

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 3, 2014

Chautauqua Institute: The “Institute” consists of probably 300 acres on the shore of Chautauqua Lake, about 65 miles southwest of Buffalo, New York. Established in 1874 by Lewis Miller (father-in-law of Thomas A. Edison) and Bishop John H. Vincent, its original intent was to teach the history and geography of Palestine, but soon, as more summer cottages and boarding houses were built on the property, it served as a religious retreat with all sorts of programs popular in the final years of the 19th century. Perhaps the most spectacular building in the Institute is the Athenaeum Hotel, built in 1881 and beautifully restored in the late 1970s to open again as a renowned hostelry.

Today, more than 145,000 people subscribe to a portion of the summer offerings each year. Besides those who stay at the big hotel, numerous small hotels, boarding houses, private homes, and condominiums are spaced around the grounds and offer accommodations in all price ranges. It's possible to attend lectures and programs at all hours of the day, and evening programs in the 2,300-seat open-sided auditorium are varied. It's not unusual for 75,000 people to be on the grounds in a single day.

My Aunt Mary Ferguson took the train to Chautauqua and stayed several days in the 1930s and '40s. Ruth and I first visited on our way home from Cleveland in 1985, a few weeks before we were married. The next year we invited our good friends George and Kitty Wright to accompany us, and we stayed three nights at the Athenaeum. One night we listened to Walter Reuther, head of the United Auto Workers, and another time the place was packed to hear Peter, Paul and Mary. Kitty Wright, especially, enjoyed hearing a woman who portrayed Katharina Luther, the wife of Martin Luther.

Chautauqua was one of the first (and certainly the fanciest) religious “Camp Meetings,” which grew up all over the country in the late 19TH century. Seldom mentioned today, some, such as Brandywine Summit Camp Meeting west of Johnson's Corner on Route 202 and Mount Gretna in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, are still in operation.

Somewhat different was the “Chautauqua Circuit,” a traveling summer show with featured speakers, which grew out of the Chautauqua experience. William Jennings Bryan and Carrie Nation spoke at Whiteman's Grove (near Milford Cross Roads) and in Kennett Square. Hockessin had its version of the “Chautauqua.” My grandmother Marshall liked to attend, and my father often took her in one of his Stanley cars. Very popular in the early years of the 20th century, traveling Chautauquas had run their course by 1940.