

Chapter 21 - PLATFORM

Chautauquas..."Them Fellows Back There"...Paid for No Speech...Easy to Please...Across the States...A Touch of Fame...Notes on Speaking...Three Blows...Nose in Manuscript and a Cabinet Secretary...Let-down at Rotary...Topmost of Performing Arts

The speaker's platform is a lonesome place. Once introduced, the speaker is in business for himself. The actor's lines are written for him and a director rehearses him. The writer can back up, erase and rewrite. The painter can rub out and do over. The speaker, once launched, has to perform. Maybe that is why, to some persons, the platform has attractions.

When the Coit-Alber Lyceum Bureau wanted a farm speaker for its 1924 independent Chautauquas season, their approach found me willing. George Martin thought *Farm and Fireside* would benefit and urged me to go. After preparing one speech and announcing two or three titles, I set forth in late June for Worthington, Minnesota. I never heard what reports were made regarding that initial effort, but at least the itinerary was not cancelled. The next town was St. Peter, in the same state and not far away. The weather was good, and few farmers were attracted by the chance to hear a farm editor from New York. At St. Peter I noticed that toward the rear of the tent two rows of seats were filled by men who, though apparently not a business or professional group, did not look quite like farmers. Just as I was launching into my last and most eloquent five minutes they arose as one man and walked out. "What happened? What did I say wrong?" I demanded of the local manager as soon as the program was over. He looked blank. "Why," I asked, "did a quarter of my audience get up and leave?" "Oh! You mean them fellows back there? Don't pay no attention to them. They're from the insane asylum down the road, and had to go to get back in by four o'clock."

At Eau Claire, Wisconsin, I was scheduled for an evening talk at the state teachers' college on July 2. The head of the institution met me at the train and immediately asked about McAdoo's chances for winning the Democratic presidential nomination at the convention then in session in New York. He seemed to think that, having lately come from New York, I ought to know. During dinner he revealed his McAdoo enthusiasm further. As we drove out to the auditorium he remarked that when scheduling the evening's event the imminence of the Fourth of July holiday had been overlooked, and he doubted whether many would be present.

He was right about that. Not more than twenty people were seated by eight o'clock. Without mentioning his intention to me, he rose promptly on the minute and said: "I think it would be a great injustice to Mr. McMillen to ask him to speak to this small assemblage. We will adjourn to the laboratory where we can listen

over the radio to what is going on at the convention." He wrote a check for my fee, and we listened to "Alabama casts 24 votes for Underwood."

After Mouse River Loop, North Dakota, near Kenmare and not far from the Canadian line -- the next engagement was in McConnellsville Ohio. The bureau had plotted out all the routings and train schedules. Until late in August the itinerary crisscrossed and backtracked over Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Missouri while, under one title or another, the lecture was repeated. That no copy of it can now be found may be just as well.

The Chautauqua had known its hey-day during the century's first two decades. From miles about people came to camp out, or rent rooms, in order to attend. Dozens of communities erected wooden pavilions, with up to a thousand seats. Others used tents. The programs, running from five to ten days, included lectures, musical concerts, entertainers and small dramatic companies. Several bureaus supplied talent. A community might buy its whole package from one bureau. The larger independent Chautauquas used the bureaus, too, but often preferred to engage some of their speakers directly.

The idea had originated in 1874 in Chautauqua, New York, and spread widely through the Middle West and into other states. By 1924, interest was waning, and within a year or so most of the Chautauquas had been discontinued. I might have put in a claim to have assisted the demise, but actually moving pictures, good roads and other competitive influences brought about the end.

One small reward, aside from the experience, came out of the Chautauqua summer. A year later, the office wired me some expense money at Plattsburg, Missouri. The bank cashier was properly cautious about paying the order until he was sure of my identity. While he hesitated, a young lady behind the next window said, "I will identify Mr. McMillen." From a drawer she brought out a copy of the 1924 Plattsburg Chautauqua program and showed him my picture. I not only got the money, but also went out feeling that I had been touched by fame.

Platform demands were not frequent for another ten years. I worked at trying to learn something about national agriculture and about the magazine business. After 1935, editorial positions and other connections led to numerous invitations. My publishers encouraged acceptance of as many as did not interfere with the editorial jobs and, moreover, frequently "promoted" the idea by circulating the speeches in pamphlet form. So, again, I was trying to become an orator.

The years of pyrotechnical and floral orators, the Websters and Clays and Sergeant Prentiss's had long gone by. No one wanted to hear that brand of speech. It belonged to an era that offered little public entertainment from other competing sources and when people were willing to listen for two or three hours. I thought that thirty minutes were enough for "our principal speaker." Nor was it

ever wise to bring up an old story. Audiences would laugh, but usually they would have heard the yarn over the radio or from other speakers. Another rule was never to repeat or make a vulgar joke. It was always better to assume that there were gentlemen present.

Audiences do like to laugh, and they will laugh easily, especially at the unexpected and at the immediate. If it seemed desirable to open with a moment of amusement, some incident of the day, some recent personal embarrassment, some jovial allusion to a well-known person present, could always lighten the beginning moments. Or, if one felt the need for a break in serious talk, nearly always something then and there could be made into a joke; a dog barking outside: "Our overflow audience is applauding."

Most invitations came from groups and for occasions where no "set" speech would do. People did not go to conventions, annual dinners, sales conferences and association meetings merely to hear speeches. They wanted ideas or facts that pertained to their particular interests. Consequently it was usually essential to prepare appropriate material, little of which could be re-used for the next engagement.

Many invitations came from around the country for the editor-in-chief of *Farm Journal*. The one I remember best came from Fred Hoppin, county agent at Lincoln, Illinois. He urged that I plan to arrive early and to stay around a day after, so farmers could come in for personal visits. As he put it: "We don't want you just to blow in, blow off and blow out.!"

Every speaker should be conscious of his time, unless he is marvelous his audience will not forget the clock. If one faces only a hundred people but uses up six minutes of his half hour in needless triviality and platitude, he has wasted ten hours of human time, besides his own.

Whether to read a speech from manuscript or trust to notes was a question that came up often. If the audience was known in advance to be an important and thoughtful group, likely to be impatient with meandering, it was safer to use the manuscript. That, however, does not necessarily impair the effectiveness of delivery. If the lectern aids the speaker to conceal his papers, and if he will look at his listeners more than at his manuscript, he can conclude an address without many realizing that it has been read. For such gatherings as the San Francisco Commonwealth Club, the Chicago Executive Club or the New York Economic Club a manuscript was preferred.

One occasion taught that it is best not to step on the platform without knowing what has preceded. The South Dakota Stock Growers Association was meeting at Hot Springs. Wind prevented the plane from Cheyenne from landing at Hot Springs and had to leave us at Rapid City. The alert association secretary had a car on hand to get me back to Hot Springs in time for the scheduled afternoon

talk. We made it, but with no time to spare, and I hurried from the car into the auditorium without my brief case. This had gone on to the hotel with the baggage.

As I sat in the wings for a few moments, Douglas McKay, then Secretary of Interior, was standing at ease with an elbow on the lectern while fielding questions directed at him from the audience. I admired the forthright way he handled them.

Until the introduction I had not thought about the missing manuscript. Then it was too late. I explained what had happened, offered to speak without it, but assured the crowd that "I can put on my spectacles, put my nose in a paper and read it just as well as anyone else."

The remark seemed to bring down the house. I didn't think it was funny enough to evoke such a gale of laughter. Only later did I learn that the Secretary of Interior, before my arrival, had read his set speech in monotone, with his glasses on and his nose down. At the buffalo meat barbecue that evening several people were more cordial to me than was Mr. McKay.

Speaking from notes, or without any, can be more fun because, no matter how serious the topic, one can be more informal and can more easily inject the humorous touches. Either notes or extemporaneous utterance can, however, betray the user.

After an address before a considerable crowd of Michigan farmers in a pavilion at the State Agricultural College, I left the platform better satisfied than usual with the performance. I knew what I wanted to say, paid little attention to the brief outline, and loudly belabored what seemed to be a very friendly audience for a half hour and a few minutes more.

A friend on the college staff had taped the talk, and sent me a copy. I found a tape player in the office and started to listen, a solitary audience of one ready to admire his own eloquence. After seven or eight minutes I stopped the machine. Horror is about the only appropriate word for what I felt. I called in two colleagues who had frequently heard my speeches. "Here," I told them, "is a speech I want you to hear, by Senator Klaghorn, it must be." When the tape had run long enough I stopped it again and said, "If that's the way I sound, I don't believe I shall ever make another speech."

The boys argued that the tape reproduced only the voice, with none of the facial expressions, turns of body, gestures or other actions that had accompanied the words, and that it must have been a pretty good speech. I was willing to be convinced, but determined to try thereafter to be a little less orotund.

Tape reproduction affords an excellent means for anyone to study and correct his performance defects. Before it became available I occasionally was able to arrange for a fast stenographer to give me an exact transcript of an extemporaneous talk. These helped to correct errors in grammar, sentence structure and arrangement.

At the Indianapolis Rotary Club the old Claypool ballroom was well filled even before I was escorted to the dais. While chatting with the president of the club, I saw more and more people coming. Waiters were crowding in extra tables. "Mr. McMillen," the president said in apparent astonishment, "you must be the greatest attraction our club has ever had. Never, never before have we had such a crowd."

Well, after all I was a son-in-law of Indiana, had lived there four years, had been there often since, and knew a few people in Indianapolis. It was really pleasing, and beyond all expectation, that so many were going to hear my speech.

The let-down was soon to follow. Before introducing me the club president, who with a straight face had been attributing the swollen attendance to my drawing power, proceeded to welcome the large number of visiting Rotarians who were in the Indiana capital attending the national convention of high school principals. Knowing that Rotarians are expected to attend regularly, wherever they may be, I was well deflated.

Even after twenty-five years of making twenty-five to thirty speeches a year and appearing in forty-six states, the ambition to become a polished orator was never quite achieved. I never learned the art of triggering a burst of applause every few minutes. It was enough if no one walked out. The "standing ovation" after a speech has become too often a perfunctory courtesy to count for much. The best accolade comes when some listener walks up and says, "I heard you in St. Louis in 1954, and I have never forgotten something you said there," and proves it by quoting the point.

Nevertheless, I hold the public speech to be the topmost of the performing arts. No one listens to speeches any more? Annually some 18,000 or more conventions gather in the United States with six to two dozen addresses listed on their programs. Nearly 1,700,000 men belong to the luncheon clubs that meet weekly in every town and usually hear speakers. Clubs to which 11,000,000 women belong search for speakers. Labor, business and farm organizations are led by speaker. Teachers and clergymen are most effective if they speak well.

No young person who aspires to leadership should fail to develop his speaking ability. Whether to sell ideas, arouse emotions or to impart facts, effective platform delivery has power. A successful speech is also a magnificent tonic for the ego.