Elsie Behner’s Scrapbook

By Don Mabry

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The Beaches (Mayport south to Palm Valley/Ponte Vedra) were blessed in 1937 by the opening of two institutions—Duncan U. Fletcher Junior-Senior High School and the Beach Little Theatre Guild—which raised the local cultural level. This essay is about the Guild from its beginning in 1937 until its suspension in 1942. Fortunately for those interested in Beaches history, Elsie Behner, doyen of Little Theatre at the Jacksonville Beaches for decades, kept a scrapbook for the 1940-1942 period. Most of the items are undated newspaper clippings but she included programs and cast photographs
as well. She did manage to include some material from 1938 even though she lived elsewhere.

The Guild and the new secondary school were the product of the fantastic population grown of the Beaches in the late 1930s. The population increased after 1930 as people sought warmth and cheaper living costs. Many of the migrants were from more northern states. Jacksonville Beach had 409 residents in 1930, but 3,556 in 1940! There were 882 people in Precinct #31 which included the 409 people inside the city limits. Precinct #33 had 1,003 total, 164 living in Atlantic Beach town and 511 in Mayport. Precinct #1 of St. Johns County (Palm Valley and what became Ponte Vedra) contained only 63 people in 1930. Of the Duval County beaches (Atlantic Beach, Neptune Beach, and Jacksonville Beach) 66% lived in Jacksonville Beach, 3,556 of the 5,386. The Mayport Area (Mayport, East Mayport, and the unincorporated area north of Sixteenth Street in Atlantic Beach) contained 1,290 persons; the unincorporated areas of St. Johns County, Palm Valley and Ponte Vedra Beach, contained only 341 persons in 1940 but a substantial increase in percentage terms. The growth was Ponte Vedra Beach. The total population of the "Beaches" was 7,017, enough to sustain amateur theatre. As one person commented to the local newspaper, residents needed something to do after the summer tourists left. High school theatre met some of the need.

The school attracted families to the Beaches. Its teachers and students played music, created art, and performed on stage. In addition to its own theatre program, Fletcher was a source of talent for the Guild, supplying a director, assistant directors, theatre techs, and actors. The school ended the long trek to south Jacksonville for white students, making the beach a more attractive place to live.1 Lena Ramsdell taught history and drama at Fletcher in addition to her other duties at the small school; she also directed for the Guild in its first few years. She started the tradition of the Senior Class play, producing and directing "The Charm School" in the spring of 1938. Katherine Wright and Hilliard Wright won the best acting awards. She did this play again on May 17, 1945 according to the May Northeaster, which listed the cast

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1 The economy was based on amusement parks, ocean bathing, dancing and fishing on the ocean pier, and restaurants and bars for the tourists, be they day trippers or longer stay guests. Naturally, the pace was a bit frantic because the tourists were there for only a four month period.

Source: The Senator, Fletcher Jr.-Sr. High School, 1946
Senior Class of Duncan E. Fletcher Present

Daddy Long-Legs
Fletcher Auditorium
Friday, May 10, 1940, 8:15 P.M.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aubrey Williams</td>
<td>Elmer Hauge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon Hunter</td>
<td>Thora Dunbar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Broschell</td>
<td>Frank Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Montgomery</td>
<td>Letha Bestick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hena Horne</td>
<td>Raydon David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann Pock</td>
<td>Frances [Name]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Waddbrock</td>
<td>Peggy Moss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>Benning Burgard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena Potrouson</td>
<td>[Name]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta Morgan</td>
<td>Billy Adams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ORPHAN CHILDREN AT JOHN GRIFF HOUSE

Sadike Makie  =  good
Sadie Harte  =  fair

[Note: The text is partially legible and contains names and roles for the cast and characters.]
The scrapbook only includes announcements of the two one-act plays produced in 1938. They were presented as a double header, to use baseball slang. Stanley Morrell, President of the Beach Little Theatre Guild, thanks the Jacksonville Beach and the United States governments for their support as well as merchants and advertisers. The programs includes the actors, all local people.
Compliments of

Independent Laundry
ONE DAY SERVICE

129 Pablo Avenue Phone 232

The Beach Little Theatre Guild
PRESENTS

TWO ONE-ACT PLAYS
Thursday, March 24, 8:30 P.M.
BEACH THEATRE JACKSONVILLE BEACH

The Guild acknowledges its appreciation to:
Mr. J. D. Woodard, Manager of the Beach Theatre
Officials of the City of Jacksonville Beach
W. P. A., Division of Recreation
The Merchants and Advertisers whose names appear on this Program
and others, whose splendid cooperation and support
have made the Guild's productions possible.
STANLEY A. MORRELL, President.
(Beach costumes provided through the courtesy of The Beach Toggery)

Compliments of

Beach Dry Cleaners

129 Pablo Avenue Phone 232
“Aleetha’s Ankle,” written and directed by Christine Walker was a local play set in the Lobby of the Hotel Vedra Majax in the Seaside resort of Greater Jacksonville. It was half of a double header with “The Hills of Tomorrow.” Aleetha was Jean Haden (who married J. T. McCormick in 1939); the other principal cast members were Stanley A. Morrell, Roger C. Grafft, Lonita C. Foster, Victor C. Grandoff, Jack Jones, Natali Denniston, and Jean Jones. Clarice Iwanoski, Janet Ramsdell, Mrs. Jeanette [Roger C.] Grafft, Mrs. Norma [W. E.] Blaine, Mrs. Aline Williams, and Jane Coughlan played the beauty pageant roles.
Because Behner rarely included dates for the clippings she mounted in her scrapbook, figuring out when something occurred can be a challenge. One such case is the performance of the one-act farce, “A Mad Breakfast,” written in 1929 by Isabel McReynolds Gray which became a favorite of community and high school theatres. At one Guild meeting, Gray’s one-act play of mistaken identity was performed by four men and six women. In the play, a visitor to a boarding house thinks he has been invited to inspect a mental institution and doesn’t know that two boarders are playing a prank on him and their fellow boarders. They tell their fellow boarders that he is a wealthy man who is interested in what interests each of them and nothing else. They, of course, prattle on about themselves in hope of garnering his financial support while he is amazed and confused by their actions. All but the pranksters and the audience are bewildered, allowing for some witty dialogue, but truth finally prevails. Since it required little in the way of costumes or set, it was easy to stage at a meeting. Where it was done is unclear because the hand-lettered caption on the photo below says the Woman’s Club but the newspaper clipping in the scrapbook says City Hall was the venue. Both were placed in the scrapbook before the high school production of “Daddy Long Legs,” performed in 1940. Did “Breakfast” go on the boards earlier in 1940 or was it just a matter of space in the scrapbook?

Similarly, the scrapbook mentions Behner’s “Acting Club” doing a one-act play for the Guild meeting at the Friendly House. The play, “For Distinguished Services,” featured Issis Barnes, Nina Uhrig, and Raybon Davis. Pantomime was demonstrated by Helen Dean Gillespie, Virginia Conklin, Frances Reynolds, and Katherine Starrs. About 60 members attended the meeting where they discussed plans for a Little Theatre
orchestra to be conducted by Gillespie. Behner announced that the Guild can use the Neptune Beach City Hall. The clipping's undated but these events were probably in 1940.

The story resumes with a newspaper clipping on the Beach Little Theatre Guild meeting in June or July, 1940. Behner, Adrienne Conrick, and Scott Roberts McLean were named as play directors for the forthcoming season. The Guild often met in the Friendly House next to the Episcopal Church on 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue in south Jacksonville Beach. Within a few months, the Guild membership gave Behner a position of authority.

The Friendly House on left, St. Paul’s-By-The-Sea on right. Courtesy of the Beach Museum
A social hour followed with Harry Conklin showed moving pictures of the May festival opening the beach tourism season and eating a birthday cake to celebrate the second anniversary of Hugo Mendell’s store.²

In past seasons, there were only one-act plays presented on an irregular basis. The Guild changed that for 1940-41; its play reading committee chose two three-act plays in addition to the Christmas pageant for the first half of season. It planned a season of six plays, including pageants for Christmas and Easter. For some meetings, some members would present a one-act play. Whether they used costumes and a set each time or just did a play reading is not clear. For the September 9, 1940 meeting, they chose Katherine Kavanaugh’s 1936 play, “Back to Nature,” and staged it at the Neptune Beach City Hall (which had an upstairs auditorium). The participants in the summer 1940 meeting had ambitious plans for the Guild for the coming year. They decided to meet on the 2nd Monday of the month to conduct business, have a one-act play, and a social. On the 4th Monday, it would have a three-act play. Acting, makeup, and stage craft classes would be held at Friendly House at 7 PM.

At the September meeting, Behner made her directing debut, assisted by Florence Conklin. The cast, shown below, were Virginia Conklin, Frances Reynolds, Helene Behner, and Louis Hester. After the show, John Conrick provided refreshments. Guild meetings always had social aspects. It was a club.

² The newspaper followed the convention of the time of identifying married women by their husband’s name, i.e. Mrs. John Smith. Where possible, I use the woman’s first name.
Edward J. Crowley, Director of the Jacksonville Little Theatre, where Behner was also a member, spoke about “The Importance of Little Theatre in Community Life.”

Community theatres typically rely upon a small group of people to do all the work. There were only fifteen members in the summer of 1940. Stalwarts of the three-year-old Guild, those who founded it in 1937, were not natives of the Jacksonville area. New Jersey-born Harry Conklin, a superintendent for a paint company lived in Jacksonville Beach, with his New York wife, Florence, and their Pennsylvania-born daughter, Virginia. Florence was a housewife whereas 19-year-old Virginia was a stenographer for a real estate company. Virginia acted in many productions. The Conrick family was born in Rhode Island except for 14-year-old John M. Conrick, Junior who was born in New Jersey. The mother, Mary Adrienne Conrick, was an artist who also directed for the Guild. Their daughter, 26-year-old Mary A. Conrick, was a waitress and not much involved in theatre. Father and son were actors. The family lived in Tampa in 1935 before moving to the Beaches by 1940. John Jr. played a shepherd in the 1940 Christmas pageant. John Sr. acted in “Miss Mowbray’s Big Moment” as did Adrienne Conrick. Father and son acted in “Nose for News.” Stanley Morrell, President in 1938
when he also acted in “Aleetha’s Ankle, was born in New York. In 1940, he was a 36 year old shipping clerk in the oil business. His wife, Janet, was born in Nova Scotia. Their son Stanley was born in Florida in 1933. W. J. Cozens, Jr., the Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and a president of the Guild, was from Detroit, Michigan. He married Hazel C. Philips on September 1, 1938. He took a similar job in Palatka before the November 9, 1941 meeting, and he and Hazel resigned as President and 2nd Vice president, respectively. The 53 year old contractor, Harold Brownett, was born in England as was his wife Beatrice. He lived on the oceanfront in Neptune Beach.

Although a newcomer to the Beaches, Behner was an experienced amateur theatre person, having been involved in theatre in St. Petersburg and Ft. Lauderdale. In April, 1940, this West Virginia native was a 51-year old housewife living in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida with her husband, Louis D. Behner, Sr., a 45 year old radio operator for the United States Coast Guard. He was born in New York. They had two children, a 25 year old daughter, Helene, and 9 year old son, Louis, Jr, both children born in New York. The next month the family had moved to the Beaches. Elsie and both children would be involved in theatre. Louis Junior would also letter in swimming at Fletcher in 1947.

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3 Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Sixteenth Population Census of the United States, April, 1940. This census is used to gather information on others in this story.
Floridians were also involved in the leadership of the Guild. Harold O. Trezise and his wife Viola were active in civic affairs. She was president of the local women’s club. He was a silversmith. He was involved in the creation of the Beach Health Center in 1945.

Mayor Harold A. Prather, Mabel Binder and Harold O. Trezise. 1945   Courtesy of Beaches Museum

The widow Helen Dean Gillespie and her son Hardy, a photographer, lived on Florida Boulevard in Neptune Beach. Both were Floridians but her late husband, William L. Gillespie, hailed from New Jersey. She would serve the Guild in a number of capacities, including being president after Cozens resigned. Hardy acted and served as photographer. The Reverend Mr. Ben A. Meginnis, Jr., an Episcopal priest, served as president in the early fall, 1940 and wrote and acted in the Christmas pageant of that year. He graduated from the Episcopal Seminary at The University of the South (Sewanee) in 1937; the bishop sent him to be the first full-time rector of St. Paul’s-By-
The-Sea Episcopal Church after graduation. He married in 1942 and left in 1943 to become an army chaplain.

The three-act comedy, "Nose for News," was a major and successful departure for the Guild which had produced one-act shows or helped with community pageants. The October show drew rave reviews and served notice to the community that the Guild was serious about theatre. The show was performed at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall, the Bryan Baker Building at Second Street and 1st Avenue North. Adrienne Conrick directed the show whose cast included her husband and son, Virginia Conklin, Ben A. Meginnis, Jr., Sammy Lane Yarbrough, Robert Patterson, Lewis Hester, Hardy Gillespie, Frances Reynolds, Robert Scott MacLean, Harry Conklin, and Harold Brownett. The program below shows who did the technical work and publicity. Conklin starred as the
A woman who takes want ads for the paper, gets suspicious, and then follows her hunches to track down an ingenious crook.
Beach Actors
Score Hit in Nose for News

An appreciative audience witnessed the Beach Little Theatre Guild’s first production of the season, a three-act comedy entitled “A Nose for News” at the Veterans of Foreign War’s Hall in Jacksonville Beach Thursday night.

Virginia Conklin in the leading role, Frances Folsom, as a want ad taker for a newspaper and the person with a nose for news gave a splendid portrayal as she followed “hunches” which led to the discovery of the ingenious crook, Louis Lombard, played by Robert Patterson. The editor’s daughter, Frisky, was enacted by Frances Reynolds.

John Scott MacLean, more or less professional, having had many years experience on the legitimate stage and formerly supervisor of the Federal theatre of Jacksonville, captivated the audience in the role of the automobile salesman. Hardy Gillespie’s characterization of Rudy Birmbaum, a Jewish merchant provoked favorable comment.

Sammy Lane Yarbrough enacted well the pathetic role of the deserted wife. A comedy part bringing applause was that of Lona Murphy, as an intoxicated and prospective advertiser.

Supporting members of the cast included: Ben A. Megginis Jr., Lewis Hester, John Conrick, John Conrick Jr., Harry Conklin and H. C. Brownett.

To Adrienne Conrick goes the credit for the direction of the production. The technical staff was composed of Harold Brownett, stage; Dewitt Franklyn, set; Naomi Johnson, properties; Elsie Behner, lights; Helen Dean Gillespie, prompter and Elsie Behner, publicity.
By the time the second show of the year, “China Boy,” opened on November 25th for a two night run, the Guild claimed one hundred members. The show was a resounding success, confirming the decision to join the Guild. The three-act comedy by James Reach and Tom Taggart was directed by Lena Ramsdell with help from Elizabeth Finch, a Fletcher English teacher. This was done as a Junior Theatre Guild production. Having presented a three-act show the month before, there was not enough time or energy to do another in such a short time span so the Guild arranged for two Fletcher teachers to direct. Seven high school students and three adults were in the cast: Alfred Purvis, Robert Harrell, Janet Sutherland, Dixie Packard, Dorothy Watson, Alfred Gates, and Harold Douglas. Sutherland graduated from Fletcher in 1941, Packard in 1942. Playing the adult roles were Lucille Wilson as the mother, Harold Brownett as the father, and Jimmie Roberts as the maid. Wilson was a newcomer to Atlantic Beach, a graduate of Wesleyan College, and a voice student. Roberts, acted in Jacksonville and taught at the Foster Dance School at the beach.
It was a good story for high school students who so often wrestle with questions of identity, and ethics. The story line involves the arrival of a cousin from China who has trouble fitting into the neighborhood because he is a goody two shoes and thus seems a misfit among ordinary adolescents. The boys are interested in football; the girls in Hollywood. The neighborhood bully convinces him to be “bad” in order to be liked. The bully controls the popularity contest votes and tries to determine the winner by which girl is nicest to him. It backfires and the goodness wins out.

Regular Guild members worked behind the scene, doing the unglamorous but necessary work required of a show. Naomi Johnson was in charge of sets and hand properties, assisted by France Reynolds and Adrienne Conrick. DeWitt Franklin was stage manager. Elsie Behner and her stage craft class built the set.
The Guild met, chose the cast for the Christmas pageant, reluctantly accepted the resignation of the property chair, Naomi Johnson, and decided to suspend dance lessons for the holidays but continue the Thursday night classes on stage craft, make up, and acting. After the business portion, members were entertained by the one-act play “Light” performed by Ben A Meginnis, Virginia Conklin, Raybon David, Hardy Gillespie, and Edwin King. Behner directed this serious and tragic play.

Staging the community Christmas pageant on December 23th was not as taxing as either a one-act or three-act play; the basic story line was well known. The Rev. Ben A. Meginnis, Jr. wrote the script. Many Guild regulars were in the cast. Garnett Peterson played Mary, Raybon Davis, for the 3rd year, played the Angel, and Rev. J. R. MacKey of Beach Methodist Church played Joseph. Harry Conklin and the dentist Dr. J. A. Rupert played kings for the 3rd time along with Clifton Morgan. Hardy Gillespie, Edward King, and John Conrick were shepherds. Meginnis created four new characters—Youth played by Yvonne Walker, Age played by J. Lechner, Mercy done by Naomi Johnson, and War played by Harley DeLoach. Members of local church choirs formed the chorus directed by Gillespie and Andrea DeLoach. DeWitt Franklin did the set and lighting and Florence Conklin and Adrienne Conrick were the costumers.

When 1940 ended and 1941 began, the Beach Little Theatre Guild had established itself as a cultural force at the Beaches. No one person could take credit for the success on the first half of the season, but Elsie Behner was quietly emerging as the leader of the Guild. She would direct the three-act farce “Look Who’s Here” in the Bryan Baker Building on January 23rd and 30th and staged it again on March 29, 1941 for the VFW in Southside at its request.
“Look Who’s Here” enjoyed a stellar cast with Garnett Peterson playing the lead. Robert Scott MacLean, Jimmie Roberts, Ellen Sullivan, Toni Sadler, Helene Behner, Rawlins Harrell, Frances Reynold, and Harry Conklin, many of whom Guild regulars completed the cast. As the program below shows, eight people, most of whom had been on stage, formed the production crew, and support from local businesses and individuals increased. After the Jacksonville Beach productions, Mrs. J. Ellsworth and Mrs. Ellen Sullivan hosted a spaghetti supper for the cast and crew in the Sullivan home on 13th Avenue North. Harry Conklin showed home movies he had made of the play.
The Beach Little Theatre Guild

presents

LOOK WHO'S HERE!

Directed by ELSIE BEHNER

(Repeated by Request)

Lyman Winchell
Estelle Winchell
Tommy Rotanah
Grace Sterling
Alice Bainbridge
Jennie
Rose Stanford
Jimmie
Irene Andrews
Bill Mason

Scott Roberts McLean
Garnett Peterson
Edwin King
Jimmie Roberts
Ellen Sullivan
Toni Sadler
Helene Behner
Rawlins Harrell
Frances Reynolds
Harry Conklin

Scene: Living Room of the Winchell home. A summer day.

Production Staff

Stage Manager
Assistant Director
Publicity and Advertising
Property Manager
Photographer
Stage Crew
Make-up

DeWitt Franklin
Virginia Conklin
Isis Barnes
Mrs. Harry Conklin
Hardy Gillespie
Bill McLane and Robert Harrell
Catherine Sturrs

Acknowledgements

Bernie Morris
Nina Uhrig
Marge Van Giessen
Fletcher High School
Mrs. Harold Brownett

City of Jacksonville Beach
Ocean Beach Reporter
Florida Times-Union
Dickinson's Hardware
Floyd's Five and Ten

Mrs. H. H. McCondichie

Produced by special arrangement with

Samuel French

"YOUNG DOCTOR YOUNG," a drama in three acts, will be the next presentation of the Beach Little Theatre Guild Thursday evening, February 27, at 8:15.
When the Guild met in February, its members were treated to “Miss Mowbray’s Big Moment,” a one-act comedy, with cast of Mrs. Helen Zile, Elizabeth Finch, Florence Conklin, John Conrick, Sr., Adrienne Conrick, and Eddie King.

The Guild showed its strength about a month later by staging another three-act production, “Young Doctor Young” on February 27-28, 1941 at the Baker Bryan Building and again directed by Behner. Enough people had joined that casting and rehearsals started immediately. The audience would see many familiar faces but Behner was
LITTLE THEATRE
PLAY NEXT WEEK

Beach residents are invited to see the next Thursday or Friday in Bryan Hall.

James Sterling, new to the Beach group but having played with the Jacksonville Little Theatre, will play Craig Young, a young research physician who is forced by circumstances to make a life-time decision between work as a city specialist or a country general practitioner. Garnet Peterson, last seen as the rattle-brained young wife in "Look Who's Here," plays Diane Lawrence, Craig's childhood sweetheart, who reminds Craig that if his work is well done he doesn't have to go to the big city to be recognized.

Virginia Conklin, well-known to local audiences, will be seen as the devoted, self-effacing mother who thinks only of the happiness of her son. Connie Young, the equally devoted sister, will be played by Dorothy Watson, last seen here as the neighborhood cut-up in "China Boy." Raybon David will appear as the family house-keeper. Fanny McCall, who "practically brings" Craig up, Fanny, famed for her roast chicken and dressing, thinks the sun rises and sets in Craig and develops various ailments to attract his attention to her.

Dan Parker, another graduate doctor, and pal of Craig, who falls in love with the whole Young family, is the role played by a newcomer to the Beach Little Theatre, Glenn Moore.

Joel Harvey, the tired country doctor who wants to retire and turn his practice over to Craig, is another well-known Beach actor, Harold Brownett, and Julia Harvey, his wife who worries about his rubbers and coffee, will be played by Erma Richardson, who has been a member of this Little Theatre for some time though not active this winter until now. Another newcomer, Louise Powell, will portray the mother of the sick baby whose treatment and recovery balance the scales of Craig's decision. Paul Stanhope, the famous Chicago physician who brings the world to Craig's door, is Charles Barrus, who also makes his first appearance with the Beach Little Theatre.

DeWitt Franklin heads the production staff with Olga Sterling, Harry Conklin and Catharine Starrs as assistants. Elsie Behner, who directed "Look Who's Here," is the director with Scott Roberts McLean as assistant.

All members having membership tickets are asked to attend the performance on Thursday, February 27th, because the second night's showing on Friday, February 28th, will be sponsored by the Atlantic Beach Parent-Teacher Association. Tickets may be obtained from mem-
ticket committee in charge of Ellen Sca
er, at the Pablo Studio or from the

Sullivan. This is the third week of

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Atlantic Beach Parent Teacher Association sponsored the Friday, February 28th performance.

The veteran Adrienne Conrick spelled Behner to direct “Sinister House,” by Tom Taggart. Rather than a comedy, it chose a 1938 mystery melodrama with an all-female cast of eleven women. The cast began rehearsal at the Friendly House in February. There is no clipping about this play. Presumably, it went on the boards in March or April for the cast needed rehearsal time. That an all-female play was chosen probably reflects the disproportionate female composition of community theatre groups.

The Guild met in May, 1941 to elect officers for 1941-42, to assess its progress, and prepare for its production of the season. Only five of the planned six productions went
up on the boards but “Look Who’s Here” was performed again on March 29, 1941 at the veteran’s home in Southside as a benefit performance. The VFW Post 1689 requested the help and the Guild was happy to help. In the election, Cozens became President. Behner became First Vice President with Heloise Jackson as Second Vice President. Ellen Sullivan took the job as Secretary with Harold Brownett as Treasurer. Catharine Starrs, Florence Conklin, and Helen Dean Gillespie became board members. During the year, the Guild acquired a stage, scenery, lights, curtains, and a moderate positive bank balance. Most importantly, it proved the viability of live theater at the Beaches.

The Children’s Little Theatre was created at Behner’s home; she was First Vice President of the Guild of which the children’s theatre was part. The newspaper clipping reported that it would meet Tuesdays and Thursday from 10 AM to Noon but from 2PM to 4PM except for two weeks so as not to interfere with vacation Bible schools. Behner would teach dramatic arts. Nominal fee was to be charged to pay for the production of a three-act play at the end of the summer.

The season closed the season in June 1941 with “Coming Thru the Rye,” Charles George’s three-act comedy directed by Elsie Behner. The big cast (8 women, 5 men) provided stage time for many members. A VFW post in south Jacksonville saw it on June 5th in a benefit performance before they brought it home to the Neptune Beach City Hall for June 12-13. The scrapbook reveals nothing of the plot, unfortunately.
BEACH LITTLE THEATRE GUILD

PRESENTS

"Coming Thru The Rye"

CAST

SILAS STONEBRAKER .............................................. HAROLD BROWNNETT
JESSIE WEATHERBY ............................................... HELEN DEAN GILLESPIE
LIBBY STONEBRAKER ............................................... ANDREA MILLER
HARVEY KEYSER ....................................................... HENRY STAFFORD
MRS. MEARSON ....................................................... CATHARINE STARRS
ROSAMOND MEARSON ............................................... VIRGINIA CONKLIN
TRIXIE ANGEL ........................................................ GARNET PETERSON
BUBBLES ................................................................. DON JUAN FRAZIER
JAMES KARNEY ....................................................... EDDIE KING
RONALD TANNER ...................................................... FINIS ROGERS
MONICA MORRISON ................................................... BARBARA BIGGERS
LILA TURNER ........................................................... DOROTHY WATSON
SHERIFF HASKINS ..................................................... JOHN REHBERG

SCENE

LOBBY OF THE AMERICAN HOUSE.

TIME

Act 1 — Several Days Before Christmas.
Act 2 — Christmas Morning.
Act 3 — Later the Same Day.

* *

Production Staff

Stage Manager ......................................................... DeWitt Franklin
Stage Crew .......................................................... F. Rogers, E. Behner, B. Aero
Director ............................................................. Elsie Behner
Properties ............................................................. Glen Moore
Make-Up ............................................................... Bob McLean
The Guild and its members were deeply involved in the Saturday, August 9, 1941 celebration of the 57th birthday of Jacksonville Beach. They had experience in staging shows. The mayor, I. D. Sams, declared the day a holiday. The local VFW post, assisted by a contingent from Jacksonville Naval Air Station and Troop 40 of the Boy Scouts,
conducted a flag raising ceremony. Guild members conducted a pageant, written and narrated by member Jack Jones, tracing the development of the Beaches from Ponce de León to 1941. Cozens was one of the judges of the bathing costume contest as young women wore suits of a given time period, including the future. The day also featured a baby contest, speeches by notables, a bake sale, a cake cutting, and a banquet at the Casa Marina Hotel which ended the festivities.

Upper Photo: Ponce de León subduing a native, perhaps Bottom Photo: Cutting the Birthday Cake by Mrs. Thurston Roberts, President of the state Women’s Clubs with a patriotic ensemble in the back right.

Guild members were thrilled to display their skills to a much larger audience. Their willingness to support this civic event increased their community support, of course.
The Guild acquired the former First Baptist Church building and DeWitt Franklin and Harold Brownett got busy erecting the stage and building scenery. Calls for help with the building, for furniture discards, and for women to sew curtains. The cast of “Aunt Tillie Goes to Town” rehearsed Monday through Thursday night from 7:30 to 10. Converting the venue into a theatre took time so the Guild proceeded with its ordinary business, increasing membership and sustaining the interest of Guild members.
In August, it launched a poster contest as part of its membership drive, September 11th-October 9th. The three winning poster artists received prizes and a free ticket to the next major production of the Guild. The winner’s poster was hung in the lobby of the Beach Theater. The Chamber of Commerce, the Beach Theater, the Duval Laundry in Atlantic Beach, Strickland’s Grocery in Mayport, and the Woman’s Club all helped. All the posters were exhibited at the Woman’s Club house on North Second Street in Jacksonville Beach on September 11th and judged on artistic merit and effectiveness in promoting membership in the Guild. There was no clipping which said who won. The number of members determined how much could be accomplished. People paid to belong and the acquisition of a building increased expenses. Of course, the Guild needed a larger pool of talent from which to draw.

“Let’s Honeymoon Again” was staged at the first Guild meeting on September, 11, 1941 in the Woman’s Club building. Behner directed this one-act farce performed by Dixie Packard, Harold Godwin, Lenna Hendrickson, and Finis Rogers.

Behner kickoff off the main season with “Aunt Tillie Goes to Town” by Wilbur Braun on October 29th and 30th. On the 30th, servicemen in uniform got in free. Two weeks later, in early November, this very funny play was performed for soldiers from Ft. Benning, Georgia who were spending the weekend in Jacksonville Beach. The Samuel French Web site describes the play:

When her favorite niece Pamela announces she's marrying Mervin Tucker, Aunt Tillie is upset. Tillie's called to town and Mervin arrives suddenly. He’s wired his Pal Ronald to meet him at Tillie's. Mervin drops off his suitcase and goes out to look for Ronald. Tillie mistakes the suitcase for her own and leaves town. Mervin goes swimming returning in a barrel as his clothes were stolen. Ronald hands him Tillie's suitcase and tells him to change. Luther Lorimer, Ronald's employer, calls at the house and Mervin appears in female attire. Ronald presents him as Tillie and the fun is on. Tillie returns. She’s had
an auto accident and her dress is ruined, so she has to wear one of Mervin’s suits. Poor Pamela is completely confused.4

For the November production, Roy Pike took the part of Charlie One Lung because F. C. Rogers was hospitalized in Jacksonville.

November, 1941 brought leadership changes to the Guild. Mr. and Mrs. William J. Cozens, Jr. resigned as President and 2nd Vice president, respectively. Helen Dean Gillespie was appointed to fill the unexpired term of the president. Harry Conklin took Gillespie’s place on the Board. Mrs. Clara Boone was appointed publicity chairman, a job held by Mrs. Cozens. Mrs. Reid Saunders was appointed property chairman. Mrs. Leonora Olsen and Mrs. George Shearon were the ticket committee members. Members of the acting class—Rayburn David, Hardy Gillespie, Edwin King, Ben Meginnis, and Virginia Conklin—performed the one-act play “Light”; it was more serious than a comedy. Experienced hands guided the organization and acted in shows.

The personnel changes would turn out to be minor in the life of the Guild for the Japanese attacked the United States Navy base at Pearl Harbor on December 7th. The United States responded the next day by declaring war on Japan. Before the week ended, Germany, Italy, and their allies declared war on the United States, which reciprocated. No one could foretell exactly what would happen but the Japanese had been at war in Asia since 1937 and most of the European countries and their colonies since 1939. The United States would draft millions of men, increase its industrial and agricultural production, replace the men drawn into the military (sixteen million in all) with women and immigrant labor (mostly Mexican), raise taxes, and borrow huge sums of money. The national debt grew from $40 billion in 1940 to $240 billion in 1945. Military needs took precedence over civilian

desires. Rationing limited what and how much civilians purchased. The need for weapons of war superseded the production of civilian products such as automobiles, gasoline, and refrigerators. The federal government borrowed and borrowed and borrowed because the proceeds from taxes were insufficient. The US has always fought wars on borrowed monies but never at the scale of the Second World War. The war transformed the relationship between the citizens and their national government. For example, before the war, income taxes were reported and collected once a year but the US government needed the money quicker and on a regular basis so Congress passed the income tax withholding system. The effect was to increase federal spending because Congress began spending anticipated income not what it found it had available once a year. The United States war against the Japanese, Germans, Italians, and their allies, put an enormous strain on its human and material resources. Before the war ended in 1945, about 16 million people (the vast majority male draftees) served in the military.

Guild members decided to proceed with its production of “High Pressure Homer” on December 17th, 18th, and 20th. Tryouts were held November 9th and the cast had been rehearsing since then. Behner, the director, and the Guild decided that the show must go on, that residents needed to see this three-act comedy of family life as relief from the trauma of going to war.

She chose another of his plays, “I’m in the Army Now! A Timely Domestic Comedy in Three Acts” which Braun, as Ned Albert, wrote in 1941 in response to the September, 1940 Selective Training and Service Act. Men between the ages of 18 and 35 had to register and would be drafted by lottery. No more than 900,000 men would be selected and those chosen would only serve twelve months in the United States or one of its possessions. So the light-hearted nature of this play entertained people during its run on February 25th and 26th, 1942. In the play, Bronson Robertson is drafted and is taken into the army in spite of the hilarious shenanigans by his mother. When he returns on leave and finds his family members in disarray, he forms his own draft board and “army” to set things right. The $75 proceeds went to the American Red Cross for war relief. Not only was it performed at the USO Center in Jacksonville Beach for the military but also in Lake City for First World War veterans. Behner stressed that Little Theatre had a very important role to play during a time of war.

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BEACH LITTLE THEATRE GUILD

Presents

"I'm In The Army Now"

by

NED ALBERT

Directed by

ELSIE BEHNER

February 25 & 26, at 8:30 p.m.

1942

Presented by Permission
of

SAMUEL FRENCH
CAST

In Order of Appearance

Pa Robertson .................................. Harold Brownett
Granny Robertson .................................... Helen Dean Gillespie
Letty Ashbrooke ....................................... Virginia Conklin
Deanna Robertson ..................................... Helene Behner
Ma Robertson ...................................... Mary Aiken
Toby Robertson ..................................... Henry Stafford
Bronson Robertson .................................. Eddie King
Dale Morrison ...................................... Dixie Packard
Corinna Duffin ..................................... Barbara Biggers
Audrey Nayland ..................................... Toni Sadler
Mrs. Essie Knapp .................................. Barbara Biggers
Ramon Valdez ...................................... Alvin Yancey

( ) Arthur Aero

SCENE: Living Room of Robertson Home
TIME: Present

THIS PLAY IS PRESENTED
for
THE BENEFIT OF THE
AMERICAN RED CROSS

PRODUCTION STAFF

Stage Manager .................................. DeWitt Franklin
Assistants ........................................ Harold Brownett, Henry Stafford,
                                      Arthur Aero, Elsie Behner.
Assistant Director ................................ Florence Conklin
Make-up ........................................ Catharine Starrs
( ) Betty Holoway
Stage Furnishing .................................. Anna Pursel

BUY U. S. DEFENSE BONDS AND STAMPS REGULARLY

ESPECIALLY IN TIME OF WAR REMEMBER YOUR RED CROSS
Behner was determined to keep the Guild going. She held tryouts in the Little Theatre Hall behind the USO Center for “East Lynne,” a melodrama and morality play also by Ned Albert. She cast the parts for seven women and five men on Monday, February 19, 1942. The play was based on a famous, popular novel of the nineteenth century but the Samuel French play vendor explains the difference:

This is not an old and creaking version of Mrs. Henry Wood’s immortal novel. It is a sparkling and streamlined play. Lady Isabel Vane is left orphaned in her late teens. The home in which she spent her childhood, East Lynne, has been sold to Archibald Carlyle. What will become of the poor, unfortunate orphan? Insulted, humiliated and mistreated in her new home, she rejoices when Archibald
proposes to her. Her new husband brings Isabel back to East Lynne to live. Isabel is presented to Barbara Hare, a young lady who has always loved Archibald. Levison, a former suitor, starts a campaign to win Isabel away from Archibald. With the aid of a forged note, Levison convinces her that her husband longs to be rid of her so that he may marry Barbara Hare. Half mad with jealousy, Isabel deserts her husband and child and runs away with Levison. But it isn’t long before her eyes are opened to her companion’s villainy and she leaves him. Broken in health and disguised as an old governess, Isabel returns to East Lynne to see her ailing child, and with the final curtain we see virtue triumph over evil!6

After the tryouts, there was music for dancing and refreshments as usual.

The Guild, now clearly led by Behner had to adjust by producing shorter plays with a younger cast. On April 6, 8, 9 1942, it produced “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by Wilbur Braun. The April 6th performance was a 2 PM matinee whereas the other two were night shows. The next month, the Guild presented “Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court” by John Grant Fuller. This had an all high school cast and starred Vance Conant. The Samuel French catalogue blurb says:

In this version of the classic Mark Twain story, the Yankee is a young engineer just out of college and anxious to try his hand at every kind of mechanical device. Knocked out by one of his own experiments, he awakens in the Court of King Arthur. From then, the striking contrast between the old and the new develops into a series of ludicrous events, eloquently expressing the ideals of freedom at a time when it is sorely needed, and makes for some serious, side-splitting entertainment.7

The Beach Little Theatre Guild suspended operations on June 10, 1942 because “due to World War II, the men enlisting and the women in Home Defense and Red Cross work...”8 What the members built since 1937 fell to the fortunes of war.

Behner was a dedicated dramatist who had the time, talent, and dedication to take charge of the Guild in a surprisingly short time. She served her time on committees and as an officer until she directed almost all the plays. She chose plays which were entertaining and relatively easy to stage. She preferred playwright Wilbur Braun who wrote under many synonyms, such as Ned Albert and Bruce Brandon, as well as under his own name. His work spoke to broad audiences such as high schools and

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8 Handwritten note in the Elsie Behner scrapbook.
community theatres. Neither she nor other directors attempted a musical which would have required an orchestra.

The Beach Little Theatre Guild was founded and sustained long before Behner appeared on the scene. That the scrapbook did not have much material before 1940 only reflects the date of her arrival at the Beaches. What is important is that she broadened the scope of the guild, including the creation of the Junior Theatre so many young people benefitted were involved over the years.

She would remain an important person in the community. Her children’s theatre continued for many years. She rewarded participants with certificates and encouraged them. She understood that theatre training and experience were valuable in life no matter what one did. Learning to cooperate with others to achieve a common goal is important and, usually, fun, whether one is an adult or below eighteen years of age. It is very appropriate that some of Lena Ramsdell’s grandchildren learned from her program; one, Judy Hulett, acts and directs for the Atlantic Beach experimental theatre. Others used their acquired skills in numerous ways.

Example of Junior Theatre Award
Jacksonville Beach Community Center, Second Street South between Beach Boulevard and Pablo Avenue, home of the Junior Theatre for years
Seated: Elsie (Mrs. Louis Sr.) Behner, Treva Moore, ______, Florence (Mrs. Harry) Conklin, Lois (Mrs. Stanley) Niehaus, Frances (Mrs. H.H.) McCondichie


1940s

Courtesy of Beaches Museum
Treva Moore became a vice president at Beach Bank. Herb Shelley owned businesses on the boardwalk, was President of the Boardwalk Association in 1950, and directed the Chamber of Commerce. Gilbert Cotton owned The Beach Toggery. Frances McCondichie was the first President of the Jacksonville Beach Woman’s, Club, a columnist and advertising agent for the Florida Times Union, and the founding owner of the Beaches News-Advertiser. Behner, Conklin, and Niehaus raised children, and kept house and were active in civic affairs.

The Beach Little Theatre Guild in its brief life before World War Two shared the characteristics of most Little or Community Theatres. They are volunteer organizations dependent upon the support of many people. Most commonly, the actors are outnumbered by the people behind the scene—the set builders, stage managers, prompters, prop handlers, makeup artists, costumers, directors and assistant directors, play readers, house managers, and publicists. The programs attest to this. Such theatres may charge admission to performances. Most have sponsors from local business or individuals. The Beach Little Theatre Guild also used a membership fee as a source of funding. The Guild had just begun to have the means for a sustained existence—a permanent venue, an experienced pool of talent, a large membership, and sufficient community support—when war destroyed it. There were not enough people at the Beaches to sustain a community theatre. Parents sustained Behner’s Junior Theatre, a product of the Guild.

Two community theatres are active at the Beaches, Players by the Sea and the Atlantic Beach Experimental Theatre. Not a bad legacy for the Guild!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The archives of the Beaches Museum and History Park contain Elsie Behner’s scrapbook with its newspaper clippings and advertisements, play programs, and photographs. In addition, the Museum has a rich collection of historic photographs. Some were used in this essay. Without these materials, this history could not have been written. I am especially thankful for the hard work and generosity of Sarah Jackson and Robert Sanders of the Museum.

Many people helped by answering my queries. Bonnijayn Plummer Rehberg was kind enough to research for me. Elaine Hawkins Worley provided information about her grandmother, Florence Conklin, and her mother, Virginia Conklin. Janet Macdonell did her usual fine job of copyediting.

Paula and I love theatre; we frequent theatre productions very often and in different locales. Paula taught theatre for decades. She is the current president of the Starkville Community Theatre where she also directs. Paula helped me understand some of what I was seeing in the original sources and tolerated my ramblings about what I saw or thought I saw in the data.

All errors are mine.

072015