The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct America's only university-conducted circuit Chautauqua. The University of Wisconsin operated such a Chautauqua from 1915 to 1917 and in so doing demonstrated that bold leadership in adult education which was to become known as "The Wisconsin Idea."  

A Chautauqua conducted by a university is not only interesting but significant. To understand that significance one must look briefly at the phenomenon known as the Chautauqua movement.  

Circuit Chautauqua was a lusty child whose father was the lyceum movement and whose mother was Lake Chautauqua. As with most children this one was a fascinating composite of good and bad, a child who grew up to have tremendous popularity for a brief time and then to die suddenly—while its less spectacular but harder parents lived on.  

Lyceum had grown up in New England in the early 1800's. At first it was a non-commercial community affair in which lectures and talks were given by local members or by visitors from other town lyceums. In 1868, James Redpath organized the first commercial lecture bureau to solve the difficulties of bringing professional lecturer and audience together. The lecture bureau flourished and thus provided two basic ingredients upon which circuit Chautauqua could eventually draw: organization and a pool of talent.  

Mother Chautauqua grew up on the shores of Lake Chautauqua at Fair Point, New York. Rooted deep in the religious revival of the early nineteenth century, she was born of the Methodist camp meeting and the American Sunday School movement. Starting in 1874, Lake Chautauqua became a full-fledged summer school, one of the first in the United States. By 1900 more than two hundred courses were being offered in eight academic and special schools, housed in permanent buildings. She brought to circuit Chautauqua its essentially moral and religious flavor, its earnestness and its bucolic nature.

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1 It is unfortunate that this pioneer experiment is not chronicled even in the University's official records. The Biennial Reports of the University Regents during this period only mention Chautauqua. Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen's The University of Wisconsin: a History, 1845-1925, mentions it only briefly. Frederick M. Rosentree's The Boundaries of the Campus, A History of the University of Wisconsin Extension Division, 1885-1945, does not mention it at all. It has been necessary, therefore, to turn to the contemporary press of the day and this, along with bits and pieces of scattered reports, makes it possible to reconstruct, at least in part, this unique episode.  

There were several off-spring who helped to spread the Chautauqua idea. One of these was the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, usually known as the C.L.S.C., forerunner of the correspondence course and dedicated to home study and consistent and serious planned reading. A half-million earnest readers have kept the idea alive to this day.

Still another child was the permanent Chautauqua Assembly, patterned after Lake Chautauqua, two hundred of which sprang up over the country.

In 1904, the last and most colorful member of the Chautauqua family was born and the one most Americans remember—the circuit or traveling Chautauqua—an idea that was to carry the big brown tents to every corner of the land and to bring an amalgam of knowledge and entertainment to one out of every eleven men, women and children in the United States sometime during every calendar year.  

Since the Midwest was Chautauqua's stronghold, we might expect that Wisconsin played a role in its development and this is true. Permanent Chautauqua Assemblies, such as the one at Monona Bay, were active as early as the 1880's. The C.L.S.C. had chapters at Appleton, Darlington, Dartford (now Green Lake), Elkhorn, Milwaukee, Waupun, Eau Claire, Sparta and Cheboygan as well as many individual enrollees. There is little doubt that attics all over Wisconsin hold dusty copies of George B. Adams' Growth of the French Nation or J. P. McGaffey's A Survey of Greek Civilization.

Finally, the tents of the commercial circuit Chautauqua dotted the landscape of Wisconsin for more than twenty years yet no Wisconsin historian has done more than glance in that direction.

II

Our concern in this paper is with Chautauqua as it was conducted by the University of Wisconsin. What makes a university-run Chautauqua significant lies in the relationship of education to Chautauqua—a relationship which has always puzzled critics and historians. Was Chautauqua, as Sinclair Lewis once stated, "noth-
ing but wind and chaff and the heavy laughter of yokels?" or was it an embodiment of the original idea defined by Bishop John H. Vincent: "Self-improvement in all our faculties, for all, through all time, a people's idea, a progressive idea, a millenial idea?" With its talent ranging from Billy Sunday to Herbert Hoover and from the Swiss Bell Ringers to Galli-Curci, was it truly a "People's University" or was it a kind of sanctioned circus?

Wisconsin's answer was clear. Both lyceum and Chautauqua offered great educational opportunity and the University set about to demonstrate that potential in its extension offerings.

There was precedent for the development of a university-sponsored Chautauqua at Wisconsin. Gould's recent book demonstrates the relationship between Lake Chautauqua and the universities. This relationship was strongest first at the newly-formed University of Chicago under William Rainey Harper, but with his death in 1906, leadership in adult education passed to the University of Wisconsin. Says Creese: "If one were thoroughly acquainted with the experience of these two universities he would know almost the whole story of university extension in this country."

As with the commercial agencies, the foundation for Chautauqua was laid by the lyceum movement. Wisconsin was one of four state universities to carry on a university-sponsored lyceum program sharing its lyceum talent with Minnesota and North Dakota.

By 1909, John J. Pettijohn was reporting to Dean Reber of the Wisconsin Extension Division that, "these commercial lecture and entertainment courses usually called lyceum courses will provide an avenue through which the University may bring its valuable information, its culture, and its inspiration to the people of the state and furthermore I believe these lyceum courses are in themselves of sufficient educational, recreational and spiritual value to be worthy of institutionalizing by public taxation." [Italics in the original] Pettijohn stated a few years later that upon this 1909 report was built the beginnings of the University lyceum.

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7 George S. Dulgety, "Chautauqua's Contribution to American Life," Current History XXXIV (April, 1934), 59.
8 Gregory Mason, "Chautauqua, its Technique," American Mercury, I (March, 1924), 274.
9 Joseph E. Gould, The Chautauqua Movement (State University of New York, 1911).
11 Creese noted that four prominent Lake Chautauqua members moved on to the universities and were responsible for much of extension development there. Those moving to Chicago, besides Harper, included Frederick Starr, Chautauqua Registrar, who became Professor of Anthropology; and George Vincent, Vice President of Lake Chautauqua and Manager of the Chautauqua Press, who was made Professor of Sociology. To Wisconsin in 1892 went Richard T. Ely as Professor of Political Economy. His strong leadership was to continue there until 1925.
12 Noffisinger, p. 133.
13 As reported by Pettijohn in a speech "University Extension Lyceum" delivered before the International Lyceum Association Convention in Chicago, September 17, 1913. The speech was published in pamphlet form.
By 1913 Pettijohn could report in an address before the International Lyceum Convention, that the University of Wisconsin had provided in the past year over four hundred lyceum lectures and over two hundred dates filled by concert companies. Said he: "When education is the guiding motive, instead of dividends, the lyceum and Chautauqua will step up in line with libraries, art galleries and museums. It will form part of our great expanding educational system."\(^{13}\)

Pettijohn resigned that same year and was replaced by Paul H. Voelker. Voelker not only expanded the lyceum service by using non-university talent, but saw the opportunity for a university-conducted Chautauqua. After all, the administrative structure was already in existence. The lyceum programs were being scheduled by six extension districts throughout the state.\(^{14}\) If lyceum was successful in the winter, wasn’t Chautauqua, as someone once said, merely lyceum in the light pongee of summer?

So the Chautauqua began. Its aim, according to the Report of the Board of Regents was "to satisfy the growing demand among all classes in America for education in connection with recreational opportunities."\(^{15}\) The first circuit, in the summer of 1915, was to include twenty towns.

The district representatives had done a good job of promotion and the local newspapers looked forward eagerly to what was called, "Wisconsin Week." Said an editorial in the Evansville Review for May 20, 1915: "We in Wisconsin ought to be glad that our great University has entered the Chautauqua field. It is one of the best things it ever did." In Bayfield the Bayfield Progress looked forward to a "feast of good things" and proclaimed itself "The Chautauqua City of Chequamegon Bay."\(^{16}\) In Ripon the editor of the Weekly Press after complaining that a great many had nearly choked trying to pronounce the name Chautauqua, proclaimed it "good for the blues and will drive away any grouch."\(^{17}\) And said the editor of the Bloomer Advance in the wonderful prose of the small town editor: "Most of the towns and cities in the better parts of Wisconsin will this year have Chautauqua, the people’s university and recreation period, combined in one great jollification."\(^{18}\)

The newspapers stressed over and over again that University Chautauqua was a non-profit operation and thus it could bring

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) "With the opening of the year 1912–1913, the placing of lecture and entertainment courses was transferred to the districts." Biennial Report of the University Regents, 1914–1916. The districts included Milwaukee, Oshkosh, La Crosse, Superior, Wausau and Eau Claire.


\(^{16}\) Bayfield Progress, December 17, 1914; July 22, 1915.

\(^{17}\) Ripon Weekly Press, July 1, 1915.

\(^{18}\) Bloomer Advance, June 10, 1915.
better talent at lower cost than had been possible with the commercial kind.

The arrangements were similar for all the communities. Each town paid the University one thousand dollars for the program. For this payment the University sent a large-sized tent seating 1200, with platform, chairs and electric lamps, a smaller tent to enclose the two; a corps of four workers who remained in the community for six days and gave platform talks, conducted round table discussions, lead in community singing, displayed educational motion pictures and told the children stories and taught them games.

In addition, the University provided two popular programs every day for six days, each program preceded by a musical or literary prelude. Each community was amply supplied with advertising matter. It was originally estimated that it would require 26 days to give the six-day program in 21 towns. (One town later dropped out.)

This arrangement meant that seven tents and similar sets of equipment were required since it took one day to transport and set up the gear. Thus the Chautauqua would leap-frog its way around the state for as one community ended its program each day, a new Chautauqua opened someplace else. This was the basic principle of the commercial circuit Chautauqua, of course, and it was this circuit idea which made the peripatetic university economically possible.

A look at the program for that 1915 Chautauqua reveals that its talent was almost identical with one of the better six-day commercial circuits.

One is surprised to find only one University of Wisconsin lecturer featured although certainly an outstanding one. While Chautauqua programs were not given to the use of itotes, in the brochures sent out by the Extension Division, William H. Kiekhoefer, then Assistant Professor of Political Economy, was billed as "A typical American." One other Madisonian was on the list of lecturers. He, too, was well-known for his speaking. This was Reverend Father H. C. Hengell, the Irish pastor of University St. Paul's Chapel in Madison. Other lecturers were standard attractions on the commercial circuits. One of these was Dr. William Forbush, organizer of the Knights of King Arthur, called the largest boy fraternity in the world. Forbush's topic was "The Boy Problem."

Other speakers included Congressman James Manahan of Minnesota, who had served during the preceding term in the U. S.

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19 The Boy Scout movement was incorporated in this country, February 3, 1910, and received much of its impetus from the Chautauqua movement. See my article "The Chautauqua in Lansing," Michigan History, XL (September, 1956), 268.
House of Representatives; William Bruce Leffingwell, a travel lecturer, who showed slides and talked about “Seeing America First” and Edwin W. Lanham, billed as “sometimes a historian, sometimes a poet, sometimes a scientist, often a humorist, but always an orator.” Finally there was Lincoln Wirt, the former Territorial Superintendent of Public Instruction in Alaska, and a long time Chautauqua and lyceum lecturer.

These speakers were supplemented, for parts of the tour, by Congressman William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray of Oklahoma speaking on “The Philosophy of the Plow” and on several occasions by Wisconsin’s Robert LaFollette giving his famous lecture on popular government. In addition Dean Louis Reber and Paul Voelker from the Extension Division would visit the Chautauqua from time to time.

Providing entertainment was Thatcher’s Symphony Orchestra of twenty pieces. Others included a dramatic company of five members, a male quartet complete with readings and the inevitable Swiss bells, and the Tuskegee Institute Singers, a group of eight students from that institution and billed as the best Negro singers in the world. (It was worth the cost of a season ticket, said the advertising copy, to hear them singing, “The Watermelon Hanging on the Vine.”)

Two reels of motion pictures were shown after the lecture each night. The Evansville Review said of these: “It is quite a relief to see no one pushed off a cliff or something.” Instead, reported that newspaper somewhat vaguely: “Scenes of birds—various and unusual birds of all sorts, doing all sorts of things.”

The circuit began in Madison on July 1, the first Chautauqua Madison had had since the days of the Monona Assembly. The big tent was set up in front of the Historical Society library. President Van Hise came down to tell the audience, “I shall never be content until the University becomes a beneficent influence to every family in the state.” George Vincent, President of the University of Minnesota, also spoke. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray told this audience, “Preparedness is the surest protection against war.” Even with these famous names, though, bad weather and the great number of attractions going on in the University community put attendance far below expectations.

The first week had its share of troubles. In La Crosse, where the Chautauqua opened on July 4th, wind and rain collapsed the big tent just an hour before the afternoon performance was to begin. The program moved over to the smaller exhibition tent and

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20 “The biggest that has ever come to Bloomer.” Bloomer Advance, July 22, 1915.
22 Wisconsin State Journal, July 2, 1915.
the show went on. The first speaker noting the torrential downpour going on outside said, "I have been asked to make a dry speech to offset the weather." Professor Kiekhoefer hopped up on a chair, which he noted was the smallest platform he had ever spoken from, and opened his remarks like this: "I am going to lecture to you on "The Springs of Happiness" and I'll wager that there is no place in Copeland Park where you would be happier than you are right here." And if the stringed instruments of the orchestra sounded a little strange in the damp weather—well, that was Chautauqua—university of otherwise.

And so the Chautauqua went—to such towns as Tomah and what is now Wisconsin Rapids, to Stevens Point, Ripon and Antigo, to Ladysmith and Bloomer and Rice Lake, to Bayfield and Superior, and down again to Delevan and Racine and Evansville.

As with the commercial Chautauqua, it was best received in the smaller, more isolated areas. Typical was Bayfield, a village on the shores of Lake Superior, where University Chautauqua played from July 17 to July 22, 1915. Twenty citizens had underwritten the thousand dollar cost and had set up a number of committees to get ready. One hundred rooms had been made available and arrangements had been made to meet all trains and boats. Two hundred fifty children had registered for the morning games and organized play. Catering systems had been set up in the court house to handle the overflow crowds. The cost of the three meals was one dollar per day.

The Chautauqua opened on Sunday morning with Union services, two speakers and a chorus of fifty voices including singers from Ashland and Washburn.

Next day Professor Kiekhoefer told the packed tent that: "It is not enough to say this will be the last great war; to effect that end some kind of international organization must be established." In another lecture entitled, "Crusades of Today" he suggested these topics as being crusades he was for: Peace, Women's Suffrage, Eugenics, Temperance and the Labor Movement. Those crusades he was against included Commercialism, Progressivism and Socialism. Paul F. Voelker, who had appeared the previous winter on Bayfield's lyceum program, came up from Madison to talk on "Joan of Arc." The Bayfield Progress reported that he held his audience spellbound.23

By week's end the Chautauqua was over and the local headline on July 22 read: "First Chautauqua a Grand Success." The editor said the entertainment furnished was of sterling quality and reported plans to make Bayfield a permanent Chautauqua city.

23 Bayfield Progress, July 22, 1915.
The University Chautauqua returned to Bayfield in 1916 as it did to twenty-one other towns in the state. The Mayor proclaimed it Chautauqua Week and in spite of intense heat and a storm on Saturday night (weather was always the bane of Chautauqua) the thousand dollar guarantee was met. The Chief of Police kept tabs on the number of autos parked in front of the main tent during the week and reported with satisfaction that a total of 247 cars brought passengers to the Chautauqua from the adjoining county and from cities and villages to the south. The highest total for any one performance was Sunday afternoon when thirty-five cars stood outside the big tent all at the same time.24

Featured on the 1916 University Chautauqua were twenty-five members of the University of Wisconsin band. The band had spent the previous summer at the San Francisco World’s Fair in what the brochures referred to as “successful competition with Sousa and other great bandsmen.” In Bayfield the band arrived late after a harrowing and hungry ride from Superior but the results were apparently worth it, for said the editor rather breathlessly: “It [the concert] was just wonderfully fine, unsurpassably superb.”25

Speakers for this year were drawn almost entirely from commercial talent. They included Herbert S. Bigelow, city reformer from Cincinnati, Gabriel Maguire of Boston, who had spent many years in Central Africa as a missionary, and Burt L. Newkirk of the University of Minnesota, who lectured on the gyroscope. Newkirk was representative of the popular science type of lecturer beginning to appear on the circuits. The wife of the State Superintendent of Schools, Mrs. C. P. Cary, spoke on the exceptional child. Besides the band other musical events included the Milton College Glee Club and Professor and Mrs. Von Geltch on the violin and piano.

Although successful in Bayfield, reception in the twenty-one other towns of the 1916 season was uneven. Along with the usual difficulties of heat and storms and equipment delays experienced by all Chautauquas, new problems were beginning to appear. The papers were full of war news. Typical was Tomah, where Company “K” was ready to leave for Mexico. Those who stayed home were finding other things to do. The Tomah Monitor-Herald for June 16, 1916 had a full-page advertisement for a Maxwell touring car which could be purchased at the Central Hardware Company for $655. The Unique Theater was showing three reels of “What Dorris Did” for just ten cents.

25 Bayfield Progress, July 18, 1916.
In Evansville, which claimed the oldest lyceum course in the state dating from 1882, a commercial Redpath Chautauqua took the place of University Chautauqua in 1916.26

In Delevan, the Delevan Assembly brought Wisconsin Week Chautauqua to its Eighteenth Assembly season in 1915 but tried an entirely new program in 1916 entitled, “Walworth County Community Week” which, while elaborately planned, proved no more successful.27

University Chautauqua was just about over. The summer of 1917 saw a modified program of Chautauqua constructed around “patriotic inspiration and instruction with reference to the war emergencies”28 but this was the last year. An item in the Extension Division’s Biennial Report published on July 1, 1918, gives this terse account: “The results [of Chautauqua] were quite satisfactory but the financial outlay was so great, considering the small number of communities that were reached, that it was felt that the general community betterment was not far-reaching enough to justify the time, money, and energy expended.”29

III

In retrospect, University Chautauqua was a daring idea, quite in keeping with the leadership in extension work for which the University of Wisconsin was becoming so well known. Its similarity to commercial Chautauqua provides us with tangible evidence that at least at one university, educators saw in the circuit Chautauqua an educationally worthwhile venture and a force for good in the life of the small towns. At the same time that similarity to the circuits provided the seeds for its own destruction for, even though it was a non-profit university service, the cost of using commercial talent and the limited one-month season brought the price of a season ticket to $1.50 to $2.00. This was the standard price for a similar-length Chautauqua on the commercial circuits. The University could not hope to compete against the large, well-entrenched circuits on their own terms and it is doubtful if Wisconsin could have continued to sponsor Chautauqua for very long even if the war had not come along.

But the war did come and by 1917 the University and particularly the Extension Division was deeply involved in the war effort. More than one-third of the Extension staff had gone to war and those who were left were busy in the activities of the Red Cross, Liberty Bond drives, instruction at military camps and in conduct-

27 Delevan Enterprise, July 15, 1916.
ing correspondence school study programs for enlisted men. There was simply no time for Chautauqua.

University Chautauqua's justification and its epitaph was provided, fittingly enough, by Dean Lighty of the Extension Division, in his 1918 report to President Van Hise. Said he:

In the last decade, University Extension teaching has undergone as profound a change and transformation as has occurred in any field of education in our own times. No longer . . . is this a movement only 'for the promotion of university teaching' . . . but something distinct and of itself, and possessed of a body of text materials and of teaching techniques of its own, and destined independent development. It is, therefore, no longer a mere transfer of intramural teaching into an extramural setting. It is not a substitute. In fact it is no longer the extension of university teaching but it has become extension teaching—a distinct instrument of the democracy of our times.\(^a\)