

# The Old Chautauqua

A highlight of the first hundred years in Shelbina was the Redpath-Vawter Chautauqua, an institution that entertained and delighted the community for a period of seventeen years, beginning in August, 1911.

A meeting was held in October, 1910, for the purpose of bringing the Chautauqua to Shelbina and the Shelbina Democrat of October 12th reported that "George Gose and other business men are securing signers to the guarantee." In order to get the Chautauqua, a fixed amount of money was required as a guarantee, and about one hundred business men and citizens of the town signed the necessary agreement, supported by individual signed agreements to purchase season tickets at \$1.50. In later years the season tickets sold at \$2, and toward the end of the series at \$2.25, but this community has probably never had, before or since, quite so much entertainment at such low cost.

There were three sessions daily of the program, morning, afternoon and evening, for a full week. The first Chautauqua, held August 17 to 23, 1911, advertised a program of 33 events, and described the Chautauqua as "The People's University. The Most American Institution in America."

Morning sessions were usually devoted to lectures by prominent people, including senators, governors and professional speakers, although later the morning program was changed to the children's hour. At times a well known speaker was presented in the afternoon or evening, depending upon the travel schedule from one town to another in the circuit, or upon his popularity.

William Jennings Bryan, the 'silver tongued orator' of his generation, spoke in Shelbina in August, 1912, at which time, in the course of his address, he observed that not even our greatest scientists could understand or explain how a red cow could eat green grass and produce yellow butter. Bryan could speak the language of the common man, and was widely known as the Great Commoner. Many other speakers appeared through the years, including: Thomas Brooks Fletcher, Senator Luke Lea, Senator James K. Vardaman, Judge Ben B. Lindsey, John Temple Graves, Henry J. Allen, Quinn O'Brien, Francis J. Heney, Victor Murdock, Dr. Frank Church, and many others.

Good music was an important part of the entertainment, and many fine musical organizations were presented, including orchestras by Schildkret and Krantz, and such concert bands as

Thaviu, Quintana, Kryl, John C. Weber, and Signor Quaglia with his Italian band.

Dramatic plays were presented on the stage of the big tent (located in the school yard) by such groups as the Ben Greet Players and the Wm. J. Keighley Players. The dramatic productions included: Comedy of Errors, Strange Bedfellow, Broadway Jones, Robin Hood, Adam and Eva, Captain Applejack, The Melting Pot, Nothing But The Truth, Applesauce, It Pays to Advertise and Turn To The Right.

Other entertainment included: Garetta's Trained Animals, The Riner Sisters, Grand Opera Singers, Royal Hawaiians, Dunbar Singing Sextette, Russian Cathedral Quartet, and the Filipino Serenaders. In the 1916 program, for example, there were fourteen musical numbers and twelve speakers, of whom Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma was a headliner.

Mrs. Florence Nolin Sullivan, well known here as a talented violinist, was the only person in this area who was included as a Chautauqua entertainer. She served with Redpath-Horner and with Redpath-Vawter as a member of a women's string ensemble, but did not appear in the Shelbina circuit.

By 1927 the Chautauqua was beginning to run into trouble. The Shelby County Fair and the Chautauqua were usually held during the month of August, and the community perhaps was beginning to tire of the double feature during hot weather. Some thought the quality of the programs had declined, and a few business men observed that no one guaranteed their business against loss. By then, also, the radio and the automobile had come along to offer diversion and competition. Season ticket subscribers and guarantors became more reluctant to sign agreements, so for 1927 the Chautauqua was reduced from a seven day circuit to a five day program.

At the end of the 1927 Chautauqua, only 200 people signed for season tickets for the following year. The guarantors, who had stood by for seventeen years, now refused to sign an agreement for 1928, and that was the end of the Chautauqua in Shelbina. Too many people seemed to consider themselves as graduates of "The People's University," and it was not long thereafter before other communities began to experience similar difficulties and the Chautauqua was forced to fold its tent and quit, leaving behind it a fine and memorable contribution in adult education and community culture.



In the Prime of Life—This picture, taken in May, 1928, featured some of Shelbina's active "old timers." Front row, S. G. Parsons, 85; John Naylor, 82; James Bryant, 79; W. C. Picckett, 83; Charles Miller, 90; W. J. Fisher, 98; J. L. Oliver, 108; back row, Joseph Bennett, 84; Charles Gilchrist, 80; James Kent, 87; Harry Way, 82; Fred Steffen, 84; D. M. Maupin, 82; Dabney Gaines, 90; W. C. Clark, 83; John Rogers, 81; Al Gibbons, 82.