

## A Sense of Place

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

In August, I visited the “mothership” of adult education and dialogue sites in the United States, the Chautauqua Institution near Lake Erie in Western New York State. Chautauqua was founded in 1784 by Methodist Bishop John Heyl Vincent and inventor Lewis Miller as a summer tent-camp to train Sunday school teachers. At that time, public education in the United States was not widespread, especially outside urban areas. Sunday schools were an important vehicle for teaching Bible studies and related knowledge such as the geography of the Holy Land, and were often the only form of education available to children of farmers and laborers.

Chautauqua was ecumenical from the start, and by the 1880s it broadened its focus to lectures and discussions on secular topics, including the arts, science and social issues. It grew from a tent camp to have permanent meeting halls, homes, guest houses, hotels, churches and recreational activities.

Chautauqua also inspired the Chautauqua Movement, through which replicas of the Institution grew up around the United States and Canada. At its height, there were several hundred “Chautauquas,” with 16 that still operate, including one in Boulder, Colorado.

Chautauqua gave rise to the Chautauqua Circuit, which toured lecturers and performers around the United States in large tents, especially to rural and industrial areas like mining communities. By 1920, more than 10,000 U.S. communities had hosted a Chautauqua meeting.

Chautauqua has always attracted interesting people. Thomas A. Edison, son-in-law of co-founder Lewis Miller, was part of its early circle. Speakers have included a litany of presidents and iconic figures such as Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, Amelia Earhart and Duke Ellington.

I gave a Saturday afternoon Chautauqua talk entitled, “Leadership and Ethics.” It was held in the dramatic Hall of Philosophy, a replica of the Parthenon with an Adirondack-style wooden pediment atop Greek columns.

I stayed in a guest house where speakers are hosted. I was told that I didn’t need to lock the door of my room. I found the following inscription in the house’s guest book from Garrison Keillor, a prior occupant of my room who had obviously been told the same thing:

*The gentleman in 204  
Decided to not lock his door  
And in came two speakers,  
Several truth seekers,  
And a drum and piccolo corps*

There are hundreds of buildings on the 750-acre Chautauqua campus, mostly delightfully Victorian. Many of the larger public buildings date from the Beaux Arts period of the early 20th Century, reflecting

classical Greek and Roman architecture. There is a 6,000-seat modern wooden amphitheater at the center of the campus, used for performances of the resident Chautauqua Symphony and visiting dance, opera and other performing arts groups. There are also several theaters. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places and a National Registered Landmark District, the campus is lovingly maintained and absolutely gorgeous.

During my visit, I noticed two phenomena about Chautauqua. First, most major religions are represented with their own churches and guest houses on the campus, and Sunday morning is a melodious symphony of choir music from an ecumenical service in the central amphitheater and services at the surrounding denominational churches. But Chautauquans keep their religions, along with their politics, to themselves. They gather at talks, meals, on the decks of hotels and the porches of the small private homes that line the narrow pedestrian streets to discuss speakers, topics and concerns. But even though one may detect an undercurrent of unease, they shy away from aligning with or criticizing any particular political figure. This creates an opportunity for non-defensive, open discussion.

The other interesting thing is that Chautauqua, while not as widespread a movement as a century ago, is alive and well. More than 100,000 people attend Chautauqua programs at the New York campus each summer. I met people from all over the East Coast and Midwest, and a few from the West, who go to Chautauqua for some or all of the nine-week season. Many have been coming for years, following their parents and grandparents who attended before them. They are as committed to learning and exchanging ideas as ever.

I was struck by how much a physical place can nurture and facilitate learning and dialogue. The Commonwealth Club cannot boast a giant historic campus. But with the opening of our first headquarters, specifically designed for the Club’s purpose and activities, we have the start of the permanence and sense of place that characterizes Chautauqua.

Our building is designed to be the best environment for dialogue we could create, including a beautiful location, formal and informal meeting spaces, state of the art sound, lighting and digital equipment, food and drink and everything else we could think of to make it welcoming and useful.

Many of our members came to one or more of the open houses last month. If you haven’t already, we encourage you to visit soon!



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy