

Chautauqua in the Minnesota State Prison

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IN PROVIDING information and entertainment for its inmates, with the aim of reformation rather than punishment, the Minnesota State Prison at Stillwater has kept abreast of most other penal institutions in the nation. In at least two respects it has been unique—it can make uncontested claim to the longest unbroken publication of a prison newspaper in the nation, if not in the world, and it maintained a Chautauqua reading circle long after the experiment had ceased in the few other prisons to try it, and after most of the once numerous circles on the outside had been disbanded.¹

In 1878 Bishop John H. Vincent of the Methodist church, one of the two founders of Chautauqua, organized what he called the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in order to continue during the winter months the benefits of learning he had begun to give at his summer camp and school, first set up four years before on the shore of Chautauqua Lake, New York. Intended as a form of adult education, of self-help to men and women who had been unable to attend college or who wished to continue learning after graduation, the CLSC, as the organization was usually designated, quickly developed in scores of Minnesota towns and villages. This was true particularly after 1883, when the establishment of two summer assemblies, at Mahtomedi on White Bear Lake and at Waseca, enabled members to have their "Recognition" or graduation exercises near home. A Minnesota editor called the circle the "grandest institution, next to the common school, known to this generation." by 1890 the CLSC had aroused so much enthusiasm in the state that the graduation class at the summer assembly in

¹ *Prison Mirror*, January 12, 1922; July 31, 1924; July 21, 1932. According to a brief note in the issue for October 26, 1933, the prison reading circle was forced to continue activities by itself because outside circles with which it was once affiliated had "fallen away."

Waseca in July, 1890, numbered fifty-five, gate receipts were nearly double those of the preceding year, and it was reported that "Chautauqua has a stronger hold on Minnesota than ever before."²

Undoubtedly it was this general spirit of enthusiasm for Chautauqua's home study plan that led, in part at least, to the establishment of the Pierian Circle in the Minnesota State Prison in 1890. Miss Lillian M. Gowdy, who was said to have been "the founder of the Chautauqua movement in this institution" and who gave the group its name, had been active for some time previously in a Minneapolis circle.³

Within the prison itself, however, preparation had been made for the organization of the group. Almost from its first number in 1887 the *Prison Mirror*, the newspaper published by and for inmates, had printed articles and editorials showing the relation between ignorance and crime, the value of industry instead of idleness, the need in general of sound education, and specifically the need of it as preparation for rehabilitation outside the prison. Then in March, 1890, the *Mirror* for the first time made an open plea for a reading circle, urging that the number of members be limited so that success on a small scale could be assured before anything more pretentious should be attempted. Whether or not the argument was influential, the idea was adopted. In April, 1890, permission to organize a circle was granted; in May books and twenty-four membership certificates arrived from headquarters at Chautauqua, New York; and in June the first meeting was held.⁴

The Pierian Circle was not the first organization of its kind in a prison, the Massachusetts Reformatory and the Nebraska State Prison having already joined the Chautauqua plan. At a time when almost any aid to prisoners was criticized as coddling, however, the Minnesota group was certainly enough of an innovation to indicate a definite trend toward liberalism on the part of Warden John J.

² *Waseca County Herald*, July 16, 1886; *Chautauquan*, 12:134 (October, 1890). A file of the latter periodical is in the library of the University of Minnesota. The newspapers used in the preparation of this article are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

³ *Chautauquan*, 32:310 (December, 1900); *Mirror*, September 4, 1890; June 28, 1900.

⁴ *Mirror*, March 27, 1890; June 28, 1900.

Randall, who gave permission for the founding. He had been prompted, he said, by his belief that "the moral side of a delinquent's nature can only be stimulated through the cultivation of his intellect" and that "educational forces are potent factors in dispelling the dreary monotony and anxious stress which necessarily prevail among men debarred from ordinary social intercourse, and unrestricted association with their fellowmen."⁵ In the long history of the Pierian Circle there is nothing to suggest that Randall erred in his reasoning.

Naturally there was supervision, with an assistant deputy warden attending each meeting, but there is no record of a supervisor needing to exercise disciplinary powers. Indeed Warden Albert Garvin, who succeeded Randall, declared that the work of the Pierian Circle disproved a claim made in 1891 that the increase of crime was due to reformatory rather than punitive measures in prisons. Many years later Warden Henry Wolfer reported that in the activities of the circle "Not a single case of abuse of power or misuse of privilege has come to my notice during the past ten years."⁶

Members of the Pierian Circle drew up their own constitution, planned their programs, elected new members, and expelled the few who failed to live up to their standards. In the beginning the only member of the prison management to give direct and constant help was the Protestant chaplain, the Reverend John H. Albert. Until he resigned in 1898, he served as critic, advising on such matters as the organization of papers read before the group, on accuracy, and on the tone of address. After his departure the president of the circle appointed a member at intervals of two months to act as critic. Among prison officials, the only ones to attend meetings regularly were the assistant deputy wardens who served as supervisors. The first of these, John S. Glennon, helped introduce music into the programs; and later supervisors varied the programs by occasionally playing phonograph records. Although they were honorary members of the circle, no other supervisors seemed to take part in the meetings, apparently considering that they

⁵ *Mirror*, March 27, 1890.

⁶ *Mirror*, July 13, 1905; December 17, 1891.

could be of greatest help by noninterference with its procedure. Judging by the vote of thanks they received, their course must have met with approval. This was true especially of Jonas W. Backland, for whose death while on duty in 1920 members expressed sincere grief, and of Leo F. Utecht, who had long association with the circle before becoming warden of the prison in 1937. Among wardens praised for their good will toward the circle were Wolfer, Randall, and General Charles McC. Reeve.⁷

Although obviously grateful for any praise on the part of the prison management, members of the circle seemed for many years to desire more keenly recognition and help from the outside. The circle in the Nebraska State Prison had such help. Led by T. H. Leavitt, the Chautauquans of Lincoln visited the prison frequently, invited teachers from the state university to lecture at circle meetings, and organized a prison reform association to aid prisoners before and after discharge. As a result, the editor of the *Mirror* declared, with a note of envy, the Nebraska circle was a thriving influence for good on the whole institution, whereas the Minnesota group struggled to maintain a precarious existence. To strengthen the contrast, the editor quoted from a letter written by a member of the Nebraska prison circle: "You may think I am to[o] enthusiastic, but if you had the counsel and example of outsiders that we have . . . and the approval of your warden and other officers that we have, you could not help but become enthusiastic and energetic in this work."⁸

The Pierian Circle, however, was by no means totally ignored by outsiders. About a month after its initial meeting, Bishop Vincent visited the prison, addressed circle members, and was presented with a cushion which the prisoners had made. A year later Mrs. S. M. I. Henry, prison secretary of the CLSC, talked before the circle and presented copies of seven books she had written. During the next few years she wrote occasional letters of encouragement. All that Mrs. Henry said or wrote shows her to have been an ardent "uplifter," urging the men "to conquer everything unholy that by

⁷ *Mirror*, July 13, 1905.

⁸ *Mirror*, January 8, February 19, 1891; April 4, 11, 18, May 2, 1895.

and by they may walk out either on this green earth or into the far off Jerusalem" and appealing to them to remember that "they were Chautauquans," and that they should "never by word or deed bring discredit upon its fair name."⁹ That the men could tolerate the tone of her remarks at all indicates that the moral element was an integral part of the Chautauqua movement and reflects a pathetic eagerness for attention from almost anyone outside the prison.

Within a few years the prison organization began to attract considerable attention. At certain special meetings a few local visitors, chiefly relatives of prison officials and their friends, appeared. Later, after musical talent was developed, first by a few benevolent Stillwater ladies and then by officially appointed band directors, more visitors attended the programs. On one occasion the president of the circle expressed pleasure over being able to entertain and declared that it "lent a zeal and infused new life in our studies to feel that the outside world was interested in our work and appreciated our progress."¹⁰

The overwhelming majority of visitors went to the prison to be entertained; very few were there to entertain or instruct the prisoners. At rare intervals an editor, a teacher, or a judge would give a lecture. Unquestionably the visitor who did the most for the men over a period of more than a year was Miss Elizabeth Hanson, a volunteer nurse in the Spanish-American War and later a Lyceum worker who traveled over the nation to entertain in high social circles or in mission halls and prisons. From February, 1912, to late May, 1913, she went to Stillwater frequently, sometimes alone, at other times with companions, to give readings before the circle or for all inmates. She "has taken a deep interest in the work of the Circle," the *Mirror* reported after a few of her visits, and "has freely and generously given of her time and talents to help it along." And again, "Each member feels that he has a friend and well wisher in Miss Hanson." After May, 1913, however, her visits ceased. Apparently she moved elsewhere to carry on her particular form of help. A greater number and variety of visitors, however,

⁹ *Mirror*, July 24, 1890; July 2, 30, 1891; March 2, 1893.

¹⁰ *Mirror*, September 20, 1894.

soon began to appear at circle meetings. There were businessmen from Minneapolis and St. Paul, parole agents, a teacher or two from the state university, and members of the state board of control.¹¹

Later, from 1918 to 1922, the Pierian Circle attracted the outside attention some of its founders desired. Doubtless it encouraged the members and made them feel less isolated; doubtless, too, occasional gifts of reading material from visitors were of considerable help. Still, the popularity finally attained among outsiders was not an unmixed blessing. Perhaps lacking the help given the Nebraska circle was really fortunate, for the Minnesota men were forced to depend on themselves, think through their own problems, and thus establish a foundation that enabled their organization to last longer than others.

During the early years of the circle's activity an attempt was made to follow the course of study prescribed by the CLSC headquarters. To earn a certificate, members did a recurring cycle of reading—one year on England, another on America, a third on continental Europe, and a final one on Greece and Rome. This might be followed by excursions into various branches of learning for those wishing further study. The aim was the same as that of Chautauqua groups everywhere: self-improvement, uplift, high moral seriousness. The aim and planned procedure of Chautauqua study could result in information and progress of a kind; but the method was heavy and monotonous. Even on the outside, where infinitely greater variety in everyday life was possible, most circles added forms of entertainment and social activities to their programs to keep up interest. Within the prison there were calls for a similar change. "We must adapt our own moves with developments as they occur in the large world," said one circle member in 1917; "otherwise we fall into a rut and our own performance is simply a matter of repetition."¹² Clearly he was unaware that the form of the programs had been a problem in the circle for at least twenty years before his time.

Some members of the Stillwater circle early began to question

¹¹ *Mirror*, November 7, 1912; January 16, 23, May 22, 1913; November 19, 1914.

¹² *Mirror*, August 23, 1917.

whether the prescribed course of study met their needs. On June 24, 1894, they won by vote a suspension for three months of the regulation demanding that all papers and discussions be confined to assigned subjects. This, however, by no means settled the matter. Seven years later it still was an issue. In reporting on the work of the three previous months in June, 1901, the secretary complained that "of the sixteen papers read, but one treated of the current studies. This is decidedly an evil and should be remedied. While other topics may be interesting, we must bear in mind that a class report which does not treat of the current study is not a class report." This dictum was echoed the following year when a paper was reported to be "interesting and amusing but not altogether appropriate. What the circle should have in its reports is instruction; the ideas advanced should be incentive to thought." At intervals during the years that followed conservatives revived this attempt to walk a narrow and well-defined path; but in 1912 their motion was tabled indefinitely, and in 1919, after an effort to renew alliance with outside circles in order to establish "a definite objective" and avoid "promiscuous subjects," it was agreed that "a not too rigid policy would conform best with our reference facilities and enhance, rather than retard, our literary development."¹⁸ After that, local freedom of choice seems never to have been questioned.

Paralleling in time the argument over subjects to be studied was another over the amount of music to be included in programs. Variety had been added in part through debates, a mock Congress, recitations, the stage sketches of an artist, and through utilizing whatever talents members had. But when music was introduced in 1892 it immediately became more popular than any other entertainment, and the *Mirror* reported that "it is now a fight to the finish between the literary and lyric art for the honor of being the favorite of the circle." It was too early, however, for a "fight to the finish." Three years later the circle had a quartet and an organist, "who by singing popular songs, occasionally relieved by an organ solo, now make the Pierian Circle as entertaining as it

¹⁸ *Mirror*, June 28, 1894; June 29, 1901; May 22, 1902; March 28, 1912; October 9, November 27, 1919; September 14, 1922.

is instructive.” A secretary of a decade later reported that recently the circle had been without musicians, a good thing in his estimation, since emphasis could be placed on intellectual improvement, leaving entertainment to “other departments” of the prison.¹⁴

Such comments for and against emphasis on music continued at intervals until the move in 1914 to the new prison. There, with official band directors and an auditorium instead of a chapel in which to meet, the Chautauquans could concentrate fully on entertainment, at least at their quarterly meetings. Every three months the programs attracted to the prison what were probably the largest groups of visitors ever to go there on individual occasions. There were a hundred people at one meeting in 1915, three hundred in 1916, a thousand in 1917, eighteen hundred in 1918, two thousand in 1921, and twenty-four hundred (with hundreds of others turned away) in 1922.¹⁵ Although some variety was offered in the form of recitations, dialect skits, illustrated travelogues, and even drama, most of the programs were largely or wholly musical.

The trend toward music aroused no objection, at least as far as reports in the *Mirror* indicate; instead circle members seemed proud of their drawing power as entertainers. A meeting at the end of 1923, however, was apparently the last to be open to the public. In the spring of the following year the prison management cancelled the entertainment program scheduled for a quarterly meeting, and, although there was some talk of arranging another, none is reported. When the meetings were discontinued, the problem of emphasizing entertainment or instruction was finally settled for the circle. Other problems, however, continued to trouble the prison Chautauquans. Included were lassitude and laziness on the part of some members, occasional plagiarism, and the excessive self-esteem of appointed critics. Some meetings were dull because members were unprepared and apathetic. A few prisoners were dropped from the circle rolls for failure to do assigned work and for plagiarism.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Mirror*, May 5, 1892; July 4, 1895; April 6, 1905.

¹⁵ *Mirror*, May 20, 1915; March 23, 1916; November 29, 1917; January 24, 1918; February 3, 1921; March 16, 1922.

¹⁶ *Mirror*, February 27, August 14, 1902; July 13, 1905; February 21, 1907; March 27, 1924; January 14, 1926. No reason is given for canceling the entertainment or for failing to hold other quarterly meetings.

But most serious of all was the problem of falling membership. During its first fifteen years the prison Chautauqua maintained an average of thirty-two members. From 1915 to 1920 the average was about twenty, and from 1920 to 1930 about twelve to fifteen. Figures for the 1930's are not available, but they must have been small, for in 1933 a brief item in the *Mirror* says that during the preceding season membership was below normal. The paper calls this "surprising" in view of the advantages offered by the circle.¹⁷

Some reasons for the decrease must be conjectured; perhaps the enforced summer vacation was one of them. This began in 1909. Before that time meetings had been held twice a month the year round. The vacation of 1909 was ordered by the warden, who suddenly decided in July that the chapel was too hot for meetings and that they should be discontinued until September. That the prisoners were not fully in accord with the order is evidenced by an editorial which makes a plea for an unbroken succession of meetings because they "tend to materially dispell [*sic*] the monotony of long Sunday afternoons locked up in the cells." Until the end of 1924 meetings were held on Sunday afternoons, when two hours were given over to the activity and fellowship of the Chautauqua programs. A change to one-hour meetings on Wednesday mornings doubtless had a detrimental effect on the circle.¹⁸

Another apparent handicap to growth, or even to maintaining current strength, was a change in the *Mirror*. In May, 1920, the size of the paper was greatly reduced, and thereafter only a few comparatively short articles by circle members appeared in its pages. Moreover, in the late 1920's news of any kind about the circle became sporadic, and in 1930 such comments ceased completely. Three years later Chautauqua news returned, and for a time it was published with some regularity.

Probably the greatest handicap to popularity was the belief on the part of many nonmembers that the circle was "highbrow." That accusation must have been repeated frequently if one can judge from the number of circle officers who denied it. They declared that

¹⁷ *Mirror*, July 13, 1905; November 26, 1908; July 6, 1933.

¹⁸ *Mirror*, June 18, 1903; July 8, 1909; April 16, August 6, 1914; December 4, 1924.

the organization was for all, that very few of its members had more than a common school education, and that at meetings they were perfectly willing to discuss "anything from agriculture to Martin County journalism as long as it is instructive."¹⁹ But there must have been something to the charge of arrogant exclusiveness beyond the inevitable resentment of the ignorant and loutish. At a meeting in celebration of the fifteenth anniversary the secretary admitted that "At one period the circle was dominated by a 'machine' as absolute as any that ever existed." A later writer declared "That for several years the Circle was used, by various members, for self-aggrandizement. This hurt the Circle in the eyes of other inmates and it has taken some time to overcome a natural prejudice." And later still, only two years before the circle's end, the president expressed a "desire to remove all causes for misunderstandings that might exist between the Circle and prospective members, real or fancied, and to efface all the charges, imputations, and innuendos [*sic*] that a few have made against the Circle, and to provide concord, good will, and friendship for the future."²⁰

In view of all these problems and difficulties, it seems strange that the organization could continue as long as it did. In many ways, however, its accomplishments were really remarkable. True, the prison circle did not produce graduates in large numbers, nor did it do as much for the prison as a whole as it desired. Members felt that they possessed talent enough to entertain all inmates; they wished that quarterly meetings might be open to everyone; they wanted the circle to become an important "educational factor" in the life of the prison; and, above all, they liked to think of it as "Our Chautauqua" because they felt that recruits from "Kitchen, Farm, Yard, Hospital, Work-Shops, Library, Print-Shop, Business Offices" made it truly representative of the whole institution, and that even nonmembers had pride in it as an organization run by convicts.²¹ Thus the prison study group had the missionary zeal that marked the early Chautauqua movement as a whole, and like

¹⁹ *Mirror*, February 11, 1915; August 18, 1921; September 10, 1925.

²⁰ *Mirror*, July 13, 1905; January 21, 1926; January 30, 1936.

²¹ *Mirror*, June 15, 1911; September 28, 1916.

so many assemblies and circles it at times let zeal run ahead of possible attainment.

Still, benefits resulting from circle activities in the prison were significant, particularly for members. Naturally, of course, a few members gained more than others. One of the most fortunate was a young man named John Carter. While in prison he wrote two columns for the *Mirror*—"Salt and Supersalt" and "Under the Lash"—and he also sent contributions to magazines outside. His work attracted such favorable attention that several nationally known editors, led by William Marion Reedy of St. Louis, obtained his release in 1910. During the next two years, Carter's poems and articles appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, the *Literary Digest*, the *Smart Set*, and other periodicals; and a book of his verse, *Hard Labor and Other Poems*, was published.²²

Among members of ordinary talents was a "lifer" called Uncle John. After coming to the prison with only a rudimentary knowledge of English, he studied for some time in the primary school, staffed largely by circle members, and then on request joined the group. For many months he was completely overwhelmed by papers and reports, accomplishing little beyond the compilation of long lists of unfamiliar words, which he carefully looked up in a dictionary. His own first paper was a complete failure, understood by no one; but instead of becoming discouraged, he continued to attend meetings for years, without missing a single one, until he not only could report accurately and intelligently, but could serve successfully as president for more terms than any other man in the circle's history. Those who believed the circle to be a cross between a "Browning Club and Sunday School Annex," said John Carter, should be told the story of Uncle John.²³

Although men less able or ambitious might get fewer rewards from Chautauqua membership, there seems little question, in view of the frequent expressions of thankfulness for the privilege, that

²² *Mirror*, April 28, 1902; December 23, 1907; February 3, 1910. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy of Carter's *Hard Labor and Other Poems* (New York, 1911). The publishers, Baker and Taylor Company, acknowledge indebtedness to six magazines in which Carter's verses appeared earlier.

²³ *Mirror*, December 16, 23, 1909; June 15, 1911; September 25, 1913; April 4, 1918.

most of the members found their experiences beneficial. The meetings were an escape, not only from cells but also from the monotony of prison life. For a brief interval members could enjoy "good fellowship and camaraderie," could argue or expound, recite or sing, without censure or restriction. Thus, "Each felt . . . the restraint of surroundings roll away as he realized that for the time the meeting was in session at least, he was to exercise the prerogatives of manhood." Moreover, in this connection some members took a broad view of the circle's influence, thinking it capable of taking to the public the realization "that though ostracized from society, the criminal is after all a human being, with human thoughts, human heart, human intellect and sympathies and gifted in many cases with a talent which only needs the proper encouragement and assistance that it may reflect to the welfare of humanity and the glory of God."²⁴

Whether or not the circle merited such idealism, a glance at its programs will show that it offered something of tangible value to every member, regardless of ability or background. For one thing the kind of reports demanded changed the reading habits of many and resulted in all "light and trashy" books being tossed from their cells. Furthermore, in a day before radios, and in a most strictly isolated type of life, it kept men in touch with outside events in the nation and the world. Every problem and procedure from the silver issue of the 1890's to the New Deal was analyzed and discussed, not as history, but as a current event. Members dealt with tariff questions, immigration, trust busting, labor difficulties, Spanish-American and World War I issues, the League of Nations, and similar matters down to and including the relief problems of the depression years. Reading even the partial coverage of the programs in the *Mirror* is like taking a course in American history.

Thus if members merely listened to reports and debates they were certain to gain something, especially since at times there were among them teachers, writers, clergymen, journalists, publishers, bankers, lawyers, a colonel, and a bishop—men not only trained

²⁴ *Mirror*, August 6, 1896; March 15, April 13, 1899; June 15, 1911; May 17, 1923; September 11, 1930.

in their professions but capable of imparting information and leading discussions. The chief aim of the circle leaders, however, was not to provide special lecturers but to get active participation by all — day laborers as well as professional men — so that they would learn how to gather and present information, develop confidence and a sense of courtesy and fair play, and gain “a better understanding of the duties and requirements of citizenship within a free country.” In other words, the men looked forward to a time when they would again be free, and they intended to prepare as far as possible for that event. Announcements of books published or responsible positions held by former members were heard with pride. Better still, ninety-four per cent of the former circle members avoided any further trouble with the law — evidence to the Chautauquans that their group was successful in its effort toward rehabilitation.²⁵

In view of all these benefits, of official sanction and favor, of praise and hope voiced at meetings, one may well question why the meeting of April 21, 1938, was the last. Although no reason is given in the *Mirror*, it is obvious that other and newer activities were attracting attention. Among them were athletic events and activities, visiting entertainment troupes, extension courses in the University of Minnesota, and radio programs. The last alone offered more variety than was ever possible in circle meetings. Despite having certain merits that these innovations lacked, Chautauqua was outmoded in the prison, as it had been elsewhere for some time. The wonder is not that the Pierian Circle finally died, but that it continued to exist over such a long period in a world of changing fads and interests.

Although the present warden, Mr. Utecht, says that he hopes to see it revived, the chances are strong that he never will.²⁶ It is possible, of course, to organize another discussion group; but it would not be like the Pierian Circle in aims, enthusiasm, and tradition. Nevertheless, what the old circle hoped for and attained should not be forgotten, for in its record the Chautauqua, the prison, and the state can take justifiable pride.

²⁵ *Mirror*, July 13, 1905; September 28, 1916; January 6, 1921.

²⁶ Letter to the writer, January 15, 1948.



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