



"THEY HAD A DREAM"

A History of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana

Mt. Pleasant, Iowa

1973 - 1998

In the 1950s and 60s, Neil and Caroline Schaffner began dreaming about building a museum that would preserve the memories of early American repertoire theatre. They realized that the opera houses were being torn down or converted to other uses and that the tent shows were fading away from our rural landscape. Soon memories would also fade and an important segment of our American theatrical heritage would be lost to future generations.

The Schaffners started collecting any memorabilia they could find that related to repertoire theatre. They stored scenery and trunks in a barn and photographs and scripts in empty bank vaults. As the collection expanded, they started looking for a community that would support a museum. They felt it should be in the Midwest and preferably Iowa, since it was the center of early activity by the tent and repertoire companies. Numerous communities were visited and proposals were considered, but no decision was made.

Several visits were made to Mt. Pleasant and some interested citizens were enlisted. Among those showing interest were Herb Hult, Administrator of Midwest Old Threshers; Joe Mauck, a professor at Iowa Wesleyan College; and Helen Viriden, Henry County Recorder and author of many poems and pageants. Another active supporter was James V. Davis, owner/director of the Schaffner Players. During the summer of 1967, these four people met with the Schaffners at their home in Wapello, Iowa. To further the cause of the museum, it was decided that there should be a formal organization to present its case. The National Society for the Preservation of Tent, Folk and Repertoire Theatre was formed. Jimmy Davis was selected president, Caroline Schaffner 1st vice president, Joe Mauck 2nd vice president, Helen Viriden secretary and Herb Hult treasurer. The Society was formally incorporated in December of 1968.

The Schaffners and members of the Society felt that establishing a museum on the grounds of Midwest Old Threshers would be most appropriate. The emphasis in the museum would be on entertainment in rural America and this would reflect another aspect of Midwest Old Threshers' goal of preserving our agricultural heritage. Efforts were started to persuade the Midwest Old Threshers Board of Directors. Through the generosity of Alice Whaley, numerous social events were held in which troupers and board members met and shared common goals.

A temporary setback for the museum

came in 1969. Neil Schaffner died on July 3rd of that year. However, Caroline Schaffner became even more determined to see their dream come true. Shortly after Neil's death, she moved to Mt. Pleasant to devote her energies to making the museum a reality.

Permission was granted in 1970 for an exhibit to be set up on the Old Threshers' grounds. It was located in a very warm semitrailer on the south side of the grounds. The following year a larger exhibit was displayed in the unfinished offices being built for the Old Threshers' staff.

The National Society felt that broader recognition was needed for the development of the museum and that a kick-off activity would be beneficial. A special event was scheduled for November 14, 1970, at Iowa Wesleyan College called "A Repertoire Americana Festival." Stan Weiderspan, head of the Art Department at Iowa Wesleyan College, and Joe Mauck created a large exhibit of memorabilia in the Art Gallery at Wesleyan. Jimmy Davis directed and starred in a special production of the Schaffner play, *Where's My Teddy?*, which was presented in the Chapel Auditorium. Special invitations were sent and a formal dinner was held prior to the play for numerous state and local dignitaries. The campaign for a theatre museum was now formally launched.

Jimmy Davis, Caroline Schaffner, Helen Viriden and Joe Mauck attended numerous meetings of the Board of Directors of Midwest Old Threshers and with the support of Administrator Herb Hult and Board Member Leo Turley, a resolution was passed to build a shell of a building on the north end of the campgrounds to be used as a theatre museum. Joe Mauck and Leo Turley drew up plans and ground was broken in September of 1971.

By August of 1972, the building was not finished, but the lower level was usable. Joe Mauck and Stan Weiderspan decided to put up a temporary exhibit and most of the Schaffner collection was moved in.

With the organization of the National Theatre Society, troupers, educators and other interested people were invited to join. An annual meeting was held each year during the Old Threshers Reunion. Jimmy Davis conducted the meeting on Saturday morning of the reunion in the Schaffner tent. Each year more troupers attended and Joe Mauck started having his Saturday night parties, which became a highlight of the reunions.

On Sept. 1, 1973, a formal dedication of

the building was held. Dr. George LaMore of Iowa Wesleyan College gave the dedicatory prayer and Jimmy Davis and Caroline Schaffner cut the ribbon on the ramp and then the curtain went up to reveal the front door. Joe Mauck had placed the curtain over the door and had his two sons, Randy and Kent, on the roof and at the signal the curtain went up. A fitting way to open a theatre museum.

The building was far from finished. There were no rest rooms, no heat or air conditioning, no interior walls, and the lighting was bare bulbs hanging from strings of wires. Again, Stan Weiderspan and Joe Mauck tackled the exhibits. Anna Lee Scott came to their assistance by dressing and accessorizing the mannequins. Stage curtains were used as dividing walls and fiber board provided backing for exhibits. Old Threshers provided an odd assortment of display cases, many still in use today.

Shortly after the dedication, Stan Weiderspan left Mt. Pleasant and Joe Mauck became the sole exhibit technician. With no training, experience or financial backing, he assumed the challenge of developing exhibits for the next 20 years. Exhibits were created with a minimum of financial support and with materials begged, borrowed and recycled.

Gradually, rest rooms, heating and air conditioning and permanent wiring were added. Walls were installed creating a library and an office. Dr. Michael Kramme, now Chairman of the Division of Fine Arts at Culver-Stockton College, volunteered to organize the library. He developed the cataloging system, filing procedures and preservation methods. When he first started, he was a teacher at Washington High School and quite often brought his students down to do cataloging. Much of the organization in the library is due to him and his students.

As people heard about the museum, memorabilia from all over the United States started coming in. Jimmy Davis brought in more memorabilia than any other person. He made contacts all over the country and talked people into donating. He put in many hours and drove hundreds of miles to pick up items for the museum. He built the stage on the lower level, purchased and refinished five showcases, and created the track system for the curtains. Evidence of his endeavors can be found throughout the museum.

In 1976, the museum was honored to be selected to contribute memorabilia for the Kennedy Center exhibit of "Two Hundred Years of American Theatre." A stage curtain,

costumes, scripts and pictures were sent to Washington, D.C. to be on display for one year.

A minor disaster struck the museum in July of 1980. A severe windstorm caught the west edge of the roof and rolled about two thirds of it up and deposited it on the east side of the building. Fortunately, two young men were working on the set for a community theatre play on the lower level. They happened to be Kent Mauck and Steven Burden, who both had assisted Joe Mauck with many of the upstairs exhibits. Knowing the historic value of the material, they broke a lock and started moving exhibits out of the rain soaked area into the part of the building left with a roof. With one small flashlight and their knowledge of where things were, they moved everything that could be damaged to a safe area. In checking the material the next day, Joe Mauck discovered that only one advertising herald had been lost. Had they not been in the building, the destruction would have been considerable. Does the Theatre Museum have a guardian angel?

Through the years there have been several changes in the officers of the Society. Jimmy Davis served as president from 1968 to 1988. He was spending a great deal of time on the road, both summer and winter, and he felt by being away so much he could not offer the leadership necessary. Joe Mauck was elected president and Dr. Michael Kramme took his place as 2nd vice president. Jimmy was made president emeritus. In 1997, Joe Mauck decided that due to poor health it was time for him to step down as president. Dr. Michael Kramme was selected president and Joe Mauck became 2nd vice president and president emeritus. Caroline Schaffner has remained 1st vice president and curator all these years. There have been just two secretaries. For many years, Helen Virden was secretary and a driving force in the establishment of the museum. In the late 70s she became ill and was no longer able to serve. Billie Turley took over and has kept the Society on track for nearly 20 years. She handles most correspondence, gets out mailings, does news releases and keeps organizational records, along with dozens of other things. The treasurer has gone through numerous changes. Herb Hult started in the position and was more than a treasurer. As administrator for Old Threshers, he was instrumental in getting approval for the building and assisted in its future development. When he left as administrator, he gave up the treasurer's position which was filled by Leo Turley, who was then treasurer for Old Threshers. He relinquished the position after a few years and it was filled by Jerry Naylor. Jo Rodd took over after Jerry developed other commitments. She served until 1993, when ill health forced her to step

down. Claudia Streeter was elected to replace her and is serving at the present time. *Caroline Schaffner and Joe Mauck have served as active member of the board for thirty years.*

As mentioned before, the annual meeting of the Society and a trouper reunion were held during the Old Threshers Reunion. Due to the many activities and the large crowds at that time, the troupers suggested that a meeting be held at another time and a more formal program be established. Joe Mauck was appointed program chairman, a position he held for the next ten years. The first Theatre History Seminar was held in May of 1986. Due to conflicts with other professional meetings, the date was then changed to the third weekend in April, except when the date falls on Easter Sunday. All seminars have been held in April since that time. Richard Poole of Briar Cliff College has served as program chairman for the past two years. Participants have come from all over the United States and a broad range of topics has been presented.

In the early 1990s, the museum took a step forward with the assistance of Old Threshers and acquired a computer for cataloguing. Shortly thereafter, Martha Hayes was hired as cataloger and later became Collections Supervisor. She has extensive knowledge of the collection and can be most helpful for those doing research. In 1995 a major change in staffing occurred. Lennis Moore, Administrator/CEO for Old Threshers, submitted a proposal to the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs and received a grant for the staffing of the museum. Five part-time positions were approved. They are: Brian Haymond, Exhibit Technician and Museum Coordinator; Martha Hayes, Collections Supervisor; Donna Stender, Public Relations Coordinator; Claudia Streeter, Education Coordinator; and Carla Trees, Intern. Another intern from Grinnell College will be joining the staff during the summer of 1998. Under the direction of Brian Haymond and, with the assistance of Lennis Moore and the Old Threshers staff, all exhibits are being rebuilt in a more permanent and uniform manner. With a fine operating staff and with the museum being open for regular hours year around, the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana has now become a viable and recognized museum.

In the summer of 1996, the museum

took another step forward. During that year, the State of Iowa was celebrating 150 years of existence. A special historical project for Henry County was sought. Joe Mauck was serving on the local Sesquicentennial Committee and suggested a Festival of Schaffner Plays. The committee, the museum, and Old Threshers liked the idea and funds were sought. Grants were received from the Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission, the Iowa Humanities Board, and the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. Joe Mauck and Suzanne McNair, Director of the Henry County Tourism Association, were co-producers. Four Schaffner plays were presented during the month of July to full houses in the lower level of the museum. The cooperation of many local groups, including Midwest Old Threshers, the Mt. Pleasant Community Theatre, and the Henry County Tourism Association, was instrumental in the success of the shows.

Midwest Old Threshers, under the leadership of Lennis Moore, and the Theatre Society decided that a summer festival of plays should continue. In July of 1997, one Schaffner play was presented on two weekends. During the summer of 1998, two more plays will be presented over four weekends. The museum is no longer just a collection of memorabilia. It offers live performances of plays which were at the heart of the American repertoire business - a new dimension to ensure the future of the museum.

The history of the museum would not be complete without reference to the support of Midwest Old Threshers. They built the building and continue to maintain it. But their support goes far beyond that. They help purchase equipment, pay part of staff salaries, and offer assistance whenever and wherever it is needed. Lennis Moore and his staff are very much involved in the day to day operation of the museum and particularly in any special events. The Museum of Repertoire Americana has been accepted as a viable museum in the collection of those operated by Midwest Old Threshers. This, along with the continued support of the National Theatre society, will guarantee the future of the Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana.

After 25 years, the dream of Neil and Caroline Schaffner has become a reality.

Joe Mauck
Associate Curator

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