

The Monomoy Theatre

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

In 1859 the town of Chatham was growing so quickly that the selectmen felt it was necessary to extend Main Street west of Stage Harbor Road, opening a new area for locating commercial enterprises. One of the first to take advantage of this new location was Washington Taylor, who moved his store from downtown Chatham to the extended part of the street, where he built what appear to be twin houses joined by a wing. This structure now serves as the living quarters for the executive director and his family on the western side and housing for some of the Monomoy Theater company of summer actors. To the rear of the property he moved a barn once used as an ice house, which now is the theater lobby and auditorium.

In the late 1920s the barn was home to a toy factory originally operated by Stella Gill, where she produced the toy windmills that were so popular as lawn ornaments. Unable to keep up with her mortgage payments, she was forced to close her factory in 1924. But in 1925 an experienced toy maker named George Lapham reopened the toy factory as The Cape Cod Windmill Company. For several years Lapham ran the company successfully, but when the Depression dampened the economy, he was forced to close it.

The building remained idle for a number of years until an enterprising Chatham resident, Harold Dunbar, bought the building with the intention of making it a center for the arts. He used the upper floor for his studio, but the main floor was cleared to create a large hall with a small stage at the end. Dunbar was not successful in bringing activity to his hall, but two years before he bought it, the Chatham Drama Guild had been created and the group was now seeking a hall for its productions, and Dunbar welcomed them to his auditorium. For two years the Guild braved the cold of the unheated building to stage their productions.

In 1938 the theater caught the attention of Mary Winslow. She had been trained in set design and was interested in putting her talents to work. As a member of a wealthy family, she had the means to buy the theater and renovate it to make it more suitable for stage productions. The seats at that time were hard-back wooden ones that she enhanced by putting striped dish towels over them. Mary Winslow replaced these with upholstered theater seats that she acquired from a playhouse on Nantucket. She took the ferry to Nantucket in a truck and loaded the seats into it to take them to her theater.

When that work had been completed in 1938, she named it the Monomoy Theatre and mounted her first production, an English comedy called "George and Margaret," which opened on July 2. This production was followed by eight more that summer, ending with Noel Coward's "Hay Fever." Tickets for individual shows were priced from 55 cents to \$1.93.

To put her technical skills to work, May Winslow built a fully-equipped scene shop behind the playhouse in 1939, which still functions in the barn behind the present building. When she bought the theater, she also bought the twin white houses on the edge of Main Street, one of which now serves as the quarters for the executive director and his family, and the other as housing for some of the company. She was forced to suspend activity during World War Two, but as soon as the war ended, she reopened the theater and operated it until her death in 1957. At that time the theater was put up for sale, but fortunately the sign caught the attention of Elizabeth Baker, wife of John Baker, the president of Ohio University.

At the University she always had been interested in the arts, especially the theater where she often had acted and had become friends with Christopher Lane, the director of the University theater. One summer when Lane was visiting with the Bakers in Chatham, they often drove past the shuttered theater with a for sale sign in front of it. On one of those occasions they decided to take a look at it. The charm of the theater inspired Mrs. Baker to buy it for the University to rent during the summer for its drama students to gain practical theater experience.

Mrs. Baker persuaded Christopher Lane to be the executive director, a position that he held from 1959 until his retirement in 1979. Every year he held auditions at Ohio University to select members of the company for the coming summer. Among the students who auditioned in 1972 was Alan Rust, who not only was selected but who, along with his wife Jan, became close friends of the Lanes. Over the years that Alan was busy on stage, Jan assisted Charlotte Lane supporting the theater community, ranging from tending the gardens to creating a setting for the members of the company.

When Christopher Lane retired his position in 1979, the obvious person to succeed him was Alan Rust. One of the first changes that Rust made was to extend the weekly run an extra day by adding a Tuesday night performance. He further enhanced the Monomoy program by inviting colleagues from universities and theaters he was associated with. He also continued the practice of inviting students from several different schools to join the Ohio University Players. Alan Rust went from Ohio to join the faculty at the University of North Carolina and from there to his present position at the University of Hartford.

Under his leadership the Monomoy Theatre has expanded its summer program to its present vibrant activity that makes it one of the most prestigious in the country.

