

# Enlightenme à la Carte

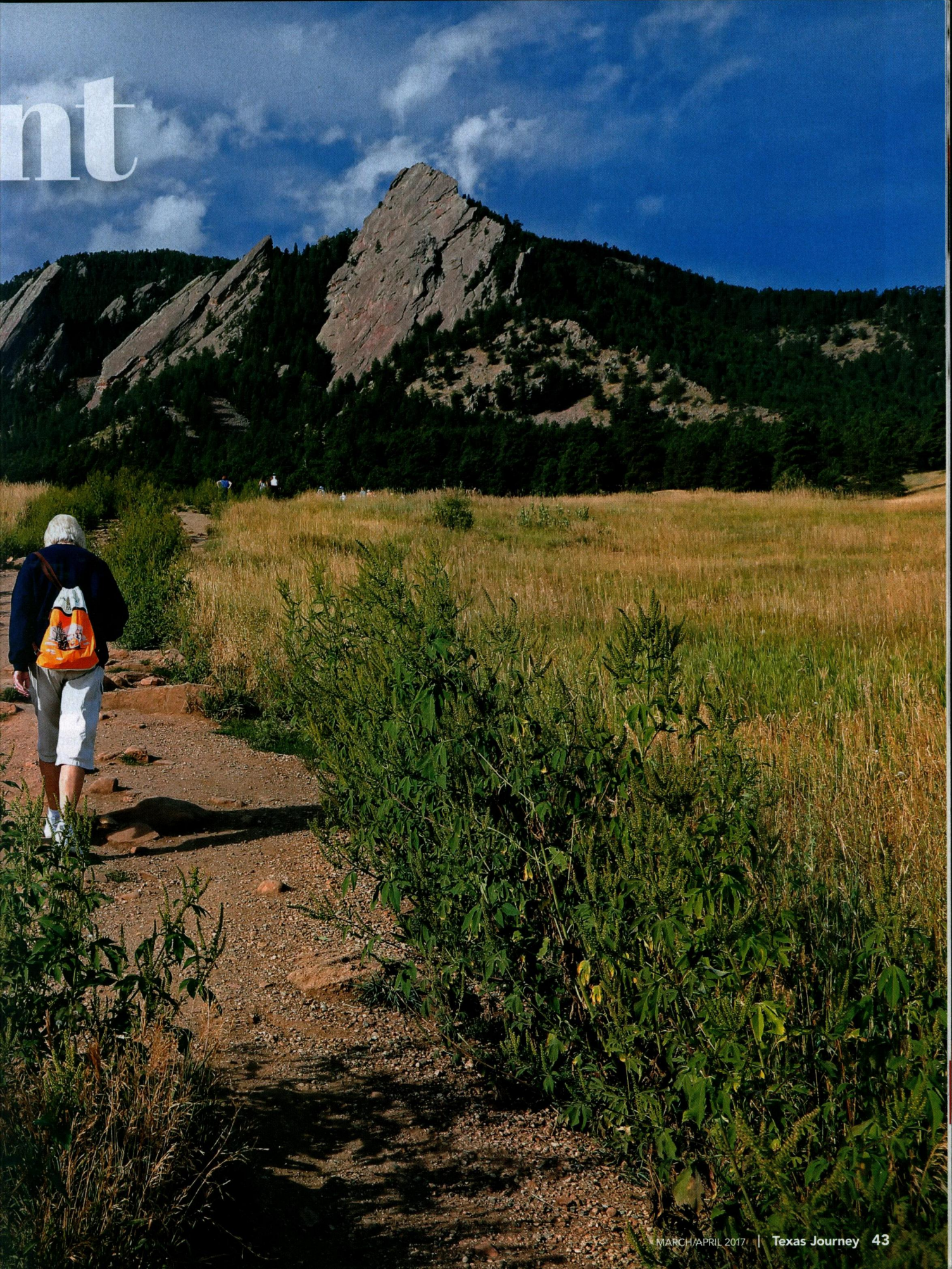
## Exploring Boulder's Chautauqua Park, a historic haven for seekers of self-improvement

BY HALEY SHAPLEY

**M**ark Twain reportedly once described the chautauqua, an adult education assembly popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as “the only institution where you can be educated and entertained at the same time and not know the difference.” Hundreds of these gatherings popped up all over the U.S., but the premier example west of the Mississippi River was the Texas–Colorado Chautauqua, which opened in Boulder, Colorado, on the Fourth of July in 1898. It’s one of only a handful of chautauquas (pronounced *shuh-TAWK-wahs* and so named because the first was founded on the shores of New York’s Chautauqua Lake) that’s been in continuous operation since its founding, with its historic structures still in place and in use.

Hiking is a popular pastime at Boulder's Chautauqua Park.  
Pictured: hikers near Chautauqua Meadow Trailhead.

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The Texas Board of Regents, along with the city of Boulder, established the Texas–Colorado Chautauqua (now called Chautauqua Park) as a place to send its teachers for summer school away from the Texas heat. For \$75, each teacher received a six-week package that included train fare, lodging, board, and programming. The summer revolved around the ideals of learning for all, uplifting entertainment, and useful leisure in an inspiring setting.

Today, Chautauqua Park looks a little different than it did in the 19th century, but this National Historic Landmark remains a spot where visitors can pursue those goals that brought thousands of people from Texas a century ago. The grounds are free and open to the public, so people who aren't staying on-site can wander into vintage buildings or buy a ticket for a show. While the summer school system is gone, visitors can craft a chautauqua-like experience via à la carte lectures, popular musical performances, and close-by hiking opportunities. Although I don't fit the original target demographic of Victorian-era teachers with summers free, I'm always up for a little learning in a gorgeous setting, so I set out to gain my own chautauqua experience.

## An American MOVEMENT

The cornerstone of the Texas–Colorado Chautauqua was, of course, education. To get some studying in myself, I meet with Kent Young, a knowledgeable guide with Boulder Walking Tours. He starts by setting the stage for the Chautauqua Movement, which began in 1874. "People were starved for education," Young says. "They had more leisure time and wanted to be productive in that leisure time." The idea of bettering oneself through a mix of culture, recreation, and lectures was so in vogue at the time that President Teddy Roosevelt called the chautauqua "the most American thing in America."

Once Boulder won the bid for the Texas–Colorado Chautauqua, the city

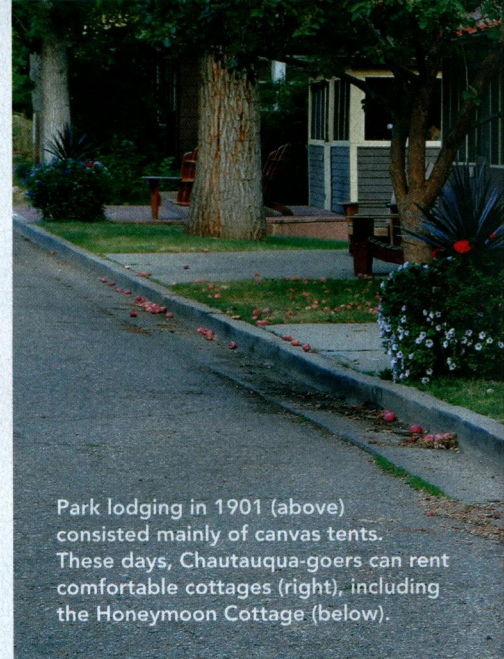


in three months pulled off the nearly superhuman feat of readying everything for the July 4, 1898, opening date. Programming included classes, nationally known orators, and orchestral ensemble performances. Lodging that first year was in canvas tents. A 12-by-14-foot setup went for \$11 for the six-week event, while a five-room family tent set you back \$24. People soon began building cottages, which are still on the property today. Thirty-nine are privately owned, but 60 are available for nightly rentals, including the adorable mint-green Honeymoon Cottage I call home for a couple of nights.

One might notice that the screened-in porches face inward instead of out toward the mountains; this was to facilitate conversation between neighbors. The homey accommodations and wide-open spaces make me feel relaxed, a reminder of summer camp as a kid when the most pressing concern was whether to spend the afternoon swimming or doing crafts. Just as in those fun-filled weeks away, I vow to experience all that I can in the short time I have here.

## Uplifting ENTERTAINMENT

Classical and other music played an important role in the early chautauquas. As tastes changed over the decades, visitors went to the auditorium to see everything from yodelers and bell ringers to magicians and moving pictures. These days, the Colorado Music Festival sets up shop in the Chautauqua Auditorium for a six-week summer concert series. Seeing a show



Park lodging in 1901 (above) consisted mainly of canvas tents. These days, Chautauqua-goers can rent comfortable cottages (right), including the Honeymoon Cottage (below).

here is a must: The one-of-a-kind barn-like building is as lovely as it is perfect for its surroundings, with a lofty ceiling, unfinished wooden beams, and acoustics that artists dream of.

"All the performing musicians feel an incredible connection with this auditorium because of how close we are to nature," says conductor Michael Christie one rainy summer evening. "The whole experience portends such great music-making and such great energy that you could only get from a space like this." While I'm here, the "bad boys" of jazz, The Bad Plus, take the famous ballet score *The Rite of Spring*, deconstruct it, and perform it against a backdrop of projected videos. The trio's rendition is boisterous and intense, provoking thought long after I leave my wooden chair and retreat to my cottage, just as the organizers intended, I'm sure.



FROM LEFT, COURTESY CHAUTAUQUA ASSOCIATION ARCHIVES/JOSEPH B. STURTEVANT; EFRÁIN M. PADRÓ (2)

# If You Go

## CHAUTAUQUA PARK Cottages

come in studio, one-, two-, or three-bedroom configurations; all have kitchens and screened-in porches. Rates are \$89–\$294. The Dining Hall (pictured) is open year-round for brunch, midday happy hour, and dinner. Brunch dish, about \$11; dinner entrée, about \$17. Lectures and performances, each about \$5–\$150. (303) 952-1611 (lodging reservations); [chautauqua.com](http://chautauqua.com).

## COLORADO MUSIC FESTIVAL

The six-week summer concert series at the Chautauqua Auditorium marks its 40th anniversary this year. Show tickets, about \$12–\$54. (303) 665-0599; [comusic.org](http://comusic.org).

## Useful

### LEISURE

Hiking has always been a major pastime here, something I learn from longtime summer resident Virginia Street Smith, a Fort Worthian who began coming to Chautauqua Park in the 1940s. Her father, Bruce, was well known for taking all the Chautauqua kids on hikes. “Daddy always had lemon drops in his pocket, which he called energy pills,” Virginia remembers. “The little ones would get candy corn.” Today, you can find a jar of lemon drops (mixed with a few candy corn) on Virginia’s dining room table, and, in honor of her father, the general store sells Papacita’s Lemon Drops.

The grounds are right at the foot of the Flatirons, and around the park, you’ll find pictures of women in lace-up boots and full skirts cheerfully making their way up the slopes. I take a more contemporary approach—trail running shoes and shorts—and set out for the iconic Royal Arch. With fluffy clouds above me and Ponderosa pines around me, I begin the ascent, a steep stair-stepping affair over large rocks. Even a false summit and the

thin air stealing some of my lung power can’t dampen my enthusiasm for reaching the arch, a giant formation made out of reddish stone that seems to say, *Aren’t you glad you tested your quads today?* At the top, hikers perch on flat rocks, eating lunch, taking photos, and enjoying views of Boulder that stretch for miles below. I look out at a sea of various hues of green dotted by the red roofs of the University of Colorado, Boulder.


For the Chautauquans, tennis also was big. Austinite Barbara Sublett Guthery, who spent her first summer at the park in 1944, would hit the courts every day. “One of the reasons you can’t play tennis before 8 a.m. is we’d wake up Miss Louise,” she tells me. “As an adult, I appreciate the quiet hours, but I was not that thrilled at the time.” It’s easy to picture her bursting with energy as a kid; her adventure-filled stories are interspersed with quotable morsels like, “When you brush your teeth with beer, you get the most incredible foam,” and “I like scuba diving because it’s mountain climbing underwater.” I relish these stories and imagine that the early Chautauquans learned just as much from each other as they did from the

guest speakers—one of whom, Boulder Walking Tours’ Young tells me, lectured on how life is better if you’re rich.

By the 1930s, the Chautauqua Movement had lost steam, as car culture, the Great Depression, movie theaters, and increased educational opportunities took some of the sheen off the summer school–camp hybrid. Resident families like Virginia’s and Barbara’s kept the park in existence until its historical value could be realized again. “It’s a wonderful place to come,” Virginia says, adding that she wishes visitors would stay longer. “It’s hard for people who are short-term visitors to get the feel for Chautauqua.”

That may be so. But as I sit on the grass with a homemade chocolate ice cream cone in hand, watching kids run and adults read, with the Rocky Mountains and quaint Dining Hall in the background, and the sun shining and a soft breeze blowing, I feel like I get it. Maybe Mark Twain was right. Now, as then, for those interested in vacations with a side of enrichment, you can come here to be both educated and entertained.

*Former DFW resident Haley Shapley writes from her home in Seattle.*

A man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a green short-sleeved button-down shirt and dark pants, is gesturing with his hands while talking to a woman. The woman is wearing a white wide-brimmed hat, a dark blue patterned top, and white pants. They are standing on a paved walkway in front of a house with a stone wall and a wooden porch. A large black-framed photograph is mounted on the house's exterior wall, showing a group of people on a porch. The background includes green trees and a clear sky.

Kent Young from Boulder Walking Tours discusses historic photographs during the "Chautauqua: Living History" tour.

## Take a Walk

### BOULDER WALKING TOURS

"Best of Boulder" tour: 10 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. "Chautauqua: Living History" tour: 10 a.m. Sundays. Private tours are available in the off-season (December–March). Tickets (advance purchase online required): adults, \$18–\$20; ages 13–17, \$15; and kids 12 and younger, free. (720) 243-1376; [boulderwalkingtours.com](http://boulderwalkingtours.com).