

## Old Paris Chautauqua Lives Only in Memories

Approaching Paris, Texas in November, we weren't confident we would be able to learn the story of the Paris Chautauqua. After all, we knew that Paris had been devastated by three fires in its history, the last of which occurred in 1916 and destroyed the entire downtown district and much of the rest of city.

It is true that most of the early newspapers were destroyed. But looking through post-1916 microfiche of the *Paris Morning News*, we did find ads and articles about the Redpath-Horner circuit Chautauqua from 1916 to 1920. In fact, we found that just two months after the "Great Fire" destroyed their town on March 21, 1916, citizens of Paris decided to host the circuit Chautauqua. When Mr. Charles Horner, owner of the circuit, "learned Paris was ashes... would donate the proceeds - in other words he would supply just the same talent he had programed but he would not receive a penny." Instead of going to the profit-making circuit, the money collected from the sale of tickets would be kept by the Paris Chautauqua committee for the "maintenance and improvement of chautauquas in future years." (*Paris Morning News*, May 20, 1916). The exact years the Chautauqua circuit started and ended in Paris is unclear from the newspaper sources.

Evidence of the early Chautauqua in Paris, before the coming of the circuit, was even harder to find. Luckily, memories of pre-1916 Paris were recorded by journalist

A.W. Neville in his daily column entitled "Backward Glances" in the *Paris Morning News*, 1929-1956.

Neville referred to the pre-circuit Chautauqua of Paris as the "real" Chautauqua. He remembered that in the early 1900s the pastor of the Paris Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the manager for the power and light and streetcar companies teamed up to start the Chautauqua, believing it would be good for the town. With five railroad depots, Paris seemed like a perfect spot to attract Chautauqua visitors.

The Chautauqua Association secured their own lecturers and musicians and arranged for the assembly to be held in the 8½-acre Warlick Park, the terminus of the streetcar line on the east side of town. A pavilion and a summer theater were built for the Chautauqua. During the first few years, people camped on the grounds for the week. The morning sessions were devoted to Bible and religious study and supervised play for children. The afternoon and evening programs were said to have had "a great influence in elevating the taste of Paris for better music and entertainment of the higher class." How long the early Chautauqua lasted before the circuit came to town is uncertain.

Warlick Park was renamed Wade Park and deeded to the City of Paris. Parisians in 2004 still enjoy a pleasant, tree-shaded park with a new pavilion, elaborate

playground equipment and a roller-hockey rink. But time has erased any signs of the Chautauqua, including the original pavilion and theater. Even the historical plaque at the park does not mention the Chautauqua.

Paris is located about 90 miles northeast of Dallas, a few miles south of the Red River.

### Sources

- *Paris Morning News*, 1916-1920
- A.W. Neville, "Backward Glances," *Paris Morning News*, June 4, 1930
- Skipper Steely, Paris historian



Old postcard shows Paris' Warlick Park ca 1905. Pavilion at end of walkway, theater behind trees.