

Tent Circuits Provided Chautauqua Talent Around the Country

By the turn of the century, independent Chautauquas had appeared in various parts of the country, each having their own campgrounds, lectures, musical events, and religious exercises. As the organizers struggled for greater attendance at their summer assemblies, they became eager to attract “big name” performers for their programs. Often multiple assemblies were held at the same time of the summer, causing conflicts in scheduling. Great competition among assemblies for the same performers resulted in high costs for the independent Chautauquas.



The Circuit provided the solution

In 1904 Iowan Keith Vawter attempted a solution to this problem when he launched the circuit or tent Chautauqua. He proposed the grouping of towns with the lecturers moving on a specified course from town to town. Lecturers could work full time, open dates would be eliminated, talent costs would be reduced, and the railroad trips would be shorter. This first circuit consisted of 15 towns in Iowa and Nebraska.

In 1907 Vawter ran a circuit of 33 towns. He provided not only the talent, but also the tents, advertising, and work crews. By 1910 the circuit assigned each performer a

specific evening on the 7-day program and they always performed in that sequence throughout the summer season.

The Redpath-Horner circuit

Promoter Charles F. Horner helped Vawter refine this system. In 1912 Horner established the Redpath-Horner Bureau circuit in Kansas City. His territory was Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota. This was the year that the Redpath-Horner circuit first provided talent for Waxahachie. (Unlike many Assemblies, however, the Waxahachie Chautauqua did continue to arrange some of its own local programming.)

Charles Horner was notable for encouraging amateurs to enter Chautauqua work and even set up his own school to train talent, the Horner Institute of Fine Arts. Of course, there were other companies that operated circuits such as Acme Chautauquas and Jones Chautauqua System.

The following Texas cities were on the Redpath-Horner Bureau Circuit:

Abilene	Denton	Marlin
Amarillo	El Paso	Mathis
Austin	Fort Worth	Nacogdoches
Burnet	Hereford	San Antonio
Canyon	Hillsboro	San Marcos
Chillicothe	Houston	Sweetwater
College Station	Huntsville	Temple
Commerce	Kelly Field	Texarkana
Corsicana	Kingsville	Waco
Dallas	Lubbock	Waxahachie

When the train carrying the circuit's first day's talent and baggage arrived in a town in the morning, there was usually a parade to the Chautauqua grounds. Although the evening program provided by the circuit consisted of both music and lecture, the lecture was considered to be the “backbone of Chautauqua.” It could be classified as a challenge lecture, an informative lecture, or an inspirational lecture. Horner favored the inspirational.

The circuit Chautauquas reached their peak in the early 1920's. There were 21 circuits operating 93 circuits in the US and Canada with an attendance of approximately 35 million people.

Decline of the Circuits

Some of the reasons that have been suggested for the decline of the circuit around 1930 are:

- φ The vast increase and the oversupply of Chautauquas With such popularity, the balance between education and entertainment shifted toward entertainment, and the quality decreased.
- φ Technological advances – the automobile, the radio, the telephone, talking motion pictures, golf courses, and summer vacation trips
- φ The economic hardships of the Great Depression

The final circuit folded its tents in 1932 and the splendor of tent Chautauqua was over.

*Excerpted and edited from “Records of the Redpath Chautauqua” by Robert A. McCown, 1973
(<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/specoll/Bai/redpath.htm>)*