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Chautauqua Week in Lyndonville: A Description Written in 1915

By DOROTHY C. WALTER

DOROTHY WALTER was 26 when the first Chautauqua came to Lyndonville in 1915. In this detailed letter to her friend, Miss Margaret Church, she provides a valuable first-hand account of how Chautauqua Week was a major cultural event in a Vermont town before radio, television, and other forms of entertainment caused the traveling Chautauqua shows to lose their popularity.

Dorothy’s father, Charles Walter, was editor and publisher of the *St. Johnsbury Republican* and thus in a position to obtain free press tickets for the Chautauqua meetings. In this letter she also mentions her brother Ed and her sisters Bess and Alice (identified as “A.A.”). This letter is published here through the kindness of Mrs. Elizabeth (“Bess”) Nelson of Burke, Vermont, and with the assistance of Mrs. Harriet Fisher of Lyndonville, the Secretary of the Vermont Historical Society.

Lyndon, Vt.

Aug. 24, 1915.

My dear Margaret,

Your letter is about three weeks old now. Is that so very bad for me? I wish you could have been here to go to Chautauqua with us and see

how breathless the Walter family was for seven days. Even Cousin Mary, whom we can't get quite used to as a perfectly well and husky person, was dismayed at the way she had been going to it and absolutely refused to go the last day. All of us went a lot except Mama. She said that she wanted to see the Shakespere play and to go to nothing else since most of the events were things to listen to. Bess and I were the record makers,—every afternoon and evening for six days and once Sunday morning. Papa had four press tickets, another each for Ed and A.A., and an occasional extra one when needed. As he couldn't be there much afternoons, we took someone who wouldn't be likely to get interested otherwise. Don't you think that was a good use to put advertising tickets to? Several of those whom we took, several of them folks whom you wouldn't expect to be interested in the best music and lectures, have said most emphatically that next year they will have season tickets of their own and go to everything. That pleases me, for it means that the Chautauqua idea is working out as it is advertised to do and as it ought to do to be truly democratic. It ought to please those artists to know that one's hired man and one's French neighbors recognize a good thing when they hear it.

The program may not be very interesting to you but I am going to tell you all about it just the same. You see, I am just like all the rest of the people in Lyndonville, Orleans, Hardwick, and other towns that have been having the meetings; I can't talk of anything else!

The first day there were brief addresses of welcome by citizens and people of the troupe. Then the Weatherwax Brothers, a male quartet, gave a fine program of horn selections, songs, readings, etc. The plan of the meetings was to have a little music and a little talking at each meeting. The artists who appeared each afternoon also gave what was called the prelude in the evening with an entire change of program. The first evening Dr. Edward Amherst Ott of Chicago lectured on community building, the central idea of the Chautauqua. Among his ideas he spoke of what a benefit it would be to a town to have a department of the local board of trade to confer with young men and women ready to go into business and to tell them whether the town needed another lawyer or dentist or doctor or merchant and to point out the way to jobs that did need doing. That struck me as being a good idea. There are lots of things that need doing about a town, but people don't know about them till afterward. The next day the preludes were given by the Aida quartet, a group of young ladies. They had an opera singer, C. Pol Plancon, with them. He sang a song which Bess says is called "Lo, the factotum" from the opera, "The Barber of Seville." The song was not

really suited to the concert stage, but the man didn't seem to be very much pleased when the little folks on the front seats roared and laughed. The evening's speech was a striking one, a lecture on the Mormon kingdom of today by a man who ought to know, for he was born a Mormon and his father was one of their twelve apostles. The speaker, he was a fine looking man, earnest, enthusiastic, a skillful user of English, a man with a story to tell. He held his large audience breathless through several hours. The afternoon speaker was Prof. Marshman of the University of Pennsylvania. He had a subject from ethics. Really it was on selfishness. The third day's prelude was cornet and xylophone music by Robert and Helen Barnard with readings by Miss Barnard. The speaking was a very fine and interesting debate on the worth of woman suffrage by Miss Helen Todd of California and Miss Lucy Price of Ohio. After the prelude in the evening, the Ben Greet players gave "Much Ado About Nothing" to a large and enthusiastic crowd. They do not make any attempt at scenery but play the plays as Shakespeare meant them to be played, with no breaks at all. They have money to put into costumes on account of not lavishing it on scenery. The best of it is that they are all good. They don't try to have stars as so many companies do. Quite a good many people that you would not pick out as ones who would enjoy such an evening really did like it very much and would have been glad to see it right over again. Quintano's Italian Band gave two concerts on Saturday and played five or six times in the union service at the tent on Sunday. The band had with it a fine man, Mr. Harry Barnhart, a community chorus leader. He got everybody to singing on old songs and people seemed to like that very much. He left with us the idea of having a community chorus and having fine music without great expense to the town. Monday afternoon came dear little Ben Lindsay "The kids jedge" of Denver. He is not much of a speaker, but he is a most lovable man and one who has a big message for people interested in community building for he tells them how to get along with their big boys. Mary and I liked him best of them all. The music was two banjos and a piano. In the evening Katherine Ridgeway, a reader, gave a very fine entertainment. She is the best reader I ever heard, I think. I heard her at Orleans last winter and liked her very much. She can't endure anyone else on her program who shines more than she does and so she has with her always a pianist who is good on technique but not much on charm and personality. Miss Ridgeway is a lover of birds and so reads about them well. She is also averse to war and so reads pieces to stir you up against war. We liked her very much. The last day Mr. J. S. Knox, a president of a business college, gave a

fine talk on community building from the business point of view. He also gave me some fine ideas on teaching English, especially oral composition. Don't you think that it would be fun and good practice to have a class pretend that they were each an agent for some commodity and try to sell that to a single member of the class in the presence of the rest? That is one idea that was an offshoot in my own mind from one of the remarks he made in his lecture. The last evening was given up to fun. The people who gave the prelude in the afternoon, The Christine Giles-Bingham company, soprano soloist, a flute player and a pianist, were the first part of the program. Mrs. Giles-Bingham did a pretty hard stunt, played her own obbligate to her solo. She did it beautifully. The rest of the evening was taken up by Mr. Bingham, such a funny man that the audience roared just to look at him. He began by saying that the other people we had heard on our program the past week had all had a message but that he was entirely message'less! Of course that started us off feeling pretty well. In spite of that, tho, he did have a very fine little message. He said just before his last number that he had for his aim and ideal the giving of a whole evening of jolly fun without one indecent thing in it, that there were people who didn't think that there could be any fun without indecency, that he wanted to commend his kind of fun to us all and especially to the young folks. Then he went on with an awfully funny thing, the story of two old darkies who went to a Sunday School picnic. And so ended our week of merry making. It was a real treat and very cheap at that, since the season tickets were two dollars if bought before the intertainments began. At Orleans there was \$350 left towards next year when the end of their week came. Pretty good!

(This letter concludes with some personal observations on other matters.)

From a report about the annual meeting of the incorporated village of Morrisville (as printed in the *Morrisville Messenger*, April 15, 1931):

One of the "high spots" was the passing over of the article to instruct the trustees to restrict or regulate the keeping of roosters within the village limits. While the article was sponsored by substantial citizens, it failed to pass, apparently from a lack of faith on the part of the voters in the ability of the trustees to regulate the crowing of said roosters.

—submitted by Robert L. Hagerman of Morrisville.