



Photograph: courtesy of Gayle Dempsey

In 1921 the Muskoka Assembly of Canadian Chautauqua acquired its own home, buying The Wadaska Inn on Tobin Island on Lake Rosseau and renaming it Epworth Inn.

Reviving Chautauqua

Article by Patrick Boyer

A century ago “Chautauqua” was widely renowned for its cultural and spiritual enrichment of peoples’ lives through an ambitious book-reading program and uplifting lectures, plays, and musical performances in outdoor settings as close to nature as possible. Beginning with a summer gathering at Lake Chautauqua in upstate New York in 1874, the movement spread widely as other “Chautauquas” sprang up across North America, including Muskoka.

Some, most notably the original “Mother Chautauqua” in New York, have continued to this very day, but the good news in 2010 is that Muskoka’s Chautauqua, forced by Depression economics to disband in 1932, is undergoing a revival.

Port Carling artist Gayle Dempsey and other like-minded members of Muskoka’s arts, music and books community have crystallized the growing cultural awareness of today’s Muskoka into a Chautauqua program which builds on the district’s lively arts community while drawing on that earlier history for inspiration.

Among the elements of this Chautauqua phenomenon were inspirational summer meetings in resort-like settings, adult education through lectures by prominent authorities on major topics, rigorous

“book circle” reading programs that at one time even came with college credits, on-stage entertainment and spiritual enlightenment.

There was even the hugely popular extension of this program through “Circuit Chautauquas” which took entertainment and education to people starving for culture but who could not attend Chautauqua assemblies. Operating across much of the U.S., Western Canada and southern Ontario, these road-trip Chautauquas rotated performers daily through different communities on the circuit, using an interlocking maze of train schedules and automobiles. For one charmed week, the huge Chautauqua tent housed alternating musicians, lecturers, and dramatists as they entertained and educated local citizens. In 1920s rural Saskatchewan a farm woman had tears in her eyes thanking the organizer at the end of a concert, pointing to her 18-year old son, “It’s the first time in his life he’s heard a violin.”

Bracebridge finally got onto the circuit and enthusiastically received the travelling Chautauqua troupe. Full-page ads in the town’s *Muskoka Herald* and *Gazette* proclaimed the five-day program in advance, with a local committee aiding the event that was “bringing the world to your door” in Jubilee Park. The travelling Chautauqua’s visits in August 1929

and 1930 came just as this road phase of the movement was winding down because radio and movie theatres were instead bringing the world to North Americans.

What Gayle Dempsey and the Muskoka Chautauqua organization are interested in reviving, however, is not that played-out strand of touring Chautauquas. Their inspiration is the much bigger role played by Chautauqua in Muskoka, the part that became a major national story as summer-long assemblies during the 1920s and early 1930s on Tobin Island, Lake Rosseau, became famous as “Canada’s literary Chautauqua.”

Like many important Canadian stories, the role of this literary initiative at Muskoka Chautauqua has been downplayed and largely ignored. The summer resort where legendary figures of Canadian literature, such as Bliss Carmen, Dorothy Livesay, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, E.J. Pratt and dozens more gathered, has not been preserved as a museum or cultural Mecca. The building has been demolished and no historical site marker even marks the spot.

Interestingly, this original Muskoka Chautauqua actually took several years to find its feet, a reality no doubt reassuring to the new Muskoka Chautauquas as they apply the essentials of the movement to 21st



Photograph: courtesy of Gayle Dempsey

Muskoka Chautauqua's mornings, given over to education, included talks and courses of study such as this 1925 session on the veranda of Epworth Inn.

century conditions and peoples' deeper needs today.

The gatherings that formed the foundation for Muskoka's Chautauqua initially convened at Windermere House in 1916, then at larger Elgin House in 1917, until finally getting a resort the Chautauquans could call their own on Tobin Island in 1922.

Charles Sinclair Applegath, a vibrant young Methodist minister of liberal views and questing mind and founder of these Muskoka assemblies, first organized an Epworth Summer School at Windermere House on Lake Rosseau in 1916, under the auspices of the Epworth League, an offshoot of the Methodist Church.

Yet he was dissatisfied with the confining nature of the Epworth League, finding it highly structured, entrenched in ritual and orthodoxy, its wholesome idealism designed only to program young people towards Christianity. Operating on a higher plateau, the visionary Applegath saw the need for Canadians and Canada itself to be infused with a nobler spirit than could be engendered through the Epworth League. So he shifted the Muskoka gatherings from Methodist Church jurisdiction to Chautauqua's interdenominational umbrella, one which welcomed even those having no religious affiliation at all.

Thus like the Mother Chautauqua herself, whose initial meetings in New York emerged with some uncertainty upon the prior pattern of Methodist and Baptist summer camp meetings and also from a Lyceum program of education in post-Civil War days, the Muskoka start-up also involved evolution.

The key thing was that the Chautauqua format



Photograph: courtesy of Gayle Dempsey

On this open-air stage, created and operated on Tobin Island, original Canadian plays, concerts and public lectures provided enlightenment and entertainment.



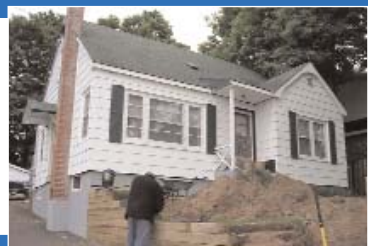
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Princess Rahme Haider of Syria (left) bought a lot on Tobin Island and built a Syrian-style cottage to enjoy Chautauqua.

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offered an open arena for discussion, in the belief that truth must be sought out rather than handed down. This freer atmosphere enabled Applegath and the growing number of participants in Muskoka's Chautauqua a richer education of the intellect, deeper spiritual exploration, and increasingly, a stronger emphasis on Canadian studies and the country's literature.

Then the big step forward occurred in 1921. While honeymooning on Tobin Island, Applegath and his bride Edna Lightle of Port Hope became enchanted by the Waskada Inn where they were staying. The property spread over 218 magnificent acres. It ran along more than two miles of spectacular shoreline. The view from the inn's hexagonal towers atop its rocky summit was one of Canada's finest. Discovering the place was for sale, Applegath promptly incorporated the Canadian Chautauqua Institution Limited, became its president and manager, issued a prospectus to solicit \$40,000 (about \$800,000 in today's purchasing power), raised the money, bought the Waskada, carried out repairs and renovations, renamed it Epworth Inn in a nod to the Assembly's origins, and opened it just in time for his summer 1921 Muskoka Assembly of the Canadian Chautauqua Institution.

Now with its independent spirit of enquiry enabled by its character as a Chautauqua, and this permanent home for the organization, Muskoka Chautauqua steadily emerged into its unique Canadian role. A new sense of Canada nationality had been awakened between 1914 and 1918 as Prime Minister Borden insisted on Canada controlling its own role in the Great War and with the Canadian

Army's tumultuous victory at Vimy Ridge, but the peoples' flickering nationalism needed substance if it was to be sustained, and further advanced. But the hurdle was that our country's deeply embedded colonial mentality meant only British and American authors were considered worthy of study, so Canadians remained deprived of their own stories.

In this context, Muskoka Chautauqua's bold program to promote Canadian books and Canadian reading – through its Canadian Chautauqua Reading Circle, its Summer School of Canadian Literature, and its annual Canadian Authors' Week – became the vanguard of an historic cultural shift.

In this process of fostering an emerging Canadian identity, those who gathered on Tobin Island for many weeks each summer, freed from denominational narrowness and partisan division, developed their own Canadian-minded approach to Chautauqua methods that were similar to, yet different from, those in the United States. They achieved a new sense of identity through an open spiritual quest and a resolute emphasis on Canadian literature.

Leader of this initiative was pioneering educator Dr. Aletta Marty, the first Canadian woman to earn a doctor of laws degree, the first woman school inspector in Canada, and author of the landmark book *An Educational Creed*. In 1922, as part of Muskoka Chautauqua, she established the Canadian Chautauqua Reading Circle to study the works of our country's overlooked writers. The reading circle was organized into four-year cycles, with a suggested list of books provided each year to participants. Lectures and readings during the summer at Tobin

Island enhanced appreciation for the assigned books. Those completing the program, by reading all the assigned books, were recognized in formal graduation ceremonies on the lawns of Epworth Inn and bedecked with maple leaf garlands.

Aptly now nicknamed Canada's literary Chautauqua, the Tobin Island assembly also featured famous authors of the day reading from their works, accessible to their audiences, and keenly discussing current issues. Through such a kaleidoscope of viewpoints, this Muskoka experience not only provided a rewarding intellectual challenge for all who participated, but sent out ripples of cultural inspiration across the country as well.

Marty's campaign would pave the way for programs to study Canadian authors in schools and universities, although it would not be until after the Second World War that Canadian literature would be deemed worthy of a credit course at University of Toronto, and even then, only at the graduate level. In this liberationist way, Muskoka Chautauqua did for literature what the Group of Seven did for art.

Over the years, more than 800 participated in the Tobin Island program. At its peak during the 1920s Canada's literary Chautauqua attracted some of the brightest stars in the country's firmament of celebrities.

One notable, Canada's wartime flying ace Billy Bishop, who in July 1920 had just become even more famous by inaugurating Canada's first scheduled air service (flying between Toronto's waterfront and Muskoka's lakes), landed his seaplane on Lake Rosseau to join in the Chautauqua sessions at

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Photograph: courtesy of Gayle Dempsey

In July 1920, Billy Bishop and Billy Barker, two wartime flying aces, inaugurated Canada's first scheduled commercial flights with a route between Toronto and Muskoka. Here Bishop taxis in to join the Chautauqua.

Epworth Inn. Mohawk Chief War Eagle, from the Caughnawaga Reserve near Montreal, regularly taught those on Tobin Island some of the basics. Syria's Princess Rahme Haider, a direct descendent of the old House of Haider mentioned in Genesis, built a Syrian-style cottage on Tobin Island and rendered full-costume dramatic interpretations of Syrian life in Biblical times.

On the literary side of things, "father of Canadian poetry" Sir Charles G.D. Roberts was not only a regular at the sessions but also delivered speeches across Canada praising Muskoka Chautauqua for "doing much toward the development of Canadian literature and culture," as the *Hamilton Spectator* reported on March 12, 1926, "thus helping along the growth of a Canadian national spirit."

Bliss Carmen, the "unofficial poet laureate of Canada" in whose work nature figures prominently as a theme, loved the Lake Rosseau setting, paddling enthusiastic young ladies around by canoe, looking suitably foppish with long hair, handsome face, and flowing cravat, reading his poems.

Wilson MacDonald, another leading Canadian poet delighting in nature was prominent in Muskoka Chautauqua's summer program, for example lecturing at the Muskoka Assembly's 1926 Canadian Chautauqua Summer School of Canadian Literature with John W. Garvin, a foremost literary critic in Canada at the time.

Muskoka Chautauqua had a serious agenda for national renewal. Its over-riding emphasis was Canadian literature and studies, but this harmonized with trenchant social criticism, a fact underscored by the presence on Tobin Island of reformers such as John Wilson Bengough, whose cartoons, caricatures and satires in *Grip*, his journal of social criticism, helped spark the reforms he was committed to.

Another reformer was Salem Bland, Methodist minister and leading popularizer of liberal theology and the "social gospel" movement, a Chautauqua lecturer and inspiration to generations of progressive activists in Canada.

A third was Newfoundland's poet laureate E.J. "Ned" Pratt who nurtured post-war radical thought and first came to read his poems during the Musko-

ka Assembly's International Week in 1927, returning again in 1928 and 1930.

Women of adventuresome self-confidence became legendary in Chautauqua circles on both sides of the border, as Sheilagh Jameson's wonderful history *Chautauqua in Canada* and the CBC's 1983 film *Chautauqua Girl* make clear. In addition to Dr. Aletta Marty, many accomplished women participated prominently in Muskoka Chautauqua.

In 1928 at Muskoka Chautauqua, 19-year-old Dorothy Livesay, a major figure in the rise of modernist poetry in Canada who in her lifetime would publish 21 volumes of poetry, expressed her interest in "imagination's underworld," which she compared to the act of diving. In this idyllic Muskoka setting, Dorothy's ideals of freedom and natural expression were boundless. She even went blueberry picking with her Chautauqua friends in the nude.

Margo Gordon wrote plays and directed "the Little Theatre in the Woods" where open-air dramas, concerts, and lectures were performed. Created by members of Hart House Theatre at University of Toronto, the Little Theatre was a stage for new Canadian plays with university student actors.

American Mabel Powers interpreted First Nations life and conducted the Indian Council Ring; Katherine Hale, a visionary romantic who lectured on Canadian literature for the Ontario Department of Education, was editor of contemporary literature at the *Toronto Globe*, president of the Women's Press Club, the Women's Canadian Club, and the Toronto Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association, wrote poetry and gave musical recitals; Jean Blewett, poet and novelist who wrote for the *Toronto Globe* was one of dozens pursuing discussion of ethics and sentiment.

Chautauqua's educational role was to broaden peoples' horizons. Under its Tobin Island program, the morning was devoted to education, the afternoon to recreation, the evening to entertainment. It was a glorious summer camp for adults. With their own summer resort, a surrounding cluster of cabins, sandy beaches for swimming, a theatre in the woods, the arrival at Epworth Inn's docks of the steamboats *Sagamo* and *Cherokee*, as well as an extensive summer

program of lectures, readings, study courses, woodland excursions, boating tours, plays, sports and music, Chautauqua in Muskoka had become a robust Canadian offspring of the "Mother Chautauqua" in New York.

Muskoka Chautauqua did not make it through the Great Depression of the 1930s. Conditions 80 years ago forced the organization to disband, although some members like Wilson MacDonald would return to Tobin Island for decades more, keeping its flame flickering.

This year's revival of Muskoka Chautauqua, now rekindling that flame, launched with two weekend sessions in June at The Rosseau, a JW Marriott Resort & Spa on Lake Rosseau. The event included a "Chautauqua tea," readings by notable authors, a book display of original titles studied in the 1920s and a workshop on "the act, not the art, of writing" featuring James Bartleman and Drew Hayden Taylor. Historical presentations were given by Jon Schnitz, Chautauqua Institution archivist; George McCormack, Chautauqua Network vice-chair; and Bob Coghill, the Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle archivist, all interspersed with musical entertainment by Beverlie Robertson and Jack Hutton and Linda Jackson-Hutton.


Central to this revival was unveiling a 2010 reading list by Muskoka Chautauqua's Reading Circle, consistent with one of the strongest traditions of the Chautauqua movement. Books and reading emerged as a mainstay of the New York Chautauqua, which published its own editions of many titles. For Muskoka Chautauqua, this emphasis was just as pronounced, but with the difference that whereas the American lists forced Chautauquans to read books they otherwise might never pick up but that expanded their horizons, Muskoka Chautauqua's lists directed reading circle members to important Canadian content, which our country's own educational institutions marginalized.


The 2010 Muskoka list testifies to the depth of interest in the current revival. After advertising for nominations of "must read books for citizens of Muskoka," the reading circle received three dozen suggestions. It selected six and announced the winners at the well-attended June 12 event with the authors present.


Issued exactly 80 years after Muskoka Chautauqua's last reading list, it recommends: *Out of Muskoka* by James Bartleman; *Local Library, Global Passport* by J. Patrick Boyer; *The Wabeno Feast* by Wayland Drew; *Canoe Lake* by Roy MacGregor; *Unlocking the Doors: a Woman's Struggle Against Intolerance* by Eva Olsson; and, *The Summer before the Storm* by Gabriele Wills.

Today's revival of Muskoka Chautauqua requires not nostalgia but realistic contemporary interpretation of Chautauqua's four pillars of entertainment, education, recreation, and reflection, says Dempsey.

"Plus a receptive awareness of what is missing from people's overactive and plugged-in lives," she adds.

These individuals and others participating with them in Muskoka's Chautauqua Assembly made it, as Sylvia Du Vernet concludes in her definitive book *Muskoka Assembly of the Canadian Chautauqua Institution*, "the most open-minded ecumenical summer group in Canada." 





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