

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Newsletter

February 2003

Theatrical Tales to be Told

February 17, 2003 at 7:00 p.m.

Brace yourself for a drama in four acts with two dazzling demoiselles, former Town & Gown starlets, spinning the yarns. Don't miss the Annual Meeting at the Virginia Samford Theater, recently reborn as the stage for the Metropolitan Arts Council and a performing venue for artists of all kinds.

Historic preservation consultant Linda Nelson will show slides and take us back to the beginning in the early 20th century when the Little Theater began as a community theater using local talent. She'll also zoom us through

the Clarke Theater years, when James Hatcher provided creative leadership extraordinaire.

Metropolitan Arts Director Cathy Gilmore will present the Recent Rescue & Reuse and the anticipated future life of the Virginia Samford Theater.

Please join us on President's Day, February 17 at 7:00 p.m. to celebrate the rebirth of Birmingham's longest running community theater: The Little-Clarke-Samford Theater.

The theater is located along 26th Street South at the base of Caldwell Park.



Despite sub-freezing temperatures, enthusiasm was high to find and photograph stone structures in Birmingham's historic parks. The types of structures found include: entrance

gates, steps, staircases, paths and walkways, shelter houses, picnic and recreation houses, barbecue pits, wading pools, bathhouses, swimming pools, and an amphitheater. They date

from 1900 to 1940, with a strong concentration in the early 1930s.

Students in Associate Professor of Photography Pam Venz' January Term

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Twin Bar-B-Que Chimneys, built as ancient iron furnaces by masons employed by the C.P.A., 1933, Green Springs Park, Adam Colbert

SOCIETY CALENDAR

Annual Meeting

Virginia Samford Theater
26th St. South at Caldwell Park
February 17, 2003, 7:00 p.m.

Discovery Tours

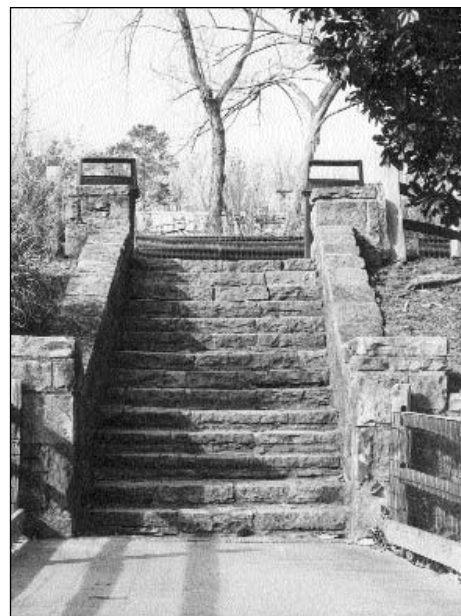
April & May

Heritage Society Party

Lockerbie
April 27, 2003, Noon

Preservation Awards

Avondale Villa
May 8, 2003, 5:00 p.m.



Bathhouse-now Shepherd Center (above), built in the French Norman style, financed by the City bond issue of 1931, East Lake Park, George P. Turner, A.I.A., Charles Horn.

Staircase, Birmingham Zoo which originally led from the Fish Hatchery built by the C. C. C. in the 1930s at Pullen Spring, staircase built under the C.W.A in 1933-1934, Annette Kittrell

The Little Theater



The famous "Buckle Down, Winsoki" from *Best Foot Forward*, the production staged for the dedication of the Clarke Theatre as

home to the university sponsored Town and Gown theatre company. Broadway star Tommy Dix led the cast.

Birmingham was a theatrical town from the get-go. Birmingham's Broadway in the central business district brought many celebrities from afar in legitimate stage performances, vaudeville, and operatic performances.

In 1915, a small group of women determined the city should have a community theatre. They created the Birmingham Center of the national Drama League of America. Miss Willie Allen of the Margaret Allen School for girls on Highland Avenue, then an elite residential district where many of the volunteer actors lived, headed the effort. Mrs. Vassar Allen served as founding president. The theatre's mission was to produce plays that might be brought to the city, with local casts. Four hundred members underwrote the cost of the early productions. The Allen School became the first home of the Birmingham Little Theatre in 1923.

In 1927, successful fundraising led to the building of the Little Theatre, a Renaissance Revival style design of William T. Warren AIA who was also an actor and a board member. (His wife Dorothy Warren designed 118 stage sets.) Real estate man and theater operator Gen. Louis V. Clark, publisher John Henley, and Eugene Fies led the fund drive. Smallman-Brice Construction Company built the 400-seat theater. It cost \$60,000. The lot on 26th Street at Caldwell Park cost an additional \$14,000.



Production photo from *Lilliom*, an early venue of the Little Theater (1913-1944), a community theater that showcases local talent.

The new playhouse allowed the Board to expand the membership to 1005 by 1929. Continuing the "best artistic standards," productions thrived through the 1930s. Birmingham playgoers found theatre (and the movies) perfect escapes from the Great Depression. Talented directors included Bernard Szold and Burt McKee. By 1939, The Little Theatre had employed 741 actors and produced 137 productions (29 written by Alabama authors). A year later, the Birmingham Little Theatre gained recognition as one of the 10 leading Little Theatres in the nation. Artistic talent kept the patrons satisfied, but not the mortgage firm. In 1943 and 1944, when many actors were drafted for military service, The Little Theatre suspended productions and its bondholders sold the playhouse to the Mormon Church.

A new theatrical organization rented the theatre and mounted productions. However, the Mormon Church censored its plays and the group moved. Following World War II, several groups produced dramas with home-town performing companies at the theater.

Clark Memorial Theater or Town & Gown and the Hatcher Years

In 1950, Enterprise native James Hatcher then an instructor of speech at the University of Alabama, interested the President and several alumni and staff



Scene from *Rose Marie*, one of the final productions of the Little Theater

of the Birmingham Extension Division (now U.A.B) infounding a community theatre with an educational mission. Naming the new group "Town and Gown" indicated the merging of community and university interests. Auditoriums, ballrooms, downtown hotels, the YWCA, and the Art Museum hosted early Town and Gown productions. Hatcher served as director and promoter.

Five years later, Augusta Clark Noland and her four daughters presented the historic Little Theater to the University of Alabama. The historic playhouse became the Clark Memorial Theatre, in honor of Mrs. Noland's father Gen. Louis V. Clark who had often offered her as a "stage baby." (The Clarks lived across 26th Street on Highland Avenue) Hill Ferguson brokered the purchase by the Nolands.

The successful composer and songwriter, Alabama native Hugh Martin, Jr., helped stage his musical "Best Foot Forward" as the opening production. Both the theater's director and technical director were University faculty, receiving salaries from the University; all others volunteered their services.

James Hatcher did nothing but Town and Gown. "Hatch," as he was affectionately known to all, brought the world to Town and Gown and Town and Gown to the world. Guest artists performed, directed productions, and taught and inspired the local company. Many local actors went on to careers on Broadway and in professional theatre. To increase educational venues of the theater, statewide tours began in the 1960s. Musical productions gained in popularity, but at least one play (without music) was performed annually.

Patrons continued to provide private funds for capital improvements. In 1962, Mrs. Horace (Kitty) Hammond underwrote construction of the enclosed gardens along 26th Street and the reorientation of the theater's entrance to face Caldwell Park. Darcy Tatum AIA designed the New Orleans-style atmosphere of the lobby and the new library on the second floor.

In the 1970s, arts patron Mrs. David (Cecil) Roberts III chaired the Town & Gown Board and financed construction of a new wing comprising a technical workshop and design and administrative offices.

Hatcher's career as creative director spanned four decades. He retired as Director in 1991 and eight years later the University of Alabama at Birmingham discontinued its support for the theater.

2000

Once again a Birmingham woman, Virginia Samford Donovan, stepped forward to save the theater. Both she and her mother had loved The Little Theatre and performed there. Mrs. Samford's gift to the theater sped along the \$3,000,000 construction project which began August 8, 2001 and finished May 10, 2002. Renovations included rewiring and upgrading stage equipment and adding a new balcony. Architect for the project was Steve Kinney of KPS Group. Seay Construction Co. workers were enthusiastic participants in the project, never missing a day on the job. Floyd Harrell of Alabama Power Company kept everyone on the fast-track schedule.

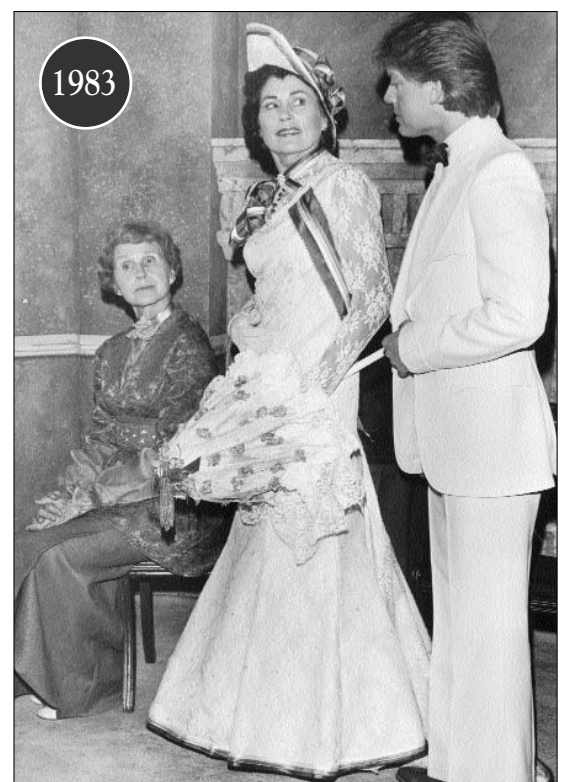
Board members leading and financing the renovations from governmental, corporate, and individual sources were Charles McCrary, Betty McMahon, Jim Miller, and Garland Smith.



Ensemble for *Camelot*, the closing production of the season



Sources: Notes for the *Theater Wall* at the Virginia Samford Theater by Linda Nelson; *History and Development of Clark Theatre*, University of Alabama Extension News Bulletin, Vol. 23, No. 5. All photographs courtesy Virginia Samford Theatre with thanks to Guy Arello



Above: Georgene Gainey, Virginia Samford, and Glenn Cohn in *Cherri*, a production based on a French novelist story of the young woman, Colette.

Left: Kristi Tingle Higginbotham and dancers in *Evita*, as costumed by Russ Drummond.



Wading Pool, now fenced and planted; *Seating Area*, seating built by the 1931 City bond issue, Rhodes Park, Olivia Hopper.



Shelter House, Avondale Park, built through a City Bond issue, 1931, Andrew Ryan.

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Course photographed Birmingham's historic parks and parkways and mounted an exhibit in the Art Department, Kennedy Center at Birmingham-Southern College. The students included Adam Colbert, Jim Craft, Olivia Hooper, Charles Horn, Annette Kittrell, Jamie Neal, Andrew Ryan, Grey Watson, and Booth Willson. Landscape historian Phoebe Cutler came from San Francisco to review the survey and present a talk on the American parks movement of the early 20th century.

In 1931, a City of Birmingham bond issue of \$500,000 provided the major funds for the Parks Board & its Superintendent Roy Marshall to develop the parks, Avondale, East Lake, Ensley, Green Springs, and Linn. Landscape architects Ruby J. Pearse and Charles Kessler supervised crews of unemployed men. In 1932, the Red Cross coordinated the recruitment and pay (food and clothing) for the laborers who worked in the parks and at Birmingham Southern where Pearse was an adjunct Professor of Landscape Architecture. In 1933 and 1934, the Civil Works Administration coordinated the labor to develop Lane Park, now the Birmingham Zoo and Botanical Gardens. Quarrying on site (today's Wildflower Quarry of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens) provided stone for paths and bridges in the gardens, the picnic houses and the great Refreshment House (long the zoo keepers' house). The major park developed by the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) was Vulcan Park, the beginning of the proposed Red Mountain Greenway. The W.P.A. also provided labor to develop an Arboretum at Lane Park and continue improvements to the entire park system.

Trustees and Officers to be Elected

The Society's Nominating Committee, chaired by Richard Bowron with the assistance of Pat Camp, Clarke Gillespie, Harold Goings, Dan Puckett, and Marjorie White, presents the following candidates to serve as Officers and Trustees of the Society. Members will vote on the Nominees at the Annual Meeting on February 17, 2003. Any additional nominations must be received in the Society's offices two weeks prior to the Annual Meeting.

New Officers for 2003

Mr. Harold H. Goings, Vice President
Mr. Douglas A. Stockham, Assistant Secretary

New Trustees for terms 2003-2005

Mrs. William (Elizabeth) Collier
Mrs. Whitney (Adair) DeBardeleben
Ms. Carol J. Poe
Mrs. Bryson (Courtney) Stephens

Trustees recommended for Second Terms

Mrs. Frank (Louise) McPhillips
Mr. Steven A. Yoder

Trustees recommended for Special Assignments

Mr. Charles S. Caldwell, III
Mr. Arthur C. P. Henley
Mrs. William (Carolyn) Satterfield
Mr. Arnold L. Steiner



One Sloss Quarters
Birmingham, Alabama 35222

Address Correction and Forwarding Requested

Join us for
The Annual Meeting
February 17, 7:00 p.m.

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