

## ***Ministers on the Lecture Circuit: Education, Entertainment, and Religion in Early Twentieth-Century America***

by Lisa Gonzalez

### **Abstract**

In the early twentieth century, some American ministers were eager participants in the Chautauqua and Lyceum lecture circuits that flourished across the Midwest and beyond. Ministers expressed their vocation in the public arena, and the Redpath Chautauqua collection shows how part of this public life was conducted. In their role as lecturers in multiple educational and civic venues, ministers functioned as experts on the Bible, as well as supporting American ideals that were loosely connected to Protestant Christianity. The essay explores how a substantial archival collection reveals a particular public role ministers played in a popular culture venue in early twentieth-century America.

### **Introduction**

The Chautauqua phenomenon occupies a unique place at the intersection of religion, education, and entertainment in the history of America culture. The earlier Lyceum lecture movement of the nineteenth-century sought to provide educational lectures to the masses, though there was an element of entertainment to the lecture tours of popular speakers such as Williams Jennings Bryan, and the nineteenth century camp meeting also contributed elements to what became the Chautauqua movement. Elements of both the Lyceum movement and the revivalist camp meeting were evident in what emerged in the early twentieth century as the Chautauqua movement. Methodist minister John Heyl Vincent was a key supporter of the ecumenical Protestant Sunday School movement and sought to establish a summer institute that would promote better training for teachers. The name comes from Chautauqua Lake in New York, where the first Sunday School Teachers' Assembly gathering was held in 1874, promoted by Vincent and other progressive ministers.<sup>1</sup> Vincent was uncomfortable with the level of emotionalism at what were known as "camp meetings," and as an alternative sought to promote programs that would stir the affections, yet in a more elevated and refined way; he specifically banned the mourning bench at Chautauqua Lake.<sup>2</sup>

The gathering at Chautauqua quickly developed into an education and entertainment program of lecturers, dramatic readers, and musical performers. While some local communities sought to imitate the original Chautauqua summer program in their communities, the Chautauqua phenomenon expanded further starting in 1904, when the Redpath Lyceum Bureau devised a strategy for providing a complete Chautauqua program that could be transported by railroad from one location to another, giving rise to the annual summer visit of the circuit Chautauqua in many communities across the Midwest.<sup>3</sup> Redpath and other Lyceum bureaus provided the basis for a network of "talent agents" who could support the demand for performers for both Lyceum and Chautauqua programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> James R Schultz, *The Romance of Small-Town Chautauquas* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 8.

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Andrew Rieser notes that Chautauqua was “neither a college nor a summer resort nor a religious assembly,” and yet it displayed characteristics of all three.<sup>4</sup> Chautauqua’s resemblance to a religious assembly is most notable when examining the contributions of ministers to the movement. While many other ministers besides Vincent served as “boosters” for the Chautauqua, clergy were at the same time active participants (often as lecturers) themselves. To illustrate, the online exhibit, “Traveling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century,” lists 206 preachers and 146 clergy in its collection of talent brochures, with some lecturers being assigned to both categories.<sup>5</sup> This exhibit features material from the Redpath Chautauqua Bureau Records at the University of Iowa, which houses one of the largest collections of circuit Chautauqua archival records. While ministers would already be well known in their local communities as public speakers, it is worth considering how so many ministers came to be speakers traveling on the lecture circuit. The present essay will explore the content of the Redpath Collection, and how this material can help inform our understanding of the role ministers played in this important popular “edutainment” venue.<sup>6</sup> Despite the rigors of traveling on the lecture circuit, this large number of ministers working as successful lecturers demonstrates that these clergy had something unique and appealing to contribute to Chautauqua’s middle-class American audiences, and, in return, the vision of Chautauqua was something that ministers were eager to support.

### The “Business” of the Lecture Circuit

The Redpath Lyceum Bureau served as a kind of national talent agency in the United States, and was well positioned to transition into supporting Chautauqua programs. Founded in 1868, the Redpath Lyceum Bureau sought to capitalize on the burgeoning independent Chautauqua movement by assisting local committees in acquiring talent for their programs. Redpath’s efforts to provide a complete program for existing Chautauquas led to its most successful venture, providing a full program at a reasonable price for small rural communities that did not have an existing program. Redpath strived for maximum profitability by establishing a circuit of programs for small towns and coordinating all the travel and scheduling arrangements for its Chautauqua performers.

The typical circuit Chautauqua included a program of lectures, dramatic readings, travelogues, and music. The program might run for either five or seven days; the seven-day version included the preaching of a sermon by either a local preacher on Sunday, or by one of the ministers on the Chautauqua.<sup>7</sup> While many of the lecturers fell into the category of inspirational or educational speakers, some were specifically marketed as Bible lecturers in their talent brochures. A broad range of denominational affiliations was represented, and their affiliations included Baptist, Congregationalist, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian. As the circuit Chautauqua moved further from its camp meeting connections, particularly after World War I, the agencies sought to be as “undenominational” as possible, which John Tapia attributes to their move beyond the confines of the rural Midwest to more urban settings.<sup>8</sup>

The Redpath Bureau employed ministers in their network of local talent bureaus primarily as lecturers, though occasionally clergy crossed the boundary to dramatic interpretation, as was the case with Preston Bradley’s recital of highlights from

<sup>4</sup> Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> “Traveling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century — (American Memory from the Library of Congress),” accessed September 17, 2013, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/chautauqua/index.html>. The digitized brochures in the Traveling Culture exhibit are from the University of Iowa’s Special Collections.

<sup>6</sup> “Records of the Redpath Chautauqua,” accessed September 17, 2013, <http://sdrclib.uiowa.edu/travelingculture/inventory/msc150.html>. The Redpath Chautauqua Bureau Records were acquired by the University of Iowa Special Collections in 1951. These include the business records of the Redpath-Vawter Bureau of Cedar Rapids (Iowa), the Redpath-Chicago Bureau, and the Redpath-Kansas City (Missouri) Bureau. The largest portion of these records, the Talent Correspondence and Brochures — Series I, includes correspondence with each performer, and often includes a publicity brochure, known as a talent brochure, for each performer.

<sup>7</sup> Clinton N. Howard: Lecturer, Orator, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1912, <http://sdrclib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/howardc/6>; John E. Tapia, *Circuit Chautauqua: From Rural Education to Popular Entertainment in Early Twentieth Century America* (McFarland, 1997), 46.

<sup>8</sup> Chautauqua never caught on in the South, however. Tapia, *Circuit Chautauqua*, 113.

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.<sup>9</sup> Lecture engagements could include either circuit or independent Chautauquas, Lyceum courses, or other speaking engagements (school assemblies, professional conferences, civic groups, and professional trade associations). Though Redpath functioned as a talent agency primarily in rural and small-town America, they were also a booking agency for some of the most prominent public speakers of the day. Billy Sunday and William Jennings Bryan, for example, worked within the Redpath network, and the vast number of actors, musicians, speakers, and other entertainers represented in the brochures attests to the inroads Redpath had made into secondary markets away from the largest urban centers.

Chautauqua's origins in camp meetings is a primary reason for the presence of so many ministers on the circuit, but the prominence of ministers as public orators in the nineteenth-century Lyceum landscape is another. In one brochure advertising the lecture circuit, independent pastor (and later Unitarian minister) Dr. Preston Bradley was described as holding "steadily to the spirit of the old lyceum days, when Emerson, Beecher, Phillips and Gough brought their messages to the people."<sup>10</sup> The Congregationalist Henry Ward Beecher also appeared on the list of prominent Lyceum speakers in a brochure for Russell Conwell.<sup>11</sup> Williams Jennings Bryan, probably the most successful and well known of the Lyceum and Chautauqua lecturers, was renowned both as a politician (he was three times a Democratic candidate for president) and as a Presbyterian preacher.<sup>12</sup>

### Ministers as Lecturers

Ministers participated in the full range of bookings promoted by the agents. This would usually include winter Lyceum courses and the summer Chautauqua circuit, as well the spring commencement season for schools. Many ministers were very particular regarding their availability for lecturing. Some might be available for the winter season or the summer season, but not both. If they lectured on the summer circuit, they might prefer to restrict their availability to one-week increments. Ministers were mindful that lecturing was worth both their time and money. For most ministers, Chautauqua represented a ministry priority rather than an economic necessity. To be sure, some pastors clearly used Chautauqua to supplement their income, while others endeavored merely to "break even." Though Preston Bradley, for example, was a full-time pastor at a large urban church, sometimes he endeavored to increase his fees by circumventing the bureau's agent and arranging engagements himself, thus avoiding having to pay the commission fee, which didn't endear him to the booking agents.<sup>13</sup>

Since ministers weren't full-time lecturers, booking agents needed to take their church duties into account. Some ministers might actually be available for the whole circuit during the summers, since some had the entire summer as a vacation period. Dr. Charles Medbury's talent brochure drew attention to both his popularity and exclusivity. The Redpath-Vawter agency had secured his time for the entire summer season, though he had previously spoken on the independent Chautauqua circuits that didn't use the booking agents.<sup>14</sup> Preston Bradley spent his summer vacation at his lodge in Minnesota, preparing for the winter lecture circuit, yet he was still willing to fill ten Chautauqua dates per season.<sup>15</sup>

Train travel could be a strain on a minister, especially when he was required to be back home in time for Sunday's sermon. For the 1923-24 winter season, Preston Bradley was willing to fill in, at most, as many as four dates per week, provided

<sup>9</sup> Preston Bradley, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1917, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/bradley/2>.

<sup>10</sup> Preston Bradley.

<sup>11</sup> Russell H. Conwell, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1909, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/conwell/1>; Charlotte Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 166. Conwell was best known for his "Acres of Diamonds" speech, which was delivered by other ministers on the circuit as well.

<sup>12</sup> Tapia, *Circuit Chautauqua*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Redpath Vawter Bureau, May 26 1921, "Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder," Box 43, Series I, Redpath Chautauqua Bureau Records, University of Iowa Libraries (Iowa City).

<sup>14</sup> Charles S. Medbury, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 191-?, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/medbury/4>.

<sup>15</sup> Publicity statement from Bradley, 1919?, "Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder."

he could get back to Chicago by Saturday morning, and be prepared to preach on Sundays and attend church board meetings on Mondays.<sup>16</sup> He preferred to be “on the circuit” three nights a week for the winter season, so that he could get back to Chicago by Friday night.<sup>17</sup> The bureaus did their best to accommodate him, even though the fewer nights per week a lecturer spent on the circuit, the less profitable it was for the bureaus. Bradley is referred to by Carl Backman, Redpath-Chicago’s Lyceum manager, as one of their “big preachers.” Not only did he preach to a congregation that averaged 3,000 on a Sunday, but he had a radio program as well.<sup>18</sup> William Colledge, Redpath, Chicago’s educational department director, was sympathetic to Bradley’s situation, and did his best to accommodate Bradley’s schedule; the church had been founded independently by Bradley himself, and “churches like his are built around himself and if he goes away on a Sunday — his audience also takes a vacation.”<sup>19</sup> Colledge’s sympathies with Bradley were particularly acute, since he also served as a minister for a period during his employment at Redpath.<sup>20</sup>

There was considerable overlap within the lectures of preachers on the civic, moral, and religious themes prominent in lecture topics, particularly in the first decade of the Chautauqua circuits. The talent brochures were constructed to promote ministers’ lectures for particular purposes and venues. The correspondence between the Redpath bureau and lecturers included regular appeals for “human interest” items, which could include newspaper reports of their lectures, the minister’s own writings, and publications from their home churches. Quotes from newspaper reports would make their way into the talent brochures, as would reports of the speaker’s ability from the local Chautauqua committees. The particular topics the minister would lecture on also figure prominently in the brochures, along with details as to their scheduling availability. Lecturers developed a repertoire of lectures that could be delivered over and over again. Popular themes in their repertoires included modern American social problems, history and literature, inspiration and self-improvement, and the Bible. Though a lecturer might have a repertoire that included a broad range of topics, it was not uncommon for a minister to develop a signature lecture, which could be delivered over and over again in multiple venues. Some venues requested a repeat performance for the same lecture year after year. C.H. Plattenburg, for instance, delivered his “Worms Beneath the Bark” lecture, which focused on the vices of society, more than twelve hundred times.<sup>21</sup>

The booking agents not only provided speakers for their own circuits, but virtually any kind of speaker that any kind of group might require. William Rainey Bennett, for example, was asked to give his lecture “The Master Thought” to a civic group that wanted to coordinate its event with the Methodist revival in town at the same time; Bennett was instructed to “apply ‘The Sunday Spirit.’”<sup>22</sup> Other preachers might be booked specifically for a church group, such as a church camp, and it was not always necessary for the preacher to be of the same denomination. Herbert Willett, for instance, a Disciples pastor, was asked to speak at a Baptist summer camp, whose main desire was for “several good lectures by some well-known minister.”<sup>23</sup>

The Chautauquas also needed preachers specifically as a regular part of the program, since a series of Bible lectures was a staple of the weekly program. Good “Bible men” such as Albert Bushnell, Henry Sell, and Herbert Willett offered a

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Mr. Backman, October 20, 1923, “Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder”; Letter from Mr. Backman, October 26, 1923, “Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>17</sup> Letter from William Colledge, December 12, 1921, “Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Mr. Backman, March 1925, “Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>19</sup> Letter from William Colledge, March 6, 1922, “Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Harry P. Harrison, March 3, 1926, “Willett, Herbert L. (Rev.) Folder,” Box 341, Series I, Redpath Chautauqua Bureau Records, University of Iowa Libraries (Iowa City); Letter to Harry P. Harrison, March 13, 1926, “Willett, Herbert L. (Rev.) Folder”. At one point, Colledge had been the minister at the Kenilworth Union Church in Illinois. The negotiations for a new pastor at Kenilworth in 1926 involved Colledge and are included in the Redpath records for Herbert Willett, Chautauqua lecturer and Colledge’s successor at Kenilworth.

<sup>21</sup> *Charles Howard Plattenburg: Lecturer*, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 192-?, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/plattenburg/1>.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Bennett, March 20, 1927, “Bennett, William Rainey (Rev.) Folder,” Box 31, Series I, Redpath Chautauqua Bureau Records, University of Iowa Libraries (Iowa City).

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Redpath Lyceum Bureau, May 5, 1916, “Willett, Herbert L. (Rev.) Folder.”

broad list of Old and New Testament lecture topics. Sell had a complete Bible lecture program that could be adapted for any venue — “Chautauquas, Bible Assemblies, Schools of Methods for Sunday School Workers, Community and other Training Schools of Religious Education, Churches, etc.”<sup>24</sup> Sell’s Bible lectures were offered as a course series. For instance, his “Bible City Travel Talks” consisted of a first course of lectures on Babylon and Nineveh, with a second course also available on Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, and Rome. If the lecturer presented a course for Chautauqua week, then the lecture would stay in one place for the week. If the lecturer gave a single lecture, then they would travel on the “circuit.” The bureaus had several Chautauqua programs going at once in a region, with the performers traveling to each location in turn for a single day, where they would give their lecture or performance and then move on to the next location. Some Bible lecturers filled the Bible course for the week, but others listed single Bible lectures in their brochure. Herbert Willett’s repertoire of Bible-themed lectures included “Job, a Poem and a Philosophy” and “Isaiah, the Prophet as a Statesman.”<sup>25</sup>

Ministers were expected to be both uplifting and entertaining, and their own travel experiences (e.g., to the Holy Land) could be used to good advantage. Rev. W.G. Aldridge had a sufficient number of lantern-slides from Egypt and Palestine that he could give two programs a day for five days.<sup>26</sup> The Rev. Bryant Howe had traversed the entire circumference of the Mediterranean, and focused his presentation on Egypt, Italy, and Palestine. He had obtained a model house and barn, which he used to present a vivid picture of what life was like in an exotic land for the enlightenment of his audiences.<sup>27</sup>

The distinction between lecturing and preaching was not finely drawn. What was considered good public speaking generally applied to both preaching and lecturing on the circuit. Clinton N. Howard’s best lecture was “Adam and Eve and the Baby” which was described as “a lecture convulsing in mirth and dynamic in power, filled with facts and fun.”<sup>28</sup> This presentation was considered an inspirational lecture, yet a citation from a Methodist pastor endorsed him as “the only man I know who can fill the churches and theatres Sunday after Sunday.” As a preacher, Howard might preach on the Sunday morning for the Chautauqua week and then offer one of the Sunday afternoon lectures.

## Popular Speakers’ Themes and Topics

Regarding the content of the lectures, it is easy to see why the lines between the lectures and preaching were often blurred. Bennett’s lecture, “The Art of Living,” was aimed at civic groups and focused on upholding capitalism as a system, and expressed that “poverty was a sin.”<sup>29</sup> A Saginaw newspaper referring to this lecture in their community noted that “he preached a lofty theme with a lofty purpose and made the commonplace a sort of holy ground where only the worthy might tread with unshod feet.”<sup>30</sup> In another report on his “Art of Living” lecture, which summarized this “art” into three stages, “making a living, living a life, . . . and living together,” his speaking was praised as providing “a wealth of illustration, story and oratory . . . that had all the marks and bearings of a sermon from the lay pulpit.”<sup>31</sup>

A good Chautauqua speaker possessed the ability to sway the emotions, ranging from pathos to humor, was an engaging storyteller, knowledgeable about the world and well educated, and displayed good moral character. Dr. Charles Bayard Mitchell, for instance, a prominent Methodist preacher from Cleveland, was praised for his wit, humor, and storytelling ability, and was characterized as a “preacher, orator and actor,” as well as being described as “an intellectual, spiritual and

<sup>24</sup> *The Sell Bible Lectures*, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1917, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/sell/1>.

<sup>25</sup> *Dr. Herbert L. Willett*, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 191-?, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/willett/1>.

<sup>26</sup> *The Land and the Book: A Series of Travelogues on Bible Lands by Rev. W.G. Aldridge*, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1927, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/aldridgewg/1>.

<sup>27</sup> *Life in the Orient: As Seen By Rev. Bryant Howe During a 20,000 Mile Trip*, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 19--?, <http://sdrdata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/howeb/1>.

<sup>28</sup> *Clinton N. Howard: Lecturer, Orator*.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Mr. Backman, January 17, 1925, “Bennett, William Rainey (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>30</sup> Newspaper clipping, Saginaw Press, “Bennett, William Rainey (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>31</sup> Newspaper clipping, Saginaw Press, January 16, 1925, “Bennett, William Rainey (Rev.) Folder.”

oratorical whirlwind.”<sup>32</sup> Ideally, the preacher epitomized a “gentleman,” as Presbyterian minister Dr. Alexander Jackson was described; he was a man who possessed good classical rhetorical skills, as well the ability to make a lucid argument, and was well educated, virtuous, and magnetic.<sup>33</sup>

Religious purpose could be found in many ministers’ inspirational lectures, whether presenting a lecture on current events or on the improving nature of good literature, themes that were found in the repertoire of many lecturers. Frank Wakely Gunsaulus’s lecture on “The Higher Ministry of Poetry” focused on poetry’s religious meaning, for example, how Browning “expressed the power of holiness,” and described the poet’s theology as real and meaningful, and almost providing a glimpse of heaven, “with the redeemed walking in glory.”<sup>34</sup> Dr. John Lloyd was known as the “Scotch-American Popular Lecturer”; he gave literary lectures to Lyceum courses, “Burns” for example, as well as Chautauqua lectures, such as one on “Jean Valjean.” His status as a Scotsman was highlighted in the newspaper blurbs praising his Burns lecture, yet the description of his character focused on his desire to improve society by upholding Christian ideals. “He has deliberately set himself to win the unchurched class to a new insight into the heart of the Christian Gospel. His great aim, his sacramental ambition, is to arouse the deeper, truer self in every man.”<sup>35</sup>

Another field where the inspirational and the spiritual overlapped was national affairs and citizenship. These lectures were particularly popular during and after World War I, when many of the ministers expressed support for the government as the duty of progressive Christians. President Woodrow Wilson himself had hoped that the Chautauqua platform would provide an outlet for raising public support for the war, and many of the ministers were inclined to oblige.<sup>36</sup> Preston Bradley, for instance, lifted up the necessity of supporting Wilson’s program for the League of Nations and opposing the forces of communism.<sup>37</sup> Highlights from Charles Medbury’s “The Man of Now” lecture focused on America’s noble sacrifice in entering the war, not so much longing to fight as desiring to uphold democracy. America was “the savior of a world democracy,” and bore the war as a burden, “welcome[ing] the cross, believing that the cross would purchase a crown for men.”<sup>38</sup>

For some ministers, the lecture circuit became their main occupation. Even though William Rainey Bennett held three pastorates in the Midwest, he traveled the lecture circuits for over twenty years, and it became his principal occupation.<sup>39</sup> His personal stationery features his most popular lectures on his letterhead, such as the “The Man Who Can,” “The Master Thought,” “Pathways to Power,” and “The Art of Living.” Bennett’s “The Man Who Can” speech was even compared to Russell Conwell, one of the best known lecturers — his speech was “a logical successor[sic] to ... Acres of Diamonds.”<sup>40</sup> Bennett’s commitment to the world of Chautauqua included hinting to William Colledge that he would like to work as a booking agent, as well as serving for a time as an editor at Platform World Magazine, a trade magazine for the industry.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Dr. Charles Bayard Mitchell, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 19--?, <http://sdrldata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/mitchellcb/1>.

<sup>33</sup> Dr. Alex Jackson, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 19--?, <http://sdrldata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/jackson/1>.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Wakely Gunsaulus, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 191--?, <http://sdrldata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/gunsaulus/3>.

<sup>35</sup> Doctor John Lloyd, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1916, <http://sdrldata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/lloyd/1>.

<sup>36</sup> Charlotte Canning, “What Was Chautauqua?,” *Traveling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century*, 2000, <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/tc/>.

<sup>37</sup> General Report on Attractions from Mayfield, October 22, 1919, “Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder.”

<sup>38</sup> Charles S. Medbury.

<sup>39</sup> William Rainey Bennett, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 1920, <http://sdrldata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/bennettw/7>.

<sup>40</sup> William Rainey Bennett, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, 192--?, <http://sdrldata.lib.uiowa.edu/libsdrc/details.jsp?id=/bennettw/11>.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to W.A. Colledge, July 17, 1925, “Bennett, William Rainey (Rev.) Folder”; Letterhead on letter to Mr. Backman, July 21, “Bennett, William Rainey (Rev.) Folder.”

## Conclusion

The traveling Chautauquas reached their zenith in the 1920s but quickly faded at the end of the decade. In 1920, circuit Chautauquas visited over 8,500 cities; by 1928, that number had shrunk to just 500.<sup>42</sup> What lay behind their rapid decline in popularity? It seems clear that, as a form of public entertainment or diversion, they were eclipsed by radio and the movies. This pattern of decline can also be observed in the fate of both the Wild West Shows and vaudeville. Some have argued that religious expression for Protestants moved more into the private sphere in the twentieth century. However, Protestants did make use of radio and film as channels for communication. Several ministers made the transition from Chautauqua lecturer to radio personality — Preston Bradley, for instance, had a radio program on WGN in Chicago.<sup>43</sup>

Chautauqua filled an educational role in a specific cultural setting, though its role as a source of religious education diminished as more theatrical entertainments were welcomed into its programs.<sup>44</sup> The Chautauqua's religious education component, which had originated in the Sunday School movement, was perhaps overtaken by the success of the Sunday Schools themselves.

Liberal Protestant churches of the early twentieth century believed they were poised on the verge of a great ecumenical movement that would transform America into a united Protestant nation. Part of their optimism was transmitted to the Chautauqua movement. Protestant liberalism and Chautauqua shared a commitment to the American ideals of fairness and democracy, and to promoting good Christian morals. Both movements hoped to raise the intellectual tone of American culture. As the ecumenical movement progressed, however, the challenges of ecumenical activity in the everyday world grew more complex. When the time for the real work of dialogue and cooperation came, Chautauqua's somewhat innocent vision of a united American Protestantism could not be sustained.

Because of their commitment to religious education for all, as well as their established role as an authoritative voice on vital issues facing middle America, clergy were a natural part of the Chautauqua phenomenon. Today's ministers seem to have lost their cachet as public entertainers on such a large scale. The celebrity preacher has not disappeared entirely, however. Besides making sophisticated use of radio, ministers today have a broader variety of communication channels, from television to the Internet. So, at least in some instances, a minister's speaking ability may continue to possess an appeal beyond the local congregation. While the day of the Chautauqua has gone, the growing diversity of the Public Square can be expected to offer opportunities for gifted voices to articulate religious commitments on a platform more vast than any Chautauqua orator could ever have imagined.

<sup>42</sup> Russell L. Johnson, "Dancing Mothers' The Chautauqua Movement in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture," *American Studies International* 39, no. 2 (June 2001): 56, 53.

<sup>43</sup> WGN Talent Division press sheet, 1924?, "Bradley, Preston (Rev.) Folder."

<sup>44</sup> Canning, *The Most American Thing in America*, 195.