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RECREATION IN CHICOPEE 1853-1857

John A. Koziol

Throughout the colonial period agriculture was dominant in Chicopee. With the turn of the century manufacturing began to develop and by 1812 Chicopee boasted one paper mill, two textile mills, one iron foundry, and various saw and grist mills.¹ During the 1820's and 1830's, with the arrival of the cotton mills, the community began to expand. The town's location and access to water power attracted investments by Boston capitalists. By 1850 Chicopee was a manufacturing center, claiming 65,000 of the 733,981 spindles owned by the Boston Association.² Two years earlier, on April 12, 1848, Chicopee was incorporated as a town with a population of 7,861.³ In 1855 the cotton factories reported the employment of 1,653 women and 688 men, a majority of the working population.⁴ Chicopee had become an industrial town.

This early industrialization and urbanization had important implications for the development of the town. It effected not only the economy but also the social and cultural climate of the community. The growth of community life encouraged social interaction between residents and increased communal awareness. Consequently, all facets of life were affected including recreation. A distinct form of recreation developed, one appropriate for a burgeoning urban area. Great emphasis was placed on public recreation and the community became cognizant of the need to provide the town dweller with public amusement. Removal from the farm and the omnipresence of work left the factory operatives and mill workers with leisure time, perhaps not much, considering the eleven hour work day, but nevertheless time for relaxation and enjoyment.⁵ The longer working hours probably encouraged the workers to take advantage of the little leisure time available to them. Therefore an increase in entertainment, both in variety and form, was only natural. Issues of the *Chicopee Weekly Journal* from this period illustrate this well. They provide an excellent description of the amusements and entertainment which Chicopee residents enjoyed. Recreation became important in the life of the town dweller. It provided him with a social outlet as well as an alternate activity. The benefits of public amusements were described in an editorial in the *Journal*.⁶

Public amusements, bringing multitudes together to kindle with one emotion, to share the same joy, have a humanizing influence.

A variety of recreational activities were enjoyed by Chicopee residents, including those which were intellectual, musical, sporting, and social.

Lectures were the most important public intellectual entertainment. Almost every issue of the *Journal* announced at least one or two lectures. The subjects varied, from "The Importance of Using Soap" to "Life Among the Wild Africans."⁷ However, not all the lectures were concerned with such matters, many were philosophical and thoughtful. One article announced a lecture with the topic "Self Culture," another entitled "Every Man is His Own Philosopher," another concerning "The Unity and Equality of The Races," and still another simply called "Opinion." A series of lectures sponsored by the Literary and Debate Club was announced and consisted of five lectures; the first was called "Lectures and Lectures," the second, "The Character of The Framers of The Constitution," the third, "The Analysis of Genius," the fourth, "The Life and Character of Lord Byron," and the last, "Success."⁹ The titles themselves suggest social awareness and interest in various areas of thought. There were indications in the *Journal* that the lectures were popular and successful. In a letter to the newspaper, the chairman of the Chicopee lecture committee commented:

Well aware of your growing tastes for lectures, we have spared no expense consistent within our means to satisfy the popular appetite for this species of intellectual amusements.¹⁰

The *Journal* also reported lecture tickets as "selling like hotcakes."¹¹

According to the weekly newspaper the Literary and Debate Club, which provided entertainment as well as education, offered a place where persons "who are disposed can have a comfortable place to spend an hour or two of a Monday evening in each week in exercises which must tend to enrich the mind and cultivate the social faculties."¹² In addition to this organization, a Scottish social club was also mentioned by the newspaper. The club met once a week and engaged its members in reading, discussing, and singing "good old Scottish songs."¹³

Besides lectures and club gatherings, the theater offered an evening of relaxation as well as education. Most theatrical performances, however, were not as popular as lectures. In one case the *Journal* indicated that a "theatrical performer exhibited to a large number of empty benches."¹⁴ One reason for the lack of interest in the theater was the high price of admission. "It is a rare thing that any exhibition can secure even a tolerable audience in Chicopee when the bottom of the poster doesn't say admission 12½ cents."¹⁵ Some performances, however, were well attended. For example, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" played to a sellout audience.¹⁶ In addition to

the plays the *Journal* described a "series of Shakespearean entertainment," an opera performed by the "New Orleans Troupe," and even an exhibition of ventriloquism.¹⁷ Art and poetry was also enjoyed in Chicopee and several articles in the newspaper express this. Descriptions of art exhibits and galleries were not uncommon. Interestingly a gallery of art was established and contained a "valuable collection of paintings and statuary."¹⁸

Music was especially popular in Chicopee during the 1850's. An article in the *Journal* described the benefits of music.

Let taste and skill in this beautiful art be spread among us and every family will have a new resource. Home will gain a new attraction. Social intercourse will be more cheerful and an innocent public amusement will be furnished to the community. Perhaps no amusement produces so much good as music.¹⁹

No other amusement was referred to in the *Journal* more than music. Almost every issue had articles on some aspect of musical entertainment, be it announcements of concerts and music lessons or reviews of musical events.

Concerts were well regarded and were usually presented by small groups of vocalists, often by family groups. Companies such as "The Original Peak Family Vocalists and Germanian Bell Ringers," "The Hutchinsons," "The Avodal Troupe," "The Luca Family," and "The Barker Family" appeared frequently and were well received.²⁰ Larger groups also appeared in Chicopee, one article referred to a "grand musical congress...consisting of 1,500 performers, the largest orchestra in Massachusetts."²¹ Another reported that "a sonata in five parts" was performed by "100 young ladies and misses."²² In addition to vocal groups and orchestras, bands were very popular. The town had its own band, the "Chicopee Quadrille Band," and it also hosted, on numerous occasions, others such as "Fullers Band from Springfield," "Milfred Brass Band," and "Griffins Band."²³ It was even "proposed to make an arrangement with Griffins Band to play in this village one evening every week through the summer."²⁴ Besides the more formal types of musical entertainment there were also social singing which the *Journal* described as "when friends meet and the lively word and laughing jest are intermingled with the voice of song."²⁵ Also lessons in voice, piano, violin and other instruments were frequently offered to the general public.²⁶

Chicopee residents during this period spent a major part of their leisure time involved in sporting activities. Fishing in the summer and hunting in the fall and winter were popular forms of recreation. From all indications, fishing was quite competitive. The newspaper kept its readers "posted in regard to the quality of articles taken" during the fishing season.²⁷ The luck of resident fishermen was often described in the *Journal*, especially the catching of trout, shad, bass and pickerel.²⁸ The sport was not restricted to the fishing pole; one article reported that "10 or 12 boys and young men had rare sport at the dam in Chicopee for the past few mornings netting and

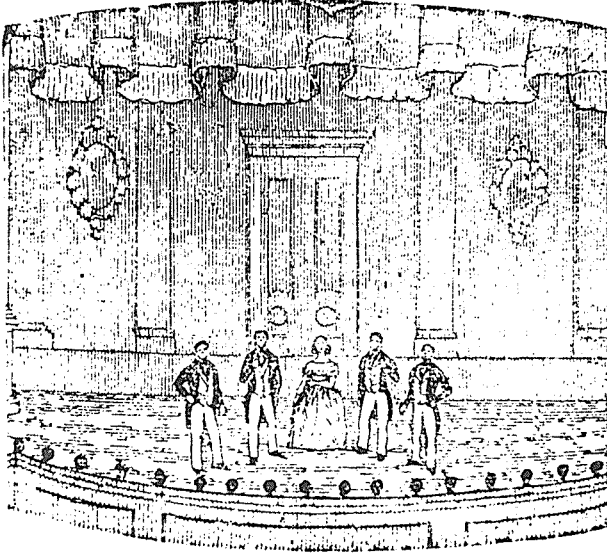
spearing shad.”²⁹ Neither fishermen nor hunters had far to travel, as fish and game were abundant in the area. One article for example noted “our sporting friends are having some fun about these days in shooting ducks who make the water of the Chicopee a resting place in their traveling expedition.”³⁰



(All illustrations are from the *Chicopee Weekly Journal*.)

Other recreational activities common in Chicopee during the 1850's were sailing, swimming and horseback riding in the summer and sleighing and sledding in the winter. In one instance 68 apparently affluent Chicopee residents enjoyed a sailing expedition on board the luxury “sloop Emma Clifford of Westport.”³¹ The newspaper also reported that at a certain place “a splendid and safe sailboat will at all times be in readiness for sailing and fishing.”³² Swimming must have been quite popular, especially since the Chicopee river was nearby and suitable for summer “bathing.”³³

The Barker Family

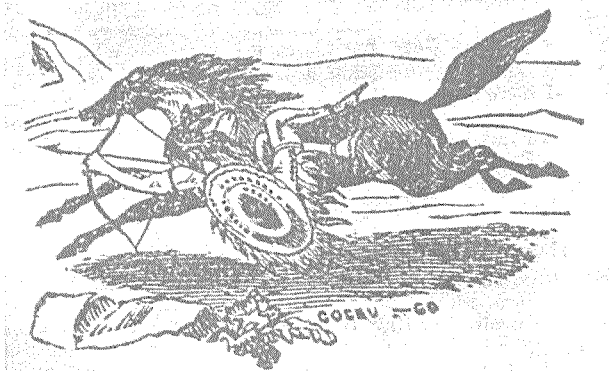


Another sport enjoyed in Chicopee was archery. One account indicated that even young children were encouraged to practice archery.³⁴ The children amused themselves with all sorts of games. The *Journal* reported that at a school picnic "a number of swings were prepared for the occasion and swinging, rolling hoops, hide and seek and other games too numerous to mention were carried on."³⁵ Little girls enjoyed jumping rope and the newspaper sadly reported:

A bright and interesting little girl about 8 years old died on Monday last from convulsions brought on by excessive exertions in jumping rope. She was competing with several of her school companions in this exercise who were endeavoring to out do each other. She jumped 400 times in succession until entirely overcome.³⁶

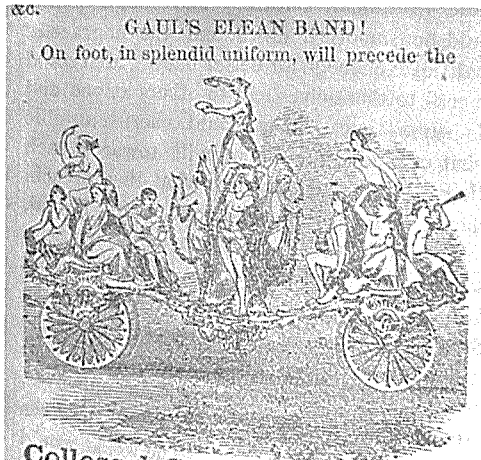
During the winter months ice skating and sledding were favorite past-times. Interestingly, this point is made clear from numerous reports of accidents in the town. Drowning after falling through the ice while skating and mishaps resulting from sledding on roadways were not uncommon. Sledding accidents were frequent enough to warrant the passage of an ordinance prohibiting sledding on the public highways.³⁷

A number of miscellaneous amusements were enjoyed in Chicopee. The interest in hunting led to an emphasis on marksmanship and competition often resulted. Reports of shooting matches were not uncommon. The *Journal* also gave accounts of a pig hunt, a horse race in which "the winning horse made 80 miles in 8 hours and 8 minutes," a dog fight which lasted 4½ hours and ended with the death of a dog because he "was so terribly lacerated," and a horse taming which was repeatedly done "much to the amusements of the crowd."³⁸



Washburn's Great Indian Amphi- theater and Circus,

The citizens of Chicopee amused themselves with various types of social affairs — church festivals, fairs, balls, suppers, picnics, fire works, sleigh rides and even a baby show. The church was the center of most social activity. Every church had its own festivals or fairs, with most of the members participating. Other common social affairs were the balls and suppers which like the festivals were usually put on by individual church, ethnic or labor groups. Obviously citizens enjoyed gathering together for an evening of dining and dancing. Indeed, one issue of the newspaper listed four dances scheduled for the same weekend. In the summer picnics seemed to attract large numbers. For example a picnic held by the Sabbath School reportedly "passed off in a manner perfectly satisfactory to all concerned, the number in attendance is estimated at about 1,000."³⁹ On the not so unusual side of things Chicopee hosted a baby show, where the top contender weighed in at 17 pounds.⁴⁰ In the winter the popular social event was the sleigh ride, and in one case "a sleigh ride party without distinction of sex" was reported.⁴¹



Magnificently caparisoned with silver mounted harness and head-dresses. This exquisite wrought-vehicle was built in the City of Paris at immense cost. It is constructed upon the model of the Ancient Triumphal Cars, and presents such a style of classic elegance and massive decoration.

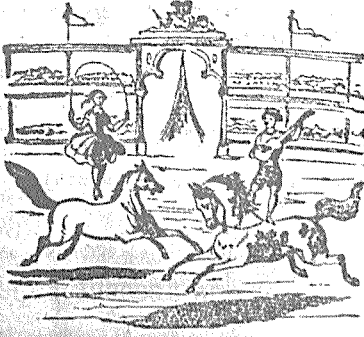
Chicopee inhabitants had many opportunities to experience interesting and unusual events; traveling circuses and shows often came to town. One such circus was "Franconi's Colossal Hippodrome" which featured "restoration of the festivals, games and amusements of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. With all its animated splendors, its daring chariot races, gorgeous tournaments, exhilarating field and desert sports and other exciting and novel exercises of the Olympian arena." The event was held under an immense tent which could accommodate 9,000 spectators.⁴² A later article indicated that the show attracted over 5,000 people, but was considered by many as "one of the greatest humbugs that ever traveled the country."⁴³ Other companies which exhibited in Chicopee were "Washburn's Great Indian Amphitheater and Circus, the only Italian Equestrian establishment in the world," "The Menagerie and Circus, featuring the celebrated General Tom Thumb," "The Great Broadway Menagerie from the city of New York, accompanied by two living giraffes," and "The American, German, and French Circus."⁴⁴ Various other types of shows were also brought to Chicopee; from the Polytechnic Institute of New York came "The Grand Moving and Mechanical Panorama, Displaying all the varied beauties of light, shade and color."⁴⁵ and from Boston came "Jone's Great Pantascope of California, Nebraska, and the Great Salt Lake."⁴⁶

Even though Chicopee and many surrounding communities were by this time largely industrial, horse and cattle shows and farm fairs were often organized. Reportedly these expositions presented “attractions full of interest” for one and all.⁴⁷ An editorial advocating temperance at the farmer’s festival stated that “there is enough at these agriculture fairs to engage the whole attention of the thinking and sober minded people.”⁴⁸

Like most cities and towns Chicopee’s entertainments were not all beneficial. The newspaper indicated the existence of drinking, prostitution, gambling, and other vices. The *Journal* reported that “another of those funerals which seemed to be turned into a sort of holiday by some of our Irish friends, came off on Tuesday last and resulted as most of them do, in a drunken spree for a portion of the attendants.”⁴⁹ Another article indicated that drinking was also a problem among the young. “A couple of b’hoys from Cabot came up here to attend the dance last Tuesday evening but before the dance they had visited a place of notoriety and imbibed too freely, getting quarrelsome and noisy, a constable was sent for to settle them.”⁵⁰

**Ballard, Bailey & Co.'s
FRENCH CIRCUS!**

COMPRISING the very celebrated TOURNAIRE TROUPE, with all the distinguished artists who have appeared in this country during the last five years, and also those whose performances in Europe have secured to them a world-wide reputation,—will exhibit in CHICOPEE, on SATURDAY, MAY 12th

An illustration of a circus performance. In the background, there is a large, ornate structure with a central archway and two flags on poles. In the foreground, a woman in a dark dress is riding a white horse. To the right, a man in a dark suit is riding a dog. The scene is set on a flat, open ground.

Besides intemperance, prostitution was perceived as a problem. An editorial explained,

The time has arrived when we deem it necessary to speak out in regard to the character of the house known as the Franklin House in this town. This house has for a long time enjoyed the reputation of a house of ill fame.... As to the internal arrangements of the house, there are two bars where spiritous liquors have been sold freely and without reserve.... Few in the community are aware of the extent to which this house has been visited or of the number and the low and debased character of its inmates.⁵¹

Gambling also existed, although not extensively. In one instance "eight professional gamblers fleeced several young men out of a considerable amount of money."⁵² Being a bit riotous and "raising the devil" seems to have been an entertainment enjoyed by the young boys of the town.⁵³ The newspaper noted that

The remark is common that the children have control of the village. If anyone doubts this let him visit the Post Office immediately after the close of school at noon, or Cabot Hall during the session of almost any public meeting or any number of dancing parties.⁵⁴

A second item described a Saturday night that was "rendered particularly noisy by the rising generation, signs were moved and various antics occurred."

Of course a study based solely on newspaper accounts cannot be complete. Yet it does offer a first hand insight into some of the leisure activities enjoyed by Chicopee residents at that time. As evidenced through the pages in the *Chicopee Weekly Journal* the recreational activities, which predominated, uniquely represent a town with a deep sense of community. The emphasis on public interaction and involvement demonstrate this. The development of Chicopee from an agrarian community to an industrial town was not merely economic, it affected, perhaps even more importantly, the social and cultural life of the village.

NOTES

- 1 Vera Shlakman, *Economic History of A Factory Town* (Smith College Studies in History, Oct. 1934-July 1935), pp. 18-23.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 39-42. Note: By 1850 the Boston Association controlled one fifth of the industry in the United States.
- 3 Thaddeus Szetela, *History of Chicopee* (1948), pp. 101.
- 4 John Michael Cudd, *The Chicopee Manufacturing Company* (1974), Chapt. 3, p. 70.
- 5 *Chicopee [Mass.] Weekly Journal*, Nov. 29, 1853.
- 6 *Weekly Journal*, July 30, 1853.
- 7 *Weekly Journal*, Nov. 15, 1853 and July 8, 1854.
- 8 *Weekly Journal*, Jan. 19, 1856, Mar. 1, 1856 and Feb. 16, 1856.
- 9 *Weekly Journal*, Mar. 8, 1856.
- 10 *Weekly Journal*, Nov. 17, 1856.
- 11 *Weekly Journal*, Mar. 8, 1856.
- 12 *Weekly Journal*, Dec. 9, 1854.

13. *Weekly Journal*, Sept. 8, 1855.
14. *Weekly Journal*, Sept. 4, 1854.
15. *Weekly Journal*, Mar. 4, 1854.
16. *Weekly Journal*, Mar. 4, 1854.
17. *Weekly Journal*, Feb. 4, 1854, Mar. 15, 1856, and Nov. 24, 1855.
18. *Weekly Journal*, Dec. 30, 1855.
19. *Weekly Journal*, July 30, 1853.
20. *Weekly Journal*, Oct. 14, 1854, Oct. 28, 1854, Dec. 9, 1854, May 26, 1855 and Nov. 22, 1853
21. *Weekly Journal*, Nov. 4, 1854.
22. *Weekly Journal*, Mar. 22, 1856.
23. *Weekly Journal*, June 13, 1853, June 2, 1855, Dec. 12, 1853.
24. *Weekly Journal*, June 2, 1855.
25. *Weekly Journal*, June 13, 1853.
26. *Weekly Journal*, Dec. 7, 1853 and Oct. 28, 1854.
27. *Weekly Journal*, May 30, 1854.
28. *Weekly Journal*, April 21, 1855.
29. *Weekly Journal*, May 19, 1855.
30. *Weekly Journal*, Nov. 18, 1854.
31. *Weekly Journal*, July 29, 1854.
32. *Weekly Journal*, July 18, 1853.
33. *Weekly Journal*, July 22, 1854.
34. *Weekly Journal*, July 9, 1853.
35. *Weekly Journal*, Sept. 22, 1855.
36. *Weekly Journal*, May 13, 1854.
37. *Weekly Journal*, April 13, 1854.
38. *Weekly Journal*, Nov. 24, 1855, Sept. 17, 1853, Mar. 11, 1854 and June 11, 1853.
39. *Weekly Journal*, Sept. 22, 1855.
40. *Weekly Journal*, July 1, 1854.
41. *Weekly Journal*, Mar. 18, 1854.
42. *Weekly Journal*, Aug. 9, 1853.
43. *Weekly Journal*, Aug. 23, 1853.
44. *Weekly Journal*, June 3, 1855, May 12, 1855, May 13, 1854 and Sept. 25, 1854.
45. *Weekly Journal*, Feb. 18, 1854.
46. *Weekly Journal*, May 13, 1854.
47. *Weekly Journal*, Oct. 15, 1853.
48. *Weekly Journal*, Nov. 28, 1853.
49. *Weekly Journal*, Oct. 15, 1853.
50. *Weekly Journal*, Aug. 20, 1853.
51. *Weekly Journal*, July 16, 1853.
52. *Weekly Journal*, Sept. 9, 1854.
53. *Weekly Journal*, Sept. 9, 1854.
54. *Weekly Journal*, Feb. 25, 1854.
55. *Weekly Journal*, July 22, 1854.