PACIFIC GROVE’S
FEAST OF LANTERNS

Within the book *A Memorial and Biographical History of the Coast Counties of Central California* (1893) are mentioned the events that led to Pacific Grove being selected as a location for a Christian seaside resort and camp meeting grounds.

*In 1875, Bishop Peck, who was ever on the alert to do good, conceived the idea, after a brief visit, that this place so nearly resembled those health-giving retreats in the East, that negotiations were soon pending with Mr. Jacks for the purchase of a site that should at once form the nucleus around which could be built a retreat where spiritual and social comfort could be had without limit, and where the ever rolling, restless sea would sing a sweet lullaby to woo the drowsy god and produce that sweet, refreshing sleep which is acknowledged by all scientists to be the great restorer of human nature. Here in this lovely spot, breathing the pure aroma of the pines, and inhaling the pure ozone from the broad Pacific, with no one to trouble them or make them afraid, these people proved beyond all doubt that so far as they were concerned, this was to them the Mecca for which they had so long and so persistently searched.*

Within less than a decade of its being established in 1875, the Pacific Grove retreat became a favorite Methodist convention headquarters for the hosting of religious, temperance and education conferences along the California coast. The coming years saw Pacific Grove become a favorite retreat for those seeking a culture of the mind and respite for the soul.
CHAUTAUQUA

The Chautauqua movement began in 1872 as a Methodist Sunday School teacher-education program in upstate New York. In 1878, John Heyl Vincent established the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), a structured four-year correspondence program, which offered an individual the opportunity to earn a Chautauqua educational degree and an honorary diploma. The CLSC program was designed to provide higher education for the masses, through a national correspondence course, based on a literary and science curriculum. For a few weeks during the summer, individuals could vacation at a regional Chautauqua Assembly, with the opportunity to attend the lectures and classes offered. The rest of the year, they would study on their own, or join with their local Chautauqua Circle, reading the books listed on the course outline, which to Circle members had received through the mail.

Proving to be popular in both in rural and urban communities, thousands of CLSC reading circles were established throughout the United States. It became a common practice for those individuals, who completed the four-year study, to attend their regional Chautauqua assembly, take part in an elaborate graduation ceremony and receive their diploma. These regional assemblies, referred to as the daughter Chautauquas, referenced the original assembly gathering on Chautauqua Lake as the Mother Chautauqua.
FEAST OF LANTERNS IN AMERICA

Feast of Lanterns festivals are centuries old and celebrated around the world and from coast to coast throughout the U. S. These events, both large and small, advertised as a “night of illumination” or a “feast of lanterns” have long inspired community celebrations and encouraged tourism. Throughout the years, these events have involved communities decorating their homes, businesses and public streets with lanterns of various styles - Chinese lanterns, Japanese lanterns, colored glasses lanterns.

Some communities mention their celebration having been adopted from a Chinese custom and based on a legend, while others made no reference associating their event with a custom or legend. The activities offered during these all-day events include various spectacles of entertainment such as plays, open-air band concerts, culminating in an evening lighted boat parade “illuminated fleet” and fireworks.

Oak Bluffs, a Methodist camp meeting grounds on Martha’s Vineyard first celebrated “Grand Illumination Night” in 1869. The annual event, which continues to this day, involves illumination of the cottages and camp grounds with thousands of Chinese lanterns, a band concert, and a grand ball, with the day culminating with fireworks. At an appointed hour, people gather in the Tabernacle for a sing-along and community gathering.
THE ILLUMINATED FLEET OF 1878

An evening event known as the "Illuminated Fleet" was introduced as part of Mother Chautauqua program during the Assembly of 1878. The gala began at 9 pm with "music on the Lake, fireworks and illuminated fleet" followed by the 10 pm ringing of the Chautauqua bells – which signaled the end of each day's activities. A description of the "Illuminated Fleet," held during the Chautauqua Assembly 1881 provides insight as to evening activities associated with the event; a depiction quite similar to the activities associated with the original "Feast of Lanterns" to be held in Pacific Grove.

I will attempt to describe one evening of last week: From eight till nine, Prof. Churchill entertained the assembled thousands by his readings of "Dr. Marigold" and "Sam Lawson:" and then all rushed to the shore to see the "illuminated fleet."

Imagine if you can, a half - dozen large steamboats and a dozen smaller ones, festooned from top to bottom, and from end to end, with colored lights and Chinese lanterns - hundreds of them, thousands - and these boats all in motion, describing circles about a common center.

Add to these a hundred, or so, of row - boats, all decked from stem to stern with parti-colored lanterns. From the upper decks of the larger steamers, rockets of various kinds were constantly firing; and Roman candles from the small boats. The whole display, an hour or two in length, closed with a grand volcanic out - burst of rainbow - colored combustibles, making altogether such a display as my rustic eyes never before beheld. And then came the pealing of bells, sending every one away to sleep the sleep of Chautauqua. And such sleep! I have not slept so soundly for months as here...
Each year the activities associated with the "Illuminated Fleet" increased as the descriptions associated with the event became more pronounced.  

The following paragraph appeared in the book “The Hall in the Grove” provides another description of the event during the Mother Chautauqua Assembly of 1881.

It was the evening of the Illuminated Fleet, The Mayville, the Shattuc, the Jamestown, and all those other boats whose names are so familiar to Chautauquans, were on the scene aglow with beauty. White lights, red lights, green lights, blue lights! How they danced and sparkled and glowed! All these wonderful lights, shimmering over the water, changed the lake into a sheet of crimson and gold, over which the boats glided silently, like fairy forms, keeping time to the most entrancing strains of music from various bands on board. The special occasion of all this magnificence was the reunion or the Chautauqua Alumni.

Each year the event grew with more elements of illumination. During the Mother Chautauqua Assembly of 1886 one find, for the first time, the phrase “feast of lanterns” along with the “illuminated fountain,” and “Athenian watch fires” as part of the celebration.

All visitors will enjoy in common the brilliant fire-works, the illuminated fleet, the feast of lanterns, the illuminated fountain, the Athenian watch fires and the many other characteristic features of the Chautauqua season.
PACIFIC COAST CHAUTAUQUA ASSEMBLY

During a Sunday School Assembly of 1879 held in the Pacific Grove camp meeting grounds, Reverend HH Rice and Reverend Dr. M. M. Gibson, of the California Sabbath School Association, met with Reverend John H. Vincent and four instructors from the California State Normal School at San Jose, Miss Mary EB Norton, Mrs. Myrtle Hudson Wagner, Miss Lucy M. Washburn, and Mrs. Arthur H. Washburn, for a discussion around a campfire fueled by pine cones.

During the fireside chat, the women of the group encouraged Reverend Vincent to establish the Pacific Coast Branch of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. The result of this informal fireside gathering, just seven years after the Mother Chautauqua was founded in upstate New York on the shore of Chautauqua Lake, was the formation of a Pacific Coast Chautauqua Assembly, with the Pacific Grove meeting grounds serving as the host location.

As a location for establishing the daughter Chautauqua Assembly, the Pacific Grove Methodist Camp Retreat offered an awe-inspiring natural setting from which to advance the ideals born of the Mother Chautauqua Assembly; lifelong learning, voluntary simplicity, love of nature, science, literature, music, oration and the arts.

In the coming years, those who traveled to the Pacific Grove camp meeting grounds to take part in the Chautauqua Assembly, arrived to find a summer haven tucked away from the vices of the crowded cities and the dreariness of rural living, and a programme of work that included daily lectures upon Scientific, Literary and Biblical subjects, with special opportunities for the study of Natural History.
ROMANTICS AND THE PACIFIC COAST ASSEMBLY

In 19th century America, with literature being the primary cultural outlet, the prose and poetry of the Romantics was embraced as the most important and respected literary form. During the annual two-week gathering of the Pacific Coast Assembly, readings, lectures and courses of instruction celebrating the works the Romantics supported the Chautauqua Institution’s idealized education in the humanities and the arts. Whether it be lectures discussing the writings of the European Romantics - William Shakespeare, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, William Wordsworth and John Milton; or the American Romantics – William Cullen Bryant, Robert Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Henry David Thoreau and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the works of the Romantics were an important literary component of the summer Chautauqua Assembly. Reading of the works of the Romantics during the Pacific Coast Assembly permeated the campgrounds of the Pacific Grove Retreat, and advanced the ideals associated with establishing a reverence for nature.

A second cultural outlet during this period was watercolor landscape painting, considered as one of the most charming and highest mediums for presenting nature's beautiful and delicate effects. For decades the Pacific Coast Assembly offered a course in watercolors with John Joseph Ivey (1891-1907) followed by William Adam (1909- 1915) as instructors. For these watercolor artists, portraying the beauty of nature went beyond simple aestheticism but understood to be a presentation of God’s glory. While Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir wrote of America’s unique connection to nature, landscape artists positioned along the Pacific slope, created paintings that glorified the nation’s wildness.
A third cultural outlet celebrated during this period was nature study, involved amateur naturalists collecting and studying objects of nature, while enjoying walks and talks in nature. While other Chautauqua Assemblies offered a course in nature study, the Pacific Coast Assembly was unique with their emphasis on the instruction of natural history. No other Chautauqua Assembly came close to offering the variety of courses related to natural history. Four core courses - terrestrial botany, marine botany, marine zoology and conchology were offered at the Pacific Coast Assembly for more than twenty consecutive years. Beyond these courses of instruction, a variety of natural history talks and instructional courses on the subjects of archeology, astronomy, economic botany, economic entomology, household chemistry and geology were provided at Pacific Coast Assembly.

Offering these natural history courses provided Assembly participants the opportunity to attend lectures, collect specimens in the forest and along the shore, and be introduced through the use of tangible objects of nature to the study of natural history under the direction and guidance of gifted instructors.

Similar to American Romantics (i.e. transcendentalists) of Massachusetts, participants of the Pacific Coast Assembly were provided the opportunity to enrich their souls with literature and poetry, American landscape paintings, outdoor walks along the shore, and the study of nature.
PACIFIC GROVE MUSEUM

Within the early announcements for the two week session of the Pacific Coast Assembly of 1880 was mentioned the opportunity for “each teacher to carry home a small but well assorted collection of prepared specimens of the forms of marine life. It is hoped that extensive collections of material for museums may be made.”

In 1881, the effort to establish a museum was advanced when the Pacific Improvement Company erected the Chautauqua Hall comprised of a lecture hall, and two classrooms fitted with shelves and other arrangements for a natural history collections, including a herbarium for California and Pacific Coast flora.

In 1883, the Pacific Improvement Company provided the Assembly with a small wooden octagonal building as a museum to store their natural history collections.

In 1900, the Pacific Coast Assembly of the CLSC donated the octagonal museum building and 2100 objects of natural history to a new organization named the Pacific Grove Museum Association. This organization took up the opportunity to build upon the museum collection that the Pacific Coast Assembly had gathered together. In addition to advancing the collection of natural objects, the Pacific Grove Museum Association organized a reference and scientific library, a small botanical garden to preserve the native flora, and established a scientific lecture series during winter months.
JAPANESE TEAHOUSE 1904

Perhaps the most unique building at Lovers’ Point was the Japanese Tea House, financed by Japanese immigrant, Otosaburo Noda. The teahouse was designed and constructed by Kohachl Handa, a carpenter from Japan, who built the entire structure without a nail. The Tea House in Pacific Grove proved to be a major tourist attraction, featuring a fish pond and garden, and offering tea and rice cakes for sale.

CHAUTAUQUA ASSEMBLY OF 1905

The program for the Chautauqua Assembly of 1905 mirrored years past with presentations by famous orators, and courses offered in the departments of science, art, music, physical culture, history, domestic science.

For the Assembly of 1905, the courses - Walks and Talks in Marine Biology, Conchology, and Geology, Art, Elocution, Cookery, German, Spanish, Music, and History – were offered to participants.

As for famous orators, during the Assembly of 1905 Reverend Ng Poon Chew, author, publisher, and advocate for Chinese American civil rights presented an address on the “Russo-Japanese War.” This talk was so much enjoyed, he was asked to speak on “Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882” at the forum hour the next morning. During the forum, Chew explained how the Chinese exclusion was unjust, and its enforcement was a form of oppression and persecution.

Missionary efforts were often reported upon during the Pacific Grove Chautauqua Assemblies. These discussions involved their current and future Protestant missionary efforts which involved the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants. Many periodical and
newspaper articles of the period mention the efforts of Protestant clergy and the Methodist Woman’s Home Mission Society who worked to educate the Chinese and save girls from the slavery trade.

Several streets in Pacific Grove are named after Methodist ministers who contributed to Chinese mission efforts, Reverend Otis Gibson, founder of Community United Methodist Church, (Gibson Street), Reverend W. C. Evans, superintendent of the Pacific Coast Chinese Mission, in Oakland (Evans Avenue), Reverend M. C. Briggs, Minister of the Methodist Mission in San Francisco (Briggs Street).

The Chautauqua Program of 1905 listed an event named the “Feast of Lanterns” and advertised in the San Francisco Call newspaper:

*Feast of Lanterns at Pacific Grove July 22 Grand Spectacular Event. Illuminated Fleet on Monterey Bay. Electric Illumination and Fireworks. Free Concert by Military Band. Special railroad rates. Come and see the grand free display and spend a few days amid the beauties of nature.*

**FEAST OF LANTERNS 1905**

The origin of the Feast of Lanterns as mentioned in a Pacific Grove Review article of 1905 stated the Chautauqua Assembly Association committee had proposed the festival to the Board of Trade. Not unlike many other Feast of Lanterns celebrations throughout America, the Pacific Coast Chautauqua modeled the celebration based on the Chinese legend of a Mandarin Emperor’s search for his drowned daughter.

*There was a meeting of the Pacific Grove Board of Trade held on Wednesday evening at which time advertising the attractions here was the principal subject*
discussed... A Chautauqua Assembly Association committee appeared before the Board to ask their cooperation in providing a "Feast of Lanterns" as an attraction during the coming 1905 Chautauqua session.

Mrs. D.W. Folger explained that the Feast is to be the introduction of a Chinese custom that is based on a legend regarding the drowning of a young Chinese girl several hundred years ago. The plan is to illuminate boats upon the bay with beautiful Japanese lanterns, adorn the shoreline with lanterns and electric lights and provide liberally for brilliant effects by the use of fireworks and colored fire. The matter was discussed at some length...after which temporary Board chairman J.P. Pryor appointed a committee to meet with the Assembly ladies and report at a called meeting of the Board of Directors of the Board of Trade. 

With permission from the Board granted, the committee for the twenty-sixth annual Pacific Coast Assembly introduced the Feast of Lanterns at dusk on July 22, 1905, with numerous lanterns lighting the walk to Lovers’ Point where the Fifteenth U.S. Infantry band gave a concert. A description of the event, printed in the periodical “The Interior,” read:

Twenty-sixth annual assembly -- This year a new feature was added to close the Assembly, called the "Feast of Lanterns" -- a time honored incident at Old Chautauqua, but introduced here for the first time. Over ten thousand lanterns were distributed, and the town was beautifully illuminated. A fishing fleet on the bay cooperated and the Board of Trade of the city joined heartily in the affair. At the water's edge the illuminations were beautiful, and a chorus of 150 voices on the water, led by Professor Fayerweather,
rendered choice selections, was fairyland in Pacific Grove on Saturday evening and the event will not soon be forgotten. The Assembly just closed will add to Chautauqua's prestige.7

The following mention of the Feast of Lanterns appeared in the Pacific Grove Review, one day prior to the event. Of interests to note are the number of Japanese boats that took part in the event.

"There is to be a revival of an ancient (Chinese) custom in the Grove on July 22nd, at which time a "Feast of Lanterns" will be the attraction. Lanterns are on sale by a committee of ladies at the store of Culp Bros. The price is 60 cents a dozen. It is desired that the illumination be general on all streets leading to the waterfront in the vicinity of the bathhouse. Candles are sold at the rate of two for five cents. Arrangements have been made for four Chinese boats and sixteen Japanese boats. Chairs to be placed on the veranda of the Bath House will be rented for 25 cents each. Red fire has been provided for the Japanese boats. $260 has been collected by the canvassers and placed in the bank. Money was apportioned for railroad advertising as well as for: Wire $10 Japanese boats $30 Fireworks $100 Candles $20 Chinese Lanterns $110”. 8

In 1905, The Chautauquan Weekly also published a review of the Pacific Grove Assembly activities, commenting that the Feast of Lanterns event originated from the Mother Chautauqua in New York.

Pacific Grove Assembly California: Recognition Day at the Pacific Grove Chautauqua was observed on July 18. The Recognition Day exercises at which four graduates were given diplomas were followed by an address on Education delivered by Dr. McClish ... One of the greatest features of the Assembly was the Feast of Lanterns
copied after a similar celebration held at the Mother Chautauqua in New York at which the Assembly grounds were beautifully illuminated with colored lanterns… One of the newspapers in commenting on the event states that “a more beautiful scene would be difficult to imagine”.

POINT ALONES CHINESE FISHING VILLAGE

Pacific Grove’s Chinese Fishing Village was founded by a handful of immigrants in the 1860s. The Chinese who settled in present day Pacific Grove were among the earliest immigrant communities to arrive on the peninsula. The village was unique being one of the earliest Chinese communities in California where entire families of men, women, and children lived and worked for several generations.

The families living in the Chinese Fishing Village were the first to recognize the potential for commercial fishing in the Monterey Bay. The Chinese fishermen built twenty-one-foot, flat-bottomed fishing sampans with a single triangular sail enabling them to fish the bay.

To fish for squid at night, the Point Alones fishermen equipped their small sampans with “fire baskets” suspended by a long metal pole from the bow. In these "fire baskets," pine wood was burned. The squid, attracted by the fire, would rise to the surface and scooped up with nets.

It has often been stated that the glow from the Chinese sampans fishing on the Monterey bay inspired PG’s Feast of Lanterns, yet the literature from 1905 suggest the celebration was adopted from the Mother Chautauqua in upstate New York. There
appears no mention of the festival being inspired by the lantern-lit Chinese fishing boats that sailed the Monterey Bay in the literature until many years later, in the 1970s.

With four Chinese boats and sixteen Japanese boats hired for the illuminated fleet confirm the two immigrant communities participated in the event, though their involvement appears to have been limited to the boat parade.

WOMEN IN PACIFIC GROVE

From the beginning, women have been the beacons of civic leadership for the community of Pacific Grove. With each organization, the Chautauqua Assembly, the Women’s Civic Improvement Club, Pacific Grove Museum, and Feast of Lanterns, women have helped to develop the nature of the community. Mary EB Norton, Mrs. Myrtle Hudson Wagner, Lucy M. Washburn and Jessica Thompson, who encouraged locating the Chautauqua Assembly in Pacific Grove; Julia Platt, President of the Women’s Civic Improvement Club; Jane Page and Lucy Chase were civic leaders involved with the PG Museum; Elmarie Dyke, educator and civic leader whose efforts ensured that Pacific Grove remained the last dry town in California and continuation of the Feast of Lanterns. The few names mentioned above represent only a handful of the hundreds of women who have shaped the civic and social structure of Pacific Grove since its establishment in 1875.

FROM CHAUTAUQUA CIRCLES TO WOMEN’S CLUBS TO THE PROTECTION OF NATURE
In the last decade of the 19th and into the 20th century, many of the CLSC reading circles were absorbed into the recently established local, civic-minded women’s clubs, such as the San Jose Women’s Club (SJWC), the Pacific Grove Civic Improvement Club. The majority of these local women’s clubs were connected to their State affiliates, the California Federation of Women’s Clubs (CFWC) which, in turn were associated with the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC). Such was the case in, California, where the formation of numerous women’s clubs had resulted from the influence that had radiated from the Chautauqua Institute.

In the coming years, the summer gatherings of the Pacific Coast Assembly supported communication among the California Women’s Clubs. In 1907, a “Club Women’s Roundtable” was organized to provide an opportunity for the different Women’s clubs from around the State, to discuss their particular efforts and report the result of their activities. The following year “Special Days” were introduced to the Assembly featuring activities around a particular cause or subject, with one day being designated as Anti-Saloon Day, another Civic Righteousness Day, another Woman’s Clubs Day, and another Forestry Day. Mrs. Laura White, who participated in the Pacific Coast Assembly of 1908, served as the President of the California Club of San Francisco (1898-1902 and 1910-1911), and was instrumental in the establishing of the Sempervirens Club serving as President of the organization (1903-1906).

The first political conservation campaigns began in 1900, with efforts of both the CFWC and GFWC directed toward protecting the Calaveras Big Trees, near Yosemite Valley, followed by SJWC efforts directed at protecting the redwood trees of Big Basin, located in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The San Jose Woman’s Club's initial involvement
in protecting Big Basin quickly led to establishing of the Sempervirens Club, which in turn seeded, decades later, the establishing of the Save-The-Redwoods League. These earliest of forest advocacy efforts, protecting the Calaveras Big Trees, near Yosemite Valley, and redwood trees of Big Basin, taken up by the CFWC, the GFWC and the SJWC, were the first of their kind directed at protecting the redwood trees of California.

With the support of the Women’s Clubs, California women not only lead the effort for the preservation of forests but waged state campaigns for suffrage, gaining the right to vote in 1911.

References

1. A Memorial and Biographical History of the Coast Counties of Central California (1893)


6. Pacific Grove Review, June 16, 1905
