



Yes, it could be a scene from the Valvoline television commercial, "It's the economy." Edison World War I veterans march in a Memorial Day parade some 60 years ago. Leading the marchers is Rem Hansman, a longtime member of Raritan Engine Company No. 1, who also was the township road supervisor, while carrying the American flag is the late Police Chief Charles P. Grand-Jean Sr. The parade route is along Woodbridge Avenue and the vacant field at the upper right was to become the site of the former Town Hall at the corner of Woodbridge and Plainfield avenues. The white building in the background is the former headquarters of Raritan Engine Company No. 1.

Edison:

Parks



Gothic splendor

A 25-room home, above and left, that was built by Johnson & Johnson heir J. Seward Johnson in 1926 is now occupied by the

Kaplan Organization. The home was later the scene of a sensational murder after its purchase by millionaire Charles Farmer.

TNT staff photo by Robert S. Williams

Mansion creaks with history

Edison Twp. Pub. Library
241 Plainfield Ave.
Edison, N.J. 08817

By KAREN LEE

News Tribune staff writer

HIGHLAND PARK — Once a home to the wealthy and the scene of a sensational murder, the Castle on River Road is now the bustling headquarters of a real estate firm.

There is no sign today of a love that ended in death and insanity. Instead, employees of the Kaplan Organization work in the 25-room mansion, which has been converted to office space.

"It is a building that moves and creeps and cranks, and most of us are here quite late almost every night during the week," said Phyllis Gottfried, executive vice president. "We kid each other all the time about ghosts, but we come and go with complete comfort."

Many employees have mixed feelings about moving out of the building this month. The steadily expanding staff has become too large for the mansion, Ms. Gottfried said.

"There is a certain atmosphere, an ambiance to the property and building that you can't duplicate anywhere," she said. Fireplaces are still used during the winter, she said. Architectural details such as leaded windows and ceiling sculptures are scattered throughout the building. Deer and other animals live on the 17-acre property, she said.

The organization expects to move most of its staff to its new Edison Corporate Center on Woodbridge Avenue on Dec. 29, she said. Kaplan will keep the castle for sales staff, she added.

The Kaplans are the third owners of the building, now simply known as the Castle. Located across from Johnson Park, the house is set 300 feet back from the street. The structure was built in 1926 by J. Seward Johnson of Johnson & Johnson, reportedly at a cost of \$350,000.

The Castle became a setting for murder when it was purchased in 1947 by Charles Farmer, a suc-

cessful industrial engineer.

His wife, Barbara, moved out of the mansion in 1963. On Sept. 18 of that year, the 61-year-old engineer shot his wife to death before turning the gun on himself.

Farmer recovered from the self-inflicted wound, but saying he could not bear the "bad memories" connected with the home, he sold the building several years later to the Kaplan family.

The businessman never served any time in jail for the crime. He spent 12 months in the criminal wing of the New Jersey State Hospital before he was declared competent to stand trial. The case finally came to trial in 1967. The state's case was presented by J. Norris Harding, then

a Middlesex County assistant prosecutor who now is a Superior Court judge in New Brunswick.

The trial was sensational. Eight psychiatrists, including several hired by the prosecution, testified that the defendant was insane at the time of the shooting.

Farmer took the stand in his own defense but said he could not recall the events of that day. He admitted that his wife's alleged relationship with noted sculptor Waylande Gregory "had been eating at me day in and day out."

Trouble apparently surfaced in the marriage about a year before the shooting. That was when Mrs. Farmer, a devotee of the arts, convinced her husband to invest \$200,000 in construction of an arts

center in rural Middlefield, Mass. Gregory was to be the lifelong resident director of the center.

According to testimony at the trial, Mrs. Farmer went to the mansion to collect some of her belongings on the day of the murder. She was accompanied by her lawyer, Douglas Hague. Hague, a partner now with Wilentz Goldman and Spitzer in Woodbridge, was an associate with the firm at that time. Hague accompanied Mrs. Farmer to the castle under an agreement worked out between lawyers for the couple.

During the trial, Hague testified that Mrs. Farmer was taking clothes out of her closet in a second floor bedroom and dropped something. When the attorney bent over to pick up the object, Farmer fired three shots, he said.

As Hague watched, Farmer turned the gun on himself and fired one shot into his chest. When the lawyer ran downstairs to call police, Farmer fired a fifth shot at his wife, apparently as she tried to crawl into the closet.

Farmer's only words to his wife were "This can't go on," Hague testified. Her last words were "That damn fool, that crazy fool."

Recalling the murder today, Hague said he originally thought Farmer was shooting blanks and was being melodramatic.

"The whole thing was very low key," Hague said. "There was no expression of pain on her face and none on his face either."

Determining that "no jury of reasonable men could find other than that this defendant was insane when he shot his wife," County Court Judge John B. Molineux took the case away from the jury and dismissed the indictment against the defendant. Farmer walked out of the courthouse a free man on Oct. 16, 1967.

He died in 1975 at age 72.

Gregory sculpture decaying in park

By KAREN LEE

News Tribune staff writer

EDISON — Nature and vandals have had their way with a huge fountain located near the Plays in the Park theater in Roosevelt Park.

Time has rusted the pipes that once pumped water into the fountain, and vandals have chipped and broken the concrete statues.

The sculptor, Waylande Gregory, died a bitter recluse after a 1963 murder in Highland Park changed his life.

Residents who use the park are oblivious to the fountain as a major work of the noted ceramic sculptor, who was hailed throughout the country as one of the most talented artists of the era.

A child wonder, the sculptor was known as "Kid Gregory" in his younger days. When he was in his 30s, he created a huge sculpture titled the "Fountain of Atom," which was displayed at the 1939 world's fair in New York City.

Gregory and a staff of 10 assisting sculptors created the Roosevelt Park monument at his Metuchen studio in the 1930s. Titled "Light Dispelling Darkness," the fountain's central shaft is of cast concrete and measures 12 feet high. Science, agriculture and industry are depicted on the centerpiece, surrounded by figures representing war, pestilence famine, death, greed and materialism.

The fountain is in terrible condition, said David Campion, superintendent of Middlesex County Parks. Getting it in working order and restoring the damage would probably cost more than \$100,000, he said.

A handful of residents periodically express interest in restoring the fountain, but the movement always dies, said Ralph Albanir, assistant superintendent of parks.

As little as eight years before he died in 1971 at age 65, Gregory was at the zenith of his career. But a 1963 Highland Park slaying

embroiled him in a criminal trial and a series of civil suits that left him disillusioned.

In 1963, Charles Farmer shot his wife to death, believing she and Gregory were lovers. Gregory spent the rest of his life consumed in exhaustive, costly legal battles with the Farmer family. These left him disillusioned and nearly penniless, according to newspaper accounts.

Following the murder, Gregory sued Farmer, claiming Farmer owed him \$200,000 for wages and commissions for art work already done. Farmer countersued, charging that the sculptor had duped the Farmers into investing in a project actually intended as a facility for the study of the occult.

After years of litigation, a Superior Court judge awarded the artist \$15,500. Farmer lost his countersuit.

Gregory died a recluse in a Warrentonville studio crammed with his works. His widow outlived him by 10 years. Refusing to show or lend his works, she was plagued by vandalism and thefts. Newspapers reported that two one-tone sculptures on the property were decapitated, and the heads stolen.



Neglected

TNT photo by James Shive

A huge fountain in Roosevelt Park stands vandalized and unworking. It was constructed by noted sculptor Waylande Gregory, a principal in the alleged love triangle that led to murder in neighboring Highland Park.

Edison:
Parks

1973 — The cast of "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown."



1981 — The cast of "Funny Girl," on stage.

EDISON TWSP. FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

20-year-old company had modest start

By ANN LEDESMA
Home News entertainment writer

EDISON — Twenty years ago, when a structure that doubled as a theater and storage shed was put up in a sloping grove in Roosevelt Park, no one foresaw that it would grow and grow and grow.

But it did, and today it is Plays-in-the-Park, and no one's summer in this area is complete without it.

Today there is a new and modern amphitheater, large commodious dressing rooms, an indoor stage for year-round productions, offices and workshops. And each year hundreds of thousands flock to it for top-caliber musical entertainment, all of it free.

Sponsored by the Middlesex County Parks Department and the Board of Chosen Freeholders, the theater celebrates its 20th anniversary this year with three big productions: "The Merry Widow" June 30, July 1-3, 5-7 and 8-10; "A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum" July 21-24; 26-31; and "West Side Story" Aug. 11-14 and 16-21.

But the debut season offered no musicals at all. Plays-in-the-Park began modestly when two people active in community theater, Vivian Paszaman and Chic Moskowitz, sought a "barn" where they could stage a few summer

productions. Jerry Halprin, a public relations man who had worked with the freeholders, approached the board for county funding for summer community entertainment.

The freeholders liked the idea and already had the funds to construct a building to store park equipment, so they decided to build a structure which would do summer duty as a theater and serve as a storage shed in the winter. In the summer of 1963, "Plays-in-the-Park" made its debut with a season of American plays.

In 1972, Ernest Albrecht, the current producing director, became associated with the theater, and it was his idea to present the all-musical format which still prevails. Since his arrival, audience attendance has swelled from 12,000 per summer to more than 180,000.

"We have a nice, loyal audience," Albrecht remarks. "They're really devoted. But there is a special atmosphere here — everyone remarks on that."

Naturally there is a feeling of a gala season this year. Albrecht is enthused over the use of the Garden State Symphonic Pops Orchestra to accompany "The Merry Widow."

"And we are spending more," he says frankly. "And the costumes and scenery will be more beautiful than ever."

All this grew literally out of ashes. In 1975 a fire destroyed the theater, which had already grown considerably from the first storage shed. But the season continued in the best of show business traditions. The remaining shows were held on a mobile trailer stage. By 1976 a plywood stage had been set up, in 1977 the season went indoors at Middlesex County College, and by 1978 the new theater was completed, along with refreshment concessions. The "My Fair Lady" overture, opening the first show in the brand new site, sounded more jubilant than ever.

Phyllis Elfenbein, long associated with the theater in every capacity from manager to director, and now resigned, recalls the early days. "There were three of us in the tech crew, myself, Cornelius Cadmus the master carpenter and Charles Peterson, who is still there. The directors would tell us roughly what they wanted and we built everything from sketches. Corny did some amazing things. For 'Mr. Roberts,' for instance, the action takes place aboard ship. He built a regular poopdeck up on the roof of the theater."

With any kind of outdoor theater, anything can happen, and Plays-in-the-Park has had its share. Once during "Plain And Fancy," a baby crawled up the stairs to the stage and toddled up to the two actors who were in-

involved in a scene. Nonplussed, one of the men picked her up and talked to her as though it had been in the script, then put her down and sent her toddling back to her waiting mama.

Another time, in "Carousel," a very light rain began falling. "The audience was adamant that the show continue," Mrs. Elfenbein says. "So Ernie and I and a couple of other backstage workers went out into the orchestra pit and held umbrellas over the string section's instruments to keep them dry and in tune."

Plays-in-the-Park has served as a springboard for area talent as well. Among the working actors who have appeared on the park stage are Robert Hegyes (Epstein in television's "Welcome Back Kotter"), Art Neill, now on the national tour of "The Pirates of Penzance," Liz Bruzesse of the New York productions of "Godspell" and "The Fantasticks" and Peter Lowey of the production staff of the Broadway shows "Barnum" and "42nd Street."

Plays-in-the-Park now draws attendance from all over. Albrecht tells of a woman from Brooklyn, who is a regular in the audience. "But she says she's not telling any of her friends back in New York. She says too many would come, the traffic would be impossible, and no one would find seating space."



NEW STAGE — The Plays-in-the-Park's plywood stage, which was erected after a fire destroyed the previous one in 1975. At right is Phyllis Elfenbein, who formerly wore several theater company hats.



Messages of Edison's monuments deserve attention

By David C. Sheehan

EDISON — They stand in almost every neighborhood in the township as something more than silent sentinels to the past. They chronicle its history and serve as memorials to the ideas, ideals, events and heroes that made Edison the community it is today. They are the township's monuments and memorials.

These granite and marble obelisks, stones and sculptures are located throughout the township, and yet short of an occasional glance from a passing motorist or brief perusal by a jogger, they generally go unnoticed.

They serve us today by providing a glimpse into what those who have lived in Edison before us deemed "important" enough to devote their energy and money to preserve in perpetuity.

Some of the monuments are memorials to those who served and/or died in military service to the United States. Others record the death of members of service organizations. Others, still, mark the site of an event, such as a tree planting. Not all are granite or stone. Some are truly living monuments and memorials. All are worth investigating, and all deserve our attention to their messages.

One of the most complex and visually arresting monuments in town is located in a meadow in Roosevelt Park within walking distance of the Plays-in-the-Park Theater. Light Dispelling Darkness was produced in honor of Thomas Alva Edison.

It is a massive and colorful 20-foot-high fountain/monument created by artist Waylande Gregory. Gregory resided in New Jersey for most of his life and worked for a time on a farm in the Metuchen area, producing such oversized outdoor ceramic pieces.

This creation is surrounded by an approximately 45-foot diameter concrete pool — but no water now is retained in the pool. Rising from the center of the circular pool is a large, four-sided bas-relief depicting men and women at study and industry. It is topped by a large, color ceramic globe.

Six gargoyles, multicolored figures sit atop the six buttresses which run from the perimeter of the circle to the base of the sculpture.

One of the more telling monuments in Edison is located in the Bonhamtown-Nixon Memorial Park. It is found in the triangular area formed by the intersection of Woodbridge Avenue, Old Post Road and Grace Street.

The gray granite monument reads: "In grateful tribute to the men and women of this community who have served in World War II." It was "erected by the citizens of Bonhamtown and Nixon" and sponsored by the Bonhamtown A.A.

Most striking to the observer of the handsome memorial, however, is its list of names of those who served. Not only is the number of names inscribed thereon impressive, but even more so is the number of family members listed.



—Photo by Thomas R. DeCaro

Light Dispelling Darkness stands in Edison's Roosevelt Park as a tribute to Thomas Alva Edison.

Thirty-nine family names appear more than once: six Petercsaks are listed, four Yelencsicses, five Christiansens, four Bors and four Disarios. Many others appear two, three and four times.

Clearly, Edison's families made great contributions and sacrifices in the war effort, and whether a family's name appears once or six times, this memorial is a potent reminder to all of us who pause there and reflect.

At the triangle formed by the intersection of Woodbridge Avenue and Edgemoor Street in the Clara Barton section, there is a 10-foot high gray granite obelisk surrounded by a small grassy area and evergreen shrubbery. At the rear is an illuminated flagpole.

The monument's engraving reads: "In honored memory of all deceased members of the Clara Barton Post No. 324 American Legion and of the Raritan Engine Company No. 2. Dedicated 1960." Small American flags in holders marked World War II, Korea, World War I and Vietnam adorn the base of the monument.

Two other monuments are located within Roosevelt Park, directly on U.S. Route 1 South, near Grandview Avenue.

Approximately 20 feet high, the first, a stone and mortar monument, has four sides. On the side facing Route 1, there is a white ceramic plaque inscribed: "1933 — Dedicated to the men of Middlesex County who donated their labor to develop this park in exchange for the benefits of relief received — Emergency Relief Administration of Middlesex County, Lewis Compton, Director." There are blue ceramic American eagles in bas-relief on each of the four sides as well as two now-inoperative water fountains.

Closer to the bustling Route 1 traffic is a smaller marker which marks the site and occasion of a tree planting. This simple 4-by-4-foot granite marker reads: "Tree planting in memory of the 70th birthday of the late Madame Marie Sklodowska Curie, co-discoverer of radium. Governor A. Harry Moore of New Jersey proclaimed April 24, 1938, as 'Madame Curie Day.' She belonged to Poland by her birth, to France by her marriage and to the United States and the entire world because of her scientific discovery."

Nearby is the New Jersey Memorial Home for Disabled Soldiers. As the name implies, the entire facility serves as a memorial. Close to the home's administration building on Memorial Drive is the center's flagpole. It is flanked by a concrete pad on which an M-114 Armored Reconnaissance Vehicle (No. 32-4769) sits.

A bronze plaque placed at the

base of the olive-drab colored vehicle reads: "108th Tactical Fighter Wing, N.J. Air National Guard and N.J. Veterans Memorial Home 'Working Together.' Governor Thomas H. Kean, commander-in-chief. Dedicated 28 October 1985."

Eighteen members of the Edison First Aid and Rescue Squad No. 1 are remembered on a 4-foot-tall black granite rectangle monument "dedicated to deceased and charter members." Squad members place a wreath at the monument every Memorial Day.

The triangularly shaped intersection of Grove, Freeman and Cutter avenues is the setting of a 10-foot-wide, 6-foot-high black and gray granite monument "dedicated to the glory of God and the memory of these brave young men who died so that we may live in peace; their names are inscribed so that all men may read and remember for generations to come."

Listed between the maps of

Korea and Vietnam and etched in the face of the stone are the names of the 13 residents killed in Vietnam and the three killed in Korea. Five marble benches face the stone and are inscribed with the names of American Legion Post 479, American Legion Post 435, VFW Post 9626, VFW Post 3117 and American Legion Post 324.

The Edison Memorial Tower at Tower Road and Christie Street not only boasts that it marks the exact spot where the "Wizard of Menlo Park" invented the incandescent lamp, but that it is one of the few monuments extant to be included in the National Register of Historic Places.

On the grounds surrounding the North Edison Branch Library can be found a 6-foot-high, 12-foot-wide gray granite monument. At the center is a bas-relief of a firefighter dressed in full turnout gear. To his left the inscription reads: "Dedicated to the exempt firemen of Edison Township, formerly Raritan Township — Association founded May 18, 1924." To the right: "Raritan Engine Company No. 1; Raritan Engine Company No. 2; Edison Volunteer Fire Company No. 1; HK Volunteer Fire Company No. 1; Oak Tree Volunteer Fire Company - 1924-1960."

The township's municipal complex is home to several monuments.

Located appropriately at Memorial Circle on Municipal Boulevard is a large, striking granite structure "dedicated to the men and women of Edison Township, formerly Raritan Township, who served in the Armed Forces of the United States during World War I, 1917-1918; World War II, 1941-1945; Korean Conflict, 1950-1953."

Forty-eight names are memorialized below that inscription. Many are repeated in the names of streets in Edison, including Conover, Carmello, Estok, Fargo, Magee, McGuinness, Merker, Monaghan, Moryan, Price, Rodak, Suliman and Wilk. A small bronze plaque on the obverse of the monument states: "Enshrined herein are the names of all those who served."

The township's newest monument was erected in 1990 in front of the municipal building. Approximately 15 feet wide and 15 feet high, it is topped by a fire apparatus' bell. Below, the inscription reads: "Dedicated to the officers and firefighters of the Edison Uniformed Fire Department who have served the residents of our community with valor, honor and integrity." In the center is a Maltese Cross and the initials, E.F.D. Directly below the cross, it reads: "Died in the line of duty John Lindquist Sr., captain."

The last entries on the monument are the names of eight officers and seven firefighters who have died.

To the left of this monument is the PBA Police Memorial, a 12-foot-high granite obelisk adorned with the PBA shield and inscribed: "Why, God ... After they have helped so many — With dignity, pride and honor, we the living members of PBA Local 75 dedicate this memorial to our departed brothers — They shall not be forgotten."

A stone newly placed at the base of the monument reads: "In memory of Anthony M. Yelencsics — August 19, 1920-April 25, 1969 — Mayor and Director of Public Safety, Edison Township — 24 years of dedicated service."

The municipal complex overlooks a handsome township park and its lake, Lake Papaanni. The body of water is named for an Edison Township police officer killed in the line of duty. It serves as a handsome tribute to Officer Frank Papaanni's sacrifice. A simple granite stone near the lake reads: "Dedicated October 23, 1983, in memory of Frank J. Papaanni Jr., member of Edison PBA 75, who gave his life in the line of duty, September 16, 1971."

Interesting, informative, artistic, moving — these monuments and memorials all convey their messages to all of us, but especially to those who pause and take the time to remember.

David C. Sheehan is president and co-founder of the Edison Township Historical Society. This is one in a series of articles by society members on the history of the area.

Edison awaits grant for park

EDISON — Approval for the first phase of development of the Bicentennial Park, on Central Avenue, is expected in the form of a Green Acres grant of \$899,481 next month.

John Delesandro, business administrator, told the Township Council at last night's caucus, state officials requested the \$1.3 million grant be authorized in stages.

Delesandro said the first stage would cover the cost of roads through the six-acre park, two ballfields, playground equipment, a pond and underground utilities.

The News Tribune April 27, 1976

Edison -
Parks

Edison:
Parks

ASK AT DESK

The Home News, Tuesday, January 27, 1976

Edison park may be started soon

EDISON — Development of the township's 65-acre Central Avenue Park could begin later this year, according to Mayor Thomas Paterniti, if the state approves a \$1.3-million application Green Acres funds being submitted this week.

The grant would pay for half the cost of developing the park, located along the Penn Central Railroad tracks between Plainfield and Talmadge avenues.

Business Administrator John Delesandro said the township has a good chance of receiving the state grant, and said approval could come within two months.

Paterniti said the park would take three years to fully develop, and would include three baseball diamonds, softball fields, soccer and football fields, a man-made lake that would serve recreational needs and would double as a retaining pond for drainage in the area.

Paterniti said some of the recreational facilities could be constructed this year if and when the state grant is approved.

Most of the land for the park — part of old Camp Kilmer — was deeded to the township in 1971 under the federal government's "Legacy of Parks" program. Mrs. Julie Nixon Eisenhower, younger daughter of then-President Nixon, came to Edison for ceremonies marking the event.

The value of the 59-acre tract turned over by the federal government was estimated in 1971 to value \$1 million. The park was expected to cost \$463,000 to develop at that time — about one-fourth of the latest development estimate.

Edison: Parks Pt. 1

OUTDOORS: Plays-in-the-Park earns reputation as the best 'outside' of N.Y.

HN 8/9/87

Continued from Page 11

Seeman said grants from the trust, which continue to this day, helped pay for the orchestras any musical stage production needs.

According to Seeman, the series really took off after Albrecht, who is The Home News theater critic, became producing director in 1971.

"It seemed to me," Albrecht said, "that the outdoor theater needed to be big. I love the musical theater and that's the way we went. I love the bigness and the splashiness of it."

"Ernie is a very talented man," Seeman said. "Between us we chose the plays that would really catch on. 'Fiddler on the Roof' was the first big show. It drew 5,000 a night in 1972."

The change to a program of musicals entirely corresponded to increasing popularity for musicals on Broadway, Elfenbein said. "The numbers went with musicals. Numbers are the name of any game of this sort."

But in 1975, just as the theater was really rolling, there came the moment everyone involved with it agrees was the lowpoint of its history.

The theater burned to the ground. Arson was suspected.

"It's a very strange experience," Albrecht said, "to sit there at 8 o'clock in the morning and watch your theater burn down in broad daylight and wonder what is going to happen."

What happened, though, was swift assurance that the theater had found a place in its community.

"The next couple of years were a struggle of making-do and getting ready," Albrecht said. "But building the new theater and getting into it was a big event."

The freeholders pledged continuing support.

And Friends of Plays-in-the-Park were formed to help the rebuilding effort. They would prove to be an enduring resource.

The 1976 season was played on a platform stage in the park. For 1977, Plays-in-the-Park went indoors at Middlesex County Community College.

And by 1978, it was back, better than ever.

Its new theater was all theater, three times the size of the old and no toolshed to it at all.

It cost \$700,000, including furnishings, with \$247,500 contributed by the federal government through a Green Acres grant. The building itself cost \$595,000.

"We have full shop facilities," Elfenbein said, "costume and prop shops, two comfortable dressing rooms, a production office and a full basement for storage with galleries for stage costumes and

props."

Seeman noted that the Friends' private donations allowed the theater to supplement the low-bid operations that must characterize county contributions.

"Go for the low bid on costumes and you end up with cheesecloth," he said.

The Friends' continuing support, Albrecht said, has meant "having more money available to reduce the number of compromises."

Of the unique cooperation between county government and the art of the musical, Albrecht said, "This kind of cooperation is commonplace in Europe. It has made things a whole lot easier. I never had to say, 'what am I doing that is going to affect the box office?'"

The musicals may be popular but they would never have happened without government support.

"They may be crowd-pleasers but they would not have made

money," Albrecht added. scouting locations for a new theater.

Putting their heads together produced the idea of putting on plays in the park.

Meanwhile, Elfenbein said, the county was planning to build a new storage shed in the park. Then-freeholder Thomas H. Lee hit on the idea of extending the front of the shed to make a stage, Elfenbein said. It would be lawnmowers in the back, thespians up front.

The makeshift arrangement was jazzed up with one piece of fancy stage equipment, a revolving stage, cobbled up by the Parks Department staff. Powered by two 1 h.p. motors, the turntable took a full minute to make one revolution — an eternity in on-stage time, Albrecht noted. But it gave productions some extra pizzazz, Elfenbein said.

The group got rolling in 1962. They were putting on plays in the park but they were not, at this point, "Plays-in-the-Park." They were the Players Roundtable, named in part after their snazzy piece of theater technology.

The group debuted in 1962 with a season of four plays, all American, none musicals — "Bell for Adano," "Mr. Roberts," "You Can't Take It with You" and "Abe Lincoln in Illinois."

The group scrounged costumes. County sponsorship came more out of the Parks Department nail barrel, spare lumber and labor time.

But by the early '70s, the series, now known as Plays-in-the-Park, became a line item in the county budget.

The first musical was "Damn Yankees" in 1965, Elfenbein said. By 1972, three of four productions were musical. And 1973 marked the first season of all musicals.

One crucial influence that made the musicals possible was the participation of William Seeman as parks secretary. Before going to work for the county, Seeman, who retired last year after 15 years in the position, played in the orchestras of Gene Krupa and Louis Prima. He also had been president of the state musicians union.

Edison: Parks Plays-in-the-Park celebrates 25 years of outdoor theater

By PETER PARISI
Home News staff writer

EDISON — Politicians don't often leave taxpayers smiling and humming a tune.

But the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders has been doing it for 25 years this summer with Plays-in-the-Park.

The summer series of county-sponsored, free musicals appears to be unique nationwide.

As many as 100,000 people a summer and 4,000 people a night tote their lawnchairs and picnic baskets to the Roosevelt Park Amphitheater, just off Route 1.

There, for the price of a hot dog and a gallon of gas, they see fully mounted productions of "Guys and Dolls," "The Pirates of Penzance," "The Most Happy Fella," "Camelot" and other classics.

In a typical season, three shows get 10 performances apiece by professional orchestras and casts of enthusiastic amateurs with occasional Actors Equity players.

That is, when it doesn't rain. Theater under the stars sometimes means theater under the clouds.

This year the season opening performance of "Camelot" was rained out on June 22. And the opening of "Follies" Wednesday was also postponed by rain.

Freeholder Steven J. Capestro, whose involvement with the county program began in 1969, has met county officials from all over the U.S. Some counties sponsor occasional cultural activities. "But I don't think anyone does a series of plays with elaborate staging and costumes," he said.

"Many people who could not afford to go to New York get to see top-notch performances," Capestro said.

A total of more than \$300,000 goes into Plays-in-the-Park, according to Joseph Helmi, county secretary of parks. The county budgeted \$293,000, including salaries, last year. The Friends of Plays-in-the-Park, a private organization, contributed about \$18,000 and the Musicians Performance Trust Fund contributed about \$16,000 for orchestra expenses, Helmi said.

To celebrate a quarter-century of bringing theater to the people, the Freeholders and county Parks Department, which also sponsors the plays, are holding an Arts-in-the-Park festival, this weekend, which continues today starting at 11 a.m. The two days of performances and arts demonstrations was highlighted last night by a free performance of Stephen Sondheim's "Follies." Today the Garden State Symphonic Pops Orchestra gives a free concert at 5 p.m.

The future may bring indoor performances that extend the summer season, said Freeholder and current Chairman of Parks and Recreation Thomas Cross. Cross said the State Theater, cur-

rently being renovated as part of the developing New Brunswick Cultural Center could host fall performances.

"We hope we're going to work together," Cross said. It is expected to take two or three years before the State can host theatrical productions.

"If they open, we could put on a show a year, possibly even two, and probably in the fall," Cross said.

In years past, fall productions have been mounted in various facilities, including the county's Burr D. Coe vocational school in East Brunswick.

Many local performers have moved through Plays-in-the-Park to success in professional theater.

Jerry Levine of Highland Park is perhaps the most famous. He has appeared in three feature films, including "Teen Wolf," and in a recently suspended TV series called "The Bronx Zoo."

Robert Hedges did technical work and now has a role in the TV series "Cagney and Lacey" said Phyllis Elfenbein, production director of Plays-in-the-Park. He had been one of the "swatbs" in Gabe Kaplan's popular 70s television series, "Welcome Back Kotter."

Art Neill went into a professional production of the "Pirates of Penzance," Brenda Lipik in "42nd Street" and Cady Cozis in a new production of "Cabaret" with Joel Gray, Elfenbein said.

Magician David Copperfield also did a stint backstage at Plays-in-the-Park, recalled Ernest Albrecht, who was the series' producing director for 15 years through last season.

Plays-in-the-Park was born from a meeting between two publicists and two theater people in a diner, Elfenbein recalled. And the meeting ultimately produced a toolshed that sprouted a stage.

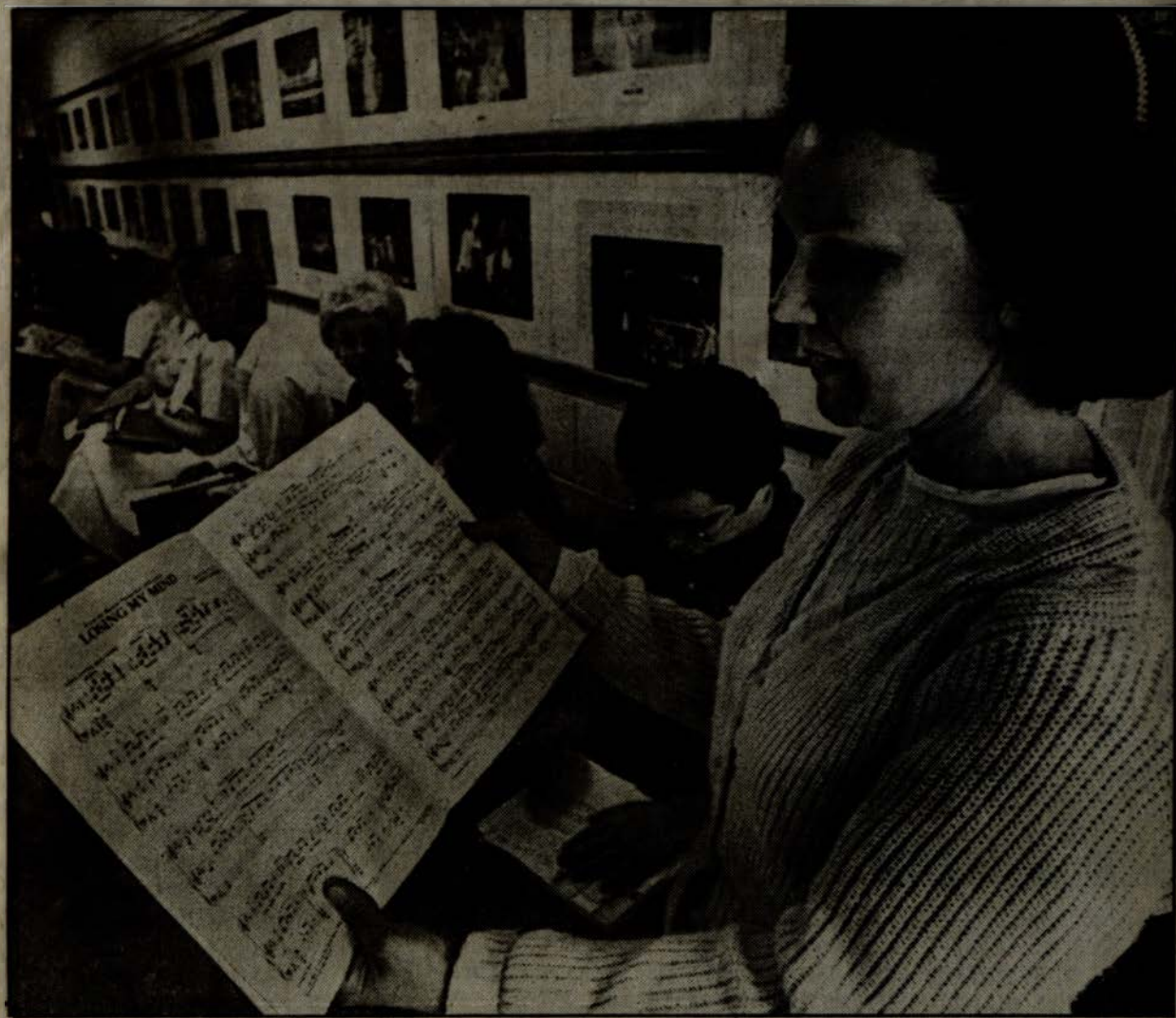
Jerry Halprin and Reggie Schein were the public relations people, assigned by the county Parks Department to publicize a tennis tournament and other park activities.

Chick Moskowitz and Vivian Paszament were theater people

See OUTDOORS, Page 15

Entertainment

Plays-in-the-Park 25 years old



TNT photo by Mike Sypniewski

Auditioning line

Christine Huhmann, of Woodbridge, waits for her turn during auditions for this summer's

Plays-in-the-Park series in Roosevelt Park, Edison.

Perspective

Community concerts out of North Jersey

By ALBERT H. COHEN
Special to The News Tribune

A small article in this paper two weeks ago said: "The Plainfield Community Concert Association gave its last concert... ending what had been a community tradition for 46 years."

The article went on to note that declining membership in the concert association was the chief reason for the action.

Perhaps most significant was an observation that there were six community concert associations in the area at one time — in Woodbridge, Somerville, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Summit, Westfield and Plainfield. Now, all the groups have been disbanded.

So for North Jersey music lovers, the concept is history. Why? For an answer, first let's look at what these concert associations were and how they arose.

By the late 1920s, most cities of 25,000 or more had regular concert programs throughout the year, drawing the most famous names of the day to their halls.

With the advent of the Depression in the '30s, many local impresarios were unable to pay their bills. So a new concept was created by Columbia Artist's Management.

The genius of Community Concerts was to sell season subscriptions in advance, without any guarantee of how many artists would perform or who they would be. Then, CAMI would deliver a concert series based on the amount of money collected.

Incidentally, it provided more than just a performer; it also delivered printed programs — complete with notes — as well as publicity materials.

During the 50-plus years Community Concerts has functioned, its sphere of operation has expanded to encompass very small towns and some sizeable cities.

An interesting aspect of the program is that in the post-war years of the '50s and '60s, before the fees paid to the big names of the classical business exploded to unmanageable size (Andre Watts, for example, now gets \$20,000 for a piano recital), even middle-sized cities could expect to see the biggest stars in the CAMI stable.

Some of the artists who regularly toured the byways of America under the program were Rudolf Serkin, Lily Pons, Zino Francescatti, duo-pianists Vronsky and Babbitt, Ruggiero Ricci, Arthur Rubinstein, Claudio Arrau, Robert Casadesu, Gladys Swarthout and Sir Thomas Beecham. More recently, mezzo Fredericka von Stade performed in Sarasota, Fla.

When funds were more sparse, the performers would be talented young artists who had been signed by CAMI expressly for the series. For them, it was a chance to perform and have more "pay days."

But there was a problem. It didn't matter if one of the unknowns was mildly received or got a rave reaction; he would not return in future seasons.

The system has exacerbated a problem that has been developing in the classical music business: There are increasingly fewer performers who can be counted on to draw large audiences, which have become more selective about the recitalists they will go see.

So how does a talented young CAMI performer develop a following when he isn't allowed to return? And why does one need to buy a "pig in a poke" when so many pre-scheduled concert series are available throughout this area, where one can choose and decide who to hear and how often to go?

Yet, it was through this promotion concept that many young artists managed to make some sort of living in the field and hone their skills before live audiences. The demise of the concept in this area, which is mirrored elsewhere, only serves to further concentrate the remaining performing opportunities among that seemingly ever-narrowing group of big names.

Only a precious few can enter that group these days. Either they make a big splash by winning a major competition or get "adopted" by someone such as Isaac Stern, who these days wields the power to augment careers to the same immense degree as Arthur Judson — founder of CAMI — did 50 years ago.

Even competition winners don't always make it. Eugene Fodor won a Silver Medal at the Tchaikovsky and was — for a period — a media darling. Yet his career has foundered upon a flurry of bad reviews.

What it all seems to sum up to is that the business side of classical music doesn't seem to be helping to replenish the supply of artists needed to create the recitalists and soloists of the future.

And the waning of the community concerts concept is still another confirmation that opportunities for classical music careers are shrinking.

Disparity keys Berlin recordings

By ALBERT H. COHEN
Special to The News Tribune

A few years back, CBS Records scored a coup of sorts by getting the vaunted Berlin Philharmonic for their label. Reviewed here are two performances by that super ensemble, under the baton of Daniel Barenboim.

What is so unusual about these recordings is the tremendous interpretational disparity that exists between the two performances.

SCHUBERT: SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN C MAJOR, D. 944. CBS Masterworks No. M-42316, digital; **BERLIOZ: "SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE."** CBS Masterworks No. IM-39589.

The great Schubert score is treated to slow Barenboim tempos, exaggerated to the extent that the performance takes more than 63 minutes! The first movement plods along from a lackluster opening and never develops momentum.

The third and fourth movements are both markedly allegro vivace. Despite their widely varying character — the third is really an Austrian Laendler, the fourth a furious finale in sonata form — each must move at the same tempo. Barenboim retards the former, then accelerates the latter, distorting the pair.

For some reason, even CBS engineers fail in transmitting the orchestra adequately. There is a lack of

See BERLIN, Page E-8.

By PEGGY O'CROWLEY
Living Section staff writer

EDISON — Costumes hang limply in the empty dressing rooms, and a damp chill permeates the enclosed stage.

In the spring, the theater in Roosevelt Park has the forlorn look of a shore resort in the off-season.

Come summer, the stage door will roll open, and thousands will set up their lawn chairs in front of the open-air theater to witness the opening of Plays-in-the-Park.

The ritual will mark its silver anniversary in June with a production of the Lerner and Lowe musical "Camelot" — the kind of American musical theater that has become Plays-in-the-Park's forte.

It's a trademark that has a lot of name recognition. The free summer shows, funded by Middlesex County under its Parks Department, attract an audience of 100,000 per season.

"We've come to develop a complete cross-section of people, from those who have never seen a play before to those who go into New York frequently for theater," said Producing Director Ernest Albrecht, who is celebrating his 15th year with the organization.

Success came with time

Like any tried and true product, however, Plays-in-the-Park went through a lot of development and a few setbacks before hitting its stride.

The theater started out as the brainchild of two Middlesex County public relations people, Jerry Halpern and Reggie Shein. They arranged with Chick Moscovitz, who was involved with local amateur productions, to present plays in Roosevelt Park.

Production Manager Phyllis Elfenbein, who had just moved to Metuchen from Manhattan, where she had been involved with The American Theater Wing, remembered the early days.

"It was a small platform with a revolving stage. They did four American plays the first season," she said. The plays were "A Bell for Adano," by John Hersey; "You Can't Take It With You," by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart; "Mr. Roberts," by Joshua Logan; and

"Abe Lincoln in Illinois," by Robert Sherwood.

It was an auspicious start. But about 10 years later, lack of funding and enthusiasm almost tolled a death knell for the theater.

Enter Albrecht, a drama teacher and theater reviewer for a local newspaper, took over as producing director in 1972. He persuaded Ms. Elfenbein, then teaching drama at John F. Kennedy High School, Iselin, to return to the park as managing producer.

"There were only eight performances with an audience of 20,000 that year," Albrecht recalled. "I recognized all I could do was keep it from totally falling apart."

All-musical policy instituted

Albrecht decided to institute the all-musical policy that has since continued. "An outdoor theater lends itself to something big. Intimacy won't work in that setting. It was either Shakespeare or musicals, and someone was already doing Shakespeare in Woodbridge."

The 1973 season inaugurated that policy with "The Me Nobody Knows," an interracial musical that spoke to the times. It foreshadowed what became the theater's policy of presenting three musicals of varying appeal per season.

"We look for a balance. We do a blockbuster, like 'My Fair Lady' or 'Oklahoma'; a show that is challenging to us artistically, like 'Sweeney Todd' or 'Evita'; and then something that isn't performed too often, like 'The Boys from Syracuse.'"

The 1987 schedule reflects that mix: "Camelot," the Lerner and Lowe blockbuster; the challenging "Follies," by Stephen Sondheim; and "The Boys from Syracuse," by Rodgers and Hart.

Three shows a year for 15 years mean a lot of musicals. "We've already run through the Rodgers and Hammerstein catalogue," Albrecht said. "We do bring things back, especially if it's a successful production."

Spending weeks rehearsing a show intensively is like having relatives stay for an extended visit: You love them, but you're very happy to see them leave.

"The thought of doing 'Annie' again sort of curdles my blood," Ms. Elfenbein laughed.

Shows Albrecht said he would like to do in the future include "42nd Street," "Big River," "Me and My Girl," "Cats" and "Les Miserables," all now playing on Broadway.

While the audience is a factor, Albrecht and Ms. Elfenbein don't choose shows just for their box office appeal.

"Our obligation as artists is challenge. By now, however, the audience has told us we're doing what they like," Albrecht said.

'75 fire destroyed theater

The theater itself was not without drama. A fire in 1975 — set by teenagers in a nearby dumpster — consumed the entire structure.

"We sat on the hill and watched this incredible ball of fire," Albrecht said. "It was miraculous that we were able to continue doing shows."

The show went on — in 1976 on a temporary stage. The players worked out of trailers. That year and the next, Plays-in-the-Park presented an ambitious line-up of "Oklahoma," "Godspell" and "1776," all of which entailed elaborate costumes.

The tragedy turned out to have a silver lining.

A new, improved theater was rebuilt with a \$500,000 federal Green Acres grant in time for the 1978 season. It is three times the original size, with double the dressing room space, showers, a costume shop, scenic shop and storage areas.

Planned improvements call for a grid system on which to hang scenery and a fully-computerized lighting system, Albrecht said.

To celebrate the silver anniversary, Friends of Plays-in-the-Park, a fund-raising adjunct of the program, will sponsor a performance commemorating 25 years of musicals performed at the theater.

Park performers of the past, some of whom have gone on to Broadway and television, will lend their talents to the revue, to be held June 6 at the Middlesex County Vocational High School, East Brunswick.

On June 13, a gala dinner dance will be held at Sheraton Towers, Iselin.

Further information may be obtained by writing to Friends of Plays-in-the-Park, P.O. Box 2281, Edison.



TNT photo by Mike Sypniewski

Behind the scenes

Phyllis Elfenbein and Ernest Albrecht survey an exhibit of photographs depicting past performances in the Plays-in-the-Park series in

Roosevelt Park, Edison. Ms. Elfenbein is production manager, and Albrecht serves as producing director.

Last curtain signals time to plan

By PEGGY O'CROWLEY
Living Section staff writer

EDISON — Just as the curtain closes on the last performance of the last show of the season, Ernest Albrecht and Phyllis Elfenbein of Plays-in-the-Park are opening up the possibilities of next year's shows.

By September, the roster of three musicals for the next year is pretty much set. The search for set designers, directors, choreographers and technical staff begins.

The set design is intrinsic to how a play will be staged. If the text is the genetic component of the play, the design is its environment. And as every psychologist knows, a good environment is crucial to a well-developed personality.

Plays-in-the-Park advertises for set designers throughout the country in trade publications. "We offer a good place to gain experience. I think designers respond to our willingness to do plays so fully, on a high artistic level that very few theaters offer," said Ms. Elfenbein, production manager.

She and Albrecht, the producing director, each direct one play, which calls for a search for a third director.

"Smart directors pick up the ads for designers. Our director for 'Evita' was the dance captain for the

national touring company production. He wanted to do ours because it was the one chance he'd have to approximate what was done on Broadway," Albrecht said.

By January or February, the artistic staff has been hired, including the designer, director, lighting specialists, prop builders, costume designers and builders. Many are graduate or undergraduate theater majors from area colleges.

Pride taken in costumes

For many years, the costume coordinator has been Pearl Albrecht, wife of the producing director. Her duties entailed putting together such diverse clothes as 18th century men's suits in "1776," Scottish kilts in "Brigadoon," and Edwardian ballgowns for "My Fair Lady."

"One of our sources of great pride is the quality of the costumes we build here," Ms. Elfenbein said.

The \$280,000 overall yearly budget for the series is funded by the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders. It includes the salaries of four full-time parks department workers, whose duties include work on the theater. The actual production budget is \$150,000, Albrecht said.

By May, work has begun on sets and costumes alike. Auditions for parts take place in late April.

Surprisingly, casting is a relatively

easy process, both directors said.

"It's one of the most critical moments. Other things you can correct, but not cast. Given the number of people who have gone through auditions, the number of roles we've had to recast has been very small. We try not to settle," Ms. Elfenbein said.

Talent pool has been steady

Albrecht has developed a mailing list to thousands of individuals, acting programs and schools on the East Coast. Over the years, Plays-in-the-Park has developed a steady stable of talent.

"The actors, singers and dancers are the most local people involved. For many, it's the first time they've come up against demanding competition. But by and large they have career objectives in the theater, and have made a serious commitment to it. We ask a great deal of them during the six-week rehearsal period," Albrecht said.

The three annual shows provide a number of aspiring actors, singers and dancers with a chance to showcase their talents.

Metuchen's Bobby Hegyes, now playing in "Cagney and Lacey"; magician David Copperfield; and Highland Park's Jerry Levine, now starring in the "Bronx Zoo," all trod

the boards of the open-air theater.

"We also have some who have gone on to Broadway chorus lines or in national touring companies of shows," Albrecht added.

Rehearsals take six weeks

Once the parts are cast, rehearsals begin six weeks before the opening of each show.

"Beginning a rehearsal is like a sculptor starting on a hunk of clay. That's what makes it so exciting and nerve-racking," Albrecht said. "You set up a family during the first rehearsal. There's a lot of intimacy with a lot of people."

"I can see why directors tend to cast friends. Nothing is more terrifying than to embark on something with a group of unknowns."

Ms. Elfenbein added: "It's very spontaneous. No matter how much you prepare, nothing is more electric than the creative moment."

Spontaneity can have its drawbacks. The directors said they can remember some harrowing moments when the unexpected happened.

"We had a dress rehearsal for 'My Fair Lady,' and at 11:30 at night the revolver that moved the sets broke down. We had to find a concrete grinder, and opening night was terrifying," she said.

See PARK PLAYS, Page E-8.