

Manchester: Past Places, People

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, built 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 serious-minded, 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 building which preceded it.

The title was "Tancred and Sigismunde," and, for its presentation, the Junior-Senior 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 of the war. The production cost them 60 pounds and the whole project was regarded, at very best, in the light of an ill-vised prank.

In 1794, Hartford's first real theater, especially designed and built for playacting, opened on Temple St. near Main. Professional repertory companies appeared there for five seasons. One play, "A Child of Nature," by Mrs. Inchbald, was followed by a favorite farce entitled "Love a La Mode."

There were occasional Shakespearean plays, including a David Garrick showing of "The Taming of the Shrew," re-titled "Catherine and Petruchio."

Did Orford Parish people attend these shows? It's possible but it seems unlikely. Traveling 10 miles then was more difficult than traveling 50 miles now.

Theatres Illegal

In 1800 the General Court, or Assembly, meeting on the second Thursday in May, passed an "Act to prevent theatrical shows and exhibitions."

"Whereas theatrical entertainments tend to the depravation of the manners and impoverishment of the people..."

"Be it enacted by the Governor and the House of Representatives in General Court assembled... that there shall be no tragedies, comedies, farces and other dramatic pieces or compositions or pantomimes or other theatrical shows whatsoever to which admission can be charged with view to gain..."

The fine for a violation was \$50.

Efforts were made several times in the 50 years following to have the Blue Laws changed; the General Assembly, pointing to the number and quality of schools and colleges in Connecticut and asserting that people trusted their children to those institutions because of Connecticut's freedom from corrupting influences, held the line. Not until 1862 was a bill enacted which made possible the licensing of theatrical or other productions by selectmen or city authorities.

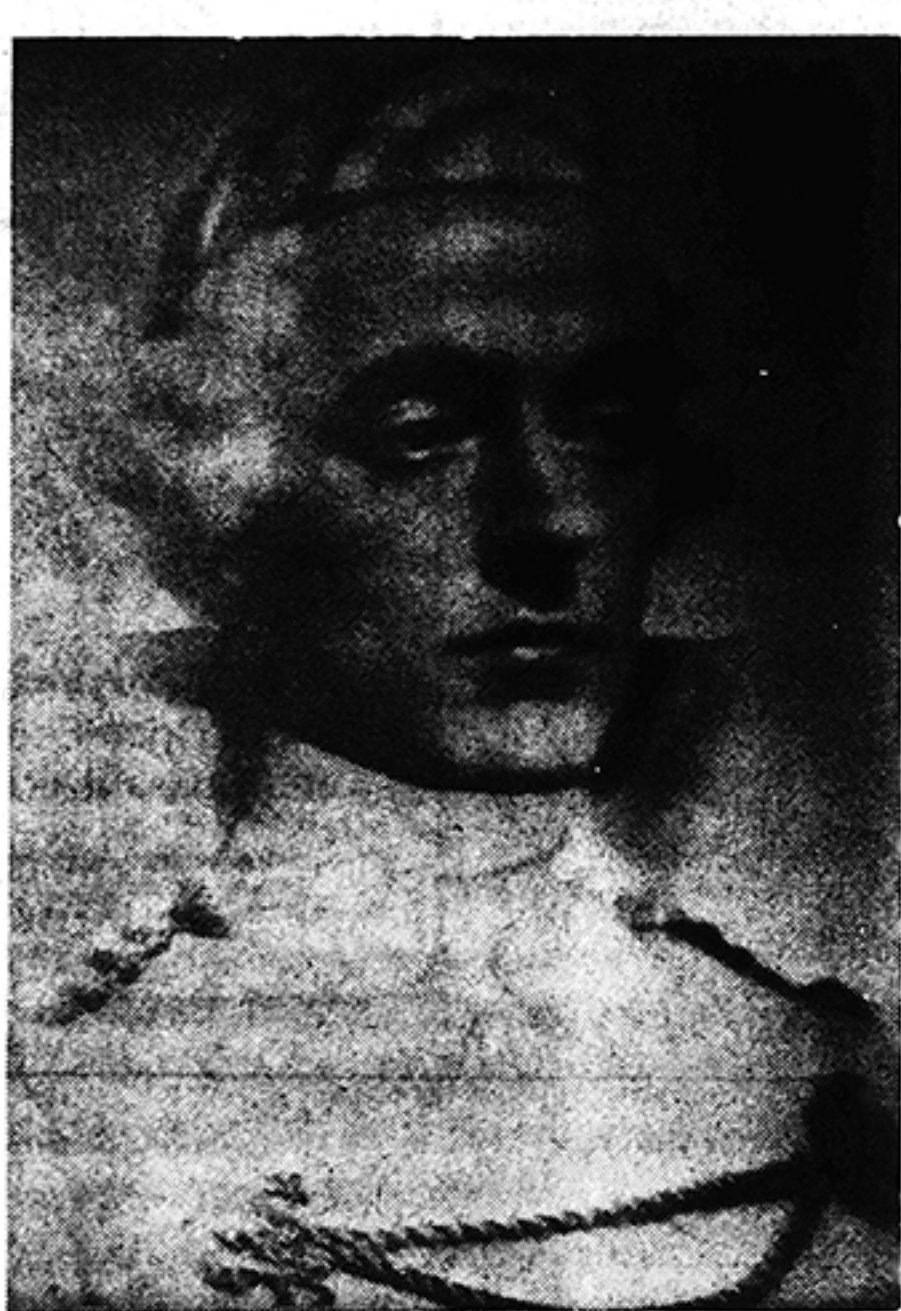
Local Performances

The importance of Cheney Hall, dedicated in 1867, in the social and cultural life of Manchester has been noted (Jan. 28, 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 York to bring guests or performers. Once at least, Mark Twain came out from Hartford to witness a performance.

Apel's 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 drug and dry goods and paint



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 Apel's Opera House — for such early movies as "Hearts of the World" and "Way Down East" for prize speakings, graduations, high school junior proms, town meetings, basketball games, and who remembers what else? To people who had never seen or heard an opera, the name was accepted without question.)

When it became known that the Historical Society was interested in what went on at Apel's, there were a few phone calls, reminiscences. A note from an old church bulletin revealed that Mr. Edison's new motion pictures were shown in November 1899, for the benefit of the Second and the North Methodist Churches. Between reels, slides were projected upon the screen for audience singing. One song was "Way Down East Among the Shady Maple Trees."

One show was "Way Down East." It seems safe to assume that "The Old Homestead" was another, that the old-fashioned melodramas were presented by the road companies which played Manchester. Were they the same companies which played, after 1896 when Parson's Theatre, seating 1700, was built in Hartford? Probably not; certainly in the early 1900's, New Haven's Shubert, Parson's, and Boston's Shubert were the usual professional sequence.

"Uncle Tom's Cabin," with a band and bloodhounds for a parade, made the news columns of the Hartford Courant but not because the advance agent was generous with tickets. The story is better than that.

Principal Frederick Lillie of Union School had warned his pupils that, go to the parade they might, but be late for school in consequence they might not. Of course, they did and they were — and Principal Lillie lined them up at the schoolhouse door and whaled them, one by one, as they went in.

All but one, James Duffy, formerly of Henry St. and now of Nantucket, Mass., tells the story: he had a job leading one of the bands in the parade. This was a reasonable excuse for tardiness.

There were burlesque shows at the Opera House. Duffy recalls. He and Billy Apel, son of the owner, sneaked into the

Jitney Players gave in their week's stay there.

The Jitney Players gave a performance of Richard Sheridan's "A Trip to Scarborough" on June 13, 1928, in Educational Square in downtown Manchester. It was the first production of the 150-year-old play in American and of especial interest to Manchester because the Jitney Players had been originated and organized six years earlier by H. Bushnell Cheney, recently graduated from Yale, and his wife, Alice Keating. Bushnell Cheney was the son of Horace Bushnell Cheney.

The unique mobile theater, a one-ton Ford truck later named Jezebel, was adapted to double as a theater, according to Cheney's specifications, by a circus tent-maker ran up the canvas which completed Jezebel's transformation nightly into a stage. The side of the truck folded down on hinged legs to form a platform. The roof over the driver's seat, supported by telescoping stanchions, was pushed down to form an upstage area just big enough for a sofa. A rack under the truck carried four heavy supports which fastened to the corners of the "stage" and, when these were in place, a network of smaller pipes could be raised like an umbrella. Then the canvas top could be raised over the framework; canvas front curtains, side coverings and a cyclorama, or backdrop, were hauled into place by stage hands, who also sang, danced, played instruments, acted.

Jezebel carried actors, costumes, a cook stove and two tents. A second truck, Desdemona, carried electrical equipment, stage properties, individual luggage — two suitcases and one make-up box per troupe member. The Puddle Duck, Cheney's side-car motorcycle, completed the caravan.

The Jitney Players presented dramas, comedies, tragedies, masques, and fantasies — "One-act plays never before seen on the road," including the work of Ben Hecht, A. A. Milne, Moliere, and Gilbert and Sullivan.

For 17 years, the Jitney Players were a famous traveling 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 Cheney carried on, finally selling the company to Ethel Barrymore Colt. World War II and gasoline shortages saw the end of the Jitney Players.

Community Players

Manchester's Community Players, Connecticut's oldest dramatic group continually active, celebrated its 35th birthday in June 1966, and honored its charter members: Mrs. Joseph L. (Mary Ann) Handley, founder of the organization, Mrs. Mark Holmes and Louis Genovesi.

The Community Players had its start during the Depression in March 1931, when eight young people having coffee together sympathized with the plight of one of their number who was president of the Lions Club. The Lions Club was trying to set up a milk fund, he said, for hungry school children. "Let's have a play," they said.

They wrote the script, found the songs, made up the dances, designed the scenery, browbeat their friends into taking parts, borrowed costumes. Six weeks later "The Lion's Share" hit the boards. "It was not 'Oklahoma,'" said Mrs. Handley at the Players' 25th anniversary. "But it gave us something to do and a group of people got grease-point 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 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 Theatians

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



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.

held in the fall of 1960 and operated for some time under the aegis of the Manchester Recreation Department, then directed by James Herdic. LTM is now independent. Its first season included "Bus Stop," "Time of the Cuckoo" and "Born Yesterday." "Look Homeward Angel" was its first production of 1967.

In 1962 the LTM instituted the Children's Wing with a membership of more than 100. Mrs. Rowley was the first chairman of this department. The first show was Maeterlinck's "The Bluebird." There were three original musicals with the book written by Mrs. Rowley and the music composed by Mrs. Fred Blish III; "Alice in Wonderland," "Toby Tyler" and "Little Pawnee Brother." A teen-age group put on one-act plays for several years, presenting them at elementary schools, with one program of three short plays given at Rham High School in Hebron.

Presidents of the LTM have been Fred T. Blish III, for two terms of office; William Campbell, Philip Burgess, Mrs. Ralph (Betty) Lundberg, Archibald Stuart and Mrs. Rowley.

In 1966, production activities — rehearsals, scene painting, and meetings — moved from the old Howell Cheney Technical School building to rooms at 22 Oak St. The annual budget for 1967 runs to \$8,000; membership has grown to 80 and the patrons' list from 125 couples to 540. LTM looks forward to owning a building.

Gilbert and Sullivan

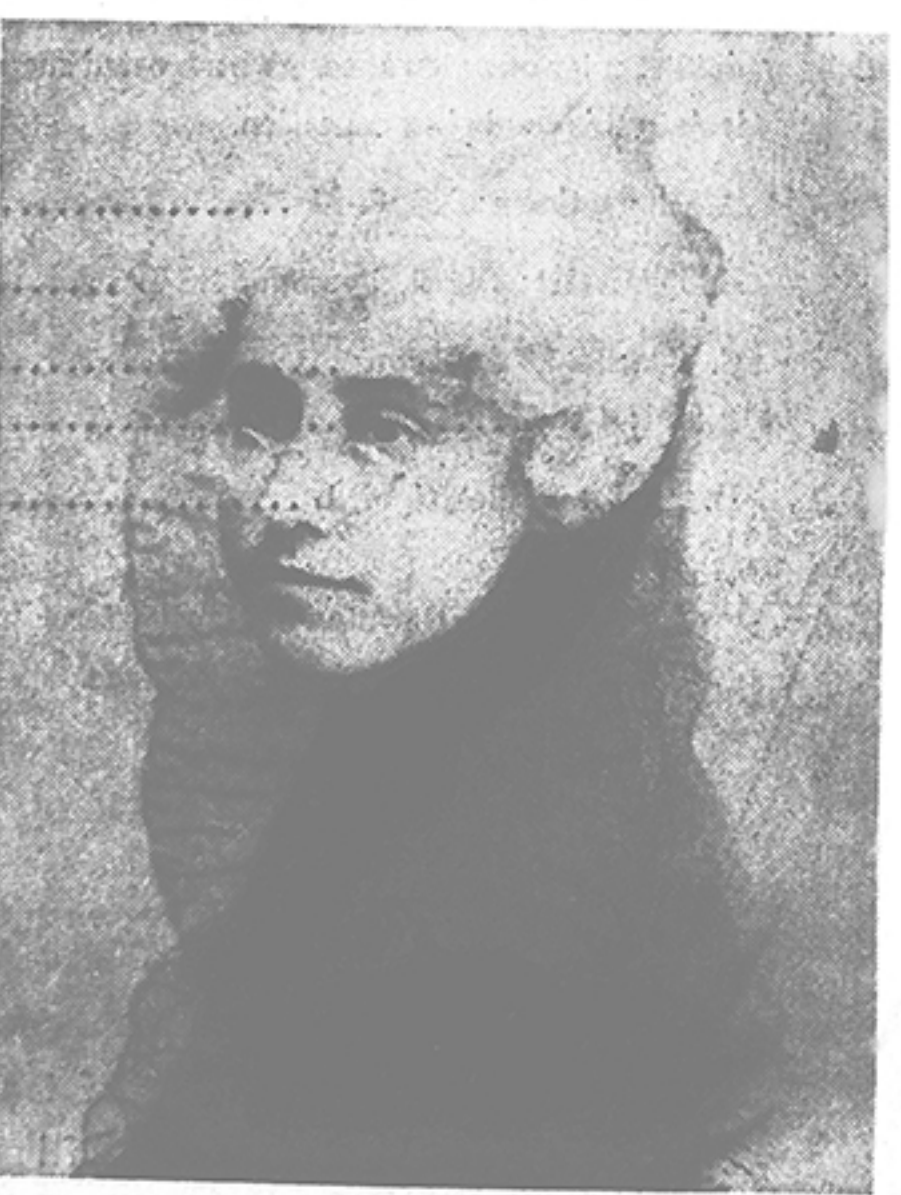
Another anniversary in Manchester theatrical activity was celebrated in 1967 with the Gilbert and Sullivan Workshop's "Trial by Jury" and "H.M.S. Pinafore." "Trial by Jury" was first presented in 1947 — under the direction of Bernard Campagna, tenor soloist at South Methodist Church, by the Epworth League of the church. Since 1960, when the group was incorporated, Miss Martha White, music supervisor for the elementary schools, has been director.

Three members of the original cast have been in productions every year: Virginia Ryan, Robert Gordon and George Duncan.

Note: The "Manchester: Past Places, People" series is prepared under the direction of the Public Information Committee of the Manchester Historical Society.



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 Coughlin Thrall, Sylvia Hagedorn Spain, Faith Fallow, Ben Radding, Beatrice Perrett Keith, Eleanor Wilson, Russell Potterton, Walter Henry and Mable Holmes.



Miss Nora Tuohy, 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.