

Maxinkuckee Playhouse

(1950 - 1961)

By Harvey Firari

*Don't let it be forgot
That once there was a spot
For one brief shining moment that was known
As Culver's Camelot*

For almost a dozen years after World War II, area residents had the good fortune to be entertained by one of the best straw-hat theater groups in the nation. During three months of each summer, from 1950 to 1961, at least eight quality plays or Broadway musicals were staged by the first Maxinkuckee Players, a group of revolving professional and college actors, many of them destined to gain prominence in the world of entertainment.

As one of the founders, Martin Tahse had begun his stage career while he was a cadet at the Culver Military Academy. After graduating in 1948, he continued his involvement in dramatics at the University of Cincinnati, where he studied under Professor Paul Rutledge, head of the theater division. Out of this relationship was born the idea to create a summer theater on the shores of Lake Maxinkuckee.

Together they examined various locations and then with the help of Anne Ellsworth, a local real estate agent, discovered the Vacation Club, a property owned by Winifred Legg, who used the long two-story building just off East Shore Lane as a summer school for girls. Sometimes described as the Green Barn, the structure was adjacent to the property of Ruth Johnson, with whom Winifred shared an easement to the lake. While Paul and Martin were walking about inside



Paul Rutledge, left, one of the original founders of the playhouse, with David Hager, who replaced the other co-founder, Martin Tahse, after two years. Photo was taken during the players 59th production, the Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Picnic*, written by former summer resident of Lake Maxinkuckee William Inge.



Winifred Legg's Maxinkuckee Vacation Club, Culver, Indiana (Front of Club House)

the Green Barn, one of them accidentally kicked a cowbell. Both reached the same conclusion simultaneously: the cowbell was a favorable omen, a tinkling symbol, a sign that they had found the right place. And so it was that the Maxinkuckee Playhouse came into existence with the lucky cowbell, an icon that for many years would alert the audience that the play was about to begin.

(continued on page 2)

Maxinkuckee Playhouse

(continued from page 1)

The Maxinkuckee Playhouse - 1950

Supported by such local residents as Betty Shetterly, manager of the Maxinkuckee Inn acting as a major player in the negotiations, Dorothy Oberlin, J. Gerald Markley, Arthur Hughes, and Col. Charles C. Mather, the team of Rutledge and Tahse purchased the Vacation Club with the financial backing of Will Osborn and began drawing up plans to use the second floor for the stage and 125 folding chairs for the audience. Later, the chairs would be made more comfortable by Nora Howell's gift of seat cushions.

The first floor would provide space for the box office, a Green Room for actors, and a place for the theatergoers to gather at intermissions for refreshments and entertainment. Outside, parking problems were solved with the rental of a large lot with its own entrance, making it possible to keep traffic off East Shore Lane.

The nucleus of actors was drawn from colleges in the Cincinnati-Cleveland areas. Many of the actors moved on after a year or two. There were exceptions Bob Moak signed on the second summer and endeared himself to Culver audiences for the next 11 years in 98 productions. Although his forte was playing befuddled old men, Bob often shifted gears and gave powerful performances in *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*, *The Flowering Peach*, and equally challenging plays (**At the time of this report (2001), Bob is still provoking laughter and tears in theaters around Louisville and Phoenix.**)

Not all of the actors came from the outside. Many times local citizens were cast, three of them appearing on opening night, June 21, 1950. Dorothy Oberlin (later Mills) gave an excellent interpretation of Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*, along with Mary Bishop, who had appeared in plays at the Culver Military Academy, and Nancy Todd (Kutcher), whose mother would later marry John Edgell. One of the first and

only coveted "Oscars," renamed "Macs," was awarded to Nancy Todd for the most outstanding work over the period of the ten-week season. The "Macs" had been donated by Don Trone, but were discontinued because play production is an ensemble, a group effort.

Later that summer, another local actress Marj Overmyer played Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* opposite Tom Brubaker as the rebellious son. Marj continued her theatrical career with the LaPorte drama group, while Mr. Brubaker directed many plays in the South Bend area and eventually became the founder of PBS Channel 34, South Bend, Elkhart. He now does tech work at The Firehouse with Jim Coppens, who once worked as PR director at the Culver Academies.

12 Years Later - The Final Curtain

In 1961 when the playhouse closed its doors forever, the lead in *Flower Drum Song* was played by local resident Bob Glaze, whose sister Tommye Lou, a runner-up in the Miss America contest, had earlier been starred in *Brigadoon*. Bob (later enacted Buffalo Bill on an Indy radio station) had three Culverites with him in the cast -- Betty Kose and Donna Dawson in minor roles -- while Lana Berger was in charge of the music and provided the accompaniment.

Between the first and final productions, names of people associated with Culver and the lake keep appearing in the history of the playhouse. William Inge, who had spent summers on the lake, wrote some of the plays produced here, which had been directed earlier on Broadway by CMA graduate Josh Logan, whose father once worked as a military officer at the Culver Military Academy.

Esther O'Callaghan had a role in *You Can't Take It With You*. Peter Sexton did tech work, and Emerson Cabell's name often appeared, probably because his wife, nicknamed **Agie**, was the company's cook, dietitian and confidant. Operating on a shoestring budget, the players were grateful that good neighbors like Marilyn Kelly supplemented their almost strictly hot-dog fare with fresh vegetables, solved their car and bus problems by providing the service of Norman, her husband, and contributed homegrown boy actors to their casts.

In addition to David and Steve Kelly, Jackie Maull soon established himself as a confident child actor, reaching the heights of thespian glory as the boy Patrick in the musical *Auntie Mame*. Other child actors in various productions were Sugar Fell, Don Reed, Tina and Eric Hughes, and Coke Smith, Jr..

More about Martin Tahse

After about two years, co-founder and co-director Martin Tahse left the Maxinkuckee Playhouse for service in the US Air Force -- (the Korean War was going on) -- but he never succeeded in getting the theater out of his blood. After his discharge, he formed touring companies of Broadway shows with financial support from two of his former CMA classmates: Jackson Parriott and George Steinbrenner, who said he was an investor and didn't want to be called "an angel." No one had any objections to that.



Here Playhouse favorite Bob Moak pinches the cheek of Mimi Bowen. When the traditional old man (often tricked by young lovers) was needed, you can be sure that Bob was onstage in powdered white wig, a leer buried in the wrinkles, and the familiar cane at his side.

Martin eventually reached Hollywood, where he produced movies and TV shows. One of his most successful endeavors was the After-School Television Specials aimed at young people. On a recent visit to Los Angeles, lake resident Richard Ford had a chance to visit with Martin, who said that he was still finding satisfaction and enjoyment as a producer and director.

New Blood - 1953

Following in the footsteps of Martin Tahse, two stalwart performers arrived on the scene at the playhouse, and for the next eight years, Sally Noble of Kokomo served in the capacity of an incredibly talented leading lady. She was joined by David Hager of South Bend, first as the company's scene designer, later as an actor, director, and co-manager. In 1956 Sally and David were joined in wedlock, a union that produced a son. **(Today Sally occasionally will play a role, but some years ago David, after suffering from a serious illness, passed away.)**

In this area, both Sally and David will always be remembered by theatergoers for their performances as the lovers in *The Moon Is Blue* and for David's interpretation of the witch boy in *Dark of the Moon*. That role may have helped him escape burning to death when gasoline ignited during the cleaning of some old paint in the playhouse.

Not just satisfied to put on a different play each week on the shores of Lake Maxinkuckee, the energetic players began traveling to Lake Wawasee on Mondays, when the big switch from one play to another took place, to share the previous week's play in a tent theater under the management of Douglas S. Cramer, who would eventually wind up in Hollywood producing such television shows as *Love Boat* and *Dynasty* with Aaron Spelling. The first show re-produced in Wawasee was *Charley's Aunt*.

"During the second year, about an hour before the opening of *Affairs of State* in Wawasee in 1954," writes Paul Rutledge, "a tornado swept through the area and completely destroyed the tent operation. No one was injured. We tried to carry on in a barn, but it was soon obvious that working two locations was too grueling and created too many logistic problems."

Although renovations back in 1951 under the leadership of Don Trone and his citizens committee had increased the seating space to 158, the company managers decided it would be best to stop out-of-town engagements and to improve the Culver location. Another group of lake residents headed up by Peirce Ward, Walter W. Foskett and William C. Griffith, with the cooperation of The State Exchange Bank, helped finance the building of a new playhouse.

Early in March of 1955, the versatile Dave Hager and his brother Dan supervised the clearing of the ground for the new building that he had designed. Professor Rutledge picks up the story here: **"It was a very wet spring and many times it seems that the new theater could not be ready for its June opening. The old upstairs theater space had been remodeled to provide comfortable living quarters for the company. The new theater was the only space available for the opening."**

"The Fourposter had been chosen as the opener. While



New Theater
in process of
construction.

View from the parking
lot, showing side of
new theater with
company house, lobby
and box office in
background.



most of the company helped put on roofing, sand doors, or paint walls, Sally Nobel and Tom Burke would rehearse their lines. Finally that opening night came. The house, now seating 225, was sold out, but as yet we had no electricity. Although the set was up and finished, Tom and Sally had never practiced on the stage. At eight o'clock when some of the first audience members were parking in the lot, the final electrical connection was made and 'the show went on.' Those in that first night audience never knew what a really last minute drama had taken place."

According to *The Culver Citizen* (John Cleveland's father, Chester W., the publisher and editor of the paper at that time, had always supported the players with free publicity and lots of encouragement, as had his predecessor Bob Rust): **"The opening performance was preceded by a few well-chosen words from Paul Rutledge, the talented young genius, who thanked Culver and Lake people for their help and cooperation in making the building possible."**

The additional space was badly needed because the reputation of the group had spread out in all directions with block bookings from social groups and businesses, drawing an estimated 10,000 outsiders into the area during a given summer. After a ticket office was opened in South Bend, show buses ran almost nightly from that city, stopping at a restaurant for dinner before the show, and joining the company members for pie and coffee after the performance, before boarding the buses once more.

For the most part, when one considers the hordes of people invading the East Shore, it's a wonder that few serious accidents occurred. On one occasion, July of 1957, forty steel-and-wire executives of Chicago began the festivities with drinks and dinner at the Culver Inn. Then they were transported by Frank Amond's tour boat to a new pier owned by Ronald Gales.

(continued on page 4)

Maxinkuckee Playhouse

(continued from page 3)

When the slightly tipsy group all piled out of the boat onto the pier, it gave way and they plunged into the lake. The soaked celebrators (including a Mr. Long, who was about four-feet tall) were fished out and taken back to the Inn to get out of their wet clothes and into another dry martini. The playhouse held curtain for them until they returned -- this time by car.

If you've ever been in a play or helped with backstage work, you know the time, effort, and work required to produce respectable entertainment. You have to wonder how it was possible for these young directors and performers to produce a different play each week of the season: memorizing lines of three different plays at the same time; building of multiple sets, re-setting of lights on Mondays, blocking and running rehearsals. Did the audiences realize how much work went into Paul Rutledge's magic carpet that carried them from visiting on a small planet to living a life with father; from an Okinawan teahouse to a New York penthouse; from "our town" to Brigadoon; from discovering if the moon is blue or dark; from George Washington's bed to a couple's fourposter; from being a camera to stopping at a bus station; from either inheriting the wind or getting the seven-year itch?

David Canary Arrives - 1958

The 1958 summer was probably the most exciting and explosive season in the history of the playhouse. David Canary, already a fine dramatic actor with a voice trained for musicals, arrived and set into motion a string of musical comedies. The reviewer of his first show wrote that "he has about as much charm as anyone we've seen on the Maxinkuckee stage for a long time." He shared billing with Tommy Lou Glaze in *Plain and Fancy* and with the perennial favorite Sally Noble in *The Boy Friend*. He demonstrated his dramatic talent as Brady in *Inherit the Wind*.

Later, David achieved national fame as Candy in the television show *Bonanza*. Since 1983 he has been playing the dou-

ble role of Adam and Stuart, bad guy and good guy, in the soap opera *All My Children* (noon-ABC). In his spare time, he makes spot appearances in such musicals as *The Man of La Mancha*.

He returned to the Maxinkuckee Playhouse in 1960 and sang the male lead in *Kiss Me, Kate*. During that same season, Jon Jory, son of Victor, allowed the players to give a premier production of his original comedy *Tipsy Rebellion*. The play didn't go far, but Jon did to Louisville, where he founded the Actors Theater, the host for many years of a national short play contest. **(Currently, Jon is chairman of the drama graduate program at the University of Washington, Seattle).**

A few other luminaries-to-be who appeared at the playhouse were Dick Sinatra, a relative of Ol' Blue Eyes, Kent Guthrie, an actor and folk singer, and Hoosier Bernie Pollack, now a famous Hollywood costume designer, who has worked with his brother Sydney, producer and director of such award-winning movies as *Out of Africa* and *Tootsie*.

Ring down the Curtain - 1961

A startling announcement in the July 26, 1961 issue the *The Culver Citizen*: **Bad News! Maxinkuckee Playhouse Is Leaving Culver for Michigan.** Paul Rutledge was taking our cowbell to greener pastures. The transplanted theater moved to the Cherry County Playhouse of Traverse City, but lasted only two years. Once more the cowbell was on the move and ended up on the *Showboat Majestic* docked at the public landing on the banks of the Ohio River, where for 17 years it continued to warn patrons that the curtain was going up. Today it is resting in the Cincinnati home of Paul Rutledge, now retired from Cincinnati University and Cambridge University, England.

Before leaving the shores of Lake Maxinkuckee, Paul paid tribute to Bob Moak for his work in 98 of the 120 summer productions. After reviewing his years of dedicated service, Paul said: **"Certainly the Maxinkuckee Playhouse was greater than Bob Moak, but likewise the Playhouse found in Bob Moak one of the chief reasons for being great. With his departure, an institution was passing and one of its brightest lights was heralding the demise."**

Paul, the founder, was no longer just talking about Bob Moak when he added: **"Culver is losing more than it can realize in these waning days of summer."**

The brief shining moment had ended.

Was the Playhouse Really Dead?

The original playhouse (Winifred Legg's Vacation Club) was soon torn down and the "new" playhouse and land were sold to Gene Furry and Dwight Wildermuth. According to Jack Campbell, the playhouse was used by his marina as a place to store boats in the winter. So where actors once trod the boards in the summer, boats boarded there in winters, some of them sitting on the stage with the only applause coming from the blowing wind and falling rain. Later, when the boards had begun to rot, Jack's son David stepped on the stage and found himself, without the benefit of a trapdoor, a level below. Currently, the playhouse is owned by Allen Becker,

(continued on page 5)



Production picture from "Stalag 17". Stan Beck, current Broadway actor, in center.

Maxinkuckee Playhouse

(continued from page 4)

who graciously conducted me on a tour of what is now a storage shed. About the only touching reminders of a place for plays are EXIT signs over two doors. Not long ago, Allen saw a stranger standing in the middle of the road, looking toward the playhouse. On being questioned, he said that once long ago he had appeared on the playhouse stage as an actor (Stanley or Jeff Beck?), but now, as a movie technician, he was traveling from the making of the basketball movie "Blue Chips" to another location.

Special thanks to Scott Pietka and his loyal staff of the

Culver-Union Township Library for helping with the search through twelve-years of **The Culver Citizen**. The collated material will eventually be filed away in a folder and placed in the History Room of the newly-renovated Carnegie Library in downtown Culver, along with the valuable correspondence from Paul Rutledge.

Editor's Note: When asked for his recollections of the theater which was once on East Shore Lane, Paul Rutledge responded with the "The Story of Maxinkuckee Playhouse". In addition he sent ten photographs. We send our gratitude to Mr. Rutledge for his interest in the history of our area.



Cast of "Diary of Anne Frank" celebrate the good news that the Allies are winning the war. Sally Nobel as 'Anne' in center.

Our Library Heritage Room

Anyone who has been in town lately has seen that the restoration of the old Carnegie Library and the new addition are moving along quickly. In cooperation with the library board, the Antiquarian and Historical Society will establish a local history museum and reference room in the addition section of the new building. The Heritage Room, about 950 square feet in size, will be used to house historically significant documents, paintings and artifacts specific to the Union Township area, i.e. the town, lake, Academy, and farm community. The room will also contain a database of publications, audio-visual material and original papers relating to the history of the area. We expect it to be a place where budding historians can come to research their projects where we can all learn about the history and legacy of this wonderful community.

Currently we are forming three committees; a concept and design committee, a permanent collection committee (we are hoping that many of the documents, etc. will be donated), and the all-important fund-raising committee. We have so many members who would be able to help us with this project, either because of needed expertise or because of willingness to

give their time. We hope that you will be one of those to become involved in this great project.

Please contact Jim Peterson at AHS, P.O. 125, Culver, IN 46511, or 219-842-3940.

Historic Bungalow District

The bungalows on Forest Place, between Lake Shore Drive and College Avenue, are finally getting the recognition they deserve. This past year these remarkable homes were placed on the National Register of Historic Places and on the Indiana Register of Historic Sites and Structures. Our Society is ordering a bronze plaque to be placed in a prominent location and, once the plaque is in place, the Society plans to have a formal dedication ceremony. Guest speakers will talk about the historic significance of these bungalows, their dwindling numbers, and why it is important to preserve them. We'll keep you informed.

Antiquarian & Historical Society of Culver Fall 2001 Newsletter
News Editor: Agnes Bramfeld
Feature Editor: Jo Dugger
Layout and Printing: John Cleveland

FALL, 2001
NEWSLETTER

Antiquarian and Historical Society
P.O. Box 125
Culver, Indiana 46511-0125

Dues and Donations

For an all-volunteer organization, we are constantly amazed at how much money is required to fund our day-to-day activities. First off, as you probably know by now, we own and maintain Heritage Park. This includes the taxes and all utilities and maintenance costs. We have made the determination to cover all costs related to the park in order to insure that it will be maintained in a way that can make the residents of the community proud. We want this especially for those who have purchased bricks, those whose names are on the plaques, and the many people and families who just like to enjoy Heritage Park.

Other expenses include doing the research and paper work necessary to have our historic areas designated on the National Register, buying and installing the plaques involved, printing and mailing our much praised newsletter, notices for monthly meetings, putting on special events like the ice cream socials and dedication ceremonies, and developing projects like our CD-Rom.

When you send in your dues, I hope you will consider an extra contribution to help our Society develop worthwhile and lasting projects like the local history room in the library. Our dedication to these things contributes to the value and the pride we take in our unique community.

Please support our efforts by returning this form with your tax-deductible gift

I wish to make a 2001 contribution to the Antiquarian and Historical Society in the amount of:

☐ \$1,000 ☐ \$500 ☐ \$250 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$25 ☐ Dues \$20

Name _____

Summer Address _____

Phone _____

Winter Address _____

Phone _____

Make checks payable to the ANTIQUARIAN and HISTORICAL SOCIETY and mail to: P.O. BOX 125, Culver, IN 46511