

HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE PLAYERS

The Village Players began in Wolfeboro in the 1930s. The group put on shows to benefit the Wolfeboro Garden Club. Nat and Eric Erickson, Edie Carr, Henry Maxfield and Barbara Zulauf were early cast members. In the 40's a three-show season ticket cost \$1.60. Garden club minutes enthused over a small profit earned by plays such as *The Newspaper Bride* and *Candle Light* (Feb. 1941). Most of the shows were performed at The Masonic Hall.

The organization had its ups and downs and after a period of inactivity during World War II, it was reorganized as "The Drama Workshop" under the leadership of Francis Cleveland of The Barnstormers. The Ericksons, Don Brooks and Fred Osgood were among the members at that time. The group disbursed for lack of interest but in the 1970's a few stalwarts, led by the Ericksons, reactivated The Village Players. In 1978 the group put on its first show, a review titled *Yesteryears of Broadway*. This was followed by *You Can't Take It With You* in the fall of 1978 and *Two Smiles and a Song* (2 short comedies and a short musical revue) in the spring of 1979.

In 1980, The Village Players officially became a 501c3 non-profit tax-exempt educational, charitable organization. Its purpose is "to provide entertainment at reasonable prices for the surrounding community and to encourage and develop participation by amateurs in all phases of the theater arts.

The group continued producing a spring and fall show each year with the first musical production, *Oklahoma!*, in the fall of 1981. Starting in 1984 a summer show was added, but did not become routine until 1988. After that year, the season usually included 3 productions, spring, summer and a musical in the fall. (A list of all productions can be seen on the website under Past Productions.)

In the beginning, The Village Players had no home of its own and plays were performed at Carpenter School, The Masonic Lodge, and Kingswood High School. Rehearsals were held at All Saints Episcopal Church, The Helping Hand Hall in Mirror Lake, the elementary school and several other locales. Stage equipment and props were stored in Harrison Moore's barn. Costumes were squirreled away in various attics and later in a donated storage unit at the Wolfeboro Storage Center. Set pieces had to be built elsewhere and moved into a borrowed theater space just before the show.

The Village Players never dreamed they could have a theater of their very own. They were accumulating more and more stage equipment, sets and costumes and desperately needed more storage space. They were considering purchasing a pre-fabricated storage building, which would have cost over \$30,000 not including the land to put it on. When the opportunity arose to buy the Masonic Building, they couldn't pass up the chance to get a whole theater at such a bargain price. Ticket sales ensured that there was enough money to pay royalties and production costs for the next play. Little by little the treasury grew. When the Masonic Building came on the market there was enough for a down payment. The Community Bank and Trust Co. issued a mortgage.

The \$30,000 was only the tip of the iceberg. The roof leaked in several places, there were mushrooms growing on the stage, and cold came through the ancient windows and walls. Frost covered the interior walls that first winter. Some of the siding was missing and in poor condition and the furnace regularly went out. After every heavy rainstorm, water poured down School Street and into the dirt-floored basement, making it impossible to use that large space for storing sets and equipment. Members used to joke that "a river ran through it."

In order to even open the doors to the general public, new building codes had to be met. A building committee was formed including Corky Mork, Michael Wilkes, Carol Bense, Willie Mork and others. A plan was made to determine what needed to be done. Emergency lighting had to be added, and an entrance and bathroom which were accessible to the handicapped had to be built. Asbestos insulation had to be removed. Years and years worth of accumulated debris had to be carted away. Windows had to be repaired and rotting sills replaced. The leaky roof had to be repaired. Stalwart players undertook many of these projects with enthusiastic volunteer labor. A fund drive was mounted to fund the first phase of the building restoration.

Ticket sales have always been able to support ongoing costs such as heat and utilities, insurance, routine maintenance and play production, but the Players needed to raise considerably more money to restore and renovate the old building. Under the leadership of Dean Richardson, by 2001, \$360,000 had been raised through gifts and pledges. Much of the renovation was in the costly but unseen infrastructure of the building. New wiring replaced the ancient electrical systems, and more power was brought into the building. A new furnace, circulating system and air conditioning were installed. A required sprinkler system was added which required a new high-pressure water system. New stage lights were installed and a new sewer hook-up constructed. The expenses went on and on. The balance of the mortgage was paid off in 2002 using special donations and a small surplus in the treasury. The Village Players now owns the building free and clear.

A terraced floor was built in the auditorium and Bill and Christine Fluhr donated seats they had purchased from an old theater. These were sent out to be re-upholstered while an enthusiastic crew of community volunteers under the leadership of Dean Richardson painted and refinished the arms, legs and seat bottoms and installed them on the newly-carpeted tiers. Care was taken to see that the seats were installed so that the stage could be seen from every single seat and there was enough knee room for comfort.

New stage curtains replaced the musty dusty tattered originals. A crew of Village Players climbed ladders to paint the dingy front of the building. The basement was graded, waterproofed and paved so that set pieces could be stored there. A workshop was set up under the stage for building sets and large props. Bill Wiebe repaired and refinished the original heavy wooden front door that had been replaced by an inappropriate aluminum and glass door, bringing the front of the building back to its original splendor. Members built shelves and costume racks for storage and installed new wall sconces in the theater. A crew of hard-working volunteers refurbished the antiquated light booth.

The process of restoring and renovating the theater is ongoing. Fairly recent additions are shiny new men's and ladies' restrooms and a fire-safe back stairway to the second floor. A security alarm system now connects the building to the fire department. Member, Dick Cary, a theater architect, volunteered countless hours drawing up plans for making the theater a top-notch, attractive, comfortable performance and meeting space, one of which the arts-friendly citizens of Wolfeboro and the surrounding communities can be proud.

A single generous anonymous donor, provided the funds to replace the crumbling front steps of the building with a beautiful new terrace and double staircase.

All the money raised by the original fund drive has been poured into the theater renovation project. Much more work needs to be done. The stage needs to be enlarged and extended, the backstage area need to be expanded so that there is more space for sets and props during shows. The auditorium walls need to be updated. The sides and back of the building need to be resided. Projects continue to arise and the group will continue to work to bring the historic building up to code and create a wonderful space for the arts.

Over the years, when not working on the building, the group also entered several one-act productions into the New Hampshire Community Theater Association's annual drama festival with several shows and actors taking awards. They also participated in the New Hampshire Theater Association program which was sponsored by New Hampshire Magazine and involved adjudicating and being adjudicated for awards. The group also won several awards in this competition including in 2003 Best Overall Production for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Best Director for its director, Michael Wilkes.

In 1997 The Village Players began offering a one-act melodrama as part of the Wolfeboro First Night event. Each year they performed a humorous melodrama to add to the festivities.

Currently, the group produces three full-length shows each year, usually including a musical in the Fall and occasionally another production for workshops or if a member is interested in adding to the usual performance schedule. It also maintains a website at www.village-players.com. Much time is devoted to maintaining the building and raising funds for the renovations. A few years ago, they began offering a comedy series during the summer months. For this series, professional comics from the Boston area were hired to perform at the theater on the third Friday of the month. Profits from this series were added to the building renovation fund. The comedy nights have been suspended, but the latest venture is Classic Movies at the theater. With spectacular new projection and sound equipment provided by the estate of Michael Wilkes, the group is offering big screen movies one week-end a month. You can find the schedule on the website.

Scholarships are also offered each year to students who express an interest in theater arts and plan to continue their participation in one form or another. Students can apply for grants to aid in their post-secondary education. All profits from donations during intermissions at performances go into the fund which is used to support these scholarships.

The group welcomes new members and supporters at any time. On-stage, back-stage, in the audience, the folks who make everything happen also have lots of fun doing so and are always looking for help.