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# **An Ethnographic Perspective of the Chautauqua Institution**

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***Abstract:*** *This paper discusses a year long study of the Chautauqua Institution. I used a variety of learning methods in order to gain a better understanding of this uniquely American phenomenon. I conducted telephone interviews with staff, frequently visited the official website and reviewed literature. A week long stay at the Chautauqua Institution during the summer season, afforded me the opportunity to experience the educational offerings and interview other participants and staff. Findings from this cultural immersion experience are discussed in this paper. Implications for future study of the Chautauqua Institution are suggested. Additionally, suggestions for other adult learners desiring to embark on a path of independent learning using an ethnographic approach is included.*

## **Introduction**

I first became aware of the existence of the Chautauqua Institution almost four years ago in an adult education class. From a list of people who had influenced adult education I randomly selected the name of John Heyl Vincent. This action alone led me on a fascinating journey over the course of a year. From the time I first attempted to discover who Vincent was, I was immediately directed to the Chautauqua Institution. As I read their web site I was amazed at what I was learning about a place that I never knew existed. As I talked to people about Chautauqua, no one outside of my adult education faculty had heard of it either. My mother and aunt, both in their 70's and 80's respectively, and both raised in the deep South, had heard of it, although they could provide no real details about its purpose. In spite of this, I only heard positive comments from both of them about the place.

After an internet search and reading books on this subject, I did a presentation on Vincent in my adult education doctoral class and recognized how very significant his contribution to the field of adult education had been. This man and his friend and co-founder of Chautauqua, Lewis Miller were truly visionaries in their desire to provide a place of continuing education long before that term was popularized (Rieser, 2003). A number of sources discuss the importance of the Chautauqua Institution as a force impacting adult learning (Howell, 2006; Scott, 2005; Howell, 2006-2007; & Rieser, 2003). The more I learned about Chautauqua, the more intrigued I became.

For another part of this same adult education course, I had to interview a person who directed a program for adult learners and we were given a wide range of places from which to select someone for this interview. I seriously contemplated going to Chautauqua during the fall semester but frankly, I simply did not have the time or economic resources due to a full-time job and full-time graduate courses. My adult education faculty member knew how excited and enthusiastic I was about Chautauqua and offered to allow me to conduct a telephone interview for this course requirement. I was fortunate to contact a programming staff member who was extremely helpful and patient. We made a telephone appointment and when the time came for the appointment, I was afforded the opportunity to ask many questions about Chautauqua and particularly in regard to how programming was done. At that time, my naivety about this place

gave me the impression that all programming was arranged by a single office. I have since learned differently. The complexity of the organization makes it necessary for multiple people to assume leadership positions in program decisions.

The fall semester concluded and I found that the Chautauqua Institution had really been a source of self-directed study for me. I ordered a Chautauqua cookbook and made recipes from the late 1800's and the early 1900's. I perked up whenever I did reading in any course that mentioned the Chautauqua Institution. I was excited to learn that William James and John Dewey, both prominent in the field of education had attended the Chautauqua Institution and I wondered what the experience had been like for them. The long list of notable people who had attended Chautauqua could not fail to impress me as among them were Ulysses S. Grant, Booker T. Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, William Cullen Bryant, William Jennings Bryan, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bill Clinton and Al Gore (Rieser, 2003).

I made frequent trips to the official web site and wondered so much about the experience that people had when they attended that I decided I must go and see this place. Fortunately, I had the support of my faculty to design an independent study course for myself which would mean that I would attend Chautauqua for 1 week during the summer. Now I had even more reasons to continue to visit the web site as I searched for places to stay and studied how the programs were offered so I could buy the tickets I needed. I secured my lodging, gate and parking passes and waited for my week to attend to arrive.

### **Research Focus and Purpose**

Throughout this paper, it is my goal to help the reader become aware of the experience of the Chautauqua Institution as seen through the experience of the author as a participant, observer, and researcher. The original purpose of this research was to examine the experience of attending the Chautauqua Institution by adult participants. The original research questions were:

- 1) What is the Chautauqua Institution?
- 2) What does it mean to attend this place?

During the week I attended, I interviewed participants and several staff members. I attended a variety of programs and observed participants at these programs. Residents of the geographical region were also asked about Chautauqua during informal conversations. The Chautauqua Institution is a subject that can be studied from afar as I did during the eleven months preceding my visit. However, reading about this place cannot substitute for actually experiencing it for oneself. During the week I attended, I immersed myself in the culture of Chautauqua and relished the experience as I watched others and participated in the programs. From these activities, the experience of attending the Chautauqua Institution can be described and analyzed as information pertinent to adult education.

### **Literature Review**

There is very little scholarly material in the current literature about the Chautauqua Institution. Scott (2005) discussed liberal education as visualized through Chautauqua. In this article he presented an historical overview of liberal education as a movement in the United States. Chautauqua played a role in this movement albeit heavily influenced by the theological backgrounds of the founders, Vincent and Miller (Scott, 2005). The article concluded with citing the contributions the Chautauqua Institution made to adult and university education

Howell (2006) presented information about Chautauqua intended as an overview to acquaint the reader with this institution. The audience for this article was clearly one that had little or no background about Chautauqua. This article attempted to inform the reader about the early years at Chautauqua and to make some references to how these early years have impacted adult education today.

Howell (2006-2007) appeared to have taken his earlier 2006 work and developed it into a more inclusive historical overview of the Chautauqua Institution. Similarities between adult education challenges in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and today were discussed.

Morrison (1974) developed a comprehensive book on the Chautauqua Institution which was published the year the institution celebrated its centennial. It provided detailed information as only a book can do about the institution's origins, the impact of the world wars, and other societal forces intersecting with Chautauqua. Crocker and Currie (2001) wrote a book that showcased Chautauqua through mostly old photographs that were part of the archives. In some instances, personal family photos were used. This resource provided the reader with pictures and photos that brought the institution to life in a way undoable in a text only format. Rieser's (2003) book provided the most in depth analysis of the interaction of Chautauqua on the world and the world on Chautauqua. This book was a comprehensive discussion of such topics as the early camp meetings that paved the way for the Chautauqua Institution, the forums that contributed to the delivery of Chautauqua speeches such as the lyceums that originated in Europe and the economic prosperity and defeat that Chautauqua experienced over the years. Additionally, this book discussed at length the relationship of Chautauqua and the women's movement. To his credit, Rieser never reduced Chautauqua to one element of the world but helped the reader to see the world with Chautauqua in it.

In my review of the literature, I found no published scholarly research articles on the Chautauqua Institution. As this was the case, I became more and more convinced that that an absolute gap existed in the body of knowledge that has been accumulated about the Chautauqua Institution. Due to the nature of the institution as a cultural and educational phenomenon in our society, it seems fitting that attempts be made to study Chautauqua using modern research methods. Perhaps Rieser's (2003) book stands alone in any real attempt to apply research methodology as his book actually reflects a ten year historical study of the institution. Considering the absence of research studies that have been done about Chautauqua, an ethnographic approach that involved the researcher's immersion in the culture was appropriate and long overdue.

## **Research Context, Methodology, and Methods**

### *Context*

The Chautauqua Institution was founded in 1974 and has been operating as a place of retreat and learning continuously ever since (Howell, 2006-2007; Howell, 2006; Scott, 2005; Crocker & Currie 2001; Morrison, 1974). It is situated in the western corner of the state of New York on the Chautauqua Lake and has thousands of visitors each year. The majority of the people who attend Chautauqua are from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York although there are always international visitors every year. During the nine week season, every age group is in attendance. During the week that I attended, I saw infants that were only a few months old and adults appearing to be well into their nineties. Every age group in between was also in

attendance. It appeared that the majority of adults were late middle age to younger old age (approximately 60's-70's).

### *Method*

During the week I attended the Chautauqua Institution, I was a paying participant and stayed on the grounds in one of several inns as a paying guest. Prior to attending, I formulated a study contract with my adult education doctoral faculty advisor. We agreed that I would complete a book report on a book of my choosing about Chautauqua, conduct informal interviews with participants and staff, keep a daily journal of my experiences and complete a formal paper, the design of my choosing, at the completion of all these activities. Due to the nature of the experience, it became increasingly apparent that this body of work fit the criteria for an ethnographic report according to Creswell, (2003). The Chautauqua Institution and its participants are a cultural group in a specified setting. As the researcher, I was able to enter this cultural group as a participant and observe firsthand the programs as they were offered, observe the other participants, reflect on my experiences, and then interview participants for their reactions to the programs. I formulated study questions prior to attending Chautauqua.

As I participated in programs I became most interested in what it was that I would take away from this experience and how I would be different as a result of having attended Chautauqua. As I talked to participants and staff, I also found myself returning to this same question, "How does attending Chautauqua affect your life during the year when you are not physically present at Chautauqua?" True to an ethnographic approach, I developed a research process during the week I attended, that allowed me to experience an evolution in my questioning process. My questions to participants and staff became more sophisticated as the week progressed. My personal reflections took on the same qualities.

Using this ethnographic approach, I collected data from a variety of sources. I interviewed participants with their verbal permission and talked to as many people as I could at programs I attended. I always told people who I was and what I was doing. My standard reply was, "I am a student working on a doctoral degree in adult education. I am here to study Chautauqua as a place where adults come to learn." No one refused to talk to me and all welcomed the opportunity to talk about their affiliation with Chautauqua.

I kept a journal where I recorded my experiences each day and reflected on them. This personal recording addressed programs, the physical attributes of the location (architecture, natural beauty, and sounds), descriptions of people I met and how I felt as a result of these experiences. I made appointments with staff and asked them questions about programs.

I read a book about Chautauqua that I purchased in the bookstore on the grounds, *The Chautauqua Moment* by Andrew Rieser (2003). As mentioned earlier, this book is the result of a ten year study by the author and reveals many of the forces that interacted to impact the Chautauqua Institution and the many imitators it spawned. Clearly his book was a testimony to the complexity of the Chautauqua Institution and the far reaching impact it has had on American culture. I appreciated that the bookstore offered sources on Chautauqua that gave critical thought-provoking analyses of the Chautauqua Institution. The bookstore was not simply an outlet for positive propaganda about Chautauqua.

## Data Analysis

### *Participants*

From the participant interviews I learned that those who attend Chautauqua do so for a variety of reasons. I did not interview anyone who was attending for the first time although I did meet several other first-timers who seemed to be as enthusiastic about the place as I was. It appears that once someone attends, the desire to return is ignited, and I can certainly relate to this idea. Participants seem to be an already highly educated and well informed sub-group of the American culture. This was evident in comments made about music theory as symphony performances were discussed, comments about the financial market, and as participants revealed to me their educational backgrounds (a high school student who desired to study voice, a nurse with administrative experience, a retired vocational teacher, several retired university faculty, a retired businessman, and a longtime participant turned staff member). Staying at one of the smaller inns on the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution gave me a rich pool of conversationalists who seemed eager for the most part to share their impressions of the local world (Chautauqua) and the world at large (America and beyond).

Participants attend partly out of an acquired habit that has become a way of life. Some cannot imagine a summer not attending Chautauqua. They also attend to become better informed and to retreat from the world. Attention to the quieter, gentler side of life and time to reflect and think were also cited as reasons for attending. The actual theme of the week played a role in some participants choosing certain weeks. For others, the theme of the week was not the point of focus; the opportunity to get away from their regular life was best suited by attending this particular week. So in other words, some participants would come no matter what the theme of the week was if this week was convenient for their schedule; whereas other participants were very selective based on the theme of the week. These participants want to see the Chautauqua Institution program continue to be able to be offered at affordable rates. Some participants have seen the price change over the years regarding programs and lodging. Retirement incomes necessitate careful scrutiny of costs associated with leisure activities, such as Chautauqua.

An interesting theme seems to have emerged regarding the impact of participation in the cultural and religious events. Participants feel that attending these programs during their time at Chautauqua does affect their desire to attend these types of programs when they are away from Chautauqua. It is almost as if they are “filled up” with spiritual (multiple religious services to choose from) and cultural events (such as symphonies and plays) during their stay at Chautauqua to the extent that the desire for these things in their lives away from Chautauqua is diminished. This was particularly evident in a participant who typically attends the entire 9 week season but also was mentioned by a participant who attends annually for just 1 week. Attending these programs at Chautauqua allows these participants to therefore spend time away from Chautauqua in pursuit of other activities and interests.

Participants who are grandparents seemed eager to have their family share in this experience. For some, I gathered that the sharing of the time together was most important. For others, there was simply a desire to have the grandchildren exposed to what Chautauqua has to offer. One day, while I was walking in Bestor Plaza, a centrally located gathering spot considered to be a highly utilized common area for the entire institution, I overheard this being said, “The best thing about this place is that your grandkids can play out in the open and be safe.” Indeed, Bestor Plaza was observed by me to be the scene of many intergenerational gatherings; at any time of the day, people of all ages come here to be active or be still. Young

children were observed playing the violin regularly in this public place. This type of public practice could influence young musicians to overcome any feelings of shyness and accustom them to playing to an audience.

### *Staff*

From the interviews I had with the staff, I learned that these are people who love what they do. They have all been a part of Chautauqua for many years and one was attending as a child more than 50 years ago before becoming a staff member. I was impressed with the interdepartmental communication that seems evident in the way the staff talked about how themes were decided for each week. Equally impressive is the timeline that they employ and an 18-24 month planning time is necessary for coordination of all events.

Evaluation is formally and informally conducted with participants and program presenters offering input. Participants may also choose from special classes to take, in addition to attending the regular programs included with the purchase of a gate pass. These special classes may be offered over 1 week, 2 weeks, or even up to the entire 9 week season. Some weeks there are as many as 800 children or youth participating in the programs. Since the Chautauqua Institution has now been established for over 125 years, many of the buildings are aging and in need of costly upkeep. Thus physical resource utilization is in a constant state of flux and development campaigns ever necessary to maintain standards set early on at Chautauqua. That consideration is given to the fact our society is aging is evident in Chautauqua's policy to award free gate passes to participants over the age of 90. I started the process of studying Chautauqua as a place where adults go to learn. What I found was a vibrant learning environment that structures programs around the lifespan.

### *Researcher Field Notes*

The physical beauty of the Chautauqua Institution cannot be overlooked as part of this data review. The setting by the lake, the Miller Bell Tower which played beautiful music multiple times during my week there, the sounds of the boats on the lake, including the steamboat whistles, the lush flower gardens and carefully tended lawns, the quaint Victorian architecture along with the narrow streets which insist on pedestrian transportation, and even the more modern homes and other structures all combined to form a sensual place that cannot but help to impart a feeling of other worldliness surrounded by peace and tranquility. If one seeks a getaway from modern urban life, then Chautauqua is certainly a setting in which to accomplish this and yet learn at the same time.

Walking the grounds is really the only way to get around although there are some buses at the end of the evening performances to take weary participants back to some of the further away parts of the grounds. Driving on the grounds is really only allowed at check-in and checkout when you are given a pass to do just this for 45 minutes. I loved the fact that anywhere I needed to go, I could walk and the path was rarely too strenuous. I left the grounds 3 times during my week there for mostly quick trips to grocery stores. There is the availability of some small scale grocery shopping on the grounds but mostly this task needs to be accomplished off site. The trips to grocery stores can also be accomplished by buses which service the Chautauqua Institution. I could have left my car parked in the lot all week had I chosen to do so.

The place where I stayed did not have air conditioning or television. However, I did not miss these. In fact, the ability for me to pair-down to the essentials was probably a point most appealing to me for this week. I was able to get great free internet service in Bestor Plaza, just

sitting outside and watching people of all ages. I was also able to use my computer and get free internet service in the library.

All in all, walking for transportation, having no television, not needing air conditioning in my third floor room, rarely leaving the grounds, and exposure to different sites and sounds served me well in my week there. The complete change in my life was a welcome respite and I imagine it is the same for many others.

I attended symphonies, lectures, a Shakespearean play, a musical, religious services of my choosing (and there are a variety of Protestant denominations as well as Catholic, Jewish and Muslim from which to choose), and dance recitals. The lectures gave me the opportunity to hear nationally recognized authorities in particular fields and to hear talks about the history of Chautauqua. I searched the library for selected topics, browsed the bookstore and made purchases, and received great assistance in retrieval of archives. I read newspapers that contained speeches by William James (1896) and John Dewey (1906). I searched newspapers to see how the 1918 flu epidemic may have impacted Chautauqua. (This was undertaken as a short complimentary study to a historical fiction novel I was reading at the time. Epidemiology is a personal professional interest of mine stemming from my nursing background. The Spanish flu in that region arrived in late fall and early winter of 1918-19 so attendance at the summer season was apparently not adversely affected.)

I took long walks on the grounds. I watched people. I read a variety of books I took with me and started a new one about Chautauqua (the one I purchased in the bookstore). I interviewed a total of seven people and talked informally to whoever I could engage in conversations. I returned to the official web site for the Chautauqua Institution for several more times while I was on the grounds to see if there were places I still needed to check out personally. I investigated places that I might like to stay in the future if I get to return although I might also opt to stay exactly where I stayed this time as it was so conveniently located.

### **Critical Review and Conclusions**

The Chautauqua Institution is a place of incredible beauty and offers participants an opportunity to experience a different type of setting for learning other than a traditional course set within the confines of a training center, college or university. There are programs that are designed to appeal to learning across the lifespan. There is some diversity among the reasons that attract participants. During my week, the participants were overwhelmingly of European descent. There were some other ethnic groups represented but they were very much in the minority. I wondered about this particular ethnic mix and why I saw more of some ethnic groups than others. I also could not help but critique a couple of the physical features of the grounds. As my background is nursing, I am constantly attuned to safety features. I was alarmed when during my week I witnessed 2 different times that an older adult, who did not require the use of an assistive device to walk, almost fell in the Amphitheater because of the steep grade of the walkways in the aisle. Also, the grounds at night are not particularly well lit and participants are encouraged to carry a flashlight for the walk back to their lodging. Fortunately, the major walkways are well maintained and appeared to be mostly level, even walking surfaces.

The opportunity to immerse myself in this culture for a week was the culmination of a year long study of the Chautauqua Institution. This study took place using self-directed approaches, guidance from doctoral faculty members, and an ethnographic research methodology. This opportunity allowed me to fulfill a personal learning goal and in so doing



develop skills to foster the same goal in other adult learners. For learners interested in designing an independent study course the following suggestions are offered: be passionate about what it is you want to study, seek guidance from someone who can offer a set of steps to be followed in the study process, read whatever you can on the subject you wish to study, including web-sites, allow plenty of planning time to execute your ideas and schedule time to reflect on the experience and what has been learned. Plan to ask yourself, “What does this experience mean for me?”

An ethnographic approach worked well for my study of the Chautauqua Institution. A holistic picture of the Chautauqua Institution emerged for me as I talked with staff and participants about their experiences and observed participants. Additionally, I became a participant and reflected on my experiences through journaling.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

As The Chautauqua Institution continues to evolve in its second century, a phenomenological study could be helpful to understand the experience of being at Chautauqua as viewed by newcomers and returning participants. While this type of study could uncover as yet unidentified motivation for attending Chautauqua, and this could be useful marketing information, I rather think that it would enrich the data resources historically for Chautauqua.

Another suggested study would attempt to describe empirically the demographics of the participants, particularly regarding ethnicity. Chautauqua may already have this information in their internal reports. How Chautauqua views its current cultural diversity could be another area for future study. As indicated on the website,

(<http://www.ciweb.org/display/Search?searchQuery=Abrahamic+Initiative&moduleId=2964011>) the Chautauqua Institution has long been a forerunner in the area of bringing diverse groups together as evidenced by its Chautauqua-Soviet Exchange that took place in the mid to late 1980’s and the Abrahamic Initiative that was started in the late 1990’s. The original conception of the Chautauqua Institution by Miller and Vincent established an environment where inquiry was embraced and various groups studied together amidst a changing post civil war country for the purpose of interpreting truths (Scott, 2005; Howell, 2006-2007, Howell, 2006, Crocker & Currie, 2001, Morrison, 1974).

While technology is succeeding in persuading us to learn more in online communities, there is still a place where people of all ages can go to learn in a face-to-face environment that is steeped in history and yet very much attuned to present day issues. In this environment are an unlimited array of opportunities to study how adults are learning and how the learning process is influenced by an aging population. There is a place where multi-generational learning activities abide in peaceful coexistence and it is the Chautauqua Institution. Studying this place and the people who go there gives the adult learner an appreciation for part of the history of adult education in this country. I predict that Chautauqua will flourish as it continues the legacy of learning and the search for truth while embracing a world that is ever changing.

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