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N E W S R E L E A S E

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Grand Island's Grace Abbott featured in Chautauqua

Grace Abbott will take the stage two evenings during the Nebraska Humanities Council's "Visions for America: Notable Nebraska Reformers" Chautauqua in Kearney June 21-24. Humanities scholar Helen M. Lewis will portray the renowned social reformer at 7:30 p.m. June 23 in the big Chautauqua tent on the grounds of the Platte River Road Archway. On opening night, June 21, Grace Abbott will introduce the 2007 Kearney Centennial Chautauqua, also including George Norris, William Jennings Bryan, and Malcolm X, and will moderate the evening's main stage show, which features U.S. Sen. George Norris, portrayed by former state Sen. David Landis.

Norris and Abbott shared many of the same concerns during the 1920s and 1930s about the federal government's role in making the United States a better place for poor Americans. Miss Abbott will have the opportunity on Saturday evening to present her position as a social activist on behalf of women and children, as well as the immigrants who poured into America during the first decades of the 20th century.

Grace Abbott's life-long commitment to social reform began in Grand Island in a family that encouraged education and political involvement. Her father, Grand Island attorney Othman A. Abbott, served as lieutenant governor of Nebraska, and her mother, who had been a high school teacher and principal, was determined that her daughters, Grace and Edith, would be well educated.

Grace Abbott's work as a social activist began in 1907 at Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago. Miss Abbott was a frequent speaker for female suffrage, often traveling to Nebraska to urge the vote for women. She was named director of the Immigrants Protective League, and became active in advocating for legislation to protect immigrants, especially women and girls. In 1921, President Harding named Abbott as chief of the U. S. Children's Bureau, and her long career on the national level focused on making children's health and safety a federal priority.

According to Lewis, who also will present a workshop on Abbott and other women reformers Friday at 2 p.m. in the Merryman Performing Arts Center, her historical character has a unique connection to the 2007 Chautauqua. While growing up in Grand Island, a young Grace Abbott heard William Jennings Bryan speak at a Chautauqua in Nebraska. Lewis has an interesting connection to Chautauqua, as well. She portrayed Jane Addams in the 2000 "Behold the New Century" in Grand Island and traveled with the Great Plains Chautauqua as Addams from Oklahoma to North Dakota each summer from 1999 to 2002. Lewis teaches humanities and English at Western Iowa Community College and has also taught at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where she received a 1990 NEH Summer Fellowship to study women poets at the University of Pennsylvania. Lewis is a frequent speaker in the humanities for audiences across Nebraska.

Each evening of the Chautauqua begins with entertainment in the tent at 6:30 p.m. and the Chautauqua program at 7:30 p.m. June 21 features George Norris; June 22 brings William Jennings Bryan to the stage, portrayed by Omaha attorney Don Fiedler; June 23 features Grace Abbott; and on June 24, veteran Chautauquan Charles Everett Pace, who portrayed Booker T. Washington in the 2000 Chautauqua in Grand Island, will present Malcolm X. Chautauqua scholars also will offer workshops during the day, and the Kearney Centennial Chautauqua sponsors have organized a full schedule of daytime events that can be found at www.nebraskahumanities.org or www.visitkearney.org

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