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The Crawford and Ella Peffer / Redpath Chautauqua Collection

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FROM THE COLLECTIONS:
THE CRAWFORD AND ELLA
PEFFER / REDPATH
CHAUTAUQUA COLLECTION

By WILLIAM DAVID BARRY

ONE of the more delightful manuscript holdings in the Maine Historical Society Library is the “Crawford and Ella Peffer/Redpath Chautauqua Collection” (coll 1921), a cornucopia of information on one of America’s great populist cultural movements. Included are photographs, correspondence, broadsides, clippings, programs, reports, and tour schedules relating to Redpath events and organizer-participants Crawford A. Peffer (1868–1961) and Ella Harding Peffer (1887–1945).

The tent movement was conceived by Peffer’s partner Keith Vawter in 1904 and borrowed its name from the earlier Chautauqua Institution founded at Lake Chautauqua, New York, in 1873. Crawford was a founder of the Redpath Chautauqua of New York and New England (1913–1933), the summer tent presentation. He also served as director of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau (c. 1915–1945), the winter speaking tour. Ella, a native of Portland, was a professional musician who worked as a singer with the lyceum. They were married in 1910 in Falmouth Fore-side. They are buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Portland.

Their granddaughter, Carol McCracken of Portland, rediscovered the materials relating to the Peffers and their work with Chautauqua. She found personal and professional items relating to the Peffers (including material about Katherine Ridgeway Camp for Girls in Jefferson, Maine (an organization co-founded by Ella) as well as letters about Chautauqua from such notable figures as Admiral Richard Byrd, poet Carl Sanburg, actress Dame Sybil Thorndike, and perennial presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan.

Ms. McCracken not only preserved and organized her grandparents’ material, she prepared several essays about them, their work, and the



Ella Harding Peffer and Crawford A. Peffer, seated second and third from the left.

holdings. There is also a series of letters regarding an earlier donation of Peffer Chautauqua papers to Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. It is hoped that future research will make good use of the materials in both institutions as we expand on our knowledge of this great education movement.