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“Dancing Mothers” The Chautauqua Movement in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture

Russell L. Johnson

The chautauqua movement in the United States traces its origins to 1874, when Protestant ministers John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller started a summer training program for Sunday-school teachers at Lake Chautauqua in the state of New York. Vincent and Miller had no expectation or intention that their training school would inspire a vast national cultural movement. But it did. Within two years assemblies devoted to the education of the masses, modeled after Vincent and Miller’s school at Lake Chautauqua, began springing up in small towns and cities across the nation.¹ During the peak years, from 1920 to 1924, chautauquas brought their unique blend of education, inspiration, and entertainment to as many as ten thousand cities each year. What President Theodore Roosevelt once called “the most American thing in America” branched out to other nations as well, becoming “the most American thing” in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries. The glory faded quickly, however. In 1928, for example, one estimate has just five hundred cities holding chautauquas. The numbers continued to decline thereafter; only one chautauqua, at Mediapolis, Iowa, survived into the 1950s.²

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This essay analyzes chautauqua's rise and its decline in the 1920s. Because the state of Iowa became a particular center of chautauqua activity, many of the specific examples will come from that state, especially from three representative cities—Marshalltown in the center of the state (1930 population: 17,371), Fort Dodge in the northwest (population 21,895), and Washington in the southeast (population 4,814).³ An analysis of chautauqua's rise and decline illuminates more than this one institution, however. Chautauqua represents one of the first attempts to deliver a truly national culture—linking rural and urban, east and west, north and south—to the masses. Thus the relationship among the chautauqua movement, emerging and competing means of delivering a national culture to people, and changing times suggests important points about the historical development of American popular culture.

The earliest Chautauqua assemblies in the late-nineteenth century were called "independent chautauquas." This meant that the towns involved organized local committees, which then took on all the responsibilities for staging the chautauqua, from engaging talent to selling tickets to advertising, and doing whatever else was necessary. Independent chautauquas generally gave their programs in the largest auditorium in town or in a large tent.⁴ Organizers often preferred tents because they could be situated near a lake or river, or in a grove of trees—in other words, a location that would recreate as near as possible the original setting at Lake Chautauqua. A normal program would run for five or seven days, with morning, afternoon, and evening sessions. Morning sessions were usually devoted to Bible study. The remainder of the program consisted of varying mixtures of lecturers (of both the scholarly and moral uplift variety), musical acts, debates, dramatic readers, bird callers, bell ringers, and, in the later years, plays and even radio and motion pictures.

The independent chautauquas were the first chautauquas apart from the institute, and they were the last survivors. They were not destined to be the most numerous, however. Over the years, independent chautauquas made various attempts to band together to cut costs and use performers more efficiently, but these attempts always failed. Then in the early-20th century, Keith Vawter, a partner in the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, a talent agency which routinely provided lecturers and other entertainers to independent chautauquas, concluded that a lyceum bureau could profitably run

a series of chautauquas; they already controlled the talent and had vast experience arranging speaking and other performance tours. In 1904, Vawter put together a talent package, purchased a few large tents, and signed up fourteen towns in Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska. Thus was launched the country's first "circuit chautauqua."⁵

Although his 1904 circuit lost \$7,000, Vawter persevered, tinkering with the contract and scheduling. As to the former, Vawter stiffened the contract with the towns to be visited. He began to require that local chautauqua committees guarantee \$2,000 in season ticket sales; season tickets admitted the holder to all the sessions during the week, and usually cost two dollars for adults, one dollar for children. The contract further stipulated that each town on the circuit could sell only the \$2,000 in season tickets necessary to meet the guarantee and no more. All other admissions would be on a single session basis, and all money from single admissions would go to the Redpath-Vawter system. In other words, the local committees would receive no money from any ticket sales and had to cover any shortage in the season tickets. One source aptly summarized the new contract as "bring all—take all." The fact that towns willingly accepted these terms testifies to chautauqua's grip on the public imagination.⁶

Vawter's tinkering with scheduling meant a comparable stiffening of contract terms with chautauqua performers. The stops on Vawter's first circuit in 1904 were far-flung and followed no geographically coherent progression; a stop in Minnesota could be followed by a couple in Iowa, then back to Minnesota before returning to Iowa. By 1910, a new system was in place. The distances between circuit towns were shortened, and the schedule was designed to leave no open dates for the talent. As soon as they finished in one town, the performers headed to the next, where they would appear the next day. One 1924 lecture tour was described as consisting of "ninety-one lectures in ninety-one days in ninety-one Middle Western towns." A performer who began on a circuit as a first-day performer appeared on the first day at every chautauqua on the circuit; a second-day performer always appeared on the second day; and so on. Eventually, Vawter ran five- and seven-day circuits, but the talent remained separate—no one would appear on both the five- and the seven-day circuit in the same summer.⁷

The only exception to this rule was made for William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate for president in 1896, 1900, and 1908 and a tireless orator with a golden voice. Bryan found one pre-

sentation per day too confining and demanded to be scheduled to speak two or even three times every day, each time in a different city. Because a Bryan appearance guaranteed the largest crowd of the chautauqua (and lots of single admissions), circuit organizers readily acceded to his demand. The only other performers with Bryan's drawing power were Russell Conwell, whose classic lecture "Acres of Diamonds" advised seekers of fame and fortune to cultivate their own backyards before searching for greener pastures, and the Rev. Billy Sunday, a one-time professional baseball player who found religion, quit baseball, and became a spell-binding evangelist.

Once Keith Vawter showed that circuit chautauquas were feasible—and profitable—the number of circuits multiplied rapidly. By 1915, eleven years after Vawter's first circuit, fifteen circuits were operating, each visiting between 50 and 300 towns; in 1920, circuit chautauquas visited 8,581 cities nationwide. As the circuits grew, the number of independents declined. In Fort Dodge, Iowa, for example, the chautauqua committee explained in 1925 that switching from independent status and joining a circuit saved them from "the thousand and one other details," and left only the responsibility "to arrange about the sale of season tickets."⁸

Joining the circuit to ease the burden on the local committee still leaves the more basic question of why towns held chautauquas at all. How can chautauqua's grip on its audience be explained? In 1929, one chautauqua critic offered an acid-dipped explanation of the importance of chautauqua in its early years:

The significant thing is that the Chautauqua audiences were tired, isolated men and women. Even the twittering of a bird imitator gave relief from the silo, the cowshed, the cooking, and the greasy dishes of the depressing lives these people led. Even a lecturer with nothing much to say was a relief to husbands and wives who, for years, had even less to say to each other. Nothing remotely resembling the Chautauqua had come into their monotonous existence before. It served its purpose.

Although this critic had little sympathy with the people who comprised the majority of chautauqua's audience, the theme of ending isolation recurs in much of the literature about chautauqua. In this way, chautauqua can be seen as one of the first attempts to deliver a truly national culture to the masses—a culture linking rural and urban, east and west, north and south. Although the Midwest, and

especially the State of Iowa, became the center of chautauqua activity, programs were held in all regions of the nation and in the largest cities; there were chautauquas in New York City and Chicago, for example.⁹

In addition to ending isolation and building national culture, circuit operators saw several other benefits accruing to towns served by their chautauquas.¹⁰ In keeping with the origins of the movement, the benefit cited first and foremost was educational. The length of the assemblies prevented any kind of intensive education, but chautauqua could stimulate its audiences to think. The 1923 Redpath-Vawter program at Fort Dodge, Iowa, for instance, included: former Governor Henry J. Allen of Kansas speaking on citizenship, a lecture on farming by "a dirt farmer," lectures on American, Russian, and Chinese history, and a combination travelogue and lecture on the Middle East. A lecturer, of course, could only scratch the surface of the Russian Revolution or the Chinese history in a one or two hour talk. One circuit operator accordingly described chautauqua as serving "an appetizer to people who are hungry for a full meal." Although only an appetizer, some members of the audience might be stimulated to want to learn more. Another circuit operator claimed that university extension services and the adult education movement which emerged in the 1920s were the direct offspring of chautauqua.¹¹

Circuit operators also frequently cited an increase in community spirit and togetherness as yet another benefit of chautauqua. Most of the year, the operators argued, communities were divided into religious, political, and social groups, but for chautauqua these divisions were forgotten. The nature of the circuit contract meant that people of all creeds, parties, and fraternal organizations were needed to sign the guarantee. Also, the chautauqua risked a drop in attendance if it became too identified with any one group in the towns it served. Until near the end of its existence, for example, the Redpath family of circuits steadfastly refused to book speakers paid for by another organization.¹²

Only once did chautauqua become absorbed in a single overriding issue: the First World War. Since at the time, chautauqua provided a means of access to the people surpassed only by newspapers, the federal government decided it could serve a key role in the war effort. As President, Woodrow Wilson, for example, urged that chautauquas be supported because "through them the people will receive messages from the government." On the Redpath-Vawter

seven-day circuit in 1918, four of the eleven lectures dealt specifically with the war, and a section in the program booklet, entitled "This Town is Going Ahead," tried to equate buying chautauqua tickets with buying war bonds. In recognition of chautauqua's contribution to the war effort, the federal government even extended the draft exemption for educators to chautauqua workers and performers. At the same time, however, reflecting the somewhat schizophrenic nature of chautauqua—was it education or entertainment?—the government subjected chautauqua profits to the 10 percent war tax on amusements.¹³

In the years after the war, chautauqua operators leaned increasingly toward the entertainment side. To cite a few numbers, on the Redpath-Vawter circuits during the years 1910-1920, the portion of the program devoted to lecturers fell below 40 percent only twice (1913 and 1915). Beginning in 1921, however, lectures never exceeded 39 percent of the program (1921) and dropped as low as 22 percent in 1928. Meanwhile plays first appeared on the Redpath-Vawter circuits in 1918 and by 1927 comprised almost 20 percent of the program offerings. According to one postwar analysis, chautauqua changed from being "education with entertainment" to "entertainment with or without education."¹⁴

Of course, as noted earlier, the years 1920-1924 when these changes were occurring, were also the years of chautauqua's greatest success, when it appeared in more cities and reached more people than ever before. But chautauqua's expansion and its tilt toward entertainment carried the seeds of its demise. With up to 10,000 assemblies in its peak years, one community's chautauqua frequently followed on the heels of an assembly in a neighboring town, often—given the way chautauquas operated—with exactly the same program.¹⁵ The decline in the numbers of lecturers on the program, moreover, alienated longtime backers, the people on whom each community relied to subscribe the necessary number of season tickets to guarantee each year's program.¹⁶

Chautauqua in the 1920s also faced increased competition in both the educational and entertainment realms. The growth of university extension services after World War I contributed to chautauqua's inability to sustain its educational role in the communities it served. Furthermore, book production and magazine publication increased throughout the 1920s; one important advance in popular literature came in 1922 when *The Reader's Digest* began. On the entertainment side, the expansion and improvement of paved roads, auto-

mobiles, country clubs, and other things gave people in even the smallest towns more opportunity and diversity in amusements. The 1920s have also been described as the “golden era of sport,” a time when professional athletics increasingly engaged the public. A sense emerged that life moved at a faster pace after World War I. As one scholar puts it, people developed a “jazzy attitude ... toward everything in general.”¹⁷

Most significantly, the early 1920s witnessed the emergence of rival means of delivering a national culture to even the most isolated parts of the nation: radio and motion pictures; movies with sound appeared in 1926. According to one circuit operator, “The final and most direct blow to the Chautauqua came from the radio and talking movies.” Another added that radio and movies were responsible for “blighting the circuits.”¹⁸

Based on his own use of the device, Keith Vawter held a low opinion of radio in 1927, and in a 1929 letter to other chautauqua managers he wrote “I still insist that the radio did not materially effect [sic] ... chautauquas.” Other managers thought similarly in the mid-1920s, with the most optimistic thinking that radio might even help chautauqua by widening the interests of the audience. Most managers changed their opinions, however, ultimately recognizing that radio could more efficiently perform the same task as chautauqua, namely “the entertainment and instruction of millions simultaneously.” Moreover, radio’s ability to reach its audience every day of the year was something chautauqua could never match.¹⁹

During the 1920s radio grew even faster than chautauqua had earlier. The first commercial radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began broadcasting on election night in November 1920; one estimate places its audience in the 500-1,000 range. By 1927, the number of stations had reached 722, and by this time the federal government was moving to regulate the industry to prevent the overcrowding of the airwaves. In other words, by creating conditions where each station’s signal to be received with minimal interference others, the government would rationalize the competition among the stations and save radio from the kind of ruinous over-saturation then afflicting chautauqua assemblies. In the state of Iowa, for example, federal regulation meant the loss of five of its twenty-four radio stations in 1928.²⁰

In the pattern that emerged, communities were served by local stations as well as by powerful out-of-town stations, like WLS from Chicago. In 1925, WLS boasted 5,000 watts, which allowed it to “be

heard from New Orleans to Winnipeg." By 1928, its power had increased to 15,000 watts. Iowa itself possessed three 5,000 watt stations in 1928, and in 1930, the local newspaper in Marshalltown reported that three Chicago stations, along with stations from Cincinnati, Minneapolis-St. Paul, St. Louis, Davenport, and Des Moines could be heard in the city.²¹ That same year, the United States census for the first time counted the number of homes in the country with radios and found that almost half of the families in Iowa, over 300,000 of them [49 percent], owned a radio; similarly, in each of the three cities here, Marshalltown, Fort Dodge, and Washington, half or more of the families owned radios.²²

Super-stations like WLS and the subsequent advent of networks based in New York allowed performers to reach mass audiences without going to them in person. Instead of performers traveling to every back-water town, they could stay in Chicago or New York or elsewhere and send their voices over the air waves. "Can we get those blues from Memphis?" a young girl asks her parents in an advertisement for WorkRite Super Neutrodyne Radio Sets. "Easy! Just turn the dials to 64, Mary, and we'll have 'em right away." Radio performers, moreover, were not receptive to the efforts of chautauqua operators to book them as attractions. Chautauqua booking practices as well as better pay in radio kept most away.²³

Not only did radio provide a more convenient way for performers to reach an audience, audiences also found it more convenient. With radio, people could stay in the comfort of their own homes to be entertained, safe from mosquitoes, hard benches, and rain. "Neither Snow nor Rain nor Gloom of Night can stay your enjoyment of the world's entertainment," declared an advertisement for the Grebe Synchrophase Seven radio. "Quick, easy, movements bring the world to your easy chair." Nor did it much matter where that easy chair was. "It used to be so lonesome here—it ain't any more," an advertisement for Joseph W. Jones Precision Radio Receivers quoted a lighthouse keeper saying; the ad further declared the man had been "for 38 years a hermit until Radio brought the outside world to him." The ad continued: "into the isolated places of the world, where grim-visaged men were wont to eke out a lonely existence in utter solitude Radio now brings the welcome voices of the great and near-great ... the priceless joy of human companionship." Radio audiences could also be part of events that chautauqua could never bring them, events as diverse as presidential elections, inaugurations, and prize fights. On its opening night in 1927, for example, the

chautauqua in Fort Dodge had to compete with the broadcast of the Jack Dempsey-Jack Sharkey championship boxing match over local station KFJY. All anyone needed to be part of the action was a radio.²⁴

Radios, of course, could be rather expensive. Judging from a limited sample of advertisements, prices in 1930 and 1931 ranged from \$49.95 to \$149, excluding radio-phonograph combinations. At the lowest price, \$49.95, the cost of a radio would have provided a family of four with eight years of chautauqua tickets, assuming the typical rate of two dollars for adults and one dollar for children for a week-long program, with a \$1.95 surplus. On a weekly basis, however, \$49.95 was less than a dollar a week for a family, and even children could not attend chautauqua for less than a dollar a week. Radio, moreover, did not leave a gap of fifty-one weeks between programs. "Radio is a Lasting Gift," an advertisement for the Westinghouse company asserted. "Expressed in a new Westinghouse radio set, the Christmas gift to your family is a lifelong delight. Every day, instead of but once, fresh and new after other gifts are forgotten, a Westinghouse will give countless hours of enjoyment—everlasting reminders of your Christmas wishes."²⁵ In sum, radio's ability to perform the same educational and entertainment tasks as chautauqua and its ability to reach even the most isolated locales every day of the year with its programs—programs which were increasingly more diverse than the typical chautauqua offerings—made radio a formidable competitor for chautauqua.

In their relationship to chautauqua, motion pictures had much in common with radio. And, as with radio, chautauqua operators initially downplayed the significance of movies. In fact, movies were welcomed on the programs as a way to boost attendance. As a 1905 program booklet put it:

A Chautauqua program would be incomplete without moving pictures. They please the children very much, and really we think it is a little like the circus, the older people like to go and take the children. ... When you see this you will go away feeling cheerful and gay, wishing for the year to roll around so that you can attend the next Assembly in 1906.²⁶

Nor did this attitude ever change completely. Even in chautauqua's declining years, motion pictures remained on some programs to compete with those shown at the theaters.²⁷

But the 1905 program's hope that the motion pictures would leave audiences anxious "for the year to roll around" so they could again be "cheerful and gay" indicates the significant competitive advantage motion pictures, like radio, gained over chautauqua. Many people were unwilling to wait a whole year to feel "cheerful and gay." Occasionally, local chautauqua associations took advantage and showed films during the off-season to raise money, but that could backfire, fueling a desire for more. Other cities showed movies in any building available, and, of course, buildings devoted to the exhibition of motion pictures were built. By 1928, Iowa had more than 1,000 movie theaters; in some places, theater capacity exceeded the local population—in at least one case doubling it.²⁸

Thus motion pictures, like radio programs, were increasingly available during the 1920s. Motion pictures also shared with radio the advantage of convenience for both performers and audience. For performers, the convenience of motion pictures outstripped even that of radio. With the movies, a single performance could be replayed thousands of times, nationwide, over the course of many years. Moreover, the performers would not have to content themselves with being disembodied voices, though until the advent of "talkies" in 1926 they did remain voiceless faces. For audiences, motion pictures could not match the convenience of radio. As with chautauqua, movie patrons had to leave their houses and travel to the entertainment. But once they arrived, movie audiences were treated to much more comfortable surroundings than chautauqua audiences. As one chautauqua operator later wrote,

Movies were of little consequence, as far as our Chautauqua life moved, until the perfection of the talkie and the comfortable embellishment of the picture theatre. Then they really cut into our crowds.²⁹

The "comfortable embellishment" of the movie houses included soft seats and "blizzard breezes." These gave movies a distinct advantage over the chautauqua tent with its wooden benches during the hot days of July and August.³⁰

So, movies were available and comfortable. But were they affordable? Adult single admissions to the 1925 chautauqua at Fort Dodge cost 35 cents in the afternoon and 50 cents in the evening, with increases to 50 and 75 cents for special acts. The same day the 1925 Fort Dodge chautauqua opened, the Majestic theater began showing *The Ten Commandments*, a film which was said to be the best box-

office draw in both 1924 and 1925. Five times daily Fort Dodgers could view this blockbuster film, and an adult ticket cost 50 cents; the theater had to turn crowds away. For those who could not get in, or who wanted something less expensive, the Plaza showed *Orphans of the Storm*, starring Lillian and Dorothy Gish. It charged adults only 20 cents for matinees and 25 cents at night.³¹

On a single admission basis, then, films were competitive with chautauqua. The latter, however, also sold season tickets, which in Fort Dodge in 1925 cost adults \$2.25 each. With such a ticket, an adult could be admitted to seven afternoon and seven evening sessions, with usually two performers per session. At the season-ticket price, therefore, the chautauqua was competitively priced with even the Plaza, and chautauqua-goers would seem to have gotten more for their money. However, theaters in the late-1920s also offered multiple attractions. Newsreels, episodes in serials, and other short films accompanied the main features. Further, some theaters had in-house orchestras, and, of course, all had organists or other music to accompany the silent features. The Casino in Marshalltown even had vaudeville acts on stage before each movie.³²

When it came to competing with chautauqua, moreover, price and variety of entertainments were not the only considerations. Theater owners often tried to book especially attractive films during chautauqua week, as exemplified by *The Ten Commandments* at the Fort Dodge Majestic in 1925. Indeed, local theater owners had an advantage over radio stations in that they could program specifically to counter the appeal of chautauqua. In a 1929 interview, for example, the manager of the Fort Dodge Rialto noted that the best box-office attractions in the city were Clara Bow and Al Jolson. Thus, while it was only coincidence that the start of the 1927 chautauqua in Fort Dodge coincided with the broadcast of the Jack Dempsey-Jack Sharkey prize fight on the local radio station, it almost certainly was not coincidence that in the years 1928-1930 the coming of chautauqua week in the city also meant the coming of a Clara Bow or an Al Jolson film to the Rialto. In 1928, Bow starred in *Ladies of the Mob*. The following year, the Rialto showed Jolson's *The Singing Fool* during chautauqua week; the film had run earlier in Fort Dodge, but "hundreds of requests ... from our patrons" brought it back. During the 1930 season, Bow returned to the Rialto in *True to the Navy*, followed by Lillian Gish in her first talking film. Also during the 1930 chautauqua week, the Strand theater in Fort Dodge showed the film *With Byrd at the South Pole*, which mixed entertainment and

education in a way which had once been chautauqua's forte. The 1930 chautauqua finished with a deficit of \$825 and was the last held in Fort Dodge.³³

Evidence that theater owners in Washington and Marshalltown also programmed to counter chautauqua can be cited as well. In Washington during the 1929 chautauqua, for instance, the city's two theaters showed three films which were considered among the "best of the year" according to critics, and Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*—the first feature-length film with sound—made its Washington premier that week; it was not the first "talkie" shown in the city, however.³⁴ In Marshalltown, in 1926, the city theaters joined a nationwide promotion for a "Greater Movie Season." Although the promotion did not officially begin until August 7, the local theaters began advertising it on July 30, and on Saturday, July 31—the day before the 1926 chautauqua opened—a large advertisement for the promotion appeared in the local newspaper. The ad delivered three messages. First, it asked people to begin attending movies on Sunday, which also happened to be the first night of the chautauqua. The ad also emphasized that movie-goers would be entertained by more than just a film: "If it's 'Western' and Vaudeville [you want]—CASINO. If it's 'Mystery' and Organ—LEGION. If it's 'Comedy' and Orchestra—STRAND. Let's go to all of them." Finally, at a time when chautauqua was increasingly being seen as old-fashioned and out-of-step with the times, the advertisement linked movie attendance with "speed" and "thrills."³⁵

Two years later, in 1928, another Marshalltown theater promotion occurred in connection with the city's Diamond Jubilee celebration. During the late-1920s, complaints had increased that chautauqua, with its "bring all—take all" contracts, took too much money out of the towns it served. The Diamond Jubilee theater promotion combined exhortations to "Buy in Marshalltown!" with a schedule of all the movies playing in town during the week. Although the ads were not particularly directed at chautauqua—they started running before chautauqua week and continued well after—they very effectively connected going to the movies for entertainment with supporting the home town. Thus, at the same time movies delivered education and entertainment more efficiently than chautauqua, the Marshalltown theaters, at least, tried to usurp another chautauqua theme, community building.³⁶

In Marshalltown, chautauqua disappeared from the local landscape after the 1930 assembly, leaving scarcely a ripple of interest in

reviving it. In Fort Dodge, chautauqua also ended after the 1930 assembly; the editor of the local newspaper offered a brief post-mortem citing competition “now too numerous to mention” and implying that that competition raised audience expectations beyond what chautauqua could deliver. Chautauqua survived through the 1931 season in Washington. In 1929, the *Washington Evening Journal*, an ardent supporter of chautauqua, had written that “the novelty of the institution has passed largely now and it stands upon its merits, alone.” Two years later, the local chautauqua committee conducted a poll to assess those merits. Based on its poll, the committee concluded that there was “not enough interest” to justify holding an assembly in 1932. Indeed, the poll generated so little interest that the *Evening Journal* did not bother to print the results. Even in Washington, with population less than 5,000—the kind of place that had always been chautauqua’s bread and butter—the *Evening Journal*’s editor was forced into the same conclusion as people elsewhere: “Times have changed. There is more ‘going on.’ There is more competition.”³⁷

In a letter to fellow chautauqua operators in 1929, Keith Vawter offered his assessment of chautauqua’s demise, blaming “dancing mothers.” The reference was to a 1924 Broadway play titled “Dancing Mothers,” which depicted one woman’s discovery of the larger world outside her home and narrow existence. In an interesting coincidence, the actress Clara Bow received one of her first big breaks in Hollywood when she was cast in the film version of *Dancing Mothers* in 1926. In Act One, the woman’s daughter (the part played by Bow in the film) tells her mother, “Buddy [the daughter’s name for her mother]—you mean awfully well, but you belong to a different age.” She could have been talking about chautauqua in the late-1920s. It too meant well, but times had passed it by. With other outlets for entertainment and education available year-round in even the smallest communities, chautauqua programs became less necessary.³⁸

Chautauqua had become identified with old-fashionedness. Thus, although one program booklet for a 1930 independent chautauqua asserted that “Each year your community testifies to its progressiveness by maintaining a high grade Chautauqua,” in fact many people came to believe that holding a chautauqua testified to their backwardness and placed them among those who journalist H.L. Mencken sneeringly dismissed as the “booboisie,” or worse, “yokels” who had been “defectively assimilated” into modern America.³⁹

Still, it is hard to escape the thought that something was lost when chautauqua gave way to radio and motion pictures as a primary cultural delivery system—and when radio and movies lost much of their significance to network television, cable television, and satellite television. Paradoxically in this process, people became progressively more isolated as individuals as a larger and larger world opened up to them. When radio and motion pictures supplanted chautauqua, for example, people retreated from sharing a bench with their neighbors under the big chautauqua tent in the bright sunshine, to their own homes and darkened movie theaters for their entertainment. The proliferation of television channels with cable and satellite dishes further reinforced this trend toward isolation. Television traps people more than ever in their own homes, and while the increased number of television channels represents a gain in the realm of individual choice, it reduces the common cultural experience to the simple act of watching television, not the content of what's on.⁴⁰

If, as Marshall McLuhan famously argued, “the medium is the message,” where does this leave the United States as it enters the new millennium? As the United States—and the world—enters the 21st century, the internet offers a continuation of the same paradox of increased individual isolation as a larger world and greater choice are made available to people. Indeed, the total volume of information available on-line never ceases to amaze.⁴¹ The more serious problem potentially comes from the increased isolation of individuals promoted by the internet. A recent Stanford University study concludes that “the more hours people use the Internet, the less time they spend with real human beings.” Norman Nie, the lead researcher on the study, notes that no one is asking the important questions about what increased internet use means for American society as a whole—just as they failed to ask similar questions about automobiles and television to the overall detriment of society. Authors of science fiction have begun postulating a world where every individual will be able to create their own virtual environment and identity with no need for actual, physical contact with other human beings. William Gibson's 1996 novel, *Idoru*, for example, includes one character who spends all of his time in an online “Forbidden City.”⁴²

On the other hand, despite its many problems, the internet also carries the potential for opening up human interaction and for re-

storing some of what has been lost since chautauqua first gave way to radio and motion pictures in the 1920s. In Gibson's *Idoru*, another character suffers from severe birth defects caused by chemical pollution but participates in an on-line community of teenaged fans of a particular musical group, projecting a "normal" image of herself. In fact, new forms of community exist online, ranging from the individualized community of a website like Geocities (where hundreds of thousands of individual webpages share nothing in common apart from their web address and the advertising which appears on them), to the Humanities Network, or H-Net (an online community of scholars with, among other features, over 100 specialized e-mail discussion groups linking scholars throughout the world), to Hell-dot-com (an online community of artists accessible by invitation [password] only). These are just a few examples.

Moreover, although the volume of information available online may induce passivity, there is virtue in the uncontrolled nature of the internet. In contrast to radio and television, where networks were established and continue to function to limit content, and in contrast to movies where studios played much the same role, educationally-oriented material shows no signs of dropping off the internet because there is no profit in it. Indeed, even the Stanford researchers note that most people treat the internet as a "giant public library." The internet could stimulate people to want to learn more, in the same way that chautauqua once stimulated its audiences to learn more.⁴³

Notes

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¹ For the early history of chautauqua, see George S. Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution to American Life," *Current History* 34 (April 1931): 39; R.B. Tozier, "A Short Life-History of the Chautauqua," *American Journal of Sociology* 40 (July 1934): 69-70; Harrison Thornton, "Chautauqua in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History* 50 (April 1952): 97-100; George E. Vincent, "What is Chautauqua?" *The Independent* 79 (6 July 1914): 17-19; Jesse L. Hurlbut, *The Story of Chautauqua* (New York: Putnam, 1921), chapters 1-4; Rebecca Richmond, *Chautauqua: An American Place* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1943); and Chautauqua Institution Online, <<http://www.chautauqua-inst.org/>>, 10 December 1999.

² Alma Ellerbee and Paul Ellerbee, "The Most American Thing in America," *The World's Work* 48 (August 1924): 440; Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution," 39; Sheilagh S. Jamieson, *Chautauqua in Canada* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1979); Thornton, "Chautauqua in Iowa," 105; Victoria

Case and Robert Case, *We Called It Culture: The Story of Chautauqua* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), chapter 15; and Karl W. Detzer, "Broadway, R.F.D.," *Century* 116 (July 1928): 317.

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States (1930)*, *Population*, 6 vols. (Washington, DC, 1932) 3: part 1, 781, 782, 784.

⁴ The tent used at Allerton and Centerville, Iowa in 1930 was typical—70 feet by 105 feet. Letter, Baker-Lockwood Manufacturing Co. Inc. to Horace Loomis, 14 July 1930, in Centerville folder, Box 892, Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries (hereafter CC, UI).

⁵ For Redpath and Vawter, see Harry P. Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas: The Story of Tent Chautauqua* (New York: Hastings House, 1958), chapters 4, 6; Case, *We Called It Culture*, 22-26, 30-31; Charles P. Horner, *Strike the Tents: The Story of Chautauqua* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, Inc., 1954), 27-29, 32-35; and Hugh A. Orchard, *Fifty Years of Chautauqua* (Cedar Rapids, IA: The Torch Press, 1923), chapters 6-7. Harrison and Horner operated circuit chautauquas.

⁶ Case, *We Called It Culture*, chapter 16, quote from 178.

⁷ Ellerbee, "The Most American Thing," 440; and Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas*, 53-54, 80-81. A more detailed account of a performer's experiences on a circuit chautauqua can be found in Gay MacLaren, *Morally We Roll Along* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938).

⁸ "Current Tendencies in the Development of the Chautauqua," *Current Opinion* 59 (August 1915): 115; R.B. Tozier, "American Chautauqua: A Study of a Social Institution" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1932), 65 [for 1920 data]; and Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 11 July 1925, p. 4. Donald L. Graham, "Circuit Chautauqua, A Middle Western Institution" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1953), Appendix 2, provides a list of circuit chautauqua companies in the United States, 1904-1933.

⁹ Henry F. Pringle, "Chautauqua in the Jazz Age," *The American Mercury* 16 (January 1929): 89.

¹⁰ For other references to the isolation theme, see Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution," 44; Edward Lindeman, "After Lyceums and Chautauquas, What?" *The Bookman* 65 (May 1927): 247; and Bertha Waterman, "History of the Chautauqua at Clarinda, Iowa" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Iowa, 1937), 82.

¹¹ Redpath-Vawter Program Booklet 1923 in Fort Dodge, Iowa folder, Box 895, CC, UI; Albert E. Wiggam, "Is the Chautauqua Worthwhile?" *The Bookman* 65 (June 1927): 405; and Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas*, 272-273. Also, Horner, *Strike the Tents*, 173-174 for another circuit operator's views on the educational aspects of chautauqua; and, for a more scholarly perspective, Harriet Jeanne Ames Buckridge, "A History of Some of the Organizations that Provided Opportunities for Nonformal Adult Education in America, 1727 to 1926: An Annotated Guide to Selected Sources" (Ed.D. diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 1990); Sheila Michael Sherow, "The Pennsylvania State College: A Pioneer in Nontraditional Agricultural Education" (Ed.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1989); and Michael T. Colky, "Jane Addams, Pioneer to Adult Education" (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University of Chicago, 1988).

¹² Wiggam, "Is Chautauqua Worthwhile?" 403-404; Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas*, 251, 254-256, 271-272; and Graham, "Circuit Chautauqua," 255.

¹³ Graham, "Circuit Chautauqua," 266; Waterman, "Chautauqua at Clarinda," 18; Redpath-Vawter Program Booklet 1918 in LeMars, Iowa folder, Box 898, CC, UI; and Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution," 43.

¹⁴ Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution," 43 [for quote]. Sources for data in text are: 1925-1930 from Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 6 July 1925; 17, 19-22 July 1926; 21-25 July 1927; 25-28, 30 July 1928; 10 July 1929; 5 July 1930. For Program Booklets 1910-1924: Box 895: Hopkinton, Iowa folder (1914), Garner, Iowa folder (1915), Grundy Center, Iowa folder (1922), Fort Dodge, Iowa folder (1923); Box 898: Le Mars, Iowa folder (1911, 1916, 1918), Lake City, Iowa folder (1912), Keota, Iowa folder (1919, 1921); Box 899: Marshalltown, Iowa folder (1910); Box 900: Postville, Iowa folder (1913), Osage, Iowa folder (1920); Box 901: Shenandoah, Iowa folder (1917); and Box 902: Vinton, Iowa folder (1924)—all CC, UI.

¹⁵ On saturation, see letter A.M. Beeson to A.M. Weiskopf, 10 October 1912, Farmington, Iowa folder, Box 894, CC, UI; Glenn B. Darling, "The Chautauqua in Black Hawk County, Iowa" (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1936), 94-95; Helen Nau, "The Chautauqua in Des Moines County" (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1937), 97. For most of its existence, for example, the chautauqua in Marshalltown competed with an assembly at Toledo, less than twenty miles away. In 1925, a week separated the two assemblies, but in 1930, they overlapped—Marshalltown's chautauqua opened three days after Toledo's. Neither city held a chautauqua in 1931. See 1925 and 1930 program booklets in

Marshalltown folder, Box 899, and Toledo folder, Box 901, CC, UI.

¹⁶ M. Sandra Manderson, "The Redpath Lyceum Bureau, An American Critic: Decision-Making and Programming Methods for Circuit Chautauquas, circa 1912 to 1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1981), 182-185; and Lindeman, "After Lyceums," 247-248. For more on internal factors in chautauqua's decline see, Graham, "Circuit Chautauqua," 237-242, 263-266; Nau, "Chautauqua in Des Moines County," 115; and Harry Hibsichman, "Chautauqua, Pro and Contra," *North American* 225 (May 1928): 601-602, 604.

¹⁷ Graham, "Circuit Chautauqua," 261 (for quote), 263-264; Tozier, "Short Life-History," 72-73; Lindeman, "After Lyceums," 247-249; Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution," 42-44; Nau, "Chautauqua in Des Moines County," 97, 111, 113; and Darling, "Chautauqua in Black Hawk County," 93-95; Waterman, "Chautauqua at Clarinda," 85; Carol M. Jones, "History of the Fairfield Chautauqua" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Iowa, 1935), 45-48; and Pringle, "Chautauqua in the Jazz Age," 85-86.

¹⁸ Horner, *Strike the Tents*, 189; and Harrison, *Culture under Canvas*, 248.

¹⁹ Keith Vawter to Rev. R.H. Miller, 1 December 1927, and Vawter to C.A. Peffer, *et al.*, 17 January 1929, both in Box 1, Keith Vawter Papers, Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries [hereafter KVP, CC, UI]; and Waldemar Kaempffert, "The Social Destiny of Radio," *Forum* 71 (June 1924): 764-772, quote from 764. For other low opinions of radio, see Graham, "Circuit Chautauqua," 261-262; and for a re-evaluation of opinion, see Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas*, 248. For optimists, see Detzer, "Broadway, R.F.D.," 316; and "Notes," *The Billboard* 36 (2 August 1924): 55. See also S.E. Frost, Jr., *Is American Radio Democratic?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), vi, 109-110.

²⁰ For KDKA, see Paul Schubert, *The Electric Word: The Rise of Radio* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 200; Merlin H. Aylesworth, "The National Magazine of the Air" in *The Radio Industry: The Story of its Development* (New York: Arno Press, 1974, orig. 1928), 229; Frost, *Is Radio Democratic*, chapter 2; and, for Iowa stations, *Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission* 7 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1927-1933), 2: Appendix D, Table 3, pp. 152 and 157 [hereafter FRC, *Report*].

²¹ For WLS, see Harrison, *Culture Under Canvas*, 259; FRC, *Report*, 2: 91 and Appendix G, Table 1 [a fourth Iowa station is listed as 5,000 watts in this table, but it was soon reduced to 3,500 (FRC, *Report*, 2: 195)]; and Marshalltown *Times-Republican*, 9 August 1930, p. 5.

²² *Fifteenth Census: Population*, 6: 446, 459, 462.

²³ WorkRite advert., *The Saturday Evening Post*, n.d. 1924, p. 143 (source: Ad*Access, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/dynaweb/adaccess/radio/1922-1929/@Generic__BookTextView/1422>, 25 March 2000). The NBC network started broadcasting in 1926, and CBS followed a year later. Aylesworth, "National Magazine," 232-235; and Ellerbee, "The Most American Thing," 440 [for quote]. For chautauqua's attempts to book radio acts, see William Cumberland, "A Classification of Circuit Chautauqua Programs and Talent for the Year 1924" (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1953), 80; Wiggam, "Is Chautauqua Worthwhile?" 406; and Jones, "Fairfield Chautauqua," 48.

²⁴ Grebe advert., *Life*, 20 October 1927, p. 31 (source: Ad*Access, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/dynaweb/adaccess/radio/1922-1929/@Generic__BookTextView/3714>, 25 March 2000); Joseph W. Jones advert., *Collier's*, 5 October 1925, n.p. (source: Ad*Access, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/dynaweb/adaccess/radio/1922-1929/@Generic__BookTextView/3128>, 25 March 2000); and Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 21 July 1927, p. 1.

²⁵ The \$49.95 radio was listed in the Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 9 July 1931, p. 10; the most expensive in *The American Magazine* 110 (September 1930): 157; also Westinghouse advert., *Canadian Home Journal*, December 1927, n.p. (source: Ad*Access, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu:80/dynaweb/adaccess/radio/1922-1929/@Generic__BookTextView/4318>, 25 March 2000). The price comparison could also be made on a single admission basis: as early as 1923, adult single admissions to all chautauqua sessions during the week on the Redpath-Vawter circuit totaled \$6.95. Redpath-Vawter Program Booklet 1923 in Fort Dodge, Iowa folder, Box 895, CC, UI.

²⁶ Program Booklet 1905 in Farmington, Iowa folder, Box 894, CC, UI.

²⁷ Jones, "Fairfield Chautauqua," 57-58.

²⁸ Thornton, "Chautauqua in Iowa," 120; Jones, "Fairfield Chautauqua," 64-65; and *The Film Daily Yearbook* [for 1928] (New York: *Film Daily*, 1928), 574-580 [hereafter *Film Daily*, year: page]. Welton, Iowa, population 75, had a theater with a capacity of 150. *Film Daily*, 1928: 579.

²⁹ Horner, *Strike the Tents*, 189. See also, Dalgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution," 44.

³⁰ The Majestic in Fort Dodge boasted of “blizzard breezes” (see, for example, Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 12 July 1925, p. 8). On the other hand, the Fort Dodge Rialto merely claimed to have “the best ventilating system of any theater in Iowa;” advertisement for the Rialto in *The Community Builder* (1923), in Fort Dodge folder, Box 895, CC, UI.

³¹ For chautauqua prices, Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 6 July 1925, section 2, p. 1. On “The Ten Commandments,” see *Messenger & Chronicle*, 12 July 1925, p. 8; *Film Daily*, 1925: 628-629; 1926: 425; and, for the film’s popularity in Fort Dodge, *Messenger & Chronicle*, 13-15 July 1925, p. 6 each day. For Plaza film and prices, *Messenger & Chronicle*, 16 July 1925, p. 6.

³² Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 16 July 1925, section 2, p. 1. On theater offerings, see for example Marshalltown *Times-Republican*, 31 July 1926, p. 7.

³³ Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 13 July 1929, p. 2. See also, *Messenger & Chronicle*, 26 July 1928, section 2, p. 4; 10 July 1929, p. 6; 5 July 1930, pp. 6-8; 8 July 1930, p. 8; 12 July 1930, p. 5; and *Film Daily*, 1929: 9. *With Byrd* also finished in the top ten in the *Film Daily* poll for 1930 films; *Film Daily*, 1931: 33.

³⁴ *Washington Evening Journal*, 14 August 1929, p. 8; 17 August 1929, p. 8; 19 August 1929, p. 6. The three films were *Weary River*, *The Valiant*, and *Show Boat*; see *Film Daily*, 1930: 21 for rankings. *The Jazz Singer* was produced in 1926, premiered in 1927, but took another two years to get to Washington.

³⁵ Marshalltown *Times-Republican*, 7 August 1926, p. 7; 30 July 1926, p. 11; 31 July 1926, p. 7.

³⁶ The Diamond Jubilee ads ran every Monday from at least July 23 to November 26; the celebration itself was October 7-13; see, e.g., Marshalltown *Times-Republican*, 30 July 1928, p. 7. For complaints about chautauqua taking money out of towns, see Tozier, “Short Life-History,” 73; and Thornton, “Chautauqua in Iowa,” 121; also Case, *We Called It Culture*, 178 (quote).

³⁷ Marshalltown *Times-Republican*, 9 August 1930, pp. 9, 11; Fort Dodge *Messenger & Chronicle*, 12 July 1930, p. 5; *Washington Evening Journal*, 22 August 1929, p. 4; Secretary’s Book, Washington, Iowa [no folder], Box 902, CC, UI (“not enough interest”); and *Washington Evening Journal*, 17 August 1931, p. 3.

³⁸ Vawter to Peffer, *et al.*, 17 January 1929, Box 1, KVP, CC, UI; Edgar Selwyn and Edmond Goulding, “Dancing Mothers,” quoted from Burns Mantle (ed.), *Best Plays of 1924-1925* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1925), 184; Rudy Behlmer, “Clara Bow: The ‘It’ Girl of the ‘20s,” *Films in Review* (October 1963) [source: Silents Majority Page, <<http://www.mdle.com/ClassicFilms/Guest/rb2.htm>>, 30 September 1999]; Internet Movie Database,

<<http://us.imdb.com/Name?Bow,+Clara>>, 25 March 2000; and Silents Majority Page,

<<http://www.mdle.com/ClassicFilms/FeaturedStar/star9.htm>>, 25 March 2000.

³⁹ H.L. Mencken, “Next Year’s Struggle,” 11 June 1923, and “Real Issues at Last,” 23 July 1928, in Mencken, *A Carnival of Buncombe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984; orig. 1956), 57 and 161.

⁴⁰ For the development and evolution of television see, for example, Patrick R. Parsons and Robert M. Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998).

⁴¹ An earlier draft of this essay, for example, was going to illustrate the barrenness of television’s content by noting that the last program starring the famous journalist Edward R. Murrow was replaced in the CBS network lineup by *Mister Ed*, a show about a talking horse. To find the year when this happened, I turned to the internet, finding the answer (1961) at, where else, “Mister Ed Online.”

⁴² John Markoff, “Portrait of a Newer, Lonelier Crowd Is Captured in an Internet Survey,” *New York Times*, 16 February 2000 [source: The New York Times on the Web <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/00/02/biztech/articles/16online.html>>, 2 June 2000; and William Gibson, *Idoru* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1996). It is not quite accurate to say no one is asking the hard questions; see the ideas of Arthur Kroker, the self-proclaimed “Marshall McLuhan of the Internet,” for example in Arthur Kroker, *Spasm: Virtual Reality, Android Music and Electric Flesh* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993).

⁴³ Markoff, “Portrait of a Newer, Lonelier Crowd.”