CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY - 175TH BIRTHDAY

HISTORIANS ARE THE RICHEST RESIDENTS OF CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY. YOUR WEALTH IS NOT IN TERMS OF DOLLARS FOR SOME OF YOU WORK FOR NOTHING AND OTHER HISTORIANS FOR NEXT TO NOTHING. HOWEVER, YOU ARE RICH BEYOND WORDS IN LORE, IN KNOWLEDGE OF PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS.

IN THE FINANCIAL WORLD THE SUCCESSFUL MUST GET A SUBSTANTIAL RETURN FOR THEIR MONEY. TO MULTIPLY THAT WEALTH THEY MUST RECEIVE HIGH RATES OF INTEREST.

THE HISTORIAN'S WEALTH BRINGS UNTOLD MEASURES OF INTEREST. WHEN THE AVERAGE CITIZEN, THE HISTORICALLY POOR CITIZEN, GOES TO A PERFORMANCE AT CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION, ALL HE KNOWS MUCH ABOUT IS THE EVENT OR PEOPLE OR THINGS HE IS ABOUT TO SEE. HE MAY KNOW OF A CHET ATKINS OR OF AN ETHEL MERMAN, BUT THAT IS ALL. WHEN ONE OF YOU, AS HISTORIANS ENTERS THE GATES AT CHAUTAUQUA, YOU TOUCH THE SPIRIT OF THE FOUNDERS, YOU BRING BACK TO MIND THE DAYS THE HORSE AND BUGGIES BROUGHT PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER AMERICA TO CHAUTAUQUA AND THE AGE WHEN VISITORS CAME IN ELABORATE TOURING CARS.

AS THE HISTORIAN SITS IN THE AMPHITHEATER QUIETLY WAITING FOR A PERFORMANCE, HE CAN ALMOST SEE AND HEAR THE PRESIDENTS WHO VISITED THE INSTITUTION - GRANT, McKINLEY, GARFIELD, HARDING, BOTH ROOSEVELTS. THE HISTORIAN CAN HEAR WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, GOVERNOR AL SMITH,

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SOCIALIST NORMAN THOMAS, SENATOR ROBERT KENNEDY AND THE HISTORIAN REMEMBERS WOMEN OF VARIOUS CAUSES - FRANCES WILLARD, CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT, JANE ADDAMS, IDA TARBELL AND MRS. THOMAS EDISON, HENRY FORD.

AND THE HISTORIAN REMEMBERS THE PREACHERS, EXPLORERS, REFORMERS, MUSICIANS, ARTISTS, SCIENTISTS WHO ADDRESSED MULTITUDES IN THE AMPHITHEATER.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO WHEN MY WIFE AND I TOOK A WEEK LONG VACATION AT CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION I VISITED THE AMPHITHEATER ONE AFTERNOON. IT WAS EMPTY EXCEPT FOR A WHITE HAIRED, BRIGHT EYED SENIOR CITIZEN WHO WAS SEATED NEAR THE BACK ROW. ABOUT A HALF AN HOUR LATER WHEN I RETURNED HE WAS JUST GETTING UP FROM THAT SAME SEAT. "GET A GOOD REST?", I SAID. "NO", HE REPLIED, "I WASN'T RESTING. I JUST QUIETLY RELIVED FORTY YEARS OF CHAUTAUQUA'S GREATEST GUESTS. I CAN STILL HEAR THEM".

WHEN THE AVERAGE CITIZEN WALKS PAST BROADHEAD MILLS ALL HE HEARS AND KNOWS IS BROADHEAD MILLS. THE HISTORIAN SEES PICTURES OF FACTORIES, BUSTLING WOOLEN MILLS, BRICKYARDS, TROLLEY CARS, THE BROADHEAD FAMILY.

THE HISTORY POOR PASSING THROUGH FREDONIA SEES NOTHING BUT EXISTING BUILDINGS, TRAFFIC LIGHTS, EXISTING PEOPLE. THE HISTORIAN SEES THE OLD NORMAL SCHOOL, THE FIRST GRANGE, THE FIRST NATURAL GAS WELL, THE FIRST WCTU. WHEN THE HISTORIAN VISITS BARCELONA HE SEES THE FIRST LIGHTHOUSE EVER TO BE LIT BY NATURAL GAS STILL STANDING FIRMLY ON THE SHORES OF LAKE ERIE.

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WHEN THE HISTORY IGNORANT HEAR THE NAME NIXON THEY THINK OF THE FORMER PRESIDENT BUT THE CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORIAN KNOWS THAT NAME REPRESENTS ONE OF THE GREATEST POLITICAL FIGURES IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY. TO THE AVERAGE CITIZEN THE NAME SAMUEL CARLSON MEANS LITTLE MORE THAN A NAME REPRESENTING SWEDISH DISCENT, BUT THE HISTORIAN KNOWS THAT NAME REFERS TO ONE OF JAMESTOWN'S OUTSTANDING MAYORS.

THE HISTORY POOR LOOK UPON WESTFIELD AS A LOVELY COMMUNITY WITH OLD AND NEW HOMES AND BEAUTIFUL TREE-LINED STREETS. BUT THE HISTORIAN SEES MORE THAN THAT. THE HISTORIAN KNOWS IT IS THE HOME OF GRACE BEDELL, THAT LITTLE GIRL WHO WROTE TO ABRAHAM LINCOLN, SUGGESTED HE GROW A BEARD, AND THEY KNOW IT IS THE COMMUNITY THAT HISTORY'S MOST BELOVED AND RENOWNED PRESIDENT TOOK THE SUGGESTION AND VISITED WESTFIELD JUST TO MEET THAT YOUNG LADY AND THANK HER FOR HER WISE ADVICE.

KNOWING THAT YOU HISTORIANS HAVE THIS EXCELLENT KNOWLEDGE-MADE MY TASK A DIFFICULT ONE - TO SPEAK BEFORE SUCH A GROUP WHO INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY KNOW SO VERY MUCH ABOUT SO VERY MUCH CAN BE A HUMBLING EXPERIENCE. THE CHALLENGE WAS WHERE TO BEGIN.

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HAS SUCH A WEALTH OF HISTORY, OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - PLACES AND EVENTS - A HISTORY THAT HAS SEEN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY RESIDENTS WHO LITERALLY TOUCHED, PERSONALLY SAW AND LISTENED TO THE SPEECHES OF MANY FAMOUS PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES. FAMOUS ARTISTS, PREACHERS, EXPLORERS AND INVENTORS. PUBLIC OFFICIALS HAVE EITHER COME TO OR FROM CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY. THE COUNTY HAS A WEALTH OF HISTORY OF PLACES FROM CHICKEN TAVERN TO THE BUSTLING CITIES OF DUNKIRK AND JAMESTOWN AND THE COUNTY IS REPLEAT IN GREAT

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EVENTS LIKE THE FIRST NATURAL GAS WELL AND THE FIRST LIGHTHOUSE EVER TO BE LIT BY NATURAL GAS. AND THE SITE OF THE FAMOUS PORTAGE TRAIL WHICH CAUSED A DISPUTE OVER POSSESSION BETWEEN THE ENGLISH AND FRENCH WHICH ULTIMATELY LED TO THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR.

THERE IS ENOUGH CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORY TO FILL TWENTY VOLUMES. I FELT MUCH LIKE THE AUTHOR TRYING TO EDIT HIS OWN BOOK. HE WAS ASKED TO REDUCE HIS 1,000 PAGE TOME INTO A FIVE PAGE MAGAZINE ARTICLE. HE DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN. HE DIDN'T HAVE THE HEART TO CUT ONE SINGLE WORD OUT OF HIS BOOK. HE ASKED HIS WIFE TO DO THE JOB FOR HIM AND WENT OUT OF TOWN. WHEN HE HAD RETURNED HE FOUND SHE HAD CUT IT TO A 300 WORD ESSAY.

THAT IS WHAT I DID. ONCE I DECIDED ON A SLIDE PRESENTATION I ASKED THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE TO DO THE SURGERY AND OUT OF THAT SURGICAL OPERATION CAME THE 8 MINUTE TIME CAPSULE WHICH YOU ARE ABOUT TO SEE. NO DOUBT THERE ARE PHOTOGRAPHS OR SKETCHES WHICH SOME OF YOU WILL FEEL SHOULD BE IN THE CAPSULE AND OTHERS WHICH YOU FEEL SHOULD NOT, BUT IN ANY EVENT WE HAVE MADE AN EFFORT TO SPAN THOSE 175 YEARS OF THAT GLORIOUS CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORY.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN THE PICTORIAL HISTORY I AM GOING TO DISTRIBUTE A LIST OF THE SLIDES WHICH YOU HAVE SEEN. I HAD IN MIND TESTING YOUR RECOLLECTION AND RECOGNITION BY FIRST GIVING YOU A BLANK SHEET OF PAPER AND ASKING YOU TO MAKE YOUR LIST TO COMPARE WITH THIS PRINTED SHEET. HOWEVER, WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE A BETTER IDEA TO DISTRIBUTE THE LIST SO YOU COULD TEST YOURSELF.

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I'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH YOU A STORY ABOUT AN OLD HERMIT WHO LIVED IN THE MOUNTAINS OF WEST VIRGINIA. HE WAS A WISE OLD MAN. HE WAS NOT WISE BECAUSE OF COLLEGE DEGREES FOR HE HAD NONE. HE WAS WISE BECAUSE HE WAS GIFTED WITH THAT RARE INSIGHT THAT SOME MEN, EVEN THOUGH UNEDUCATED, ACQUIRE THROUGH CLOSE CONTACT WITH NATURE AND WITH GOD.

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THE YOUNG BOYS IN THE VILLAGE WERE AFTER THE OLD MAN. "I KNOW A WAY WE CAN FOOL HIM", ONE BOY SAID. "I'LL TAKE A BIRD IN MY HAND. I'LL HOLD IT SO HE CAN JUST PEEK THROUGH MY FINGERS AND ASK HIM WHAT IT IS. WHEN HE ANSWERS I'LL SAY, IS IT DEAD OR ALIVE? IF HE GUESSES THAT IT IS DEAD, I'LL OPEN MY HANDS AND LET IT FLY AWAY. IF HE SAYS IT'S ALIVE I'LL CRUSH IT".

THE BOYS VISITED THE OLD MAN AT HIS HUT. "OLD MAN," SAID THE LAD. "I HAVE A QUESTION. WHAT'S IN MY HAND?" THE OLD MAN PEERED AT HIM FOR A WHILE AND SAID, "WELL MY SON, IT LOOKS LIKE A BIRD YOU'VE CAUGHT". "THAT'S RIGHT", SAID THE BOY. "NOW, IS IT ALIVE OR DEAD?" THE OLD MAN FIXED HIS EYES ON THE BOY FOR A LONG, LONG MOMENT...LOOKED AT HIS HANDS AND THEN HE SAID. "IT IS AS YOU WILL MY SON. ITS LIFE IS IN YOUR HANDS".

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY'S HISTORY HAS BEEN PLACED IN OUR HANDS. NOW IT IS AS WE WILL. WE CAN CRUSH IT OR WE CAN STRANGLE IT OR BURY IT AND IT WILL DIE. OR WE CAN FEED IT, WE CAN ENCOURAGE IT AND WE CAN WATCH IT MULTIPLY. IT IS AS WE WILL.

FOR CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY TO FOREVER HAVE A GLORIOUS PAST, ITS PEOPLE MUST WORK FOR PROMISING AND GLORIOUS FUTURE. IT IS AS WE WILL. WHETHER CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY WILL TREASURE ITS HISTORICAL

BUILDINGS, OR WHETHER WE WILL TEAR THEM DOWN, IT IS AS WE WILL. CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY'S PAST IS GOING TO DEPEND ON WHAT WE DO IN THE PRESENT AND IN THE FUTURE. IT IS AS WE WILL. WHETHER WE PROTECT OUR ROADS FROM JUNKYARDS AND JUNK SIGNS. WHETHER WE STRESS BEAUTY. WHETHER WE AVOID THE CHEAP AND HONKY-TONK TOURISM, IT IS AS WE WILL.

THE BEST BIRTHDAY PRESENT THAT WE CAN GIVE CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY IN THIS YEAR 1977 IS THE COMMITMENT TO MAKE THE BEST EVENTS OF THE COUNTY'S PAST THE WORST EVENTS OF ITS FUTURE. IT IS AS WE WILL.

ONCE THERE WAS A FARMER WHO DECIDED TO SELL HIS FARM. HE FIGURED HE'D GET ANOTHER ONE MORE TO HIS LIKING. HE CALLED IN A REAL ESTATE MAN AND HE LISTED THE FARM FOR SALE. THE REAL ESTATE MAN SAID O.K. THEN HE PREPARED AN AD FOR THE PAPERS. WHEN IT WAS FINISHED HE PROOF READ IT TO THE FARMER. THE AD DESCRIBED THE FARM'S ADVANTAGES, IDEAL LOCATION, HANDY ROADS, GOOD SCHOOLS, GOOD FENCES, FERTILE ACRES, WELL-BRED STOCK, PLENTY OF WATER, GOOD NEIGHBORS, GREAT COMMUNITY. "WAIT A MINUTE", SAID THE FARMER. "READ THAT AGAIN". THE REAL ESTATE MAN READ IT AGAIN. HANDY ROADS, GOOD FENCES, GOOD SCHOOLS, FERTILE ACRES, WELL-BRED STOCK, PLENTY OF WATER, GOOD NEIGHBORS, GOOD COMMUNITY. THE FARMER SAID, "STOP RIGHT THERE. IT'S NOT FOR SALE". THE REAL ESTATE AGENT ASKED HIM WHY THE SUDDEN CHANGE OF HEART. THE FARMER REPLIED, "THAT'S JUST THE SORT OF PLACE I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR".

I DARE SAY THAT IF EACH OF YOU GOES HOME TONIGHT AND ATTEMPTS TO WRITE UP AN AD FOR THE SALE OF YOUR HOME IN YOUR COMMUNITY THAT YOU, LIKE THE FARMER, WILL SAY "WAIT A MINUTE. STOP RIGHT THERE.

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IT'S NOT FOR SALE".

ALL I AM ATTEMPTING TO DO IN THIS TALK IS TO WRITE UP THE AD FOR THE GREAT COMMUNITIES EACH OF YOU HAS INHERITED AND THE GREAT COUNTY THAT WE'VE COME TO TAKE FOR GRANTED. WE HAVE HEARD TOO MANY PEOPLE SO EMPHASIZE WHAT IS WRONG WITH OUR WONDERFUL COUNTY THAT WE UNINTENTIONALLY MINIMIZE WHAT IS GREAT. THE SPIRIT OF HISTORY AND PRIDE IN OUR COUNTY HAS BEEN UNSOLD TO OUR CHILDREN AND OUR SCHOOLS AND TO OUR OTHER RESIDENTS. SINCE WE HAVE THAT KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY, LET THE HISTORIAN BREATH NEW LIFE INTO THAT SPIRIT AND INTO THAT PRIDE WHILE THERE IS YET STILL SOME TIME.

THROUGH OUR HISTORY WE CAN REVIVE THAT SPIRIT AND THAT PRIDE WHICH ONCE WAS SO, THAT LIKE THE FARMER, WE CAN SAY, "WAIT A MINUTE...READ THAT AGAIN...STOP RIGHT THERE. CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY IS NOT FOR SALE".

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SPEECH GIVEN AT CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BY COUNTY EXECUTIVE JOSEPH GERACE
WESTFIELD, NEW YORK

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