

Barnstorming on the Bryan Circuit

BY ROBERT GOLDSMITH.

"SORRY," said the baggage-master to the Chautauqua superintendent, "but I'm afraid you'll have to buy regular fare tickets and ride on a passenger train. You can't travel with the tents in the freight car. It ain't allowed, except to take care of livestock."

It was the end of the week's programme of entertainment and instruction, the last of the "seven joyous days"—as the window posters said.

By midnight the big tent was down and all the property neatly tucked away in a commodious box car. The "prop" man had set up enough cots for the whole crew and an extra one for me, as a special lark.

Then came the superintendent, with a smile of victory on his face and a suckling pig under his arm. That night we all traveled on the side-door Pullman as necessary caretakers of the "livestock" in transit.

The big white Chautauqua tent is even more indigenous to the soil of America than the little red schoolhouse. England and France and Germany and Russia have little red schoolhouses, too. The same is true of churches and theaters and newspapers and many other social institutions. But the Chautauqua was invented and discovered and patented and copyrighted in America. And today—except for some attempts by American companies to extend it to Canada and Australia—it remains a distinctively American phenomenon.

The parentage of the contemporary Chautauqua is usually traced back to the "Mother Chautauqua," founded by Bishop Vincent at Lake Chautauqua, New York. As Dr. Vincent was a Methodist preacher, it is quite possible that the Methodist camp meeting was the grandmother of the idea. Perhaps this is the direct lineage, but if so, then the old lyceum system and the university extension system are indirectly related, as aunts or uncles or second cousins.

The traveling Chautauqua system as we know it today was organized in Iowa about two decades ago. Since then the idea has spread like a contagion from one community to another community and from one state to another state.

Being a Chautauqua lecturer is a summer career not without its amusing episodes—and occasional thrills. I shall not soon forget the time when a baby cyclone sought us out at Louisiana, Mo., the town where Champ Clark spent a part of his young manhood. The tent was pitched on the playground of the school in which the speaker-of-the-house-to-be taught the three Rs.

It was a few minutes past eight and the musicians had hardly started with their prelude when the funnel-shaped cloud of wind hit the tent a terrific blow, bowled over the erstwhile upright piano, carried the canvas wall away like a kite, pulled the guy-stakes out and made the whole tent look like an immense umbrella with the center pole for handle.

As I was the lecturer of the evening scheduled to appear directly after the prelude, I was waiting my turn in the dressing wings immediately off the stage. Here was the chance for the thrill that comes once in a lifetime. I leaped upon the platform, scrambled over the prostrate piano, grabbed one of the dangling ropes and, swinging like some giant pendulum from one end of the stage to the other, thundered above the heavenly artillery for the frantic crowd to be calm. I can still see myself in a freshly pressed "ice-cream" suit (drenched and bedraggled), blown about the stage like a thistle down in the breeze, while I stretched my forensic talents to the breaking point in an unequal competition with the furious and indifferent elements.

On another occasion, less dramatic but quite as amusing, I had reached the most thrilling part of my lecture, hitting on all six cylinders, when to the welcome applause of an appreciative audience was added the not-so-welcome applause of the lowering skies. Every time I raised my hand or voice to emphasize my point a

peal of thunder would silence my most eloquent periods.

For ten minutes, perhaps, I pitted my puny power against the hideous clatter of ill-mannered clouds that got in each other's way.

Then it began to rain pitchforks, as we children used to say. The roof of the tent above my head was beaten to tatters. Tiny rills soon swelled into little Niagaras. I dodged and danced from one to another, the while I sawed the air and exhorted my audience as to the horrors of war and the splendors of peace. I know now why the people held their sides with convulsive laughter as they sat watching me fox-trot and camel-walk all over the stage, wildly gesticulating but uttering not a syllable they could hear.

Acknowledging defeat in open attack I tried trench warfare; I sat down in a comfortable chair, raised an umbrella and winked back at the good-natured audience.

Not knowing what else to do to kill time I began to drink glass after glass of

water until the pitcher was dry. Unable to squeeze out another drop I stood up and, with empty glass extended, recited, during a moment's lull in the storm:

"Water, water everywhere,
And how the boards did shrink;
Water, water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink!"

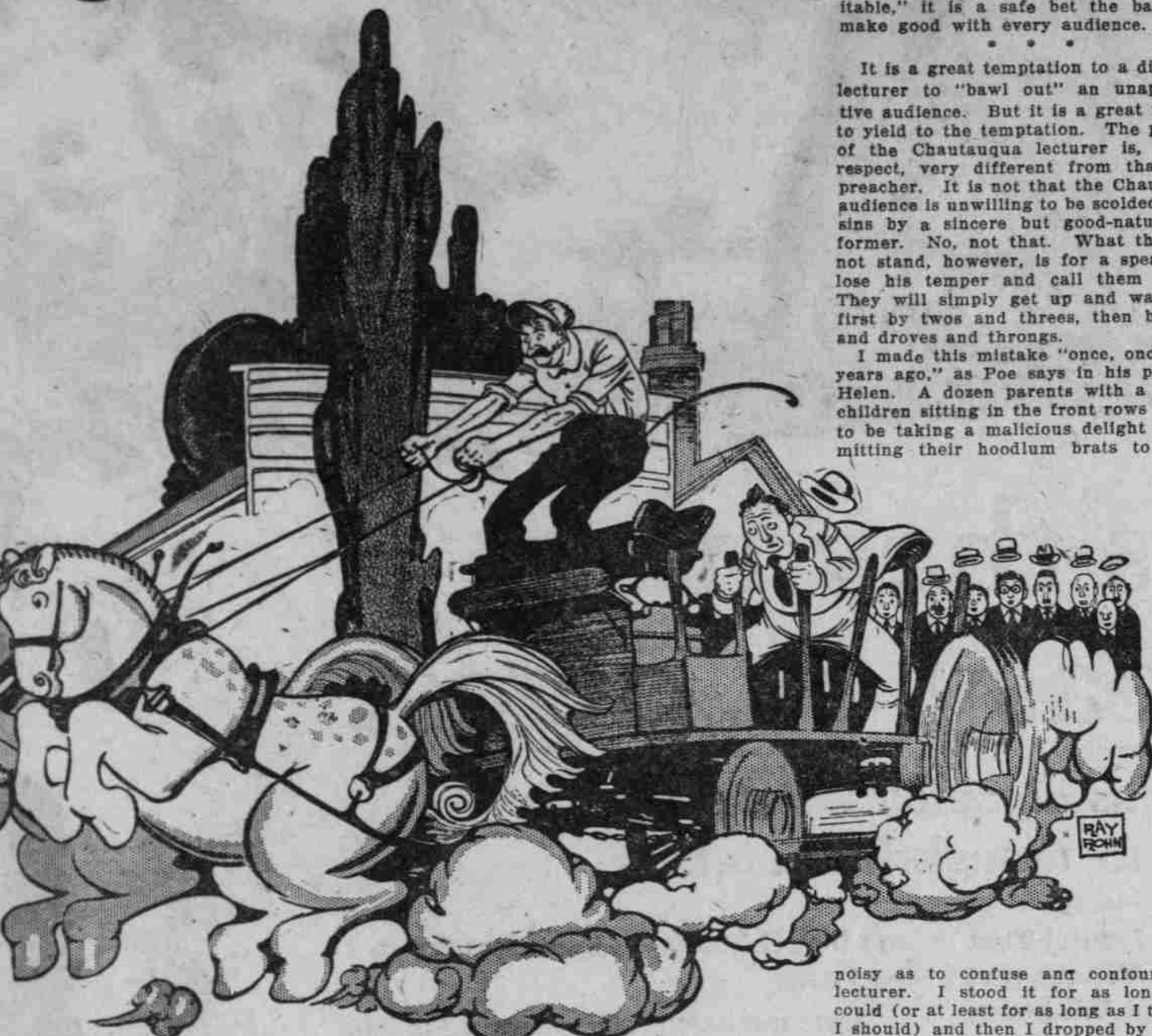
Once in Sisseton, South Dakota, I was marooned for nearly a week by a cloud-burst.

You probably know that the Chautauqua system includes a standardized two-part programme of music and speaking for seven successive days, a sort of endless chain which usually begins the first week in June and which usually ends the first week in September.

Flood-bound, I could not move on to my next town and the lecturer who followed me on tour could not reach Sisseton.

But as the people of the community had invested their precious \$2 per in season tickets for seven days' entertainment and instruction, I lectured twice every day to as patient and sympathetic a group as I have ever addressed. Blessed is the man who has a good memory in such an emergency. Between public appearances, "twice daily," I sat on the hotel porch and watched the small boys dive from their kitchen window and swim to the barn and back in castaway suits of clothes.

Sisseton, however, was not my long-distance record. I recall one occasion when I had gone on to the next lecture point by train—ahead of the prelude company, which had to stay for a full-night programme. I think they sang certain acts from the opera "Martha." They were to come by auto in time for an afternoon performance. Half past one the platform manager received a telegram saying that the engine had gone dead somewhere in the mountains, a million miles from nowhere. I was asked to precede the postponed prelude with my lecture on Maeterlinck's "Blue Bird." I began at 2 o'clock promptly. At 2, as I



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drew near the familiar peroration, I heard the manager in the wings (and out of sight of the audience) trying to get my attention. He waved another telegram and stage-whispered to me to go on and hold the crowd as the musicians were on the way and would arrive shortly. At 3:30 came another message be-moaning further delay through tire trouble. At 4 they had got started once more. At 4:30 they were stuck again. At 5 they were once more on their way and at 5:30 they appeared on the scene, like a courier of the king with a last-minute pardon. By 6 o'clock they were on the platform and I was relieved from further duty. For four endless hours I had kept my blue bird flying.

My rhetoric teacher used to explain, as did yours, about the arts of expansion and condensation. I have just described how I was perforce obliged to learn something about expansion. I shall tell you how I learned to condense a two-hour lecture into a 50-minute talk.

Chautauqua was on at a town perhaps 40 miles from Hannibal, Mo. We had heard the praises of the "Mark Twain" hotel at Hannibal sung far and wide. The last train for that city left at 9:25. The prelude company went on at 8 and, instead of running till 8:45, their usual time, they quit at 8:30. By 8:31 I was half through the opening paragraph of my lecture. I was on a one-way turnpike, and no motor cop in sight. I stepped on the gas and my verbal speedometer registered 60 miles an hour, or 200 words a minute. At exactly 9:20 I reached my final period. By 9:20½ I was standing up in a drayman's truck, holding fast with both hands to the rope-stakes. The driver was a superb actor. He ought to drive one of the real chariots in "Bon Hur." Standing up and balancing himself with a tight hold on the reins, he broke all local speed laws, took all corners on two wheels and reached the station a second before the train pulled out. As it happened the train was a fast freight and I had to ride for 40 miles in a sooty caboose all dolled up in a brand-new Shantung suit with white buckskin shoes.

Whenever a Chautauqua lecturer reaches a good hotel he makes up for lost time, hygienically, by taking from four to six baths. I got my money's worth at Hannibal that night.

What would you do if you had half finished your night lecture and something went wrong at the central power plant, leaving you on the platform and your audience before you all in utter darkness? That happened to me once. I just kept right on talking while a quick-witted manager had four automobiles driven up close to the stage, two on each side. All eight lights were switched on, brilliant, and the programme proceeded without interruption.

It will not do to conclude from these recited incidents that the days of the Chautauqua lecturer are filled with interesting experiences in rapid succession. On the contrary, the case-hardened peripatetic orator invents little tricks of one kind and another to beguile the tedium of 90 days of the same lecture over and over again in 90 Gopher Prairies during the hottest part of the summer in the hottest part of the country.

And yet, while there is a good deal of sameness in the towns, there is often as much difference between the audiences of two towns in the same county as not infrequently there is between two brothers in the same family.

We are accustomed to think of the man on the platform as the ready target for the praise or the condemnation of the audience. After the night's lecture in the big tent the patrons will laud or damn with faint praise the orator of the

table," it is a safe bet the band will make good with every audience.

It is a great temptation to a disgusted lecturer to "bawl out" an unappreciative audience. But it is a great mistake to yield to the temptation. The position of the Chautauqua lecturer is, in this respect, very different from that of a preacher. It is not that the Chautauqua audience is unwilling to be scolded for its sins by a sincere but good-natured reformer. No, not that. What they will not stand, however, is for a speaker to lose his temper and call them names. They will simply get up and walk out, first by twos and threes, then by rows and droves and throngs.

I made this mistake "once, once only, years ago," as Poe says in his poem to Helen. A dozen parents with a million children sitting in the front rows seemed to be taking a malicious delight in permitting their hoodlum brats to be so

lectured as to write a "History of Civilization in the United States," in which the church was ignored as of no consequence. To ignore the Chautauqua as a force in the making of public opinion or as a factor in the shaping of national character would be to display the same sort of obscurantism.

If "hard-boiled" city cynics want to jeer at Chautauqua and Chautauqua lecturers, I don't suppose there is any law to prohibit them making fools of themselves. Meanwhile, all the people who live on the main streets of the country will continue to attend in ever-increasing numbers and managers will continue to be flooded with letters from celebrated politicians, novelists, editors and preachers who want to "break into" the lecturing game and swing around the circuit.

Lecturers are of three sorts. First, there are those people, men or women, who have become more or less famous (or notorious) because of some signal achievement, such as discovering the North Pole, like Dr. Cook (sic), or robbing a train, like Al Jennings. People will pay perfectly good money to see such folks, just as they will pay the ballyhoo man his fee to any museum of curiosities.

Then there are bona-fide professional lecturers who really are talented platform speakers. These, however, are soon likely to get into a rut, and the more they change their lecture the more it remains the same.

The third group is the most worth while, the most sought after by managers and the most appreciated by audiences. It consists of those who are doing some important work in the world and who are at the same time gifted with such a dramatic or convincing style of speech that they are able to tell a "story" or deliver a "message" with compelling interest.

Home Consumption.

A northern man who had read much of "moonshiners," but had gathered very hazy ideas of their habitat, went on a vacation trip through the mountains of Tennessee. In a most inaccessible region he was amazed to find an immense field of corn, evidently more than enough to support the population for miles around. When he stopped at a log cabin for dinner, he made inquiry about it of his hostess.

"Pardon me, ma'am," he said, "but I shouldn't think anybody could run a wagon down the trail from this valley to Sunset."

"No, suh, I shouldn't reckon they could."

"And isn't there any way of getting from here to the river or anywhere else except by that trail?"

"No, suh, I reckon they ain't."

"Well, then, ma'am, how in the world do you folks ever manage to market all the corn you raise in here?"

The woman, suddenly startled out of her composure, looked at him intently. Then she assumed an air of nonchalance again.

"Why, suh," she said, "we don't market no corn f'm hereabouts. We generally manage to use all we raise in these parts."

As the northerner made his way up the trail that afternoon he had occasional glimpses of a sharp-eyed small boy following at a respectful distance behind, who declined to come nearer or to go away. When he had come again in a city and related his experience, his Tennessee friends looked serious.

"That's as close a call as you'll ever have," said one of them. "They sure took you all for a revenue officer. Next time you go up in these hills and see corn, you eat all they put before you, but shut up about the rest."



Then came the superintendent with a smile of victory on his face and a suckling pig under his arm.

emotional fervor will be balanced to the fraction of a dram. The perfection of the speech, both as to substance and delivery, will then be attested by the cordial, the enthusiastic reception of six successive audiences. And then on the seventh night the whole thing will fall flat. The "bonehead" audience will stare at you either in blank amazement as to what you are driving at or else sneer at you with a supercilious grin, which they are at no pains to conceal. Sometimes an experienced lecturer, by studying his audience for the first 15 minutes, can size it up and by a clever story or shift of method succeed in capturing a recalcitrant crowd. At other times he will simply know that what he has is not for them (pearls before swine), so he will beat the air and hurry on to the unappreciated denouement. Two or three local highbrows may come to him secretly, afterward, to apologize for their fellow townsmen. He will take the first train for the next town on his schedule and try to forget his failure to put it over. He knows whose fault it was.

The circuit managers understand this difference in taste or lack of taste. That is why they build up a table d'hôte programme for the week with enough variety to suit every kind of appetite. If everything else is "flat, stale and unprof-

I have said that the strain of 10 or 15 weeks of daily lecturing is considerable. As a matter of fact, a good many husky men go all to pieces after the first three weeks. This is usually because they do not know how to take care of themselves on the road. The best of Chautauqua circuits will have some bad jumps, when it will be necessary to travel all night, with two or three changes at junction points. This means that if a man hasn't learned how to sleep on a baggage truck at the station while he's waiting for the 12:51 A. M. train to pull in, or on the straight seat of a day coach, with his suitcase and raincoat for a pillow, he will soon get fagged out. And if he gets thoroughly tired he will be an easy victim of the first stray germ. Then, too, unaccustomed to outdoor speaking, he will, like a not, begin by yelling his head off, with the inevitable result that in less than a fortnight he is too hoarse to speak above a whisper. If this persists, he frequently has to quit early in the season. Later he learns how to use his voice without abusing it and how to conserve his general health.

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