

Chautauqua and Mishawaka

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We look back one hundred years ago to find the roots of Martin Gardner's passions in later life. In the 1920's Tulsa, Oklahoma, was hot and the dust bowl was coming. With no air-conditioning people of means found ways to get out of town in the summer. This essay is about two remarkable places the young Martin Gardner spent his summers. These are both going strong today and have been visited for this article. There were other destinations not mentioned here.



In 1874 the Methodist church set up a camp meeting on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in western New York state. The church had many semi-permanent camp meetings in the East. This was different inasmuch as it was an educational mission. At that time, in the rural U.S., schools were not strong or not present at all. Sunday school teachers were called on Sunday afternoons to teach the children. This camp was meant to give the participants a general education that they could take back home. It quickly became focused on the Arts and Sciences. Soon, everyone wanted to attend. There was a park that was a reconstruction of Palestine and prayer meetings, but within decades, it was quite ecumenical.

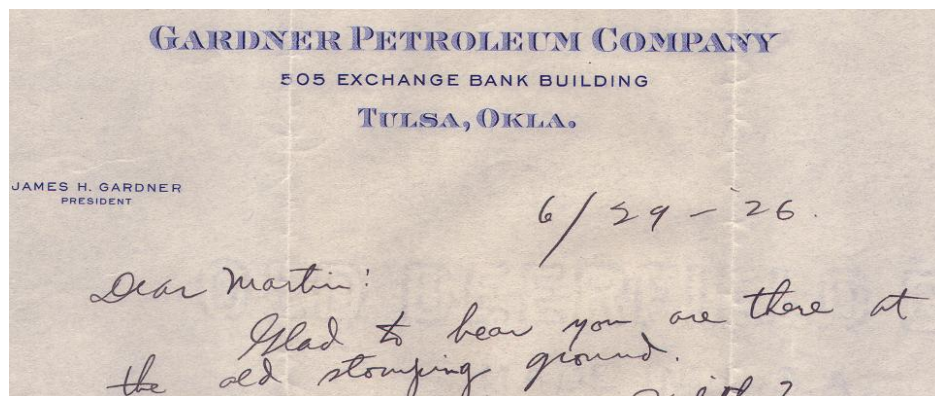


Within the first decade the camp sites (with up-scale tents!) gave way to people owning lots with summer homes built on them. A large hotel, the Atheneum, was soon built. By the 1920's the campus had the permanent structures of a small college. The summer population was several thousands, as can be seen by the amphitheater built in 1898:



It was an adult summer camp and appealed to the population that did not have the mental stimulation that we find more easily today. It was an age when many communities had cultural and literary societies. (The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle was founded in 1878.) The difference was that at Chautauqua there were lectures, classes, and entertainment all day long for an entire summer. There were classes and entertainments geared for children but that was not the main point.

A 1926 letter shows that after his father returned to work in Tulsa, Martin was left with his Mother (the two M's), his sister Judith and brother Jim (the two J's) and old ladies Mrs Hill and Mrs Hypes (the two H's) and his Gran and "goodness" (the two G's). Chautauqua was their "old stomping ground". While most participants were from the Northeast, the Tulsa contingent was substantial.



What was the influence on Martin? Beyond the immersion in an intellectual atmosphere was the direct influence on his budding interest in magic and his attitudes toward pseudoscience. John Mulholland was a perennial lecturer and a magician. He did a magic act in the auditorium, but also did exposés of spiritualism. It was not groundbreaking inasmuch as at the same time, Houdini toured the US doing magic alongside exposés. (Martin had seen such a Houdini show in Tulsa.) Further, at Chautauqua, Paul Fleming was another magician doing something similar. (At this time Martin was also influenced by the magician Dunninger, but did not meet him.)

THE SCIENCE OF SOOTHSAYING

MR. JOHN MULHOLLAND REVEALS
MANY TRICKS AND DECEPTIONS
PRACTICED BY MAGICIANS

Entertainment for Old and Young is
Offered in Two Entertainments —
The Serious Side of All the Related
Arts is Discussed and Much is Ex-
plained.

his hands a pack of cards — that old
standby of professors of mathematics
discussing permutations, combina-
tions, and probability — paid no at-
tention to the shufflings which it un-
derwent, but turned up the required
card no matter how subtly hidden.
As for writing, Mr. Mulholland did
not have to be within ten feet of a
slate or a card hidden in the wallet

(As a sign that the Chautauqua crowd was educated, the writer of the above article said “that old standby of professors of mathematics discussing permutations, combinations and probability, paid no attention to the shufflings ...”.)

“He revealed the vast amount of trickery which lies behind fortune-telling and most, if not all, so-called spiritualistic phenomena. Fortune-telling is not dying out.”

In 1938 Mulholland wrote *Beware Familiar Spirits* expanding his series of exposés, and in 1979 Martin Gardner wrote an introduction to it, wherein he recalls meeting and talking to Mulholland at Chautauqua. Mulholland soon went on to be the editor of the *Sphinx*, where Martin first published in 1930.

When Martin got older, he leaves the somewhat erudite Chautauqua and goes instead to a boys’ camp.

Camp Mishawaka
SINCE 1910



Camp Mishawaka, in northern Minnesota (not to be confused with one in Indiana), was not an educational institution. It was where you went to exercise and learn the joys of living out-of-doors. You had to swim in the lake twice a day, do group activities, and learn some survival skills. Since there were so many lakes there, it was encouraged, using portage, to expedition closer to Canada. "It was just a boys' camp, but one of the better ones." It must have been talked up locally because a Tulsa contingent went annually. A history of the camp was written in 1925, so we have a clear idea of what the daily routine was.

(Martin attended with his brother and sent his two sons there. He also sent his nephew there. His son James sent his sons there and then stayed for a decade as a counselor. The camp exerted a strong influence. It later became coed.)

It was not a religious camp, but in the 1920s it was unsurprisingly assumed that everyone was Christian. On Sundays, the counselors did sessions on moral behavior which were entirely optional. Before going there, Martin was not a Christian (to his Mother's chagrin). He has written "I had been reading literature from the freethought press and priding myself on my ability to see through religious shams." While there he fell under the influence of a religious counselor who happened to be from Tulsa. There was no point of conversion, but soon after his return he was attending fundamentalist churches. This took a strong hold on him, lasting through several years at the University of Chicago.

In 1932 he wrote this doggerel for the camp newsletter, *The Totem*:

One day at Mishawaka
When we were not taking tracka,
I hit the ball a blocka
On beyond the paddle racka.
But I tripped upon a rocka
As I ran to touch the sacka.
And of stars I saw a flocka
So teriffic was the whacka.
But still greater was the shocka
When Rush pulled a wisa cracka.

