

HISTORY OF THE  
BIRD and TREE CLUB  
————— of —————  
Chautauqua, N. Y.



1913 -:- 1941

# The Chautauqua Bird and Tree Club

1913 - 1941

The idea of a Bird and Tree Club seems to have sprung full-fledged from the brain of Miss Henrietta Ord Jones, who, on the afternoon of July 26, 1913, "called together under her hospitable roof those known to be interested in Bird and Tree problems." According to the minutes of that first meeting, the Club hoped to create "a Chautauqua Bird Sanctuary and a renowned Arboretum, from which missionaries for the cause of Conservation" would return to their homes prepared for local leadership in such work. Particularly, activities were to include study of the birds and trees of Chautauqua, for their beauty as well as for their value in the Conservation movement; a study of the diseases of the trees and their care, including consultation with experts; the planting of trees and shrubs suitable to the locality and attractive to the birds; and adequate protection for the birds.

The first public meeting was called for August seventh. Mrs. Robert Miller, daughter-in-law of Mr. Lewis Miller, was elected president; leading personages of that Chautauqua day rushed to join, and in three days the fledgling Bird and Tree Club had a roster of



200 members. Active dues were \$.25, sustaining \$1.00 or more, junior \$.10. Chancellor George Vincent of Chautauqua Institution, his father, the Bishop, Earl Barnes, Kate Kimball, Dr. Schmucker, Dr. Julius King, Dean Shailer Mathews, Mrs. B. T. Vincent, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Bray, Henry Turner Bailey, were among the first members. Enthusiasm grew and culminated in an exciting "Benefit Entertainment" in Higgins Hall, with talent contributed by members of the Summer Schools staff, and with proceeds amounting to \$137. And the Chautauqua Bird and Tree Club ended its first season with 275 members and \$260!

The reason for this burst of success is not hard to find. The Chautauqua program in 1913 was as vital and inspiring as ever. Prominent speakers appeared on the platform, great music was heard, the lake was still beautiful, most of the primeval trees still stood. But tall houses were crowded onto the tiny tent lots, narrow streets wound muddily around and over the roots of the trees, the South Shore dump daily grew larger and more unsightly, public buildings stood up gaunt and bare without foundation planting, summer people brought their pet cats along for vacations and went home and left them behind to prey upon the birds. The Bird and Tree Club filled a need.

By the second year the Club had a definite program. Meetings were held three mornings a week, with inspirational talks on the care and study of trees and birds; pleasant social affairs are noted; and perhaps most important of all, concrete, practical measures to keep and restore Chautauqua's original beauty were taken. The first trees to replace those destroyed, had been planted the winter before, a row of maples on the Plaza in front of the

Post Office. Mr. Paul, professor of Forestry in the Summer Schools, had listed the trees of Chautauqua, and Mr. L. J. Hawk had labeled them. Fifty dollars was voted for the purchase of young trees to start a nursery on land on the Overlook given by the Institution. The first of the notices to cat owners to take their pets home with them appeared in the Daily. The Institution made a solemn promise to control dumping at the south end of the grounds, and the Club had acquired an official emblem designed by Louis Agassiz Fuytes, renowned naturalist-painter.

From that time on the Chautauqua Bird and Tree Club has consistently developed these three avenues of interest—a sufficient amount of sociability; regular meetings with speakers of repute presenting all the facets of Nature Study; and a tremendous and ever-increasing responsibility for the beautification of the physical Chautauqua.

Each season has seen pleasant hospitality extended to distinguished guests. The most outstanding of these affairs in the history of the Club occurred in the summer of 1929, the year of the Lewis Miller Centenary, when the Club honored itself in giving a reception for the children and grandchildren of Mr. Miller. This was held in the Bird and Tree Club Garden. Mrs. Robert Miller, serving as president after an absence of several years, welcomed the guests. In the receiving line were numerous members of the Miller family, including Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Edison, with their guests, Mr. Adolph Ochs of the New York Times, Mr. Alvin I. Findley of the Iron Age, Mr. Elmer A. Sperry, inventor of the Gyroscope, Mr. William H. McMasters, then President of Mount Union College, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford, and other distinguished persons.



The Club particularly enjoyed the opportunity to entertain in its own garden. For years it had been a sort of homeless waif. The first meetings in 1913 were held in the Amphitheater at seven o'clock in the evening, and "running on until the time for the evening program," one record says. For several seasons three classes a week were held in or in front of Normal Hall, with other meetings in a tent on the Overlook, or in a "Tent-in-the-Woods," or in Alumni Hall. In 1918, the upper room in the Pier Building was turned over for their use, and Miss Jones, still the unofficial club mother, arranged for windows to be installed on the north and east sides. Evening lake breezes were evidently too much, even for the Bird and Tree-ers.

In 1924, Mrs. C. M. Wilkes presented Smith Wilkes Hall to the Institution as a memorial to her family and her husband. She stipulated that the Bird and Tree Club should find there a permanent home, and designated the room at the rear of the platform as the official meeting place of the Executive Board. Later, the Club, with the co-operation of the Institution, landscaped the vacant property lying between the Hall and the Hotel Annex. Since then, Garden and Hall together have furnished the setting for a large part of the Club activities. Picnics and receptions and dedications have taken place in the garden. All the phases of the art and science of Nature have been presented at the regular meetings in the Hall, and generally the speakers have been "experts" in their fields, in accordance with the ideals of the founders. Only a few can be mentioned—T. Gilbert Pearson, of the National Association of Audubon Societies; Dr. Clyde Fisher, of the American Museum of Natural History; Dr. Roy Waldo Miner, Dr. Raymond Ditmars,

Professor William Alexander, Jack Miner, Dr. Arthur Allen, Dr. Van E. Kilpatrick—representatives from Government agencies interested in Conservation, from Federated Garden Clubs, from City Planning Commissions, from Highway Beautification groups, landscape architects, Forest Rangers, ornithologists, phot-naturalists, geologists, apiarists, plain dirt gardeners—all have given inspiration.

And early and late, in season and out, the practical work of beautification has steadily proceeded. In 1913, it was very jolly and inspiring for the members to march in single file from the tent on the Overlook to the South Shore, each person carrying a willow withe which he planted near the rubbish dump, and a cloud of willows to this day bears witness to the soundness of the idea. But these amateurish, though well-intentioned, efforts were soon superseded by planned, supervised projects, and wages for a gardener or a forester began to appear in the treasurer's reports. The first so-called "zone of beauty" which the Club undertook to create comprised the area around the Traction Gate. Trees and shrubs and flowers were planted inside and outside the gate and fence and along the highway boundary of the parking lot. Year by year, new zones were added—Alumni Hall, the Hall of Philosophy, the Hall of Missions, the Summer Schools Dormitory; gardens were planted—the Ruth Norton Garden, near the Dormitory, named for the daughter of Mrs. O. W. Norton, a kind and generous friend of the Club; the Louise Miller Garden near the Road Gate, in memory of Mrs. Robert Miller, and other less formal plantings. The responsibility for future upkeep was assumed in all these new beautifications.

Constantly, too, the Club found itself in-



volved in new ramifications of its original purposes. In 1917, the members who wintered in New York formed the New York Bird and Tree Club, which raised \$13,000 to purchase fruit trees to be planted in rehabilitated France. In 1924, when the garden movement was beginning to sweep the country, Mrs. Charles Greer introduced garden programs and suggested a greater emphasis on garden-making in Chautauqua. A Garden Department was created, from which stemmed a series of Flower Shows. Starting with a few tables of Artistic Arrangements at the Country Fair, the idea grew until quite professional shows resulted, with most interesting exhibits from the Chautauqua School, entries from various commercial firms and one year a miniature Nature Trail of unsurpassed beauty. A real Nature Trail had been one of the aforementioned ramifications of the Club program. Mrs. Frank Grove, as chairman of the Nature Study Department, had envisioned an "outdoor museum" in the South Ravine, with specimens of the flora of the region in naturalistic settings. With the help of like-minded enthusiasts, and in the face of great discouragement, she created, and is still creating, a distinctive beauty spot of great educational value.

Protection of birds has been of constant interest. Diatribes against the cat appear in the 1913 minutes and more or less consistently throughout the years, even up to 1940. At first, the sparrow was named as the greatest menace to the songbirds—later the starling was the culprit. Red Squirrel's record as a criminal is unbroken. Martin houses were discussed in 1914, bat towers in 1939. Lists of berry-producing shrubs appeared with regularity in the Chautauquan Daily, and still do. In 1922, Dr. Mary Jewett reported that through efforts

of her committee, Chautauqua had been legally declared a Bird Sanctuary. In 1939, legal opinion held that Chautauqua could not be a Bird Sanctuary as long as certain kinds of dogs were admitted. The question still rages.

Sometimes an institution is described as the "lengthening shadow" of a certain man. Certainly the Bird and Tree Club is the "lengthening shadow" of certain women. In the beginning, there was Mrs. Robert A. Miller, with her radiant personality and great love of people and life. Just out of sight behind her stood Miss Henrietta Ord Jones—"The Little General" someone called her in a 1914 meeting. With her fertile mind and her unbounded energy and optimism, she supplemented the leadership of Mrs. Miller, and together they made Chautauquans catch a glimpse of their vision. Mrs. Miller served as president for ten years, then was made Honorary President. From 1925 to 1929 Mrs. W. W. Boyd presided, a woman of great intellect and executive ability.

At the opening meeting in 1926, Mrs. Boyd reported that approximately \$5,000 had been received by the Bird and Tree Club from Old First Night gifts of the year before, \$3,000 of which had been earmarked immediately for tree care and surgery by the Davey Tree Company. Previously, the Club had contributed \$2,200 toward the fee of Harries, Hall and Kruse, Landscape Architects and Town Planners, who had drawn up a comprehensive plan for a model Chautauqua. A similar sum had been expended upon Smith Wilkes Garden. The treasurer, Miss Ella Stephenson, reported in 1930 that the Club had spent \$18,235 for the beautification of Chautauqua in the period since 1925. A bill for \$677.40 for a daylight screen merited only a line in the minutes of a certain meeting.



In 1929, Mrs. Robert Miller returned as president, and served through 1932. The next year Mrs. Thomas A. Edison came back to Chautauqua as a regular summer resident, after many years of frequent but irregular contact, and consented to accept the presidency of the Bird and Tree Club. The Club had always been considered a sort of "child" of the Miller family. Many members had belonged and contributed. (In 1928 there were eight members from two generations of the Miller family, six from three generations of the Nortons, and twelve from four generations of the Kings.) Mrs. Edison herself had been an exceedingly generous contributor to Bird and Tree Club causes; her gift of \$2,000 in 1927, with an added \$500 from her sister, Mrs. Hitchcock, had been sufficient to restore the chimes in Miller Bell Tower. Now she returned, bringing fresh vision to the problem of beautification, and a plan which she had carried out successfully in other communities.

This plan included the division of the Assembly Grounds into Districts, each District largely responsible for its own financing and improvement. Each District was to be divided into smaller component parts—neighborhood groups—to include every cottage holder within the boundaries. Upon these smaller groups, if allowed, would fall the privilege of beautifying all vacant or uncared-for property in the neighborhood; all Districts would be under the direction of a chairman of District work. The plan had been presented by Mrs. Edison in 1931 and carried into effect in 1932, when she became president.

It is impossible to give an adequate picture of the results. The spirit of friendship and co-operation engendered under the working out of this plan in friendly rivalry has reacted to

the good of Chautauqua far beyond the scope of the Bird and Tree Club, and the actual results in day-to-day physical improvement have been amazing. Various systems of reward have been tried. Blue wooden markers for noticeable improvement were superseded by a system of points on a score sheet, with a silver cup donated by Mrs. Edison to the District scoring the most points. Other methods may yet be tried. But it seems as though Chautauquans were almost ready to work for this District plan, without stimulus of any kind, for the sheer joy of seeing beauty where there has been no beauty.

Incidentally, this District organization provided the nucleus for an effective group of workers during the "Save Chautauqua" campaign of 1936-38. In one year over \$38,000 was credited to the efforts of the club, largely through the sentimental sale of trees—and aside from cottage owners' contributions and the like.

All of this has not interfered with the general Club program of beautification. New problems are constantly being pressed upon the Planting Committee and constantly that committee seems to find ways to meet them. For more than twenty years, Mrs. Lillian Smith has directed this department. Much of her work, most of it, has been done in the lovely fall days when summer Chautauqua has gone its way—or in the early spring. She is no longer able to preside over the planting of each individual shrub and tree; she delegates that to the able Mr. James Pringle, but her directing hand is still felt.

No organization, such as the Bird and Tree Club, can live by its own efforts alone. It is only a part of a great whole, and is eternally in the debt of all the other parts. It must



have the friendly co-operation of other agencies and of many individuals. First of all, the Institution itself, through its officers and trustees, has always been ready to give kindly ear to the importunities of zealous Club administrators, has acceded generously when it could, and denied gently when it couldn't. The Club has leaned heavily upon the Science Department of the Summer Schools, from the days when Dr. Vaughn McCaughey and Dr. Samuel Schmucker prepared "Simple Keys" to the birds and trees of Chautauqua, through the period of Miss Dorothy Schmucker's six-thirty a. m. "bird walks," down to these later years of Dr. V. W. Jackson's interest and service in ways too numerous to recount. The winter residents of Chautauqua have carried on many out-of-season activities in which the Club was interested, such as winter feeding of the birds, building and erecting bird houses, conducting bird censuses, and so on. Wherever possible, Mr. George R. Raynor has fitted the Nature Study projects of the Chautauqua School into the Club program.

Many organizations have contributed to the success of the Bird and Tree Club, and many individuals. The records sparkle with the names of generous contributors to this purpose or that—\$1 for a bird house prize for the Boys' Club, \$10 for a C. L. S. C. tree, \$50 for tree surgery, \$100 toward the program, \$500 for a garden, \$1,000, \$2,000, ad infinitum. Under Mrs. Edison's leadership, the weekly programs have taken on new beauty and meaning. She has largely financed that part of the work. Since the days of Receivership and Reorganization, the Club has never been permitted to receive funds through Old First Night gifts, as the Institution's need has been greater. Perhaps the Chautauqua Bird and

Tree Club will never know greater justification than is shown by the fact that for the last two years, the Institution has set aside in its budget a specified sum for expert tree care.

Finally, the Club owes most of all, perhaps, to those silent members, those unsung heroes, who have created tiny spots of beauty in difficult places, who have served on obscure but necessary committees, who have accepted irksome offices without thought of praise, and without whom there could be no Bird and Tree Club program.

As we look around and realize that practically all Chautauqua is thoroughly "beautification-conscious," we must realize that it is only the start of a greater work which is the real aim of the Bird and Tree Club—as constantly emphasized and promoted by Mrs. Edison — to awaken young and old to the marvels that nature holds on every hand, from the heavens above to the sea and under the sea, and to open up paths into the sciences which cover every phase of nature and offer endless opportunity for study, for vacations, and for general enrichment.

At every meeting one hears something along one line, at least, of natural science. To beautify Chautauqua has been and is a great work but a greater work lies ahead, and the nature study work in the school and clubs for children and young people, fostered by the Bird and Tree Club, are a signpost pointing the way to this greater aim.

In this year of 1941, the Chautauqua Bird and Tree Club finds itself facing greater opportunity than ever before in its history. It can make no specific promises of things to come. It can only give a simple pledge, that, under such leadership as Mrs. Edison provides,



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and with such co-operation as friends and members have given in the past, it will continue to strive toward the ultimate goal of a Chautauqua perfect in its beauty.

In the words of an early dedication:

"May the Bird and Tree Club be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, whose leaf shall not wither, and whatsoever they do shall prosper."