

# A place in history

## Chautauqua drew crowds from all over the

By Joe Baggett  
 Neighbor News Editor

Long before the days of radio, television, movies, or an easy way to get to the activities of Atlanta, culture came to Douglas County in the form of the chautauqua. The Piedmont Chautauqua at Lithia Springs, with its amphitheater holding 8,000 people, was one of the best-known in the South.

The chautauqua took its name from Chautauqua, New York, where the first of these cultural programs started in 1874. Up until World War I in most parts of the country, the chautauqua circuit brought eight weeks of summer lecturers, musicians, concerts, plays, operas, acrobats, poets, evangelists, and entertainers and self-help experts of every stripe to small towns across America.

In 1878 the New York Chautauqua pioneered in home reading and correspondence school courses, starting the present adult education movement in America. The popularity of the combined country fair and revival meeting soon spread across the country, and President Teddy Roosevelt called this the "most American" of cultural pursuits.

Lithia Springs was the perfect location for the Piedmont Chautauqua, with its imposing Moorish Hall and bell towers, because of the popularity of the curative lithia water springs and presence of several hotels nearby.

The last and most famous of the hotels, which burned in 1912, was the Sweetwater Park Hotel, located on Bankhead Highway across from what is now White House Antiques.

An 1897 description of the hotel, in "The Commercial History of the State of Georgia," states that "the superb Sweetwater Park Hotel has accommodations for 300 guests... The service is by a corps of trained waiters, and is prompt and efficient. The grand dining room is finished in

cherry and curled pine, with eight large French plate mirrors surmounting handsome sideboards."

The hotel beds were "of curled hair, with wire mattress, and the linen is scrupulously clean. The hotel is lighted by 750 incandescent electric lamps, there being no gas or other dangerous illuminating agents used. The porches, ranging from 15 to 20 feet in width, are 700 feet long, on three sides of the house. The ballroom is spacious and lighted by electric lamps, and a good orchestra is supplied for dancing."

Outside, flowers were landscaped around the fountains and "broad drives approach the wide and spacious porches, and the Bowden Lithia Springs Short Line Railroad trains depart every hour from the west porch of the hotel for the Lithia Springs one mile distant."

The "guiding star" of the hotel, according to the account, was H.T. Blake. "His success can be attributed to many things, but one of them and the most prominent is the fact that he does not and never has catered to the class of people that want accommodations for less than a first-class resort can furnish them, and still reasonable according to the table he sets."

Prices ranged from \$10-\$17 per week and there were a "large number of germans (dance parties) given during the season, and Atlanta people flocked to Sweetwater Park by the hundreds."

Five trains ran daily between Atlanta and the springs in 1897, taking one-half hour per trip, and the businessman was encouraged to spend nights at the hotel during the summer to escape "the severe strain brought about by the summer sun if his office be in Atlanta."

Dancing was plentiful, with "regular hops and germans Saturday and informal dances nightly."

For outdoor recreation, a bicycle track, three-quarters of a mile in length, was completed by 1897 near

the hotel, and "the excellent roads and the bracing air have caused the hotel to be called the Cyclists Paradise," the copywriter enthused.

Blake had not overlooked the spring baths, which in 1897 included "massage, vapor, electric, etc., baths, all under the same roof in the hotel. There is no mud or dust around Sweetwater Park Hotel; no evidences of town, but an unbroken stretch of pretty scenery, cooled by delightful breezes."

The spring waters, the original attraction of the area, were both drunk and bathed in for "rheumatism, kidney and bladder troubles," according to the 1897 description.

U.S. Presidents William McKinley and Howard Taft visited the resort at the turn of the century and Uncle Remus author Joel Chandler Harris came out on several visits from West End, often bringing along fellow writers from across the country.

Evangelist DeWitt Talmage was one of the popular speakers at the chautauqua and stirred the crowds, always a mixture of young and old and local and out-of-town guests.

The employees were also a mixture of local and out-of-town. While many of the hotel employees, especially the chefs and bakers, were European, others were Douglas County natives. The 1900 census of Lithia Springs, for example, shows that local resident Charles Maroney was employed in bottling water, while meat cook Henry Timmerman and pastry cook Charles Graul were recently arrived from Germany.

With the exception of the springs, which are now tapped again and bottled for their lithia water, there is little visible evidence today to remind Douglas Countians of the fabulous hotels and Piedmont Chautauqua which brought a taste of culture to Douglas County at the turn of the century.



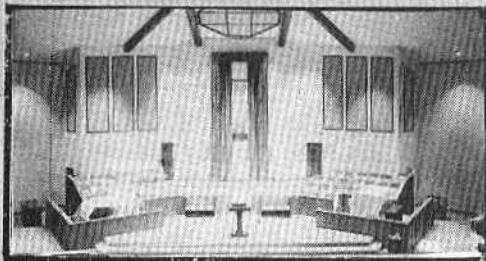
THE PIEDMONT C  
 to enjoy the entert



IT HELD 300 GUE  
 line railroad to the

# ople

March 26, 1986

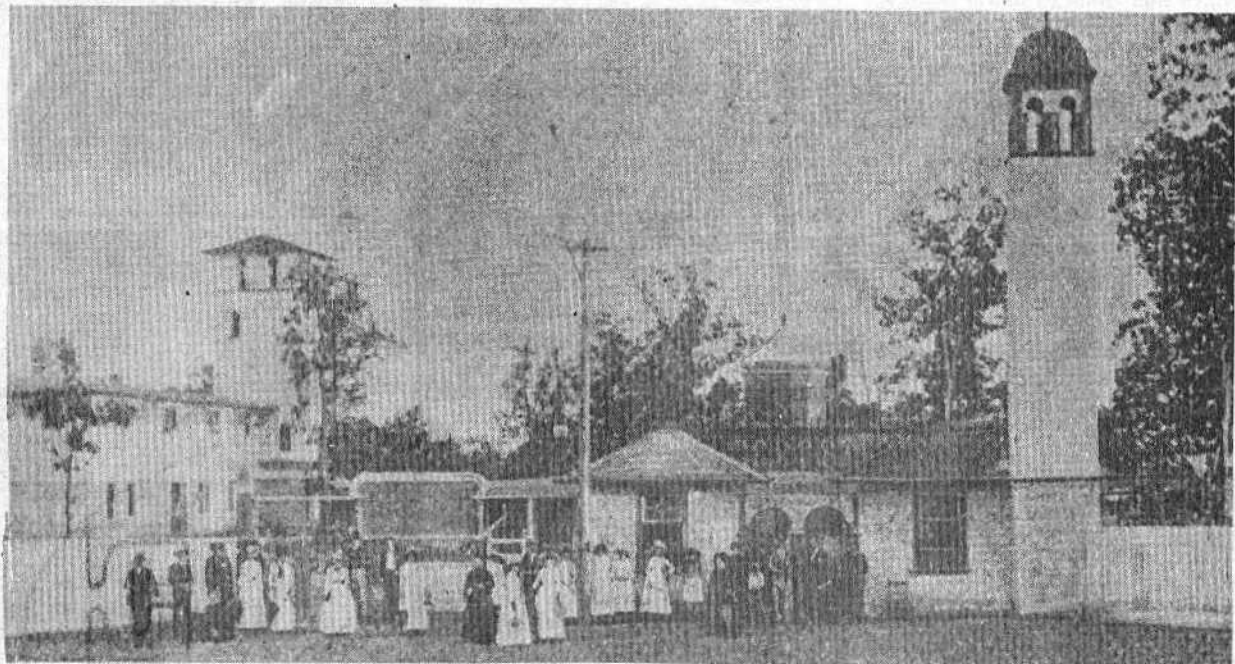


**Growing**  
First Baptist  
sanctuary finished

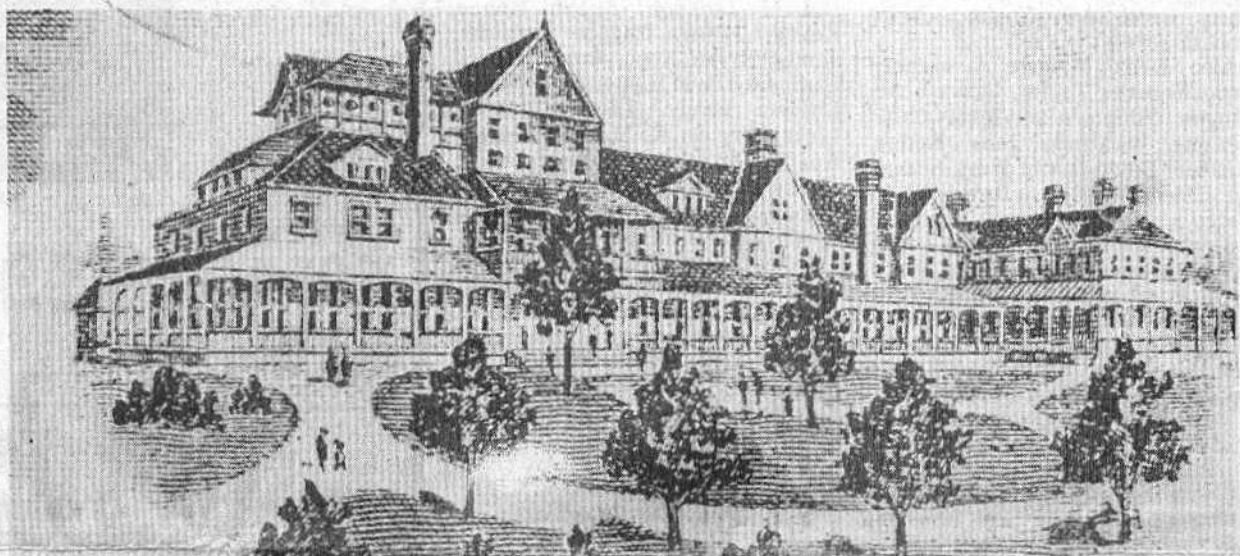
—4B

# ry

## l over the world to Lithia Springs



**THE PIEDMONT CHAUTAUQUA:** During the summer, vacationers came from across the country to enjoy the entertainment, culture, and curative springs.



**IT HELD 300 GUESTS:** The Sweetwater Park Hotel in Lithia Springs was connected by a dummy line railroad to the nearby springs and to Atlanta.