

Mount Dora, Florida— Chautauqua in the Wilderness

Harry J. Schaleman, Jr. and Dewey M. Stowers, Jr.
University of South Florida

The Chautauqua movement, a broad program of adult continuing education, reached its zenith following the turn of the nineteenth century. Established in 1874 on Lake Chautauqua, New York, this Methodist-inspired idea spread quickly throughout the United States and later to Canada and England. Like its predecessor the lyceum movement, the program focused on scholarly discourse and intellectual stimulation in the arts and sciences. In camp-like settings, adults assembled for lectures, discussions, readings, elocutions, and musical, religious, and recreational programs. The Chautauqua movement became extremely popular, and by 1924 it was estimated that one of three people in the United States had exposure to the Chautauqua system. Spreading from its cradle of inception, the name and idea were carried nationwide to rural America as well as to the larger urban centers. Mount Dora, Florida, embraced the movement and became one of the 103 local Chautauqua sites in 1887.

Locational Characteristics

Mount Dora is in Lake County, twenty-five miles northwest of Orlando, Florida, next to the northwest border of Orange County and facing the eastern end of Lake Dora. Here the hilly terrain rises in terraces to an elevation of 184 feet above sea level, one of the highest elevations in Florida. Therefore, the generic toponym, Mount, accompanies the specific toponym, Dora, to provide the community's name, Mount Dora. Lake County comprises 1157 square miles and includes 202 square miles of fresh water lakes formed primarily from sinkholes.¹ The county has some 1400 named lakes, a chain of which connects with the Florida east coast Inland Waterway. Leesburg is the largest city in the county, with a population of 14,900 (1990 census).

¹“Florida City and County Management,” 1988, *Florida County Atlas*, Tallahassee: State of Florida, pages 70-71 (Figure).

Mount Dora, embracing an area of six square miles enjoys a pleasant climate throughout the year, with an average August temperature of 82.4°F and an average January temperature of 59.7°F.² Two-thirds of the average annual 47.57 inches of precipitation occur during the summer months, due to convectional thunderstorms. These climatic factors enhance the quiet, rural setting of the Mount Dora region.

The natural site of this city is dominated by the Albany and Apopka sandy soils which range from somewhat poorly drained soils near the lake (Albany) to the more heavily drained, loamy soils (Apopka) further inland.³ Both soils are rapidly permeable and of medium acidity. Small formations of Astatula dark loam soils exist throughout the area.

Climax vegetation of this region consists primarily of pine forests which occupy 53% of the county.⁴ The understory vegetation includes creeping bluestem, Indian grass, and runner oak.

The primary economic pursuit of this region is agriculture, with citrus groves dominating the landscape. Important truck crops of the county include cabbage, carrots, celery, corn, cucumbers, lettuce, radishes, and watermelons.⁵

Mount Dora and nearby towns are served by the Southern Coast Line Railroad. However, this facility has been declining during the past three decades (Figure 1).

Historical Overview

Many visitors from northern states are drawn to this area and other similar small Florida towns with rural charm, natural setting, and moderate

² Ibid.

³ Soil Survey of Lake County, Florida, 1975, Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, maps 32 and 33, pages 7 and 10.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

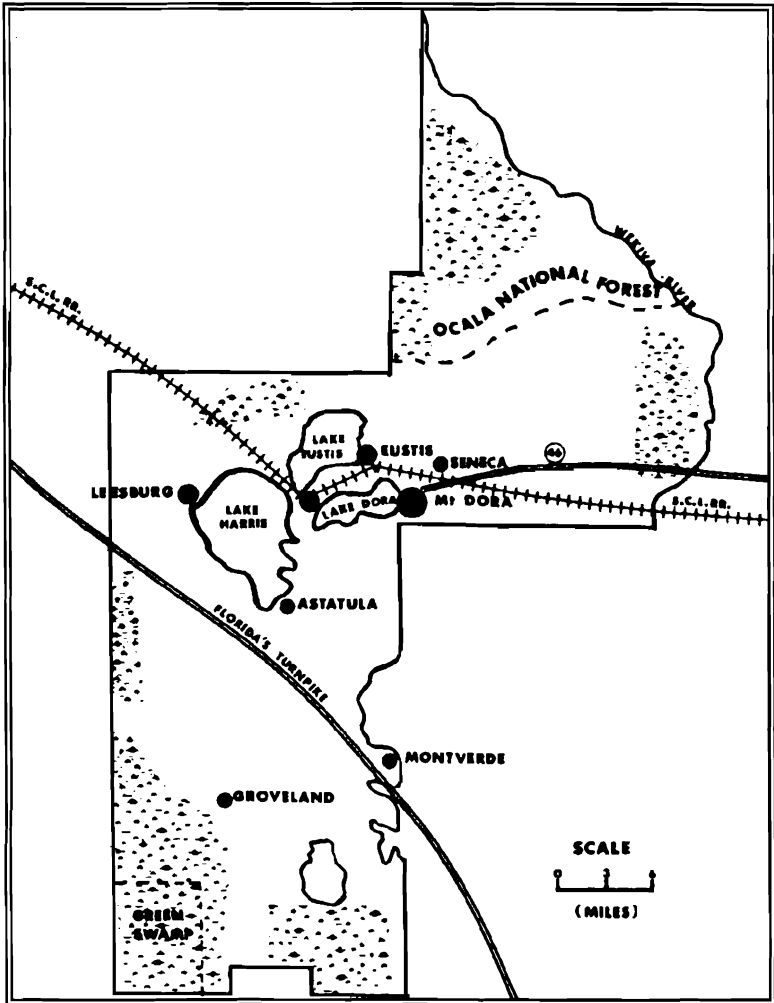


Figure 1
Mount Dora

climate. The quiet atmosphere and natural environment played important roles in establishing Mount Dora as an appropriate site for the famous Chautauqua gatherings.

Middens containing fragments of clay pottery, shell beads, broken arrowheads, and charred remains of aboriginal campfires suggest that Indians inhabited the area of Mount Dora as early as 500 years ago.⁶ Identified by the Spanish explorers in the 16th century as the Timucua tribe, the Indians survived through hunting and gathering activities as well as fishing and farming. European trade items found in burial mounds and campsites throughout the central lake region of Florida suggest exchange between the two peoples. Soon after the arrival of the Europeans, the Timucua became extinct. Despite occasional passage through the area of small groups of Indians (later referred to loosely as the Seminoles) from Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina en route further south, the area remained relatively unoccupied.

In this setting in 1846, Dora Ann Drawdy and her husband established a homestead about two miles south of the lake, later thought to be named in her honor by government surveyor James A. Gould whom she befriended.⁷ In appreciation for camping privileges and hospitality on the Drawdy property, it is said that Gould placed the name Lake Dora on his map of 1848. Confirming details are lacking, as all Orange County records were destroyed in a fire in 1869.⁸ Lake County, the contemporary location, was created later in 1887 out of parts of Orange and Sumter Counties.⁹

Ironically, Dora Drawdy for whom the lake and, later, the community were named never officially lived in Mount Dora. She and her husband arrived from Augusta, Georgia, and built a pine log cabin to the south on the eastern shore of what today is called Lake Beauclair. Here the

⁶ Sleight, Frederick W., "Mount Dora's Prehistoric Past," Introduction to R. J. Longstreet, *The Story of Mount Dora, Florida*, Mount Dora: Mount Dora Historical Society, 1960, page v.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 2.

⁹ Chapter 3771, No. 91, "An Act to Create and Establish the County of Lake from Portions of Sumter and Orange Counties," approved by the Governor, May 27, 1887.

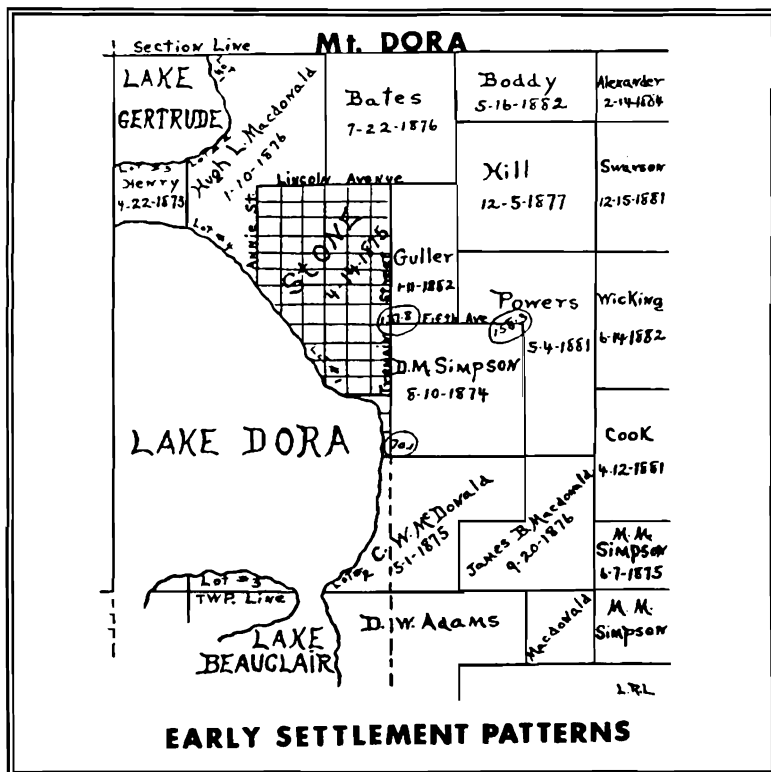


Figure 2
Mount Dora

Drawdys raised their six children. Fearing isolation and danger from deserters and runaway slaves when her husband James joined the Confederate Army, Dora moved to the small settlement of Seneca some ten miles to the northeast, where she died in 1883; her body is buried in the Umatilla cemetery.¹⁰

David M. Simpson, son of the owner of a large Florida plantation, along with his wife and two children, were the first homesteaders in what is

¹⁰ Longstreet, op. cit., pages 20, 21.

today Mount Dora (Figure 2).¹¹ On a 160-acre plot of forested high ground facing the eastern rim of the lake, Simpson built a log cabin in 1874. Like many early homesteaders, he is memorialized with a street named in his honor. Unfortunately for Simpson, oversight and error by the surveyors, combined with changing water levels of the lake resulted in the valuable lakeside section of his property which is today downtown Mount Dora, passing into the hands of Annie Stone. Annie's father, Clark W. McDonald, purchased additional lakeside real estate further south and adjacent to that of his daughter. Thus the second homestead family, in concert with David M. Simpson controlled the heart of what is now Mount Dora.

Who named the settlement Mount Dora and when it was named are unclear. Whether the community was "founded" or just evolved from scattered homesteads is also a matter of conjecture. If the former, who were the "founders"? Besides homesteaders and squatters already in the area, entrepreneurs and promoters, such as John A. Macdonald from Eustis, and surveyors, such as John W. Weeks (later U. S. Secretary of War), along with others arrived and platted streets and lots for the new community. The question of "founders" is, therefore, a moot one, as dozens of families lay claim to that honor.

In 1880, local settlers petitioned the U. S. government for a post office. Ross C. Tremain was appointed the first postmaster, and the settlement assumed the name of ROYELLOU (with at least six spelling variations thereof) after Tremain's three children: Roy, Ella, and Louis.¹² Conflicting stories from diaries of local residents and early publications render it impossible to establish specific details about who changed the name to Mount Dora and when this was done. The winter of 1882-1883 is the best estimate for the use of the new name, according to available records.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Morris, Allen, *Florida Place Names*, n.d., Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, page 105. Interview with Louis Clayton Tremain, June 1990.

By the end of 1883, no more than an estimated 50 families lived in Mount Dora.¹³ More than a century later, the population is nearly 12,000. Dr. C. R. Gilbert, an Ohioan who purchased land from salesman and promoter John A. Macdonald, noted in his diary in December 1882 that “this is the most lovely spot I have ever beheld. I predict for Mount, Dora a PROSPEROUS future.” In many ways the prophecy has come true.

The 1880’s were a decade of “firsts” for the Mount Dora community. The first school, a small log cabin, was established in 1882 with sixteen-year-old Edith Gates as teacher.¹⁴ Methodist and Congregational churches were organized with services held in local homes and the new school building.¹⁵ Four years later, in 1886 a school for Negroes was established.¹⁶ In the next year (1887), Mount Dora’s first newspaper, the *Mount Dora Voice* was published, a copy of which is on display in the Royellou Museum, a structure whose original function was that of city jail.

John Philip Donnelly, a bachelor from Pittsburgh, married Annie Stone after the desertion of her husband William, thereby merging his 160 acres with her valuable lakefront property. Writing a column in the Spring of 1886 in the *Mount Dora Voice*, Donnelly described the community of more than 250 residents as having “two general stores, one drug store, a carriage factory, three hotels, and two churches.” As a harbinger for future progress, he announced plans for a “broad gauge railroad” and “the Congregational National Chautauqua Assembly . . . which will bring 5,000 to 10,000 people each winter.”¹⁷ The first

¹³ Longstreet, op. cit., “List of Residents 1882-83,” page 26.

¹⁴ Minutes of Orange County Board of Public Instruction, September 17, 1881.

¹⁵ Longstreet, op. cit., page 36.

¹⁶ Minutes of Orange County Board of Public Instruction, December 6, 1886.

¹⁷ Donnelly, John P. *Mount Dora Voice*, April 23, 1886.

railroad service through Mount Dora was in 1887, providing prestige and status for the community.

Chautauqua Period

In the same year, just thirteen years after the nation's first Chautauqua assembly was established in New York by Bishop John H. Vincent, the South Florida Chautauqua convened and provided similar annual educational assemblies centering on religious and cultural themes.¹⁸

Two years later, ten acres of prime lakeside real estate bordering the north shore of Lake Dora was deeded to the "Congregational State Association" for the new Chautauqua project by Dr. W. P. Henry, one of the early homesteaders, in exchange for lifetime passes for him and his wife.¹⁹ As described atop the one sheet program for the inaugural session, "the grounds are beautifully located between Lakes Dora and Gertrude and on the Sanford and Eustis division of the Jacksonville-Tampa and Key West road. Two regular trains pass over this road each way—extra trains will be run if needed. Passengers, by either rail or boat, will be taken directly to the grounds. Excursion tickets at half rates. A dining hall and dormitory has been erected, and tents may be rented during the season."²⁰ The first session was held in a great tent with the new auditorium and hotel built in 1888. It was in this complex that noted lecturers, writers, musicians, and scholars participated during the early years.

Mrs. O. W. Sadler, Sr., wife of an early settler, was active in the Chautauqua sessions and in addition to her own readings and participation produced at least two entertainment extravaganzas. In 1895 she orchestrated and directed a "Sham Battle of the Blue and the Gray." All

¹⁸ Longstreet, op. cit., page 111.

¹⁹ 1889 Program, The Florida Chautauqua, Orange County Deed Book 37, December 7, 1885, page 97.

²⁰ 1887 Program, The Florida Chautauqua, First Annual Session at Mount Dora, April 5-14, 1887.

of the Yankee and Confederate veterans donned their uniforms, picked up their rifles, deployed themselves in the wooded lakeside area, and reenacted a chapter from the American Civil War. True to history, the Union prevailed. The following year, 1896, Mrs. Sadler staged a production entitled “The Nations,” an assemblage of women wearing native ethnic and national costumes—a precursor to the family of nations concept that followed later.²¹

Annual meetings continued until 1906, when fire destroyed the facilities; and Mount Dora’s brief flirtation as a “font of cultural greatness” came to a close. The list of lecturers on the program appeared less impressive in the later years. No figures for attendance are available for any of the assemblies. Support from the local community ensured its success, although out-of-town visitors are known to have stayed in hotels as far away from the campgrounds as Tangerine, Tavares, and Eustis.²²

Post Chautauqua Period

At least a dozen late nineteenth century structures remain. Most have been remodeled, enlarged, refurbished, or modified from their initial appearance and/or function. Two are conspicuous landmarks, and are on the National Register of Historic Places: namely, the popular Lakeside Inn (1883) and the Donnelly House (1893). The former is often cited as one of the nation’s charming historic inns (Smithsonian Society’s Top 50). The two story, three unit frame structure, occupying a knoll at the foot of Alexander Street, provides a sweeping vista to Lake Dora. The Donnelly House, built by John P. Donnelly for his bride Annie Stone, on the main street that today bears his name, has been handsomely refurbished and since 1930 has been the Masonic Temple Lodge. Another noted structure is the Community Congregational Church (1887), oldest church building still standing, also located on Donnelly Street. The old Guller House, built in the 1880’s, after extensive

²¹ Longstreet, op. cit., page 124; also plates xx, xxxviii.

²² 1887 Program, op. cit.

remodelling in 1920 and again in 1963, is today the City Hall of Mount Dora.

Following the end of the Chautauqua series, Mount Dora attained incorporated status in 1910 with a population officially registered at 371.²³ Still lacking paved streets, sidewalks, street lights, and a water system, the community was physically undistinguished in the early years of the 20th century. Shortly after that, by the 1920's, the necessary amenities arrived: telephones, electricity, oil-sand roads, a new school, waterworks, an ice plant, a fire brigade, etc. A Commercial Club, forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce was established in 1918-1919. Eager to expand and enhance the reputation of Mount Dora, the Commercial Club published an information booklet and "posted" Mount Dora signs all the way to and from Washington, D.C.²⁴

The citrus industry flourished off and on in the early years of Mount Dora. From a modest start, orange groves soon became big business. "It is probable that every homesteader planted a few orange trees about his home. When the 'Yankees' started coming to Mount Dora in the eighties, certainly one of their ambitions was to become citrus growers.²⁵ A series of big freezes during the winters of 1885-1886, 1894-1895, and 1898-1899 (lows respectively of 20°F, 15°F and 17°F), and cold weather severely damaged the groves and depressed the economy of the Mount Dora community. Many abandoned their hopes, plans, and homes, leaving the area in some instances with but a few personal possessions. It was more than a half century later before a freeze of this magnitude returned to the area.²⁶

²³ U. S. Census, 1910. Chronological History of Mount Dora, Mount Dora: Chamber of Commerce, Inc.

²⁴ White, R. N., Mount Dora Information Booklet, August 10, 1920.

²⁵ Longstreet, op. cit., page 46.

²⁶ Ibid., pages 46-58.

Conclusion

Mount Dora's first half century set the tone for the community of today. Proud of its past, the city is perhaps one of Florida's best kept secrets. The charm and ambience of this quaint New England-style city of some 7,196 (1990 census) captivates visitor and resident alike. The accent is on culture and education as in the city's formative years. Home of the oldest art league in Florida, Mount Dora today has the Mount Dora Art League and the Ice House Theater, a troupe performing for more than forty years on a year-round repertoire. Festivals such as the Art Festival held each February attract some 150,000 visitors to view the works of 300 artists. Other annual events include the Antique Boat Festival, the Antique Auto Tour, the Crafts Fair, etc. Just outside Mount Dora is one of the largest flea markets in the state. Acclaimed the "Antique Flea Market Capital of Florida," such shops abound within and on the outskirts of this central Florida community.²⁷

Home of the state's oldest inland waterway yacht club, the Mount Dora Yacht Club, the city is water and sports oriented. The annual Bicycle Festival with more than 1,000 cyclists participating, the Dora Invitational golf tournament, the Sailing Regatta, and many fishing contests help to provide a setting amid lakes, mild climate, and Victorian homes that recall a more relaxed turn of the century atmosphere. The shaded streets lined with moss-draped oaks, interspersed with palm trees further accent the quaint New England atmosphere. True to its early heritage and the foresight of its founders, Mount Dora reflects its cultural past. The Chautauqua vision prevails today in spirit and memory.

²⁷ Mount Dora Chamber of Commerce, Inc.