

By Williard Spiegelman

Chautauqua, NY

Any old foggy who frets that sobriety, morality and civility have vanished from our midst should make a beeline to the Chautauqua Institution, two hours west of Buffalo. Ditto anyone who worries about a national obsession with pop culture, tabloid celebrities and what passes for conversation on most TV and radio "talk" programming.

Plain living and high thinking have thrived here since 1874 on a property that now encompasses 783 acres. Akron, Ohio, inventor and businessman Lewis Miller (whose son-in-law was Thomas Edison) teamed up with Methodist minister John Heyl Vincent to create the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly, with the express purpose of providing vacation learning to under-prepared Sunday school teachers. Four years later came the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, now the oldest continuous book club in the country. The Chautauqua Institution's size and season have grown, but Chautauqua has remained faithful to the four pillars of its mission: religion, arts, education and recreation. Its position in this country is unique.

Think of a theme park for the entire family-children have their own array of activities and classes-but a park whose themes are intellectual curiosity and engaged dialogue. Think of a summer camp for grown-ups with opera, dance, drama, orchestral concerts, academic seminars, lectures, interviews, author reading and book signings, as well as the usual golf, boating and other items from the sporting life. Think of Utopia.

Ever since Emerson, Alcott and the other Concord sages developed a new transcendentalist religion, America Protestantism has equated spiritual enlightenment with self-improvement. Finding God and fining oneself became synonymous ventures. Add to this equation the rage

for workingmen's and women's colleges that spread from 19th-century industrial England to America; a dash of S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure"; and a belief in the innate healthfulness of rural life ("God made the country; Man made the town," as an old adage puts it), and you've got a handle on this dynamic community, which hosts roughly 7,500 weekly participants-people can also buy day passes-all of whom have come to enjoy a wide range of activities designed to nourish and improve body, mind and soul.

Chautauqua can incite incredulity, even skepticism. The gorgeous gated community houses a colony of mostly late-Victorian cottages and tasteful modern Victorian reproductions, some of which have been passed down for generations. Grand ones line the lakefront; more modest ones stand behind them. Driving is limited, walking the preferred mode of locomotion. Kids ride bikes in safety. Houses have front porches, rocking chairs, canvas awnings, American flags and patriotic bunting, meticulous but unpretentious garden plots speckled with hostas and hydrangeas. The beauty evokes an older, friendlier, mythic America, say a tree-lined small town where everyone knows and greets everyone else. Think "Ah! Wilderness" or "The Music Man."

At 7 in the morning the determined joggers seem incongruous. Their speed doesn't suit the setting so well as the leisure of strollers, the yoga practitioner with her mat, or the elderly couple just watching the mist evaporate from the lake. By nine, daily religious (mostly Protestant) services are under way in the many small houses of worship. (Several denominations also offer lodging.) The compound has a Catholic chapel; Jews borrow space for Sabbath services from the Methodists; a Brooklyn imam has been invited to continue a fruitful dialogue under an "Abrahamic



Initiative" begun in 2000. An ecumenical weekday Protestant service draws 500 people to the 5,000 seat Amphitheater, the venue for lectures and concerts later in the day, and site of the world's largest outdoor organ.

Religion pervades but does not overwhelm this place. There are hundreds of mini-courses, ranging from business and finance, through dance, juggling and creative writing, to personal development (e.g., Happiness Is A Choice, Not a Chance: The Nine Choices of Extremely Happy People"). The array is familiar to anyone who's ever seen a Continuing Education brochure. Kids are off at their day camp.

Each week centers on a separate theme. On my visit it's "Education: Our Children and the World." (On Sunday, July 24, during a week focused on "Global Climate Change: Securing the Future," Al Gore will probably draw the season's largest crowd.) At 10:45 a.m., Graham B. Spanier, president of Penn State, talks about today's undergraduates. One of his points stresses their diversity-economic, demographic, ethnic and racial-an irony given that he is addressing a 2,000-person

assembly with a mere handful of non-Caucasians.

In this predominantly WASP enclave-where people are debating the pressing issues of the real world-it's the overwhelming whiteness that seems most unreal. Thomas Becker, the Institution's genial president, acknowledges an imbalance and has made efforts to diversify the population. But time moves slowly here. A longtime Chautauquan said that Bill Cosby visited and told the following joke. Question: How many Chautauquans does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Change?

Liquor is officially banned from restaurants and public spaces, though residents can drink in private. The Athenaeum, the grand 1881 Belle-Époque Victorian hotel at the heart of the community has no bar. But starting next year beer and wine will be available at dinner. "It's unbelievable, a total violation of what the founding fathers meant," one semi-orate strict constructionist told me. And this is the first year that gentlemen are admitted to the Athenaeum dining room at supper without ties, although jackets

still prevail. What to one person is a violation is to another an acknowledgement of changing times.

Friendly tolerance, earnest inquisitiveness and lively discourse attract and inspire the guests. Eighty percent of them return; 94% say they would like to. Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux and Jay Lesenger, veteran directors of the dance and opera programs, and Vivienne Benesch and Ethan McSweeney, the dynamic new heads of the theater, all said they value the fact that Chautauqua, as opposed to in "real" life, they get to see their audiences for several days after performances, and Chautauquans are never shy about expressing opinions and asking questions.

One evening I ran between two buildings. In the beautiful, new 269-seat Bratton Theater, apprentices joined veteran actors in a stunning production of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." Unlike any place I have been recently, there was not a single noise-cough, sneeze, snore, let alone cell phone-to be heard from the audience until the final curtain. Next door, in the down-at-heels Art Deco

Norton Hall, a dress rehearsal of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" provoked equivalent respect

The following day I chatted with a Jewish Manhattan woman of a certain age with whom I shared a lunchtime bench on the town green. In front of us children gamboled, teenagers flirted, middle-age couples talked about a lecture they'd heard. The golden sunshine cast a patina of unreality over the scene. I asked my seatmate how long she'd been coming, how long she stayed each year, and why she returned. "Fifteen years...At first I came for three weeks. Now it's the whole nine-week season. I came initially for the creative-writing courses. Why do I come back? Chautauqua is the last bastion of that much overused word, 'community.'"

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