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KELLER, TERESA DIANE. A Survey of the Attitudes of the Abingdon Community Toward Barter Theatre of Abingdon, Virginia. (1977) Directed by: Dr. Herman Middleton. Pp. 87.

This study investigates the attitudes of the Abingdon, Virginia, community toward Barter Theatre. A telephone survey was designed to answer the following questions: (1) How many Abingdon people attend Barter Theatre? (2) What is the frequency of their attendance? (3) What percentage of those attending are residents of the city of Abingdon? (4) What percentage of those attending are residents of rural Abingdon? (5) How many Abingdonians attended the theatre under the barter system? (6) What are some of the general feelings of the Abingdon community toward the Barter Theatre?

In this study 129 randomly chosen Abingdon residents were surveyed by telephone. Results indicate that sixty-three percent (63%) of those surveyed have attended Barter Theatre; thirty-six percent (36%) have never attended Barter Theatre; forty-nine percent (49%) had attended the theatre within the two year period preceding this survey; eight percent (8%) had attended the theatre under the barter system; forty-six percent (46%) of the subjects seldom attend the theatre (do not average attending one play per year); thirty-nine percent (39%) attend one to four times per year; and fifteen percent (15%) attend five or more times per year.

More city residents have attended the theatre than rural residents. More rural residents have never attended the theatre than town residents.

Although some Abingdonians have negative feelings toward the theatre, this study conclusively shows that the community attitude as a whole toward Barter Theatre is positive, and that Abingdon residents support the theatre in attendance and through financial contributions.

A SURVEY OF THE ATTITUDES OF THE ABINGDON COMMUNITY  
TOWARD BARTER THEATRE  
OF ABINGDON, VIRGINIA

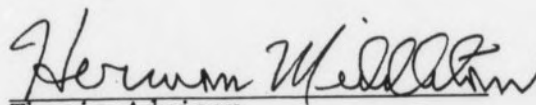
by

Teresa Diane Keller

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Approved by

  
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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following  
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12/12/77

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## CHAPTER I

ROBERT PORTERFIELD - FOUNDER, DIRECTOR,  
AND PROMOTER OF BARTER THEATRE

The first four major regional theatres in the United States were built around the personality of a founding director. Margo Jones' personal force originated Dallas' regional Theatre-in-the-Round in 1947, and its absence when she died folded the theatre in 1955. Nina Vance created the Alley Theatre in Houston in 1947, and gained the reputation as the "famous Alley chutzpah," but her theatre succeeded and now occupies a new building constructed in 1968 as the result of a Ford Foundation grant. Zelda Fichandler has been and remains the primary energy force in Washington D.C.'s popular Arena Stage, established in 1950.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Porterfield was making the same accomplishments in the 1930's, one step before these well-known regional theatre founders. However, he seems to be denied equal prominence in regional theatre history, possibly because his theatre truly served a region. Barter is located in tiny Abingdon, Virginia, and operates without the advantages of identification with a well-known metropolis. Today Barter Theatre

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Wesley Ziegler, Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), pp. 17-61.

is the longest running fully professional theatre outside of New York City in the United States. Like Jones, Vance, and Fichandler, Porterfield's personality complemented his environment, either by nature or by calculation and insight, and was the major, constant driving force behind the successful growth of his theatre.

### Porterfield's Early History

Robert Porterfield was born December 21, 1905, in Austinville, Virginia. He attended Saltville High School and Hampden-Sydney College. For some reason, Porterfield had always been interested in theatre, and as a child presented plays in a barn, using hay bales as a proscenium arch and cousins as actors. By his twelfth birthday, he had announced to his family that he was going to be an actor--a great disappointment to his father, who wanted him to be a preacher. "You are not going into that wicked world of theatre!" he told him. But his mother simply replied, "We'll see what happens."<sup>2</sup>

While attending Hampden-Sydney College, Porterfield traveled to Richmond to participate in a debate tournament and was impressed with a road production of Rose Marie. He decided to leave college and enroll in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. His father tried to discourage him from

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<sup>2</sup>Interview with Mrs. Robert Porterfield, at "Twin Oaks," Glade Springs, Virginia, March 1977.

the plan, as did one of his professors who also talked to him at length about the beauty of saving souls. Porterfield's answer was, "Sir, I'd rather entertain souls than save them."<sup>3</sup>

Bob's father was like many people in the southwest Virginia area at that time in knowing very little about the world of theatre and thinking it was wicked show business. His pride was probably assaulted by a son who would disregard his wishes, and for many years he showed little tolerance for Robert's profession. During an illness prior to his death, however, he told Bob that he had decided "Actors are about the nicest people I know."<sup>4</sup>

This change in attitude of the elder Porterfield came after the son's years of struggle toward a life in professional theatre, including many different non-theatrical jobs while "pounding the pavement" in New York. In 1928 Robert Porterfield graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and succeeded to a role in The Ivory Door which had opened at the Charles Hopkins Theatre, October 18, 1927. He played small roles in Mima, The Dagger and the Rose, The Blue Ghost, and Blind Windows between 1927 and 1932 before touring the country with Walter Hampden's production of Cyrano De Bergerac.<sup>5</sup> Between roles, besides doing some modeling and some

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<sup>3</sup>Idem.

<sup>4</sup>Idem.

<sup>5</sup>John Parker, compiler, Who's Who in the Theatre, (New York: Pitman Publishing, 1972), p. 1299.

radio work, Porterfield worked at The Athletic Club in New York as an elevator boy, desk clerk, manager of the dining hall, and eventually as official host of the club. The life of a young actor in New York City is very difficult, and Porterfield faced an additional burden when his residence was robbed. Everything of any value was stolen from his apartment, requiring him to stay with two of his friends until he recovered from the loss.<sup>6</sup>

While crossing the country by train with Cyrano, Porterfield began thinking about the plight of the country, which was suffering at that time from the Great Depression. He felt the tragedy of belonging to a profession that could not operate successfully because people were occupied with surviving, rather than with being entertained. Ironically, in the time of greatest need for diversion, entertainment becomes lowest in priority. Because the economy could not support theatre, actors were without work, without money, and often without food. The Actor's Dinner Club at the Union Methodist Club in New York provided low budget meals for actors.<sup>7</sup> Porterfield often took advantage of this service. While touring the country and while eating at the Actor's Dinner Club when in New York, Porterfield often thought of home and southwest Virginia.

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<sup>6</sup>Interview with Mrs. Robert Porterfield, March 1977.

<sup>7</sup>Idem.

Glade Springs, Virginia, was the location of the Porterfield farm in 1932. The community is located ten miles from the larger town of Abingdon, county seat of Washington County. Abingdon, organized in 1777, was first recorded as Wolf Hill by Daniel Boone on his "Wilderness Road" trail from Kentucky. Boone's dogs were supposedly attacked by wolves that lived in a cave on the crest of a hill near his camping area. The name was changed to Abingdon either in honor of the Duke of Abingdon, England, by early settlers or after a parish in which Martha Washington worshipped as a young girl. By 1786, Abingdon was thriving and growing as a cultural center for the rural, farming region which Porterfield later thought of as home during the Depression.<sup>8</sup>

While actors in New York were wondering if they would have food for their next meal, food was going to waste in Washington County, Virginia. Crops rotted in the fields because there was no money for their purchase, leaving southwest Virginia farmers with no money for pleasure. Theatres were not thriving because there was no money, leaving actors with no money for food. Porterfield's idea was both simple and brilliant. He would take Broadway actors to his home area to present plays in exchange for food. The need for money would be eliminated. Actors could exercise their art, and farmers could avoid letting their crops be totally wasted.

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<sup>8</sup>Playbill, "A History of Abingdon, Virginia," Barter Theatre, 1976.



The idea which seemed so logical to the twenty-seven year old Porterfield was met with pessimism from others. Farmers are not interested in plays. New York actors will not be interested in going to a small town in a rural region to live. If actors could be persuaded to go, the community would not accept them.<sup>9</sup> Skeptics, however, underestimated several things. First: the spark inside theatre people that will not allow satisfaction unless they are performing and displaying their talent. When there is no pay, the artist would rather act, direct, or design for free than not act, direct, or design at all. In short, an artist will endure a great degree of sacrifice for the sake of his art. Second: the quality in the rural people of southwest Virginia which allows them to identify sincerity and honesty and compels them to support an honest effort by one of their own kind. Third: Robert Porterfield.

#### Porterfield Complements Abingdon Environment

While Porterfield was still in New York during the Depression, his mother wrote informing him that the two colleges in Abingdon, Martha Washington Academy for Girls and Stonewall Jackson Institute, had closed.<sup>10</sup> After conceiving and becoming committed to his idea of a bartering theatre,

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mrs. Robert Porterfield, March 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

Porterfield contacted town officials and persuaded them to grant a rent-free lease on the town's Opera House. He also arranged to use the vacated Martha Washington Academy as a residence hall for his actors. The college was made available to him rent-free. Stonewall Jackson was offered for a small amount of rent. Porterfield knew many people in Abingdon, but having the town and college officials agree to his plan testifies to his promotional ability. According to Rex Partington, current managing director of Barter, "Bob was one of the very few people I've met that people could not say no to."<sup>11</sup>

Porterfield's efforts at promoting his theatre never stopped because he believed so strongly in it, and his enthusiasm was contagious. He excited Abingdonians about having real New York talent in town. New Yorkers and more sophisticated crowds appreciated the charm of professional theatre in rural area--with the local color of real farm produce being exchanged for tickets at the box office. The state of Virginia approved of having a popular tourist attraction in Abingdon as a boost to the economy. To the nation's theatre community, the idea of a national theatre based on the success of Barter's touring program was introduced. An attempt was made at promoting the theatre on an international basis with a performing residency in Denmark followed by a tour of U.S.

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<sup>11</sup>Interview with Rex Partington, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.



Army bases. Porterfield looked for novel approaches to publicity, such as becoming honorary chairman of June Dairy Month, by virtue of his title "farmer" and attracting the attention of a group not usually pursued by theatre promoters.<sup>12</sup> The practice of special student matinees, begun in 1964, continued to promote Barter Theatre to future theatre supporters. Porterfield's constant involvement with the community through organizing the Historical Society and a Cotillion Club, and developing the idea for "Friends of Barter," as well as other smaller efforts have contributed to the existing relationship between the theatre and the community.<sup>13</sup>

Innovative ideas characterized Porterfield's promotional work as well as his personal life. Some of Barter's most popular anecdotes are the result of calculated planning. One member of the Abingdon community suggested that the news-making arrival of a pig at the box office on opening night was arranged by Porterfield.<sup>14</sup> His cleverness is apparent in many of his personal cliches: "If you like us, talk about us. If you don't, just keep your mouth shut;" "We don't have stars at Barter Theatre--we make stars;" "You buy what you don't know;" "With what you can't sell, you can buy a laugh;"

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<sup>12</sup>Dairy Month Promotion News, American Dairy Association of Virginia, Spring 1967.

<sup>13</sup>Interviews with Mrs. French Moore and Mrs. Beth Shuman, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with unnamed Abingdon resident, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

"Our actors eat the box office!" and "If you can't curse convincingly, don't curse."

Groundhog day letters instead of Christmas cards were another delightful bit of Porterfield's cleverness. These letters were short summaries of the preceding year, combined with small doses of philosophy and were sent to ardent theatre supporters, family, and friends. The letters began as follows:

#### GROUNDHOG DAY GREETINGS

I thought of you on

Lincoln's Birthday  
Good Friday  
Washington's Birthday  
Memorial Day  
Independence Day  
Labor Day  
Columbus Day  
General Election Day  
Armistice Day  
Thanksgiving Day  
Christmas Day  
New Year's Day

but most especially am thinking of you on this

#### GROUNDHOG DAY

I was married Oct. 6. Just Pearl and William, who jetted down from New York to hold me up knew. The first time I introduced my wife. . . I said, "Hugh, I want you to meet my wife, Mrs. Vance." The AP announced the marriage "Robert Porterfield Takes Mississippi Widow." 1965

At Stonehenge in England I really had a strange, goose-pimply feeling that I had been there in another incarnation and I said so to Mary Dudley. When at the ruins of the House of the Vestal Virgins Mary Dudley said "I have been here before in another incarnation." My laugh echoed through the Forum and I'm sure Caesar, Anthony and even Brutus must have smiled. 1966

I hope you realize you can't take it with you, even though they are now making coffins with pockets for those who wish to try. My good wishes for love that offers us escape from the unquiet world into the universe of private happiness. 1968

"Travel is good for culture and culture is good for travel." Since Governor Godwin appointed me to the Arts and Humanities Commission of Virginia, I thought the travel and the arts people should know one another. The Virginia Travel Council's theme for 1969 is "Virginia is for Lovers."

The dairy is fine. The only thing is one can't make money on a farm. As my grandfather, who ran "Twin Oaks" said, "You should only have things on a farm that reproduce themselves." The thing that is going to ruin the country is the fact that a tractor can't give birth to a bicycle.

We adopted Jay Bird. Once while struggling with him during a bath, I asked him if they didn't have a bath tub where he came from. He said he took a bath in a bucket. It's wonderful to get him out of that bucket.<sup>15</sup> 1969

To say that Porterfield was ambitious is an understatement, and the story of Barter's Awards Dinners are an example of his boldness. When he conceived the idea of presenting an annual Barter Award to a New York performer, he knew that he needed celebrities to attend the dinner. He asked a friend how he could "crash the Park Avenue crowd,"<sup>16</sup> and was given the name of a woman with whom to discuss his ideas. He called her and asked if they could talk, and she suggested that he come to her house at 7:30 P.M. on a certain evening. When he arrived at the apartment and rang the bell, the door opened upon a large party in progress and the lady rushed him into

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<sup>15</sup>Groundhog Day Letters, 1963, 1965, 1966, 1968.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Mrs. Robert Porterfield, March 1977.

the room saying, "Hurry up, come in, you're late. We're ready to hear you right now. Go on. We want you to talk about Barter Theatre."<sup>17</sup> Porterfield handled the situation so successfully that he continued to speak at dinner parties and meetings with the topic "Hams for Playwrights," through an arrangement with a professional lecture agency, and the membership at the first annual Barter Award Dinner was quite impressive. Laurette Taylor was the recipient for her performance in Outward Bound, and the presentation was made before an audience including Tallulah Bankhead, Katherine Cornell, Helen Hayes, Kate Mayhew, and Sophie Tucker.<sup>18</sup> Porterfield had brought Barter Theatre to the Park Avenue crowd and to the top of New York social circles which proved to benefit Barter on many occasions. Because of his friendship with Mary Chase, she allowed Harvey to be performed in Abingdon during the height of its run in New York.<sup>19</sup>

"At home with anybody" is a characteristic often used to describe Porterfield--"regardless of their station in life. He talked with Gregory Peck and a country farmer down the road just the same."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Idem.

<sup>18</sup>"Robert Porterfield: a memorial," (Bristol, Tennessee: Preston Printing, 1972), pp. 9-10.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Owen Phillips, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, October 1976.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Mrs. Robert Porterfield, March 1977.

He had a tremendous warmth and "folksy quality." He never made an audience feel no matter how much they were country people, that they didn't know what good theatre was. He had charm not only with people of the area, but he carried it into New York. He just took for granted that people would like theatre.<sup>21</sup>

He tried to be just as country as he could be. I remember there used to be a group of old women who came down from Richmond every year. Why, Bob made them feel like a million dollars.<sup>22</sup>

He could walk with kings nor lose the common touch.<sup>23</sup>

As charming as Porterfield could be, he was also firm and demanding. Mrs. French Moore, an Abingdon resident who has supported Barter Theatre since its founding, remembers him with a personal example:

He was not wishy washy. If he didn't like something, people would know it.

William King High School used the Opera House for their plays. Even after Barter took over, it was used for graduation and plays, and I was helping with a high school play when I heard his voice boom out--"Helen Moore, don't you know no one smokes in this theatre. Put that cigarette out!" I was so provoked. He was just dynamic--just a dynamo. I just loved him.<sup>24</sup>

The largest adjustment in Barter's history came on October 28, 1971, when Robert Porterfield, the founding director and manager of Barter Theatre since its first performance in June 1933, died of a heart attack. There was no question that Barter would continue to operate--Porterfield

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<sup>21</sup>Interview with Owen Phillips, October 1976.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Mrs. Fred Parks, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Rex Partington, March 1977.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Mrs. French Moore, March 1977.

had firmly established the Barter Foundation, Board of Directors, Friends of Barter, and had prepared the theatre operation for continuing in case of his death. The difficulty was in accepting a Barter Theatre without Robert Porterfield when the two had been synonymous for thirty-eight years. For a play to begin at the theatre without Porterfield's curtain speech seemed impossible. Long time supporters continually repeated the idea that the theatre was not the same without Bob and that the charm was gone without him, but in true Abingdon style these people continue to attend Barter and they expressed their support at memorial dinners and through memorial fund drives.

Those who attend the theatre and never knew Bob Porterfield do not experience his absence. For those who knew him, his absence is very real. Rex Partington was chosen by the Board of Directors to manage the theatre. Partington knew and loved Porterfield as many did, and he understands the feeling of knowing and regretting Porterfield's absence, but he performs his duties efficiently and believes that Porterfield would be proud of the path the theatre has taken since his death.



## CHAPTER II

## THE HISTORY OF BARTER THEATRE

Barter Theatre of Abingdon, Virginia, was founded in 1932 by Robert Porterfield and is now advertised in parts of Virginia and Tennessee as Robert Porterfield's World Famous Barter Theatre. Barter Theatre is also the State Theatre of Virginia and falls in the category of regional theatres as listed in Theatre in America, 1968 survey for the National Theatre Conference.<sup>1</sup> Ten to eighteen apprentices work at Barter each season, and since 1972, up to sixteen interns are employed with Barter's Equity company. In Sandra Schmidt's 1965 study of regional theatre statistics, Barter Theater then operated on a budget of \$125,000.<sup>2</sup> A yearly budget of \$250,000 to \$500,000 now supports the three hundred seventy-five seat theatre. This money is composed of: ten to fifteen percent state and federal subsidy, thirty to thirty-five percent private donations, and fifty percent in box office receipts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robert E. Gard, Marston Balch, Pauline Temkin, Theatre in America: Appraisal and Challenge (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Sandra Schmidt, "The Regional Theatres: Some Statistics," Tulane Drama Review X,1 (Fall, 1965): 50-61.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Rex Partington, March 1977.

Barter also operates a Playhouse in the summer months where children's shows and experimental plays are staged. Children may still barter for admission to the fifty seat theatre where interns and apprentices do most of the acting.

Barter Theatre, unlike any other U. S. regional theatre, has not always depended exclusively on cash for its operation. It is often said that Barter Theatre is "built upon heart," and although this may not be literally true, Robert Porterfield's conception of and dedication to the idea of a bartering theatre was one that required his lifetime in effort and the complete support of the Abingdon community where it resides.

#### First Season Involves Community

Although "theatre" can exist without a building, "a theatre" cannot. Barter Theatre as it is known today came into existence when the Abingdon Town Council allowed Robert Porterfield to use the Opera House rent-free to present plays six days a week--but never on Sunday. The Opera House had been built in 1830 and contained the jail underneath and the town offices in the front.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Plaque on the front of Barter Theatre, Abingdon, Virginia.



Porterfield accepted the condition and attempted to please Abingdon with his first season's plays, chosen for their family appeal and light tone. All profanity and vulgarity in scripts was eliminated or softened.<sup>5</sup> Porterfield recognized that his New York actors were different in many ways from Abingdonians, and he took several precautions to insure that the actors were not rejected by the community. One of the policies which he maintained until his death was for the actors not to socialize extensively with members of the community. He asked to be informed when a member of the acting company attended a private party or social gathering involving members of the community. His belief was that "you buy what you don't know."<sup>6</sup>

In the first season, being aware of the importance of religion to the people in Abingdon, one of his first requirements of the newly formed company was that they attend church on Sunday. "My first job, Porterfield recalls, was to convince them that the theatre and the church were not necessarily at opposite ends of the street."<sup>7</sup> According to numerous reports, on the Sunday before opening night, the actors walked from their residence at Martha Washington College to the

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<sup>5</sup>Anne St. Clair Williams, "Robert Porterfield's Barter Theatre of Abingdon, Virginia; the State Theatre of Virginia" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1970), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Pearl Hayter, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, January 1977.

<sup>7</sup>Brochure, "Visit the World Famous Barter Theatre."

Presbyterian Church several blocks away on Main Street for services. During the first hymn, Abingdon Presbyterians who might have reacted negatively to the group of actors sitting in the back pews were mellowed by one especially impressive baritone voice booming out the melody to "Rock of Ages." They also noted that the man sang without a hymnbook--like a true Christian. After the service, church members approached the actors to find out who possessed the talent to produce such a beautiful sound. H. H. McCollum was the singer. A Barter actor made a favorable impression on a group of Abingdon people before the first play had been presented. In fact, every actor was invited home with someone for lunch. McCollum later admitted that he knew the song, not from church but from having sung it in a Broadway play.

Besides the building, the Abingdon community provided props and costumes. Members of the company would go into town and knock on doors asking for needed items.<sup>8</sup> And, those who attended the plays provided the most basic necessity of all--food. Common bartered items were corn, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, milk, okra, and meat. Owen Phillips recalls coming to hate the sight of okra because it was so commonly bartered.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Interview with Mrs. French Moore, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>9</sup>Owen Phillips, "Lecture at Virginia Highlands Community College," 4 March 1976, heard on tape at Virginia Highlands Community College, 20 October 1976.

Famous Barter anecdotes revolve around box office activities involving bartered items:

On opening night a local farmer brought a sow to exchange for a ticket. His animal became legendary as the pig that made the greatest contribution to culture in Virginia. Not only did that pig represent bringing New York theatre to the country, but it and its descendants provided the hams that served as royalty payments to the playwrights who agreed to allow their plays to be presented on a barter basis.<sup>10</sup>

George Bernard Shaw allowed his play Candida to be performed for barter in 1936 and a ham was sent to him as royalty remittance. He wired back a thank you and one other statement: "I am a vegetarian."<sup>11</sup> Several years later, in 1939, he was asked permission for his play Pygmalion to be presented by Barter. He replied that he would release his play in Abingdon under the condition that he would not be paid with a ham. "Spinach would be acceptable," he suggested.<sup>12</sup>

Another farmer became legend when he brought a cow to the box office and asked how much milk would be required in exchange for a ticket. When he had milked that amount he gave it to the person at the box office. The box office attendant

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<sup>10</sup>Idem.

<sup>11</sup>Brochure, "Robert Porterfield presents the Barter Theatre."

<sup>12</sup>"Curtain Time," The Nashville Banner, 5 September 1956.

reportedly saw a woman with the farmer, assumed her to be the farmer's wife, and asked the farmer if he wanted a ticket for his wife also. To this the farmer replied, "Let her milk her own ticket!"<sup>13</sup>

At the end of Barter's first season of operation, food had been provided in such abundance that the actors gained a total of three hundred pounds and there was a small supply of canned goods to be stored away until the next season. Some pigs also awaited their turns as royalty payment on a farm in Glade Springs, Virginia.<sup>14</sup>

The most serious problem of the first year's operation was caused by Robert Thompsen's letters to his mother in Baltimore which were published in Baltimore's "Sunday Sun." His letters talked about the theatre being situated over the jail so that the performers and the prisoners could actually see each other. "I am awfully keen to know what they thought of my performance."<sup>15</sup> But his comments about audiences insulted some Abingdonians and became the focus of much controversy and several letters to the editor, especially his statement

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<sup>13</sup>Phillips, "Lecture at Virginia Highlands Community College."

<sup>14</sup>"Stage: Southern Farmers Swap Country Produce for City Plays," Newsweek VII, 7 (June 20, 1936), pp. 24-25.

<sup>15</sup>Baltimore Sunday Sun, 13 August 1933.

that "The farmer audiences are pretty funny." He elaborated that they whistled and cheered and laughed in the strangest places and "like to make strange sounds every time I kiss Eleanor."<sup>16</sup>

"Community Becomes Target for Ridicule by One of Her Beneficiaries" was the heading of a letter to Abingdon's Journal-Virginian from an angry citizen who suggested that Thompsen should go back to Baltimore and grow up. Thompsen apologized in the same paper, regretting that the "adverse fiction" was published.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not the letters were fiction or exaggeration is difficult to determine. An audience laughing and jeering at a public kiss in 1933 seems probable. The primary sources interviewed in this study do not remember anyone ever being thrown out of the theatre, but Thompsen's letters report that

some of the local young bloods were a bit 'high' last night and until they got put out in Act III, made acting rather hard. They'd brought stink bombs and they were very fine shots. There have been some hard moments in my nineteen years but none to compare with playing an emotional scene behind a beard with stink bombs on stage. The first few rows of the audience moved back but no one left.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, in the first year, positive community relations were fostered through card parties and a dance given as a benefit by the Hospital Club at the Barter Inn. Porterfield

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Journal-Virginian, Thursday 17 August 1933.

<sup>18</sup>Baltimore Sunday Sun, 13 August 1933.

and "Fitchie," former teacher at Martha Washington College, who had worked diligently in organizing the actors' residence, were married. Paramount did a news reel on Barter Theatre.<sup>19</sup>

#### 1934 Through 1941

The most notable change in the second season's operation was that patrons made their own decisions about the amount of barter they exchanged for a ticket. "Thirty cents or the equivalent in victuals" was the admission price advertised, but weighing and measuring everyone's admission was a tedious process. A scale balancing poultry and the masks of comedy and tragedy continues to be the symbol of Barter Theatre, but in 1934 the scales were retired from active duty. Actors did not go hungry.<sup>20</sup>

A difficult year for Barter was 1935. A movie chain had leased the opera house and forced Barter to relocate. Fortunately, the Stonewall Jackson College which had closed in 1932 was still vacant and Barter moved a mile northeast to a new home. One building was used for plays and another for housing. Furniture came with the facility and enough food continued to appear at the box office to feed the actors, but the movie competition caused a decline in attendance. A Kentucky neighbor, Judge Bodley, came to the rescue by promoting an all cash performance in Johnson City, Tennessee,

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<sup>19</sup>Barter Scrapbook, 1933.

<sup>20</sup>Barter Scrapbook, 1934-1935-1936.



stating in a letter to the editor that if people could pay cash to see movies, they could do the same service for Barter Theatre. A three hundred dollar cash reply eased the financial difficulty.<sup>21</sup>

In 1936, Barter performed its season success, Two Angry Women of Abingdon, in New York on September 13, and Macbeth was performed in New York in 1937.<sup>22</sup> Both of these performances received New York coverage. Bury the Dead was also included in the 1936 season, the play in which Porterfield had performed on Broadway. In New York, Porterfield was the second soldier.<sup>23</sup> In Abingdon, he played the leading role.<sup>24</sup> Winter touring groups operated each year which helped publicize the theatre and enhance its reputation.

In 1938, when Stonewall Jackson's furniture was to be auctioned, the Abingdon community donated \$2,000 for the purchase of beds, chairs, pianos, and linen.<sup>25</sup> The pride brought about by Barter's national recognition may have contributed to the energy required to collect \$2,000 for the purchase of the Stonewall Jackson furniture.

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<sup>21</sup>"The Barter Theatre; A History," Southern Theatre XV, 3 (March 1972), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup>New York Sun, 20 April 1936.

<sup>23</sup>Playbill, Bury the Dead, Barter Scrapbook, 1934-35-36.

<sup>24</sup>"Stage: Southern Farmers Swap Country Produce for City Plays," Newsweek, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup>New York Herald Tribune, 16 November 1938.

The annual Barter award was initiated in 1939 to honor a Broadway performer. Each year Porterfield would journey to New York for an awards dinner and presentation of a ham, a silver platter to serve it on, and the deed to one acre of Virginia land. The platter was designed by Mabel Ruskin, an Abingdon businesswoman who operates Cumbow China and whose shop has been a resource for many props used on Barter's stage. Both Barter and Cumbow China were founded in 1932.<sup>26</sup>

With the Barter award came the opportunity of selecting a male and female to be members of the Barter company for the next season. Laurette Taylor chose Larry Gates and Edith Sommers. In 1940, Dorothy Stickney received the award and her choices for the 1941 season were Evelyn Fargo and Gregory Peck. In 1941, Ethel Barrymore received the award and in order to expedite the auditioning of the four hundred performers who wanted a job at Barter, she allowed each actor one minute of audition time. Miss Barrymore's idea was that if there was talent, it would be obvious with one minute. If not, it would seem that the clock had stopped.<sup>27</sup> Robert Pastene and Charlotte Wilson were chosen and the one minute audition has been common. Porterfield introduced the procedure to the Southeastern Theatre Conference which he helped found.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Mabel Ruskin, at Cumbow China Shop, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>27</sup> New York Post, 7 May 1957.

<sup>28</sup> "From his friends . . . in memory: R. P." Southern Theatre, p. 9.



The Martha Washington Inn had been converted into a hotel in December, 1936, and housed tourists who came to Abingdon to see Barter plays. An annual summer festival had been instituted in Abingdon featuring a week's repertory of the season's best plays, arts and crafts displays, and special workshops such as a theatre clinic for high school and college drama faculty.<sup>29</sup> Barter had become well established in the community and Porterfield had tried new ideas and had begun to plan for the future. He attempted to form an artists' colony connected to the theatre, but abandoned the effort. Artists paid room and board one summer in order to work in a mountain retreat atmosphere stimulated by other artists.<sup>30</sup> Porterfield had begun groundwork for securing a regular state subsidy, organized Virginia Drama Directors into a society that exists today as the Virginia Speech and Drama Association, and he had done a survey of dramatic activities in the state. The study showed that Abingdon was faring well in a Commonwealth "critically lacking in dramatic activity."<sup>31</sup>

Hitler and Stalin had more effect on Barter Theatre in 1942-1945 than its founding director. Robert Porterfield was drafted to serve in World War II and the theatre closed. A tornado touched down in Abingdon in 1944 and took the roof

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<sup>29</sup>Poster, "Barter Art Colony," Barter Collection.

<sup>30</sup>Barter Scrapbooks, 1936-1940.

<sup>31</sup>Robert Porterfield, "How Live Theatre Won the State Legislature," Theatre Arts XL, 10 (October 1956): 64-65.

off of the old pool building of Stonewall where costumes, props, and scenery were stored. Everything was waterlogged, blown away, or destroyed.<sup>32</sup>

While Abingdon citizens were dealing with war-time rationing as opposed to Depression shortages, Porterfield spent time in the Navy. After the war he went to Hollywood where he secured a role in a movie, The Yearling. While in Hollywood, Porterfield met James Hilton, author of Goodbye Mr. Chips, who became a supporter of Barter Theatre. Mr. Hilton advised Porterfield to return to Abingdon and fight for his theatre after the war in spite of tornado damage and other difficulties.<sup>33</sup>

#### Theatre Reopens

In 1946, the "Opry House" again opened its doors as Barter Theatre on a rent-free arrangement with the Abingdon Town Council which also financed an annex to the building. Contributions and support were abundant, including gifts from actors in New York and Hollywood.<sup>34</sup> On April 3, 1946, the Virginia Conservation Commission approved a petition for state support of the theatre and proposed a \$10,000 contribution to the theatre. Barter became the first and only state subsidized theatre.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Roanoke World-News, 12 August 1949.

<sup>33</sup>Barter Scrapbook, 1957.

<sup>34</sup>Journal-Virginian, 25 July 1946.

<sup>35</sup>Brochure, "Visit the World Famous Barter Theatre."

The community was delighted over the return of the theatre, and it contributed to the renovation of the residence hall with physical labor, moral support, and donations of furniture, props, and costumes. Elizabeth Huffard, an aunt of Porterfield, organized the renovation. Two thousand season ticket books were sold. J. C. Vann donated a warehouse as a scene shop. Red Cross sewing rooms were converted into costume shops.<sup>36</sup> Prior to opening, however, the announcement that the post-war box office would be strictly cash caused a rift among the community.

The acceptance of produce and other barter, used by less than 10% of the customers in the early 40's was to be discontinued. The Abingdon community reacted negatively to the announcement; the community wanted the barter policy continued. Porterfield then announced that barter would be acceptable in Abingdon; during out of town tours however, the box office would operate only on a cash basis since the actors and the technicians had to be paid in cash to meet their expenses and road travel.<sup>37</sup>

Antoinette Perry for whom the famous Tony awards are named also contributed to Barter's reopening with the donation of old sets from the touring production of Rose Marie.<sup>38</sup> Blithe Spirit opened the 1946 post-war return of Barter to Abingdon. The New York Times Magazine covered Barter Theatre's re-opening and the drama festival was very popular.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Richmond Times-Dispatch, 19 May 1946.

<sup>37</sup>Journal-Virginian, 6 June 1946.

<sup>38</sup>Williams, "Robert Porterfield's Barter Theatre of Abingdon, Virginia; the State Theatre of Virginia," p. 115.

<sup>39</sup>New York Times Magazine, 23 June 1946.

Actors now recieved Equity minimum salaries.<sup>40</sup> An unsuccessful attempt was made to promote "city nights" during this season. A junior players and directors' seminar also failed. A power failure on July 6 prompted a performance of Stage Door by candlelight.<sup>41</sup>

Porterfield had become friends with Robert Breen during the war. In conjunction with the American National Theatre and Academy, of which Breen was executive director, the two former soldiers proposed a plan for a public theatre foundation to promote theatre on a national level, which was ANTA's basic purpose. The foundation would be governed by a six member board and money would be developed and controlled centrally. The plan gained no momentum.<sup>42</sup> Another later ANTA idea suggested fourteen regional centers for theatre, all of which would open on the same night and tour their respective regions. Organizations would be on a national level.<sup>43</sup> The idea of a chain of theatres across the country, all sharing opening night is dramatic and exciting, but neither proposal "went beyond the pages of Theatre Arts."<sup>44</sup> Porterfield had

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<sup>40</sup>Bristol Herald Courier, 26 May 1946.

<sup>41</sup>"Bring Your Beans and See the Show," The Commonwealth, August 1935, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup>Robert Porterfield and Robert Breen, "Toward National Theatre," Theatre Arts V, XXIX, 10 (October 1945): 594-601.

<sup>43</sup>"Anta's 40-Theatre Circuit Plan: ANTA's First Step in the Creation of a National Theatre," XXXIX, 12 (December 1955), pp. 67-82.

<sup>44</sup>Joseph Wesley Ziegler, Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage (minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1973), p. 126.

gained national attention through the proposals, and Breen and ANTA supported a Barter tour to Denmark in the 1950's.

The theatre was operating smoothly, but Porterfield always had new ideas for improving community relations. In 1949, he helped organize the Washington County Historical Association. With their involvement, the annual drama festival expanded into a popular Arts and Crafts Festival.<sup>45</sup> The Virginia Highlands Festival is held each August in Abingdon during which time Barter offers popular plays of the season in repertory. A student theatre guild was formed allowing students to use Barter's scenery and costumes. Snacks were served in Barter's cafeteria after the play in an effort to bond community and theatre. A talent search for local actors was used as a promotional device. Winter tours continued and spread Barter's reputation, making Abingdon residents more proud of their theatre.<sup>46</sup> Porterfield was still lecturing around the country about "Hams for Playwrights," and in 1948 he received an honorary degree from Hampden Sydney and the Antoinette Perry Award for his outstanding contribution to the theatre.<sup>47</sup>

Mary Grey Hoisery Mill began a continuing arrangement with the theatre of presenting a pair of hose to the person

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<sup>45</sup>Williams, "Robert Porterfield's Barter Theatre of Abingdon, Virginia; the State Theatre of Virginia," p. 164.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>47</sup>John Parker, compiler, Who's Who in the Theatre (New York: Pitman Publishing, 1972), p. 1299.



attending each Barter performance for the first time from the farthest distance. The gift later became a mug from Iron Mountain Stoneware, a pottery business located near Damascus, Virginia. Barter Opening Night Association (BONA) was originated and members wore 1930's clothing and bartered for admission to a play.<sup>48</sup> The center building of Stonewall Jackson was bought by the theatre with the assistance of James Hilton.<sup>49</sup>

In 1953 the Abingdon community made major contributions to Barter by extending the lease agreement on the building and footing half the bill for a new air conditioning system. Also in 1953, the Empire Theatre was being demolished on Broadway and 34th Street in New York, and Lady Astor donated the interior of the theatre to Barter upon Porterfield's request. The Barter crew had permission to begin moving on Friday before the demolishing crew began work on Monday. With the assistance of the town's Junior Chamber of Commerce, seats, curtains, lights, and decorations were transported to Abingdon. In Porterfield's curtain speeches, he often mentioned the Empire Theatre and Katherine Cornell whose picture came with the Empire's interior and found its home close to the Abingdon stage.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Barter Scrapbooks, 1948-1952.

<sup>49</sup>"The Barter Theatre," Southern Theatre, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup>Barter Scrapbooks, 1952-1954.

In 1955 Ernest Borgnine received the Academy Award as Best Actor for his performance in the movie Marty. When he received his award, he thanked Barter Theatre and Robert Porterfield for giving impetus to his career. Borgnine was featured on the "This is Your Life" television program and Porterfield appeared on the program.<sup>51</sup> This type of national publicity has been invaluable to Barter in attracting an audience as well as instilling pride in the community's attitude toward the theatre.

A 1956 performance by Susan Reilly, well-known television star, attracted attention to Barter,<sup>52</sup> and yearly Barter awards continued in New York involving popular performers such as 1955's winner Mary Martin for her performance in Peter Pan, Julie Harris in 1956 for The Lark, and Robert Whitehead, first producer to receive the award in 1959. When David Wayne received the Barter Award in 1954 and was attempting to choose apprentices for a season at Barter, auditions were interrupted by a stagehands' strike at the Martin Beck Theatre. The auditions were moved into the street. Porterfield called the newspaper and pictures of the "Alley Auditions" were widely circulated. Paul Lukather and Phyllis Wynn were the winners.<sup>53</sup> The "Alley Auditions" illustrate Porterfield's

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<sup>51</sup>The Roanoke Times, 13 November 1956.

<sup>52</sup>Bristol Herald Courier, 24 August 1956.

<sup>53</sup>"The Barter Theatre," Southern Theatre, p. 17.

resourcefulness in profiting from adversity.

With the secure foundation established by the fifties and more stability with the purchase of the Martha Washington Inn in 1955, Porterfield began experimenting with new ideas to promote the theatre. Washington County was using the first floor of Barter's rehearsal building as a library on a rent-free arrangement with Barter. The library needed new shelves, so Barter hosted a "Board Party." Everyone brought a board to be used in building the shelves.<sup>54</sup>

In trying to improve relations with the community, Porterfield made several efforts at after-theatre parties and receptions. At different times they were held on the grounds of the Martha Washington and behind the Cave House, a craft shop on Main Street about one half of a mile from the theatre. Porterfield called them "Chez Robert" and said their purpose was so the audience could watch the actors eat. There was little intermingling between the townspeople and the actors. However, Pearl Hayter, current business manager says that some interest has been expressed from the community in reviving the Chez Robert idea. Lack of staff prevents the effort.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Bristol Herald Courier, 9 March 1954.

<sup>55</sup>Interview with Pearl Hayter, Abingdon, Virginia, January 1977.



1957 marked Barter's twenty-fifth year of operation, an event which prompted a video taping of the opening for the Arlene Francis "Home Show" on television and the making of a film by Paramount of the occasion.<sup>56</sup> A Bristol garden club planted what is now known as the "Shakespeare Garden" behind the Barter Inn. The garden still exists, growing some herbs and flowers that were common in Elizabethan England.<sup>57</sup> Porterfield narrated "Peter and the Wolf" with the Kingsport Symphony Orchestra, once again testifying to his belief in the importance of local promotion.<sup>58</sup> In July, 1958, Porterfield paid his actors with silver dollars so that local merchants could realize just how much financial benefit they got from Barter's presence. The fact that most of the silver dollars wound up at the liquor store did not receive a lot of publicity.<sup>59</sup> The community might have criticized.

#### Barter in the Sixties

Abingdon was judgmental in the sixties, creating so much controversy over Cat on a Hot Tin Roof that the show was cancelled during the second week and replaced with Rumplestiltskin. One member of the Barter staff insists that the reason for the substitution was because one of the actors was having

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<sup>56</sup>The Charlotte Observer, 16 June 1957.

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Ken Swiger, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, October 1976.

<sup>58</sup>Program, "Peter and the Wolf," Barter Collection.

<sup>59</sup>Interview with Owen Phillips, October 1976.

throat troubles. Another source says that church leaders prompted the Washington County Library to sponsor Rumplestiltskin. Cat, however, was not repeated at the end of the season at a time when all plays were being repeated.<sup>60</sup>

Another promotional gimmick attempted and abandoned was to have a "Guest for a Day" in Abingdon. An out of state car was stopped and given lunch, dinner, tickets to a Barter play, motel accommodations and breakfast. The practice was abandoned after only one week. An attempt to arrange a New York tour from the Abingdon community was also unsuccessful. Only eight people registered to go. Even though some promotional ideas failed, the theatre generally prospered with main stage plays, Playhouse productions, and tours.<sup>61</sup>

In 1962, financial community support was again required to raise \$25,000 in order to secure a \$100,000 Old Dominion Foundation Grant.<sup>62</sup> James Hilton died and left literary rights to Lost Horizons and Goodbye Mr. Chips to Barter.<sup>63</sup>

School performances at special rates began, highway signs noted Barter Theatre location, Tennessee Williams came to Abingdon to rewrite The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore,

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<sup>60</sup>Interview with Pearl Hayter, January 1977, and Survey questionnaires, December 1976.

<sup>61</sup>Barter Scrapbooks, 1960-1961.

<sup>62</sup>Kingsport News, 22 February 1967.

<sup>63</sup>"The Barter Theatre," Southern Theatre, p. 16.

CBS filmed a special on Barter to be shown in an "America" sequence, and Friends of Barter was formed.<sup>64</sup> This organization is composed of theatre supporters from the region surrounding Abingdon. Each member sells season memberships to Barter. Twenty-six areas were represented in 1976 and were responsible for 1,013 of the 1,981 season books sold.<sup>65</sup>

Mary Dudley Vance who had organized Friends of Barter and Porterfield were married in 1965. She says that Robert was fond of saying that the marriage came after he fired her.<sup>66</sup> She was hired under a special one year funding for establishing the community organization. Mrs. Porterfield says that Robert was a very difficult employer.

I tell you, Bob was the hardest person to work for I've ever seen the likes of. Everything had to be letter perfect. . . He was traveling back and forth to New York. I had to make speeches. He sent me to Saltville to talk to the Rotary Club. I got there and it was the Kiwanians. . . He loved to say he fired me.<sup>67</sup>

Friends of Barter has probably directly involved more members of the Abingdon community in helping Barter than any other attempt since the theatre's re-opening after the war.

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<sup>64</sup>Williams, P. 239.

<sup>65</sup>"Patron Membership Book Sales," typewritten.

<sup>66</sup>Interview with Mrs. Porterfield, March 1977.

<sup>67</sup>Idem.

The annual "Friends" luncheon is heavily publicized in each town and provides an opportunity for community members to be identified with the theatre and to promote the theatre to their friends. For example, a typical publicity article features a picture of Rex Partington with supporters and lists of everyone who have tickets for sale.<sup>68</sup>

After a visit to theatres around the country, Robert Porterfield observed that no regional theatre had outlived its founding director. He was determined not to let the same fate befall Barter. In an effort to plan for Barter's ongoing growth, Peter Culman had been given increasing responsibilities in the sixties leading toward a job in management. In 1966, Porterfield left Abingdon to visit theatres around the country and left Culman in charge. Culman was not successful. Three of Barter's staff members resigned; Culman staged a "happening" in the Playhouse in which the audience was bombarded from above and live animals roamed freely around the theatre. Some audience members were shocked and offended. Culman decided to "clean" a storage area and threw away valuable furniture and props. Upon Porterfield's return, Culman was fired.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Elizabethton Star, 9 March 1967.

<sup>69</sup>"It Could Even Happen Here," Variety, 31 August, 1966.

The theatre did not operate smoothly the following year. Pearl Hayter, the business manager, was in the hospital having a baby. Porterfield was on crutches because of a minor car accident; and, the Virginia Cultural Development Study Commission released their money through the Virginia Museum Theatre, overlooking Barter.<sup>70</sup> The National Arts Council did match \$25,000 funded by ever-supportive Abingdon.<sup>71</sup> Barter's festival offering in 1967 was a hired production of Stop the World performed by the Barksdale Acting Company.<sup>72</sup>

In 1967, the Olde West Dinner Theatre opened near Bristol which may have temporarily diverted some of Barter's audience. Dinner theatres, however, typically attract a somewhat different audience from regional theatres and although some Abingdonians who attend Barter also attend Olde West productions, the two theatres have no negative competition. As Owen Phillips says,

There's nothing like good competition to help the theatre. When someone sees a good play, they want to go again so they may say, 'Let's try Barter.' The thing you have to be concerned about is bad competition.<sup>73</sup>

Mr. Phillips returned to Barter in 1968 from the Wayside Theatre, in Middletown, Virginia, and helped in smoothing out the season's operation. Phillips had been with Barter

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<sup>70</sup>Williams, pp. 253-255.

<sup>71</sup>Kingsport Times, 21 February 1967.

<sup>72</sup>Williams, p. 257.

<sup>73</sup>Interview with Owen Phillips, October 1976.

for three seasons before the war and directed several productions for Barter over the years. As a result of this he was familiar with Abingdon and with Barter policies. He also became very close friends with Porterfield and currently serves as director at Barter.

In following years, notable events included a 1969 premier of The Incomparable Max by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, authors of Inherit the Wind and Auntie Mame.<sup>74</sup> In 1970 Porterfield was doubly honored by receiving the Southeastern Theatre Conference's Distinguished Career Award and by having a new Radford College building named "Porterfield Hall." By act of the National Endowment for the Arts Barter and twenty-three other regional theatres received grants of \$7,500 in 1971.<sup>75</sup>

#### Ongoing Community Efforts

Efforts continue to be made to increase audiences at Barter. Because of a \$7,500 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Barter presented a series of events to the public in 1976, free of charge, in an effort to spread the arts into the five state community served by Barter. Some of the events were in conjunction with the annual Highlands Festival and included (1) three workshops in mime with Avner Eisenberg, (2) lectures by Rex Partington, "Production at

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<sup>74</sup>"Yearly Productions," framed schedule on wall of Rex Partington's office.

<sup>75</sup>Interview with Ken Swiger, October 1976.



Barter: First Thoughts to Final Curtain," (3) lecture by author Daffi Nathanson, "Playwrighting for the Modern Theatre," and (4) author Ira Wallach, Composer David Spangler, and lyricist Susan Dias discussing their work on the musical comedy Sweet Mistress for its world premier at Barter.<sup>76</sup>

The Friends of Barter organization annually promotes season ticket sales. Abingdon "Friends" have always sold more than other towns, although Bristol, Kingsport, and Johnson City are larger in population.

TABLE 1  
SEASON TICKET SALES

	1974		1975		1976	
Abingdon:						
Friends	269	22	279	27	221	20
Box Office	162	11	176	14	334	19
Business Office	292	19	339	49	587	28
Bristol	210	7	210	11	185	8
Kingsport	<u>203</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>186</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>152</u>	<u>13</u>
TOTALS	1,597	127	1,581	138	1,838	143

SOURCE: "Season Book Sales," Barter Collection.

<sup>76</sup>Press Release, Typewritten, Barter Collection.

Twenty-one other small southwest Virginia towns have representatives as Friends of Barter, but most of the tickets are sold in Abingdon, Bristol, and Kingsport. Sales have increased each year from 1974-1976.<sup>77</sup>

According to the theatre, Barter depends heavily on tourist trade. Again, the population of Abingdon is a mere 4,376. Washington County's total population is only 14,857. Porterfield has been quoted as saying that seventy percent of the people who come to Barter drive over one hundred miles to see the plays.<sup>78</sup> An August 1975 survey by the theatre shows through fifty responses attendance by states at a performance of The Devil's Disciple during the Virginia Highlands Festival: Virginia--21, Tennessee--14, North Carolina--4, Maryland--2, Pennsylvania--1, West Virginia--2, Wisconsin--1, California--1, and Missouri--1.<sup>79</sup> Thirty-two of the fifty had known about the theatre for longer than ten years. Thirty-nine heard of the theatre by word of mouth as opposed to any printed matter. Twenty-eight had attended the theatre prior to the performance of Disciple. Eighteen were attending for the first time.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Bristol Virginia-Tennessean, 16 July 1970.

<sup>79</sup>"Summary of Audience Survey," typewritten, Barter Collection.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

The 1976 spring performances for schools were seen by 13,813 students. Abingdon High School took the largest number of students: four hundred and twelve. Bristol Virginia Junior High School also took over four hundred students. Twenty-six of the 177 groups were elementary students. The Glass Menagerie and You Can't Take It With You were the plays presented in April and May weekday matinees.<sup>81</sup>

According to the 1976 Barter Foundations Contributions and Receipts report (1975-1976), approximately \$3,800 of the \$24,419 in private donations was given by members of the Abingdon community.<sup>82</sup>

#### Other Community Interaction

Virginia Highlands Community College in Abingdon has arranged a program which allows students to take advantage of Barter's excellence by observing rehearsals and in some cases, appearing on stage. Richard Leigh composed and performed music for Spoon River Anthology in 1971 as a student at the community college.<sup>83</sup> Jeff Dalton was singer and narrator for The World of Carl Sandburg in 1970.<sup>84</sup> William Van Keyser, drama instructor at Virginia Highlands, was employed

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<sup>81</sup>Reservation List From Schools, typewritten, Barter Collection.

<sup>82</sup>"The Barter Foundation, Inc. Contributions and Other Receipts, November 1, 1975, through October 31, 1976," typewritten.

<sup>83</sup>Program, Spoon River Anthology, Barter Theatre.

<sup>84</sup>Barter Scrapbook, 1970.

by Barter Theater to choreograph Threepenny Opera and some of his students were used as extras on stage. Cast parties consequently involved Barter and Abingdon people.<sup>85</sup> This interaction represents Barter's respect for local theatrical activity as well as a mutual admiration from the theatrical community and is a very positive aspect of community relations.

Community support has remained strong. The Town Council shared the cost of a new marquee in 1972. Recent special events have been attractive to Abingdonians: Will Geer performed a benefit show for Barter in 1973; Mary Chase, author of Harvey, premiered a new play, Coctails for Mimi, at Barter in 1975; Sweet Mistress was a world premier musical in 1976. In 1975, Barter moved to Norfolk, Virginia's Chrysler Theatre for a full winter season, a new effort in expanding Barter's program. Support was not as great as expected and in 1976, Barter remained in Abingdon and continued a regular winter tour.<sup>86</sup> Barter's upstairs art gallery often features local talent, and the Abingdon Rotary Club holds its annual minstrel on Barter's stage.

The following 1976 survey shows that Abingdon loves Barter Theatre and supports it morally, financially, and in attendance. Pearl Hayter says that no one has refused her

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<sup>85</sup>Program, Threepenny Opera, Barter Theatre.

<sup>86</sup>Interview with Ken Swiger, at Barter Inn, October 1976 and March 1977, and Barter Scrapbook, 1975.

requests to purchase an advertisement for the Barter program. "The Today Show" featured Bob Porterfield's "Groundhog Day Letters" on February 2, 1977, a great bit of publicity for Barter and another tribute to the genius of Robert Porterfield.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Interview with Pearl Hayter, January 1977.

### CHAPTER III

#### PRESENT ATTITUDES OF THE ABINGDON COMMUNITY TOWARD BARTER THEATRE

##### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: (1) How many Abingdon people attend Barter Theatre? (2) What is the frequency of their attendance? (3) What percentage of those attending are residents of the city of Abingdon? (4) What percentage of those attending are residents of rural Abingdon? (5) How many Abingdonians attended the theatre under the bartering system? (6) What are some of the general feelings of the Abingdon community toward the theatre?

##### Definition

For this study, Abingdon is defined by the area served by the Abingdon exchange of the United Intermountain Telephone Company. This area corresponds to the area which supplies students to Abingdon High School as shown in Appendix A. The city limits of Abingdon would have been too restrictive as a boundary for the purposes of this study by eliminating several subdivisions immediately outside the city limits. These subdivisions are commonly referred to as "town." Farmers and other land owners surrounding the town would be eliminated



in surveying only the area within the city limits of Abingdon. Labeling the entire Washington County area as Abingdon would also have been inaccurate because the county includes the small towns of Damascus, Glade Springs, and Meadowview as well as an area which includes some subdivisions and businesses commonly associated with Bristol, Virginia, a larger city located twelve miles from Abingdon.

### Procedure

TABLE 2  
SURVEYS COMPLETED

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Survey attempts . . . . .	150*
"Not in service". . . . .	14
Eliminations. . . . .	2
Not contacted . . . . .	<u>5</u>
Completed questionnaires. . . . .	129**

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\*Every thirtieth of the 4,534 households listed in the Abingdon exchange of the United Intermountain Telephone Company.

\*\*86% of survey attempts and .028% of total households in Abingdon.

The Abingdon community was surveyed by telephone. A random choice of subjects was made by listing every thirtieth household of the 4,534 households listed under the Abingdon telephone exchange, a total of 150 subjects. Of the 150, 131 were contacted.

The questionnaire in Appendix B was duplicated, and one was completed for each of the 150 subjects at the time of the telephone interview. In attempting to make contacts, a complete progression through the alphabetical order of subjects was made without back-tracking to try again if no one answered or if there was a busy signal. Most of the calls were made in the afternnon, between 1:00 P.M. and 5:00 P.M. After three times through the alphabetical order of subjects, calls were made at night, between 7:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M., and most of the numbers not answering in the daytime were reached. Only five of the households with working telephone numbers were not contacted. Fourteen of the selected numbers were "not in service" and two of the questionnaires were eliminated due to internal inconsistencies, such as not remembering if they had attended Barter or confusing it with a film theatre.

With 150 attempts, fourteen phones out of service, five not contacted, and two eliminations, 129 completed survey questionnaires, a percentage of 2.8 of the Abingdon households were used to analyze the attitudes of the 4,534 Abingdon residents toward Barter Theatre.

Attendance Results

TABLE 3

## ABINGDON ATTENDANCE OF BARTER THEATRE

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Have attended Barter Theatre . . . . .	82	63%
Have never attended Barter Theatre . . . . .	47	36%
Attended Barter Theatre in:		
1975-1976. . . . .	24	
1974-1975. . . . .	39	49%
Have attended Barter since 1974. . . . .	63	49%
Have attended under the barter system. . . . .	10	8%

---

Of 129 responses, eighty-two subjects have attended Barter Theatre. Forty-seven have never attended. Twenty-four of the 129 attended in 1975-76; thirty-nine attended in 1974-75. Sixty-three respondents, almost half of the Abingdon residents surveyed, had attended Barter Theatre at least once in the two years immediately prior to this study.

TABLE 4  
 FREQUENCY OF ATTENDANCE OF BARTER THEATRE  
 BY THE ABINGDON COMMUNITY

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Have attended but do not attend regularly . . . . .	38
Attended only as a member of a student group . . . . .	14
Attendance times per year:	
one. . . . .	11
two. . . . .	11
three. . . . .	6
four . . . . .	4
five . . . . .	5
six. . . . .	0
seven. . . . .	1
eight or more. . . . .	5

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N=129

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Sixty-three percent of the respondents had attended Barter Theatre. Thirty-eight people, 29%, answered that they attended infrequently or had been once or twice. Fourteen of the thirty-eight had only attended as a member of a student group at one of the special performances given for the schools each spring prior to the official opening of the season. Eleven answered that they average attending a play only one time a year. Eleven attend twice a year; six attend three times a year; four attend four times a year; five attend five times a year; one attends seven times a year; and five answered that they attend eight or more times per year.

TABLE 5  
PERCENTAGE OF ATTENDANCE ACCORDING TO FREQUENCY

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Seldom attend . . . . .	46%
Attended only with a school group . . . . .	11%
Attend one to four times a year . . . . .	39%
Attend five or more times per year. . . . .	15%

---

Grouping the frequency levels shows that forty-six percent of the Abingdon residents surveyed seldom attend the theatre. Seldom as defined here includes those who have attended only once, twice or more, but who do not average seeing one play a year. Thirty-nine percent of those surveyed say that they attend one to four times per year. Fifteen percent say they attend the theatre five or more times per year.

Thirty-seven percent of those who seldom attend had only seen a Barter play as a member of a school group. Of the total number of subjects, 11% had only attended as a member of a school group. Other infrequent attenders reported reasons such as (1) taking out of town guests, (2) receiving free tickets through employers or from Robert Porterfield, or (3) curiosity about the theatre for their occasional visits to the theatre.

TABLE 6  
ATTENDANCE BY TOWN AND RURAL  
RESIDENTS OF ABINGDON

	R-Group*	T-Group*
Have attended	34	48
Have never attended	35	12
Attended 1974-1976	14	49
Attended four or more times per year	0	14

\*R-Group: N=69; Abingdon residents with rural route or road address.

\*T-Group: N=60; Abingdon residents with street or subdivision address.

Questionnaires were divided by mailing address in order to determine any differences in attendance habits between town residents and rural residents. All rural routes and roads were categorized as "R" for "rural," and street addresses and subdivisions were labeled "T" for "town." Sixty-nine questionnaires were in the "r" category and sixty were in the "T" category. The natural balance of the two groups allows comparison.

More town people (48) have attended the theatre than rural people (34). More rural people (35) had never been to the theatre than town people (12). Forty-nine town people had attended Barter Theatre during 1974-1976. Fourteen rural people had attended during the same period.



None of the "R" respondents reported attending the theatre more than four times per year. Fourteen of the "T" respondents attended more than four times per year.

TABLE 7  
ATTENDANCE BY THE BARTER SYSTEM

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Have bartered for admission to a play . . . . .	10
Have bartered for admission to Barter's Playhouse . . . . .	8

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Eight percent (10) of the subjects of this survey at one time exchanged calves, preserves, eggs, chickens, onions, potatoes, spinach, beets, radishes, cabbage, lettuce, hominy, sauerkraut, okra or other victuals for admission to a play. One lady reported bartering "that good fresh corn rite out o' th' garden," and she also always had a "standing reservation for opening night ever since Barter started." Other subjects remember taking gallons of June apples, some green peppers, "a big bunch of snapdragons--all I could hold in both hands," and "some furniture that my husband made for them when they were up at Stonewall Jackson."<sup>1</sup> Stonewall Jackson was the college where Barter plays were performed from 1933-35 when a movie chain rented the town hall and padlocked the

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<sup>1</sup>Quotes from survey forms as illustrated in Appendix B.

doors. Eight others have bartered for admission to the Playhouse to take children to children's plays or to see experimental productions.

### Other Results

#### Positive Feelings

TABLE 8

#### ATTITUDES TOWARD BARTER'S EXISTENCE IN ABINGDON

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Subjects making definitely positive statements about Barter's existence in Abingdon . . . . .	51	40%
Subjects making definitely negative statements about Barter's existence in Abingdon . . . . .	6	5%
Subjects making neither definitely positive nor definitely negative statements about Barter's existence in Abingdon. . . . .	72	55%

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Fifty-one responses included definitely positive statements about Barter Theatre. Six comments were negative toward the theatre. Exemptive positive statements include the following:

It's nice to have a world famous theatre in your own little town. It adds to the culture.

I would be stupid not to take the opportunity of going.

It's good for the town. Brings people in. Good for the Martha Washington Inn.

Without seeing the plays, it makes us feel proud. It's mainly the prestige of having it in Abingdon.

It's great to have. Amazing that it's not in Richmond.

I'm proud that it's here.

Like what they do--we're patrons.

I love the Shakespeare plays. The theatre is cordial, friendly. Always see friends.

I think we're fortunate to have it in this area.

Draws tourists. That's good for the town.

Negative comments included, "Don't like it--no reason," "Don't care much about it," and one man who completely disapproved of having it in Abingdon for religious regions.

#### Abingdon People Do Not Attend Barter

TABLE 9

#### ATTITUDES ABOUT ABINGDON'S ATTENDANCE PRACTICES

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Subjects believing that Abingdonians do not attend Barter Theatre . . . . .	4	3%
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Four people expressed the opinion that Abingdonians do not go to Barter and that the theatre is supported mainly by tourists. Comments included statements that "the ones who live around here don't attend much. It draws tourists;" "I've been there when I saw no Abingdon people. Audiences are from out of town--Bristol, etc;" "Local people don't support it like out of towners. It's for the tourists--the

local people go to say 'I've been to opening night';" and "I've heard people say that Abingdon people don't support it."

### Church and Religion are Important

TABLE 10

#### FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO CHURCH AND RELIGION

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Subjects referring to church and/or religion in survey responses . . . . .	21	16%
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Twenty-one people referred to religion in answering survey questions, revealing the strong influence of churches in Abingdon. Abingdon is considered to be part of the "Bible Belt" of the South.

Seven people gave religion as a direct reason for not attending Barter Theatre. Some comments were:

My husband is a preacher and I don't attend things like that. We try to stay away from shows and movies. Most all we do is go to nice clean places here and there to help things.

I've never been. They don't follow my belief. Since I became born again, I don't believe in movie stars.

Don't go to no theatres at all. Religious reasons.

Never been. Try to live right and do what is right and just don't approve. People who live right don't go to things like that.

One very vocal minister disapproves of the type of plays presented because some plays have been advertised as suitable for adult audiences only. Because the theatre is supported by tax dollars, this man argues that all of the plays should be suitable for audience members of any age.

There is an adverse association with Hollywood when you mention 'theatre' of decadence and degeneracy. I'm desperately concerned with: TV media and the effect that TV has on moral standards of the nation; the degree of violence; the sexual revolution and proponents of acceptance of homosexuality and lesbianism as a way of life that disregards accepted standards of life which are also negated by those in the theatre. I think the whole nation should wake up--so few realize what is going on. The American people are being brainwashed. Even some of my relatives believe in situation ethics advocated by 'libertines.' Barter shows violence and sex. It is sad that we can't have anything not associated with sex.

One lady's comment was not negative toward the theatre even though she does not attend because of her religious beliefs. "I don't know what they have there. I don't go to theatres; it's against my religion, but I don't object to it being there."

Of twenty-one references to religion, fifteen mentioned church as a preferent or habitual activity. Sixteen of the twenty-one respondents who mentioned religion in their comments had never attended the theatre.

## Some Plays Have Been Offensive

TABLE 11

## REFERENCES TO OFFENSIVENESS OF BARTER PLAYS

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Subjects who reported being offended by Barter plays . . . . .	4	3%
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There were four references to offensive language in Barter plays:

Never been. Just don't approve of the language. It reminds me of a bunch of clowns.

They used to talk kind of ugly. I could hear that on the streets. They're better now. I didn't go when I knew they had dirty ones.

I'm old fashioned. From what they say, I think some could be left out, like on television. I was born forty years too soon.

I've heard rumors that some words used might not be a good influence. If it's in the play, they have to use it.

Only one comment referred directly to sexual subject matter. Three others insinuated that sexual content offended them:

Sometimes they have dirty ones.

I don't go to plays like that.

Risque - dirty--made no sense.



## Barter Theatre Was Robert Porterfield

TABLE 12

## FREQUENCY OF REFERENCES TO ROBERT PORTERFIELD

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Subjects referring to Robert Porterfield when questioned about Barter Theatre . . . . .	11	9%
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The idea that Robert Porterfield was Barter Theatre recurs among the Abingdon community. Eleven people mentioned him in commenting about the theatre. Some people reported attending the theatre because of friendship or relation to Porterfield; some related famous Barter anecdotes beginning with "Bob Porterfield said...", and some people believe that the theatre will "never be the same" now that he is dead.

When Robert Porterfield was there, we attended regularly, but we lost interest after he died. We knew him quite well. He just was the theatre to us. Now we're more interested in the Olde West.

I miss Bob Porterfield.

I love their plays. Was a good friend of Bob Porterfield.

Since Bob Porterfield died, I don't know if the theatre has gone up or down.....

We all miss Bob, but I think Rex Partington is doing a good job.

I loved Porterfield--I like Partington, and Owen Phillips is a fine boy.

Bob was my second cousin. I remember stories he used to tell--the one about the farmer and the cow on opening night.

### Reasons Given For Not Attending

In spite of forty-five years of successful operation, Barter Theatre cannot attract some Abingdonians. Some claim to be too busy and pressured. Some of the subjects of this survey remain uninvolved in most of the activities around them. They give the followin reasons for not attending:

Never thought about it. Don't go out.

Never go nowhere.

Just never did.

Always laid out to go, but jest never did make it.

Ain't interested in much of nothing myself.

I go to the store and get groceries and come back and that's the only thing I do.

Just never cared anything about it.

Just don't go nowhere.

Don't go out much.

I'm too old to get out.

Three people reported that they did not have time to see a play, and two mentioned that money was a prohibitive factor.

### Activities and Entertainment

Almost every subject listed two or three regular hobbies or entertainment activities. Most commonly mentioned were church activities, movies, and sports. Seven people included attending the Olde West Dinner Theatre, which is located thirty miles from Abingdon, between Bristol and Johnson City, Tennessee, as an activity. Three people said they attend

the theatre in New York City, and six attend college theatrical productions in the area. Outdoor activities were the only other forms of entertainment mentioned more than twice. Activities mentioned once were bowling, horseback riding, farming, square-dancing, senior citizens' activities, travel, parties, and dances.

### Discussion

Conversations with Abingdon area residents about Barter Theatre prior to this study had revealed several recurrent ideas: (1) "the theatre is a good thing because it brings a lot of business to the Abingdon area," (2) "Robert Porterfield was a charming person and Barter is an extension of him," (3) "Barter plays were better in the past and were attended by many Abingdon residents," (4) "the plays got to be filthy," and (5) "Abingdon people do not often go to Barter--the theatre is supported mainly by tourists."

These pre-study conversations suggested greater enthusiasm for Barter's past than for its present. Many people readily shared well-known stories of Barter's early history, but information about current Barter history was less spontaneous. For example, one lady who has not attended Barter in many years reported that she and her family saw plays in the thirties and early forties in exchange for cabbage and potatoes, but when the plays "got so dirty," she and her family stopped attending. "Poor as we were, we always went to Barter."

Some of the ideas expressed hinted at a social gap - perhaps between (1) those who bartered for admission to a play in the past but no longer attended, and (2) those who continue to attend Barter plays. The latter group of people has been referred to as the "town/gown" group. This label may have evolved from formally dressed people stopping downtown traffic at a pedestrian crosswalk in front of the theatre and waiting on the sidewalks near the theatre before a play. Overnight tourists as well as area residents attending a play often eat dinner at the Martha Washington Inn across the street from the theatre and visit its gift shop or relax in rocking chairs on the front porch which faces Main Street until the theatre opens. The result is a small-scale theatre district atmosphere on the main route through town, placing those attending the play on display to those traveling through town. The main street of Abingdon lies on US 11 and was the primary road through southwest Virginia until 1962, when Interstate 81 was opened. It remains the main route for traffic traveling through Abingdon.

A social gap could exist as a difference in attendance habits between rural and city residents. Walter Hampden suggested to Porterfield in 1932 that farmers do not attend plays. Porterfield's barter system discredited that statement by being especially attractive to farmers during the Depression, but the current cash operation may uphold the statement. Rural residents near the small town of Abingdon tend to be

more church oriented for social interaction than business and professional people who often live in subdivisions closer to the city limits. For instance, cocktail parties, country club activities, and attending theatre may be more common to the latter group than to rural people who are more likely to disapprove of social drinking, country clubs, and theatre.

Trying to determine socio-economic standing was eliminated as being impractical for the methodology of this study. Even if the survey had been conducted by mail rather than by telephone, asking questions about occupations and income might have been offensive and might have reduced the number of responses. An evaluation of responses based on income, however, would be interesting.

### Conclusions

Most of the ideas suggested in conversations prior to the study did reappear in the survey. They include the following: (1) the theatre is good for Abingdon, (2) Robert Porterfield was Barter Theatre, (3) some plays have offended members of the Abingdon community, and (4) Abingdon people do not attend the theatre.

Fifty-one people made positive statements about the theatre's existence in the Abingdon community. Six of the subjects were negative toward the theatre.

Eleven people mentioned Bob Porterfield in commenting about the theatre. Three responses indicated less interest in the theatre without Porterfield.

No one reported terminating support of the theater because of being offended by a play, although eight comments referred to offensive material.

The idea of a social gap received little support, although this study suggested that rural people do not attend the theatre as often as town people.

The suggestion that Abingdon people do not support and attend the theatre is not substantiated by this study. Four subjects reported this attitude, but Abingdon people do support and attend Barter Theatre. Forty percent of the respondents made definitely positive statements toward the theatre, and sixty-three percent of the Abingdon population surveyed have attended Barter Theatre. Thirty-nine percent attend one to four times per year. Fifteen percent attend the theatre five or more times per year. Of the subjects who report not seeing Abingdon people in Barter audiences, an explanation could be that a large percentage of the small population of Abingdon extended over a seven month theatre season would allow only a small number of Abingdonians in any audience. Older Abingdon residents may not recognize new or younger members of the community, causing them to think that all the unknown faces belong to tourists rather than to Abingdonians. If Barter Theater is supported primarily by tourists, it is because of the positive reaction of tourists to the theatre.

Questions about attitudes from the theatre toward the Abingdon community are discussed in the following chapter.



In general, the results of this study show a strong support of Barter Theatre from the Abingdon community. The support in attendance and in attitude negates the idea maintained by some people that a few Abingdonians attend the theatre. Fifteen percent attend five or more times per year. Fifty-nine percent attended during the two year period prior to this study. Some who had never attended stated that they would like to go. Others who do attend stated that they would like to go more. The attitude of the Abingdon community toward Barter Theatre is overwhelmingly positive.

## CHAPTER IV

OTHER ATTITUDES OF ABINGDON RESIDENTS  
TOWARD BARTER THEATRE

To supplement the formal study of community attitude, interviews were conducted with Barter staff employees, Mrs. Robert Porterfield, Abingdon residents who have supported and attended the theatre since its beginning, and other community members who have been involved in Barter's operation. These interviews offered insight into the recurring ideas found in the study and revealed ongoing community involvement in the theatre's operation.

Abingdon's Way With A Stranger

A Barter brochure explains that when Robert Porterfield brought his actors to Abingdon he "had not reckoned with the way of Abingdon people with a stranger. Two thousand Abingdon folks looked on the actors as the legs of Satan."<sup>1</sup> Mrs. French Moore, a Barter supporter since its beginning, remembers the attitude. When asked if she felt the same way, she replied:

Well, yeah, we had a queer feeling about them, you know. They would lie up there and rehearse their plays and it was something we weren't used to, you know. Then they would come down the street and you could tell they

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<sup>1</sup>"Visit the World Famous Barter Theatre," brochure.

were so different from the people around here. I would say they were outlandish looking in comparison with the natives. Sometimes they were barefooted and partially dressed and then of course they brought the swearing and cursing that is in plays but people here didn't like that. There was really quite a bit of controversy over that at the first. Then they deleted it, but since then it has come back, but they don't say anything about it. They just go right on.<sup>2</sup>

One man never returned to the theatre after a stage reference to what men wore under their kilts, a remark that he considered to be distasteful.<sup>3</sup> According to attitudes expressed in this study, people who complained continued to attend the theatre. The few who may have been offended in the early days and still believe that Barter plays are "dirty" represent only a small portion of the community and have never endangered the theatre's existence.

During the sixties and the advent of theatre of the absurd at the Barter, some of the theatre's friends were a little unsure about the material being presented. Gradually the audiences began to understand the avant-garde drama. The audience reaction is still carefully considered in choosing a season, as it is in any well-operated theatre, but as late as the 1976 season some people walked out on a production of Beyond the Fringe. This British play satirizes a wide range of topics, including human relationships and religion. Some

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<sup>2</sup>Interview with Mrs. French Moore, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>3</sup>Idem.

people reacted to the play with discomfort. A member of the Barter staff says, "All of us were cringing at times wondering how things would be taken. Mostly people took them as satire, but some did walk out."<sup>4</sup>

This problem is not unique to a rural area. Andre Gregory observed sixty percent of an audience in Philadelphia walking out of Endgame because a nude breast was exposed. He was told by the theatre's board of directors to wait until the community was ready for such a production. His public reply was that theatre relates to life. The nerve of a community should be touched. "If we wait until communities are 'ready,' the regional theatre will disintegrate."<sup>5</sup>

The Abingdon community is more tolerant today than in early Barter days.

When we first came down here, a great many people looked down on the theatre. They just didn't know enough about the theatre, and I guess they didn't think much of actors and actresses. That was better then twenty years ago, but then a different group of people moved in. When we first came, if they did anything with a 'damn' or 'hell' it it, my goodness, you would think the world was coming to an end. Of course, the whole world has changed.<sup>6</sup>

Concern with language and sexual material has diminished, as has Abingdon's early distrust of actors and actresses. Barterites were the first "hippies" Abingdon ever saw, and they

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<sup>4</sup>"The Theatre of the Living Arts," Tulane Drama Review 11, 4 (Summer 1967): 18.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Mrs. Louis Shuman, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

had the reputation of being unclean. Often a dirty actor is a sign of a working actor or someone from the shop on a quick errand to pick up some hardware to finish building a set. People who are unacquainted with theatre activities could not be expected to realize this, and Abingdon people were wary of a group of people they did not understand.<sup>7</sup>

David Henry, now principal of one of the Washington County high schools, remembers working at a grocery store in downtown Abingdon where the actors came to buy lunch. Sometimes they would sing or rehearse lines walking up the street "in a kind of world of their own." He guesses that some of the Abingdon people thought they were strange.<sup>8</sup>

Because the life styles of Barter actors are a mystery they remain open to conjecture.

Some of the things I've heard about the players used to be pretty rough. Once Mr. Dan Graham (a well-known evangelist in the area) had a tent meeting. This boy and girl from Barter sat on the front and she unbuttoned her skirt to the top. My mother asked her to button it. She did, but then she unbuttoned it again. And they used to lay out in the sun naked. And had drunken parties. Mr. Paris worked for 'em and told me about the parties. He said they'd get drunk and not know in the morning whose wife was with who. In recent years, I haven't heard anything about them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Various interviews with Abingdon residents.

<sup>8</sup>Interview with David Henry, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>9</sup>Survey questionnaire, December 1976.

I've been around where they all stay. I don't cater to that type of living. I used to work at Barter Inn. They were rude, vulgar, half-dressed. I never seen anything outstanding about that type of people. And they appeared to be lower class people. I'm a country girl, and I was taught morals.<sup>10</sup>

You gotta admire those who came from the city to work here. I came to Abingdon as a student. The town was divided--the established people and the nurses and the Barterites. Barterites would sneak through the fence and go skinny dipping. Most people had crew cuts--Barterites had long hair. More what you'd call hippy-looking types. I had never seen an actor except somebody like Roy Rogers. The women wore weird eye make-up.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the possibility that some of the acting company ever went skinny dipping in the nurses' pool, Rex Partington, current managing director of Barter, says he doesn't know, although a very definite blushing reaction occurs and he recalls with a chuckle, "There was nowhere else to swim."<sup>12</sup> (He may have forgotten nearby South Holston Lake; and the nurse who remembers the occurrence did not express outrage that it had happened.)

One lady said the actors reminded her of a "bunch of clowns."

They overdo it on the make-up. I've seen 'em on the street. Oh Lord, you can tell the actors from all the other people. The talk is stupid. If I don't like it I don't attend it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Rex Partington, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>13</sup>Survey questionnaire, December 1976.



However, the negative attitudes are few, and two comments of the six references to the actors in this study were positive:

I like meeting the actors when they borrow props.<sup>14</sup>

Barter has wonderful plays and wonderful actors and actresses.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Porterfield made a conscious effort to keep his actors from socializing extensively in the community, believing that "you buy what you don't know." He requested to be told of any parties in the community which any of the actors attended. Rex Partington does not admit a hesitancy for his actors to socialize in the community, because he feels that the life styles of the Abingdon people and the Barter people do not contrast as much as they did in the theatre's early history, although one member of the 1976 Barter company, who desires to remain anonymous, says he feels that close social contact is discouraged.<sup>16</sup>

Actors interviewed agree that Abingdon is a friendly town. One description was of an "austere warmth."<sup>17</sup> The experience of the assistant costumer is "Just tell 'em you're from Barter and they'll do anything for you."<sup>18</sup> Now that

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with unnamed actor, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Mary Duff Parker, at Barter Inn, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

everyday fashion's boundaries allow most any clothing or hair style, including blue jeans for women and beards for men, no shoes and no bras, the Barter actors are indistinguishable from the residents of Abingdon. The costumer, indistinguishable from the customers in a local store, informed the store manager that she was from Barter, rather than having him say, "Oh, you must be from Barter."

When Mrs. Louis Shuman moved from New York to Abingdon during the 1950's, she was not employed by Barter, but was often asked if she were associated with the theatre.

I was an outsider myself and I think they saw me the same way they saw the actors, because I can remember going to different places, like downtown, and I guess that at that time I dressed differently from the town people. But anyway, people downtown would say "Oh, you're with Barter." I mean, I was not an Abingdonian so I had to be a Barterite. So, I assume that anybody who looked differently was an actor or an actress.

When asked exactly how she looked different:

You know, I really don't know how....I modeled and designed when I was younger. I don't know if I brought a big city look or maybe my make-up was different. I was never quite sure why they would say "you must be from Barter." I know I even went to get my license renewed and the female police woman said, "Oh, you must be from Barter."<sup>19</sup>

Mrs. Shuman was, however, an actress and acted in a Barter production of Midsummer Night's Dream in 1964 although she had previously had the "definite impression" that Robert Porterfield did not want anybody from the town being in the

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mrs. Louis Shuman, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

theatre. She learned that this was not the case when Pearl Price, the business manager, called her and asked her to read for a part; and later, her son performed some child roles in Barter productions. Abingdon's way with a stranger is interesting, and Porterfield's philosophy about buying what you don't know was probably a serviceable adjustment.

#### Porterfield's Influence Continues

The Abingdon area characteristic of knowing an "insider" from an "outsider" was beneficial to Porterfield. He often reminded the community that he was just a country boy and one of them. And he was loved by many Abingdon people. For this reason, some feel that the theatre lost its charm when Porterfield died. Rex Partington realizes this attitude exists and frankly admits dealing with it. "Of course the theatre is not the same without Robert Porterfield. The country is not the same without Abraham Lincoln either."<sup>20</sup> One lady's words are, "There's just nobody like Bob. Bob was just a country boy. Rex Partington says the same things, but it's just not like Bob. I don't feel as close to the theatre as I used to."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Interview with Rex Partington, March 1977.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with Mrs. Fred Parks, Abingdon, Virginia, March 1977.

The farther north he went, the more southern he got. He used that southern accent and in one show he had one line, "Have you seen Mr. \_\_\_\_\_?" Well, he rehearsed his line night after night, but on opening night he came out on stage in New York and when it was time for his line, in an exaggerated southern accent he drawled, "Have any of you all seen Mr. \_\_\_\_\_?" He got applause as he left the stage.<sup>22</sup>

This story seems to be compatible with a review of The Petrified Forest in which Porterfield appeared with Leslie Howard and Humphrey Bogart.

Humphrey Bogart is simple and veritable...A word, too should be said for Robert Porterfield. There is not enough in the character of the cowboy which Mr. Porterfield portrays to decide his abilities as an actor, but the round of applause which greeted his exit spoke volumes for his charm and personality.<sup>23</sup>

Other sources substantiate the appeal of his being "just a country boy." When Abingdonians were upset in 1933 by some published letters written to an actor's mother describing the community's "farmer audiences" as being "very funny," Porterfield wrote an apology letter for the Abingdon paper. "Being one of you, I appreciate your feelings, but please let us forget it, won't you?" And Porterfield managed to avoid the wrath that was directed at the entire theatre. In a letter to the paper regarding these letters written by an actor named Thompson,

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<sup>22</sup>Interview with Mrs. Robert Porterfield, at "Twin Oaks" in Glade Springs, Virginia, March 1977.

<sup>23</sup>Vernon Grenville, "The Play," The Commonwealth, January 1935, p. 23.

an angry citizen states:

Abingdon Virginia was not born yesterday. Hospitality has always been her key note--charity her watchword. If this young man can't decide on his future calling, let us decide for you sonny and suggest that you run along back to the parental roof and wait until you grow up. . . . In speaking of Marion, the reporter seemed so touched by the company's reception there, they must have played on the hill above Marion. We're sure Porterfield had no part in this.<sup>24</sup>

The reference to the hill in Marion is to the state mental hospital located there. Thompsen said that the Marion audience was the smartest audience for which they had performed. This letter alienated some of the "farmers" from the theatre. One eighty year old man says that he has never felt favorable toward the theatre since the Thompsen letters were printed.<sup>25</sup>

Porterfield's curtain speeches were appealing to audience members. Partington remembers admiring them from backstage as an actor and now executes them dutifully. Although Partington may be slightly uncomfortable in making the well-known curtain speeches, his discomfort has been interpreted as an air of superiority.

Rex is not humble. Bob was almost apologetic; he acted like he was floundering for words, getting mixed up and then coming out of it. Rex just spells it out.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Journal-Virginian, 17 August 1933.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with unnamed farmer, Abingdon, Virginia, April 1977.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Mrs. French Moore, March 1977.

Partington thinks everyone should realize that a man can't live forever, and he finds the people who come to the theatre to be warm, comforting, and welcoming. He says he loves the community.

The theatre is advertised today as "Robert Porterfield's Barter Theatre." The closing line of the curtain speech at Barter is, "In the words of our beloved founder, Mr. Porterfield, 'If you like us, talk about us; if you don't, just keep your mouth shut.'"



## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

Barter Theatre is significant in American theatre history, for it is both the first fully professional regional theatre and the first theatre to be recognized as a 'State Theatre' and receive state subsidy. Barter is located in the small rural town of Abingdon, Virginia, and is unique in the fact that it operates without the advantage of being located in or near a thriving metropolitan area. For this reason the theatre has always depended heavily upon community support for its survival. The name of Barter itself came from the original system of bartering produce for admission to a play during the Depression, a plan that benefitted both the actors and the local residents by providing food in exchange for entertainment.

Robert Porterfield, founder of Barter Theatre, was born in southwest Virginia and liked to characterize himself as "just a country boy." However, this country-boy demeanor masked a dynamic personality and innate intelligence which were the corner stones for the success of Barter. From the beginning, he realized the differences between the lifestyles of New York actors and rural residents and was acutely aware of the importance of developing strong community relations. Throughout the years Robert Porterfield worked closely with local people and organizations, fostering positive attitudes toward Barter

Theatre. His by-line would have to be considered the closing line of his curtain speech in which he asked "If you like us, talk about us -- if you don't, keep your mouth shut." His persistence in developing good community relations led many people to feel that "Robert Porterfield was Barter Theatre." Consequently, upon his death many area residents felt that the charm of the theatre was gone. However, this study has shown that in the last six years since Robert Porterfield's death the theatre itself has survived as a powerful force in the community, growing and developing from the initial influence of its founder.

Never a stagnant operation--always open to new ideas, the Barter Theatre has recovered from the death of Robert Porterfield, and under the management of director Rex Partington has continued its regular production schedule, established an intern program for pre-professional actors, and is currently considering a proposal to make the theatre a year-round operation.

Barter Theatre has been an integral part of the community structure of Abingdon since 1932, and during this time varied attitudes have developed toward the theatre among the community residents. It was the purpose of this study to factually survey the attitudes of community residents toward Barter Theatre.

It is important to realize that attitudes have vastly changed within the last forty-five years in almost every area of the social structure, and the attitudes of Abingdonians

toward the Barter Theatre are no exception. From an earlier assumption by some residents that the theatre was 'the workshop of the devil,' attitudes have become increasingly more positive, to the point that this study found generally favorable reactions to the existence of Barter Theatre in Abingdon.

The Abingdon community has undergone much change from the days when rural residents were mostly farmers, and city residents were mostly business and professional people. There are now more college-educated people in Abingdon, and as a result there is a greater appreciation of the theatre in general and Barter in particular.

As indicated in Chapter III of this report Abingdon residents now express definitely positive attitudes concerning the Barter Theatre. Sixty-three percent (63%) of the subjects interviewed have attended Barter, and forty-nine percent (49%) have attended within the two years immediately preceding this survey. Of an average of eight plays per year, thirty-nine percent (39%) of those surveyed reported they attend one to four times per year, and fifteen percent (15%) report attending five or more times a year, over half the productions per season. This is phenomenal if one could imagine the theatre capacity required to contain comparable percentages of the populations of Dallas or Washington, D.C., where two other prominent regional theatres are located.

Abingdon attendance frequency is the most valuable information revealed by this study. Other attitudes were difficult to categorize, although several themes were repeated often enough to deserve notice. These include Robert Porterfield's continuing influence on the Barter Theatre and the strong religious orientation within the community. All subjects recognized the name of 'Barter Theatre' and forty percent (40%) of this survey expressed without solicitation the community's appreciation of the theatre's contributions to Abingdon.

A possible future study could be a similar survey of attendance frequency in a larger surrounding community, including several of Abingdon's neighboring cities, in the state of Virginia, or in the five state region (Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and North Carolina) which surrounds Barter Theatre.

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Parks, Mrs. Fred, resident of Abingdon, Virginia, 10 March 1977.

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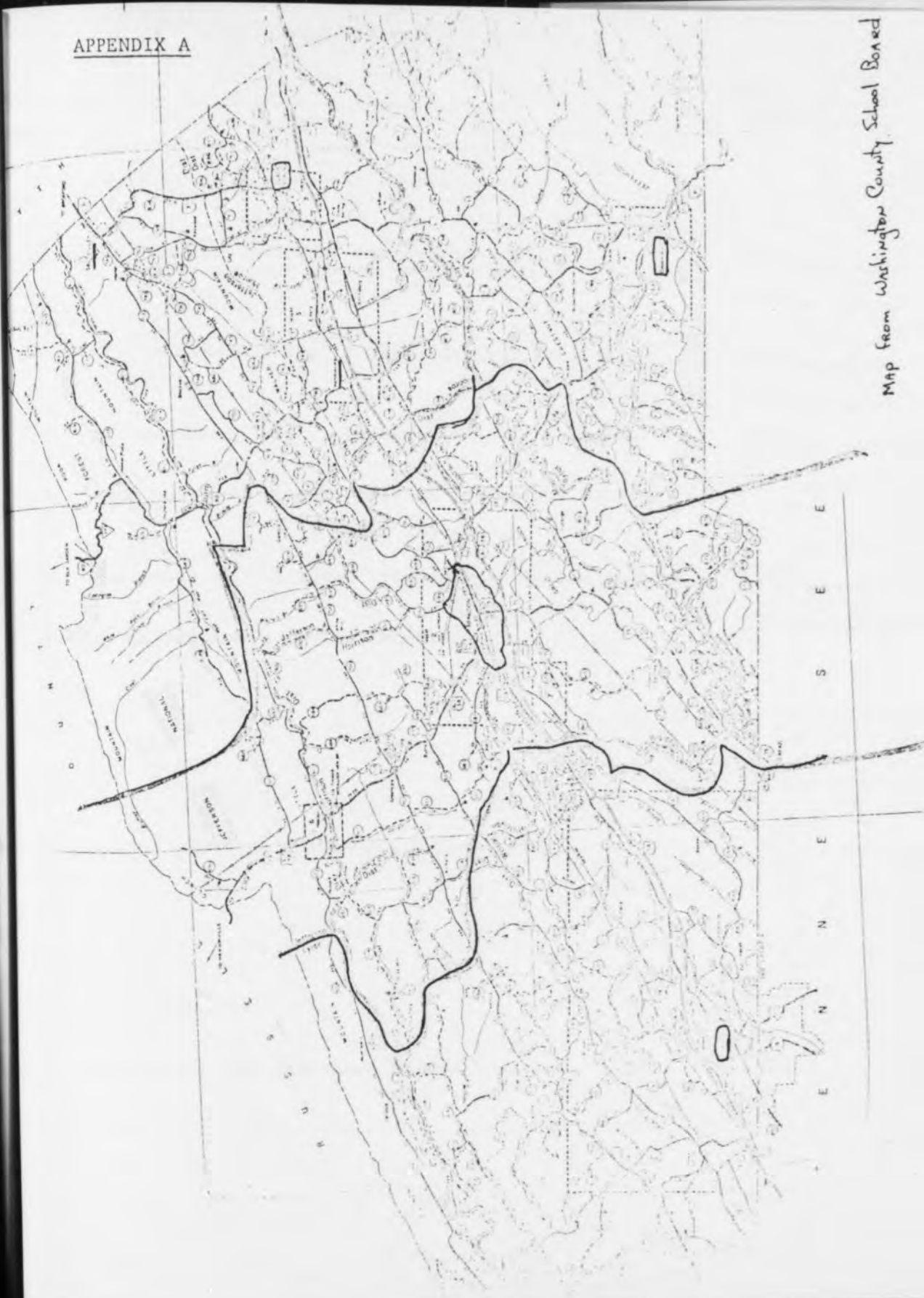
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APPENDIX A



Map from Washington County School Board

## APPENDIX B

Telephone Survey, December 1976

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

Male \_\_\_\_\_  
 Female \_\_\_\_\_

1. Have you ever attended Barter Theatre?  
 a. Why do you not attend Barter Theatre?  
 yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 no \_\_\_\_\_
2. Did you attend Barter during the past season?  
 yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 no \_\_\_\_\_
3. Did you attend Barter during the 1974-75 season?  
 yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 no \_\_\_\_\_
4. About how many times a year do you attend Barter?  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Have you ever "bartered" your way in to see a show?  
 yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 no \_\_\_\_\_
6. Why do you go to Barter Theatre?
7. What do you like about Barter Theatre?
8. What do you dislike about Barter Theatre?



## APPENDIX C

BARTER THEATRE AWARD WINNERS AND THEIR  
AUDITION SELECTIONS

1939	Laurette Taylor	Larry Gates, Edith Sommers
1940	Dorothy Stickney	Gregory Peck, Evelyn Fargo
1941	Ethel Barrymore	Robert Pastene, Charlotte Wilson
1942	Mildred Natwick	Paul Wasserman, Margaret Phillips
1943	Tallulah Bankhead	no audition - theatre closed
1944	**	
1945	**	
1946	Louis Calhern	Martin Waldron, Joan DeWeese
1947	Helen Hayes	Ray Boyle, Marion Wilson
1948	Henry Fonda	James Andrews, Virginia Baker
1949	Tallulah Bankhead	Robert Blackburn, Patricia Larson
1950	Frederic March	Jerry Rifkin, Ann Buckles
1951	Shirley Booth	Al Hudson, Rosemary Murphy
1952	Cornelia Otis Skinner	Charles Quinlivan, Sylvia Short
1953	Rosalind Russell	Charles McCawley, Grant Williams, Jane Moncure
1954	David Wayne	Paul Lukather, Phyllis Wynn
1955	Mary Martin	Jerry Hardin, Cleo Holliday
1956	Julie Harris	Aren Sundergaard, Marcie Hubert
1957	Ethel Merman	Mitch Ryan, Vienna Cobb Anderson
1958	Ralph Bellamy	Alex Murphy, Elizabeth St. Clair
1959	Robert Whitehead	William Corrie, Virginia James
1960	George Abbott	Donald Linaham, Diane Hill
1961	Hume Cronyn	Gene Coleman, Joan Lancaster
1962	Abe Burrows	Gerome Ragni, Tojan Matchins
1963	David Merrick	Michael Beirne, Melinda Dotson
1964	Robert Preston	Robert Jundeland*, Daryle Ann Corr
1965	Rober L. Stevens	Russ Murphy, Art Roberts
1966	***	
1967	***	
1968	Tom Prideaux	no audition
1969	Pearl Bailey	no audition

\* Decided not to work at Barter after winning the audition.

\*\* Theatre closed during World War II.

\*\*\* No awards presented.

The last presentation of the Barter Award was in 1969.

## APPENDIX D

## MAIN STAGE PRODUCTIONS OF BARTER THEATRE

1974 -- 1976

1974

Candida  
Scapin  
Torch-Bearers  
Straightjacket  
The Odd Couple  
Private Lives  
Beyond the Fringe  
Ten Nights in a Barroom  
Champagne Complex  
Silent Night, Lonely Night

1975

The Devil's Disciple  
The Diary of Anne Frank  
Beaux Strategem  
The Male Animal  
Broadway  
Light Up the Sky  
Biography  
Sleuth  
Two on An Island  
The American Experiment  
La Ronde  
Subreal

1976

The Glass Menagerie  
You Can't Take It With You  
The Threepenny Opera  
Democracy  
The Matchmaker  
The Little Foxes  
Sweet Mistress  
Beyond the Fringe