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Those of us who have lived in New Bern for a span of 40 years or more still remember Swarthmore Chautauqua. Each summer, in front of the Moses Griffin building on our Academy Green, it pitched tent for a week and brought us good music, high class drama, and informative lectures.

In an era when radio and television hadn't come into being for the family living room, and outside entertainers rarely invaded the region of the Neuse and Trent, the Chautauqua was a temporary oasis of culture and amusement for hundreds of New Bernians.

Judged by today's standards, the performers may have been inferior, but we certainly didn't think so at the time. Most of the music was classical, and it was presented with impressive dignity. Plays included such things as Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew, and the lectures were by orators of national reputation.

Chautauqua week was a big event in the lives of New Bern's small fry. There were morning recreation sessions for youngsters who possessed season tickets, and an opportunity to appear in a play. You got a button to wear, and learned a song. The opening lines were "I am proud of my town, is my town proud of me?" All of us wanted it to be, of course.

The visiting entertainers were real troupers. The tent leaked around the poles, when there was a violent thunderstorm, and the drippings often got all over the string ensemble or the Swiss bell ringers. This didn't dampen their enthusiasm, apparently, and we discovered delightfully that moist notes could be as sweet as dry ones.

Once, when high winds were blowing, part of the scenery-supported by iron pipes-fell on the heroine of a very serious play. A length of pipe cracked her squarely on the head. The blow would probably have killed a bull but bless her heart she just sagged a little and kept right on with her lines.

Swarthmore Chautauqua, if memory serves us correctly, originated at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. The school was founded in 1864 by Friends, and opened in 1869. Devoted to arts, sciences, and engineering, it is now non-sectarian. Numerous other "chautauquas" played the small towns of America too.

However, neither Swarthmore Chautauqua nor any of the other touring groups was connected with the Chautauqua Institution on the wooded slopes of Lake Chautauqua, in western New York State. The Institution's sweeping success at its own location simply gave others the idea to take art to the tank towns.

Men and women from all parts of the United States still gather at Lake Chautauqua each summer for entertainment and study. In a single season the Institution has attracted more

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Clouds adorning September's sky,
Lonely notes of a sea gull's cry,
Solitude where waves meet sand,
As autumn gently claims our land.