



The Chautauqua Assembly at Ottawa's Forest Park appealed largely to white, middle-class women as depicted in this 1897 photo. The Ottawa Chautauqua was the first of these established west of the Mississippi, and the longest-running in Kansas.

A Congress of Women: The Woman's Council at the Ottawa Chautauqua, 1892–1914

by Sarah Bell

In September 1891, the *Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly Herald*, the monthly newspaper of the Ottawa Chautauqua, announced that “a great feature” was coming to the summer assembly: a convention of women’s clubs and societies from across the state that would bring together “such an assemblage of thinking and working women as has never been gathered in Kansas.” The convention, called the Woman’s Council, was considered “a congress, a representative body of all these organizations, where the members of each and all shall meet to compare notes, to tell what has been done and to devise good works.”¹ The Woman’s Council at the Ottawa Chautauqua coincided with the rise of the women’s club movement both in Kansas and across the United States. The first women’s clubs in Kansas started in the 1870s, and Kansas became a charter member of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs when that organization was founded in 1890. Between 1892 and 1914, the Ottawa Chautauqua management positioned its assembly as a physical and textual space for the growing movement of women’s clubs with the development of the Woman’s Council. More significantly, the Ottawa Chautauqua became a platform to advance women’s rights and political equality in Kansas, particularly during women’s campaigns for the vote in 1894 and 1912. Through its interaction with the woman suffrage and women’s club movements, the Ottawa Chautauqua actively helped women in changing the political and social atmosphere of Kansas and contributed to women’s work in the state through the development of the Woman’s Council.

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1. “The Woman’s Council,” *Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly Herald* (hereafter *Assembly Herald*) 13 (May 1892): 2; “Social Science and Women’s Department,” *Assembly Herald* 13 (September 1891): 4.

The Ottawa Chautauqua was one of many independent assemblies across the country modeled after the original Chautauqua in New York, which began in 1874 when Methodists John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller started a Sunday school training camp for their predominantly female teachers in western New York state. Women were the primary focus of the Chautauqua's programming from the beginning, but they were not the only attendees; men and children participated in the Chautauqua as well. As with other social movements of the period, the audience was, by design, primarily the white Protestant middle class. Vincent and Miller modeled their assembly after the outdoor camp meeting of evangelical Methodism but with less of the revivalist, emotionalist style and more emphasis on Bible study, musical entertainment, lectures, and recreation. The assembly, named Chautauqua after the county of its birth, was such a success that it became an annual event, and more than one hundred independent Chautauquas that emulated the New York Assembly sprang up across the country. Although the Chautauqua began as a primarily rural movement focused on moral education and self-improvement through programs on music, art, religion, and culture, its content quickly expanded to include topics such as science, literature, temperance, and woman suffrage. Around the turn of the twentieth century it attracted numerous prominent speakers, including William Jennings Bryan, Susan B. Anthony, Theodore Roosevelt, and Booker T. Washington. Many of these orators not only lectured in New York but also traveled across the country to speak at independent assemblies, bringing a level of celebrity never before experienced to many small towns. While the New York Chautauqua continues to present day, the height of the movement came to an end during the 1920s, in part due to the rise of radio, movies, and automobiles.²

The small body of scholarship on Chautauqua history tends to focus on New York, yet the Chautauqua's expansion geographically demonstrates the significance of this movement, which influenced millions of lives during its more than sixty years of widespread popularity. Chautauqua's expansion occurred during a critical period of U.S. history that featured the growth of industry and cities, a massive influx of immigrants, and the rise and fall of the Populist and Progressive movements. Moreover, this period marks a time when the country was grappling with how to define what it meant to be a civilized

2. Theodore Morrison, *Chautauqua: A Center for Education, Religion, and the Arts in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 31.

society and what were the rights of its citizens. Within this debate regarding the future of America was the ongoing discussion of the role of women in society. The Chautauqua provided its white middle-class participants with rhetoric and tools to ease their anxieties about the rapidly changing times.³

The Ottawa Chautauqua was the second independent assembly formed after the New York Chautauqua and was the first to be founded west of the Mississippi. Because of its early history within the movement and the quality of the speakers who lectured on the platform, the Ottawa Chautauqua claimed to be the best assembly in the West. Ottawa's distinction was echoed by outsiders, including a Rev. George Hays, who traveled to ten assemblies during the summer of 1890 and claimed that Ottawa was "among the very best of them all" and that its intellectual discussions were equal to those of the New York program. The Ottawa Chautauqua management looked to the New York Chautauqua as a model for its program, but the managers were also aware of the leadership role of Kansas in many of the country's social reforms, particularly temperance and woman suffrage. Mary Elizabeth Lease, a Populist orator and women's rights advocate, wrote in 1893, "[Kansans] are quick to adopt improvements, entertain new ideas, make sweeping and radical changes when needed, and in fact are ready at all times to push the car of progress along the path of the centuries."⁴ Many of the changes that Lease identified were due to the thousands of women in Kansas who organized and asserted their right to a voice in public policy.

While women were a primary focus of the Chautauqua assembly's programming, they had historically been treated as passive recipients of moral education by the all-male management. By the 1890s, women were no longer content with this passive position and had become vocal participants in determining the topics on the platform through their roles as lecturers, authors, and attendees. The topics pushed for by women at many Chautauqua assemblies reflected what was occurring nationally with the rise of the women's club movement, women's

3. For the movement in Kansas, see Roland M. Mueller, "Tents and Tabernacles: The Chautauqua Movement in Kansas" (PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, 1978); F. W. Brinkerhoff, "The Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 27 (Winter 1961): 457-468; W. Stitt Robinson, "Chautauqua: Then and Now," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 22 (Summer 1999): 132-141.

4. Mary Elizabeth Lease, "Do Kansas Women Want the Vote?" *Agora* 2 (January 1893): 197; Rev. Geo. P. Hays, "Western Summer Assemblies," *Assembly Herald* 11 (June 1890): 5; *Assembly Herald* 17 (June 1896): 7.

growing participation in temperance, and the emergence of woman suffrage. During the 1890s, the Ottawa Chautauqua's summer program and monthly newspaper began to reflect the growing women's social and political movements occurring in Kansas and across the country. With the development of the Woman's Council, Ottawa positioned itself as an intellectual center for the rapidly growing club movement in Kansas. Understanding the impact that this single assembly had on women's political activism and intellectual development provides a better understanding of the entire Chautauqua movement and the progress and challenges that women faced in their efforts to gain public recognition and participation at the turn of the twentieth century.

Ottawa had a successful thirty-year Chautauqua from 1883 to 1914 that brought in prominent speakers and hosted audiences of thousands along the Marais des Cygnes River in Forest Park. Ottawa, located approximately twenty-five miles south of Lawrence and fifty miles southwest of Kansas City, was conveniently situated on the Santa Fe Railroad, allowing access to travelers from across Kansas. Newspapers across the state advertised and wrote about the Ottawa Chautauqua, encouraging readers to take advantage of the affordable round-trip ticket prices.⁵ Visitors came from the nearby towns of Lawrence and Kansas City, the southeast town of Moline, and even as far away as the north-central Kansas town of Burr Oak, 240 miles from Ottawa. Ottawa's Forest Park was an important feature in the selection of this town for a Chautauqua. "What other park or place is so competent," asked the *Assembly Herald* in September 1891, "so beautiful and so favorably situated to accommodate large numbers and great audiences?" Ottawa had all the elements to successfully host a large gathering, not the least being its reputation as a "moral town."⁶

While Ottawa was eventually synonymous with the word "Chautauqua" for people living in Kansas, it was not the first town in the state to host the assembly. After Chautauqua founder John Vincent traveled to Kansas in 1878 to lecture at the Kansas State Sunday School Association in Emporia, where he gave a glowing report on the success of the New York Chautauqua, Kansans decided to start their own assembly at Bismarck Grove. From the outset, Bismarck Grove appeared to be the

ideal location for a Chautauqua. It was located on the Kansas River, about two miles northeast of Lawrence, and had temporary structures for dining, sleeping, and lectures; the capacity for thousands of audience members; and a "beauty and adaptability" of its grounds that were ideal for large gatherings.⁷ Bismarck Grove is most prominently remembered for its association with temperance meetings, a connection that would have been favorable for a Chautauqua, as the founders were strict prohibitionists and enforced temperance at their assemblies. In September 1878, Bismarck Grove hosted the national temperance camp meeting, one of the largest temperance meetings in the West and the first large gathering in the grove. The success of this site among temperance advocates prompted Rev. J. E. Gilbert to use it for the first Chautauqua assembly in Kansas in 1879, but after three years, attendance was not as high as the management desired. According to newspaper reports, the people of Lawrence did not seem interested in the assembly or its speakers, and this lack of interest drove the Chautauqua assembly out of Bismarck Grove. The Chautauqua next moved to Topeka's Hartzell (now Garfield) Park, "a well shaded grove, of forty acres," for the 1882 summer session.⁸ Despite being conveniently situated along transportation lines, Hartzell Park held only one Chautauqua before the assembly moved for a third time.

In 1883, Ottawa became the third and final host of the longest-running Chautauqua in Kansas. One of the reasons for its success, in contrast to Lawrence and Topeka, was the support of the town for hosting an annual Chautauqua. The Chautauqua management signed a ten-year contract with the city of Ottawa in 1885 that the two parties renewed in 1895 and 1905. The contract allowed the Chautauqua to use Forest Park and its buildings for its annual meetings and ensured that the city would maintain and repair the buildings for up to \$2,000 in expenses over the entire ten years. The city permitted the Chautauqua to charge a gate fee, and the Chautauqua had to hold a ten- to fifteen-day annual meeting each summer for ten years. The Chautauqua had to keep Forest Park clean and safe, pick up litter, enforce sanitary regulations, take care of buildings, and hire its own police officers. The Chautauqua management also had to agree "to put forth, in every way, all reasonable efforts to make its

5. "Local News," *Clyde (KS) Herald*, June 17, 1896.

6. "Sunday School Assembly of Kansas and Missouri," *Kansas State Sunday School Journal* (January 1, 1883): 8; *Assembly Herald* 13 (September 1891): 3.

7. Jim L. Lewis, "Beautiful Bismarck: Bismarck Grove, Lawrence, 1878-1900," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 35 (Autumn 1969): 225-256.

8. "Western Chautauqua," *Wichita Eagle*, June 29, 1882.



Middle-class comforts were made available to attendees while camped for the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly in 1886. These ran for ten to fifteen days during the summer and included food vendors on the grounds so that attendees need not worry about doing their own cooking. Courtesy of Franklin County Historical Society.

meetings a success, both in attendance and interest; and that it will employ suitable and competent persons to give entertainments and to lecture and give instructions to various classes.”⁹ The city profited from the visitors who attended the Ottawa Chautauqua, so there was an incentive for it to provide an accommodating space for the assembly.

The Ottawa Chautauqua ran for ten to fifteen days each summer, offering music, lectures, and educational programs to people from across the state of Kansas and western Missouri. The ticket prices were affordable for the middle class, with season tickets costing \$1.50 and day passes only 25 cents in 1896. Most visitors rented tents, which cost \$5 for the season in 1896.¹⁰ There were food vendors on the grounds, so visitors did not need to worry about cooking. The Ottawa Chautauqua

appealed to different groups by highlighting topics such as labor, children, temperance, and the Grand Army of the Republic. The managers sometimes invited special guests; for example, in 1896, they sent special invitations to railroad men and their families to attend the assembly on Labor Day. In 1908, the Woman’s Council demonstrated the fireless cooker and especially encouraged farmers’ wives to attend. Not everyone could make time to visit the Chautauqua during the week, but many visitors, including farmers, came on Sundays. Newspapers estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 people attended the Ottawa Chautauqua to hear popular orators such as William Jennings Bryan and Senator John James Ingalls, although the management estimated that Forest Park could “comfortably accommodate” 25,000 people.¹¹ Thus, the Chautauqua would have created an exponential

9. “Ordinance No. 292,” *Ottawa Herald*, June 13, 1895.

10. *Clyde (KS) Herald*, June 17, 1896. In 2018 dollars, these prices would be approximately \$42 for a season ticket, \$7 for a day pass, and \$140 for a tent.

11. *Assembly Herald* 13 (September 1891): 3; “Closing of the Assembly,” *Ottawa Herald*, July 2, 1896; “On Second Week,” *Ottawa Evening Herald*, June 22, 1908.

summer increase in the inhabitants of Ottawa, which had a population of 6,000 in 1896.

Women were the primary attendees at Ottawa and represented many different groups and organizations. Carrie Daughters, a clubwoman from Lincoln, Kansas, observed “the surplus of women over the men” during her visit to Ottawa in 1899. Through an examination of the women’s clothing and their chosen activities, Daughters identified the young schoolteacher, the stylish clubwoman, the intelligent-looking Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle woman, and the elderly Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) woman, “but the club woman was most in evidence.”¹² The abundance of clubwomen at Ottawa in 1899 indicates that the Woman’s Council had successfully positioned itself as the congress for Kansas women’s clubs.

The women’s club movement was one of the defining social movements of the 1890s. Women’s clubs were organized by middle-class women and were typically racially segregated. The creation of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1890 and the National Association for Colored Women in 1896 provided a means for white and black middle-class clubwomen at the state and regional levels to formalize their work in civic and social affairs through national organizations.¹³ The New York Chautauqua observed this growing movement of women and decided to add a special section to its monthly publication, the *Chautauquan*, for topics especially devoted to women’s interests. In 1890, the New York Chautauqua started the Woman’s Council Table, which would “advise and suggest, warn and encourage” women readers. The Ottawa Chautauqua observed New York’s successful program for women and asserted, “No more efficient aid to the advancement . . . of women exists than the work of the Woman’s Council in connection with the Chautauqua New York Assembly.”¹⁴ The managers of the Ottawa Chautauqua believed that they could provide a similar level of advancement for women and even impact the social movements of women across the country with the development of their program: “Our state has long stood high in the fame and genius of men. The future symposium of our national women will most assuredly

have a Kansas cast to heighten the beauty of both form and feature.”¹⁵ The Ottawa Chautauqua had been providing a restful environment and educational programming to its female visitors for almost ten years, but with the addition of the Woman’s Council, the management anticipated an increase in female attendees, as it was focusing especially on the interests of women. The creation of the Woman’s Council in 1892 meant that “the women will do more for the Assembly and the Assembly will do more for them.”¹⁶

Under the jurisdiction of the new Social Science and Women’s Department, the Ottawa Woman’s Council provided discussions and topics of interest for the women of Kansas in both the pages of the *Assembly Herald* and the summer program. The *Assembly Herald* published a club directory to better acquaint the clubwomen with each other, calling on its readers to send in information “so that the *Herald* may grow into a club medium through which the club women of Kansas may talk to each other.”¹⁷ By providing a space where white middle-class women of Kansas could converse and learn from each other, the Ottawa Chautauqua broadened the influence of the women’s club movement throughout the state. Through the physical space of the Ottawa Chautauqua and the textual space of the *Assembly Herald*, the Woman’s Council brought women together and then sent them out to spread the knowledge of club life for women among their towns, “that the seeds of organization may be scattered broadcast over our beautiful prairies, resulting in a woman’s club in every town, village and school district in the state.”¹⁸

Carrie Prentis, wife of the notable Kansas journalist and editor Noble Prentis, managed the Social Science and Women’s Department and the Woman’s Council at the Ottawa Chautauqua. Prentis, who had experience organizing women’s clubs across Kansas, was superintendent of women’s clubs at the Ottawa Chautauqua from 1885 to 1900. By naming her department the Social Science and Women’s Department, Prentis connected the Ottawa Chautauqua to the Social Science Club of Kansas and Western Missouri, which covered the same geographic boundaries as the Ottawa Chautauqua. Prentis wished to introduce each social science department to the other and both to the general public, “believing that such a course will benefit the Assembly, the club and all who are interested in the aims of both.”¹⁹ Prentis

12. “Something of Interest to Our Club—Women about the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly’s Woman’s Council,” *Lincoln (KS) Republican*, August 3, 1899.

13. Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1980), 119.

14. Editorial, *Assembly Herald* 13 (December 1891): 4; “Editor’s Outlook: The Advancement of Women,” *Chautauquan* 11 (July 1890): 474.

15. Editorial, *Assembly Herald* 13 (December 1891).

16. *Assembly Herald* 13 (February 1892): 7.

17. “To Clubs,” *Assembly Herald* 16 (September 1894): 1.

18. “Lectures and Entertainment,” *Assembly Herald* 13 (May 1892): 2.

19. “Social Science and Women’s Department”; “Assembly Notes,”

asked for all societies, clubs, and associations of women devoted to literature, art, domestic science, philosophy, or benevolence to write to her so that “all readers of the Assembly Herald and the great constituency of the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly may know what is being done with voice and pen and brain in ‘our neighborhood’ for the betterment of our lives as social beings.”²⁰ Prentis turned the *Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly Herald* into a communication center for women’s clubs across Kansas and western Missouri, connecting the Chautauqua’s promotion of moral education with support for social reforms.

Prentis took advantage of the Ottawa Chautauqua’s monthly newspaper to keep clubwomen across Kansas connected throughout the year, but the great appeal of the Woman’s Council was the physical gathering of women at the Ottawa Chautauqua each year. There, women could learn from the best women speakers, meet others who supported similar causes, and join groups of women. The Woman’s Council offered two sessions a day of lectures and discussions of “vital interest to all ‘women.’” The topics ranged from germs and sanitation to the concerns of children’s employment, advocacy for temperance, and support for women preachers. In 1896, a representative of the Woman’s Press Association spoke at the Woman’s Council on “The Fellowship of Journalism,” urging any woman who had an interest in journalism to join the group.²¹ In addition to the benefits of joining groups and hearing noteworthy women speak on a variety of topics, the Ottawa Chautauqua had a special headquarters for the Woman’s Council and Social Science Club, giving women a place to rest in between sessions. Their rest could not last too long, though, as they were urged to attend every session “of this great gathering,” both for their intellectual benefit and so that they could extend “true Kansas hospitality” to the speakers who had traveled so far to promote women’s interests.²²

By 1896, the Woman’s Council and the *Assembly Herald* had established their position as a congress for women’s clubs and reported that the newspaper had insufficient space to publish all the letters from women’s clubs that were sent to it. Over 170 clubs were listed in the *Assembly Herald*’s directory that year, yet the editors did not believe

that this number accounted for even two-thirds of the clubs in the state. While the *Assembly Herald* provided a means of continued discussion among the club members during the year, the annual summer program at the Ottawa Chautauqua was the height of the assembly’s mission to provide a physical and intellectual environment for these clubwomen. As the summer assembly drew closer, readers were encouraged to gather in Ottawa to receive both the physical and intellectual benefits of the summer Chautauqua. The managers wanted representatives of all club organizations to attend the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly in June, “where will be gathered, the largest assemblage of club women ever seen in the West.”²³ In addition to the physical beauty of Forest Park, the women would gain a respite from housework and the opportunity to discuss intellectual topics with each other: “Women most heartily enjoy the intellectual treat offered by the management, then the ten days opportunity to confer with each other; to discuss the topics offered in the Woman’s Council; to meet so many congenial friends; to learn something new of the work in hand, and the rest and freedom from the care of the household, make the 10 days’ outing a real pleasure.”²⁴ The Ottawa Chautauqua provided a space that enabled intellectual discussions while offering a reprieve from household chores—the ideal way for a white middle-class woman to spend her leisure time.²⁵

The women in these Kansas clubs helped determine the content of the Chautauqua program. In 1892, the Woman’s Columbian Club of Ottawa made a proposal to the Chautauqua management to have a Columbian Day on the upcoming summer program. The all-male officers “very cheerfully granted their request and named July 1st as ‘Columbian Day’ . . . [and] the board of managers very kindly tendered the columns of the *Assembly Herald* in order that the ladies may make known to the public their aim and object.”²⁶ The women’s aim was to promote the upcoming Columbian Exposition in Chicago the following year, with Ottawa and several other Woman’s Columbian Clubs contributing to the decorations and exhibits at the exposition’s Kansas building. The Chautauqua management had the final say in how the paper’s space was used, however. While

Ottawa Daily Republic, June 25, 1910.

20. “Social Science and Women’s Department.”

21. “Ottawa Assembly,” *Topeka Daily Capital*, June 18, 1896; “Assembly Topics,” *Ottawa Daily Republic*, June 2, 1892.

22. “Assembly Topics.”

23. “To the Club,” *Assembly Herald* 17 (April 1896): 2.

24. *Assembly Herald* 17 (May 1896): 4.

25. Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 102.

26. *Assembly Herald* 13 (March 1892): 7.



Chautauquas embodied ideals of respectability with program emphases on temperance, Christian teachings, and moral education. It is also evident in photos depicting refined activities such as tea-drinking. Courtesy of Franklin County Historical Society.

articles about women and women's clubs filled the pages of the *Assembly Herald* in the winter months, as summer approached, the paper returned to its primary objective of promoting the Ottawa Chautauqua. The prioritization of topics came through clearly in the March 1894 edition of the *Assembly Herald*, which stated that the club directory would be discontinued for the next few months to make room for "assembly news."²⁷ Women and the women's club movement were relevant sections in the periodical, but they remained secondary to the summer assembly program.

While the Woman's Council focused on how to increase the impact of the club movement, from the beginning, it also supported discussions of political equality and woman suffrage. At a time when the perception of women's clubs was that their members did not discuss politics or suffrage, the Woman's Council proved that women, and specifically clubwomen, were in fact discussing both subjects. A benefit of the Chautauqua was the respectability that it provided for discussing the radical

topic of suffrage. Woman suffragists needed to subvert socially acceptable activities into ones that supported their political involvement while still maintaining their respectability. The Chautauqua embodied respectability with its focus on biblical teachings, temperance, and moral education. Women visitors extended respectability from their homes by setting up a parlor tent at the Ottawa Chautauqua and drinking tea under the treetops.²⁸ This environment made discussions of political equality and woman suffrage acceptable for the numerous clubwomen who participated in the Woman's Council.

In its inaugural year at the Chautauqua in 1892, the Woman's Council hosted a three-day Suffrage Conference where women discussed how to ask the next session of the legislature for further extension of woman suffrage. Women had received municipal suffrage in 1887, and they

27. "Club Notes," *Assembly Herald* 15 (March 1894): 2; Kansas Board of Managers, *World's Fair, Report of the Kansas Board of World's Fair Managers: Containing Report of the Board of Managers, Kansas Exhibit* (Topeka, KS: Press of the Hamilton Printing Company, 1894), 53.

28. Michael L. Goldberg, *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 58. A *Souvenir History of Lawrence, Kansas, 1898* refers to the formation of the City Federation of Clubs, organized in 1895 with fourteen women's clubs. The book mentions an "unwritten law" that certain subjects not be discussed by the women's clubs: religion, politics, and woman suffrage. E. F. Caldwell, *A Souvenir History of Lawrence, Kansas, 1898* (Kansas City, MO: Lawton & Burnap, 1898), 127.



From re-created parlor tents such as this one from June 1907, the respectable environments made discussions of ideas and movements of the day, including political equality and woman suffrage, more acceptable. Courtesy of Franklin County Historical Society.

wanted more. Kansas women had first campaigned for woman suffrage in 1867, but they had been unsuccessful. Almost thirty years later, women had another opportunity for a suffrage amendment in 1894. National suffrage leaders campaigned in Kansas in 1867 and returned to Kansas for the 1894 campaign. Two of these prominent women were in attendance at the Ottawa Chautauqua's 1892 Suffrage Conference. Susan B. Anthony came to "inspire and to counsel," while Rev. Anna Howard Shaw was "to preach the doctrine of political equality in her electric fashion." While it was neither their first nor last visit to Kansas, it was the women's first time in Ottawa, "an honor for Ottawa never before enjoyed." The *Assembly Herald* proclaimed, "Woman's day with two such woman speakers as Miss Anthony and Miss Shaw should draw as large a crowd as did Senator [John James] Ingalls two years ago."²⁹ Anthony and Shaw spoke at the Tabernacle, the largest meeting space in Forest Park. Laura M. Johns, president of the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association, earnestly requested all state workers and friends of the movement to attend the 1892 Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly, as "this Conference will afford an excellent

opportunity for an interchange of thought, and ought to stimulate our work." Johns conducted sessions, Prentis facilitated discussions of the topic throughout numerous sessions, Anthony and Shaw lectured, and "the outgrowth of the conference was the resolution presented to the Republican state convention."³⁰ The Ottawa Chautauqua demonstrated that the Woman's Council would not simply be a place for women to gather and discuss; it would also be a place of action directly linked to the political activities of the state.

Political action was also evident with Ottawa's promotion of a petition to the Kansas State Legislature that was signed by 500 of the female attendees during the 1892 summer program. The petition called for the law to be amended to require that two women be appointed to the State Board of Control of Charitable, Penal, Reformatory, and Educational Institutions.³¹ The *Assembly Herald* urged every reader to clip the enclosed petition form from the newspaper, add their name, and forward it to the editor. The Ottawa Chautauqua again inserted itself into state politics during its summer assembly and continued to remain

politically relevant through its monthly newspaper.

Several months after Shaw and Anthony's visit to Ottawa, Carrie Prentis reported on the "fine work" of Johns and Anthony during the 1892 session to promote the submission of a resolution to the Republican convention, "a work that might have been done two years ago as well as now if our republican managers had used good judgment and saved the humiliation of the past two years."³² Prentis was referring to the Populist victory of 1890 that had suddenly upset the Republican legislative structure. The Populist Party's surprising electoral success in the historically Republican-dominated state sparked several years of political turmoil that extended to the woman suffrage movement. While state suffrage leaders such as Republican Laura Johns and Populist Annie Diggs attempted to form a nonpartisan women's organization, the growing tensions between the Populist and Republican Parties meant that the partisan loyalties of the women complicated the nonpartisan ideal of a united

29. "The Woman's Council," *Assembly Herald* 13 (June 1892): 2; "Kansas Suffrage Conference," *Woman's Journal* 23 (June 11, 1892): 194.

30. "Woman's Council," *Assembly Herald* 13 (July 1892): 4-5; the Johns quotation is from "Kansas Suffrage Conference," *Woman's Journal* 23 (June 11, 1892): 194.

31. "To the Legislature of the State of Kansas," *Assembly Herald* 13 (July 1892): 7.

32. "Social Science and Women's Department."

sisterhood within the woman suffrage movement.³³ Partisanship was not the only reason for the 1894 defeat of woman suffrage, but it did not help the women's campaign.

The women of Kansas were highly attuned to political partisanship and had regular discussions about partisan politics and its effect on woman suffrage. Mrs. S. A. Thurston, the president of Topeka's Republican Association, believed that the "breach between republicanism and populism is too wide to be covered by the suffrage plank." She pleaded in the *Assembly Herald* for women to conduct partisan work because a single party could not carry the amendment alone, and she urged women to stop focusing so much on women and to start convincing men. The partisanship in Kansas was not helped by national suffrage leaders, who disregarded the partisan divisions when appealing to the state's political parties for suffrage support. Anthony and Shaw worked with the Republican Party during their 1892 visit, but when the Republicans rejected woman suffrage in 1894, the suffrage leaders turned to the Populist Party for support. Rea McClure, the editor of the *Kansas City Journal*, reported that Anthony and Shaw's return visit to Kansas and their participation in the 1894 Kansas Populist convention was discussed in a number of meetings in the Woman's Council tent at Chautauqua. One woman, communicating her Republican loyalties, dismissively stated, "Miss Anthony is a suffragist—not a politician." "And so she is," McClure defended Anthony, "and if she lost sight of party in an eager desire for the realization of a dream of a lifetime, who that pauses to think will say that she would not have done the same?"³⁴ The debate over Anthony's political acumen reveals women's differing views on how to navigate partisan politics to their benefit.

Anthony and Shaw's return to Kansas in 1894 coincided with the state's second attempt to pass an amendment for woman suffrage and the Ottawa Chautauqua's third consecutive Suffrage Conference. The *Topeka Capital* reported on the assembly's suffrage program: "From 6:30 this morning to 10 o'clock, the all-absorbing theme was 'equal rights.' Not a prayer-meeting, not a normal class, not a conference passed without mention being made of woman's cause." Men, women, and children wore yellow badges. The Woman's Council headquarters was

adorned with yellow bunting and displayed the motto "She flies with her own wings." The featured speaker was a former governor of Wyoming Territory, John W. Hoyt, a Republican, who spoke from firsthand experience about the benefits of woman suffrage, as the territorial legislature of Wyoming had granted suffrage to women in 1869. Carrie Chapman Catt, one of the newest leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), fresh from her 1893 suffrage victory in Colorado, spoke of women purifying politics and exhorted her audience to be unconcerned about the votes of bad women, as good women outnumbered them.³⁵

The *Assembly Herald* reported that 1894 was "to the women of Kansas, the most important year since the territory became a state." Every individual woman needed to ask herself "what it means to have the power, the effectual power, of the ballot placed in her hands; the power to amend the present laws, and to create new laws for the better protection of her home, her children, her money." Acquiring that power required women to work, to hold conferences and plan campaigns, and to attend the Ottawa Chautauqua, as it "offers a fine opportunity for a great gathering of the women, who, as they listen to eloquent lectures, instructive Bible study and entrancing music, may consult with each other as to the best plans of fighting for victory."³⁶ The *Assembly Herald* urged every club to send a representative to the summer assembly or, better still, to "come *en masse*," as "this will be a woman's year in Kansas, and we should improve it."³⁷ It is worth noting that Naomi Anderson, an African American woman from Kansas who was a representative of the NAWSA, did not make an appearance either year at the Chautauqua assembly, although she spoke at numerous other cities and towns across Kansas in both 1892 and 1894. The separation of black women from white women working in the same space was a theme that ran consistently across these women-centered organizations in Kansas during the late nineteenth century, and the Ottawa Chautauqua propagated this separation with its emphasis on including only white women's groups within its Woman's Council.³⁸

33. Michael L. Goldberg, "Non-Partisan and All-Partisan: Rethinking Woman Suffrage and Party Politics in Gilded Age Kansas," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25 (Spring 1994): 23.

34. "Our Assembly," *Assembly Herald* 16 (August 1894): 2.

35. "Suffrage Day at Ottawa, Kan.," *Woman's Journal* 25 (July 7, 1894): 212.

36. "1894," *Assembly Herald* 15 (April 1894): 6–7.

37. "Club Notes," *Assembly Herald* 15 (May 1894): 6.

38. Lawrence B. de Graaf, "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850–1920," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 309; "Will Speak on Suffrage," *Kansas City Gazette*, August 13, 1894;



A sense of the gathering of large numbers of people is conveyed in this 1895 photo. Newspapers estimated some five to ten thousand people came to hear popular orators. Forest Park management believed they could accommodate closer to twenty-five thousand attendees. Courtesy of Franklin County Historical Society.

Even after the summer assembly ended, the Ottawa Chautauqua continued to promote the woman suffrage cause. As the November election drew closer, the *Assembly Herald* strongly justified women's vote and urged its female readers to participate in active campaigning: "This month of October, 1894, should be to the women of Kansas one of earnest, unflinching work for the cause of women. . . . Get a poll list from the voting precinct in which you live, and don't give up the work until every man on the list is talked to. . . . Use your tongues, women of Kansas, as never before."³⁹ The Ottawa Chautauqua was not simply a place to disseminate ideas; it instructed women in how to complete specific tasks while campaigning for the vote.

Despite their best efforts, the women of Kansas did not receive the vote that year. A November 1894 article in the *Assembly Herald* addressed "To Suffragists" reported on the campaign's defeat. Due to the negative effects of the extreme partisanship of the campaign, the article urged women to change their tactics and forget partisan politics as they continued to convince male voters of the necessity of woman suffrage.⁴⁰ While woman suffrage was no

longer a primary focus of the *Assembly Herald* after the 1894 defeat, the Woman's Council continued to support women's political activism in other ways.

Temperance was consistently a popular topic at the Ottawa Chautauqua, but in 1896, the rhetoric slightly but significantly shifted in the pages of the *Assembly Herald*. That year, the "enemies of prohibition" were challenging the sixteen-year-old state prohibition law. In 1896, the pages of the *Assembly Herald* were filled with concern over the "perilous and aggressive assault from the enemy" of temperance. In May, the *Assembly Herald* pressed all the "earnest temperance people of Kansas to mass together and attend the exercises" of Temperance Day that summer.⁴¹ The annual gathering of temperance advocates carried "peculiar significance" because of the attacks on prohibition. The Kansas WCTU (KWCTU) actively responded to the threat by organizing a temperance program at the Ottawa Chautauqua. The women held a series of discussions led by prominent men and women that covered the different phases of temperance work in Kansas. With this program, the KWCTU took a "'new departure' in the line of work usually undertaken, but this critical year in Kansas history demands aggressive

"Notice," *Winfield Daily Courier*, May 12, 1894; "Local Items of Interest," *Summer County Standard* (Wellington, KS), July 28, 1892.

39. "To the Women," *Assembly Herald* 16 (October 1894): 3.

40. "To Suffragists," *Assembly Herald* 16 (November 1894): 3.

41. "Special Days," *Assembly Herald* 17 (May 1896): 3.



Racial segregation was apparent in the Chautauqua movement with its focus on middle-class white women and their interests. Yet, as shown in this 1895 Ottawa Chautauqua photo, African American women can be seen in photographic evidence but often in a servant capacity. Courtesy of Franklin County Historical Society.

thought and action.”⁴² The women used the Ottawa Chautauqua platform to spread this message of action in the face of the enemy.

The increasing strength of women’s position at the Ottawa Chautauqua concerned some audience members. In a 1902 letter “From a Lady,” the presumably female author provided a list of opinions on the past summer’s program, addressing both positive and negative elements. While overall she found the assembly a success, she believed that the lecture platform “was greatly weakened by the feminine element.” Her primary concern regarding the female lecturers was that she could not hear them, and they lacked a certain “vitality and vivility [*sic*]” that a lecturer must have for a large Tabernacle event; the “ordinary ‘lecture-lady’ does not possess the essential elements in sufficient power.” The author continued, “Beware of allowing women’s club methods to dominate your general management in any way . . . we don’t want a woman’s Assembly, we want an Assembly for everybody, full of the fibre of men.” In case her feelings toward female leadership were still unclear, the author included a poem proclaiming, “This is the woman’s age—thank God for

such a crown! And yet the world is one great noisome fen; Before the wrongs we have to trample down. Dear Father, give us men!”⁴³ For this “lady,” masculinity and femininity signified very specific roles and positions in society. While not advocating that women remove themselves from the public sphere or stop attending a Chautauqua, she clearly indicated that a respectable woman would not take on a position as a public authority. The wording in “From a Lady” is similar to the rhetoric of antisuffragists, who fought to maintain gendered behavior but still wanted to improve social conditions in ways they considered appropriate to their sex.⁴⁴ This letter is one example of a critical voice and indicates that not everyone thought the Ottawa Chautauqua’s promotion of women’s public participation on the platform was a positive step for the assembly.

Women continued to participate in discussions at the Woman’s Council throughout the early 1900s, including the municipal ballot for women, teaching proper housework, and later, in 1913, what women needed to do

42. *Assembly Herald* 17 (June 1896): 7.

43. “From a Lady,” *Assembly Herald* 23 (November 1902): 6–8.

44. Thomas Jablonsky, “Female Opposition: The Anti-Suffrage Campaign,” in *Votes for Women: The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited*, ed. Jean H. Baker (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 119.



Shown in this undated photo is the entrance to Ottawa's Forest Park, a place touted as "so beautiful and so favorably situated to accommodate large numbers and great audiences."

now that they had the vote. In 1908, the Woman's Council acted as the representative of the women of Kansas and asked that the \$95,000 given to Kansas by the national government for damages to its citizens during the Civil War be applied to the building that would serve as a memorial to the state's Union veterans and house the State Historical Society and museum.⁴⁵ Sixteen years after it had begun, the Woman's Council continued to act as a congress for Kansas women through the dissemination of ideas and as a means for enacting change.

Just months before women won the vote in Kansas in 1912, the Ottawa Chautauqua held a debate on woman suffrage between Dr. Lucile Eaves, a political scientist and sociologist, and Dr. A. L. Bixby, the poet laureate of Nebraska. The *Assembly Herald* explained that it was "particularly fitting that the program should offer an opportunity to discuss this question" because of the state campaign for woman suffrage. Dr. Eaves was described as "one of the best informed women in America, a scholar and thinker and will be a representative that the women will not be ashamed of." In case there was any concern about her femininity, the readers were reminded that she

was "a womanly woman" with "an attractive manner." Despite Dr. Eaves's assured debating capabilities, the *Assembly Herald* hinted that there would be a touch of sensationalism, as Dr. Bixby, an antisuffragist, was "quite able to ruffle the feathers of his femin[in]e opponent."⁴⁶ The suffrage debate came two years before the end of the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly in 1914. While the Ottawa Chautauqua continued to promote woman suffrage in 1912, the differences between the 1894 and 1912 suffrage campaigns in the *Assembly Herald* are distinct. In 1894, under the guidance of the Woman's Council, women audience members were active participants in the campaign, and the *Assembly Herald* instructed its female readers in how to fight for victory. In 1912, woman suffrage provided the setting for a "novel" and "attractive" debate rather than a means for active campaigning by the Chautauqua's constituents.⁴⁷ The shift in the discussion of woman suffrage raises questions about the progressive nature of the Ottawa Chautauqua in terms of the advancement of women in politics, social reforms, and intellectual

discussions.

The limitations of progress at the Ottawa Chautauqua included issues of race. As inclusive as the Ottawa Chautauqua was of white women's clubs during the 1890s, it remained exclusive of the needs of black women in Kansas. The Ottawa Chautauqua reflected tendencies typical of this period, when black women were forced to use a separate platform to advance their concerns. The General Federation of Women's Clubs was a space designed for white women, as was the woman suffrage movement and the Chautauqua, all of which mostly shut out black women from participation. Thus, black women created their own clubs to have an outlet for education, self-expression, and social services.⁴⁸ Some white Kansas women lauded their black counterparts for creating separate organizations rather than attempting to join established white women's clubs, as many black women on the east coast were trying to do at the turn of the twentieth century. Lucy B. Johnston, president of

46. "Our Program," *Assembly Herald* 7 (June 1912): 2.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Marilyn Dell Brady, "Kansas Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, 1900-1930," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 9 (Spring 1986): 19.

45. "Ask for New State Building," *Ottawa Daily Republic*, June 23, 1908.

the Kansas State Social Science Federation in 1901 and later president of the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association, wrote a letter to the Kansas chapter of the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs congratulating the women on their "independent, progressive spirit" in organizing their state federation and calling the Kansas women more enterprising than their eastern sisters.⁴⁹ White clubwomen could support black women—as long as they were in separate clubs. Racial segregation was also evident within the Chautauqua movement, where the participants were almost entirely white. African American women showed up in photographic evidence at the Chautauqua in 1895, but as servants waiting on a group of white women eating lunch.

While its progressive nature had limits, the Ottawa Chautauqua provided both a physical and an intellectual space for the white clubwomen of Kansas to discuss and actively participate in social and intellectual topics. The Chautauqua's promotion of women's social and political movements in both its physical space in Forest Park and the textual space of the *Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly Herald* indicates the significant role that it played in encouraging women's participation in suffrage, temperance, and women's clubs. By promoting women's organizations in Kansas, the Ottawa Chautauqua situated itself as a key player in both the political and reform atmosphere of the state. While continuing to adhere to the tenets of moral edification and uplift that were the Chautauqua ideal, the Ottawa Chautauqua also closely tied itself to the current issues of Kansas and the country, giving the assembly both a regional and a national significance in culture, politics, and reform.

For over thirty years, the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly provided culture, entertainment, moral uplift, and intellectual discussions for the people of Kansas. The audience included men, women, children, city residents, and farmers but excluded African Americans, immigrants, and other nonwhite middle-class groups. Women were just one of the groups on which the management focused, but that focus was significant for both women and the assembly. Women's involvement with the Ottawa Chautauqua gave the assembly a specific political and social agenda through its promotion of women's interests and reforms, and Ottawa's participation affected the

impact of these Kansas movements by giving them a platform. The Ottawa Chautauqua's role within the women's organizations of Kansas did not always remain the same, yet for a time, it situated itself within two dominant themes of white middle-class women's political and social involvement in their state: woman suffrage and the women's club movement. The connection to these groups provides insight into the Ottawa Chautauqua's perceptions of women and their changing public role.

Chautauqua founders John Vincent and Lewis Miller did not promote a specific political agenda in their original vision of the movement, yet the political aspects of some topics—namely, woman suffrage—included on the program affected the political nature of the independent Chautauquas. Ottawa's support of woman suffrage showed a tendency toward a Republican association, as evidenced by Prentis's comments on the fine work of Republicans in 1892 and women's concerns over Anthony's association with Populists in 1894. The aspiration of the Woman's Council to be a congress for the club movement paralleled the goals of Republican suffrage leader Laura Johns and Populist leader Annie Diggs, who strove without success to form a nonpartisan, united Kansas women's movement in the 1890s. These different political associations within the Ottawa Chautauqua, whether it was promoting a specific party or attempting to unify its members across partisan lines, reflect the dynamic political atmosphere of Kansas at the time. The political ties of the Ottawa Chautauqua require further exploration, as does the degree of influence that audience members had on the selection of platform topics and lectures. The political atmosphere of the Chautauqua may have been an effect of both the management's and the audience's interests.

Ottawa claimed to be the best Chautauqua in the West, and its work for the advancement of women was part of this claim. Its connection to and participation in women's social and reform movements in Kansas between 1892 and 1914 gives the assembly a significance that extends beyond its association with the national Chautauqua movement. By supporting the woman suffrage movement and the women's club movement, the Ottawa Chautauqua Assembly helped women change the political and social atmosphere of Kansas through the development of the Woman's Council. [KH]

49. Lucy B. Johnston, "Federation of Colored Women's Clubs," *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 14, 1901, 13.