WOMEN STRETCHING THE LIMITS BY STRETCHING THEIR MINDS:

100 YEARS OF THE CHAUTAUQUA STUDY CLUB

by Betty Trapp Chapman

Ima Hogg, left, with two friends on cottage porch at Chautauqua Lake.
Photo courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives.

Miss Hogg and Friends
Her cottage Lake Chautauqua New York

At the turn of the twentieth century, Houston was still a little-known southern city of less than 50,000 residents. While progress was being made in the world of commerce and trade, there were few opportunities to explore cultural offerings. Houston had no museums, no symphony orchestra, and no institutions of higher education. Women, especially, were limited in receiving any education beyond a high school diploma, and even that was not attainable for many females. It was inevitable that women with inquisitive minds would seek ways to become better educated. That happened on an October morning in 1909 when a group of women gathered in a room at Houston's First Presbyterian Church to launch a new venture. What they had in mind was an organization in which they could pursue a common interest. They were not focused on gardening or bridge or sewing; nor were they considering the idea of adopting a community service project. These women wanted to learn. Because they were curious about many subjects, they decided to form a club whose members would stretch their minds and expand their knowledge. Thus the Chautauqua Study Club was born.[1]

The local club was an outgrowth of the Chautauqua Movement that was spreading across the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. The first Chautauqua was organized in 1874 by Methodist minister John Heyl Vincent and businessman Lewis Miller at a campsite on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in the state of New York. Two years earlier, Vincent, editor of the *Sunday School Journal*, had begun to train Sunday school teachers in an outdoor summer school format that included study, bonfires, meals, and lodging. Originally named the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly, the gatherings grew in popularity and broadened almost immediately beyond classes in religious and Biblical study to include a whole range of literary, historical, sociological, and scientific subjects. American presidents—Grant, Garfield, Hayes, McKinley, (Theodore) Roosevelt, and Taft—spoke to huge crowds from

Club members frequented Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

the pavilion on the lake. College presidents, popular authors, Shakespearean actors, leaders of reform, and legendary humorists educated and entertained vast audiences at this new type of American "university."[2]

Vincent, born in Huntsville, Alabama, also believed that Chautauqua was a way to "mitigate sectional antipathies" in the post-Civil War years. Yet the venture was not confined to southern locales. The idea spread to the Midwest where independent Chautauquas were organized, first in Ohio followed by similar ones in Michigan and Iowa. They were soon found in thirty-one states. These Chautauquas, usually built in an attractive semi-rural location near an established town with good rail service, blended vacation with study and entertainment.[3]

In 1878 the educational experiment took on a new dimension—distance learning. To reach people across the country who could not afford the time or money to attend college, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) was established. Using a four-year correspondence course, students were encouraged to form reading groups in their local communities and to share the cost of materials as they learned together. At the end of four years of study, students were invited to travel to Chautauqua to receive their certificates in a ceremony. Among those who engaged in the CLSC program were women, teachers, and those who lived in remote rural areas. The CLSC embodied the principal educational beliefs that Vincent cherished throughout his life. He insisted that education never ended until the grave. For those who did not have the opportunity to undertake college or graduate training—an opportunity he had missed himself—he was convinced that a program of guided reading could at least initiate them into a higher level of learning. With this foundation they could advance in a field of their choosing, but more importantly they could provide a home environment for their children where knowledge and educational ambition were respected. In Vincent's own words, "The CLSC aims to promote habits of reading and study in nature, art, science, and in secular and sacred literature . . . to develop the habit of close, connected persistent thinking."[4] His creation was rooted in a thirst for knowledge.

As these learning forums spread across the country, many new Chautauqua venues were created, giving rise to the Chautauqua Movement. As special agencies became successful at providing speakers and entertainers for these platforms, they began to put together shows that traveled to small towns around the United States. These venues became known as the "circuit" or "tent" Chautauquas since the programs were frequently presented in tents pitched on a field near town. They were sometimes referred to as "culture under canvas." At the height of its popularity, nearly 8,500 towns were on the "tent Chautauqua" circuit in the United States and Canada. Noted women's rights advocates such as Susan B. Anthony, Anna Howard Shaw,

and Carrie Chapman Catt made the rounds, but the eloquent William Jennings Bryan was undoubtedly the most visible and active participant with his spellbinding orations on such subjects as suffrage and prohibition. Issues presented by other eminent speakers included the eight-hour work day, slum clearance, free textbooks, national parks, juvenile courts, pure food and drug laws, and direct election of United States senators. By 1880 the Chautauqua platform had established itself as a national forum for open discussion of public issues, international relations, literature, and science. Music, another important component of Chautauqua, was presented through symphonic concerts, marching bands, Gilbert and Sullivan operas, and Cossack choirs.[5] Thousands flocked to the tents seeking the education, entertainment, culture, and inspiration that had been so widely advertised.

Although there is no record of Houston appearing on the Chautauqua circuit, the institution's programs were known to Houstonians. There is even evidence that some local residents ventured to Chautauqua Lake for the summer activities. The Hogg family had a cottage in the resort setting. It was here that Ima Hogg was introduced to the educational venues.[6] In 1909 upon her return to Houston after a visit to the New York camp grounds, she brought together acquaintances for the purpose of organizing a local club based on Chautauqua principles.

The first order of business for the fledgling Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle was writing a constitution. The original document stated that the club's objective "shall be the promotion of study, entertainment, and good fellowship." Within four months members revised it to declare that their intent was "the diligent study of the Chautauqua course and to promote intellectual and social entertainment resulting in good fellowship." The by-laws limited membership to thirty women who would meet weekly. Annual dues were three dollars. If a member missed three consecutive meetings without notification, she was removed from the roll. Mrs. Turner Williamson was chosen as president, while Miss Ima Hogg stepped into the role of recording secretary. The other charter members were Misses Ella Cage, Mary Hays, June Percival, Agnes Robinson, and Mesdames Eugene Blake, Lynch Davidson, Thornwall Fay, James P. Gibbs, Herbert Godwin, E. M. Haralson, Vard Hulen, J. C. Hutcheson Jr., William States Jacobs, William Hinds Kirkland, H. H. Lummis, Joseph Mullen, Mabel Franklin Smith, and Nell Lee Van Valkenburgh.[7]

The group considered having a paid leader for its discussions, but ultimately decided that members themselves would direct the studies. They also voted to establish the office of Critic to be the final authority for pronunciation and definitions, although in reality the membership did not relish being corrected. *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* was adopted as the club's final authority in this matter.[8] Undoubtedly, these new Chautauquan devotees were intent on broadening their horizons. Little did they realize that their quest for learning would continue into the next century.

The eager CLSC embarked on its initial learning adventure by ordering the prescribed materials. Each year the national Chautauqua organization published a list of books, which members anywhere in the country could order and study. The books came with an outline to follow in presenting the information. Supplementary reading was included, as were discussion questions. The materials were intended to provide a complete study of the selected books. The book list in 1909-10 included *The Greek View of Life and the Homeric Stories: Iliad and Odyssey* by G. Lowes Dickinson, *Social Life at Rome in the Age of Cicero* by William Warde Fowler, and *The Friendly Stars* by Martha Evans Martin.[9]

Since few families had automobiles in 1909, transportation to meetings was not easily available. For this reason the women chose to hold their meetings downtown, which they could reach by riding on one of the city's streetcars. They finally chose to use a room designated for use by women's club meetings in the Carnegie Library that had opened in 1904 at the corner of McKinney Avenue and Travis Street. This arrangement continued for ten years until Mrs. Harris (Louise) Masterson offered her spacious home on Burlington Street in the Westmoreland addition as a permanent meeting place.[10] And, indeed, its doors were open to the Chautauqua Circle for the next twenty-five years.

Chautauqua members repeatedly stated that their organization existed only for the purpose of study. Accordingly, they never adopted a charity or civic cause to champion. That is not to say, however, that individual members were not active in the community in many different ways. The woman suffrage movement was building momentum during the club's early years. Louise Masterson, a staunch suffragist, frequently told of marching down New York City's Fifth Avenue in a suffrage parade. Masterson has been described in club memoirs as having "a brilliant mind and decided views on everything—war, politics, religion, clothes, even smoking for women." These memoirs added that she could have a sharp tongue, as reflected in her comment regarding the new hat of a fellow member: "I see you did not eat your grapefruit at breakfast but saved it to wear to Chautauqua." It appears that the wearer of the Lily Dache hat was not offended, saying that she accepted the remark as "just her way."[11]

Louise Masterson, an avid civic worker in Houston for many years.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

Masterson, longtime president of Houston's YWCA and a founder of the local League of Women Voters, was among the many Chautauquans who contributed their time and talents to the broader community. Ima Hogg, a trained pianist, acted as the catalyst in the formation of the Houston Symphony Orchestra in 1913. She was joined on the symphony's first Board of Directors by Mrs. Mullen, Mrs. Gentry Waldo, and Mrs. J. Lewis Thompson. The club's second president, Mrs. William H. (Mary Porter) Kirkland, was a leader in the Woman's Choral Club, which avidly promoted musical venues by bringing in visiting artists and sponsoring locally produced

performances. Mrs. Henry B. (Florence) Fall served as president of the Houston Art League during the eight years money was being raised to build The Museum of Fine Arts. Mrs. Henry (Elizabeth) MacGregor, Mrs. Godwin, and Mrs. Waldo were charter members of the Public School Art League, the museum's forerunner. One of the city's legendary civic workers was Mrs. Walter B. (Estelle) Sharp, a founder of United Charities in Houston, which later became the United Way. Mrs. Edgar Odell (Mary) Lovett was instrumental in organizing the city's Social Service Bureau, which combined the efforts of different agencies offering social services. As a founder of the Houston Settlement Association (HSA), Mrs. James A. (Alice) Baker worked tirelessly to improve the quality of life for residents of Houston's East End. Joining Mrs. Baker as HSA board members were Mesdames Fay, Williamson, Sharp, Mullen, and Thompson.[12] Yet, when these women gathered every week for their Chautauqua studies, all other aspects of life were put aside.

Florence Fall, the club's third president and strong advocate for progressive reforms in Texas.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

Over the next twenty-five years the club followed the CLSC studies. They explored subjects as varied as "A Study of the U. S. Constitution," "The New Worlds of Islam," and "Mark Twain's America." When they felt additional resources were required they turned to such publications as *The Saturday Review of Literature, Atlantic Monthly,* or *Harper's*. Records also indicate that a stimulating radio program called *Information Please* was utilized in their discussions. All parts of the world were studied including Greece, Great Britain, Italy, China, Soviet Russia, Africa, and Central America. In looking at these different areas, club members focused on history, government, art, and literature. Although Chautauquans expressed relief that their studies were more literary than scientific, they did not shy away from science. They tackled chemistry on several occasions, but a study in 1925—"Keeping Up with Science for Unscientific Readers"—probably reflected their true preference in topics. Shortly after women gained the right to vote, a study was conducted on "Women Professional Workers"—an innovative concept for the "New Woman" in America. Yet as they discussed new roles for women, they also looked back at the lives of two queens, Cleopatra of Egypt and Victoria of England. Whatever the subject, the studies were thorough and intense.[13] After all, their object was to stretch their minds and in doing so to increase their knowledge.

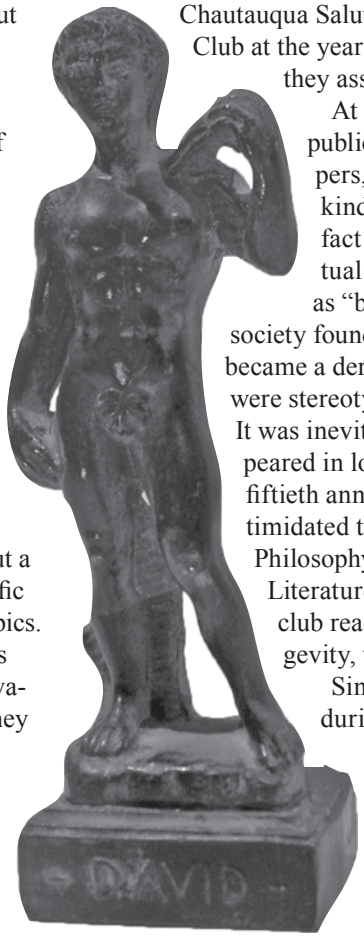
While on a trip abroad, Louise Masterson purchased a small bronze replica of Michaelangelos's *David*, which would assume a permanent place at every Chautauqua meeting. As Mrs. Masterson explained to the club, "*David* represents a complete victory. Thus everyone in Chautauqua should make a complete effort and strive for a complete victory when presenting their paper." As a reminder of each woman's obligation to educate and be educated, *David* has occupied a place of honor at all Chautauqua meetings since that time.[14]

Although club members enjoyed fellowship at their meetings, planned social activities were only incidental to the study courses. There was an exception to this in the early years. The first president, Mrs. Williamson, wanted to reward the members for their hours of serious study. She arranged a Play Day at the end of the year during which the club traveled on the Williamsons' boat down the bayou for a picnic at a member's home. Then they continued by boat to San Jacinto Battleground where they toured the grounds after which they enjoyed tea. Their return trip back up the bayou was by moonlight. This began the tradition of Picnic Day held each year in the spring at Mrs. Bonner's Bayshore home, Mrs. Red's house at Red Bluff, or Mrs. Howard's farm near Baytown. Picnic Day was observed until the 1960s, when it faded away.[15]

One tradition that has not faltered is the Chautauqua Salute. In 1909 it was not considered lady-like to applaud a well-done presentation. Instead the members would wave their white handkerchiefs to show their appreciation. This practice had been used at Chautauqua Lake assemblies when speakers delivered excellent speeches. Instead of receiving thunderous applause, the speaker would be greeted by a sea of waving kerchiefs that resembled a snowstorm. Today—one hundred years later—the Chautauqua Salute is still used by the Chautauqua Study Club at the year's last meeting to "wave in" new officers as they assume their duties.[16]

At a time when women's clubs often received publicity in the society section of local newspapers, Chautauquans shunned publicity of any kind. This attitude may have been due to the fact that women who organized for intellectual purposes were often jestingly referred to as "bluestockings"—this alludes to a literary society founded in the late eighteenth century, but it became a derogatory term for educated women who were stereotyped as wearing woolen worsted stockings. It was inevitable, however, that the club sometimes appeared in local newspapers. Not long before the club's fiftieth anniversary, this appeared: "No subject intimidated the ladies of the Chautauqua Study Club—Philosophy, Physiology, American History, German Literature—they conquered them all!"[17] When the club reached significant anniversaries in their longevity, they were more receptive to publicity.

Since the records of the club are abbreviated during its early years, there are no detailed



Michaelangelo's David*, present at every meeting of the Houston Chautauqua Study Club for over seventy-five years, inspires the women to make a "complete effort" as they strive for knowledge.*
Photo courtesy of Joan Eidman.

Chautauqua Study Club members in October 2009 at 100th anniversary celebration. Photo by Miro Dvorscak.

accounts of their meetings. We might assume, however, that a meeting of the Houston Chautauqua Circle was similar to a fictionalized meeting written by novelist Zona Gale for *Harper's* magazine in August 1928. In Gale's sketch, the CLSC has gathered during the evening at a member's home. The circle is operating on its own resources—no local doctor to give guidance on chemical experiments, no apparent access to a microscope or telescope, and no William Jennings Bryan to lend prestige to the occasion. The group is devoting itself to "The Preparatory Latin Course in English." Although the study materials are lofty in nature and incomprehensible at times to the women in attendance, Gale succeeds in telling her readers that there is a glimmer of light within the circle. These students understand that "the knowledge that knowledge exists can be the beginning of knowledge, and can come as a revelation." The article proves that the Houston Chautauquans were not alone in their quest for knowledge. They were part of a vast network. By 1940 the CLSC had reached a membership of three quarters of a million. Members and circles spanned not only the United States, but also the continents and sub-continents from Labrador to Argentina, from Puerto Rico to Ceylon, from Russia to Korea.[18] The Chautauqua Movement was a truly world-wide one.

In the late 1930s, club members began to supplement the Chautauqua curriculum with other materials. In 1939 studies of Ernest Trattner's *Architect of Ideas* and William Lyon Phelp's *Autobiography of Letters* were accompanied by reading *Maude* by Alfred Lord Tennyson and *Return of the Native* by Thomas Hardy. In addition to prescribed discussion questions, club members frequently related the subject to their own surroundings, as in exploring the teaching curriculum in their local schools. The third study in 1939 was *The Good Neighbors*, a study of Latin America by Delia Goetz and Varian Fry. A question on which the club deliberated was: "Should the United States maintain a Navy large enough to defend the Western Hemisphere?"[19] There is no record of the club's conclusion, but this subject became especially relevant in our nation in just two years.

With the advent of World War II in the midst of a rapidly changing world, the Houston club finally severed ties with the national Chautauqua organization, and members began to develop their own programs, frequently using courses provided by universities. In 1944 the club adopted a format in which a committee selected an overall theme for a year, or a portion of that year. Members then presented papers on an assigned subject relating to the theme. They chose India as the subject for that first year. In reality, the group's departure from the Chautauqua format reflected what was happening in the rest of the county. By the 1940s the Chautauqua movement had become only a shadow of itself. The institution had reached its peak in 1924, the movement's Golden Jubilee year. At that time, twelve thousand towns participated in the country-wide circuit, reaching thirty-five million people.[20] But life was changing in small town America. More people had automobiles, enabling them to travel to attractions. Improved communication made radios and movies readily available. Newspapers and magazines were proliferating at a rapid pace. In short, Americans no longer depended on the Chautauqua circuit to entertain and inform them. Most of the tents folded, never to bring the excitement of Chautauqua to the countryside of America again. The Chautauqua Institution, although diminished, continued to offer programming just as it does today.[21]

And what of the Chautauqua Study Club a century after its organization? Its procedures have changed little over those years. The club continues to meet regularly for the presentation of papers on subjects assigned by the planning committee for that year. Little business is ever discussed. The meeting is devoted entirely to the club's purpose—study. Fellowship is enjoyed over lunch following a discussion of the papers. Membership is limited to twenty-eight women to correlate with the twenty-eight papers presented each year. When there is a vacancy on the roll, interested individuals apply for membership.

Although much has changed in the lives of women since 1909, one thing is still constant for those who belong to Chautauqua today: they are eager to stretch their minds and learn new things. They enjoy researching subjects they may know little about and then sharing their findings with fellow students. As Rev. Vincent wrote all those years ago, "It is Chautauqua's genius to allow that every man has the right to be all that he can be."[22] The Chautauqua Study Club member might alter that statement to declare that "every woman has the right to learn all that she can." After all, that was the club's goal one hundred years ago and so it remains today.

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