



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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CHAUTAUQUA

by Edna Luce

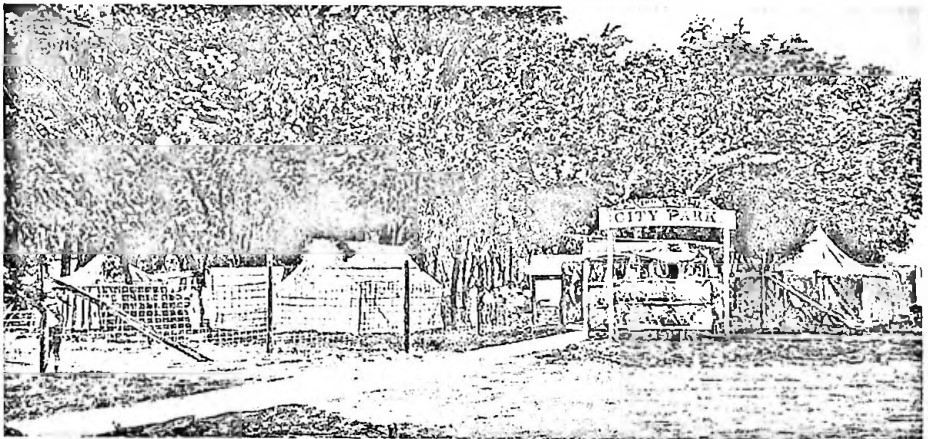
The name "Chautauqua" comes from an assembly led by a Methodist minister in 1874 at Lake Chautauqua, New York. Its purpose was to give the people who came to the lake for a vacation something to hear and do. The assembly programs consisted mostly of lectures, music and sermons.

During Kearney's "boom" period a plan was proposed to make the city another headquarters for a Chautauqua Assembly patterned after the New York Assembly. In the July 30, 1887 issue of *Kearney New Era* was the following item:

With the new lake made from the Kearney Canal, it was proposed to the Board of Trade by the Rev. Dr. Archibald of Cincinnati, Ohio, that a Chautauqua Association be formed in Kearney; Dr. Archibald will buy 320 acres of ground and proposes that a stock company be formed with a capital of \$50,000. Proceeds would go to improving the grounds, making the lake, building a pavilion and erecting such other buildings as would be necessary to carry on a Chautauqua Assembly.

It would give Kearney a reputation as a summer resort. He described the New York Chautauqua grounds and saw no reason why Kearney, being located near the center of the United States, should not build up an Assembly that would be attended from the east and west, the north and south. The Board of Trade heartily endorsed the Chautauqua movement.

Nothing further was mentioned in the Kearney press about this proposal. However, around the turn of the century tent Chautauqua developed with the same type of programs, and Chautauqua was brought to the people in their own community. By 1904 tent Chautauqua had reached Iowa, and three years later, Nebraska.



Chautauqua Grounds at Third Ward City Park

(Continued on Page 3)

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people.

Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Basic Membership	\$ 7.50
Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Alice Howell; Secretary, Colleen Parker; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren. Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Burgland, Minnette Steinbrink, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield, Viola Livingston and Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

WITH THE SOCIETY

From the President:

THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

Many good things have been happening with the Buffalo County Historical Society. Expanded hours at the museum seem to be paying off in increased attendance. We have many dedicated volunteers who are making this possible. However, we are ever in need of more of you to help with these visitors.

If you have not been contacted and feel you can give a few hours of your time, either morning or afternoon, call the museum (234-3041) or me (237-7327).

Members of Dobytown Kiwanis have painted two railroad carts and two handcarts at Trails and Rails Museum. Another THANK YOU to them!

We will have a booth at the Buffalo County Fair. This will be a way of telling our story about the Society to the public, how we are funded, and what are our programs and projects. Do stop and visit. Tell your friends about the Historical Society and urge them to join our ranks to preserve the history of Buffalo County.

As we have done in past years, new 1988 memberships can now be purchased and the new member will receive the September, October and November / December 1987 issues as a bonus. 1988 Basic Membership increases to \$10.00 and Institutional / Business increases to \$15.00. Supporting and Life memberships remain the same.

Tales of Buffalo County, Volume III will be printed and available at the museum and at the fair booth. This volume covers the *Buffalo Tales* articles published in 1984, 1985 and 1986. Volume II is still available, also.

Is someone missing a Tupperware pie carrier? We have one left from the Wagons West Celebration. Check at the museum.

NEW MEMBERS

Vincent & Ruby Wolford Kearney Mrs. Dorothy M. Lewis Shelton

SUPPORTING MEMBER

Jane Gibbons Henry Kearney

Kearney was included on the first Chautauqua circuit in Nebraska in August of 1907, which opened at Blair and closed in McCook. Local planning had started a year earlier. In the *Kearney Daily Hub* of January 15, 1907, announcement of a meeting on January 16 to form a Chautauqua Association was made, and the next day the *Hub* carried the news that a Kearney Chautauqua Association was formed and incorporated. Members of the committee to solicit stock were V. C. Chase, S.A.D. Henline, F. J. Switz, G. E. Haase, E. B. Finch and John A. Miller. It was planned to secure 80 acres adjoining Third Ward Park running back into the hills to make one of the most attractive parks in Nebraska. Stock shares were priced at \$1.00 upward.

After looking over various parts of the city the committee settled on a plot of 30 acres immediately north of and adjoining Third Ward Park for a "great and permanent Chautauqua Park." Plans were announced in the June 19 issue: "Concession fees were announced; season ticket price is \$1.75 if bought in advance. Williams Dixie Jubilee Singers will open on Saturday evening, July 15. They will sing twice a day for three days. Have you secured your tent? Of course, you're going to camp there. Henline, the tent man, must know how many tents will be wanted by July 1."

In the June 22 *Hub* it was stated that there were no complimentary tickets and tickets were not transferable. Advance sale of tickets for \$1.75 would last until midnight, July 1, then would be \$2.00. The July 10 edition stated that the Chautauqua management would like for all businesses to close at 5:30 p.m. during Chautauqua days, July 13-21, and there would be Union Sunday School at Chautauqua on Sunday.

So, for one brief week during the stifling heat of Nebraska summer, Chautauqua meant music, entertainment, lectures and laughter to the Kearney community. The opening days met more than the highest expectations. A list was published of who was camping and where, and stated that "the tent occupants will enjoy the week living the simple life mid the cool breezes and delightful shade of the park." There were a number of concession stands for lunch and refreshments, and a large dining hall west of the big pavilion. "A well-arranged fountain provides pure running water constantly. Benches and settees are amply placed on the grounds," stated the *Hub*. Professor Porter of the Kearney State Teachers College faculty was platform manager, announcer and local liaison with the circuit. He had been on Chautauqua circuits before coming to Kearney.

For three decades, beginning at the turn of the century, the huge brown tents dotted the plains, bringing glamour to the main streets of America. For an all too brief time the activity of town revolved around Chautauqua. Ministers announced its arrival and extolled its virtues from their pulpits, businessmen closed their stores in the afternoon and farmers drove in from the country in spite of the heavy demands of summer work in order to attend all sessions. It was the only summer holiday that most had. With the closing of school in the spring until the last part of August they could talk of nothing else. To put it briefly, Chautauqua was a show in a tent which was both educational and entertaining, "Culture Under Canvas."

The brown tent held a peculiar fascination. Inside, it smelled of dust, dried grass and new lumber. The hard board seats were less than comfortable . . . the gentle flap of the canvas lulled people into a pleasant lethargy in the stifling heat . . . but in spite of the discomforts they were held spellbound by the entertainment from the platform. Chautauqua was the best entertainment bargain of all time. For a season ticket the holder could see fourteen programs, seven in the afternoon, seven at night. The afternoon program usually featured a 30-minute musical prelude by the Company that was slated to give the entire evening performance. This was followed by a lecture given by some outstanding personality of the day. Bands, orchestras, small musical companies, quartettes, readers and sometimes, to the delight of the children, a magician made up the entire weeks program. Later with much success, plays and musicals were added

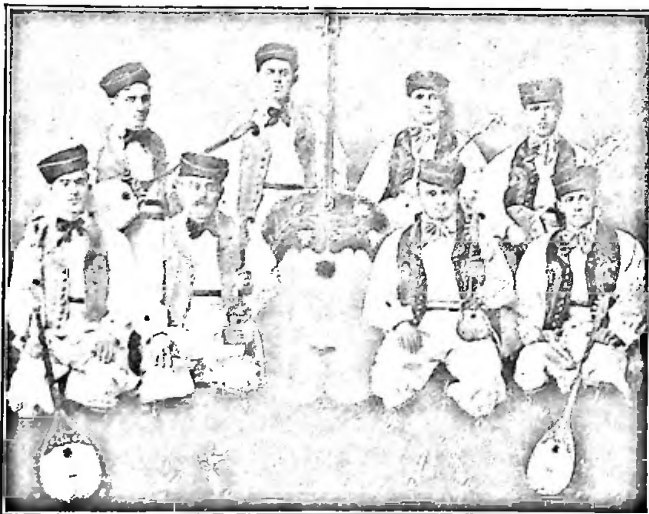
but these sometimes posed an additional problem because some towns objected to plays being given on Sunday. Many who later became prominent in TV and radio got their start on a Chautauqua Circuit—Clarence Nash (voice of Donald Duck), Lucille Ball, Edgar Bergen (Charlie McCarthy), Curt Massey, Everett Kemp, and Columnnist Drew Pearson.

Chalk talks were a favorite with children. These fast-working cartoonists gave us our first glimpse of comic strips. It was fun to watch the artist make a few quick strokes with his chalk and then with a flourish, tear the finished picture from his easel and hand it grandly to the person in the audience he had singled out as his model. The artist was posted ahead of time and always chose a prominent citizen who had signed the Chautauqua contract.

The lectures were the backbone of the original Chautauqua movement. Outstanding men were brought to small towns to deliver their messages to the people . . . Champ Clark, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Thomas Brooks Fletcher, Warren Harding, later President Harding, and always a great Chautauqua booster, George Norris, outstanding Nebraska Legislator, Dr. Russell Conwell (1917), who gave his famous lecture "Acres of Diamonds," thousands of times, and the greatest orator of all time, Nebraska's own William Jennings Bryan with his "Prince of Peace" lecture. Gladys Grantham Benthack said, "These men had positive beliefs and were not afraid to state them. We have no brilliant speakers today nor do we have statesmen . . . that day is gone . . . we have in their place, politicians, who say what the people want to hear."

Mrs. Benthack, a native of Kearney but now living in Lexington, Nebraska, was the niece of Charles F. Horner, one of the pioneers in the tent Chautauqua movement. Redpath-Homer had the first Chautauquas in Nebraska and the states south and west. For three years she and her sister traveled the circuit with their uncle and learned much about how Chautauquas were handled.

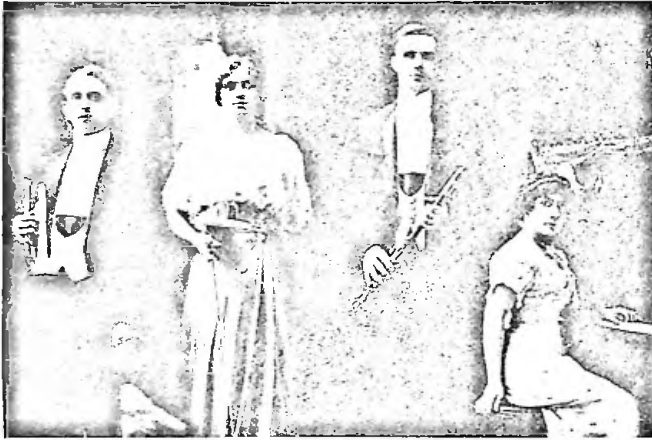
The circuit managers booked the towns so that the talent could reach the next town the next day, keeping seven Chautauquas going at all times. The 7-day Chautauquas required nine crews, each of which consisted of a Platform manager, whose job was to see that the townspeople were happy and that things were running on schedule, and most important to get the contract for the next year. There were two boys assigned to each crew whose duties included putting up and tearing down the big tents . . . sack-



THE TAMBURICA CROATIAN ORCHESTRA – 1887

ing the canvas sections for shipment, taking tickets, and in general, keeping an eye on the entire set-up. Living in a town for an entire week gave the crew special attention from the townspeople. Picnics, ice cream freezes, watermelon feeds, dinners, etc. In fact, they were royally entertained and made many good friends over the whole circuit.

The crew boys were well trained in setting up the big tents and, indeed, it was a responsibility. Pounding the many stakes was a chore and at the beginning of the season there were many blistered hands from using the big mauls. As the season progressed, they toughened up and could sink the stakes with great rhythm and rapidity. Each crew took great pride in their set-ups, always hoping to outdo the other eight crews. A wet tent on teardown night was a disaster; 250-pound bags of canvas became 500-pound sacks to handle. The boys were unhappy, the railroad express men were unhappy and the Company was, too, because of the excess baggage charges.



THE GILBERT SHORTER PLAYERS — 1887

A Versatile Company of Artists who Entertain in Many Different Ways

Some towns were so enthusiastic about Chautauqua that they built open air pavilions to take care of the week's entertainment. Hastings, Fullerton, and St. Edward in Nebraska did this. Some of these pavilions are still standing. Leroy Walker tells about tent Chautauqua in Gibbon, Nebraska in the city park there in the early 1920's:

"I remember particularly one tall, gangly, homely (very homely) speaker. As a child I imagined that he looked as Abraham Lincoln must have looked. But one forgot his looks when he spoke; for he was an excellent speaker. I even remember, after 65 years a story he told. The story went something like this: The speaker had been talking from the platform in another town, and two women down front were carrying on a conversation with each other paying no attention to the speaker. So the speaker talked louder and louder and louder. The women talked louder and louder and louder. The speaker suddenly stopped speaking. One of the women in a loud voice said to her companion, "I always cook mine in goose grease."

"My father, S. A. A. Walker, a hardware merchant in Gibbon, was one of the local men that signed the contract with the Redpath-Horner Co. for the coming year. This local committee also signed notes, which meant that if the sale of tickets did not cover the contract the note signers would make up the difference. Several times he was required to use his own money to make the Chautauqua costs come out even.

"So it was that the idea of a home-town Chautauqua seemed like a good

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idea, and it was adopted. A local woman, Florence Buck, who was a dramatic reader and who had had experience on the stage gave one program. Wrestler John 'Tiger John' Pesek gave a wrestling 'exhibition' with another grappler and L. T. Osborn explained and named the holds. It was illegal to name a winner. Other local groups provided musical numbers.

"The local Chautauqua lasted for several years, long enough for the profits to be used to build a roofed, but wall-less pavilion with bench seats with backs on a raised floor for the audience. One of these seats still exists and is on Front Street in Gibbon. Vandalism in the off season on the walls of the dressing rooms was given eventually as the cause of the demise of the local Chautauqua."

Many funny things happened on the circuits. One evening Ruth Bryan Owen was speaking in Fort Collins, Colorado, when it started to pour rain. A puddle started to collect in a fold of the canvas just above the platform and the crew boy hesitated to interrupt her lecture to take care of it, hoping it would go away. It didn't! Finally, it split the canvas and the water came crashing onto the platform. Mrs. Owen with great poise stopped her lecture and said, "Friends, you are present on an historic occasion. This is the first time a Bryan has ever spoken on a wet platform."

Incidentally, in all the years of Chautauqua, even after stage plays were introduced, the stage was never called anything but the "Platform." The entertainers were always known as the "talent." The crew boys always had to print the name of the town on the floor of the platform for the use of lecturers in case any of them might slip up and mention the wrong town.

The peak year for tent Chautauqua was 1924 when 30 million Americans in twelve thousand towns attended programs of political oratory, plays, musical entertainment and lectures of the "hearth, home and heaven" variety. With the coming of talking pictures, radios, more cars, air conditioning, and the beginning of the depression of the 30's, the idea began to fall and it finally died in 1932. There has never been anything like Chautauqua that has affected the lives of so many people.

SOURCES

Gladys Grantham Benthack, *Tent Chautauqua, 1904-1928*; Leroy A. Walker, *Chautauqua in Gibbon; Kearney Daily Hub*, July 30, 1887; January 15, 16, June 19, 22, July 10, 1907; *New Era Standard*, August 3, 1906.