

Historic Plaque Marks Georgetown Chautauqua Site

Last July our appreciation grew dramatically for the 1970s preservationists who rescued the Waxahachie Chautauqua Auditorium from demolition. That was when we visited Georgetown, Texas to try to find the story of the Texas Chautauqua Assembly, which was held in Georgetown 1889-1894. What we found in Georgetown was a historic plaque in a park located on the former Chautauqua campground on the South San Gabriel River. Gone was the suspension bridge that crossed the river and connected that campground to the assembly grounds, lost in an early 20th century flood. Gone were the auditorium, dining hall, and cottages that had been set on the dramatic high bluffs above the river. In their place were condominiums, which were built recently despite attempts by local preservationists to save the historic site.

In 1888, local citizens of Georgetown sought and won the right to become the home of the Texas Chautauqua Assembly. This was an effort to enhance its intellectual and cultural image. The person who brought the idea to Georgetown was the Reverend C.C. Armstrong of Austin, then president of the Texas Chautauqua Assembly.

Local Georgetown residents who had attended the New York Chautauqua talked glowingly of their experience, but expressed sadness that the cost of the travel prevented longer stays or more frequent visits. One of Reverend Armstrong's arguments was that by establishing a Texas-based Chautauqua similar to that in New York, the large amounts of money that were leaving the state could be retained.

In his proposal to the city he asked for 200 acres of land and \$10,000 that would make the Texas Chautauqua equal to any other. The money would be used to erect buildings and any profits from the Assemblies would be used for improvements. He predicted the annual attendance to eventually grow to 15,000 visitors!

Land located on the South San Gabriel River was donated to the Assembly and plans were put into place for a three-week

Chautauqua Assembly to held in July of 1889. A tabernacle was built on the south bluff and was decorated with electric lights and hanging plants. The campground was located across the river on the north side. Soon seven or eight summer homes were built by leading residents, the best remembered being the "castle" built by Capt. John Sparks.

One of the main attractions and an item of interest was the suspension foot bridge that crossed the river and connected the town with the Chautauqua grounds. Historian Clara Scarborough, in her book about the history of Williamson County entitled *Land of Good Water*, tells about the Chautauqua and the fun children had swinging on the bridge.

The Georgetown Chautauqua soon had financial difficulties. In 1894 the Assembly was shortened to two weeks and eventually was closed soon thereafter. The economic realities of the depression of 1893 had taken its toll. However, this vision, and that of the San Marcos Chautauqua (1885-1895), led to the establishment of other independent Chautauquas in Texas at Weatherford (c1891-1898), Glen Rose (1898-1899), Waxahachie (1900-1930), Mineral Wells (c1905), Paris (1906) and Dallas (1906-1907).

With the passing of time and the explosive growth of the area, all that remains of the Georgetown Chautauqua legacy is a marker in a city park and some documented memories.

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Sources:

- Scarborough, Clara, *"Land of Good Water"*, Williamson County Sun Publishers, Georgetown Texas. 1973.
- McCook, Jane Brown and Martha Mitten Allen, "The Texas Chautauqua Assembly at Georgetown" in *"Georgetown's Yesteryears: Reaching for the Gold Ring,"* edited by Martha Mitten Allen, Georgetown Heritage Society, 1985.



Suspension footbridge over the South San Gabriel River in Georgetown. The Chautauqua grounds are on top of the bluff on the right.

(Scarborough, Clara, *Land of Good Water*, Williamson County Sun Publishers, Georgetown, TX, 1973, p.280)