely different areas of Wisconsin.

Andrew C. Reiser's analysis asserts that Circuit Chautauqua's pro-war messaging began with the US entry into World War I in 1917.³¹ The Chautauqua that visited La Crosse in one year prior lightly sidesteps this narrative, demonstrating the ideological flexibility of a Chautauqua system reliant on the support of different populations and demographics. Other elements of Reiser's work are more prevalent, however. The economic, social, and political stresses of wartime seemed to universally effect Chautauqua in Wisconsin.

Returning to Stevens Point just a year later shows the impact of the Great War on Chautauqua and the community. A July 14th schedule titled "The Program for a Patriotic Week" shows that the war effort had become a key part of Chautauqua culture.³² Programs for the younger children are still listed among the Chautauqua services, but now the children have been redirected to overtly patriotic activities. On the final night of Chautauqua, a pageant titled "America Yesterday and America Today" is described.³³ The contents of this pageant are unknown, but it stands to reason that the local children were directed in a patriotic show for parents and community members. If the title is anything to go by, the performance also likely served to connect Stevens Point populations to a larger American history, likely including the children of ethnic German and Polish residents in a round of theatrical mythmaking. However, as these patriotic, possibly nationalistic sentiments undeniably took hold in some areas, other acts appear quite similar to those before the war. Advertisements describing the lecturers do not discuss the patriotic credentials of the speakers. In fact, one of the lectures, titled "India's

²⁹ "Look For Big Attendance At This Year's Chautauqua", *The La Crosse Tribune*, July 1, 1916.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Andrew C. Reiser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 277.

³² "The Program for a Patriotic Week", *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 14, 1917, 5.

³³ Ibid.

Millions,” was delivered by an Indian man Mohammad Ali.³⁴ It is a clear continuation – though admittedly sensationalist – of prior attempts at cultural education. One of the plays performed mid-way through Chautauqua week was titled “The Melting Pot,” meaning a part of the “patriotic week” focused on America’s identity through immigration.

Despite the best efforts of Chautauqua organizers to build a versatile program, it seems the circuit could not survive wartime. Adult season tickets in Stevens Point cost two dollars per person, and, in a time of tightened belts, investors likely feared ticket sales would dwindle.³⁵ No matter how patriotic the content, Chautauqua was still an entertainment expense. In the weeks prior to Chautauqua’s arrival, the *Journal* described four separate wartime fundraising events.³⁶ The locals would have likely already given money to at least one of these events by the time the tents went up. It is possible German populations might have felt additional social pressure to donate, as doing so might prove their loyalty to a more suspicious population.³⁷ No matter the reason, spending directly on the war effort through bonds and donations would be nobler than buying show tickets. Promoters of Chautauqua appear to have navigated this tension by advertising the week’s programs as necessary to maintaining public unity, with one column claiming the patriotic content will “make the Chautauqua of more than usual interest and of large public value.”³⁸ The company was even willing to sacrifice profits by admitting draftees free of charge, once again showing the lengths to which Chautauqua was willing to go to keep their service relevant.³⁹

The situation also exposes the risks of the Circuit Chautauqua business model. An article addressing investment concerns reported a loss of ten dollars for each member of the Chautauqua Guarantee Committee of Stevens Point for the 1917 Chautauqua. Despite this, one of the investors was still quoted encouraging investment in future Chautauqua, stating “It was worth \$100 to any merchant in Stevens Point to hear the lecture of Nels Darling Thursday night.”⁴⁰ It does not seem other business owners shared this sentiment, as a week later, the words “No Chautauqua in 1918” greeted readers on the front page of the *Stevens Point Journal*. The *Lincoln Company* Chautauqua, according to the article, was unable to secure funding from local businesses (despite alleged support from locals).⁴¹ This indicates a lack of confidence in Chautauqua as an investment, likely due to the poor performance. While historians like Reiser have considered German-American alienation to be a factor in the economic struggles of wartime Chautauquas, the program for the 1917 *Lincoln* circuit seems similar to that of the prior, more successful seasons.⁴² Local business owners likely understood that with men overseas, rising food prices, wartime donations, families had less money to spend on

³⁴ “The Program for a Patriotic Week”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 14, 1917, 5.

³⁵ “The Program for a Patriotic Week”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 14, 1917, 5.

³⁶ “Is Chautauqua to Live or Die”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 21, 1917, 1.

³⁷ Paul W. Glad, *The History of Wisconsin Volume V: War, a New Era, and Depression, 1914-1940* (Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1990), 12.

³⁸ “The Coming Chautauqua”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 14, 1917.

³⁹ “Chautauqua Entertains Men Called in Draft”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 28, 1917, 1.

⁴⁰ “Chautauqua Behind Costs Each Tenner”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 28, 1917, 1.

⁴¹ “No Chautauqua in 1918”, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, July 31, 1917, 1.

⁴² Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 279.

Chautauqua tickets. Alongside “Meatless Mondays” and “Wheat-less Wednesdays,” there would be a Chautauqua-less summer.

Chautauqua’s place in postwar American society is less defined in the discourse. The prevailing idea, present in the works of Gould⁴³ Dalgety⁴⁴, is that the 1920s saw lecture content diminish in favor of song, dance, and theatre. This narrative posits that, having sacrificed Progressive Era ideals of the movement to latch onto the war effort, Chautauqua organizations were further estranged from the intellectual aspirations of its predecessors.

Written in the summer of 1921, Frederic Haskin’s essay “Our Intellectual Circus featured in papers throughout Wisconsin, including Madison’s *Wisconsin State Journal* on July 27th.⁴⁵ Haskin’s piece features a lengthy evaluation of Chautauqua’s current place in the Midwest. Wisconsin is listed alongside Iowa, Ohio, Missouri, and Oklahoma as states forming the “Great Chautauqua Belt”.⁴⁶ These Midwestern strongholds, according to Haskin, are engaged in a tradition extending from famous American Lyceum lecturers through the original lakeside workshops of the New York Chautauqua.⁴⁷ Missing from Haskin’s evaluation, however, is any substantial discussion of religion or progressivism. This seems to indicate a shift in Chautauqua’s legitimacy in American society. Whereas previous Chautauqua advertisements from the 1916 season leaned into Progressive Era rallying cries, the Chautauqua Circuit of Haskin’s time is encouraged primarily through its identity as an American tradition connected to icons like Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁴⁸ Comparing Haskin’s promotion of Chautauqua to the 1916 statement by the *Wisconsin Chautauqua*, a shift in stated values is evident, and this likely stems from a need for greater legitimacy in the absence of a broader social movement.

According to a May 26 issue of the *Wood County Reporter* of Wisconsin Rapids, lecture content temporarily returned as a key part of Chautauqua culture in the early 1920s.⁴⁹ Though much of the page promotes the upcoming music and dance acts, large print photos also extol the various speakers, with an addition section proclaiming “Public Speech Not Dead.”⁵⁰ The article appeals to public speaking as both an American institution and a source of cultural enrichment, representing a mix of naval-gazing and social posturing. Whether or not even the veneer of intellectual democracy remained company-to-company matters less than the lack of a common source of ideological legitimacy.

This shift seems to have occurred later on in the 1920s for various Wisconsin locations. In a 1968 recording for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, George Ferger interviews a 57-year-old woman from Necedah. When prompted about her memories of Chautauqua in the 1920s, the woman describes Chautauqua primarily as travelling theatre with song and dance

⁴³ Gould, *Chautauqua Movement*, 83.

⁴⁴ Dalgety, “Chautauqua’s Contribution to American Life,” 4.

⁴⁵ Frederic Haskin, “Our Intellectual Circus,” *The Wisconsin State Journal*, July 27 1921, 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Chautauqua Coming,” *Wood County Reporter*, May 26 1921, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

troupes.⁵¹ Though her recollections are anecdotal in nature, they represent a Wisconsin perspective supporting the trend of theatrics supplanting lectures. Her description of the play “The Gorilla” also corroborates Dalgety’s claim of Shakespearean drama giving way to “small cast farce”.⁵² The trend is further corroborated by a 1976 Manitowoc Local History Collection interview with a musician named Walter Ahrens. Ahrens describes 1920s Chautauqua, first and foremost, as “vaudeville”.⁵³

The final stage of Circuit Chautauqua to evaluate centers around the downfall of the movement. A point of division among scholars, the cocktail of factors that led to Chautauqua vanishing into mid-20th century mythology can be further explored through Walter Ahrens’ interview and contemporary news articles. Canning concluded that dance halls, movie theaters, and radio usurped Chautauqua’s place in American entertainment.⁵⁴ Presumably, the woman interviewing Ahrens in 1976 came to the same conclusion, noting that “movies came after Chautauqua.” Ahrens denies this, claiming the two coexisted in Manitowoc.⁵⁵ While initially seeming to contradict Canning, it is worth mentioning that Ahrens, given the timeline of events, is likely referring to silent movies, meaning the spread of “talkies” in the 1930s still could have dealt a greater blow.⁵⁶

On the other side of the entertainment-education spectrum, contemporary articles, like a 1932 piece in the *Eau Claire Leader* titled “Chautauqua’s Decline” attribute audience disinterest in Wisconsin to a diminishing intellectual talent on the platform. The author views Chautauqua as unequipped to bid for talent with more lucrative entertainment careers offered in radio and film. The piece concludes: “Today, even the villager demands something more spectacular than he can find in the Chautauqua tent.”⁵⁷ It seems this process of undercutting ran both ways (education and entertainment), as correspondence between popular Wisconsin Chautauqua performer Robert Bowman in the 1930s reveals frequent appearances by Bowman’s Shakespeare interpretations in high school classrooms⁵⁸, with Bowman citing limited work in Chautauqua. In a chicken-or-egg scenario, it seems later Circuit Chautauqua suffered from ‘brain-drain’ as popular intellectuals and cultural figures found better modes of expression, leaving others like Bowman to find other ways to entertain and educate.⁵⁹

Small-town Wisconsin’s love affair with Circuit Chautauqua reveals a broader struggle. The story of Chautauqua is one of a medium in search of legitimacy. Originally, Chautauqua maintained influence through a homogenized ideal of progressivism coupled to the old institutions of New York, furthering the notion of a Chautauqua Movement. With the death of

⁵¹ “Necedah, Wisconsin; Primary Informant WI029,” 1968, Audio File, 16:20.

⁵² Dalgety, “Chautauqua’s Contribution to America,” 5.

⁵³ Walter Ahrens, “A Manitowoc Musician,” 1976, Audio File, 2:28.

⁵⁴ Canning, “The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance,” 223.

⁵⁵ Ahrens, “A Manitowoc Musician,” Audio File, 4:20.

⁵⁶ Canning, “The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance,” 224.

⁵⁷ “Chautauqua’s Decline,” *Eau Claire Leader*, 20 July 1932, 8.

⁵⁸ Letter from Edward G. Lange, Delavan Public Schools, 1931, MSS 955, Box 1, Folder 1, Robert O. Bowman Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁵⁹ Letter from Sverre O. Braathen to Robert O. Bowman, 1936, MSS 955, Box 1, Folder 1, Robert O. Bowman Papers. Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

the Progressive Era came the loss of a major source of respect for Chautauqua, and social reform balanced with jingoism to stay relevant in a wartime society. This was a temporary solution, and the end of the war revealed a hollower Chautauqua. Legitimacy was then sought through doubling down on a mythologized idea of 'American as apple pie' entertainment. It seems this attempt to maintain influence by appealing to the values of good entertainment set the movement up to fail, as without even the pretense of ideological influence, Chautauqua was no more valuable than that a movie, or radio program. Small deviations in Wisconsin's experience with Chautauqua do not dismiss this narrative, rather, they support the idea that Circuit Chautauqua had truly become divorced from any broader set of social values or objectives, leaving a dwindling state-by-state hodgepodge of education for some, entertainment for others, and populism for all.

Circuit Chautauqua fed existing currents to ensure economic success, as indicated by the ideological disparities of pre, interwar, and postwar Chautauqua content. Simply put, Chautauqua's changing ideas were the product of a de-centralized program desperate to justify its existence amidst other popular forms of media. True believers or no, the Chautauqua managers still boil down to economic actors encouraged to seek profitable ideas to sell tickets. A company ideology, as experienced by Wisconsin residents of Stevens Point, was not dependent on any one movement. It gained meaning and influence from a multitude of expectations and appetites. Chautauqua is then understood, not as an ideological movement, but a feedback loop of pure populism.

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