

Getzendaner Memorial Park

Waxahachie, Texas

In 2006, a Texas historic marker was applied for and received for Getzendaner Memorial Park in Waxahachie, Texas. The complete narrative that was written for this application by Maureen Moore begins on page 2 of this document. The wording on the marker reads as follows:

Established in 1889, Getzendaner Memorial Park was originally named West End Park as part of Waxahachie's West End Addition. By the early 20th century, it became Chautauqua Park, named for the annual retreat held on its grounds through 1930. Chautauqua Assemblies began in western New York in the 19th century as cultural program events, typically held during summer at pastoral settings. From 1900, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and, later, local citizens held Chautauqua retreats here.

For two weeks each year, thousands would gather from throughout Texas and Oklahoma for the program, erecting tents for housing on the park grounds. During the assembly, restaurants, a barbershop, a telephone booth and a post office could all be found in the park. In addition, numerous tents served dining, religious and social needs. An auditorium constructed in 1902 replaced the former assembly hall, which the Chautauqua had outgrown. The new structure became the stage for lectures, concerts and other performances. Later, the building would be used for other occasions, such as high school graduations.

The park has hosted other events, including a Confederate soldier reunion, which is noteworthy for the participation of W.H. Getzendaner, for whom the park was renamed in 1914. Born in 1834, Getzendaner moved to Waxahachie in 1859 and later served in the civil war. Residents held many other events at the park over the years, including speaking engagements for orator and presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in 1909 and humorist Will Rogers in 1927. With historic ties to the early Chautauqua years, the park remains a gathering place for civic and religious events.

(2006)

NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

This narrative will tell the story of West End Park in Waxahachie, Texas, which later became known as Chautauqua Park and finally Getzendaner Memorial Park.

During the late 1800s Waxahachie experienced intense growth and wealth and fame due to its cotton agriculture and cotton industry. The vibrant economy contributed to a construction boom that resulted in the rapid development of businesses in the downtown as well as the building of a magnificent ornate 3-story Romanesque courthouse. Housing demands led to the creation of large neighborhoods filled with vernacular and popular house types. As existing neighborhoods were filled, new sections were opened for development. The West End and East End Additions were popular areas for the town's more financially successful individuals. Large and impressive Victorian residences with ornate jig-saw detailing prevailed in the West End and developers encouraged a street car line to come down Main Street to that Addition. (1) As part of the West End Addition, developers carved out 23 acres to create West End Park.

While Waxahachie was becoming this economic success, a cultural and education movement called Chautauqua began in New York and spread across the country. Chautauqua Assemblies were typically a summer retreat and encampment held in a pastoral setting, nearly always located by water. (2) The first Chautauquas to appear in Texas were in San Marcos in 1885 (3) and in Georgetown in 1889. (4) In 1898 the Cumberland Presbyterian Church brought their Chautauqua and Summer Encampment to Glen Rose. (5) In 1899, after just two Assemblies, the church found that Glen Rose was not a good place to host their Chautauqua due to its inaccessibility and lack of local sympathy and patronage. (6)

When the church looked for an alternative location, Chautauqua and Waxahachie's West End Park came together.

HISTORY I: BEGINNING OF THE PARK

In 1889 the Waxahachie Investment Company planned to develop over 250 acres of land just west of the City of Waxahachie. The platting of the West End Addition included a tree-shaded, 23-acre park, bordered on its southern edge by Waxahachie Creek, which they called West End Park. (7) To encourage growth to this new addition, a mule-drawn streetcar line was extended to the area. A pavilion was built in the park along with various other amenities such as tennis courts, swings, electricity and an artesian water well. (8) Residents came out to the new park to enjoy a respite from the City in this place of beauty. (9)

HISTORY II: CHAUTAUQUA

Getting the Chautauqua: Ten years later, in 1899, when the Texas Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was searching for a place to re-locate their Chautauqua Summer Encampment and Assembly from Glen Rose, the West End Park in Waxahachie was promoted as having all the right qualities. In addition to being accessible by street car, two railroads crossed within a few hundred yards of the entrance. Local dignitaries promised improvements such as a comfortable auditorium and other necessary buildings as well as undisturbed use of the park and all of the improvements during the encampment. Additionally, Waxahachie citizens showed enthusiasm and dedication to "arranging and improving the grounds" in order to procure Chautauqua at the park. (10)

In October of 1899 the Texas Synod made the announcement that the 1900 Chautauqua Assembly would be held in West End Park in Waxahachie. (11) Thus the park became known as Chautauqua Park and became host of the 31-year-long Chautauqua Summer Encampment and Assembly.

“Little City”: From 1900 to 1930 Chautauqua Park provided the setting for Chautauqua’s summer retreat of education, culture, art, and recreation for the citizens of Waxahachie and for nearby cities, counties, and states. It attracted thousands of participants and hundreds of campers. For two weeks each year, it became the center of cultural, social, religious, and economic life in Waxahachie. The park became a little city, surrounded by a board fence which also served as hitching rail for livestock. Along with as many as 300 tents erected, one could find a restaurant, a barber shop with two chairs, a telephone booth, a post office, a newsstand, a cold drink establishment, and a night watchman. The artesian well provided ice cold drinking water during these summer Assemblies. (12) (13)

Photos show row after row of white tents lined up in the park. In addition to campers from neighboring cities and counties, Waxahachians themselves packed up furniture, rugs, and cooking equipment, settled into their tents and became part of the little city in the park for two weeks. (14) Various tents served as dining hall, church headquarters and social centers.

The memoir of a Waxahachie girl, Ann Frances Matthews Stodder, tells about her experience of one day in Chautauqua Park during an Assembly. Her day included waking in a tent to the sounds and smells of the campground as bacon and eggs sizzled in a grill, watching “the boys dive from a high limb into the Deep Hole in the Creek”, visiting from tent to tent, waiting by the gate to see buggies and mule-drawn streetcars deposit their various passengers, and racing to the Auditorium to get their seat for the Evening Entertainment along side the farm families who had already settled in for the show with their children asleep on pallets on the floor. (15)

Pastoral beauty: Chautauqua Park provided the serene pastoral beauty that was traditional for Chautauquas around the country and central to the spirit of the Waxahachie Chautauqua. Chautauquans were entreated to go to the “cool sequestered nooks” of the park. (16)

After the close of the 1901 Waxahachie Chautauqua Assembly, the Waxahachie Enterprise stated, "Bless me, what a time we have had under the greatest trees that ever grew in Texas. Like angels of mercy these trees have shaded us, fanned us and spread their great arms above us and pronounced heaven's blessings upon us by day and night." (17)

The Waxahachie Enterprise published 4 winning poems from the 1903 Chautauqua Poetry contest which praised the idyllic setting of Chautauqua Park in verses such as:

*Could we find a spot more lovely,
More the ideal camping ground?
Than this Park along the creekside,
Than this grove we have found?
No, methinks not this side of Eden
Are surroundings found the same
As this lovely combination
That has spread Chautauqua fame. (18)*

Waxahachie Creek was important to the summer Chautauqua experience. It was used to cool the water and drinks and food. It was dammed at times to provide boating, swimming and diving, and a place to occupy children while adults were at lectures and concerts. A bridge was built across the creek in 1902, thus expanding the grounds to include the other side of the creek and giving a place for "lovesick youngsters to commune with nature and whisper sillied nothings in each other's ear" (19)

Social setting: During the Assemblies, Chautauqua Park providing a setting for social events and activities, including breakfasts, luncheons, and picnic dinners. Many of these activities were looked after by two organizations, the Graham Bachelors and the Young Men's Chautauqua Association. Each group erected a large tent, up to 60 feet long, on the grounds for social functions, receptions, and concerts elaborately furnished with chairs, sofas, pianos, phonographs and graphophones, rugs, electric lights, stationery, ice water and fans. Some of the activities included a Mexican string band, a watermelon cutting, singing and playing popular music on a piano and games of "Forty-Two."

By 1907 their tent was officially designated as the “Chautauqua Parlor” because it contained all the amenities of a well appointed parlor. It was also referred to as a “matrimonial agency” by townspeople since so many young people met at the social tent and then later married. (20, 21, 22, 23, 24)

Buildings: The pavilion that had been built in 1890 served as Assembly Hall for the first two Waxahachie Chautauqua Assemblies in 1900 and 1901. It had a capacity of 1500 and was filled in 1901. (25)

After the success of the 1901 Assembly, it was obvious that a larger building was needed. (26) And so an unusual octagonal 2500-seat auditorium was constructed on the northwest corner of the park and was ready for the 1902 Chautauqua Summer Assembly. (27) Built entirely of wood, the auditorium had large “wooden windows” which would slide upward into the upper portion of the walls, making an open-air structure. 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. (28) In addition, with the windows open, spectators could crowd around the outside and still view performances. (29) Estimates of crowds in and around the auditorium reached 5000 at times. (30)

After the Chautauqua Assemblies ended, the auditorium continued to be used for civic and educational events, including high school graduations. Eventually, with lagging interest and use, the wooden structure began to decline. In the mid-1970s, the decaying and almost demolished auditorium was resurrected and restored through the efforts of local citizens and remains today a monument to the Chautauqua history of Waxahachie. It has been awarded a Texas Historical Marker and is on the National Register of Historic Place. (31, 32)

In 1903, a log-cabin replica (12 x 14 ft) of the first Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Tennessee was built in the park to house church exhibits. It was located about 200 feet south of the current Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium. We do not know when it was torn down, but some remember a log cabin in the park as late as the 1930s. (33)

HISTORY III: BESIDES CHAUTAUQUA

In addition to the Chautauqua, Getzendaner Park has had other historical highlights.

Before the Chautauqua, West End Park served as the setting for at least one Confederate Soldier Reunion. On August 5, 1892, the Reunion of Parsons Cavalry Brigade was held at the park and was attended by approximately 5000. (34) Captain W.H. Getzendaner, for whom the park was later named, was a member of Parsons Brigade and performed various functions over the years, including vice-president, president, and treasurer. In 1890 the Park was the site for a “union” picnic of all of Waxahachie’s Sunday Schools (35) and a county-wide “old-fashioned grange picnic” that included baseball games between the Lancaster Crescents and the Waxahachie Quick Steps. (36)

Even **during** the Chautauqua years, the park hosted reunions, band concerts, receptions, classes, and celebrations not connected to the Chautauqua Assemblies, including veterans’ reunions and children’s recreation. (37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42) Famous speakers during this time who brought crowds to the park and auditorium included William Jennings Bryan on September 13, 1909 (43) and Will Rogers on February 26, 1927 (44).

After the Chautauqua Assemblies ended in 1930, Getzendaner Park continued to be used for various civic, church, and family events, including high school graduations at the Auditorium. To this day, the Central Presbyterian Church of Waxahachie continues their 4th of July tradition of having their church service in the Auditorium followed by lunch at tables under the trees.

HISTORY IV:
OWNERSHIP AND ADMINISTRATION

- 1889 – West End Park was platted along with the rest of the West End Addition of Waxahachie, owned by Waxahachie Investment Company. (45)
- 1900 - Chautauqua grounds were leased for 10 years for the Waxahachie Chautauqua Summer Encampment and Assembly. (46)
- 1902 - The Waxahachie Chautauqua Park Association (WCPA) was organized. Land for a new Auditorium was assembled and conveyed to the WCPA through three deeds. (47)
- 1905 - Despite the reported success of the Assemblies, the WCPA was still in debt from the 1902 building of the Auditorium and Assembly expenses which were not being covered. The WCPA tried but failed to sell the park grounds and improvements to the City of Waxahachie for \$5000. Selling the 23 prime acres of parkland was a popular idea for solving financial problems and had been proposed many times. (48)
- 1906 – The Chautauqua Park property was finally sold by the WCPA to a group of 22 leading citizens, headed by E.P. Hawkins, to pay the debt of \$5,252.53. (49)
- 1909 – The 10-year lease expired after the 1909 Assembly. Because of its success, it was then decided to continue the Chautauqua at Chautauqua Park permanently. (50)
- 1913 - Texas Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church relinquished control of Waxahachie Chautauqua on 10/10/13 to 54 local citizens who agreed to underwrite its indebtedness. (51)
- 1914 -, Chautauqua Park became Waxahachie city property. R.W. Getzendaner and his sister Willa Skinner bought the Chautauqua Park property from E.P. Hawkins for \$6000 and conveyed it as a gift to the City of Waxahachie for use as a park. It was then given its current name of Getzendaner Memorial Park to honor the Getzندانers' father, Civil War veteran Captain W.H Getzendaner, and has remained a public park ever since. (52)

HISTORY V: **THE PARK TODAY**

Getzendaner Memorial Park today is made up of the same 23 acres that were platted in 1889. Most of the park land is in flood plain and provides shade through mature pecans, oaks, and other hardwood trees. It now contains two pavilions, two restrooms, three areas of playground equipment and, of course, the 1902 Chautauqua Auditorium. It is now bordered on its northern side by the growing Baylor Hospital of Waxahachie, heliport and medical office building. A popular new Hike and Bike trail adorns its southern edge along Waxahachie Creek. In addition to regular events at the Chautauqua Auditorium, including those produced by the Waxahachie Community Theater and Waxahachie Symphony Association, the park itself is always full of activity. Park events include family reunions, school outings, church events, the Gingerbread Trail Arts & Crafts fair, antique automobile gatherings, SPCA dog shows, walks for various charities as well as many residents walking, running, biking and enjoying nature. In addition, since 2000, there has been a revival of the annual Chautauqua Assemblies, which uses the park for lectures, concerts, dinners, and socializing in the same manner as the original Waxahachie Chautauqua.

CONCLUSION

Getzendaner Memorial Park (formerly West End Park and Chautauqua Park) has played a prominent role in the history of Waxahachie and in the Texas Chautauqua movement.

It is through its 31-year long Waxahachie Chautauqua Assemblies and the Chautauqua Auditorium that this park received the attention and status that has kept it an important part of Waxahachie life to this day. In the post-Chautauqua years, it became a center of leisure activities, social gatherings and cultural events, anchored by the Auditorium, which became Waxahachie's civic center for many years.

Although the Chautauqua Auditorium has its own Recorded Texas Historic Landmark designation as well as national historical recognition, Chautauqua Park deserves its own historical acknowledgement. The park was an integral part of the attraction that brought the Chautauqua to Waxahachie in the first place. In addition, its tree-shaded grounds and cooling creek provided just the right pastoral setting for the respite and inspiration that Chautauquans were seeking in the social, educational and religious “Little City” that grew up each summer for 31 years. While Georgetown’s Chautauqua grounds now contain condos, San Marcos’ Chautauqua site is currently a university, and Mineral Wells has multiple new buildings where its Chautauqua was held, Waxahachie’s Getzendaner Park continues to give its visitors the respite and beauty that its originators envisioned and to celebrate the Texas Chautauqua heritage.

As current research and trends in urban design reaffirm the human need for parks, green spaces and natural beauty, we are grateful to those turn-of-century ancestors who understood this need and planned and developed this park. Now Getzendaner Memorial Park is a focal point of Waxahachie’s park system and sees extensive and increasing use by individuals, families and numerous community groups. It is hoped that securing a historical marker for this park will help future generations of Waxahachians and visitors know the story of this place of rest, recreation and nature and its historical significance. With Waxahachie’s current aggressive growth and development on all sides of this park, now seems like the opportune time to seek historic recognition for this important legacy.