

Waxahachie Memoir Tells Of Old Chautauqua

The following childhood reminiscence of the early Waxahachie Chautauqua was taken from the memoir of Ann Frances Matthews Stodder. She was born in 1894 and lived the first 12 years of her life at 1121 West Main Street in Waxahachie. The Dunlap family to which she refers was her next door neighbor at 1203 West Main Street. This excerpt was sent to us by Mrs. Matthews Stodder's cousin's daughter, Mary Hartshorne from Massachusetts. The entire manuscript is at the Ellis County Museum.

"We never had a tent to camp at the two week summer session of Chautauqua. Mammy called it She-Togger. But the Whites had a tent. Of course we lived only a short distance from the Chautauqua Grounds, really just a pecan grove where Waxahachie Creek, Cow Creek that meant, went through. We could walk there. But the Whites thought it "worth the trouble" to set up a tent, move out an oil stove and housekeep. We would go home in the early afternoon to have our baths, but what fun to spend the night and wake to the sounds and smells of the tent colony. Country people camped from all over Ellis County and further, many town folk had tents, too, of varying elegance.

Next to the Whites, Miss Stell had a canvas of Oriental splendor, a reception and dining tent, a sleeping one as well for her visiting young ladies... Both tents had wooden floors, there was an awning sheltered kitchen. From the Whites dirt floor tent, always room for us to sleep, we were quiet so as not to wake the young ladies in the morning, we tip-toed so as not to disturb their afternoon naps while their freshly Blanched white slippers were rowed up in the sun. Miss Alice had such tiny ones, not just canvas but embroidered linen. Lucy, the extra maid Ellen had got in, pressed the white ribbon ties in the kitchen tent where the flounced dresses were spread over the ironing board.

Light came earlier in a tent. I was awake, longing to run to the creek, but Ruth and Martha were still sleeping. Flies were plentiful; I put my head under the sheet to wait. Next door Lucy was soundlessly lowering the flaps, rolled high for the night breeze... Sid was bringing buckets of water to fill the kettle, later the pitchers on the wash stands. He had driven from the Dunlaps house with a block of ice for the refrigerator. Soon Mrs. White with a quick lick to her hair, stole out, her finger to her lips as she gave me a pat in passing. Into a skillet she sliced the thick farm bacon. Ruth and Martha squirmed, hitting at flies, opened an eye. At last! We could get up, I heard eggs break and sizzle.

We'd be on time for the first program, a chalk talk, in the Auditorium.

Between lectures, concerts, elocutionists, we wandered about, calling on those lucky enough to have tents. We watched the boys dive from the high limb that hung over the Deep Hole in the Creek. Much time we spent in the Young Men's Tent which the town beaux and blades had flung wide in hospitality. This was almost circus size with scalloped flaps, rugs on the floor, tables for whist and dominoes, an overflowing water cooler with a puddle to avoid. During the day this club was fairly empty, we could while away long afternoon hours at the free gaming tables with our dominoes choice, forty-two. We skipped all political and philosophical offerings in the Auditorium.

After the trip home to dress for the late afternoon we waited by the gate to see the little mule cars unload the crowds hanging on the steps, the buggies drive up for the Evening Entertainment. Miss May Conner was laughing as she dropped from her hand the ruffles of her skirt, she let them trail in the dust. How gloriously careless, if ever I got to be a young lady I wanted to be just like her, resolving to let my ruffles sweep the dust no matter what anybody said. She had a beau from Out of Town, Cincinnati no less. I had not seen him since winter when he was on the street car with her, in a covert cloth overcoat, a garment not worn by the young men in Waxahachie... Miss May paused to introduce him, we couldn't stop longer, though we were impressed with his white flannels and striped blazer. We wanted front seats, grown-ups were slow and lingering, we raced to the Auditorium. The farm families were long since in their places, rows of children, the littlest ones already asleep on pallets in the aisle, a jug of water and a box of crackers handy under the seat. Whatever was offered, we scanned the program, Funny Men preferred.

Afterwards there was high life in the Young Men's Tent. Mrs. White let us stay up late, we circulated, watching the card games, rushing outside to clutch each other and giggle at a tender passage we had overheard as Mr. Bob Griffin whispered to Miss Roberta Conner, leaning over to pull out her chair. Back to the water cooler, Mr. Bob Carlisle was there, laughing very loud. His face was freckled, tobacco juice oozed from the corners of this mouth. He teased us but he treated us to soda pop."