

Chautauqua's Literary Roots Produced America's First Book Club

"Reading, reading, reading, page after page, chapter after chapter, book after book, one may gradually become absorbed in elevating themes, gain knowledge and power, brighten life, strengthen character, broaden one's world, and come into fellow kinship with noble souls." (*Francher, Pauline, Chautauqua: Its Architecture and Its People, 1978*)

In Waxahachie in 1889, some "young ladies who hoped to derive mutual benefits from a course of systematic reading" organized the Sappho Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC). They expected to complete a thorough four-year course in June 1892. The officers were: Miss Willia Getzendaner, President; Miss Zephie Trippet, Vice-President; Miss Mary Siddons, Recording Secretary; Miss Flora McMillan, Corresponding Secretary; Miss Scotta McMillan, Treasurer; and Miss Ruth Wyatt, Critic. (*History of Ellis County, Texas, Ellis County Historic Workshop, 1972.*)

What is CLSC?

This same type of society was being organized all around the country as a result of the formation of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in New York 11 years earlier by Chautauqua founder Reverend John H. Vincent. This was a four-year home study course whose participants read certain prescribed books, thus becoming the first reading club in America.



After the four years of reading the book list, participants became eligible to attend a Recognition Ceremony during the summer assembly in Chautauqua, New York to celebrate their completion. The ceremony consisted of graduates marching behind a banner through the Grounds to a Golden Gate to the white-pillared Hall of Philosophy. Small children led the way with baskets of flowers, dignitaries spoke, and graduates received diplomas.

Why start CLSC?

Vincent said, "The aim of CLSC was to promote habits of reading and study in nature, art, science, and in secular and sacred literature..." The CLSC helped give people a sense of belonging as society resurrected itself after the Civil War. During a visit to the Chautauqua Assembly in New York in the summer of 1880, Presidential candidate James A. Garfield stated "It has been the struggle of the world to get more leisure, but it has been left to Chautauqua to show what to do with it."

Who joined CLSC?

During the 3 days after Vincent first announced the CLSC on August 10, 1878, over 700 people signed up. The first year's class had 8000 participants registered. By 1891, 180,000 people enrolled and by the 1920's there were more than 300,000. In the first 20 years, 10,000 circles were established (one quarter of which were in villages of less than 500 population.) Although this organization was chiefly aimed at those who would otherwise not have an opportunity for an education, it also attracted college graduates right from the beginning. The participants came from all walks of life, from high society to low society, from rural areas to large cities, from socialites to farmers, factory workers, and prisoners.

CLSC today...

Today the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle is still centered at Chautauqua Institution in New York and is still active throughout the country. After paying a nominal fee for the 4-year program and reading 13 books from the CLSC list (composed of 700 books, chosen from 1878 until the present), students are eligible to graduate at the Recognition Day ceremony. After graduation, alumni are encouraged to stay active in their class and to continue their education. (*Simpson, Jeffrey., [Chautauqua: An American Utopia](#), 1999 and www.chq.org/season/literary-arts/*