The Friends of the University of Iowa Libraries will present their third annual Chautauqua, June 1-3, 1995. Entitled "The Dream and the Deal: Federal Support of the Arts and Public Projects in the 1930s" the program will address the nation’s reaction and response to the Great Depression. Planned this year to coincide with the Annual Alumni Reunion Weekend and housed in a traditional Chautauqua tent, the program will offer the two key ingredients of all Chautauquas, education and entertainment.

The celebration begins Thursday, June 1, with a picnic and band concert hosted by the University Alumni Association. On Friday and Saturday, June 2 and 3, the schedule features presentations on the photography, politics, literature, music, theater, and public projects of the 1930s. The University Libraries has significant material in many of these area and will mount an exhibition in the North Lobby of the Main Library showcasing these rich holdings.

Nick Natanson, an Iowa American Studies Ph.D. who currently serves as an archivist in the photographic section of the National Archives, Washington, D.C., will be the featured Friends dinner speaker in addition to lecturing on the Chautauqua stage. Natanson’s work deals with the photography project of the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s.

Other Chautauqua lecturers are Professor Rebecca Conard, public historian from Wichita State University, who will present her study of the role the Civilian Conservation Corps played in developing the Iowa State Park system, and Professor Kathleen Farrell of the Iowa Communication Studies Department who will discuss the relationship between politics and literature during the thirties ferment.

In addition to the abovementioned lectures, the Chautauqua will feature two staged readings of Federal Theatre manuscripts, a presentation by the Iowa City Footliters of James
Thurber’s “Many Moons”, a play for adults as well as children, and several showings of 1930s films.

The three day event culminates with a reception and concert opening the exhibition in the Libraries’ North Lobby, “The Dream and the Deal.”

The Friends of the University Libraries want to share this exciting event with all communities: the campus, the city, and the state. If you would like more information or would like to contribute time or ideas, please contact Margaret Richardson at the Libraries (319)335-5626.

Memories of Chautauqua

Circuit or “tent” Chautauqua was the offspring of the lyceum movement, which began in Massachusetts around 1826, and of the Chautauqua assemblies held at Lake Chautauqua, New York, after 1874. Lyceum programs, aimed at self-improvement, provided lectures and discussions on literary, scientific, and moral topics. After the Civil War, lecture booking agencies such as the Redpath Lyceum Bureau scheduled appearances throughout the country by such prominent figures as Susan B. Anthony, P.T. Barnum, Henry Ward Beecher, Wilkie Collins, Mark Twain, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

At about the same time, the first of a long sequence of educational summer sessions was conducted at Lake Chautauqua. Originally religious in tenor, these sessions soon grew to become almost a summer university with courses offered by the Chautauqua Normal School of Languages and a school of library training.

As the popularity of the institutional Chautauqua grew, it became clear that all interested people could not travel to western New York for the summer. Soon independent Chautauquas were established in small cities in states such as Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, and Iowa. These sessions shared many characteristics with the lyceum programs, so it seemed only natural that lyceum bureaus offered some of their more prominent lecturers and performers to the independent Chautauquas. As one might easily infer, the efficient management of travel and booking dates posed a problem for lyceum
bureaus seeking to supply far-flung independent Chautauquas. In 1904, Keith Vawter of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, who was from Iowa, moved toward a solution by launching the first Chautauqua circuit. In effect, Redpath offered a package deal to towns wishing to sponsor a Chautauqua. The agency would supply the talent, tents for outdoor shows, advertising, and work crews.

Town boosters handled the advance ticket sales and guaranteed the contract with Redpath. While circuit Chautauqua presentations included entertaining performances, the educational tone of institutional Chautauqua and lyceum was never abandoned, so local support often rose from a sense of civic pride.

By 1912 there were circuit Chautauqua offices throughout the United States providing a variety of booking networks which covered the country from North Carolina to New Mexico and from Michigan to Mississippi. Shortly after World War I, there were twenty-one circuits providing programs for 8,520 towns and 35,449,750 people. While Chautauqua was a nationwide movement, Iowa was always at its center.

At the height of its popularity, tent Chautauqua could offer a week-long sequence of programs for each town on its docket. There would be performances by lecturers, humorists, actors, interpretative readers, musicians, or magicians. Usually about half of a Chautauqua program consisted of music. One could expect Swiss bell ringers, orchestras, glee clubs, string quartets, oratorio artists, and ethnic bands. Grand opera stars such as Alice Neilson and Madame Schumann-Heink toured with Chautauqua. There might be a dramatic presentation by a group like the Ben Greet Players, a demonstration of sculptural technique by Lorado Taft, or some magic and ventriloquy by the young Edgar Bergen.

The backbone of Chautauqua was the lecture, however. Religion, temperance, and politics proved to be the most popular subjects. Before radio became a valuable campaign tool, politicians found touring with circuit Chautauqua a useful way to gain national exposure. Warren Harding and Herbert
Hoover did so. In the early years of this century, the Progressive Movement owed much of its success to the forums provided by Chautauqua. Robert La Follette, William Jennings Bryan, Joseph Folk, and Hiram Johnson toured the circuit in an effort to undermine the “standpatters.”

For better or worse, circuit Chautauqua did not survive the 1920s. Radio and film took their toll, as did saturation of the market and the almost inevitable decline in quality of the programs. For several decades, however, Chautauqua was a vital force in American cultural history. It brought new information, opinions, and entertainment to a sizable population, hastening an end to cultural isolation.

Some of our readers have their own memories of Chautauqua and below are some of their reminiscences.
Northwood, Iowa

My mother was very enthusiastic about Chautauqua and insisted we all, three children, mother and father, each have week-long tickets. I don’t remember the price but it was considered fairly expensive in our family.

In the morning 9:30, 10:00 or so, some of the Chautauqua staff young men and women conducted crafts and games for children. Sometimes the afternoon program started with a half hour or so of music followed by a lecture. My mother never insisted we children stay for the lecture, but we had to leave right after the music program before the lecture started.

I remember the week as a fun time. Some of our relatives from nearby towns and farms would come and I could play with my cousins. We looked forward to Chautauqua each year!

Marjorie Lyford
Iowa City

In the early 1920's as a lad growing up in Iowa City I looked forward to one annual midsummer event at College Park (some called it College Green). The park was only a block away, up the Dodge Street hill and the event that took our time and attention for a solid week was Chautauqua. From the Monday morning when workers pitched the big tent on the southwestern quadrant of the square block until the last performance on the following Sunday evening, Chautauqua monopolized our interest.

I don't remember the sequence of the varied performances but there was always a xylophone performance, a group
playing Hawaiian instruments and songs, a magician, speakers, musical groups, vocal and instrumental, a Saturday night play, comedy or drama. In sum, entertainment, instruction, edification, enlightenment.

The audience, seated on folding chairs, was the elite of Iowa City, professional and university faculty, no working class, few young people, mostly middle aged or older, dressed up, wives and husbands, the ladies wearing hats, and fanning themselves with fans supplied by funeral homes. Most of the audience arrived by foot or streetcar so there was no parking problem for the few cars on the adjoining streets. The audiences were neither hungry nor thirsty, unlike those today. I don't remember sales of soft drinks though ice cream cones were dispensed by vendors from carts near the entrance at the corner of College and Johnson Streets. The cones were small and the one dip was miniscule, as at the circus. The ice cream seemed to melt awfully fast and was always dripping down the cone.

We never had tickets for the performances. We simply walked in from the rear where the tent flaps were raised to permit ventilation on account of the heat under the tent. We took our seats wherever there were vacant ones without let or hindrance. No one tried to keep us out; there were always empty seats. And we behaved ourselves. The performances were high entertainment from our point of view and our appreciation was reflected in our model deportment.

Carl B. Cone
Oakland, Iowa

From August to August, we waited for Chautauqua to come back to Oakland. In the little western Iowa town where I grew up, Chautauqua was far and away the most exciting event of any year in our lives, a time when families from miles around brought their tents, their beds, their cooking equipment to the wooded park on the bank of the Nishnabotna river to be a part of that wonderful mixture of entertainment and stimulation in a time when radio was mostly static, the people in movies didn’t talk, and television was something they were experimenting with in electronic laboratories.

The big tent where all action took place had to be put up and all the boys in town had to be there to watch it happen. As we grew older, we were sometimes even paid money to perform some of the menial tasks involved, though we’d have paid for the privilege had it been necessary.

Next came the family tents (there were scores of them each year), which went up in the wooded area south of the big tent. People flocked in from farms and small towns within a thirty-mile radius of Oakland to spend the whole time the Chautauqua lasted—sleeping there, eating there, socializing there.
Oakland families usually went home to sleep, but groups of them would put up their tents, too, and eat one or two meals a day at the park.

And then came all the star attractions—the preachers, the politicians, the lady eclecutionists, the Swiss bell ringers, the gospel singers and—best of all—the actors who transported us to other places. Billy Sunday would be there to sanctify us, and William Jennings Bryan would come to exhort us. Bohumil Kryl’s brass band would stir us, and string orchestras would soothe us. The acting companies made us laugh uproariously or sob in sorrow. We lived in a different world from the one in which we spent the other fifty weeks of the year.

I’ve sometimes regretted that I didn’t take advantage of the chance to see Chautauqua from the other side of the footlights. After I’d graduated from high school, one of the groups that presented those wonderful plays made me an offer to spend the summer of 1930 doing the circuit with them. My parents thought that, at 16, I was a little young for that sort of thing. Probably they were right, but....

John M. Harrison
New Waterford, Ohio

I must have been about eight when I first sat under the brown canvas of a Chautauqua tent. It was pitched on a lot across Main Street from my grandparents’ house in New Waterford, Ohio, pop. 500. My grandfather was the town baker. Chautauqua days required him to more than double his work in order to bake the cookies the children wanted before the performances began, and the bread their fathers and mothers bought to take home in their buggies, or, in the case of the most well-to-do, their Fords and Overlands.

For three years running my grandparents saw to it that I had a five-dollar season ticket, which admitted me, or sometimes my grandmother, to all matinees Tuesday through Sunday and all evening performances Tuesday through Saturday. Inside the tent, there was a platform large enough to hold a piano, a lectern (pulpit we called it), and seats for five or six speakers and performers. There was also a curtained off section at the back of the platform that served as a dressing room and a place to hide props. Almost as a ritual we kids peaked under the curtain of this “dressing room” to get a preview of the mysterious delights that awaited us. In the main part of the tent were about two hundred collapsible chairs carefully lined up in rows of about twenty each with an aisle down the middle. When the weather was uncomfortably hot, which it usually was for matinees, the side curtains would be rolled up to let in whatever breeze was stirring. Once, I remember, a thunderstorm during a performance made it necessary to unroll the curtains hastily, and for their owners to rush out to soothe their horses and to see that they were well hitched.

Before a performance began there was always a cheerful character at the entrance to the tent who punched tickets or took cash. He seemed to know all the adults, for he always greeted them personally. “Hi, there, Fred,” or “Good evening, Mrs. Robinson.” Once he did wonders for my ego by greeting me as “Big Fella.” Another time he asked me if I was attending Sunday school regularly.
The programs usually opened with a hymn led by the "director" and accompanied on the piano by a middle-aged lady who would attack the keys with great vigor, usually ending each verse by bounding her hands into the air. Next came the announcements, followed by the "educational" or "uplifting" portion of the program. Too often, it seemed to us boys, this part of the program was taken over by a minister from "an eastern state" or a missionary from "a distant land." We were lucky, we thought, when the speaker was an authority on, say, the planets or the war that was just getting started in Europe.

The second part of the program was the segment we really looked forward to: the entertainment. On occasion, though, even the entertainment could be pretty dreary—or even harrowing, as I was to find out. The most tedious performers were the soprano soloists and mixed quartets singing sentimental songs that made our mothers and grandmothers dab their eyes with their "hankies." Much better, we thought, were the barber shop quartets, the Swiss bell-ringers, or those who produced tunes from a line of tumblers partly filled with water. Most exciting of all, though, was the occasional magician who puzzled and delighted us with cards that would appear on
order or half dollars that would somehow get lost and then wondrously fall from the magician’s ears. Once I was asked to climb on stage to assist the magician. What an exalting yet dreadful moment! Half of me dearly wanted to perform in front of my friends; the other half was too frightened to move. In the moment I took to master my agonizing indecision, a farm boy sitting next to me jumped up and in a loud voice offered himself—and was readily accepted by the magician. Partly I was relieved; partly I was furious with both the farm boy and the magician, who had suddenly become little less than a traitor in my eyes. After all, he had selected me, but had taken a pushy showoff. It was a searing experience. Even today, almost eighty years later, with all the happy memories I have of Chautauquas not only in New Waterford, Ohio, but also in Chautauqua, New York, the center of the institution’s activities, I can still feel a slight twinge of resentment against the boy and the magician—and Chautauquas in general.

John Gerber
Superintendent

I was hired to be what they called a superintendent on the Chautauqua. His principal work was to collect on the current year’s contract and to sign up a new contract for the next year. There were three-day, five-day, and seven-day Chautauquas. Ours was a five-day Chautauqua. This is how it worked. With a five-day contract deal, there would be five towns with five nights of tent shows in each one. They had darn good programs. The exciting part for me was that I got to introduce the speakers or talent. I had to stay in the main town all five days but every day the talent would travel by Chevrolet in a rotation from town to town around the circuit. If they were in a play at one town tonight, they knew that in the morning they had to get up and drive on to the next town. At the end of five days, the Chautauqua would move to the next main town, carrying its equipment in trucks. I rode in a tent truck and stayed in little hotels, a room, or often slept on a cot in the tent.

Each town had a contract calling for $1,200 and if the town didn’t have the money when we arrived, the people had to dig it up. That’s what made it hard and finally caused the Chautauqua to peter out. People wouldn’t pay the money. The superintendent arrived the day before the programs started and would immediately begin to hunt up every one who had signed the contract to get them to sign for the next year. On the fourth night, there would be what we privately called a “contract lecture” to pep up the crowd so they would feel like they had to have another Chautauqua. We had to get enough signed up for the next year’s contract to go back to the town. I had about fourteen towns that summer and I think I signed them all but two. I had pretty good luck.

I was also kind of in charge of the operation. We had a big tent with two or three poles, board seats, and a stage with a piano on it. I had a tent boy and a junior girl. The junior girl arrived in town several days ahead of everyone else and ran programs for the children. This not only kept the children interested but helped attract the adults. The tent man was
supposed to help put up the tent, keep the tent stakes plugged in, and see that everything mechanical was working right.

In 1929 about the only entertainment in small towns was silent movies. There was no TV and few people had radios. Chautauqua and lyceums were a matter of great interest to people for both entertainment and education.

Herschel Langdon