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Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle - Bowling Green, Kentucky (MSS 700)

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Descriptive Inventory

MSS 700 CHAUTAUQUA Literary and Scientific Circle – Bowling Green, Kentucky

1 box. 9 folders. 83 items. 1907-2000.
 Originals, photographs, and photocopies.

SC2020.41.1

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

When naming a new literary club, founders sought to envision the organization's unique identity. Some of those names were selected from a quotation, some were initials, some reflected the time period, some indicated the number of members, and some were named after a person—one after a British poet, another after a woman who organized the first woman's club in America, and one after a prominent Bowling Green citizen. Only one club, the one with the unusual name, was affiliated with a national organization—the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle.

Just as a pebble tossed into a placid lake creates ever-widening concentric ripples, so too does the word *Chautauqua* evoke expanded meanings and influence. Originally an Iroquois name for a lake located in southwestern New York State, *Chautauqua* (pronounced “shə-TAW-kwə”) has several meanings, including “jumping fish” and “two moccasins tied together.” The most popular definition is “bag tied in the middle,”¹ an apt description of the long, narrow lake that is pinched in the middle, nearly creating two segments.

The definition of *Chautauqua* was broadened considerably with the arrival at the lakeshore in 1873 of John Vincent (a Methodist bishop) and Lewis Miller (a businessman and advocate for Sunday School education). Their original plan to establish a summer camp-meeting to support and inspire Sunday school teachers was such an enormous success that it evolved into the Chautauqua Institution. Nestled near the lake is an entire community dedicated to adult education. Still in existence today, the Chautauqua Institution hosts thousands of visitors who, each summer, come to listen to lectures, enjoy evening concerts, attend theater and opera performances, take classes, study, and visit with others from around the country and the world. Indeed, many of the 19th century buildings are still used. The original Amphitheatre, for example, was the centerpiece of the open campus area known as The Grounds.² According to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), the 1892 Amphitheatre was the place where “the community gathers for daily lectures and concerts and religious services on Sundays. Few podiums in this country have held such a distinguished group of speakers and performers.”³ Examples listed in the Chautauqua Archives include Booker T. Washington, Susan B. Anthony; William McKinley, William Howard Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Bobby Kennedy, Gerald Ford, Thurgood Marshall, Elie Wiesel, John

Philip Sousa, Duke Ellington, and Ella Fitzgerald.⁴ Another significant structure is the Hall of Philosophy, built from 1903 to 1906. It is described in the NRHP as an “open-air Doric Temple,” surrounded by trees and delineated by Doric columns on each side. “Masonry pedestals at the corners support Classical cauldrons on tripods which are ceremoniously lighted annually.”⁵

Also located in the historic district is the grand Athenaeum Hotel, opened in 1881. “Facing east with a view of Lake Chautauqua is a great verandah over 200 feet in length with 30-foot-high columns and large scroll brackets under the eaves.”⁶ It was one of America’s first hotels to use electric lights. The description in the National Register of Historic Places includes an 1881 press release about all the amenities: “There is no modern appointment lacking in this great structure. The first class barber shop, the telegraph office, the telephone office, electric bells, gas and electric lights, hot and cold baths, magnificent parlors, large rooms—well lighted and ventilated, elevators, music—everything to make it most complete. The table is such to tempt the appetite of a lord, the servants are attentive, the guests cultured, the proprietor genial and gentlemanly, and the terms moderate.”⁷

Surrounding these impressive structures are numerous halls and charming Victorian cottages. These picturesque cottages, which visitors may rent for the duration of their stay, are “primarily wood frame in construction [and] sheathed in clapboard or shingles and covered by gable roofs. Most noticeable are the ubiquitous front porches with wicker rocking chairs, a kind of living-room extension which is very American in concept.”⁸ For several weeks every year, this special place becomes a thriving summer festival that “embraces all the arts and offers the sense of community.”⁹

The concept of continuing education was too popular to be limited to one place, even a place as special as the Chautauqua Institution on the lake. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the word *Chautauqua* began to take on an additional meaning due to the popular summer traveling shows presented in huge khaki tents, which were delivered by train and set up for about a week at locations across the country. “Tent Chautauquas swept the nation as communities saw an opportunity to gain access to the most famous speakers, the best music and literature, the latest in science, and the educational leaders otherwise unavailable in small and mid-size towns and cities.”¹⁰ Kentucky was only one state on the circuit, with people in Ashland, Louisville, Lexington, Owensboro, Danville, Frankfort, Russellville, Bowling Green, Paducah, and other cities eagerly anticipating the annual opportunity to meet under the tent for morning, afternoon, and evening events. Long before television and the internet, they valued the excitement and importance of hearing patriotic speeches, sermons, self-improvement lectures, science updates, the latest agricultural methods, and myriad forms of entertainment, such as soloists, choirs, orchestra and band music, and dramatic readings. Reinforcing the importance of becoming informed citizens, Henry Hardin Cherry, president of Western Kentucky State Normal School, spoke at a Chautauqua event in Warren County in 1913, stating, “A great Commonwealth cannot be bestowed; it must be achieved through education. It takes a full-grown mind to reach and a full-grown heart to feel a full-grown democracy.”¹¹

The most expansive meaning of the word *Chautauqua* developed in 1878 with the founding of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (C.L.S.C.). So passionate about adult education was John Vincent that he envisioned a far-reaching course of study that would be available to a wide spectrum of people. In his 1885 book titled *The Chautauqua Movement*, he wrote that the C.L.S.C. would be for “high-school and college graduates, for people who never entered either high school or college, for merchants, mechanics, apprentices, mothers, busy housekeepers, farmer-boys, shop-girls, and for people of leisure and wealth who do not know

what to do with their time.”¹² The lofty benefits of his nationwide book groups were to “develop higher and nobler tastes; increase mental power; exalt home-life, giving authority and home-help in public-school studies, and organizing home into reading circles. It will counteract the influence of our modern popular pernicious literature, and sweeten and enrich the daily lives of poor and hardworking people. It will bring the more cultivated people into contact with the less scholarly, promote a true appreciation of science, and tend to increase the spiritual life and power of the Church.”¹³ People all over the country were encouraged to form Circles in order to foster mutual reading and discussions; readers could, however, choose to participate individually. The goal was to read a list of required books each year. The titles for the 1878-1879 year were the following:

A Short History of the English People, by J.R. Green
English Literature, by Stopford Brooke
Outline of Bible History, by John F. Hurst
Old Tales Retold from Grecian Mythology, by Augusta Larned
Old Greek Life, by J.P. Mahaffy
The Word of God Opened, by Bradford K. Peirce
Fourteen Weeks in Human Physiology, by J. Dorman Steele
Greek Literature, by A.D. Vail
English History, by John H. Vincent
Greek History, by John H. Vincent
Studies of the Stars, by Henry W. Warren
Recreations in Astronomy, by Henry White Warren

If members read and reported on an entire four-year course of study, they could travel to the Chautauqua Institution in New York to participate in the annual August Recognition Day ceremony. Although not literally a college graduation with the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance,” the event featured plenty of pageantry. Proud graduates marched with a colorful banner, designed by the members of the class, through The Grounds toward the Hall of Philosophy. There, in a day-long ceremony, participants heard speeches, sang songs, and received diplomas. One of the ornate diplomas, now archived in the Library Special Collections at Western Kentucky University, was earned in 1906 by Russellville, Kentucky resident Fannie Morton Bryan.

In the first twenty years of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle’s existence, an amazing ten thousand home study circles were organized in large cities, in small towns, and even by individuals living in remote places.¹⁴ Bowling Green joined the Chautauqua movement in 1913. Having visited the Chautauqua Institution in New York, Mrs. J. Murray Hill, her sister Miss Kate Phillips, along with Mrs. Ben Proctor and Mrs. Morton Alexander, decided to establish a C.L.S.C. in Bowling Green. Their plan was not necessarily to strive for the four-year diploma but simply to read and discuss the assigned books. That year, the list, not quite as daunting as the inaugural list of 1878, consisted of the following books:

Social Progress in Contemporary Europe, by Frederic Austin Ogg
Mornings with Masters of Art, by H. H. Powers
Home Life in Germany, by Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick
The Spirit of French Letters, by Mabell S. C. Smith

For many decades, Mrs. Hill hosted the group in her lovely home on Park Street, where members met on Wednesday afternoons. In fact, a 1978 article in the Louisville *Courier-Journal* reported that Ruth Hill, then 84, had hosted the meetings in her home for the past 46 years.¹⁵ Members devoted the first part of each meeting to a program about the required book; the second part was reserved for another member to speak on any “chosen topic.” One year, Mrs. Hill presented a chosen topic so popular that she was asked to give it for many other women’s literary clubs. Her remarks not only offered her formula for overcoming pessimism about the current state of affairs in the country but displayed her intellect and high level of education. Her introductory sentence states, “In this year of 1966, it seems, in spite of the most comforts and conveniences ever known, the most effort toward worthwhile objectives, broad education, international tolerance and understanding, abolition of poverty and discrimination, in spite of these and many other lofty goals—and some accomplishments—we are still the most restless, the most apprehensive, the most cynical, the least confident people in our history.” She went on to quote poems by William Wordsworth (“The world is too much with us”), Sara Teasdale (“Life has loveliness to sell”), and other writers before enumerating many things in life that gave her pleasure: family, home, flowers, friends, interesting memories, the theater, and exciting developments in science. She also offered the beginning of an alphabetical list of Bible passages that brought her happiness (“All things work together for good for them that love God,” “Be still, and know that I am God”). She concluded by recommending that her listeners, too, create their own list of favorite things to lift their minds from the depressing news of the day.¹⁶

Several members of today’s Bowling Green’s Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle have visited the Chautauqua Institution in New York. Betty Jo Beard (who joined the club in 2000) and Mary Schardein (a member from 1956 until her death in 2017), had fond memories of their day-long drive from Bowling Green and their thrilling arrival at the grand old Athenaeum Hotel on the lake.¹⁷ Wilma Smith visited the New York site twice and recalled the peaceful setting and the utter civility of all the Chautauquans.¹⁸ Wenonah Manning spent a part of every summer since 1995 at the Chautauqua Institution. There, she felt as if she were going back in time since all cars had to be parked outside of the Grounds; the Chautauqua campus reminded her of a Victorian movie set. During her stay, she loved reading *The Chautauquan Daily*, the institution’s newspaper with reviews of plays, books, and concerts as well as a detailed schedule of upcoming events. Having attended as many speakers and events as possible, she always felt completely renewed because she had been “fed with so many ideas.”¹⁹ Other members back home in Bowling Green appreciated hearing about Wenonah’s experiences, for it made them, too, feel connected to the place of origin of their club and to others around the country with the same love of learning.

For many years in the Bowling Green circle, the program committee studied the national book list and chose the titles that would be of most interest to the members, sometimes omitting a title, sometimes dividing a long book to be studied by more than one member. The committee scheduled the year’s meeting dates and wrote each date on the outside of an envelope. Inside the envelope was the book title selected for that meeting. Every year at the summer picnic, members selected one of the displayed envelopes according to whichever date would be most convenient for them to present a program. Only then did they open the envelopes to discover what their “assignment” would be. That tradition has recently been modified. Now, Convener Betty Jo Beard orders the books assigned by the New York institution, as well as their accompanying book reviews, and invites members to her home for a fall luncheon. There, each member can take a look at the books and reviews and then choose the one she would like to

study and present at one of the monthly meetings. The typical season for Bowling Green's Chautauquans includes monthly afternoon meetings from autumn through spring. In December, members enjoy a lovely Christmas tea at Betty Jo Beard's home, decked for the holiday with greenery outside the door and wreaths, garland, and red and white poinsettias indoors. A spring luncheon, often at Hobson House at Riverview, features a guest speaker.

In discussions of Bowling Green's literary clubs, the Chautauqua Club has been referred to as "the hard one." Indeed, the members themselves have commented that sometimes the required books are quite a challenge to read. Mary Schardein stated, "It's *work* to be in Chautauqua!" Yet, invariably, the effort is worth it, for all agree that learning new ideas is so interesting and important. Betty Jo Beard remarked that she loves to read, share with others, and thus expand her horizons. Furthermore, it is fun to try to determine the national organization's rationale for selecting a certain book. What is also enjoyable about C.L.S.C. is the special camaraderie and deep friendships that have developed over the years.²⁰ Donna Lile spoke for many when she said she enjoyed knowing all the members and especially appreciated all their different backgrounds and perspectives.²¹ Corinne Meeks, reflecting on her many decades in the C.L.S.C, thought about the fact that she personally knew ladies who knew the very earliest members of the club. Smiling, she added, "That makes me part of the chain."²² That chain, that tradition of reading and discussing books chosen for readers across America, is now more than a century old in Bowling Green.

A significant milestone for Bowling Green's C.L.S.C occurred on April 17, 2013. Although Bowling Green does not have a Chautauqua Institution-style historic amphitheater, classic columned buildings, and a grand hotel on the shore of a lake, it does have the stately, Italianate, Civil War-era home known as Hobson House at Riverview. It was the perfect historic setting for members of Bowling Green's Circle to gather for a celebration of the club's 100th anniversary. The event included a delightful luncheon, remarks on the club's heritage, and even the singing of the opening verse of the very song that was sung 100 years earlier at the Chautauqua Institution's 1913 Recognition Day in New York. The "Commencement Carol" (written by W.F. Sherwin and sung to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic") proclaims the excitement and pride of the people a century ago who had completed the entire four years' reading program:

Sounding out among Chautauqua's cool and classic shades,
Peeling till the echoes wake in all her forest glades,
Hear the shout of triumph as our mighty host parades
On this our Jubilee!

Hail the Day with joy and singing!
Swell the chorus full and ringing!
Love to Alma Mater bringing—
All hail! "C.L.S.C."²³

A framed resolution from the New York headquarters, congratulating the circle on its 100 years of participation in the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle and its achievement of providing academic excellence in the community of Bowling Green, was read at the anniversary luncheon by Convener Betty Jo Beard for all to hear and appreciate the special honor.

Since the 2013 celebration, local Chautauqua members have continued to study the list of books sent by the New York headquarters, including titles published in the past few years,

such as these from the 2018-2019 season: *The Signal Flame* and *A Gentleman in Moscow* (novels); *Otio* (poetry), *Other Russians* and *The Broken Country* (nonfiction), and *The Song Poet* (memoir). The number of dedicated members, however, is decreasing, as a result of aging and the shortage of discretionary time in the twenty-first century. Officials at the New York Chautauqua Institution acknowledge the fading of local circles across the nation; nevertheless, they feel the younger generation is becoming so weary of being obsessed with their digital lives that there will be a resurgence of readers yearning for more personal connections with fellow readers. Leaders of Chautauqua, therefore, want to build on the institution's strong history of adult education and create programs to reignite the interest in reading groups across America. Meanwhile, the members of Bowling Green's Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle are pleased to continue with their traditional schedule and activities, holding in their hearts an affection for the lake where the Chautauqua movement began, for the learning that has enriched their lives, and for the legacy of their truly remarkable literary club. *by Jean Nehm*

COLLECTION NOTE

This collection includes minute books for the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (Folders 1a-6). Loose items within the minute books were removed and placed in adjacent folders and numbered separately (see Folders 3 & 5). Folder 7 includes scattered yearbooks for the organization from 1940 to 2000. Folder 8 includes a 1907 *The Chautauquan: The Magazine of System in Reading* from the group's national headquarters in Chautauqua, New York, as well as other promotional material from the organization. Folder 9 includes miscellaneous material which includes a 1976 letter from the national organization requesting a history of the Bowling Green branch. Club member Ruth Hill obliges with a one-page history and a poem.

SHELF LIST

BOX 1	Chautauqua	1907-2000	83 items
Folder 1	Inventory		1 item
Folder 1a	Minute book	1932-1934	1 item
Folder 2	Minute book	1966-1977	1 item
Folder 3	Loose items from 1966-1977 minute book (found in Folder 2)	1966-1977	35 items
Folder 4	Minute book	1978-1988	1 item
Folder 5	Loose items from 1978-1988 minute book (found in Folder 4)	1978-1988	10 items

Folder 6	Minute book	1989-1990	2 items
Folder 7	Yearbooks	1940-2000	17 items
Folder 8	National publications	1907-2000	10 items
Folder 9	Miscellaneous	1939-1976	5 items

BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORD

MSS CHAUTAUQUA Literary and Scientific 1907-2000
700 Circle – Bowling Green, Kentucky

Minute books, yearbooks, and sundry other items from the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, a women's literary club in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

1 box. 9 folders. 83 items. Originals, photographs, and photocopies.

SC2020.41.1

SUBJECT ANALYTICS

Clubs – Bowling Green

Women – Societies and clubs

SEE or SEE ALSO

Chautauqua Club – Bowling Green, Kentucky

See:

Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle – Bowling Green, Kentucky

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