

BAA Traces 'Colorful' History

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Staff Writer

The two homes of the Bloomfield Art Association, which was born Oct. 15, 1956, have both been closed—for different reasons.

The first "residence" of this community's art center was, indeed, a residence; originally a private home, two-story, white frame with a widow's walk atop the roof.

This was about 100 years old and located at 361 N. Woodward Ave. The group of eight local citizens who first met at the home of Ruby Williams to discuss an art association had expanded to 20 by the third "meeting" when plans were proposed to locate a suitable dwelling.

Harry Denyes and Morgan Douglas, Jr., had charge of locating real estate which the group had specified they should be able to "rent, buy, build or accept as a gift."

ALMOST immediately they found the property, which was one of Birmingham's few remaining stately old homes, offered for rent.

Clarence Patterson wrote the first check for \$175 and set off a series of pledges at \$25 each. Paul N. Averill arranged the bank account, and Denyes went ahead and rented the property.

The Birmingham School System lent its support, hoping that the art association could provide an extension of the schools' art training program. Superintendents

Dwight Ireland and Eugene Johnson (of Bloomfield Hills) pledged their cooperation.

UNDER THE direction of Mae Averill, president of the Birmingham Women Painters, the membership committee garnered 125 members, along with \$4,000 for the bank account.

Establishing "firsts" in the teaching staff were Kathleen Birch, who headed the educational department, and Mary Jane Bigler, who was the first instructor.

Clifford West took direction of the program committee which would schedule a variety of exhibits, lectures and films.

The house was not the BAA until Ruby Williams and Max Tun-

cliff (co-chairmen of the house committee, and their crews of volunteers went to work.

CONTRIBUTING their supplies and skills were Fred Weed of Rinsed-Mason Paint Company, who gave paint; designer Peter Duenas, who transformed the building interior into a contemporary studio-gallery; and Randy Clark, who created 18 adjustable easel-bench units.

These "captains" and their crews were finished in time for the BAA to open its first classes March 6, 1957; two water color classes, a life class and a men's painting course.

The first exhibit was by Dean Cornwell, muralist and illustrator, who also gave a lecture. The Michigan Academy of Arts and Science provided the second show.

AT THE time the BAA was establishing its first classes, William McGonagle of the Detroit Institute of Arts Extension Service informed the BAA that he had read of their efforts through an article in The Birmingham Eccentric.

He explained that the extension service had been established to help just such suburban art movements, and from then on the BAA was pleased to receive the institute's cooperation and assistance.

A first-come, first-served policy had to be established when membership applications reached 200, but by September, 1957, when Volume 1, No. 1, of the BAA's magazine "Sketch" was published, there were 342 founding members.

A Children's Workshop was one of the first, proudly-established activities at the Association. By Sept. 23, 1957, a full schedule of classes for all age groups had been organized.

THE "FIRST Annual Birmingham Festival of Arts" was slated for May 17-25 the following year. There was art at the BAA, in the

public schools, in several musical programs, and in street dances, puppet shows, plays and open house.

By July, 1960, a three-man group called the Long-Range Planning Committee was established to appraise future needs of the BAA.

Committee members Robert Thom, future housing; Robert VanderKloot, future financing; and Paul Averill, future programming, were checking out possible sites for the association's next and bigger home.

SHORTLY, THE BAA received notice that its present quarters would be razed to make way for the City of Birmingham's northwest parking lot. Efforts were redoubled to find a new home, and when no property within Birmingham met the qualifications—and the limitations—of the BAA, a private residence in Bloomfield Hills finally was selected.

But before the purchase, which was estimated to be \$50,000 on a land contract basis, plus an additional sum for any alterations, the BAA board reconsidered moving outside the city and discussed the possibility of converting the Birmingham Sewage Treatment Plant.

THE CITY, it turned out, had been searching for a suitable use for the plant which had been deactivated in 1960 when the Evergreen interceptor sewer was completed.

From artist's renderings by Bob Thom, classroom and gallery areas were visualized. The BAA was to remodel the interior and the City to provide some changes for the grounds.

The rent was set at only \$1 a year, according to the lease, for the next 25 years. Linn Smith Associates designed and supervised the remodeling of the building which was to be called the Birmingham Art Center and open for art in the fall of 1961.



SPACIOUS AND WELL-DESIGNED GALLERY HIGHLIGHTS BAA Completely remodeled, it was originally the city's sewage treatment plant.

'On Stage' Cues Village Players

Behind a row of footlights made from 10-cent store dishpans with holes punched in them, the Birmingham Village Players gave its first productions in the early 1920's.

Sunday School rooms of St. James Episcopal Church in the old Community House served as the theatre. The stage was without a raised area, and the curtain that went up was a simple black one.

Audiences sat through the performances, the first two rows on the floor, the second two on kindergarten chairs. Then last two rows stood.

Premiere production was "The Maker of Dreams," a one-act Pierrot fantasy by Oilphant Downs, presented late in the spring of 1923. Rolfe C. Spinning, Caroline Reilly and Forbes S. Hascall comprised the three-member cast.

MARY MARTIN, who was Community House director, is credited with organizing the Village Players. Reports also indicate that John W. Gaffill, a high school student in the fall of 1922, originally proposed the formation of a community drama group.

The Birmingham Village Players came into being in February, 1923, as a private amateur theatrical club. Sixteen charter members soon were joined by other players, and

Just What's Needed!

In the opinion of some people, John Stanley, in 1879, brought to this town just what it needed for so long—a first class foundry and machine shop. The foundry was located on Troy Street, (now East Maple) on the south side of the street.

Loren T. Robinson was elected president.

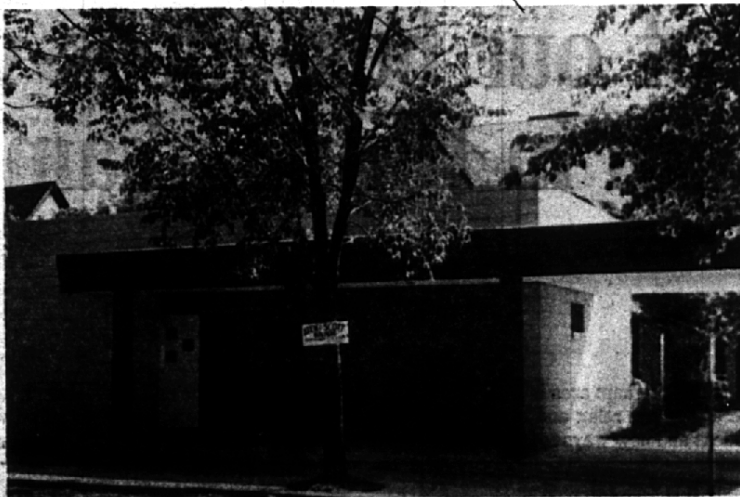
After several seasons, the players sought out basic theatrical facilities for producing plays longer than the one-acts they had been offering.

PROPERTY WAS purchased on Chestnut Street, in 1926, and Wallace Frost was commissioned as architect. Loren Robinson was to handle the backstage design. Ma-

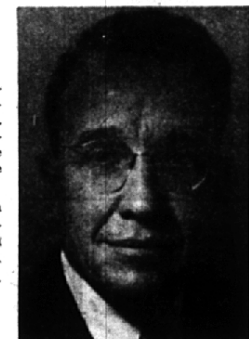
terials were furnished without cost by Howard Simpson and labor without profit by Bob Tillotson.

The Village Players gave its first performance in the new theatre in November, 1926.

In 1933, floor-to-ceiling murals, depicting casting, first night and the beginning of the cycle, were drawn in chalk by Fred Farrar. Later they were restored and painted with more permanent materials.



PLAYERS' 1952 PROJECT WAS A REMODELING JOB Face-lifting and expansion work modernized the Chestnut Street building.



FORBES S. HASCALL One of the first actors.

'Strike Up Band' Rings True In Franklin

Music has become the common denominator in Franklin that brings together engineer, salesman, housewife, surgeon, dentist, sexton, preacher and student—all forming the Franklin Village Band.

Sponsored by the Franklin Community Association, the band, under the direction of Dr. Conrad Lam, made its debut about seven years ago.

THEY MEET MONDAY-nights, Nowing up a storm of music while sitting in the hard, straight-backed chairs for two to three hours at a time. Enveloped in harmony, they huff and they puff.