257# Matheson History Museum (Script by Joanna Grey Talbot and Peggy Macdonald)

Did you know that Tom Petty and the Allman Brothers Band used to play at the Matheson History Museum? Back then, the building was an American Legion hall. Before that, the Florida Winter Bible College Tabernacle was located on this spot. That building was constructed for the annual meetings of the Tabernacle, and also as a location for Chautauqua meetings. In 1874, John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller founded the Chautauqua movement to professionalize the field of teaching. Although religious education was part of the curriculum, the focus of the Chautauqua movement was on education, not revivals. A few years after the movement was established, the Chautauqua Institution, located in New York state, broadened to include adult education in all areas, including a correspondence course. Thousands of people traveled there every summer to attend classes, concerts and social activities.

Eventually, other cities started to hold their own Chautauqua meetings. Starting in 1903, Gainesville began to host an annual two-week meeting. In 1906, this meeting started to be held at the Tabernacle. Founded in Gainesville by Reverend Clarence B. Strouse, the yearly Chautauqua offered a variety of lectures, dramatic readings, musical quartets, singers, magicians, programs of slides, and even horse shows.

Unfortunately, the movement started to die out in the 1930s as higher education for women became more accessible and the influence of radio, movies, and the car culture began to rise. In 1911, the City of Gainesville purchased the Tabernacle and continued to host events. In 1926, the City donated the building to the American Legion but it burned down in 1927. In 1932, the current building was constructed. Designed by Sanford Goin in the Georgian Revival style, it features pilasters, keystones, recessed arches, and fanlight windows. For fifty-seven years this building served as the American Legion Hall. Conventions, banquets, boxing matches, dances and rock concerts used to be held here. The bands switched from jazz and swing to rock ‘n’ roll and eventually punk rock.

In 1994, the building was completely renovated as the Alachua County Historical Society transformed it into the Matheson History Museum. Named for the family that once lived in the 1867 Matheson House, including museum co-founder Sarah Matheson, the Matheson History Museum Complex includes the museum, the Matheson House, the Tison Tool Barn and the Matheson Library and Archives in the building that once housed the Gainesville Gospel Tabernacle and Melting Pot fondue restaurant. Today the museum houses two galleries, offices and a gift shop and is available for private rentals. Throughout the year, the museum hosts book talks, documentary viewings, discussion panels, a Floridiana show, festivals, and rotating temporary exhibitions that examine a variety of topics in local and Florida history. In many ways, the museum is keeping the Tabernacle’s Chautauqua tradition alive.