

A Brief History of the CLSC

**“Education, once
the peculiar
privilege of the
few, must in
our best earthly
estate become
the valued
possession of
the many.”**



Bishop John Heyl Vincent

These are the words of Bishop John Heyl Vincent, cofounder with Lewis Miller of the Chautauqua Institution. They are from the opening paragraphs of his book, *The Chautauquan Movement*, and represent an ideal he had for Chautauqua. To further this Chautauquan ideal and to disseminate it beyond the physical confines of the Chautauqua Institution, Bishop Vincent conceived the idea of

the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), and founded it in 1878, four years after the founding of the Chautauqua Institution.

At its inception, the CLSC was basically a four year course of required reading. The original aims of the CLSC were twofold:

To promote habits of reading and study in nature, art, science, and in secular and sacred literature

and

To encourage individual study, to open the college world to persons unable to attend higher institution of learning.

On August 10, 1878, Dr. Vincent announced the organization of the CLSC to an enthusiastic Chautauqua audience. Over 8,400 people enrolled the first year. Of those original enrollees, 1,718 successfully completed the reading course, the required examinations and received their diplomas on the first CLSC Recognition Day in 1882.

The idea spreads and reading circles form.

As the summer session closed in 1878, Chautauquans returned to their homes and involved themselves there in the CLSC reading program. Many introduced the CLSC idea to their friends and neighbors and, in turn, additional groups were established for the purpose of studying and discussing the CLSC course of instruction. The concept of local "CLSC Reading Circles" spread and, by the turn of the century, over 10,000 "circles" had been formed.

Clearly, the rapid and widespread growth of the CLSC filled a deeply felt need for a structured program of reading and learning. As such, its importance both to the Chautauqua movement and to the spread of education was significant to the history of our country. Arthur E. Bestor, Jr., president of the Institution 1915-1944, wrote in his Chautauqua Publications: "Through the home reading courses of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, it (Chautauqua) reached into innumerable towns, especially in the Midwest, and made education a powerful force in American life."

The CLSC becomes a role model.

With the success of its program of planned reading, book selections and local circles, the CLSC became the prototype for book clubs, study groups and university extension courses. According to the World Book Encyclopedia, the CLSC was "an example to American universities when they developed their extension programs, and influenced adult education leaders in such countries as England, Japan and South Africa."

Dr. Vincent's ideal yields nationwide results.

From 1878 through the 1920s the CLSC maintained a preeminent position in the field of adult education and augmented the general support for learning. This, in turn, prompted the spread of libraries in small communities, the extension of adult education, the growth of book clubs, the availability of book review services, the increasing opportunities for enrollment in institutions of higher learning, and the involvement of people in community life and social organizations generally.

More nationwide reading opportunities result in a period of decline.

The accumulated effects of the Depression, the spread of libraries in small communities, the extension of adult education, the growth of book clubs, the availability of book review services, the increasing opportunities for enrollment in institutions of higher learning and the involvement of people in community life and social organizations steadily detracted from the influence of the CLSC. By the 1960s and 1970s, participation had declined, and a dedicated group of Chautauqua Institution administrators and alumni association members united to rebuild it.

The CLSC is experiencing a renaissance.

Presently, the Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle is thriving and remains at the heart of the Chautauqua experience. The CLSC is closely identified with Chautauqua itself, and has greater meaning on and off the grounds as Chautauqua proclaims its past and reclaims its future.

Since 2000, class size has averaged 184 each year. The number of books honored each season has increased to at least nine, so that a contemporary author visits the grounds at least once each week. Book choice has become more relevant to the weeks' theme, and a variety of genres are honored throughout the season. Recognition Week, with its traditional banner parade, marching band, golden gates and arches, is the most photographed event in the nine-week season. The Alumni Association of the CLSC has incorporated recognition and honor for advanced levels of reading.

The CLSC has always provided Chautauqua outreach beyond the Chautauqua grounds. Currently, there are CLSC circles in Nagasaki, Japan; Harare, Mutare and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe; and cities and smaller communities throughout the United States. (If you are interested in forming one in your community, please write clsc@chq.org or call 716.357.6293 July-August, 716.357.6310 September-June.)

The CLSC is a vital program of the Chautauqua Institution.

Chautauqua Institution is a community on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in southwestern New York state that comes alive each summer with a unique mix of fine and performing arts, lectures, interfaith worship and programs, and recreational activities. As a community, we celebrate, encourage and study the arts and treat them as integral to all of learning, and we convene the critical conversations of the day to advance understanding through civil dialogue.

With a history steeped in the literary arts, Chautauqua Institution is the home of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, founded in 1878, which honors at least nine outstanding books of fiction, nonfiction, essays and poetry every summer. Further literary arts programming at Chautauqua includes summer-long interaction of published and aspiring writers at the Chautauqua Writers' Center, the intensive workshops of the nationally recognized Chautauqua Writers' Festival, lectures by prominent authors on the art and craft of writing, the publication of the literary journal *Chautauqua*, and The Chautauqua Prize. The nationally prominent Chautauqua Prize is an annual award that celebrates a book of fiction or literary/narrative nonfiction that provides a richly rewarding reading experience and honors the author for a significant contribution to the literary arts.

CLSC-related buildings at Chautauqua



Pioneer Hall – Originally built as a class building by the 1882 Pioneer Class, the hall is maintained by the Alumni Association as a museum of early Chautauqua memorabilia. During the season, this building is occasionally open to the public with docent tours.



Octagon Building – Originally an 1883 class building, it is now used as a Special Studies classroom and the meeting house for the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).



Alumni Hall – Built in 1892, when it became clear that if each CLSC class were to build its own class building the Institution would soon be crowded out, Alumni Hall became the home of all CLSC classes. Remodeled in 2007 to preserve its history while enabling a broader expanse of programming, the Literary Arts Center at Alumni Hall now houses Alumni Association memorabilia and meeting spaces on the first floor; a ballroom and writing classrooms on the second floor; and apartments for the Writers' Center writers-in-residence on the third floor.



Hall of Philosophy – Modeled after the Parthenon, the Hall of Philosophy is used for CLSC author presentations and Department of Religion lectures. The hall was renovated in 1965.



The Veranda – The CLSC summer office is located on the Brick Walk between the Amphitheater and Bestor Plaza. Its staff provides information about the CLSC, its function, membership and graduation requirements. All current CLSC Young Readers books, CLSC selections and the historic book lists are on display and available for purchase.