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*Exploring Our Heritage
Shaping Our Community*

Home-Grown Chautauqua Festivals

These guidelines were drawn up in 2006 by the program staff of the Missouri Humanities Council, which produced a touring Chautauqua festival for over a decade. The information is based on suggestions from the Big River Chautauqua in Bonne Terre, Missouri, one of the successful examples of a “home-grown” festival.

What is Chautauqua?

The modern-day Chautauqua is a festival of American history, often taking place outdoors under a big-top tent. The tent evokes a historical connection with the old Chautauquas of a century ago. They were a national phenomenon. Teddy Roosevelt called them “the most American thing about America.”



Gathering at dusk for the Pike County Chautauqua

The historical Chautauqua was an educational and entertaining program series – lectures and arts performances – organized by urban promoters and sold to rural communities as a wholesome and uplifting experience. William Jennings Bryan was one of many celebrities who toured on the Chautauqua circuit.

The old Chautauqua virtually disappeared from the American scene during the Great Depression. The modern Chautauqua revival began in the 1980s with many of the same ingredients of the old Chautauqua – the tent, local entertainment, the involvement of the whole community, and a featured “lecture.” The major difference is that the modern Chautauqua does not present contemporary celebrities. You won’t see Colin Powell on the modern Chautauqua stage. Instead, the modern Chautauqua simulates the old Chautauqua by presenting impersonations of historical figures, who pretend to

speak to an invited audience. Instead of Colin Powell, you have an opportunity to hear someone like Robert E. Lee or Ulysses S. Grant (or Phillis Wheatley or Amelia Earhart); and you can ask them lots of questions.

The “Chautauqua style” is a superb example of **experiential, interactive learning** that is usually engaging for adults as well as their children. There is no one way to organize a Chautauqua festival. There are several models. They all have this in common:

- The programs relate to a unifying theme.
- There are at least three historical figures who provide three perspectives on the theme. With fewer than three, you simply can't create the Chautauqua experience.
- The historical figures are presented by people who have done a great deal of research, so they can field virtually every question, and the presentations reflect high-quality acting ability. We call these presenters scholar/actors whether their primary training is related to a teaching career or a stage career.
- The programs are paced so that people can relate what is said in one program to what is said in the others.

Compact Model

The typical festival is compact; it lasts from several days to a week and then it is over. Following this “compact” model, nightly programs usually begin with warm-up entertainment by local musicians. This is followed by a presentation by a historian/actor portraying a historical figure who will speak in costume, in reference to a designated theme that unifies the festival programs. The monologue usually lasts 30 to 45 minutes.

The program provides ample opportunity for audience members to ask questions of each historical figure. This Q&A session is followed by a time for questions and answers with the scholar.

In addition to evening programs, some Chautauqua festivals organize daytime programs by the scholars for organizations in the area. Some of these programs have been organized for children. Scholars may also be available for media interviews and informal social events.

With the compact model, it is generally assumed that the scholar/actors are “in residence” for most of the week. Lodging and transportation need to be arranged by the local sponsors. Someone has to schedule the time of each scholar/actor.

Outdoor programs under a tent can be a very enjoyable community experience. They have a wonderful feel when the weather cooperates. However, these programs have to be scheduled during the summer, when school is out, and it's always necessary to plan for an alternative venue in case of a thunder storm.

Expanded Model

The “compact model” is not the only way to go. Successful Chautauqua festivals can also be organized in other seasons of the year and in venues that aren’t subject to oppressive heat or electrical storms. The tent is not the key to success, though it can be attractive and charming.

Chautauqua can also be organized as a program series with events taking place every two weeks or once a month over a longer span of time. What we think of as “the Chautauqua experience” entails the kind of learning that becomes possible by exposure to multiple perspectives on a unifying theme. We think a Chautauqua requires at least three historical figures presented in a time frame that enables audience members to connect one presentation with another.

Compressed Model

The “compact model” can also be shortened into a “compressed model.” You could present three characters in a single day and have a festival experience. Timing is just one of the variables you can think about.

Chautauqua Themes

Theme is another interesting variable. Selecting from our new [National Chautauqua Directory](#), you could put together a fascinating portrait of “Leadership” with characters as diverse as Queen Elizabeth I of England, Golda Meir, Napoleon, Tecumseh, and Dwight David Eisenhower.

Or take a theme of “American Writers on American Subjects,” and you would have dozens of choices, including Louisa May Alcott, Samuel Clemens, Frederick Douglass, Woodie Guthrie, Zora Neale Hurston, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Or imagine a theme based on “The Capacity to Invent” and combine path-breaking writers with people like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, or Thomas Edison.

You could create themes based on “Pioneering Achievements” and include figures such as James Madison (The U.S. Constitution), Marie Curie, Charles Lindbergh, Sacagawea, and Branch Rickey, the man who broke down the color barrier in professional baseball.

The Directory is the place to start imagining the feast of ideas you can create for the people in your town. At the end of the Directory you will find a list of themes that have been developed in various Chautauqua venues.

BEGIN BY CREATING:

STEERING COMMITTEE

Choose a core group of 4 to 5 people who will attend all meetings and serve as Chairs of the subcommittees.

Recommendation: Include an organizer who pays a lot of attention to detail and keeps to task; a financial officer who will help draw up a budget and keep account of income and expenditures; a marketing/publicity person with contacts in the community for promotion and money; and a dreamer who will make great suggestions and think about possibilities for what the event could be.

TIMELINE

Create a calendar of events and deadlines to ensure plenty of lead time.

SCOPE OF YOUR CHAUTAUQUA

Length of Festival: A weekend? Three nights in a single week? A full week? Or perhaps a series spanning several weeks or months.

Location and Time of Year: Outdoor venue or indoor? When? In some cases, you may want to program Chautauqua during the school year; in other cases, during the summer. Whatever you decide, make sure the location is well-known and easily accessible.

Duties of Chautauqua Performers: Would you like the performer to be “in residence” in your town for several days, presenting daytime programs for local organizations, a children’s activity, and a presentation for adults? Or do you prefer simpler scheduling and a lighter assignment for each scholar, entailing less time in your town?

Theme: With a resource as rich as the Chautauqua Directory, you will be able to imagine a large number of possible themes. Our suggestion is that you develop theme ideas in connection with your need to stimulate community interest and publicity.

Diversity of appeal: If you want to attract families, think about some historical figures who might appeal to children or Chautauqua performers who offer children’s activities. Select characters who reflect racial or ethnic diversity.

Think of a theme and a list of historical figures who would make for an interesting festival, then discuss your idea with some of the scholars you have in mind. Build your festival around a few recognizable historical figures to create a “comfort zone” for the audience. With recognized figures in the festival, you can include less well-known figures with a better chance of success for your festival.

Chautauqua scholars: Contact several scholars to find out their interest and availability. Once a good list is determined, choose the three (or five) characters to suit your theme. The theme may have to be modified to accommodate the available scholars. Commit the details of each person’s engagement in written letter of agreement. Include the period of time the scholars are expected to be in the community, rate of pay and per diem, and their responsibilities: in how many interviews, daytime programs, other events are they expected to present and/or participate?

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

Decide how many sub-committees will be needed and effective to plan and coordinate the Chautauqua events and activities. The following is a menu of committees. Some may be combined or deleted, depending on local community needs and plans. **Guidelines** for these various committees are provided on the MHC Chautauqua web site.

<http://www.mohumanities.org/programs/chautauqua/index.htm#ChautauquaCommittees>

Committees may include:

- Publicity Committee
- Program Committee
- Grounds Committee
- Fundraising Committee
- Entertainment Committee

ONCE THE VENUE HAS BEEN CHOSEN

If Outdoors

Tent: Consider size, rental availability and set-up including liability for accident/injury. Be sure the site for the tent is handicapped accessible, protected from wind, located on firm grass turf with adequate drainage and near public rest rooms. For a 40' x 60' tent the footprint required is 50' x 70' minimum

Alternate rain site: Select a site for the evening programs in case weather conditions prohibit the use of the tent.

Stage: Consider size and composition, rental availability and set-up. Don't forget steps to get on/off stage.

Lighting and sound equipment with Sound technician/Technical Director: Work with a professional to determine the sound, lighting, and electrical needs for the size of venue that has been chosen. Contract with a service or volunteer to provide this service. Note: MHC's electricity requirements for a 40' x 60' tent were 4 separate 20-amp circuits that maintain 115 – 120 volts under load. See Grounds Committee guidelines for more detail.

Whether Outdoors or Indoors

Seating: How many chairs will fit under the tent or in the venue? Chairs can be rented or borrowed from local schools, churches, or other organizations.

Liability insurance: Check to see if a rider may be put on the host organizations insurance or on the host site insurance policy.

Food allowance for the troupe: Provide a Per diem amount based on the cost of meals in the area, minus any meals provided (see Fundraising guidelines). This information needs to be provided to scholars in their letters of agreement.

Lodging for the troupe: Contact local hotel, Bed & Breakfast, or even college dormitory for room availability. Offer publicity in exchange for complimentary rooms or greatly reduced rates.

Transportation for the troupe: Find a volunteer to coordinate travel to and from the program sites and for excursions while scholars are in town (see Program Committee guidelines)

Publicity kits including releases and photographs: Require scholars to submit pictures and information on themselves and their historic figures for use in pre-program publicity. Put together press releases, schedule radio interviews, etc.

Printed Materials

- Programs: Develop and print a program with information about the event, the scholars and the historic characters. Include such things as biographies, timelines, and bibliographies for further research.
- Promotional Banners: Consider creating a large banner to hang on or near the Chautauqua site.
- Daytime Program schedules: Create a one-page handout listing all of the Chautauqua event for easy reference.

During the Festival

Plan for contingencies.

- If anyone needs prompt medical attention at a festival event, how will you meet the need?
- If something affecting public safety occurs (electrical storm, fire), who is responsible for deciding on a change of venue, cancellation of a performance, or for managing an evacuation of a building?
- If a key volunteer is incapacitated, who will fill in?
- If a scholar is incapacitated, who will work out a “Plan B?”

Invite feedback and suggestions from the audiences. Make it easy for people to tell you why they came, how they heard about it, and what they most enjoyed or disliked.

After the Festival

- Thank lavishly. Thank committee members, volunteers, donors, and the scholars.
- Complete all the fiscal details and put the festival records in order.
- Convene a meeting of the Steering Committee shortly after the conclusion of the festival to assess strengths and weaknesses and consider the future.