

## THE REDPATH CHAUTAUQUA COLLECTION

University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections

Rick Altman, University of Iowa

Few areas of film history have been so systematically overlooked as the elusive realm of itinerant exhibition. From the 1890s to the 1950s traveling showmen periodically brought moving pictures to spectators interested in topics outside the mainstream of public entertainment, avid for a level of seriousness and erudition superior to that of theaters, or located in small towns lacking permanent projection facilities. Most traveling exhibitors signed season-long contracts with booking agents who sold their services to churches, charitable and fraternal organizations, or municipalities. Turn-of-the-century shows took place in churches, Lyceums, or opera houses; later, summer tent Chautauquas and public schools were the venues of choice. Throughout this period, traveling exhibitors made or commissioned many of their films. Often uncatalogued and ignored by historians, these films were almost uniformly documentary in nature, concentrating on local events, little-known portions of North America (including the newly established national parks and Alaska), foreign sites from European cities to the Panama Canal and the South Sea Islands, or unusual and exciting experiences such as sea rescues and big-game hunts. Just as important to early film exhibition – and just as ignored – as vaudeville and amusement parks, traveling lecture circuits have been almost totally excluded from film history.

This neglect has been partly caused by lack of available archival materials covering lecturers and their shows. One collection that deserves to be consulted is the University of Iowa's Redpath Chautauqua Collection. First organized in 1874 in the western New York town that gave it a name, a "Chautauqua" was a three to seven day meeting, usually in a tent, featuring lectures on topics of cultural interest, often accompanied by music and other uplifting entertainments. Organization into "circuit Chautauquas" began in 1904, with the booking of lecturers and other acts into circuits (on the model of vaudeville). For thirty years, until the Great Depression, circuit Chautauquas constituted one of middle America's most important gathering places. At its peak in the mid-1920s, circuit Chautauqua performers and lecturers appeared in more than 10,000 communities in 45 states to audiences totaling 45 million people. What the picture palace was to the city, Chautauqua was to the hinterlands. The Redpath Lyceum Bureau was the country's foremost booking office for circuit Chautauquas, totally dominating the Midwest. Now deposited at the University of Iowa, the Redpath Bureau papers include 648 shelf-feet of talent pamphlets, business records, correspondence, and photographs dating from 1890 to 1940. This is the largest collection of its kind in existence.

Thanks to the Library of Congress program on "American Memory," major portions of

the Redpath Chautauqua Collection are now available online, under the title "Traveling Culture: Circuit Chautauqua in the Twentieth Century." Online materials include 7,949 publicity brochures, promotional advertisements and flyers for 4,545 lecturers, teachers, preachers, statesmen and politicians, actors, singers and opera stars, glee clubs and concert companies, magicians, whistlers and other performers who traveled the circuits at the beginning of the 20th century. Each page of all 7,949 brochures can be displayed. Of particular interest to film scholars are the many pamphlets advertising the services of lectures who exhibited moving pictures, most of which they personally made in the off-season. These include everything from John J. Lewis's Passion Play films to Edward Burton MacDowell's films of the Panama Canal, the Fiji Islands, and Samoa. Other filmmaking lecturers represented include Arthur K. Peck, Arthur J. Pillsbury, Clarence Price, George Earle Raiguel, and A. W. Stephens. While most of their films were shot on location to document current events or disappearing civilizations, others involve narrative recreations, such as J. E. Comerford's recreations of sea rescues. The C. J. Hite Company exhibited Gaumont Chronophone synchronized sound films. All of this and much more can be located with the help of the search function included in the online collection.

The Redpath Chautauqua Collection may be consulted in the Department of Special Collections, located on the third floor of the University of Iowa Library. The Department is open from 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Monday to Friday, except on national and some University holidays; scholars visiting from a distance are urged to check service hours on the Department website (<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll>) or to communicate prior to their visit, preferably by e-mail at [lib-spec@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-spec@uiowa.edu). The Department's telephone number is 319/335-5921; the fax number is 319/335-5900. The Department generally does not have staff resources to search the record books or to make large numbers of photocopies for readers. A limited number of photocopies can be made from some of the materials in this collection.

The online collection may be found at:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/iauhtml/> or accessed through the University site ([www.uiowa.edu](http://www.uiowa.edu), select Libraries, go to specific Main Library unit, select Special Collections, select About Us, select Traveling Culture).