

San Marcos: The First Chautauqua in Texas

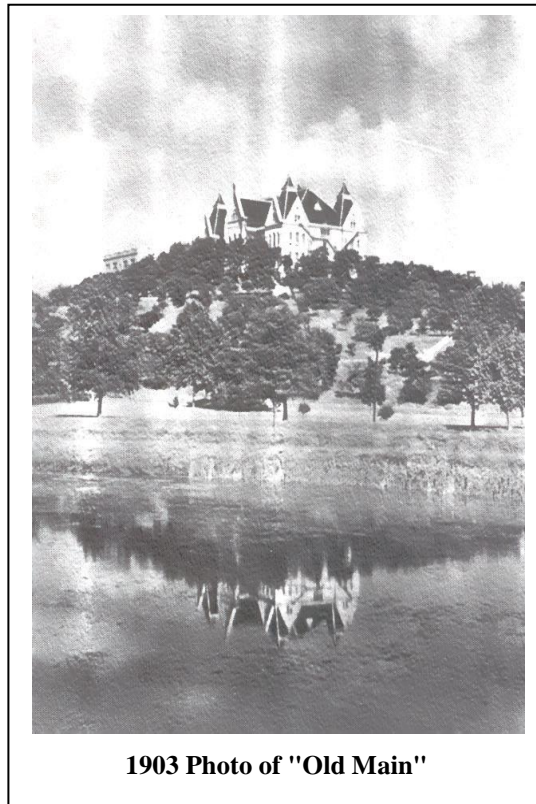
1885-1895

The historical San Marcos Chautauqua is invisible today at its former site in the heart of the campus of Southwest Texas State University (SWT). On our recent visit to SWT (Nov. 2002), not a plaque nor sign was in view to remind visitors or students of that Chautauqua history. However, Old Main, SWT's first building, was built in 1902 on the very site of the Chautauqua Tabernacle (auditorium) which was the center of the San Marcos Chautauqua from 1885 to 1895. Old Main still stands at that spot, towering over the campus from the pinnacle of the steep hill. To those who know the Chautauqua story (or find it at the SWT library), it serves as a reminder of their Chautauqua heritage.

In 1885 Methodist minister Horace N. Dubose of Houston visited San Marcos and conceived of the idea of establishing a Chautauqua in Central Texas above the banks of the San Marcos River. He joined with three other men to form a subscription stock company that eventually became the San Marcos Chautauqua. The Association bought eleven acres that included "Wood's Hill" and renamed it Chautauqua Hill. It is now known as University Hill.

On the crest of the hill, a 66x90-foot, wooden Tabernacle was erected that could hold 1,500 people. The fenced grounds included an entrance gate, sites for tents and a restaurant. Visitors could also find restaurants, boarding houses and hotels nearby in town. Liverymen carried passengers and supplies up and down the very steep hill.

The Chautauqua programs included religious studies, Sunday school institutes, outdoor recreation, travel lectures, temperance rallies, discussion of social reforms, and political speeches. Special attractions included river excursions on a small steamboat, the *Tom Glover*, and precision marching by the Chautauqua Guards.



1903 Photo of "Old Main"

Reasons for the demise of the San Marcos Chautauqua are unclear. However, in 1895, the last year a Chautauqua was held, the wooden tabernacle collapsed. This apparently sealed the fate of the San Marcos Chautauqua Assembly and heralded the beginning of a new era for the grounds.

The 11 acres of land on Chautauqua Hill was deeded to the City of San Marcos when the Chautauqua ended. In 1901 the city gave this land to the State of Texas to build a normal school and the state appropriated money to construct buildings and maintain the school. Old Main was built, and in 1903 the doors to Southwest Texas State Normal School opened to 303 students and 17 faculty members.

In the spring of 1999, SWT sponsored a "Chautauqua Series," four days of lectures and discussion about the future of education, the media, and the planet. The purpose of this series was to celebrate the university's centennial, and, at the same time, they were also honoring San Marcos' Chautauqua heritage.

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Source:

Brown, Ronald C. with David C. Nelson, "A Century in the Life of the College in San Marcos: Southwest Texas State University, 1899-1999," The Donning Company Publishers, 1999.