PAGE SIX





ON MANCHESTER STAGES The story of theatrical performances in Manchester -professional or amateur theater is two-sided -- Manchester people as audience and as participants; maybe even three-sided. taking into account Manchester people who made a living as professionals and became known outside of Connecticut.

One thinks first of Cheney Hall, buikt in 1867 by the silk manufacturing family, and of Apel's Opera House, built "over north" by B. C. Apel, furniture dealer and undertaker. One thinks of the Community Players, oldest (35 years last June) company in Connecticut continuously active, of the Little Theatre of Manchester, presently hopeful of its own auditorium, of the Gilbert and Sullivan Workshop, seen recently in a 20th anniversary production of "Trial by Jury" and "H. M. S. Pinafore."

But surely there was professional theater before the late 19th century. Let's have a setting for our story.

Entertainment, public and private, probably yes; theater as we know it now, almost certainly not. The people who settled in Connecticut were the seriousminded, too strait-laced to be beguiled by play-acting.

Hartford's First The first theatrical performance in Hartford was an amateur show in May 1778, presented in the first State House in Hooker Square -- not the present Old State House, but the build-

ing which preceded it. The title was "Tancred and Sigismunde," and, for its presentation the Junior Sombister Class rented-had the audacity to rent is a phrase better expressing the reaction of some, at least, of their audience-the State House because no hall was available for them in Glastonbury, where they'd been relocated from New Haven because question.) of the war. The production cost



H. Bushnell Cheney of Manchester acted as well as directed plays put on by the truck-based Jitney Players, which he and his wife organized.

stores. It was used-as was building, rode in the freight ele-Apel's Opera House-for such vator used to store furniture in early movies as "Hearts of the the attic above the theater, and World" and "Way Down East", watched the shows from the for prize speakings, gradua- shelter of balcony seats.

tions, high school junior proms, town meetings, basketball

Trees.'

When it became known that the Historical Society was inJitney Players gave in their held Oct. 18. Mrs. Skinner (the late Helen Page Skinner, for week's stay there. The Jitney Players gave a many years Manchester High performance of Richard Sheri- School drama coach) will predan's "A Trip to Scarborough" side at the first session."

on June 13, 1928, in Education- The drama group was exal Square in downtown Man- pected "to assist the education chester. It was the first produc- committee. supply religious tion of the 150-year-old play in dramas for church groups, pres-American and of especial in- ent seasonal plays and pagterest to Manchester because eants, entertain local clubs and the Jitney Players had been present plays for the general originated and organized six public.

years earlier by H. Bushnell Thus began several years of Cheney, recently graduated intense activity on the part of from Yale, and his wife. Alice a small membership which was Keating, Bushnell Cheney was known as the Center Thespithe son of Horace Bushnell ans. Their first production, "The Rock," was presented Cheney.

The unique mobile theater, a four or five times in the one-ton Ford truck later named church. The second was an Jezebel, was adapted to double original play, "Barabbas." as a theater, according to Both were religious plays. Cheney's specifications, by a They were followed by a heavy maker of circus wayons. A cir- schedule of four or five plays cus tent-maker ran up the can- a year, ranging from "Blithe vas which completed Jezebel's Spirit" to "Pygmalion" to "The transformation nightly into a Glass Menagerie." 'Family Porstage. The side of the truck trait" was taken to the Bushfolded down on hinged legs to nell auditorium in Hartford as form a platform. The roof over a part of a Pilgrim Fellowship the driver's seat, supported by Rally.

telescoping stanchions, was In 1954 the Thespians did an pushed down to form an upstage original pageant, "The Pillar area just big enough for a sofa, and the Ground," by Mrs. Mil-A rack under the truck carried lard (Ruth) Rowley for the

place, a network of smaller Christmas.

pipes could be raised like an The Thespians were active in rected by James Herdic. LTM Rham High School in Hebron. first presented in 1947-under umbrella. Then the canvas top the Associated Little Theater, is now independent. Its first Presidents of the LTM have the direction of Bernard Camcould be raised over the frame- which represented little thea- season included "Bus Stop," been Fred T. Blish III, for two pagna, tenor soloist at South work; canvas front curtains, ters from many Connecticut "Time of the Cuckoo" and terms of office; William Camp- Methodist Church, by the Epside coverings and a cyclorama, towns and within which a one- "Born Yesterday." "Look bell, Philip Burgess, Mrs. Ralph worth League of the church. or backdrop, were hauled into act play contest was organ- Homeward Angel" was its first (Betty) Lundberg, Archibald Since 1960, when the group was place by stage hands, who also ized for each of several years. production of 1967. sang, danced, played instru. The Thespians won several In 1962 the LTM instituted In 1966, production activities White, music supervisor for the

ments, acted. Jezebel carried actors, cos- individual actors.

tumes, a cook stove and two

Men's Catholic Association, and troup member. The Puddle and Mrs. Doris Belding. of St. Bridget's Dramatic Club, Duck, Cheney's side-car motor-





Apel's Opera House at the corner of N. Main St. and Oakland St. was once the center of entertainment and culture for North Manchester, the first populous area in town.

four heavy supports which fast- 175th anniversary of the ized in the fall of 1960 and op- plays for several years, pre- celebrated in 1967 with the Gilened to the corners of the church; other pageants were erated for some time under the senting them at elementary bert and Sullivan Workshop's "stage" and, when these were in produced at Easter and at aegis of the Manchester Rec- schools, with one program of "Trial by Jury" and "H.M.S.

Stuart and Mrs. Rowley.

membership of more than 100. and meetings-moved from the director.

Mrs. Skinner was first Mrs. Rowley was the first chair- old Howell Cheney Technical Three members of the orig-Mention Apel's to older mem- tents. A second truck, Des- president of the Thespians; man of this department. The School building to rooms at 22 inal cast have been in producgames, and who remembers bers of St. Bridget parish and demona, carried electrical others were George Munson, first show was Mactenlinck's Oak St. The annual budget for tions every year: Virginia Rywhat else? To people who had they recall the stories told by equipment, stage properties, in- Dr. Samuel Pond, Merrill Ad- "The Bluebird." There were 1967 runs to \$8.000; member- an, Robert Gordon and George never seen or heard an opera, their parents of the YMCA, dividual luggage-two suitcas- ams, A. William Astley, three original musicales with ship has grown to 80 and the Duncan.

reation Department, then di- three short plays given at Pinafore." "Trial by Jury" was incorporated, Miss Martha ALT awards for plays and for the Children's Wing with a -rehearsals, scene painting, elementary schools, has been

the name was accepted without which then meant the Young es and one make-up box per Charles Tindel, Mrs. Rowley the book written by Mrs. Row- patrons' list from 125 couples Note: The "Manchester: Past ley and the music composed by to 540. LTM looks forward to Places, People" series is prepared under the direction of the Mrs. Fred Blish III; "Alice in owning a building. LTM Organizes Many of the Thespians be- Wonderland," "Toby Tyler" and Public Information Committee Gilbert and Sullivan The Jitney Players presented came members of the Little "Little Pawnee Brother." A Another anniversary in Man- of the Manchester Historical "A Confederate Spy, or The dramas, comedies, tragedies, Theatre of Manchester, organ- teen-age group put on one-act chester theatrical activity was Society.

them 60 pounds and the whole project was regarded, at very best, in the light of an ill-advised prank.

One play, "A Child of Nature," on the screen for audience singby a favorite farce entitled East Among the Shady Maple "Love a La Mode."

There were occasional Shake-

"Catherine and Petruchio." cult than traveling 50 miles now. ter, seating 1700, was built in Richard J. Maloney.

Theatres Illegal In 1800 the General Court, or tainly in the early 1900's, New ood Thursday in May, passed Boston's Shubert were the usual an "Act to prevent theatrical professional sequence.

shows and exhibitions. r'Whereas theatrical entertain- band and bloodhounds for a ments tend to the depravation parade, made the news columns of the manners and impover- of the Hartford Courant but not ighment of the people ... "Be it enacted by the Gover- generous with tickets. The story

nor and the House of Represen- is better than that. tatives in General Court assembled. . .that there shall be Union School had warned his no tragedies, comedies, farces pupils that, go to the parade and other dramatic pieces or they might, but be late for compositions or pantomines or school in consquence they other theatrical shows whatso might not. Of course, they did ever to which admission can be and they were-and Principal charged with view to gain. . ." The fine for a violation was schoolhouse door and whaled \$50.

Efforts were made several in. times in the 50 years following All but one. James Duffy, to has we thre Blure Lease ohanged; formerly of Hempy SSI, and now the General Assembily, pointing of Manuniket. Mass., tells the ers parked their cars an'too the number and quality of story: he had a job leading one pitched their tents in a val sectorists and orditegres in Con- of the bounds in the paralle, contillat mean Rutland Higneediteut and asserting that pre- This was a reasonable excuse Stined." this reporter wooh pite trasted their officien to for teariness. these institutions because of There were burbsque shows Ruthand, Wt., Heradd-and, de later "The Lion's Share" hit the od which made possible the Mcensing of theatrical or other productions by selectmen or cl.y authorities.

Local Performances The importance of Cheney Hall, dedicated in 1867, in the social and cultural life of Manchester has been noted (Jan. 26, 1966). This was -- to state the obvious -a non-commercial venture. Concerts were held there, recitals, lectures, amateur theatricals. On some occasions the Cheneys arranged for a special train from New

terested in what went on at building fund. Apel's, there were a few phone

calls, reminiscences. A note from an old church bulletin reby Mrs. Inchbald, was followed ing. One song was "Way Down ter after the dancing. W. P. Smith (the late Wil-

liam P. Smith of Golway St.) One show was "Way Down played the spy, and Miss Nora spearean plays, including a East." It seems safe to assume Tuohey, later Mrs. Smith, David Garrick showing of "The that "The Old Homestead" was played his mother, with white Taming of the Shrew," re-titled another, that the old-fashioned wig and spectacles borrowed melodramas were presented by from a neighbor. Michael Tuo-Did Orford Parish people at- the road companies which play- hey, Hartford Courant reporttend these shows? It's possible ed Manchester. Were they the er for many years, was the po- Cheney carried on, finally sellbut it seems unlikely. Traveling same companies which played, liceman, and the heroine was ing the company to Ethel Bar-10 miles then was more diffi- after 1896 when Parson's Thea- Julia A. Harrington, later Mrs.

St. Bridget Players

Hartford? Probably not; cer-Other members of St. Bridg- of the Jitney Players. et's Dramatic Society were Assembly, meeting on the sec- Haven's Shubert, Parson's, and Barney Horn, the comedian; John Gill, who played the villain; Daniel Sullivan, who liked "Uncle Tom's Cabin," with a

> the leading lady. because the advance agent was

Principal Frederick Lillie of parade in costume to the hoto. Genovesi. for supper (good publicity!] Lillie lined them up at the them, one by one, as they went

The Jitney Players

"Mesterilay the Jimey Blay

Connectiouits freedom from our- at the Opera House, Duffy me some good fortune, was able to boards. "It was not 'Oklarapping influences, heidd the line. oallis. He and Billy Aged, son of see all the Gilbert and Shilb homa." said Mrs. Handley at "Not unitil 1862 was a bill or anti- the cowner, annalod into the wan performances which the Players' 25th anniversary.



which raised money for the cycle, completed the caravan.

Blue and the Grey," in five masques, and fantasies -- "One-In 1794, Hartford's first real vealed that Mr. Edison's new acts, was one title. It was pre- act plays never before seen on theater, especially designed and motion pictures were shown in sented on Thanksgiving eve, the road," including the work built for playacting, opened on November 1899, for the benefit Nov. 27, 1889, followed by a of Ben Hecht, A. A. Milne, Mo-Temple St. near Main. Profes- of the Second and the North turkey supper at Apel's lower liere, and Gilbert and Sullivan. sional repertory companies ap- Methodist Churches. Between hall and dancing, with W.P. For 17 years, the Jitney peared there for five seasons, reels, slides were projected up. Smith as caller. Buses ran to Players were a famous travel-Vernon and to South Manches. ing company, ranging from New England to the Mexican border. By their second season, there were 14 members, transported in two open Ford touring cars, leaving the trucks for equipment. A generator truck with a cargo of 400 folding chairs and a canvas top to shelter the audience was soon added. After Bushnell Cheney's death, Alice rymore Colt. World War II and gasoline shortages saw the end

Community Players

Manchester's Community Players, Connecticut's oldest dramatic group continually acblackface roles (minstrels?); tive, celebrated its 35th birth-Sadie Wall, Mrs. Edward Wall, day, in Juna 38th and hours day in June 1966, and honored Some productions were tak its charter members: Mrs. Joen to Rockville. The cast would- seph L. (Mary Ann) Handley, go to Rockville early in thd founder of the organization. day, rehearse in the afternoore Mrs. Mark Holmes and Louis

The Community Players had and come home after the show) its start during the Depression The Opera House was use? in March 1931, when eight for other purposes than thed young people having coffee atre-for school graduation together sympathized with the before any school had a suitable plight of one of their number auditorium; for exhibitions or who was president of the Lions art and other work done bif Club. The Lions Club was trystudents; for church fairs. y ing to set up a milk fund, he said, for hungry school chil-

Gren. "Let's have a play," they said. They wrote the script, found

the songe, made up the dances, designed the scenery, browbeat their friends into taking parts, ailsoutt 19928 im as sitony ffor the borrowed costumes. Six weeks "But it gave us something to do and a group of people got grease-paint in their veins." Thirty-five years and 100 productions later, last June, the charter members looked over

the old scrapbooks; re-read old press notices, remembered fondly Manchester clubs and organizations who have been their sponsors.

A ticket in the 1930's cost 40 cents; once a show was given for the benefit of the King's Daughters, whose project was



The cast of "Enchanted April," presented by the Community Players in 1933, included, left to right, Louis Genovesi, Beatrice Coughlin Thrall, Sylvia Hagedorn Spain, Faith Fallow, trice Cougnin Inrall, Sylvia Hagedorn Spain, Falth mallow,

Ben Radding, Beatrice Perrett Keith, Eleanor Wilson, Russell Potterton, Walter Henry and Mable Holmes.

York to bring guests or performers. Once at least, Mark Twain came out from Hartford to witness a performance.

Apels' Opera House In the 1880's Mr. Apel built his opera house at the juncture of N. Main and Oakland Sts. It was a period when many New England towns, even villages, had similar structures. They were called opera houses rather than theaters, perhaps as a gesture toward respectability or perhaps as a gesture toward elegance. All those cities in Europe could have opera houses, why shouldn't we in New England? (The writer remembers two other opera houses. One was in northern New Hampshire and recollection groups under one roof-is it possible ?- a minstrel show and the firehouse. The second was simply a huge bare barn of a second-story room over a row of disig and dry goods and paint

Miss Nora Tuohey, later Mrs. William P. Smith, played the mother of the hero in "The Confederate Spy," presented at Apel's Opera House. The picture is from an album owned by her daughter Miss Madeline Smith; another daughter is Mrs. Richard Martin, wife of the former town manager.

Thanksgiving baskets for the needy, and admission was paid with cans of food.

The intention was to function as a truly community theater, to include people from all walks of life and all age groups. Eighth grade boys appeared in "Tom Sawyer," a retired school superintendent was cast as Mr. Lawrence in "Little Women." a man who was to become town manager had the part of a policeman.

The list of plays is impressive: "The Old Soak," "The Queen's Husband," "Biography." "The Enchanted April," "Accent on Youth," / "Three Live Ghosts." In 1966-67, the schedule includes "Everybody Loves Opal" and "Ready When You Are, C.B."

Center Thesplans In September 1946, the Center Church Bulletin included a notice that "A drama group is to be formed in Center Church ... The first meeting will be