



Our Times

Volume 3 Issue 2

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Summer 1998

Chautauqua Summers

When Margaret Sparks and Clifford Wilmert were courting, they spent many pleasant evenings attending the programs at the annual Chautauqua. Margaret was staying on the grounds; so after the program, the young couple sometimes strolled back to the cabin to visit with family and friends before Cliff drove home to his family's farm.

As they sat on the porch swing, talking quietly, they couldn't have imagined that their friendship would evolve into a marriage that has lasted 60 years. They may have sensed, however, that the Chautauqua was as much about friendships as it was about camping in a virgin oak forest and attending programs in the auditorium decorated with huge American flags.

The Chautauqua Institution had begun at Chautauqua Lake, New York, in 1874, as a summer school for Sunday-school teachers. Soon, however, the idea broadened into a popular movement that brought entertainment and educational programs to rural areas across America. At its peak in 1924, Chautauquas were being held in 1,200 towns in America.

The Chautauqua was introduced to Logan County by James H. Shaw of Bloomington, who met with a group of Lincoln people on December 6, 1901, to propose a program in the summer of 1902. If 800 subscribers could be guaranteed, Shaw would secure the talent, pay all expenses, receive all profits, and make good all losses.

With J. H. Boyd as chairman, a committee secured 815 pledges; and on April 12, 1902, The Lincoln Chautauqua Association was incorporated. The first board

members were E. G. King; D. H. Harts, Jr.; Henry Traub; Joseph Landauer; Lawrence B. Stringer; Joseph Hodnett; and Adam Denger. The association obtained a 10-year lease from Mrs. Ella Brainerd for a wooded area west of the city, with an option to buy. (By 1908, a total of 120 acres had been purchased. Over the years, coal rights were sold; and in 1916, the Lincoln Country Club bought 36 acres from the association for a clubhouse and golf course.)

The 1902 assembly was held in a big tent at the foot of the hill, lighted by smoking gasoline torches that dangled from nails on tree trunks and tent poles. Despite wet shoes from the damp grass and an onslaught of hay fever from the golden-rod, those assembled had a good time. By 1903, the Lincoln Chautauqua had ended its association with Mr. Shaw and was off and running on its own.

Logan County people took to the Chautauqua with great enthusiasm. In 1903, by-laws were adopted by which Chautauqua members paid \$100 in two installments: \$50 to build an auditorium and improve the grounds and \$50 to purchase the land. Each membership entitled the holder to a perpetual lease on a lot, and many members built summer cottages. Eventually Brainerd Park, as the grounds were called, became a little city in the woods, with 400 people camping there during the 1929 assembly.



Auditorium platform. Lincoln Chautauqua program book, 1906. Courtesy of Lincoln Public Library.

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The People, History, and Culture of
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Publisher's Notes

My first glimpse of Lincoln's summer magic came in 1972 when my wife and I spent an evening on Violet Scully's back lawn (along with a few dozen other Lincoln College folks). Now don't get the wrong idea: we were a sophisticated young couple, quite accustomed to faculty parties. During the previous four years at LeRoy High School, we had seldom missed beer and brats in the coach's garage after a football game. But when the gentlemen in red jackets served champagne on the sunken croquet court at Violet's, we were sure Logan County was farther from LeRoy than the distance on the road map indicated.

The Logan County Fair always rates high in my summer memories: watching my kids show their Suffolk sheep, tolerantly tagging along after my wife through the craft buildings, sitting on the big tractors, seeing the suntanned faces of teenagers striding hand-in-hand through the carnival, eating pizza, taking a splash in the dunking booth, bumping into people I never see the rest of the year. When I wear a seed-corn hat, put a

straw in my mouth, and feel the heat rise up from the sun-baked earth, I pretend that I'm a farmer.

The Lincoln Community Theater fills summer nights with a kind of entertainment we find nowhere else. "Look, that's our neighbor on stage! I didn't know she could act. And sing. And dance." What exquisite talent is called forth from this county each summer to delight us and remind us that gifted people walk our streets!

I must admit that few summer memories match those of my swim team days in the 1970s. I remember coming back to Lincoln with a carload of kids who had captured medals at the state long-course championships in Hinsdale, and delivering them to their proud families. We won all our dual meets one summer and took two carloads of teenagers to the Oklahoma State Championships, where the Lincoln kids kicked some Sooner fannies. But the memories are not about winning (well, maybe a little bit, but we did some losing, too); they are mostly about beautiful mornings practicing beneath the oaks at the Elks Club; sweaty afternoons on the deck at Scully Natatorium; and late evenings at the Rec, with the sun reluctantly dropping out of view, a whistle piercing the air, and the thunderous whoosh of strong, young arms churning down that 50-meter stretch, banging a flip turn against the aluminum poolside, and bringing it home. We hosted the Brazilian National Team and treated them to a family picnic at Memorial Park. A handsome Olympic swimmer from Ecuador visited us; and the Lincoln boys, a bit jealous of the attention he received from the local girls, quickly dubbed him the "Ecuador." The Archie Harris Swim Camp made us Lincolniters feel pretty special when it brought swimmers and coaches from all over the nation, as well as such distant lands as Japan, England, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. (Yes, Saudi Arabia. The swimmer claimed he had seen someone riding a camel and wearing a T-shirt marked "Archie Harris Swim Camp, Lincoln, Illinois," and so he inquired.) I knew then that I was working with the best bunch of kids ever assembled in one summer place, and, seeing how they have turned out, I know it still. SR

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The little city had been platted by Minneapolis landscape architect G.C. Cone. Meanwhile, Thomas L. Blackburn had designed the open-air

steel auditorium, the first of its kind in the country. The circular amphitheater, which cost \$10,000 and seated 4,500 people, was ready for the third assembly in 1904.

From its beginnings as a tent city, the grounds grew to more than 100 cottages, an administration building, a woman's building, a dining hall, the Masonic headquarters, two lodging houses, two bank cottages, and a custodian's home. By 1925, Brainerd Park was the largest Chautauqua grounds in Illinois.

For many Logan County people, their vacation was the ten days to two weeks spent at the Chautauqua in August. For farm families, an extra treat was the electricity and indoor plumbing they didn't have at home. In addition to a full-time police force and post office, the grounds boasted a water and sewage system.

Tent campers rented or bought their canvas homes. Or they could stay in one of the lodging tents, which were run by the ladies' societies of the churches in the years before the lodging houses were built.

Making his home in a cottage under the trees, listening to the bell toll to announce the programs and "quiet time" at 11:00 p.m., a camper could feel very far from Lincoln. Not that he would ever really be out of touch. If a phone call came to the administration building, a young man like Raymond Merry, who earned \$1.00 a day as a messenger, would pedal over to the cottage to say, "You're wanted on the phone."

Because Herb Alexander's father and other grocers took orders every afternoon for deliveries the next morning, campers only occasionally ate in Mrs. Molloy's dining room. The ice man came by every day; the *Courier* was delivered daily also.

Husbands who worked during the day and non-campers who came out for the programs paid five cents to ride the streetcar out Stringer Avenue past the State School, along the north end of Union Cemetery, and on out to Brainerd Park. The open cars with rattan seats often held as many as 150 people; and Henrietta Branom remembers them as packed full, with

people hanging out the sides.

Some of those riders had bought tickets for just an event or two. Others had season tickets, which cost from \$2.00 to \$4.00, and entitled the holder to a host of activities: the women's programs; the kindergarten classes and swimming lessons; the lectures by William Jennings Bryan, Billy Sunday, and Gov. Robert La Follette; the entertainment as diverse as the Schildkret Hungarian orchestra (enjoyed by the residents of North Lincoln) and Root, the Bee Man.

Sports were popular during the Chautauqua. Most important was baseball, with Chautauqua teams and later the Twilight League playing every day at 4:00 p.m. Tennis and croquet were available; and in 1907, Chautauqua Lake was dredged from Salt Creek, stocked with fish, and equipped with a motor launch and canoes. (William K. Maxwell claimed it was ruined by motor boats and became a "little canal full of mud.")

The Lincoln Chautauqua thrived for many years, gradually replacing the "heavy lectures" with more popular entertainment (later supplied by the Redpath Bureau), historical pageants, and the Chautauqua Players. The feed lots of the early days gave way to a parking garage.

The association had a good scare in 1936, with the failure of the Lincoln National Bank, which held the mortgage. One hundred \$50.00 bonds had to be sold to pay off the remaining debt and "Save Chautauqua" from foreclosure.

But the Chautauqua's days were numbered. The coming of radio and automobiles and, according to Margaret Wilmert, the reinstatement of the Logan County Fair in 1937, finished off the assembly. The last complete Chautauqua was held in 1938. In 1939, a plan of weekly programs was instituted, which included an appearance by columnist Drew Pearson. The next two years brought very abbreviated programs, and the grounds were sold to the Elks Crippled Children's Trust in 1942.

On February 11, 1960, the Elks Trust sold Brainerd Park to the city of Lincoln; Memorial Park was born. ■

Where Have All the Cottages Gone?

Staying in a cottage at the Chautauqua grounds was exciting and fun, but it was anything but elegant. In fact, as Bill Gossett tells us, it was "indoor camping out."

Bill's grandparents' cottage had one big square room, with a "little bitty kitchen," a water closet, and a seven by ten-foot screened eating porch. The family strung curtains to make the big square room into four bedrooms, where they slept on army cots. The children slept under the eaves on pads in a tiny loft over the front porch. The walls were unfinished on the inside—just studs. It wasn't until the Gossetts took the cottage out to Lincoln Lakes in about 1937 that Bill and his dad added the pine paneling.

Chautauqua cottages had no heat and only a tiny kerosene stove and ice box; but most had running water and electric lights, even if they were often just bare bulbs.

When Bill's dad put the family's cottage up on stilts at Lincoln Lakes, Jack Gordon laughed that the water would never get that high. But after Jack got water in his house that first year, he jacked his house up, too.

Bill and Jean lived in the cottage when they were first married. In later years, Henrietta and Lowell Branom bought the house; and today it is owned by Larry Bosley.

Many cottages ended up at Lincoln Lakes; in fact, the first five old cottages on Cottonwood Lane (after



George Gimbel cottage, 1928. Courtesy of Edna Dehner.

the log house) were moved there from the Chautauqua grounds.

Some cottages at the Chautauqua grounds were bigger, if not more grand. The cottage owned by the family of Gertrude Sparks Franz Munsch and Margaret Sparks Wilmert was located south of the Larry Shroyer cottage. The living room was separated from the two little bedrooms with curtains instead of doors. There was a tiny bathroom with just a stool, a kitchen with a three-burner oil stove and a sink with running water, and a front porch.

"We didn't have swell furniture," says Margaret Wilmert. In fact, her dad made a table out of boards and covered it with linoleum. Cast-off furniture finished the decor.

Whenever Margaret and Gertrude feel nostalgic, they only have to travel as far as Eighth Street. Their former cottage is the second house west of Elm. The porch has been closed in and windows added, but they still recognize their home at Brainerd Park.

Many Chautauqua cottages are scattered around Lincoln. Raymond Merry can find his family's cottage diagonally across from Jefferson Street Church. Other cottages were moved to the Melrose addition near the fairgrounds by George White. ■

Material for this issue came from "'An American Legend' (Chautauqua)" by Mary I. Alvey; "My Personal Memories of the Lincoln Country Club—Lincoln, Illinois with Apologies for Errors." by W. K. Maxwell; Lincoln Elks historical materials; *History of Logan County, Illinois 1911, 1982*; Chautauqua program books; the *Courier* under its various names; and, most important, the memories of our friends.

Correction: A newspaper account used in researching the last issue stated that Gullett's Greenhouses had a bad fire the same year as the hailstorm—1942. Turns out the fire was WITHIN the same year: it actually happened on July 14, 1941.

Chautauqua Memories

Frances Shull Remembers

"That was the most important thing in the world to us," says Frances Keys Anderson Shull. "There was everything. It was heaven."

Every summer, Frances and her four sisters and younger brother would stay with their parents in the Koehnle cottage for the two weeks of the Chautauqua. "I don't know how my mother did it," says Frances, "but it was the thing to do."

The children loved the Chautauqua, because they were free to run. Free to cross the bridge over the ravine to the children's playground where they could slide down the big slide with its two curves (where at least one person had broken his arm) and play on the merry-go-round and swings. Free to run to the four-sided drinking fountain in the middle of the cottages to get a drink.

Of course, there were organized children's activities as well, and afternoon lectures, which "my mother loved," though "we didn't like them so much."

Frances tells us that "baseball was very big." Bill Gossett's father was "one of the very fine players" who were cheered on by the spectators in the good-sized grandstand.

Frances remembers seeing David Harts introduce the programs in the auditorium. When the evening program ended, Frances hurried to the confectionery to spend the money she had saved up for ice cream. Meanwhile, those who had come just for the evening were leaving in a "string of cars."

In the center of the cottages, says Frances, Lincoln National Bank had built a little cottage where people could go to use the indoor bathroom and to get free stationery. She also remembers the two-story Masonic building with its open porches and the little log cabin where First



Simpson cottage. Program book, 1909. Courtesy of Lincoln Public Library.

National Bank had "lots of old Lincoln memorabilia."

Between the cottages, spaces could be rented for tents. One year, when the Koehnle cottage was not available, Frances and her family stayed in a big tent with four bedrooms.

Cooking on a two-burner stove, taking the clothes into town to wash and iron them: Frances says the Chautauqua must have been a lot of work for her mother. Still, she loved it. For the whole family, in fact, it was "something to look forward to all year."

Bill Gossett Remembers

"Billy! Billy!" Virginia and Eugenia Sisson called, and little Billy Gossett came running to see what his twin aunts wanted.

The adult Bill Gossett has "vivid memories" of staying at his Grandma and Grandpa Sisson's cottage during the Chautauqua. In fact, he says that the first money he ever made was from going door-to-door on the grounds, selling Mrs. H. J. Mayer's homemade doughnuts, when he was about ten years old. He also remembers riding in the ice wagon with Steve Verban, checking the sign in each window to see how much ice was wanted, and hopping off to deliver it.

Bill remembers the tan bark floor of the great amphitheater, the building draped with flags and bunting by Gene Sheer. Someone always brought a special chair for T. T. Beach, a

portly man with a walrus mustache, who lived on College Avenue.

Bill reminds us of the "ubiquitous musicians," including Herbert Petrie and His White Hussars, a brass band whose members wore plumed headgear.

Then there were the plays. The "forerunners of Lincoln Community Theatre," according to Bill, were those that featured local talent like Walter Spatz, Jess Sparks, Wilbur Layman, and Thekla Stoll. Bill himself played Zar in the "Emperor's New Clothes," a production put on by Lincoln Junior High students in 1936.

At the concession stand, located near the entrance to the grounds, Bill bought Holloway suckers and grape pop, ice cream bars, and Cracker Jack with prizes.

Of course Bill remembers the baseball games: his father, Hermann, played in the Twilight League, along with Joe Sapp, Ed Malerich, "Sleepy" Armstrong, and Ray Sayers.

Bill reminds us that after the Chautauqua closed, the Elks Crippled Children's Trust acquired ownership of Brainerd Park, with the goal of keeping it up for public use and eventually putting a rehabilitation center for crippled children there. Bill's dad, Hermann; Jack Gordon; and Albert Arnold were trustees.

However, as the state became involved in crippled children's care and it became obvious that the need for a center was not there, the property became somewhat dormant. In the spirit of patriotism during the war, the amphitheater was torn down; and the "steel was sent back to Japan in the form of bombs, I guess," says Bill.

Later, when the Elks were making a concerted effort to expand their nine-hole golf course, the city (under mayor Edward Spellman) asked the trust to convey the ground to the

park district. The city owned a little triangle of land that could be used for part of the golf course; they wanted to swap it for the park. Quite a bit of discussion took place among the Elks, with a vocal minority wanting to turn Brainerd Park into another nine holes of golf course.

Bill was a trustee—and a golfer. But he felt it would be a shame to cut down the beautiful oak trees. In addition, the park had been acquired for the benefit of the community and therefore, the trustees thought, it should be returned to the community. Their position prevailed, the swap was made, and Brainerd Park was sold to the city of Lincoln in 1960. (The Elks got their additional nine holes in 1965.)

Other Chautauqua Memories

Mary Irish Alvey remembers that her family stayed in a brown shingled cottage with a porch. She remembers coal oil stoves “and how they smoked,” programs introduced by E. H. Lukenbill and Judge Stringer, huge lime suckers from Jimmy Vaughan’s concession stand, and “the coldest water in the whole world” from the big drinking fountain.

Mrs. Charlie Gehlbach’s tiny cottage, “The House that Jack Built,” reminded Mary of a doll house—or a gingerbread house with white icing. She remembers sleeping there in a little alcove upstairs.

Mary says she won a Boston Bull Terrier at the Chautauqua one year and that her dad offered her \$5.00 to leave it there. She took it home, of course, and named it Buttons.

Mary tells us that Mrs. Royce from Decatur produced a grand finale at the end of the Chautauqua. In one production, Mary wore white pants, a blue jacket with brass buttons, and a tall hat in the “March of the Wooden Soldiers.” Mrs. E. O. Koch,

who taught elocution at Lincoln College, wrote and directed historical pageants, including the 1932 pageant, “Highlights of American History.”

Muriel Barrett White remembers that the Chautauqua was a “hot place.” If a politician happened to be visiting, it was “a biggy if you told everybody who you saw.”

Mildred Hawes Struebing remembers that her family stayed in the cottage of J. D. Fusch, a Lincoln banker, one summer when they were moving into a different house.

When Deane Doolen was a child, his family rented the cottage of Elmer Brown, the owner of the Basket Grocery, where Deane worked on Saturday mornings.

Deane remembers that religious groups used the Chautauqua facilities in those days. During the revivals, people went into “quite an emotional state” on the stage.

People didn’t have radio and television in those days, so they especially appreciated the Chautauqua programs. Two that Margaret Wilmert found impressive were John Philip Sousa’s band and “The Shepherd of the Hills” production.

Ruth Stillely Rice remembers that when her parents and friends came to visit, they would rent a cottage on the Chautauqua grounds for three days or so.

Faye Perry Klemm remembers hiking to Chautauqua Lake with her skates over her shoulder. Because the little lake froze over before Lincoln Lakes, it was a good place to skate. During the summer, her Campfire Girls leader, Edith Ryan, picked up the girls in the family car and took them to her family’s cabin on the Chautauqua grounds for picnics and parties.

Raymond Merry remembers splashing in the three-foot-deep wading pool in the children’s playground.

Edna Dehner remembers staying in the George Gimbel cottage in 1928 with her mother and two aunts, Minnie and Nellie Bloes. At the women’s programs, she made daffodils and roses and crocheted a little red envelope purse—all out of crepe paper.

Edna will never forget parking the car in the enormous garage, which had individual stalls separated by big posts. Getting out of the car, the teenager forgot to put on the brake. The car started forward, the door hit the post, and it was torn off. ■



The J. Q. Primm family, c. 1906. Courtesy of Margaret Wilmert.

Lincoln Country Club

Pat Hodnett Reese remembers the old country club—the Swiss chalet nestled in the trees near the Chautauqua grounds. Her father, William E. Hodnett, was one of the founders; and Pat can still see her dad and her uncles, Ted and Jim McGrath, dressed in their plus fours to play golf on Sundays.

The country club was the result of a dream shared in 1915 by William K. Maxwell and Henry Holmes, who were just learning to play golf and thought a local country club would be a wonderful idea. By December of 1915, the Lincoln Country Club had been organized, with a plan to sign up 100 members, each buying one share of stock for \$100. (In May of 1916, the membership was expanded to 150.)

That first board was full of well-known Lincoln names: Hoblit, Trapp, Holmes, Atlass, Houser, Burke, Longan, Maxwell, and Lutz. Soon the club had bought 47 acres of ground for \$7,000, and the grounds committee had contacted Clarence Lincoln.

Lincoln was a hometown boy who had made good at the A. G. Spaulding Sporting Goods Store in Chicago. He provided the services of Douglas Tweedy (the company's head salesman) and Tom Bendelow (who later became a world-famous golf architect) to lay out the course. Walter Kennett, a young Scotsman,

was hired to be the first golf pro; and club members set about mastering the sport.

Although the club was proud of its "sporty" course, after seven years of fighting floods and debris, the members sold off most of the bottom ground and bought higher ground. The American Park Builders laid out a mostly new course in 1923.

Meanwhile, Edward C. Lutz and his committee had planned the Swiss chalet clubhouse, with its immense fireplace and the balcony where, Mary Alvey remembers, the older people sat to watch the young folks dancing in the ballroom below. The clubhouse was elegant: its first flatware was sterling silver. But it was also homey, says Pat Reese. "We used to go out there pretty nearly every Sunday night to eat," she remembers.

For people like the Maxwells, who stayed at their cottages on the Chautauqua grounds on weekends or even all summer, a golf course and clubhouse just across the way were real assets.

Maybe it was all too good to be true, for on September 21, 1930, the clubhouse burned to the ground in less than an hour. Golfers who ran in from the course saved the porch furniture and carried \$2,500 worth of golf clubs out the rear windows of the new golf shop before its fireproof

roof collapsed. But the clubhouse was gone long before the Lincoln fire trucks could make the three-mile trip out into the country.

Although the clubhouse was insured for \$12,000, the insurance had to be applied to the club's \$15,000 debt. So for several years, the ladies ate at the Spinning Wheel restaurant before their tournaments, until the Lincoln Elks rescued the club from foreclosure in 1935. After a successful bond issue and membership drive, a new clubhouse was built; and the social season of 1936 opened with a dance featuring Harry "Tiny" Hill and his band.

Pat Reese was at the country club the night Jim Malerich demonstrated crop dusting with his little plane. "As we were standing watching," says Pat, the airplane "disappeared down a little hill" and crashed. Fortunately, Jim wasn't badly hurt.

The Elks bought the clubhouse and grounds in 1942 and opened it for use by Elks members in 1943.

Back in the old days, 18-hole tournaments had meant playing the nine holes twice. Finally in 1965, the Lodge bought 35 acres of adjoining land to make an 18-hole course. The clubhouse was in disrepair; so the Elks bought the neighboring Lincoln Aquatic Club in 1967, adding an addition to the pool clubhouse in 1968 to make the whole complex into a new Lodge home and country club.

Bill Tebrugge has played at that club "a couple times a week," ever since Jim Abbott got him to join the Elks over thirty years ago. Bill says he thinks his wife, Gretchen, "enjoyed looking at the birds and trees more than she enjoyed the golf," but it was "kind of fun to get out with the guys and the couples and make friends." Bill remembers Friday night two-ball tournaments; dances and parties; and golf lessons from Odell Trueblood for the Tebrugge children, Mark and Amy, when they were young. ■



First clubhouse, Lincoln Country Club. Courtesy of Pat Hodnett Reese.

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THE LINCOLN CHAUTAUQUA

August 12-25, 1925
Some Typical Days

THURSDAY, AUGUST 13

- 9:00 Boys and Girls Recreation, Miss Mary L. Hunter
- 9:30 Kindergarten, Miss Eleanora Dittus
- 10:00 Pressure Cooker Meals, Miss Eva Montgomery
- 2:30 Prelude, Elias Tamburitza Serenaders
- 3:00 Lecture, Dr. Roy L. Smith
- 4:00 Baseball, K. of C. vs. Gulletts
- 8:00 Concert, Tamburitza Serenaders

SUNDAY, AUGUST 16

- 9:30 Chautauqua Sunday School, D. C. Shepler, Superintendent
- 11:00 Religious Services, sermon by Rev. J. A. Hoefer
- 2:30 Prelude, The Marimbaphone Sextette
- 3:00 Lecture, "Problems of the Day," Hon. Pat Harrison
- 8:00 Program, The Marimbaphone Sextette

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25

- 9:00 Boys and Girls Recreation, Miss Hunter
- 9:00 Better Babies Conference, Miss Cardiff
- 9:30 Kindergarten, Miss Dittus
- 3:00 "Fine Feathers," The Bennett Dramatic Company
- 4:00 Baseball, Casket Co. vs. Brewerton
- 8:00 "Peg O' My Heart," The Bennett Dramatic Company

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