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N E W S R E L E A S E

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2008 Chautauquans bring a wealth of experience

Five Chautauqua scholars gathered in Omaha March 7-9 to prepare for the new Kansas-Nebraska Chautauqua, a collaboration between the Nebraska and Kansas humanities councils. The scholars will portray five historical characters who helped shape America's response to the Great Depression during the "Bright Dreams, Hard Times: America in the Thirties" Chautauqua, which will travel to Falls City and Hastings, Neb., as well as Beloit and Lawrence, Kan.

The characters are humorist Will Rogers, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Louisiana governor and U.S. Sen. Huey Long, evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson and Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston. Most of the scholars have worked with Chautauqua for many years and in many states, and they have a variety of backgrounds and experience.

Both Doug Watson (Rogers) and Fred Krebs (Long) have been Chautauquans for nearly two decades. Watson has spent 15 years perfecting his portrayal of Rogers, and his candid presentation gives the audience a taste of Rogers' satiric style and "common man" mannerisms. While this is Krebs' first time as Long, his Chautauqua experience dates back to 1985, when he presented Kansas newspaper editor William Allen White, a critic of FDR, in the Great Plains Chautauqua. Nebraska audiences saw him last summer in Kearney as William Jennings Bryan during the "Notable Nebraska Reformers" Chautauqua.

Roosevelt and McPherson will be portrayed by scholars Patrick McGinnis and Tonia Compton, who first appeared in Nebraska as Capt. William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Dolley Madison, respectively, in the 2005 and 2006 Great Plains Chautauqua, "From Sea to Shining Sea." McGinnis brings his historical knowledge of the Thirties to his FDR, accurately representing Roosevelt in his vocal cadence, his physical impairment, and his overriding theme of assuredness and hope in a time of great despair for the country. Similarly, Compton's evangelizing McPherson provides audiences with the experience of the 1930s through the lenses of faith, womanly persuasion, and charitable assistance for those suffering through the Depression.

Wanda Schell, who will portray Hurston, is the newest addition to the group familiar to Nebraskans. Schell, who has researched and presented Zora for more than 20 years for state humanities councils and other educational organizations, brings the eccentric folklorist and novelist to life with a presentation complete with folktales and singing.

"I'm very excited about being a part of this year's Chautauqua," Schell said. "The theme allows me to explore some of Zora's work that was written for the Work Projects Administration but never published until recently. I have performed my one-woman show on Zora since 1985. Orientation gave me the opportunity to begin incorporating my solo performance with four extremely talented performers."

The "Bright Dreams, Hard Times" Chautauqua will be hosted by Falls City from June 25-29 and by Hastings from July 2-6. It is funded, in part, by a major three-year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the NEH's special "We The People" initiative. For additional information on this summer's Chautauqua, go to the Nebraska Humanities Council's website, www.nebraskahumanities.org or contact Beth McQueen at (402) 474-2131 ext. 108 or beth@nebraskahumanities.org.

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