



THE PACIFIC GROVE RETREAT: A CONFERENCE HEADQUARTERS

Within less than a decade of its being established in 1875, the Pacific Grove Retreat became known as the primary conference headquarters for the hosting of religious, temperance and education meetings along the California coast. To accommodate the steady stream of conference participants and vacationers, a variety of lodging facilities became available to those traveling to the retreat. These lodging options included individual tents, cottages, or rooms in boarding houses that were available for rent. Also available to visitors were accommodations at the opulent Hotel Del Monte, located in Monterey, that had opened to guests in June 10, 1880; or the centrally located 114-room El Carmelo Hotel, situated in the heart of Pacific Grove, which opened to guests on May 20, 1887.

In June of 1889, traveling to the Methodist Retreat became more convenient to conference participants when the Southern Pacific Railroad's Monterey Express extended rail service to the Pacific Grove, allowing passengers to disembark at the newly constructed train depot just a few short blocks from Chautauqua Hall. Travel time from the train depot in San Francisco to the train depot in Pacific Grove amounted to an average of three and a half hours.

The attractiveness of Methodist Camp Retreat for hosting conferences quickly became apparent to organizers, as the list of summer meetings held in Pacific Grove expanded to the point of filling the calendar from the beginning of April to the end of September of each year. Throughout the summer months the Pacific Grove Retreat hosted a variety of conferences, summer encampments and assemblies of intellectual,

spiritual and societal organizations associated with the Methodist movement. In addition to the Pacific Coast Chautauqua Assembly, these gatherings included the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Summer Meeting of the California's Teachers' Association, the California Annual Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church, the California State Sunday School Convention, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Midsummer Encampment for Political, Civil and Social Reforms, Summer Encampment and Assembly of Christian Workers, Summer School of Theology, Camp Meeting and School of the Prophets, and the Epworth League.¹

As such, the Pacific Grove Methodist Retreat provided a platform for these organizations to introduce and advance the moral, ethic and social values associated with the Methodist reform movement to residents that made up California's urban and rural communities; many of who had only recently arrived as part of the first wave of Anglo-Saxon settlers to the Golden State. One process by which these values were introduced to multitudes of summer vacationers, conference attendees, and the year-round residents of the retreat, was through the establishing and enforcement of the community's blue laws.



El Carmelo Hotel, centrally located in downtown Pacific Grove.

Photograph courtesy of Pacific Grove Natural History Museum.

PURITAN BLUE LAWS

Pacific Grove, selected by the Retreat Association when it was still a wilderness, was to be set aside as a location where Christians could gather with their families for recreation and health, and hold religious assemblies and conventions, for the promotion of educational and moral enterprises. In an effort to enforce the religious standards and encourage proper conduct within the Methodist Retreat, the organizers of the camp enacted what are referred to as “blue laws.”

First established by Puritan colonies of New England in the 17th century, blue laws were enacted to prohibit specific activities, both recreational and commercial, on Sunday or the Sabbath. In some cases the sale of specific kinds of merchandise was prohibited, and in other cases all retail and business activities were banned.² Serving as an outpost for the enforcement of Puritan ethics during the late 19th and early 20th century, Pacific Grove enacted blue laws which prohibited the following: Gambling, including any games of chance which might lend to wagering; The manufacturing, buying, selling or giving away of any and all intoxicants, cider, wine, beer or spirituous liquors within a one mile radius of the original survey of the retreat; The use of obscene and profane language was strictly prohibited, as was all boisterous talking, rude or coarse conduct not in harmony with propriety and good order. Swimming without proper bathing apparel or in immodest costume, or passing through the streets, to and from the beach, without proper covering was prohibited. All boating, fishing and bathing activity was prohibited on the Sabbath. And finally, any form of public or social dancing was strictly prohibited.³

Just how prohibited public dancing was in Pacific Grove is acknowledged in a newspaper article that appeared in *San Francisco Call*, July 7, 1891 and read as follows: *Prominent members of the Retreat Association are indignant at a statement made in a sensational San Francisco morning journal to the effect that the association, which has the moral and prudential management of Pacific Grove, has decided to remove a restriction which has always been enforced prohibiting public*

dances. The statement telegraphed is denounced as untrue and without foundation, and, moreover, there is no disposition to remove dancing from the list of diversions which come under the ban or any other rule contained in the deeds to property. There are many Christians who are not opposed to dancing, but the mass of people here are, and it is the intention to prohibit them. In future as in the past. An attempt was made to get up a dance the other evening, but the enterprise was conducted under the disguise of a "social" and in the name of a "club," the leaders in the movement not desiring that their names be made public (for prudential reasons), and the affair was attended by a very limited number of persons.⁴

What it was to spend time in the Grove, with its high moral, ethical and social values in place, is expressed in an article that appeared in the *Pacific Bank Handbook of California* (1888), written to entice visitors to the retreat:

...Life at the Pacific Grove is very enjoyable, there are so many agreeable amusements to be had for a trifling outlay in money. Gathering sea-mosses is a favorite pastime with many ladies; the walks and drives are beautiful, the surrounding country is so full of interest. There are several peaks near, commanding extensive views; Monterey Bay swarms with fish, and is suitable for yachting; there are three old missions in the vicinity, and the climate is favorable to a long sojourn, not shortened by inclement weather, as is the season at the great eastern temperance resort, Ocean Grove, New Jersey, on the bleaker Atlantic Coast.

Pacific Grove is in truth, more a winter than a summer resort, many wealthy and influential people living here the whole year round. It is a most entrancing spot, having no winter in the true sense of the word. Besides being one of the loveliest places on earth, on account of its temperance regulations, it is especially safe and pleasant for ladies who have no near male protector; it is, moreover, a most advantageous and healthful place in which to rear children.

There are few temptations to win children from the path of rectitude, and both climate and surroundings conduce to form a wholesome growth of body, and mind, while the grandeur of the scenery is favorable to lofty thoughts. Here are natural beauties to inspire the poet, and which must tend to elevate even the most matter-of-fact mind. And yet it is not a place in which to dream one's life away, the cli-

mate is not so warm as to be enervating, as is often the case where perpetual summer reigns, the nights being cool and comfortable, and the sea-breeze tempering the air with that delicious softness which gives energy of action as well as a keen sense of enjoyment of either labor or repose.⁵

During the Chautauqua Assembly, with a recognition and sanctioned enforcement of the blue laws, the Sabbath was a day reserved for organized sermons and Sunday school classes, which in turn provided for a devotional religious spirit to elevate the atmosphere of the Methodist Retreat. Beyond the opportunity to take home a collection of shells from the sea, participants of the Pacific Coast Assembly returned to their local communities, church congregations and individual Chautauqua Circles, having been introduced to the moral, ethical, spiritual and social values the Methodist movement wished to advance into the American society at large.

THE FINAL YEARS

As the years went by, the pioneer instructors who taught the core courses of natural history at the Pacific Coast Assembly grew old and passed away. First to cross the great divide was Professor HB Norton (1885), followed by Dr. JH Wythe (1901), Dr. CL Anderson (1910), Josiah Keep (1911), Miss Mary EB Norton (1917) and finally Miss Lucy M. Washburn (1939). As was the case with many of the Chautauqua's established throughout the United States, participation in the Pacific Coast Assembly of the CLSC slowed over time. The Assembly programs continued their popularity through the early 1900s, but enrollment in CLSC reading circles waned as the opportunity to attend summers schools at the University of California, Berkeley and the California State Normal School at San Jose became increasingly available to schoolteachers.⁶

After 1910 the quality of the program offered at the Pacific Coast Assembly declined, with fewer and fewer departments directed at scientific and literary subjects being offered. By 1913, the California Methodist Ministers had ceased holding their annual conference at the Methodist Church's Assembly Hall. The loss of the annual visit of the Methodist ministers became a point of transition for the Pacific Grove Retreat as a destination for advanced education and spiritual contemplation, to a location that attracted the common tourist in search of recreation and a seaside vacation.⁷

With the completion in 1913 of Pacific Grove's Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) conference facilities, (today's Asilomar Conference Center), a number of the societies began to hold their annual meetings at this spacious, and more accommodating facility. As time went on, the emphasis of Pacific Coast Assembly program became increasingly focused on entertainment, rather than education, with the performers recruited by the managers of the Ellison-White Circuit Chautauqua.⁸ Even so, tent Chautauqua's continued to be brought to Pacific Grove by the Ellison-White organiza-

tion for a number of years, with the final Chautauqua Assembly held in August of 1926.⁹

The transformation of the Pacific Grove Methodist Retreat, which had long provided many the opportunity of an educational and spiritual vacation, with availability of tents to rent at reasonable rates, had given way to the establishing of the small coastal township of Pacific Grove with cozy cottages for visitors to lease or purchase as a home of their own.



Yosemite Valley as seen from Discovery View, looking east.

Photograph courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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THE SCHEDULED APPEARANCE OF JOHN MUIR AT THE YOSEMITE CHAUTAUQUA ASSEMBLY OF 1909

Yet one is left wondering if John Muir ever spoke to a Chautauqua Assembly during his lifetime. According to an article in the *San Francisco Call*, July 9, 1909, titled “*Roosevelt Will Speak at Chautauqua in Yosemite - Coming West on Return From Africa*” both Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir were just days away from delivering their presentations at a Yosemite Valley Chautauqua. John Muir was to speak during the Assembly’s “Sierra Day,” with a first talk titled “*California Glaciers*” and a second talk titled “*Big Trees.*” Also mentioned within the article was the fact that John Muir would speak, only if the eminent naturalist could be persuaded to return from his Lake Merced Sierra Club outing.¹⁰ Such was not the case according to an article that appeared several days later in the *San Francisco Call*, July 13, 1909 titled “*Honor Memory Of Prof. Le Conte*” which provided the following short account of the day:

*Le Conte' day named in honor of Prof. Joseph Le Conte, the scientist of the University of California, who died here in the summer of 1901, was celebrated, by the Yosemite Valley Chautauqua. Addresses on the life and work of the dead geologist and author were delivered by Chester Howell of Fresno and Prof. James Perrin Smith of the department of geology in Stanford University. John Muir, a lifelong friend of Professor Le Conte, was expected to deliver the principal address here today, but remained with the Sierra club, 30 miles away, in the heart of the high mountain region, being unable to make the trip into the valley, on account of his great age and feebleness.*¹¹

According to the book, *The History Of Woman Suffrage*, in addition to the Sierra Day and Le Conte Day, the special program days for this, the first Yosemite Valley Chautauqua Assembly, included a Woman’s Day, during which the entire day’s program was devoted to woman’s suffrage: *During the Chautauqua meeting in the Yosemite in July, through the*

*efforts of Assemblyman Drew of Fresno, an entire day and evening were granted for an excellent suffrage program of a strong political flavor with Mrs. Ray, Mrs. Coffin and Mrs. Gamage in charge.*¹²

And as for John Muir ever participating in a Chautauqua Assembly, it appears Muir received invitations to participate at the summer gatherings in Pacific Grove (1880)¹³ and (1883),¹⁴ Venice Beach (1908)¹⁵ and Yosemite Valley (1909),¹⁶ each of which he seems to have successfully avoided.