

“A Grand Beginning
Ottawa Chautauqua, 1883-1983, Part II”
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“Ottawa throbs and swells with the magnetic excitement of the hour.”

Thus, the Ottawa Daily Republican summed up the mood of the city as the first Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly opened on June 26, 1983.

Like most of the following Chautauquas, it was to last 10 days and was filled with a host of scheduled classes, vespers, temperance talks, children’s assemblies, Bible studies, musical performances, entertainment and recreation.

Patterned closely after the New York Chautauqua, there was something for people of all ages. From the start the Ottawa Chautauqua was a family affair, with adults admitted for a small fee and children under 15 free.

Opening day brought an unexpected crowd of 2,000 people, about four times that of previous assemblies. The numbers grew daily, jumping to three, four, and seven thousand. Special trains brought in hundreds at a time, with thousands of buggies and wagons transporting the rest. One expected trainload from Indiana never made it, however, due to flooding on the Missouri River.

While most participants were from Kansas, many travelled from as far away as the East Coast and Canada. In contrast with today, hundreds of Lawrence residents were arriving in Ottawa each day, eager to take advantage of this “cultural event of the year.”

The crowds grew so large that the west wall of the tabernacle was taken down so chairs could be set up outside. The Daily Republican joked that the fence around Forest Park might have to be strengthened as the expected crowd on the Fourth of July “might bulge it out.”

Attendance did peak on the 4th when a conservative estimate was made at 12,000 people. A more liberal boast proclaimed it was the biggest gathering ever held west of the Mississippi.

To house the participants, a few hundred tents were set out, creating “boulevards” in the park. Many of the occupants were Ottawa citizens who packed up their households, left the comfort of their homes, and enjoyed the vacation-like setting. The family names and tent numbers were published in the newspaper so friends and mail could find them.

The organizers of the first Ottawa Chautauqua worked to produce a program of quality, although it did not have quite the variety of later Chautauquas.

Among the prominent lecturers was a professor who enthralled his audiences with scientific experiments as he spoke on “The Matter King; or the Wonders of Oxygen.” He followed this hit the next day with “The Matter Queen: Hydrogen,” and more apparently astonishing demonstrations.

A chalk artist-humorist also drew enthusiastic crowds with his form of “magic,” as recognizable images appeared from his lightening-like scribbles.

The program was not without flaws, however. While music was a major part of all of the Ottawa Chautauquas, the 1883 organizers found they could not get singers to roll out of bed for a daily 8 a.m. choir practice. A Bible study was quickly substituted with unrecorded results.

The events of the 10 days were covered by Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago papers which had reporters in attendance. "The Associated Press sends out a full report each day," the Daily Republican wrote approvingly.

At its conclusion, there was no doubt about it: The 1883 Chautauqua had been a huge success. Not only was the attendance enormous, but the quality of the programs also made a favorable impression.

Some of the highest praise for the city of Ottawa and its citizens came from a respected source. Jesse Hurlbut, one of the assembly's organizers, also was a leader in the "Mother" Chautauqua in New York.

He proclaimed, "There is nothing to prevent this place from becoming to the West what Chautauqua (N.Y.) is to the East." And with that, the citizens of Ottawa began to make plans for subsequent, and even better, Chautauquas.