It started on a ski hill in 1986....

“Culture under the tent” enjoys a rich tradition in the Midwest. In 1874 the Chautauqua Assembly of Lake Chautauqua, New York, offered adult education in the sciences and the humanities. Soon after the turn of the century, traveling Chautauquas took the form of tent shows moving from town to town during the summer offering lectures and entertainment. The town of Bayfield hosted several Chautauquas during the years preceding World War I.

A permanent Chautauqua landed in Bayfield in the summer of 1986 after the talents of Warren Nelson, Betty Ferris, Sally Kessler and the Lost Nation String Band (made up of Nelson, Don Pavel, Bruce Burnside, Jack Gunderson and Bruce Bowers) attracted the attention of community leaders in Bayfield, Ashland and Washburn. The group had received rave reviews for their original musical histories produced and performed for three specific occasions: Souvenir Views for the Washburn centennial celebration; Whistle Comin’ In for the Ashland centennial; and Riding the Wind for the Bayfield all-class reunion.

Audience response to Riding the Wind - presented in the Bayfield High School gym - was so overwhelming that the group was asked to add an extra performance. Bayfield resident, Mary Rice along with the MAHADH Foundation (established by Mary Andersen Hulings and A.D. Hulings) offered to build a permanent theater that would showcase the myriad talents of these creative artists. But Nelson had a love for canvas after spending summers with his dad traveling to county fairs across southern Minnesota. He proposed a Chautauqua-style entertainment venue that would draw visitors from across the Upper Midwest to enjoy a variety of original productions, regional artists, and national headliners.

The first tent and the first season in the summer of 1986, offered 42 shows with 5,218 tickets sold. The first original show commissioned specifically for the new venue was the musical revue “Take it to the Lake” featuring songs, stories, poetry and even mime centered around the theme of Lady Lake Superior.
Lake Superior Big Top Chautauqua continues to advance its mission of PROVIDING YEAR-ROUND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES THAT CELEBRATE EXCELLENCE IN ENTERTAINMENT, EDUCATION, HISTORY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP. We stay true to the ideals of the original Chautauqua movement all year long by touring during the off-season, delivering a mix of rich musicals to schools and community theatres throughout the region. Tent Show Radio is beamed into the homes of families on some 50 public radio stations across the country.

While we have lost our beloved Lost Nation String Band with the 2008 death of our friend and bandleader Don Pavel, our Blue Canvas Orchestra is still performing and creating new material. Our revered Executive Director Carolyn Sneed has retired – but still supports and attends the shows on the hill, and while our Founder and long-time Artistic Director Warren Nelson has stepped down from his post, we still perform his celebrated works and look forward to welcoming him back for a special Warren Nelson & Friends performance this summer. Co-Founder and Visuals Director, Betty Ferris, is still our curator and historian – although digital images have replaced thousands of slides used to illustrate songs and stories of the past.

At the turn of a new century, the magic of Big Top Chautauqua nests comfortably next to its competitive cousins – radio, television, movies, the Internet – to tell stories of those who walked the land and paddled the rivers and stared at the stars dreaming of what the next day would bring. Thanks for being part of our journey which to date has taken us through 25 exciting years. Together, may we ensure that there be at least 25 more!
Past Performers

Dennis Spears
Different Drums of Ireland

Dirty Dozen Brass Band

Doc Watson

Don Albrecht

Don McLean

Don Pavel

Drexler, Sidran, Eckels World Music Ensemble

Druha Trava

Duluth-Superior Chamber Orchestra

Duquesne University Tamburitzans

Earl Scruggs

Eau Claire Symphony Orchestra

Ed Willett

Edgewater Eight

Elephant Revival

Eliza Gilkyson

Emmy Lou Harris & The Nash Ramblers

Fabian

Fire & Ice

Ferron

Fish Heads

Floydian Slip

Four Bitchin Babes

Four Shillings Short

Frank Montano

Freddy Fender

Free Hot Lunch

G Love & Special Sauce

Gaelic Storm

Gale LaJoye

Garnet Rogers

Garrison Keillor

Geno Delafose & French Rockin’ Boogie

Germany Brass Band

Gerry DePerry

Gilleland & Stauffer

Glenn Yarbrough

Golden Dragon Acrobats

Gordon Hayward

Gordon Lightfoot

Gov’t Mule

Great Lakes Boys

Great Lakes Seafaring

Greg Brown

Guy’s All-Star Shoe Band

Hans Mayer

Harmonious Wail

Heidi Howes

Heather Atherton Tucker

Hired Hands Bluegrass

Hope McLeod

Hornheads

Hot Club of Cowtown

Hot Dish Band

Hot Jazz/Radio Days
In their own words...

My whole family really enjoyed Riding the Wind last night! We took all 5 of our children, ages 2-10, and it meant the world to them! My husband and I went last year on our Anniversary and bought the CD. The children all knew the CD by heart. We even wore the old one out and had to buy another! Thank you to all of the performers who made their day by signing posters for them! What a fantastic show! Fabulous performance! We will all be back next year! Thank you for helping to make beautiful memories!

**The Berger Family, 7/4/10**

---

I love the Big Top. This is an awesome place to play.

**Bela Fleck, 7/10/08**

---

We have had such an amazing time here. This is an amazing gig. What a great idea, who would have thought of it, way up there in Wisconsin - a circus tent. And it's genius.

**Abigail Washburn, 7/10/08**

---

It's a musicians dream to be a part of something unique in all the world, please, please, don't ever wake me..

**Ed Willett**

---

The bear was memorable. I think it was stalking the tent. Beautiful country, excellent tent, lonely bear.

**Leo Kottke**

---

As both a performer and an audience member, I have always marveled at how the Big Top can make 900 strangers feel as if they are a cozy dozen...that thin canvas skin holding us warmly beneath the universe.

**Michael Perry, 11/12/10**

---

Past Performers

Howard Levy
Howard Sivertson
Hull & Larson
Indigena
Indigo Girls
Inner Visions Reggae
Interact Theatre
Iris DeMent
Iztapalotl
Jack Gunderson
Jack Norton’s Wizard Oil
Vaudeville
Jamie Hartford
Jan Lee
Janis Hardy
Japanese Dance
Jay Whitney
Jean Ferraca
Jeff Barnhart
Jeff Daniels
Jeff Eckels
Jeff White & The Front Porch
Jeffrey Foucault
Jellyeye
Jesse Cook
Jim & Bitsy Olm
Jim and Jesse & The Virginia Boys
Jim Post
Jimmie Dale Gilmore
Jimmy Martin & Friends
Joan Baez
Joe Carr
Joe Ely
Joe Weed
John Altenburgh
John Gorka
John Hartford
John Hiatt
John McCutcheon
John McEuen
John Munson
John Sebastian
John Stewart
Johnny Cash
Johnsmith

In a long line of outstanding Big Top Tent Raisers, including “Riding the Wind”, I think Elephant Revival and Avett Brothers tore out the roof and went way beyond our highest expectations - and they ARE HIGH. Elephant Revival would intimidate some great bands but the Avetts just took off from where they left us - thrilled, standing & applauding. They deserve a whole show of their own, but whoever put these two bands together found a combo as perfect as peanut butter & chocolate. Please bring them both back. I've seen a lot of concerts and this ranks way up there on the thrill meter. Thanks for such a great show, Avetts. We & Love & You!
Past Performers Continued

Jonathan Edwards
Jones & Leva
JT & the Clouds
Judy Collins
Julian Hagen
June Carter-Cash
Justin Isherwood
Justin Roth
Karen Mal
Karen Savoca & Pete Heitzman
Kate & Anna McGarrigle
Kate McKenzie Trio
Kathy Mattea
Keb’ Mo’
Keith Charters
Keith Secola
Kelly DeHaven
Kevin Kling
Kevin Locke
Kingston Trio
Koerner, Glover & Ray
L J Booth
Larry Long
Leahy
Lee Murdock
Leftover Salmon
Leo Kottke
Leon Redbone
Leon Russell
Les Barker
Les Fils du Voyageur
Les Sampou
Lettermen
Lew Orsoni
Lisa McGinley
Little Feat
Liz Woodworth
Lonesome Timbre
Loretta Lynn
Lorie Line
Los Lonely Boys
Lost Nation String Band
Loudon Wainwright III
Lucinda Williams
Lucy Kaplansky
Lura
Luther Allison
Lynn Morris Band
Marcie Gephart
Marshall Tucker Band
Martin Sexton
Mary Bondeson
Mary Lou Williams
Mary Louise Knutson Trio
Mason Jennings
Mason Williams
Maura O’Connell
McGuffins
Merle Haggard
Michael Cooney
Michael Cooper
Michael Dukin
Michael Feldman
Michael Johnson
Michael Martin Murphey
Michael Perry
Michael Smith
Michael Stanwood
Mike Dowling
Mike Mercury
Mike Weber
Mimi Blais
Minneapolis Gospel
Modern Times Dixieland
Molly & The Haymakers
Molly Culligan
Monica Maye
Monroe Crossing
Moon Gypsies
Mountain Heart
Myron Floren
Nanci Griffith
Natalie MacMaster
National Shakespeare Co.
Neal & Leandra
Neo
New Christy Minstrels
New International Trio
Nickell Creek
Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
Nnenna Freelon
Noah Siegler
Norbert Blei
Norwegian Song Trio
Nothin’ To It
Oak Ridge Boys
Otis & the Alligators
Pam Tillis
Pat Donahue
Pat Labadie
Patty Larkin
Paul Asaro
Paul Cebal & The Milwaukeeans
Paul Schurke
Peaceful Women
Peking Acrobats
Perla Batalla
Peter & Lou Berryman
Peter Ostrouchko
& The Mando Boys
Peter Rowan
Philip Hamilton
Phillip Anich
Phillip Brunelle
Phoebe Legere
Phyllis Chapell
Pinery Boys
Pipers Crow
Pop Wagner
Prudence Johnson
R. Carlos Nakai
Radoslav Lorkovic
Rambin’ Jack Elliot
Randy Lee Orchestra
Randy Sabien
& The Fiddlehead Band
Renegade Radio Hour
Rhonda Vincent & the Rage
Rich Little
Richard Bangs
Richard Watson
Richie Havens
Ricky Skaggs
& Kentucky Thunder
Riders In the Sky
Rio Nido
Robert Bly
Robert Cray Band
Robert Mirabal
Robin & Linda Williams
Rory Block
Rowan Nelson Ferris
Roy Clark
Roy Mack
Ruth McKenzie
Saffire the Uppity Blues Women
Sally Kessler
Sally Rogers
Sam Bush
Sam Cook
Samana
Santa Cruz River Band
Sara Watkins
Scandinavian Sunday
& Luren Singers
Scott Kuester
Scott Mitchen & Tony Kopp
Second City National Touring Company
Severin Behnen
Shawn Colvin
Shirley Watterspoon
Shooter Jennings
Siegel Schwall Band
Slide Jam
Small Potatoes
Small World
Smothers Brothers
Sons of Bunyan
Sons of Never Wrong
South Shore Mountain Boys
Sparrow Quartet
Spider John Koerner
Spirit of Tibet
Stephen Matier
Steppin’ In It
Steve Earle
Steven Eckels
Stoney Lonesome
Straighten Up and Fly Right
Sue Keller
Susan Werner
Sutter Brothers
Sutton/Brunelle/Hardy

And many more!

L A K E S U P E R I O R B I G T O P C H A U T A U Q U A

Willie Nelson
Willowgreen
Willy Porter
Yázmin Bowers
Yonder Mountain String Band
Zorayne

Suzanne Vega
Sweet Lips Theater Company
Taj Mahal
Tanglefoot
The Chiffons
The Crickets
The Machine
The Mammals
The Mills Brothers
The Teddy Bear Band
The Whites
Three Dog Night
Three Redneck Tenors
Tish Hinojosa
Tom Carson
Tom Mitchell
Tom Paxton
Tomás Kubinek
Tommy Emmanuel
Tommy Sands
Tony Hauser
Tony Rice
Tony Trischka Band
Trampled By Turtles
Travis LeDoyt
Trova
Truly Remarkable Loon
Tuck & Patti
Ulali
Vassar Clements
Verne Sutton
Vicky Mountain
Walin’ Jennys
Warren Nelson
What’ Ya Know? Trio
Wild Oats String Band
Williams & Ree