

# CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION ARCHIVES

## OVERVIEW

### THE CHAUTAUQUA AMPHITHEATER

Although the current structure was built over the winter of 1892-93, its presence and function date back to the beginning of the Chautauqua Assembly. The Chautauqua Movement, which began with the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly in 1874, grew out of the intersection of three earlier movements: the camp meeting, the Lyceum Movement and the American Sunday School Movement. At the center of this merger was what called the “Platform.” This was the essential program presented to the gathering as a whole – speakers, preachers, and entertainers. This program, running through the day and into the evening, attempted to introduce Americans to a broader appreciation of culture, to a deeper understanding of current affairs and to new ideas in various fields of science, all of which was presented in the context of a modern Christian faith.

The new model of life-long learning at Chautauqua proved very popular and soon spread across the country. Over the next three decades, at least 255 “Daughter Chautauquas” were created in all parts of the United States and much of Canada. At the turn of the 20th century, the Chautauqua-style program was put on the road. These traveling Chautauquas, continued up to the Depression, reaching millions of Americans. The programs provided were intended to be a healthy alternative to other forms of entertainment, such as vaudeville or burlesque, by promoting the practice of the good use of one’s leisure time for purpose of self-improvement. Chautauqua’s democratic approach to universal learning and culture had a tremendous effect on American culture and education. University extension and continuing education courses, summer schools and public radio and television can all be traced back to Chautauqua’s influence. Teddy Roosevelt, who spoke, himself, in the Amphitheater described Chautauqua as, “A gathering that is typically American in that it is typical of America at its best.” Echoing the uniquely American qualities of Chautauqua, Viscount James Bryce, British Ambassador to the United States, claimed. “I do not think any country in the world but America could produce such gatherings as Chautauqua’s:” and Edward Everett Hale wrote, “If you have not spent a week at Chautauqua, you do not know your own country.”

At the center of this movement was the stage. Unlike today, where so much is viewed or listened to in private, at Chautauqua people came together as an audience to be entertained and to learn. (In fact, Mark Twain once joked that Chautauquans approached learning in crowds as though it were something to be afraid of.) The Amphitheater was designed to facilitate this type of gathering, and so became a symbol of the movement. Every Chautauqua in America had some sort of large auditorium or outdoor theater, usually located at the center of the grounds, that was designed to perform the same function as the Chautauqua Amphitheater. Many of these structures copied the design of the first Chautauqua Amphitheater, but few still stand today.

At the first Chautauqua Assembly in 1874, a platform was erected in a wooded park, with encircling benches set between the trees. The frequency and intensity of rain in the area made it necessary to erect a large canvas tent over a ravine just up the hill, to be used as a backup; and, a couple years later in 1879, the first Chautauqua Amphitheater was erected on this spot. The seating and acoustics were designed to accommodate over 5,000 attendees. In order to preserve the outdoor sense of an earlier camp meeting, the building was left open at the sides, and the pillars supporting the roof were made in such a way as to suggest the tall maples of the area. One of the first speakers to try out the new structure was the famous preacher and editor of the Christian Advocate, Dr J. M. Buckely, who was so impressed with the acoustics interrupted his talk to declare, “This building is a genuine Amphitheater,” and the name stuck.

The only problem with the building, besides the deterioration brought about by time, was the noise created by a heavy rain falling on its roof. A new design was made to correct the problem, but every effort was made to preserve the essential structure of the original Amphitheater. After the 1892 season, the old Amphitheater was taken down and the new one constructed on the same site. The roof was slanted, the seating capacity was moderately increased and the stage enlarged. Many of the pillars were removed to allow better viewing for the audience, and modern plumbing and electric lights were added; but the basic appearance was retained. In 1907, the Massey family of Ontario, Canada, donated an enormous organ which was built into the back of the stage. (The Massey Memorial Organ remains the largest outdoor organ anywhere in the world.) With reference to the Amphitheater, William Jennings Bryan commented, "The privilege and opportunity of addressing from one to seven or eight thousand of his fellow Americans in the Chautauqua frame of mind...is one of the greatest that any patriotic American could ask. It makes of him, if he knows it and can rise to its requirements, a potent human factor in molding the mind of a nation."

Although the acoustics were excellent, permitting a speaker to reach 7,000 listeners using only his natural voice, amplifiers were later added to allow even the soft-spoken speaker to do the same, and to accommodate crowds outside the Amphitheater. (For example, in 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his famous "I HATE WAR!" speech in the Chautauqua Amphitheater to a crowd of over 12,000 people. Later that summer, Alf Landon, the Republican candidate, who was first exposed to political speaking the same Amphitheater as a boy, would draw 18,000.) In 1925 a radio broadcast booth was added and from then on, regular broadcasts from Chautauqua have reached the nation through radio.

Among the famous Americans to speak in the Amphitheater are: Booker T. Washington, Susan B. Anthony, John and Melvil Dewey, Jacob Riis, Lyman Abbott, Albion Tourgee, Amos Alonzo Stagg, William McKinley, William Howard Taft, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, admiral Byrd, Norman Thomas, Nelson Rockefeller, Bobby Kennedy, Gerald Ford, Al Gore, Thurgood Marshal, Sandra Day O'Connor, Ellie Wiesel, John Ciardi, Karl Menninger – simply too many to name. Musical performers have included, John Philip Sousa, William Sherwood, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and many, many more. Today, the Amphitheater remains at the center of the Chautauqua program for religion, culture, current affairs and education, providing a place which preserves a continuity between the present and the past – not just for Chautauqua, but for American life and culture in general.

CHAUTUQUA INSTITUTION  
ARCHIVES

## **The Amphitheater Timeline**

### **Before the First Amphitheater 1874-1879**

The Auditorium for the first Assembly was in the center of the grounds, located in what is today Miller Park. There was a crude speakers' stand partially surrounded by wooden benches that were set up between the trees. Rain proved a serious problem. The stand was covered to provide some protection for guests, but the audience was left exposed. At the first sign of rain, umbrellas would 'pop' open resembling, as one speaker described it, a field of mushroom suddenly coming into bloom. If the rain was intense, as it often was, the drenched audience, followed by the soon-to-be drenched speaker, would climb the hill for protection under the canvas canopy known as the Tabernacle on the Hill, located where Bestor plaza is today. After two seasons, the Assembly Committee realized it made more sense to stretch the canvas over the ravine that was just to the south, where the Amphitheater now stands. Perhaps as many as 1500 people could sit with some shelter beneath the canvas tent, called the Pavilion; but this, too, immediately proved inadequate and soon intolerable. A covered auditorium was planned for 1879.

### **The First Amphitheater 1879.**

Possibly at Lewis Miller's suggestion, a flat roof was placed over the ravine to cover the seats. The structure was built by W. W. Calvin. It covered an area of 145 ft by 380 ft, and could seat 4,000 people on 380 new benches constructed from 10,000 ft of lumber. There were 13 terraces in semicircles with gradually elevated seats. There was an "orchestra" area capable of seating 400 behind the rostrum. The pit was a semicircle with a 45 ft radius, with the rostrum in the middle forming a double ogee. 36,000 ft of lumber was used to construct the canopy roof, with 330 braces, supported by 55 pillars. The wood for the ceiling was covered with asbestos to make it fireproof.

The seating capacity was greater and the acoustics proved excellent. The new facility was dubbed with the noble name "Amphitheater." But there were problems. The first to be noticed were the pillars required to hold up the roof. These interfered with the view of the stage, and the seats behind them were often left vacant. The second was the thunderous noise made by a heavy rain. The third was the stress that heavy snow accumulations placed on the roof each winter.

### **The Second Amphitheater 1893**

Besides the general aging of the 1879 structure, the flat roof created problems both in the winter, with snow accumulation, and in the summer with rain. The pounding of a heavy rainfall was sufficiently deafening as to drown out the voice of even a 19th century speaker. In addition, the columns obstructed the view of the stage, resulting in empty seats.

In January 1892, the Trustees discussed plans to remedy the problems. However, the cost of renovation was as great as new construction. So, they decided to put off any decision until the summer. In the meantime, Ellis G. Hall of Syracuse and Jamestown drew up plans for a new building in consultation with Lewis Miller, co-founder and President of the Assembly. The plan retained the original width of the Amphitheater but extend it in both directions along the ravine (13 ft towards the lake and 30 ft on the upper end). The new Amphitheater was to be 185 ft by 160 ft. The roof was to be pitched, with iron shingles, supported by steel columns and bridge-style trusses, while wooden pillars would support the eaves. The ceiling was to be made of wood. The central area of 160 by 100 ft would be free of columns, allowing a clear view of the stage. The seating would be replaced with slightly reclined, solid wood benches. The choir gallery was built in concentric tiers, with a clerestory to provide light. There would be a cloak room for the choir on either side of the organ, and a reception and waiting room beneath on the ground level, along with the offices for the Department of Instruction and rooms for the speakers with a direct passage to the stage. There would also be sitting rooms for soloists with a winding stair case leading to the choir area. All rooms were connected with speaking tubes and fitted with bells to alert performers and speakers.

E. G. Leper (also spelled ‘Lepar’) of Jamestown was awarded the contract. Construction began that fall and carried on through the winter, allowing the work to be completed for the next season before the Panic of 1893 might have caused delay. We have no record of a dedication ceremony, if there was one. (Such a ceremony would typically be described in the Assembly Herald; but the Herald did not start publication until three weeks after the Amphitheater was in use.) The final cost was \$26,478.02, just a little over budget, due to the unexpected expense of the electric lighting (a combination of arch lighting with incandescent bulbs).

The pictures below show how the new Amphitheater was a significant improvement over the first, giving Chautauqua one of the finest large facilities for public speaking anywhere in the country. Without the new facility, it is uncertain that Chautauqua would have continued to attract national speakers so successfully as competition emerged over the next few decades. The real seating capacity of the new Amphitheater is unclear, since it allowed considerable standing room. As a reporter for the Assembly Herald wrote that the new Amphitheater: “would hold from 7,000 to 15,000 people according to the degree of one’s imagination.” The Administration claimed it could hold around 11,000 – but this may have been a little generous (there was seating for about 5,500).

The construction of the new Amphitheater marks a new era in building at Chautauqua. Prior to this there appears to have been little sense that the buildings, even the grounds themselves, would endure for many years. Vincent, himself, wrote that one day the grounds would probably no longer exist. But by the advent of the Chicago World’s Fair a new confidence had emerged. Moreover and new generation of the Chautauquans was now taking control. Many of these had grown up at Chautauqua and felt a sense of investment or ownership. Many of the cottages had been improved in the 1880s, and leaseholders were beginning to expect more infrastructure improvements. The first Amphitheater was constructed mainly of wood, with attention paid to function improvements and safety. The second Amphitheater was designed to impress. Brick, steel and concrete (?) were used – but most telling of all, the architect put the year 1893 in the designs of the back façade, obviously in anticipation of having the building remain for many years.

<sup>1</sup>Ellis G. Hall also designed Alumni Hall. Irving John Gill apprenticed under Hall in Syracuse.

<sup>2</sup>I have not confirmed that these were installed.

## The Massey Organ and the 1907 renovations.

Music has always been part of the Chautauqua program. Plans to add a proper organ for performances and religious services began to be considered immediately after the first Amphitheater was constructed, and, three years later, the 'Grand Organ' was completed, composed of over 1,200 pipes, with 27 stops, 30 bells, two boards of 61 keys and pedal 27 notes.

After the new Amphitheater was 1893, it was felt that a larger organ was required. It is not surprising that the new organ should be provided by the Massey family from Toronto. No one appreciated the importance of music to the Chautauqua program more than the Massey family. Lewis Miller, co-founder of Chautauqua, had introduced Hart Massey to Chautauqua many years before. They had met through business but both men had much more in common. Besides being inventors and manufacturers of farm equipment, both were active Methodists and strong supporters of temperance. Both were also ardent supporters of educational reform including the improvement and standardization of the Sunday School curriculum, and both were among the major philanthropists of their time. In memory of his son, Hart Massey had started the Fred Victor Mission in Toronto, which is still in operation. In memory of a second son, Charles, who had been an accomplished organist, he built the famous Massey Hall, which to this day is regarded as one of the acoustically finest concert halls in North America.

When Hart Massey died in 1896, he stipulated in his will that his wealth should be used to fund new philanthropic projects over the following twenty years. His son, Chester, who had assumed the father's position on the Board of Trustees at Chautauqua, took over the management of the family estate in 1901. He shared his father's love of Chautauqua, and, what was more was married to Anna Vincent, the sister of Chautauqua's other cofounder, John Vincent. (Chester and Anna were the parents of Charles Vincent Massey, who was the first Canadian Envoy to the United States and later the first Canadian-born Governor General of Canada, and Raymond Massey, the famous stage and screen actor, who said that his first exposure to theater was at Chautauqua.)

The building of the great Massey Organ at Chautauqua, originally known simply as the 'Memorial Organ,' was one of the first major projects funded by the Massey estate. The cost of the organ, alone, was \$25,000 (pretty much the same as the cost for building the Amphitheater), with more than half again for the installation and construction of a fireproof chamber. The organ was made by the Warren Organ Company of Woodstock, Ontario. It consisted of 4 manuals with 61 notes each, and a pedal of 32 notes. There were 18 stops on the Great, 19 on the Swell, 15 on the Choir, 8 on the Solos and 14 on the pedal. The wind was supplied by an Or-goblo electric fan that could vary pressure. Already, the Amphitheater was famous as one of the best constructed structures in the country for public speaking; now it was complete with one of the country's finest organs.

The new organ required that the back of the Amphitheater be largely removed and rebuilt. The new organ was placed further back from where the original organ had been, The Choir seats were placed on either side of the console and increased to hold more singers. A fireproof chamber was added to house the organ. The stage was kept much the same but lowered to decrease the viewing angle for the seats near the front. Additional seats were added at several points around the perimeter increasing the seating by 1,000. But, despite the extent of the work, the Amphitheater retained its essential character.

The existing organ was disassembled before the 1907 season began, and moved to Normal Hall. Unfortunately, the installation of the Massey Organ fell behind schedule, meaning that, for most of the 1907 season the Amphitheater had to make do without either, until it was dedicated on Old First Night.

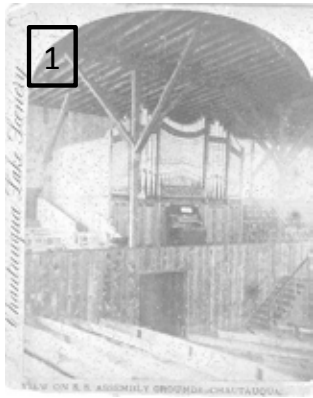
The organ has allowed for many unique performances and has remained at the center of Chautauqua's religious services and special events. It accompanied the choir and audience as it sang America after Franklin Roosevelt's "I Hate War" speech in 1936 and to celebrate the end of the war that soon followed. Over the years, many parts have been replaced and repairs made. In 1972 an anonymous donor paid for a complete cleaning and renovation. Twenty years later, a major restoration project was carried out by Mark and Paul Fisher of Erie, PA. In addition to numerous repairs, several of the original pipes that had since been removed were replaced or recovered and reinstalled. The ambitious project funded by the Carnahan-Jackson Foundation of Jamestown, Arthur S. and Arlene Holden of Painesville, Ohio, H. Parker and Emma Sharp of Pittsburgh and The Margaret L. Wendt Foundation of Buffalo cost \$700,000 and was completed in a mere nine months.

The Rueckert family carried on this philanthropic heritage in 2003. Fred Rueckert, who documented the renovations in 1993, used the money inherited from his Grandmother to purchase and install 12 pipes to complete the 32-ft Bombarde, the lowest octave, which for some reason had never been installed in the original organ despite there being room set aside for them. The Massey Organ, with a total of 5,640 pipes, the largest outdoor organ in the world was at last complete. As Ross Mackenzie, Historian Emeritus and former Director of the Department of Religion, said: "Nothing elsewhere in Chautauqua is so evocative of our past and so expressive of our present. Nothing is so glorious in its sound, its dignity, its warmth and its passion."

### **Subsequent renovations up to 1978.**

In 1921, the front of the stage was evened out, eliminating the protruding center. This signified the growing importance of musical and theatrical performances. The original stage was designed primarily to suite public speaking; however its shape was awkward for staging other performances. The new stage of 1921 allowed for better use of the whole stage accommodate larger performing groups and scenery. The new design increased the area of the stage by one third. A "Social Room" was added for the use of the choir. The cost of the 1921 renovations was \$8,000.

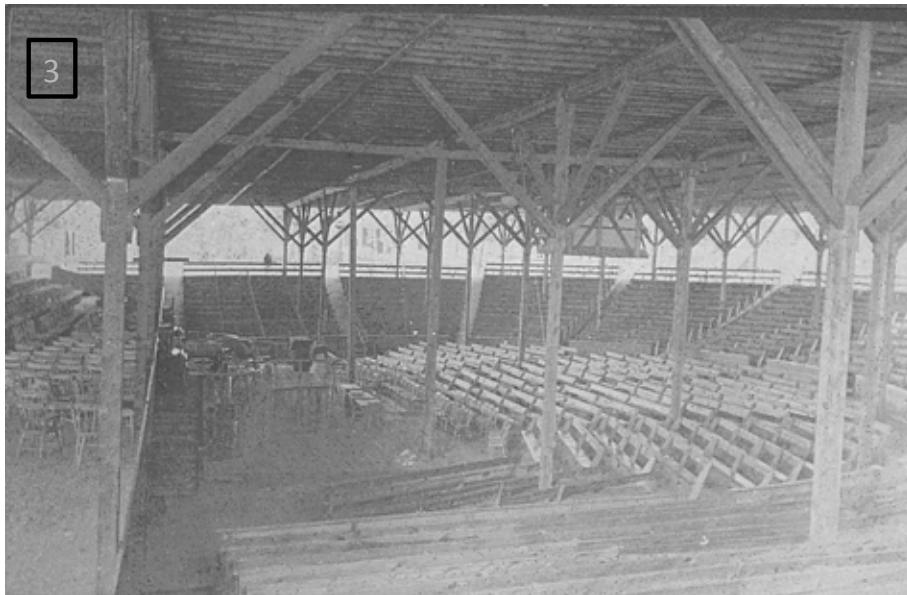
In 1928, minor changes to the choir area and the back of the stage were made to accommodate the new organ console. But there was no major renovation for the Amphitheater for nearly 50 years after the installation of the Massey organ. In 1954 the backstage was remodeled to accommodate better the orchestra. The stage was widened by 12 ft to allow a better arrangement of the full orchestra in a semicircle. New rooms for speakers and musicians were added, including a room for the conductor, Walter Hendl, a lounge for orchestra members and a space for the orchestra's library. New restrooms were installed as well. The concrete floor was covered with light-colored asphalt tile, while new lighting and plywood ceilings and walls were added to give the backstage a more "modern look." The roof was sealed by using a "plastic solution," and it is possible that the 1893 steel pillars were strengthened at this time (although this might have been done in 1978).



1879

1. Organ and front stage

2. Audience in Amphitheater

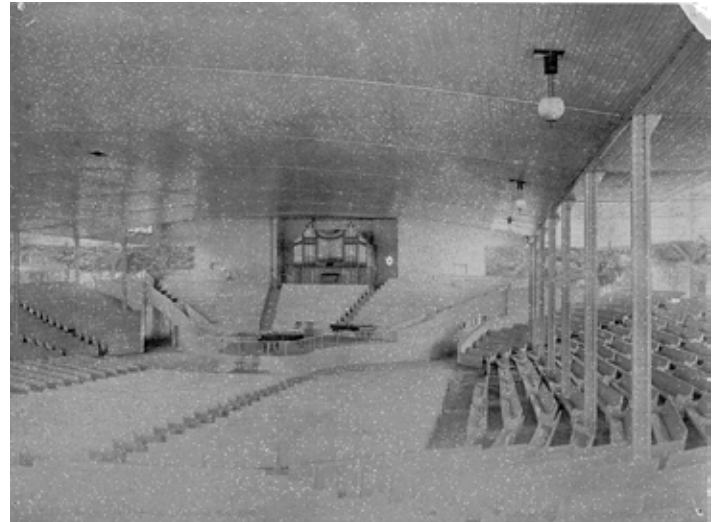


3. Empty Amphitheater

1893

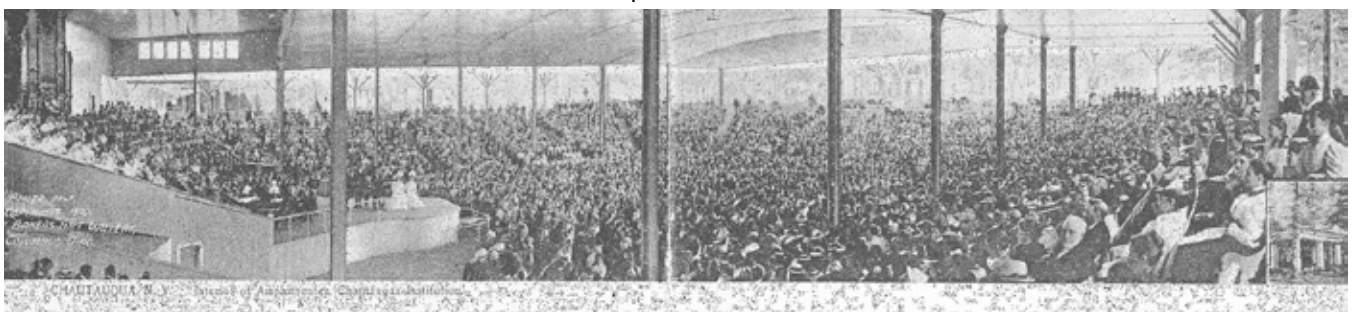


Amphitheater Stage



Empty Amphitheater

Full Amphitheater





1893-1907

1. Back of Amphitheater  
c. 1907

2. Area in front of stage.  
< 1907

3. Back of Amphitheater  
c. 1907



1907

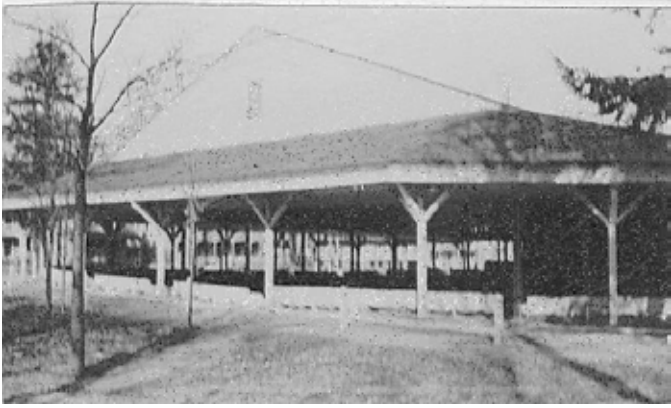
1. Back of Amphitheater  
under Construction  
1906-1907

2. The Massey Organ  
> 1907

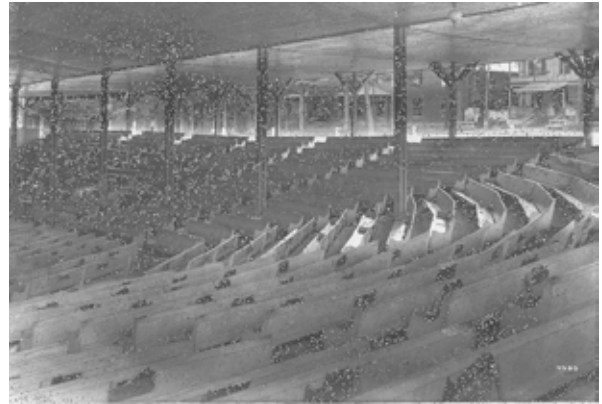
3. Back of Amphitheater  
1906-1907



1907-1920

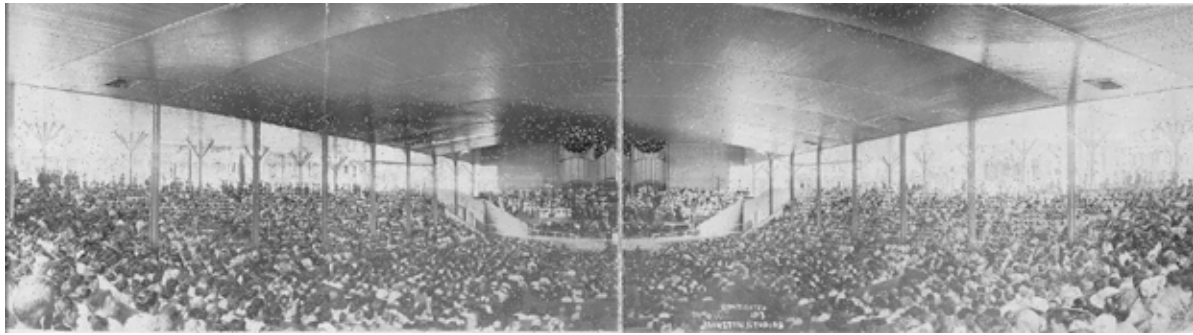


The Amphitheater 1910



Empty Amphitheater >1907

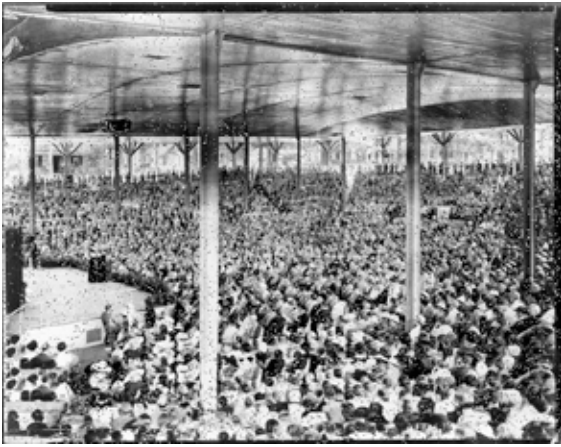
The Amphitheater 1913



Approach to the  
Amphitheater  
c. 1920



After 1921



These pictures show how the shape of the stage was changed in 1921 to accommodate performances.



After 1921



1. Alf Landon speaking in the Amphitheater – 1936
2. CSO Performance in the Amphitheater - 1941
3. Clifford Cheney (engineer) discussing plans for the Amphitheater renovation – 1954.with workman





Winter at Chautauqua – any year