

The first meeting was at the YMCA on Clay Street, and we had the first two or three plays without any props and without any stage. The first production ever was a one-act play, The Valiant, in February of 1934. The company put on monthly plays that year and invited criticism from the audience after each performance.

At this time Christ Church had a house on Bowmar Avenue across from the present site of the Bowmar Avenue Baptist Church. They had been using it as a mission, but no longer needed it, so they donated it to the Little Theater. There was no heat, no air conditioning, and we dressed across the street at the house of one of the members.

A year after that first performance, we put on our first full-length play, Holiday. The theater has done everything from one-act plays to big musicals like South Pacific. And of course, Gold in the Hills.

BEGINNINGS OF GOLD

Gold in the Hills, got started when Mrs. Balfour Miller, who was head of tourism in Natchez, contacted Julia Arnold about promoting something in Vicksburg for tourists. Mrs. Arnold found the script for the play and directed it for many years. She died just a week before the 50th anniversary of the production in 1986.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers loaned us a barge. We fixed it up like a showboat, the Dixie Belle, and opened on March 28, 1936. A huge Black choir of about 500 voices sang on the river front before the performance. A lot of people came to hear them and then went on to see the show. In later years we had a group of men singing. Tickets then were 75 cents for general admission and \$1.00 for reserved seats.



Showboat singers, 1938

There was a Confederate pageant at the City Park alternating with performances of Gold in the Hills, but when it rained, the pageant couldn't go on, so we would play that night, too. The showboat had a tin roof, and when it rained or stormed the cast had to scream to be heard.

The show was a success right from the beginning. Nobody had any idea that it was going to go as long as it did. We all thought it was fantastic that the audience would receive us so well.

THE SPRAGUE YEARS

In 1948 the City of Vicksburg bought the sternwheel steam tow boat Sprague for one dollar from the Standard Oil Company. The Sprague was the largest ever, and soon it was converted into a showboat. The city let the Little Theatre Company use the boat in return for a percentage of the proceeds.

The theatre used to be on the upper deck, but many people had trouble with the steps, so it was moved downstairs. There was also a restaurant and a river museum on board. In 1959 the Sprague went up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to Pittsburgh, where it was part of their bicentennial celebration. The cast came up from Vicksburg that year and put on several performances of Gold. Over the years Gold has been performed in Natchez, and at the Neshoba Fair, as well as at a number of conventions.



"Captain Andy" welcomed theater-goers aboard the Sprague.

The Sprague was our big drawing card, and we bought Cedar Grove with the receipts from those showboat performances. But then the Sprague burned in 1974. We had just gotten the boat back from New Orleans where it went for repairs, and I was in the last performance of Gold before the fire.

The next night my oldest son called me and said "Mother, get up quick, the boat is burning! Come see the Sprague!" And we all sat and sobbed.



The new Parkside Playhouse, Confederate Avenue and old U.S. Highway 80

THE NEW THEATER

After the Sprague burned we got an old warehouse, down on the river by the railroad track. That didn't last long, because we didn't even have a restroom. We had to rent a privy. There was a lot of noise from the trains, too, so we went back to the theater on Bowmar Avenue.

It was a shame that we lost the boat. Most of the costumes and sets were burned with it. The new theater, at the end of Confederate Avenue, was built in 1977, and after we moved, we had to sell Cedar Grove to help pay for it.

A FAMILY TRADITION

Gold in the Hills has always been a family show, and three or four generations of several families have appeared in the cast over the fifty years the show has run. For us it was somewhere to take our children.

They would go to the rehearsals, and they'd see what was going on. Then when they got old enough to go on stage they would. It's not unusual for parents and children, or brothers, or cousins to be on the stage at the same time because the play has parts for all age groups.

As old as the play is, and as many times as I've played in it, the audience is different every time. It's the audience participation that makes the cast better, because if you have a good crowd that are going to scream and yell and boo the villain and clap for the hero it stands to reason that you're going to have more excitement on stage as well. Back in the early days they used to throw vegetables at the villain as well as peanuts, but they don't do that any more.

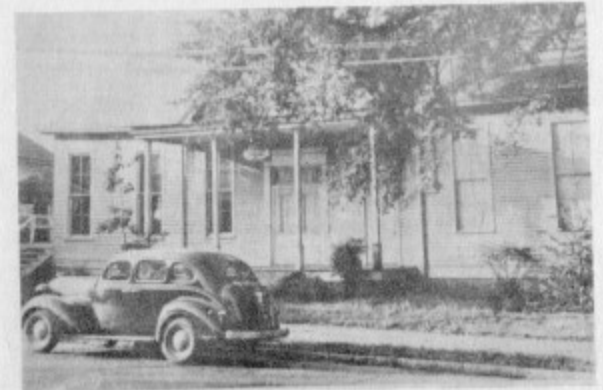
SCHEDULE

Gold in the Hills runs on weekends during March and April, and again in June and July.

Publication of this leaflet is financially assisted by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities.

Vicksburg

RIVER CITY OF MANY CULTURES



The Bowmar Avenue Theater in the 1930's

GOLD IN THE HILLS A FAMILY TRADITION

A First Person Account

By
Frances Ethridge

(Mrs. Ethridge has performed in the long-running melodrama since its beginnings in Vicksburg on March 28, 1936. She played the part of Barbara, the younger sister of the heroine, Nell. She presently appears in the role of Lizzie Jones, the housekeeper.)

The Vicksburg Little Theater actually began in 1934. There was a group of people that was interested in learning something about theater and also wanted to organize some kind of entertainment in town.