late; they feature comfortable chairs where customers can curl up with a book, and cafés where they can chat over coffee. It's just like heaven—or at least Manhattan.

Allen likens the impact of the chain bookstores to that of the sturdy paperback, which made books affordable to millions of readers after its invention in 1935. "Before the appearance of the chains, a relatively highbrow, urban clientele shopped at the independents, and a relatively lowbrow, largely regional one bought mass-market titles at supermarkets, price clubs, and drugstores," writes Allen. "Now . . . the vast territory between the two extremes has been bridged. Elitists may carp, but the truth is that they are no longer quite so elite."

And therein, Allen suspects, lies the true source of the bitter reaction to the megastores: "the knee-jerk snobbery that is never far from the surface in American cultural life."

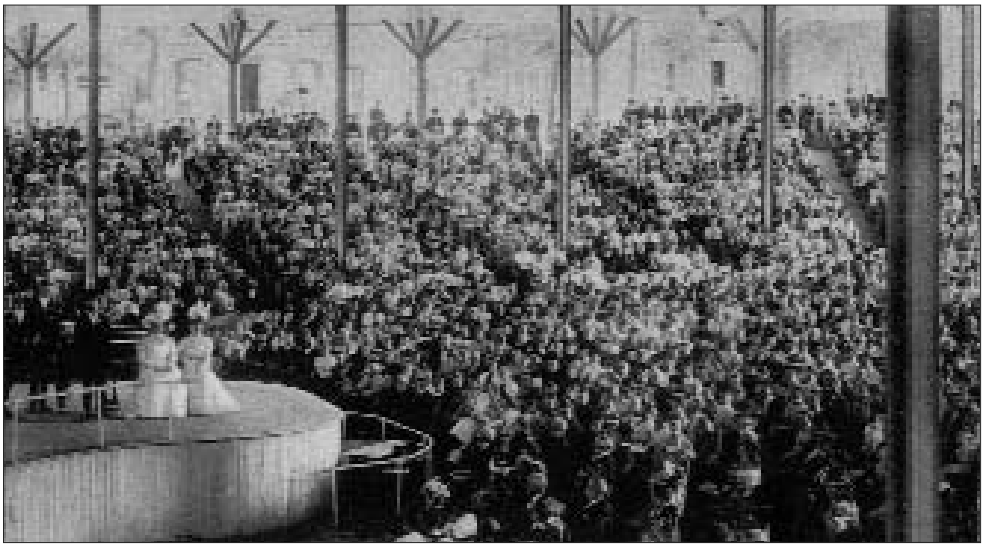
The Chautauqua Moment

"'Dancing Mothers': The Chautauqua Movement in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture" by Russell L. Johnson, in *American Studies International* (June 2001), 2108 G St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20052.

Theodore Roosevelt called it "the most American thing in America." Born in the summer of 1874 at Lake Chautauqua in western New York, the chautauqua movement enjoyed a 50-year reign over American cultural life.

When they began a summer-training program at Lake Chautauqua for Sunday-school teachers, Protestant ministers John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller had no idea they would inspire "a vast national cultural movement," says Johnson, a professor of U.S. history at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. But within two years, similar assemblies for mass uplift "began springing up in small towns and cities across the nation." Organized and run by local committees, and often held in a large tent near a river or lake, the chautauquas would run for about a week. Mornings were typically given over to Bible study, and afternoons and evenings to a mixture of lectures, musical acts, debates, dramatic readings, birdcallers, and bell ringers.

Early in the 20th century, "circuit chautauquas" developed, as entrepreneurs put together traveling extravaganzas and required local committees to guarantee a certain level of ticket sales. During the early 1920s, Johnson says, "chautauquas brought their unique blend of education, inspiration, and entertainment" to as many as 10,000 municipalities a year. For "tired, isolated men and women," chautauquas had much appeal, said one acid critic later in the decade. "Even the twittering of a bird imitator gave relief from the silo, the cowshed, the cooking, and the greasy dishes of the



Participants pack the amphitheater at Lake Chautauqua to hear a quartet perform, circa 1900.

depressing lives these people led. Even a lecturer with nothing much to say was a relief to husbands and wives who, for years, had even less to say to each other."

The chautauqua was not just a rural phenomenon, Johnson notes. It was "one of the first attempts to deliver a truly national culture to the masses—a culture linking rural and urban, East and West, North and South. Although the Midwest, and especially the state of Iowa, became the center of chautauqua activity, programs were held in all regions of the nation and in the largest cities," including New York and Chicago.

The early 1920s, Johnson notes, saw "the emergence of rival means of delivering a national culture to even the most isolated parts of the nation: radio and motion pictures." Only some 500 cities held chautauquas in 1928. By the 1950s, only one chautauqua was left—in Mediapolis, Iowa. It was no longer "the most American thing."

Press & Media

Watching the Feds

"Where are the Watchdogs?" by Lucinda Fleeson, in *American Journalism Review* (July/Aug. 2001), Univ. of Md., 1117 Journalism Bldg., College Park, Md., 20742–7111.

Are federal agencies too boring to cover on a regular basis? Editors at most major newspapers seem to think so. According to a recent *American Journalism Review* survey, a number of government bureaucracies are not covered by any full-time newspaper reporters, including the $46 billion Department of Veterans Affairs, which is the third-largest federal employer after the Pentagon and the Postal Service.

Critics warn that the change leaves government agencies less accountable to the public. Consumer advocate (and erstwhile presidential candidate) Ralph Nader argues that to cover government, reporters must "get inside, you've got to get the leaks, and the whistle-blowing, and you can't do that once in a while."

Editors are generally unapologetic, notes Fleeson, a former *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter. "We don't cover buildings," says Sandy Johnson of the Associated Press. At the *Washington Post*, national editor Liz Spayd says that her staff of 50 isn't big enough to do the job, even if she wanted it to. Editors also insist that the old approach often lost sight of larger issues in a sea of trivia, or yielded stories of marginal interest. Besides, Reuters and the Associated Press (as well as trade publications) still cover the old beats. Today's editors prefer to assign reporters to cover several agencies at once, or to produce thematic or issue-oriented "enterprise" stories.

Out of the changes has emerged what Fleeson calls "the New Washington Reporter," who gives "only part-time scrutiny to the business of the federal government." One of them is Lisa Hoffman, a Scripps Howard reporter charged with covering the Pentagon, the State Department, and the Internet. She still stalks the halls of the Pentagon on occasion, and she's a good reporter, Fleeson says. But Hoffman is stretched thin and there's a limited payoff to covering the Pentagon: The chain's papers don't always run her defense stories. Readers aren't interested, editors say.

Another member of the new breed is the *Los Angeles Times*'s David Willman, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1998 stories revealing that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had given fast-track approval to seven drugs over the objections of its own experts and other warnings. Willman reported that one drug, Rezulin, a diabetes treatment, was linked to 33 deaths. After Willman's story broke, the drug was recalled by the FDA. But it was a triumph of enterprise rather than beat reporting: it took almost two years to complete the story, and Willman had to be freed from covering campaign finance reform and other matters.

Willman's *Times* colleague, Alan C. Miller, scored a coup in 1994 by uncovering ethical misdeeds by then Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy. He went back to Agriculture two years later and wrote about the theft of timber in national forests. "Every time I dug into something at the Ag Department, we hit paydirt," Miller told Fleeson. But the *Times*, based in the nation's biggest agricultural state, doesn't have anybody "covering the building." The department "is