

5. Professional Analysis

Searching for Utopia

I had no clue a place like this existed on earth.

My discovery of Chautauqua happened in the summer of 2013 when I interned as staff photographer at *The Chautauquan Daily*, the Chautauqua Institution's newspaper. During the time spent there, I learned about the up-state New York Chautauqua gated community, which exists for nine weeks each summer as a place where people gather for spiritual and intellectual growth.

Lewis Miller, an inventor from Ohio, and John H. Vincent, a Methodist minister from Illinois, founded the Chautauqua Institution in 1874 as an educational community where adults could gather to learn and discuss religion, politics, and art in an idyllic setting. Initially, people used to camp on Chautauqua Lake shore, while artistic performances were being held outdoors or inside big tents. Later, Victorian houses were built.

In comparison with the world outside of the gates, Chautauqua is a utopian place: a town that has its own private administration system, a board of trustees, a president, a newspaper, a police station, and transportation system, all on a 750 acre campus. During the summer season, no cars are allowed in the community. Everybody either rides a bike or walks. The Children's School, the Boys' and Girls' Club, the Women's Club, the Bird Tree and Garden Club, Chautauqua Sports Club provide recreational and leisure activities for adults and kids. Chautauqua residents refer to it as the "*adults' Disneyland.*"

"Is it a sort of cult?" "Who are the people that afford to go there?" "It sounds like a perfect world", " a utopia," said my friends back in Missouri when I shared with them

my summer experience at Chautauqua. Intrigued by the questions asked, I decided to go back to Chautauqua in summer 2014 to convey through the use of multimedia why people perceive Chautauqua as an ideal living space.

Before I started to photograph, I thought it would be helpful to know how people from the Chautauqua community perceive Chautauqua. For that I decided to use a research approach called photo elicitation, where I chose eleven photographs of places that define Chautauqua's lifestyle, taken by me in the summer of 2013, and used them in photo-elicitation interviews with eight different people of the Chautauqua community, representing different aspects of the Chautauqua experience.

In 1967, John Collier introduced the concept of using photography as a support for the interviewing process in the social sciences field. In his book *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a research method* Collier talks about "anthropology approached through the use of *photography*." He argues the camera can be an extension of the observer's perception. For him, photography was the medium that "actually extend our visual processes and to help us find out more about the nature of man [sic] and his multi-faceted cultures."

Another visual communication researcher, Doug Harper, talks about photo elicitation as a research method that "evokes information, feelings, and memories that are due to the photograph's particular form of representation". He explains that the difference between a research interview based only on words and a research interview based on images and text stands in the fact that the human brain is more developed to process visual information than verbal information. Also, the photographs can stir stronger emotions than words. This is why photo elicitation doesn't necessary get more

information from the people interviewed, but rather it "evokes" a different type of information.

I used photo-elicitation research method to see how people inside the community: year round residents, first time visitors, employees, and returning visitors, frame Chautauqua's identity based on my photographs.

Framing theory originated in social sciences, and later was applied to mass communication studies. In 1974, the American sociologist Erving Goffman defined the term "frame" as a "principles of organization which govern events (...) and our subjective involvement in them," and "framing" as the process when individuals build the definitions of a situation in accordance with the "frame." According to Goffman, people interpret the world around them through different "frameworks" or "schemata of interpretation." Through the communication process, individuals unconsciously adopt the frames, which shape their perception about reality. This applies to photographers, too, in how they frame their coverage of a story or community based on their knowledge or understanding of the place. So in this way I believe that the photo-elicitation enabled me to have a deeper and more complete understanding of Chautauqua and to provide a more accurate framing of the community.

The fact I selected eleven photographs that show iconic parts of Chautauqua to use in the photo-elicitation – it is part of the framing process. Then, people I interviewed framed their views of Chautauqua by reacting to the eleven photographs, based on their experience with Chautauqua and their personal backgrounds. Finally, based on the

answers received in the photo-elicitation, I decided to frame my multimedia project about Chautauqua in order to be an accurate representation of the insider's view.

How I chose the photographs

It wasn't easy for me to decide what type of photographs I wanted to show to my subjects in order to gather meaningful information about Chautauqua. Doug Harper, renowned visual sociologist, claims that the more plain the photograph, the more information it elicits from the people interviewed. He also talks about the risk of not getting enough information from the photo-elicitation interview because of the use of over stylized photographs, praised in the photojournalism community but meaningless for the subjects. So, I took his advice and I tried to select photographs that are easy to "read", photographs that show but don't tell.



It was important for me to show a photograph of Chautauqua Institution's main gate because I wanted to hear people's opinion about the fact Chautauqua is a gated community. I was looking to answer questions like: do people mind paying to get in? Is

the gate taking from the authenticity of the place or does it contribute to the utopian feeling of the place?

Also, Chautauqua is a place where people spend most of the time outdoors, walking, riding bikes, swimming, even the lectures and the art performances are held in open-air venues, because the belief that the beauty of nature enhances people's learning experience is fundamental to Chautauqua. Therefore, I selected photographs with a strong sense of place that show the idyllic setting.



Fig. 1 Miller Bell Tower by Chautauqua Lake



Fig. 2 Kids swim at Chautauqua lake.



Fig. 3 The Chautauqua Amphitheater



Fig. 4 Hall of Philosophy



Fig. 5 Thunder Bridge



Fig. 6 Chautauqua Street

Chautauqua is known for its beautiful old architecture. What amazed me was how close the houses are to each other. This photograph is meant to be a very straightforward photograph, which illustrates this closeness. Does that bother people, or does that contribute to a stronger sense of community?



Fig. 7 A small alley in between houses

Finally, I wanted people to talk about the children of Chautauqua. Kids are everywhere, playing in the fountains, throwing balls in the square, and ruling the roads on bicycles.



Fig. 8 Bestor Plaza



Fig. 9 Children's school

Chautauqua's Children's School was built in 1921, and it was a pioneer for nursery school education in U.S. Besides children playing, you see parents and grandparents spending time with their children reading books or playing together. By showing this photograph, I wanted to see if anybody talks about the time people have here to do that, but also about the fact that there are a lot of families that come here on vacation.



Fig. 10 Bestor Plaza

Meet the subjects

Chautauqua community is layered in four different categories of people: the year-round residents who are property owners, the short term visitors, the season-long visitors, and finally the Institution's employees. I selected at least one person from each category, and interviewed eight people, in total:

- Bob Hopper, of Washington, VA, is a year-round resident of Chautauqua. Hopper and his wife bought a house in Chautauqua 12 years ago, after he retired.
- Sharyn Killeen, of North Carolina, is a first time visitor at Chautauqua. She came to Chautauqua to meet her son, Shayne Cokerdem, and his family that came back for the summer from Venezuela.

- Ryan Cokerdem-DePriest, 10, and Justin Cokerdem-DePriest 8, are brothers who live in Venezuela together with their parents who moved there to teach for American diplomats' children. The two brothers have come to Chautauqua since they were babies.
- Karrie Fuller, of Jamestown, is a housekeeper at the Athenaeum Hotel. Fuller originally from Panama, NY, a small town near Chautauqua Institution, used to come with her stepfather on the grounds to concerts and evening performances.
- Kwasi Buffington, of Oxford, Mississippi, first time worker, came to Chautauqua to work as master electrician for the Chautauqua Theater Company.
- John Schimtz has twelve years of experience working as historian and archivist at the Chautauqua Institution Archives.
- Sulochana RamaKrishnan, 80, is a returning visitor originally from South India who comes to Chautauqua every summer. Her son owns a house outside the Institution across Chautauqua Lake.

What did they say?

There are several recurrent discussion topics that people brought up while looking at my photographs, which made them to perceive Chautauqua as a perfect environment to spend the summer to reflect about life, learn new things, improve themselves, and relax.

Depending on age and previous life experiences, for each of my interviewees Chautauqua has something appealing to offer, something they didn't find in any other place. The goal of my research is to identify the common aspects the subjects mentioned which altogether make them perceive Chautauqua as a utopian place.

Chautauqua's intergenerational aspect

All of my adult subjects mentioned the intergenerational aspect of Chautauqua that they don't experience anywhere else. For Bob Hopper and his wife, this was the reason they decided to buy a house after their first visit.

"We stayed at the Athenaeum hotel, and as we were driving to the hotel, down on Jane Street, we saw all these grandchildren and grandparents, people playing in their yards and in the streets. It was so lovely. We said, 'Wow, this is great,' and as we wandered around the first couple of days, we decided, this is heaven. This is where we would like to come."

Sharyn Killeen talked about the intergenerational aspect as well. For her, Chautauqua is "a place that in the summer brings families together." Killeen came to Chautauqua to see her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren who sold their house in North Carolina and moved to Caracas, Venezuela, to work as teachers at a school for American diplomats' children. Since they left they don't own a house in U.S. anymore, which makes Chautauqua their home in U.S.

The natural beauty and idyllic setting of Chautauqua

Regardless of age and personal background, all the subjects mentioned the natural beauty of Chautauqua - kids, adults, visitors and employees; they all love Chautauqua because

it's a beautiful place. Sulochana RamaKrishnan talked about the fact that it's a very clean place with a lot of parks.

“You see, I am now just realizing this, from landscape to architecture, even the way they chose to have the wooded area. (...) It's a lot of uniqueness to this place, a lot!” said Kwasi Buffington while looking at one of the photographs that shows a Chautauqua alley.

Based on my subjects answers the “idyllic setting” of Chautauqua is a result of the combination between beautiful green areas are part of the 750 acres of the grounds and the architecture of the place, the gingerbread houses that are preserved as they were built over more than one century ago.

A safe and shared space

None of the respondents seemed to be bothered about the fact that Chautauqua is a gated community. I expected to hear people complaining about the fact they have to pay to get inside the community. On the contrary, they don't mind paying because they understand that it costs money to maintain the place and to bring the best speakers, faculty, artist for them to enjoy the lectures and art performances. They also like the fact that it's gated because that makes it safer. Moreover, people tend to be more trustful with each other. They don't lock their doors, and they don't worry about somebody coming into the house. The trust also consolidates the sense of community and unifies. Surprisingly, the gates have a beneficial effect from many points of view over the Chautauqua community.

“The children can go on their bikes, and they can go around everywhere, and you don’t have to worry about them, and I think that’s wonderful because it brings back memories of when I was a child. We would get on our bikes and go off, and our mother never had to worry about us.” - Sharyn Killeen, first time visitor

Ryan and Justin Cokerdem-DePriest also talk about how much they like Chautauqua because they can play outside with other children. Justin mentioned the fact that in Venezuela they are not allowed to play outside because it’s dangerous to be on the streets. So in Venezuela they play video games and invite friends over to their place. This explains why they like Chautauqua so much.

“You enter the main gate, you don’t know what Chautauqua’s about, then you go ten feet away then you get to see the real Chautauqua. Amazing, I love it because it’s all outside, and I feel like I don’t want to play inside. You can play with your friends, and it’s not like when you play a video game and you have to wait.” - Justin Cokerdem-DePriest

A walking community

All the subjects I interviewed mentioned that Chautauqua is a special place for them because they can walk freely, or ride their bikes, without having to worry about getting hit by a car. Cars are not allowed on the grounds once the season starts.

Chautauqua, a learning community

Kwasi Buffington had never heard about Chautauqua before he got a summer job as master electrician at the Chautauqua Theater Company. When he did his research about it, he found the people who knew about the place were either intellectuals or artists.

He describes Chautauquans as people who come here with the purpose to learn, rather than just people with wealth.

“I think it says something about somebody who’s in wealth to come here, that says a lot about that person and their value, because some people with wealth they go on vacation, they go party and drinking... and do whatever. But how rare is when somebody comes for spiritual growth or development?” - Kwasi Buffington

Bob Hopper likes Chautauqua because it’s a place where one can go to lectures to learn about controversial topics in religion, politics, economics, and many other fields. He finds it is a unique community where people have the freedom to disagree.

“I find it really amazing that you can hear one of those religious talks on 2 o’clock on a fairly controversial religious topic and you could be walking around and you could talk to anybody about it. And you will, you will go out there and you would ask ‘What did you think about Bishop Pawn of saying this?’, and you could talk about pretty controversial things and most of us grew up and our parents would have told us you now to be nice, don’t talk about politics or religion with people you don’t know really well, and here you can do that, and I love that.” Bob Hopper

However, the criticism Hopper has for Chautauqua is that the dialogue becomes a “soft-liberalism, that everything is just a little bit liberal but not always thoughtful. They all agree, but not totally. I sometimes think that people who are really strong thinkers on either the left or the right think there’s no room for them here to express really strong opinions.” From the employee’s perspective, Chautauqua is a place of learning in the sense of self-improvement. Kwasi Buffington, master electrician at Chautauqua Theater

Company, and Karrie Fuller, housekeeper at the Athenaeum Hotel, both show respect for the philosophy of the Institution. Both of them are proud to work in a place where people go to educate themselves, and it makes them become better in what they do.

What would they change?

The only criticism brought to Chautauqua by my subjects was that it doesn't have enough cultural diversity and that it is too expensive for middle class. Sharyn Killeen sees Chautauqua as inclusive but not accessible, by that she meant to say that people of different cultures and ethnicity would be accepted, but not everybody can afford it. However, all subjects seemed to understand why it's so expensive, because it provides such a rich program, it brings people who are the best in their fields to give talks and perform.

Bob Hopper said that some people don't like Chautauqua, because it's either "too organized", or because "they have to pay to get in". He concludes if nobody would pay, Chautauqua will cease to exist.

Conclusion

Based on people's responses in the photo-elicitation answers, I concluded that it is fair to associate Chautauqua community with the word "utopia." Even though none of my interviewees used the word "utopia" to describe Chautauqua community, the qualities of the place -natural beauty and idyllic setting, the learning experience, children playing freely in the streets, safety, self-development, freedom of speech, the lack of cars, the niceness of the people - are all traits of what people outside the gates would define as ideal world and what is a utopia if not "an ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects."

Did the photographs help?

I find my photo-elicitation interviews a successful and positive experience. The responses I got from the eight interviews with people from Chautauqua community helped me to further design the structure of my project and pursue the idea of an ideal world in my multimedia project. The respondents engaged with the photographs I showed, and Doug Harper was right in asserting that plain photographs elicit more meaningful and authentic information, rather than stylize photographs.

How did it affect my shooting or editing? Is photo-elicitation a process worth using in the future, why or why not?

I definitely encourage photographers who want to document communities they are not familiar with or photographers who work under a time-constraint documenting a place, a culture, or a community to do photo-elicitation interviews with the people from that place. I think that using photo-elicitation interviews as a way to find out more about a subject photographed can make the difference between what in the journalism field is known as “parachuting journalism” and actual documentary photography. Also, it was valuable to do my research before I start photographing, as first thing when I get there.

The photo-elicitation interviews with people from Chautauqua helped to shape my vision of Chautauqua, a dreamland – a quiet and somewhat fun and peculiar place for recreation and reflection. Furthermore, I built on that concept with photographs and video that depict the idyllic, utopic, dream-like quality of Chautauqua.

I spent the rest of the summer photographing the things that reflected the answers I conducted the photo-elicitation interviews because I was interested to portray Chautauqua community from the insider’s perspective. For example, I found the Cokerdem-DePriest family that meets once a year, every summer at Chautauqua, to show that Chautauqua is a place that brings families together as well as the intergenerational feeling of the place.

I took long walks and photographed the nature, the outdoors, the recreational activities, the lectures and the art-performances, but also tried to convey the magic and the free spirit of the place, allowing myself to engage with the place, to have a Chautauqua experience.

Sometimes in school we are taught to keep a certain emotional distance between our subject and us in order to stay objective in our journalistic portrait of the subject. This is why in the first weeks spent at Chautauqua I had a fear of giving myself to the place. I was afraid that I will be called out by other photojournalist for liking the Chautauqua community and for feeling as I am part of that community. But then I stopped thinking what other might say and listened to my heart. I can see the proof that I did the right thing when I looked at my full take, the photographs I took later in the season are stronger than the photographs from the beginning of the season. Of course it is also because the more time I spent at Chautauqua the more confident I got to photograph it.

The photo-elicitation interviews also helped designing the structure of my multimedia project. I divided it into five chapters, incorporating keywords from the interviews, such as utopia, intergeneration, change, learning experience, and natural beauty. I built the multimedia stories following the same concepts, so that in the end, all the components have a unified vision.

Finally, I think that without the information obtained from the people of Chautauqua community through photo-elicitation interviews I wouldn't have had the same deep understanding of the philosophy and character of Chautauqua community, I couldn't have produced an accurate and intimate portrait of Chautauqua.

