

# YPSILANTI GLEANINGS

## PAST SCENES and OLD TIMES

YPSILANTI HISTORICAL SOCIETY~ PUBLICATION~



Ypsilanti Historical Museum  
~ 220 N. Huron Street ~

January 1976

YPSILANTI PLAYERS FROM 1915 - 1957

YPSILANTI PLAYERS FROM 1915-1920

Ypsilanti, April 12, 1915

I have for a long time had in mind the organization of a Dramatic Club in Ypsilanti. With this view I have asked a few people to come to the Ladies' Literary Club rooms, Thursday evening, April fifteenth at seven-thirty o'clock.

My ideas of the Club will be explained and some modern, short plays read by different persons.

Hoping to see you,

Sincerely  
(signed)

Daniel L. Quirk, Jr.

And so began many successful years for the Ypsilanti Players. That first meeting brought together a group of thirty-two theatre loving people. The group included homemakers, members of the various professions, and business men and women. There were, just to mention a few, C.V. Brown, former Mayor of Ypsilanti, (1916-1920), Arthur Erickson, for whom the Erickson school in Ypsilanti is named, Miss Bertha Goodison, artist and for whom a Womens' Dorm. on the Eastern Michigan University Campus is named, and C. P. Steimle, the former registrar of the College. All were enthusiastic about the new venture into the field of Theatre Arts.

The aim of the Ypsilanti Players, as formulated at that first meeting was, "To study, read, and act new plays which must have artistic merit." Simply worded and to the point.

For that meeting three plays had been prepared to be read as part of the program. In the scrapbook of that year those three plays are shown to be:

Program #1 April 15, 1915  
THE MAN ON THE KERB by Alfred Sutro  
read by Mrs. H.B. Britton (daughter of  
Professor Florus Barbour, English Dept.  
the Normal College 1885-1926)

THE NOBLE LORD by Percival Wilde  
read by Miss Luella Seeger +

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT by Stanley Houghton  
read by Mrs. R.Clyde Ford (wife of Richard  
Clyde Ford, Head of Modern Language Dept,  
Normal, 1903-1938)

The Program #2 of May 15, 1915, found a group of readers taking the various parts instead of just one reader for a play. At each meeting a committee of three volunteered to arrange the program for the next meeting.

Ypsilanti of 1915 was a community of 7,000 population and the Players filled a very definite need in the community and became a very important part of it.

The Players owed their success to the inspired directorship of Daniel Lace Quirk, Jr. It was his unfiring effort, his high standards of showmanship and meticulous regard for artistry that gave joy and satisfaction to those working with and for him. He had acquired his taste and love of the theatre in his youth when he helped in shifting scenes and in other odd jobs about the Opera House. (Ypsilanti's Opera House was built in the late 1870's on the north side of Congress (Michigan) east of Adams and Dan Quirk's father was one of the original stockholders).

As evening after evening of play reading passed, the readers grew more and more dramatic; interpretation demanded action. As latent talent developed, an improvised stage in some members living room proved most inadequate and frustrating.

The meeting of January 16, 1916, when the club was just ten months old must have been a very exciting one. The meeting of that date recorded in its minutes the decision:

"To rent from the Ladies' Library Association the barn at the rear of their lot for five years at twenty dollars per year with the privilege of buying at any time during the five years the barn and the land on which it stands for two hundred dollars..."

At the same meeting, "it was further decided that dues be paid to the club of five dollars per year".

In the last part of that same sentence came the recording of an action that had far reaching results dramatically speaking. It reads:

"and that the Club proceed with the remodeling of the barn to make it ready for the Shrove Tuesday Mask on March 7, 1916."

In this casual manner the group with apparently no board of directors or other administrative verbiage brought into being the Ypsilanti Playhouse which came to be known nationally in the field of dramatic art as the smallest theatre in the world.

There followed a hectic seven weeks of preparation for the opening of the Playhouse. One can visualize the activity of those weeks, every player at work wielding hammer and paint brush under the general supervision of D.L.Quirk, Jr.,

Bertha Goodison and Elinor Strafer, (Associate professor of Fine Arts at the Normal, 1910-1942), were the artists who worked out color schemes and decorative design.

At last Shrove Tuesday, 1916, arrived. True to their promise the Players were ready with a Masque for the first production in their remodeled barn to an audience of invited guests.

The Masque called, PLAYING THE FAVORITES ran the gamut from Shakespere through Sheridan's SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER into the world of opera, 'Carmen' and 'Faust,' then to VANITY FAIR and Barrie's LITTLE MINISTER to an up to the minute movie featuring Mary Pickford. Members of the Players - all thirty-two of them - represented noted actors and actresses.

It was a very auspicious opening for a little theatre. Wide publicity greeted the opening. The Press coverage, which was most generous, included THE DETROIT FREE PRESS, DETROIT MORNING NEWS, DETROIT EVENING NEWS, THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, and THE DETROIT JOURNAL. The YPSILANTI PRESS of March 8, 1916, gave a description with great accuracy of detail.

Last evening the Ypsilanti Players opened 'The Players Playhouse', a tiny theatre in which artistic simplicity and exceedingly ingenious arrangement and utilization of existing material have made probably the most complete and charming 'Little Theatre' west of New York. The Players have leased from the Ladies' Library Association the barn on the Starkweather place, and have fitted it up with amazing results considering the limited space and necessary simplicity into a charming little play house, with excellent lighting and simple and artistic furnishings.

The decorative scheme was the design of Miss Bertha Goodison and Miss Elinor Strafer, and the construction work was under the supervision of D.L.Quirk, Jr. The original rafters and wooden supports of the barn are utilized most effectively, being painted a soft olive with the high lights in Pompeian red. The sidewalls have a daring and effective decoration of Pompeian red and black half squares against a putty colored background, a heraldic device, featuring the cock, in dark blues and greens adorning the shield in the center panel. Over the front of the stage is a variant of the cock device, this time the cock's head in the form of a crest, and beneath on the shield are the initials Y.P., of the organization, the Ypsilanti Players.

The audience room is only 18 by 24 feet, of which the stage takes half, yet so skillfully has the space been apportioned that there is quite an effect of spaciousness, and the room will seat fifty people. Of these however, eighteen are cared for in the little balcony at the back, whose railing is concealed by oriental curtains of bright hues. The quaint iron lanterns suspended from the ceiling are the work of Harry Shaefer, (b. Dundee, Mich 1886, d. Ypsilanti 1968). The curtains are draw curtains, of the putty-colored monks' cloth, with wide vertical stripes of dark olive denim and narrower stripes of Pompeian red brocade and add dignity and effectiveness to the room. The scenery is yet in the making, so far only a set of tall screens, in which a wonderful effect is secured by the use of dark blue cheese cloth over light green cheese-cloth. The curtain bell is a set of silvery chimes. It is expected to add simple 'sets' and permanent costumes for certain parts in the future. There are no footlights, but rows of reflecting border lights above the stage are concealed by green draperies, and there are arrangements regulated by a switchboard and dimmers in the wings for lights at the side as well. The outside of the building is to be decorated similarly to the interior and the name will be painted in artistic lettering. A quaint iron lantern will be over the entrance. The little play house has all the fascination of a doll house and would tempt an anchorite to use it as a plaything. But it is to be the scene of really serious study and portrayal of genuine drama.

The first evidence of conventional organization appears in the minutes of the meeting of the week following the opening of the Playhouse. Then Mr. A. G. Erickson was elected treasurer. A play committee and casting committee for the 1916 season was chosen and dates for five public performances decided upon. The price of the tickets was to be one dollar a performance. Invitations were sent out which reminded the recipient that since "the play house had a seating capacity limited to fifty, an early acceptance was requested." The first commercially printed program bearing the crest of the Players appeared May 16, 1916.

Through the summer of 1916, much expense was incurred. An addition to the Playhouse provided for a stage entrance and storage space, painting had been done, and new dishes purchased. The Players viewed with delight the result of the summer's activity, but found themselves with a total indebtedness of eight hundred dollars.

Undaunted, the group went ahead with plans for their second season in the Playhouse. At the same time, plans to procure Stuart Walker's Portmanteau Theatre for an afternoon and evening performance had materialized. The Ypsilanti Players proudly advertised their coming by announcing that the Stuart Walker group "were coming directly from the Art Museum of Detroit on their way to the Fine Arts Theatre of Chicago, that the University of Michigan had tried to get them in Ann Arbor but were unsuccessful".

Season after season passed with the general public getting only occasional glimpses of the Player's production. Due to public demand, it was finally decided to have a "subscription season" in 1917-1918, tickets three dollars and fifty cents for seven performances one to be given each month, the night after the regular member's performances. Again announcements were sent out and the Players passed another milestone.

The First World War burst upon the world. The Ypsilanti players played their part. Many who had taken active part on our small stage went to take part in that great struggle overseas. Our beloved director went to France to serve in French Red Cross. He had worked tirelessly at home, as had his wife, in all branches of war activity - Red Cross and Liberty Loan Drives knew his directive genius.

And what of the Player's themselves? It took some doing to carry on with their main stay in France. But the play proved again to be the thing, and they carried out the plans for the season according to schedule. During D.L.'s absence, Dr. R. Clyde Ford, Head of the Modern Language Department at the college, was given the responsibility of leadership. Long a member of the Players and a fine actor in his right, he gave uninterrupted continuity to the program. It must have been with a sense of relief tempered with one of satisfaction for a task well done that he welcomed Mr. Quirk back. And it was with a widened horizon,



a renewed vigor, and enthusiasm, that in 1920, Dan again assumed his place as Director.

+++++

This article was written by Eleanor Meston an early and active member of the Ypsilanti Players. Miss Meston was born in Saginaw, Michigan and received both her B.A. and M.A. from Teachers' College of Columbia University, New York City, N.Y. She taught kindergarten at Roosevelt School from 1914 to 1956. She now resides at Gilbert Residence.

THE YPSILANTI PLAYERS  
1920-1957

In the fall of 1920 found the Ypsilanti Players hard at work preparing for the coming season. An attempt was made to keep the reading committee fluid by choosing members of varying tastes and backgrounds. To facilitate the work of those whose responsibility was to choose the plays to be given, Mr. D.L. Quirk, Jr., the director, maintained a drama library. Because of a standing order, Brentano's, New York City, added to that library whenever a dramatic work was published.

The Players were becoming familiar with the big names among playwrights. Many plays were given whose authors had a play currently on Broadway. Often plays in manuscript were given. The spirit of adventure was further shown in programs listing first performances and many players had the satisfaction of seeing their own creative endeavors presented before an audience.

Casting in those years seems not to have been a problem. The Players boast of having a "five system indexed by build, voice, and other characteristics for just about every one in town". Mr. Quirk is credited with having said, "When we needed a Priest in a play, we didn't have some one act one; we got a Priest. After all, he knew the part and had the costume". A player would be informed there was a part for him in the next play - and he took it. Perhaps the director or a member of the casting committee might see someone at a concert, in a restaurant,

or even on the street, who would seem to have possibilities.

THE DETROIT NEWS of Sunday, September 4, 1921, carried a story by Sterling Bowen, (son of Wilber P. Bowen, Head of the Department of Physical Education, Normal, 1894-1928), which gave further insight into the casting methods of the Ypsilanti Players. He tells of a young man who hopped from a passing freight train near the Peninsular Paper Mill one day, asked for and got a temporary job there. Director Quirk, at that time President of the Company, upon hearing the young man speak, said, "For some time we have wanted to put on a play, but we have needed a young mountaineer such as youself. Will you take the part"? Young Kaufman, for such was his name, was either uninterested or else he hesitated to break into a group so completely alien. At any rate, he hopped a freight and was gone as suddenly as he had come. The play was shelved. A year passed, when one day Carl Kaufman re-appeared. A roughly-dressed and stubble-faced young man, he dropped gracefully from the side of a box-car as it rounded the bend of the Michigan Central Railroad beside the paper mill. Again he applied for a job, again he got one, and again Mr. Quirk asked, "Now are you ready to play with us on our stage"? With a grin, he said, "Sure".

So the play, ON VENGEANCE HEIGHT, a story of a mountain feud, was off to a good start with young Kaufman, who had spent his boyhood in the mountains of Tennessee, in the stellar role. He is credited with having been of great help to the cast with its interpretation, dialect, and diction.

That was his only role in the Ypsilanti Players, for he left as he had come.

In the Ypsilanti Players once a star didn't mean always a star. Perhaps this play's lead might have a very menial role in the next play, or even assume the task of stoking the furnace or of cleaning up the grease paint on the make-up shelf. Perhaps he would be needed for make-up artist, to hold the book, or to shift scenes.

At times an un-announced player assumed a role gratuitously. An incident of that nature is recalled by one old-time player. It had to do with Dr. Britton's German Police dog. Always at the heels of his mater or mistress, he was a familiar frequenter of the Playhouse, parked in the foyer or at the stage door. In this particularly realistic play, his master was to experience rough treatment by a thug. When the dog heard his master's cry of terror, he made a very effective entrance --the curtain closed to denote calming of dog and reviving of thug.

The Players were very fortunate to have as a member Mrs. Anne Thompson Hubbell, her husband was a member of Eastern's History Department, who had done Shakespearian roles for several years with the English Company of the Ben Greet Players, to plan and direct the series of Shakespeare's plays presented. Scenes from five plays were given, interspersed with traditional music provided by Anthony J. Whitmire and his violin, Miss Matilda Holmes at the piano, and the voices of Carl Lindegren, Miss Lillian Ashby and Mrs. George

Wortley.

A member of that cast relates, "I shall never forget that Shakespearian program; I was one of the mob in the JULIUS CAESAR episode. We were stationed in the balcony waiting for our cues. We were to rush down the stairs, through the narrow aisle, and up onto the stage. In due time the cue came, we started down the steep little stairway. The first man, with an over-abundance of histrionic zeal, tripped and we all followed suit like so many dominoes. Almost wrecked the show, but our audience took it in its stride".

There were times, when, had it not been for the watchful eye of their director with his business acumen, the players would have been in legal difficulties. Such an incident occurred in the giving of John Drinkwater's BIRD IN HAND.

When Director Quirk returned from abroad, the play had been cast and was in rehearsal. D.L.'s first question had to do with business arrangements. "No, no one had made inquiry as to royalty". Much correspondence brought no response from the agent. Opening night and still no clearance or royalty quotation. A telegram was dispatched and just before curtain time, the following wire was received, "Sorry, BIRD IN HAND not available to amateurs". What to do posed no question - the play must go on - and on it went. Needless to say royalty was determined and paid at a later

date. Much credit for the excellent performance went to Mrs. J. Wiedman, a member of the players, under whose direction the play was staged. A few months later, a short item appeared in the CHICAGO TRIBUNE and caused the Players great elation. "A resident company in Ypsilanti (Mich.) recently gave the American premiere of John Drinkwater's play called A BIRD IN HAND, said to be a success in London".

While the Players enjoyed lighter moments, program notes indicate that they took seriously their opportunity and responsibility to educate their audiences as well as themselves. Contributions made by this civic-minded group to the community included a program given for the Stoic Society of Michigan State Normal College - "proceeds to go toward establishing a permanent scholarship fund."

The Players gave the first radio play in this area. The publicity, dated 1927, reads: "Prize Radio Play on Air - W.S.B.K., (which was located in Ypsilanti at that time). called DANGER. It is the first listening play known and was first broadcast by the London Broadcasting station". The players of that production included G.C. Handy, publisher of the YPSILANTI DAILY PRESS, and Marion Stowe, professor of speech at Eastern Michigan College.

Coping with the increasing pressures on time and energy became at last beyond the ability of the individual players. This was especially true with regard to D.L.Quirk, Jr., upon whom, as director, an increasing number of details of staging and directing had fallen. All of this led to an announcement

made on a printed program which caused, to put it mildly, great consternation. There would be no subscription season the coming year. Only one program was planned. Then came the statement, "Just what will be done after that time is undecided".

Plainly the services of an assistant director was indicated, one who could give his entire time to what had become a public demand. The players' exchequer would not permit such expenditure.

There was immediate re-action on the part of the members of the Community to the Player's announcement. Letters to the editor appeared, telephone calls increased, and the grapevine flourished. One particular letter is typical of audience thinking.

Editor of the Ypsilanti Press:

...There must be some way to keep the Ypsilanti Players active. Does anyone know how? We've been sitting back watching our neighbors entertain us. If there is anything we can do at last, I almost think we'll be found on the spot. But just how?

Another letter writer offered \$100 and contributions came spontaneously from Players and Patrons alike toward the salary of an assistant director. After careful canvassing of the field, Mr. Paul Stevenson was engaged.

He arrived in the fall of 1924. Paul Stevenson had an unusual background for this new position. He had worked and studied with many of the grats of the theatre. He had been a member of Dr. Baker's famous 47 workshop at Harvard; he had played under the direction of Max Reinhardt in Europe. Only

the reputation of the Ypsilanti Players for a high standard of experimentation and creativity interested him in coming to Ypsilanti.

The tenth season began and the community relaxed - they had saved the day.

The children of the Players gave a pantomime based on Stuart Walker's THE SEVEN GIFTS. "The audience," so says a member of that juvenile cast now an active business man, "was prepared to be amused, but instead it was inspired and amazed by the charming artlessness of the children".

Events followed in comparatively rapid succession. A three-act play was attempted and its success led to more of the same type. A study class was formed, "its object will be to make the acquaintance of the modern successful plays."

Paul Stevenson stayed only until greener fields and wider horizons claimed him and eventually the directing of the plays reverted to the members who had grown most adept at that task.

Again an assistant director was hired. He lent his talent to the staging of one of the Players' most outstanding ventures. Many members of those long ago audiences feel the Players had reached the acme of perfection in their dramatic arrangement of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem of the ANCIENT MARINER. "A fantastic illusion for those who abandon themselves to its spell, to feel its movements, to see its sights". A repeat performance was given in the Wuerth Theatre of Ypsilanti under the auspices of the Committee for Student Welfare of the Michigan State Normal College. An invitational program for



the Players of Detroit was given at their Playhouse.

In the same season, we find those versatile players giving a performance of TEN NIGHTS IN A BAR ROOM, "staged in strict adherence to the period and the mood pervading the original piece in the theatre of another generation".

Again the Players found themselves without an assistant director and again the players assumed that task themselves. But the little play house was weary of well-doing. It had reached a stage of decrepitude which was beyond repair. No longer could the much bepatched and leaky roof, nor the crumbling foundation be ignored. It was decided to give all future plays in the auditorium of the St Luke's Church House and to use the old playhouse for storage.

Play after play was given with apparent success under the direction of what might be termed amateurs whom experience had made professional. Such plays as IS ZAT SO by James Gleason and Richard Tabor, directed by Leo Whitmire; HAY FEVER by Noel Coward, also directed by Leo; SATURDAY 'S CHILDREN by Maxwell Anderson, directed by Eleanor Meston and Edith Shaefer.

All of these activities bring us to the sixteenth season, 1930-31, when THE ROMANTIC YOUNG LADY, a COMEDY IN THREE ACTS by G. Martinez Sierra, directed by Leo Whitmire, was given as the "only bill" of that season. Few of the players and none of the audience sensed that they were indeed attending the last performance of the Ypsilanti Players. And so without benefit of requiem the Ypsilanti Players drew the last

curtain. The belongings of the organization were disbursed; the building demolished and the ground on which it stood became a part of Riverside Park in Ypsilanti.

However, a group of Ypsilantians met in the living-room of one of those long ago child players and the Ypsilanti Players experience a rebirth. D.L.Quirk, Jr., was there to share his wisdom which he had garnered through a life time of living with the theatre and to give his blessing. In the last pages of his scrap book are to be found programs of the reactivated group. The first program was I REMEMBER MAMA and was dedicated to the man with vision, Mr. D.L.Quirk, Jr. The insignia of the original group is to be found on the programs of the current group and the unique bill board of old announces the plays of 1957.

+++++

This article THE YPSILANTI PLAYERS was found among the scrapbooks of the Ypsilanti Players which are located in the Archives section of the Ypsilanti Historical Museum - the author is unknown.

Both of these articles have been condensed by the Archives Department of the Ypsilanti Museum. The full articles are in the Archives section. In the Archives section of the Eastern Michigan Library there is another article on the Players: "History of the Ypsilanti Players 1915-1931" by Mr. Raymond Nickels, written in 1969 for his M.A. thesis.

