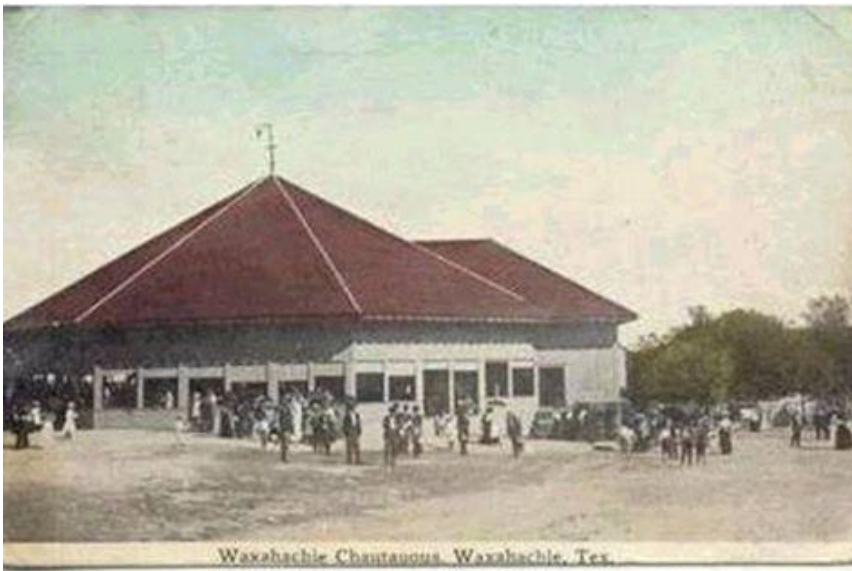


The Story of The Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium

The Building

In 1901, it became obvious to the organizers of the Waxahachie Chautauqua that the newly erected pavilion in West End Park could not accommodate the throngs of people attending the Chautauqua programs at the Summer Assemblies.

And so, on August 9, 1901, a group of citizens met in the District Courtroom of the Ellis County Courthouse and decided to build a new 2,500-seat new auditorium in the park. It is unclear who was responsible for the octagonal building's unusual design. Many believe that the structure was planned to resemble a tent, but it seems more likely that it is a copy of the original octagonal roofed platform of the open-air auditorium at the Chautauqua Institution in New York.



E.S. Boze, a local contractor and architect, was in charge of the project. Although construction did not begin until June 1902, the large and impressive building was completed in time for the Summer Assembly held July 22 - 31, 1902. The cost of construction was \$2,750.

Built entirely of wood, the Waxahachie auditorium had large "wooden windows" which would slide upward into the upper

portion of the walls, making an open-air structure. The stage, with dressing rooms below, was inset in the south side of the building. A large water tank was erected near the auditorium to furnish drinking water. Electric lights were installed. Plans to gravel the floor near the stage gave way to "planking" the entire floor.

The Venue

The Chautauqua Auditorium provided a stage for the lectures, concerts, and performances for the Chautauqua Assemblies from 1902 to 1930. During the most popular presentations, it was filled to standing-room-only capacity. In addition, with the windows open, spectators could crowd around the outside and still view performances. Sometimes buggies pulled up around the auditorium, becoming extra seating. At least once, tents were erected at the windows to accommodate the overflow crowds while keeping them out of the summer sun. Estimates of crowds in and around the auditorium reached 5000-7000 at times.

When not in use by the Summer Assemblies, the auditorium served as a venue for various other performances, reunions, conferences, and celebrations.

After the Chautauqua Assemblies ended in the early 1930s, the auditorium continued to be used for some civic and educational events, including high school graduations.

The Decline

Eventually, with lagging interest and use, the wooden structure began to decline until it was closed by the city in 1971. Due to its deteriorated and termite-ridden condition, there were plans then to tear down the auditorium.



The Restoration

Despite the gloomy forecast for the Chautauqua Auditorium, some citizens had a vision that this noble 75-year-old building could not only survive as a reminder of its role in the Chautauqua movement, but also continue to offer education, culture, and entertainment for North Texans of the future.

At a Waxahachie City Council meeting in August 1971, Josephine Ruskin, Dr. Ford Lane, and Forest and Ola Upshaw pleaded for the preservation of the Chautauqua Auditorium and were rewarded with the decision that the Chautauqua Auditorium would be restored. By the end of 1971, a Texas Historical Marker was applied for and received. There followed several years of intense planning, publicity, and fund-raising, resulting, in 1974, in the auditorium being placed on the National Register of Historic Places and construction beginning on the restoration work.



In a joyful celebration on July 4, 1975, the restored Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium was rededicated. In remarks during the ceremony, speaker Dr. Ernest Connally from the U.S. Department of the Interior, said that a historic building like the Chautauqua Auditorium was “a link between generations bearing a message in three-dimensional tangible form of human aspirations and endeavor.”

Since 1975, more generations have come of age and become part of the link. We are all fortunate recipients of the legacy of the Chautauqua Auditorium and the messages it brings to us.