

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE FIRE HALL THEATRE

by Paul J. Schwartz

July 20, 1997
Dallas PA

From August 1982 to July 1984 I was President of the Greater Grand Forks Community Theatre (GGFCT) in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The organization had existed since 1947, but as far as I know had never had a permanent home. It performed in schools, churches, university buildings, a tent and often in hotels and restaurants. Sets, costumes, props, lighting instruments, etc., were stored in basements, rented storage units, garages, all over. Around 1980, the Theatre had come to an agreement with the University of North Dakota to rent space in the basement of the Chester Fritz Auditorium.

It was during the period of my presidency that the Theatre acquired its first permanent home. The creation of the Greater Grand Forks Community Theatre's Fire Hall Theatre consumed much of my time and energy during the period from the summer of 1982 to the summer of 1984. I don't think that the story is particularly dramatic, exemplary or remarkable. But it does tell a lot about life in a particular place at a particular time, and has a cast of characters who in addition to being either eccentric, heroic, devious, narrow-minded, frightened, domineering or dedicated, are also real people whose lives crossed mine and left an impression. Most of this narrative is

contemporary to the events it describes. As noted below, a large part of it was written in the Grand Forks City Council Chambers on June 6, 1983, while I was waiting for the Council to vote Community Development Funds for the Theatre. I've added some clarifying narrative, some information I learned later, and a conclusion which relates the adventure of the Fire Hall Theatre to the experiences of Grand Forks in the spring 1997 flood.

June 6, 1983, 7:50 P.M.
City Council Chambers
Grand Forks, North Dakota

Now that our theatre renovation project seems to be inevitably approaching its realization (though I still worry how long we will be able to keep it open), and while I still have some control over the details of the events leading to our present success, I will try to narrate, for whoever may be interested, all that I knew and still remember of the beginnings of the Greater Grand Forks Community Theatre's (GGFCT) Fire Hall Theatre.

I first became aware of the existence of the Fire Hall at a cast party at Fanny Gershman's house, in October, 1981. Fanny, the widow of Grand Forks' most successful "bottle shop" owner Happy Harry Gershman, was an active board member and generous hostess, who graciously opened her home for parties and fund-

raising events. At this particular party, given for the cast and crew of 6 rms riv vu, I was sitting at some distance from a group dominated by former GGFCT Board Treasurer Rick Winant, which was discussing the Fire Hall, inspired by a Chris Jacobs editorial in the local weekly Chronicle. In that editorial, Chris, who had an active interest in promoting the arts in Grand Forks, suggested that the city should, instead of demolishing the no longer needed fire hall next to City Hall, turn it into an arts center.

I remember hearing Rick exclaim loudly that the Board of Directors didn't have the guts to pursue the matter. The statement made me turn my attention towards the group, quickly enough to catch Rick's eye. Recognizing that I was a new appointee to the Board, he apologized in my direction, while maintaining the truth of his claim.

I had been a Board member only since that summer. In the three previous years I had appeared in four GGFCT productions, and had had a lot of fun while avoiding completely the business side of the enterprise. When in July of 1981, while vacationing in Arcachon, France, I received a letter from Board President Lynn Torrance inviting me to accept election to the Board, I responded enthusiastically. I felt that I owed the Theatre some time and effort, but I certainly had no idea what I was getting myself into.

I had no desire to pursue the matter with Rick, but soon found myself discussing the matter with another small group and

maintaining the position that we couldn't possibly afford the \$6,000 it would cost us annually to heat the building, and that we were better off renting the space we then occupied in the basement of the University of North Dakota's Chester Fritz Auditorium for \$3,000 per year.

It was a few weeks later that I had a phone call from City Councilman Reuben Larson. I didn't know him at all. He said he had gotten my name from Sally and Clyde Morris, friends of the theatre, and explained that he would like to give the Fire Hall to GGFCT rather than pay \$23,000 to tear it down and build a park. He urged me to talk to Council members in my district (Mike Polovitz and Ludwig Kulas) and press them to vote to give us the building.

I learned much later that Larson was a fanatic conservative whose role in government was to try to reduce expenditures. He fought funding for the city's rape and abuse crisis center and transportation for people with disabilities. Years later, after he had lost his Council seat, he was involved in one of the most bizarre incidents in Grand Forks history. It has nothing to do with the story of the Fire Hall, but sheds some light on the different interests involved in small city politics.

Larson had stopped filing federal and state income tax returns as early as 1976. In the mid 1980's he established a "tax consultancy" which advertised that he could help clients avoid paying taxes. In October of 1988, he was convicted of tax evasion and tax fraud charges which resulted in an 18-month

prison sentence. While in prison, his wife divorced him and won an order for child support. Following his release from jail on the tax evasion charges, he refused to comply with the terms of his probation and the child support order. He was jailed six times between February 1990 and July 1991.

At a child support hearing on May 5, 1992, before Judge Lawrence Janke, who had previously sentenced Larson to jail, Larson pulled out a pistol and shot the Judge in the abdomen. Larson then went to a radio station and left the following note with a receptionist: "Hi: My name is Reuben Larson. I just shot the judge, Lawrence Jahnke. They have continuously violated the law. They do not even follow their own statutes... I had to defend myself. A citizen has an absolute right to defend, to self-defense. Our courts do not respect the law. Rather there is piracy in our courtroom. The judges and lawyers live by their own laws. However, since there is an absence of law in our courts, except the judge's law, it is recognized that we must defend against this piracy by the judges." Larson was arrested a couple of hours later heading south from Grand Forks, was subsequently convicted of attempted murder, and sentenced to a maximum of twenty years in jail. Judge Jahnke recovered completely.

After talking with Larson, I immediately called Board President Lynn Torrance, who had been hearing about the Fire Hall from actress Maureen Srur (who also called me about it). Lynn asked me to find out what I could.

At this point I called Mayor Bud Wessman's Office to ask about the status of the demolition. I was assured by his secretary, Pat Owens, that the building was gutted and the demolition ball dangling over it. I reported this to Lynn who wondered aloud why people then kept bringing it up.

That afternoon I happened to be driving on 2nd Avenue North and found myself across the street from the Fire Hall. I had never even noticed the building before. I saw that the door was open and walked in. It was emptied but not gutted, and I was impressed by what I saw: a long, open, high-ceilinged structure on the main floor and a nice wooden floored rehearsal room on the second floor. I called Lynn back, told her what I had found, and suggested that we should pursue the matter.

Rick Winant and his wife Dorcey took a leadership role at this point. Rick volunteered to write a proposal for the City Council and called board members (he was not on the board) to a meeting upstairs at the Windmill Restaurant to discuss his proposal. This was a Thursday night in November, and we were to defend the proposal at the City Council meeting on the following Monday night.

Someone did a lot of telephoning, and as a result there were about 30 GGFCT members at the Council meeting. In the meantime, we had been urged to get an estimate of the cost of renovation. Lynn had asked me if I knew anyone who could do that. I answered that I knew a contractor, Charles Frank, who had done some renovation work on our home and who was pretty

good. She told me to call him and I did. He was very interested and made me feel hopeful by saying that he knew the building and thought it was a good one.

Shortly afterwards, Lynn, Charlie and University of North Dakota Theatre Arts Department Chair Larry Hill toured the building and discussed how it could be changed into a theater. Charlie volunteered to get bids on renovation.

In the meantime, someone tracked down the status of the demolition. We learned the rather discouraging news that the City had signed a demolition contract.

So we showed up at that late November Council Meeting, and when the matter of the demolition of the Fire Hall came up, Reuben Larson presented our proposal. The discussion was long; at one point Larson moved that the building be sold to GGFCT for \$1, and that we assume all risks for it. This motion naturally scared me a lot, especially in light of testimony from City Engineer Frank Orthmeyer that the building was probably unsafe.

Eventually the Council backed away from giving us a building which might be a liability and voted to give us two weeks to come up with a more realistic proposal (original estimates for renovation were only \$13,000). During that period, the City would examine the building's structure to determine its soundness.

During the meeting, Lynn spoke for us and did well. Orthmeyer spoke for the City, and I found myself questioning his sincerity. I believe that a lot of City Hall employees were counting on the parking spaces which were to replace the Fire

Hall, and that Orthmeyer was their spokesman.

The matter of the demolition contract was raised, and the Council felt that the demolition could be delayed for at least two weeks.

So we had Charlie come up with additional renovation bids, and we met again with the Council on December 13, 1981. We had been told to come up with a renovation schedule which I drew up with some consultation. We were also told that the construction company with the demolition contract would release the City from that contract for \$3,500, the amount they had already spent for equipment rental. And so we would have to guarantee the availability of \$3,500 in our treasury. The Markestads, whose daughter Nora was actively involved in the theatre, contributed \$1,000 at this time to help us buy the building.

Everything was going pretty swell for us at the December 13 Council Meeting when John Norby stood up to speak "on our behalf." John was the third generation owner of Grand Forks' flagship downtown department store, Norby's, which at the time was experiencing financial difficulties which would eventually lead to its closing. John's son George was a Board member. John said some very nice things about us, and then left us open-mouthed by proposing that the City not sell us the Fire Hall, but vote us Community Development funds to buy and renovate a building in the City Center Mall, the Bray Building. Fortunately, the Council listened politely to John and then voted to sell us the Fire Hall with one dissenting vote, that of

Dennis Johnson who thought the building was an eyesore which should be "tore down."

I think that John Norby sincerely wanted to help us; he had two sons with theatrical aspirations and was a generous patron of the arts in Grand Forks. But he had another agenda: to save his store. I was totally unaware, as were most people, of the impending bankruptcy of the family business. I learned later that in the past he had received City Council support for urban development projects which he hoped would enhance his store's viability. In the year we moved to Grand Forks, 1971, we were dismayed to see that in the name of urban renewal a historic Carnegie library and the Federated Church were demolished to make way for a downtown parking building. Later, I learned that John Norby was largely responsible for this project. It was never very clear to me how the presence of our theatre in the decaying downtown mall would revitalize the mall and subsequently his store which was across the street, but John obviously thought it would help.

After the vote the Mayor made a pretty little speech about fighting City Hall and we went off to celebrate at Froggy's in the Windmill Restaurant, where Lynn introduced us to our fund-raising chairperson: Emma Lou Harriman. Emma Lou, widow of Dr. Harriman, founder of the Harriman Chiropractic Hospital, and a supporter of the arts, was eager to help us.

[9 P.M. The City Council has just voted us \$28,000 for

renovation without discussion. The City Engineer determined that the building was solid.]

Later that night.
At home.

We were generally buoyant. Someone made a remark about John Norby's unfortunate intervention. It might have been me; I think I said something about John Norby almost "fucking up" the whole deal, while his son George was sitting next to me. But generally we were happily making plans.

But John wasn't finished. He talked Lynn into pursuing his plan, and a day or two later, John, Lynn and I met with attorney Gary Thune to discuss the Bray Building. At John's or Lynn's request I had called the Community Development Office, and was informed by its Director Royce Lagrave that we didn't qualify for Community Development funds: organizations such as ours were specifically disqualified. I told this to Thune who felt that we shouldn't try to disagree with Lagrave. John Norby, somewhat discouraged, felt that we should still try the Citizen's Advisory Committee of the Community Development Office, which was meeting that very night. We decided not to. We were still put on the agenda of the Urban Development Committee of the City Council the next week and reported to them that we weren't eligible according to Lagrave, and the matter was dropped. (Emma Lou at this meeting spoke warmly and ignorantly on our behalf, claiming despite City Planner Bob

Bushfield's contradiction, that the Fire Hall was a historical landmark.)

The Board of Directors met late in January in the Chester Fritz basement to decide if we really wanted the Fire Hall, as the deadline for signing the agreement with the City was approaching. I couldn't get to the meeting until about 10, and I found Lynn, George Norby, and other Board members including Tom Kincaid, an Air Force Lieutenant who was our treasurer, Dan Wasdahl, an actor and juggler, Marlene Lucke, who managed a car dealership with her husband, and Bert Garwood, who worked at Sears and was well known as an actor and magician.

We discussed and listed what we thought a theater building should provide and then formally approved a motion that we should buy one: either the Fire Hall, the Bray Building or someplace else (all of the sudden, people were proposing buildings and sites all over town.) I remember that in the discussion, it was pointed out that the Bray Building was really nice and that the Fire Hall was a "rat trap."

At about this time Emma Lou invited Lynn, John Norby and myself to lunch. Lynn had warned me that Emma Lou had another building to propose to us. The luncheon scene is one that I will never forget; the adjective Balzacian imposes itself. Emma Lou's long monologue, spoken in conspiratorial tones, contained references to an anonymous generous donor, a shadowy benevolent organization which would fund our project, and an irrefutable architectural expert. In a very roundabout, elusive way, Emma

Lou told us to forget about the Fire Hall, which she had learned on good authority was an unsound building made of soft bricks. Acting on our behalf she had persuaded "philanthropist" Edgar Berg to give us the Berg Building in the City Center Mall. She would get for us (I guessed from the Myra Foundation) the \$30,000 to renovate the building - if we would use the name of the then anonymous donor as the name of the theater. And then the zinger: we would have to get the City Council to forgive the \$250,000 in special assessments due on the building.

Mrs. Harriman really expected us to obediently, blindly (and wrongly) follow her wishes. Lynn told me afterwards that she personally felt that we were into something way over our heads. I suggested we should try to enjoy the ride. I was amused and intrigued but concerned that all these distractions might lead us astray. Lynn and I visited Mr. Berg to thank him for his "generous" offer. He was straightforward about the back taxes, and left no question in my mind that he really wanted to unload the building.

Then Charlie Frank and I went to inspect the Berg Building. We didn't have to look too hard to find reasons not to want it: low ceilings, pillars down the middle, but most of all, the presence in the building of the Senior Citizens' Craft Coop, and some people who were very nervous to have prospective buyers snooping around. It was easy to imagine the bad public relations effect of our chasing the senior citizens out of their home.

I repeated this to Lynn and we decided that I should tell Emma Lou no. It was a very difficult phone call and she was flabbergasted. She made her feelings known to Fanny Gershman, and we were forced to call a meeting of the Board to discuss Emma Lou's proposal. Emma Lou explained her proposal, full of inaccuracies and half truths. I had been mentally counting votes, and unsure of Marlene Lucke, I asked her how she felt; she let me know in very strong terms that she wanted the Fire Hall, and I felt better. None of the Board members felt like answering Emma Lou. But finally History Professor Bill Gard did, forcefully and diplomatically. She left the meeting very red and upset, and we proceeded to vote down the Berg Building proposal. I believe that it was at this meeting that Lynn said emphatically "I want the Fire Hall!" I resolved to myself to do all that I could to see to it that she got it.

Before this meeting, Lynn and I had had a very nice meeting with Mayor Bud Wessman and City Auditor Don Tingum. We wanted to know 2 things: could the Council forgive special assessments due on the Berg Building; and where did City Hall stand on the Fire Hall renovation question? (Emma Lou maintained that the City was determined to demolish the building.) Tingum said that the Council can forgive taxes but not specials. The Mayor said the City is behind us, and he offered to serve as honorary fund-raising chair. These two pieces of news had permitted us to reject without reservation Emma Lou's proposal.

But we still wanted her on our side. Because of this, and

because there were still some lingering doubts about the Fire Hall's solidity, Charlie and I went to visit architect Myron Denbrook upon whose judgment Mrs. Harriman based her contention of the building's inappropriateness.

This visit was also Balzacian. Denbrook admitted that the building had no structural flaws, though the brick is soft. He had recommended that dividing it into office space was uneconomical and therefore had declared it useless to the city. But what gradually became clear was that Myron Denbrook was an architect who did a lot of work for the city, hired by the City Engineer's Office. And so he had politically refused Mrs. Harriman's request to help renovate a building that the City Engineer wanted torn down. (At this point I can't remember how much of this he admitted; quite a bit, I believe.)

He did satisfy us that the building was safe and solid. One of his associates thought the second story needed bracing but a KBM engineer later found the second story very solid.

At this point I told Myron that we had a political problem. He smiled and said he knew, that Mrs. Harriman considered his opinion to be gospel. I asked him if he could set her straight about the solidity of the building. He said he wouldn't. I don't remember his excuse if any.

So we wrote off Emma Lou. It was only a month or two later, however, that my wife Lucy volunteered me to drive her home from a performance of On Golden Pond, in which I was appearing, and we had a very nice conversation about someone who

lives in Africa. And it was just last week that she arranged for a piano to be donated to us, and while I was thanking her, she asked me if she knew me. She is apparently a forgiving or a forgetful woman. Probably both.

On January 31, 1982, Lynn signed the contract and paid the City \$3501. Attorney Bill Thoms, a sometime actor and friend of the theatre, had negotiated the contract with City Attorney Jay Fiedler. We were concerned about being tied to a time schedule. Ultimately my renovation schedule was appended to the contract, but the city gave us until January, 1985, to finish renovation before it could reclaim the building.

We recognized that we couldn't raise any money until we had IRS tax exempt status. I wrote to the local Myra Foundation and the Dayton Foundation (there was a Dayton's Department Store in Grand Forks' Columbia Mall), and they reminded us of this. And so we turned to our treasurer Tom Kincaid to work out the figures and supply the information to gain tax exempt status. This was not going to be easy for us, as bookkeeping had been erratic over several years. Bill Thoms referred us to attorney Doug Christenson who referred us to his associate Doug Cilz, who was authorized to do the paperwork as a contribution if we could provide the figures.

And so not much happened for nine months. Tom worked on the figures but was transferred to Rapid City in April. He took the books with him and promised to return soon, with the necessary

figures.

We slipped into summer. Lynn got a bunch of people to show up one Saturday to clean up the Fire Hall. In early August I got stuck with Charlie Frank, Gary Carton, manager of the Chester Fritz Auditorium, and one other fellow with moving all of our stuff from our former home in the Chester Fritz Auditorium basement to the Fire Hall.

There was a small blackboard on the second floor landing of the Fire Hall, which recorded an anonymous and prophetic conversation. Someone had written in pretty letters across the top, "GGFCT is here!" Someone else had written below it, "Yes, but for how long?" At this point I intervened, and wrote optimistically, "Forever!" A few days later, I found, "No way, we don't work hard enough." To this I responded, "I do."

In July we got an unkind letter from Building Inspector Paul Thorsen (who worked for City Engineer Orthmeyer) wanting to know why we weren't respecting our renovation schedule. I answered very diplomatically for Lynn. Obviously still hoping to tear the building down, the Inspector told Channel 4 about our delinquency. They interviewed Thorsen and me. The evening news sequence begins with a close-up of Thorsen pointing to the projected renovation time schedule we had appended to the purchase contract. He points out the areas in which we were clearly behind schedule. Then I come on and explain rather naively that there was a simple reason for our lack of progress: we don't have the money. But then I go on to explain that our

fund drive can't start until we receive tax exempt status.

Late in the summer we lost Lynn to a freak accident. Her fiancé Steve was a cameraman for the local NBC TV station, where she also worked as a copy writer. Steve was out one day shooting on location at a dude ranch, when he fell off his horse and broke the camera. He was immediately fired by news chief Chuck Bundlie, but quickly landed another job in Seattle, and Lynn followed him.

At our annual meeting delayed until August, we elected new board members, and I volunteered to start writing grant proposals, on the assumption that tax exempt status was imminent. At a board meeting the next week I was elected President.

In early September Tom Kincaid showed up. He parked his camper at the KOA campground for a week and refused all invitations. At first elated by his arrival, I soon grew discouraged as he kept postponing meetings with me, and days passed when I didn't hear from him. But finally he did it! He showed up on my doorstep with all the necessary figures.

I can't express all the admiration I feel for what he did. He pulled scraps of paper together from all over the place and produced a set of financial records for five years that satisfied the IRS and an accountant's audit in the spring of 1983. I had all along assumed that Tom could do it. But the long delay, the forced waiting, and the suggestion from others that we should give up on him, had disrupted my confidence. He certainly justified our wait and made the Fire Hall Theatre

possible.

I set about writing grant proposals to three major businesses in the area, Pillsbury, Dayton's and Burlington-Northern. I roughly figured that to raise \$40,000, our estimate of the total renovation cost, we would need \$20,000 from grants, \$10,000 from Grand Forks businesses and \$10,000 from individuals.

I called a membership meeting to get ideas for fund-raising. Having no good place to meet, I reserved a room at the Westward Ho Motel, and announced in the Newsletter that beer and wine would be provided.

The turnout was pretty good. I was very pleased to see John Norby and his wife Barbara, until, to my amazement, John started into a speech about finding a building in the City Center Mall. It was my turn to be flabbergasted. But from all around me at the meeting, people started speaking up about the Fire Hall and eventually turned John right around.

I proposed that we should make a list of 100 businesses and ask each for \$100. John Norby had a better idea. I should ask Ken Leigh, Chamber of Commerce President, to endorse our fund drive. I should postpone the drive until December, as businesses were then being hit by United Way, and the Christmas spirit could only help us. And most important of all, I should get Simmons Advertising to prepare a classy brochure which should proceed our visit.

These suggestions elated and discouraged me. I was sure he

was right, but I was dismayed by the effort I would have to make. Ultimately, I followed his suggestion to the letter.

Meanwhile, I got a call from Larry Hill; a friend of his on the Community Development Citizen's Advisory Committee had suggested to him that GGFCT should apply for Community Development money. I called, and this time Royce Lagrave thought we might qualify. Completely unaware of their guidelines, I wrote a letter requesting \$6,000 for sandblasting. I was amazed and delighted when I learned at the first Advisory Committee hearing that I had stumbled onto the one point on which we were clearly eligible: removal of urban blight. My presentation, aided by artist Mark Browning's drawing, prepared for the Simmons brochure, was very convincing. In response to Sam Silverman's question, Royce stated that he "thought" we qualified. Later, in conversation with the Bob and Ellen Korbach, and Edith Snortland, acquaintances who were on the committee, they told me I should have requested more. I asked Royce about this on the phone, and he answered that we could receive funds only for exterior renovation, and that the actual amount was determined by the City Council anyway.

On October 30th we received notification of IRS tax exempt status. It was the day of our annual "Halloween Party" in Columbia Mall, and I was excited to be able to announce the news. It permitted me to complete our applications to Dayton's, Burlington-Northern and Pillsbury and to write to the Myra Foundation.

By early November, our brochure was ready; everyone agreed it was very well done. I had submitted to John Norby a list of 100 merchants with my suggestion how much each should contribute. He more than doubled my list, actually gave me a new list of 250 businesses with amounts. Mick Simmons, president of Simmons Advertising, went over that list and approved.

I decided it was time to seek the mayor's help. Would he sign a letter to each of the businesses which was to accompany the brochure? He signed without any hesitation and thought the letter and brochure were great.

Pat Twedell, University of North Dakota Language Department secretary, played a key role in our fund drive. She helped me mail out and address our brochures, and eventually recorded and typed acknowledgments of all contributions.

Shortly after the brochure went out, I got a call from Patty Lazarus. I knew her vaguely, as I had been in a play with her son, and had been to a couple of parties at her home. Recently divorced from Hank Slotnick, she was looking for a job and had heard that GGFCT would be hiring. I told her we expected to hire a business manager in the spring, but had no immediate plans. After she hung up, I thought about all those businesses we were to call on and I knew deep inside that I couldn't count on my Board members to do a lot of calling. So I called her back, and together we came up with the idea of a Public Relations Coordinator. She threw in that she would

really like to get a charitable gambling setup for GGFCT.

The state of North Dakota had legalized blackjack in certain types of establishments, with the proceeds going to charitable organizations. Many charities and arts groups had already entered into agreements with bars and night clubs to set up gambling operations. We knew that the community theatre in Fargo was earning tens of thousands of dollars per year through its gambling operations, and several of our board members were eager to get us involved.

I knew I had a lot of selling to do to the board to get them to agree to hire Patty. Especially since Patty needed a quick answer and pay check. I thought that Bonnie Reilly would raise the most objections, but when I mentioned gambling, she said sure. It was Carolyn Roccolo who needed the most persuading. She pointed out correctly that when you work with a board, you don't do things that way. I knew I needed help with the fund drive, and Patty was very impressive. Finally, after two days of haggling, I got everyone's OK.

I was right to have hired Patty. During the second half of 82-83, we paid her \$3,500 and received ten times that amount in contributions. I did most of the fund-raising, but I wouldn't have done it alone.

During the early part of Christmas vacation, Patty and I visited about 50 businesses. Even before our visits, we had received a couple of thousand dollars in response to our mailing, the big response being \$1,000 from Dick Wold, President

of First National Bank. This contribution surprised me -- it had never occurred to me that bankers gave away money -- and changed my attitude towards the fund-raising campaign. It made the whole thing seem possible.

So when Patty and I started making our calls, while I didn't really believe that people would hand us envelopes full of money, I was prepared for the possibility that they might. And some did, or at least gave us commitments. Hal Gershman, son of Fanny and Happy Harry, and heir to the family liquor business, talked about a probable \$500 pledge. Hugo Magnusson, owner of a chain of Piggly Wiggly (later Hugo's) grocery stores, said he had already sent in \$300, and thanked us for what we were doing. Don Healy at Northern States Power was tough. We were both Rotarians so he had to be friendly. But I think he really had no intention of contributing, until he gradually talked himself into it, and a few days later we received \$500. Mike Maidenberg, publisher of the Grand Forks Herald was even tougher. He really grilled us; he had never heard of GGFCT. I was able to show him an article about our current production in the issue of the paper lying on his desk. After 20 minutes of conversation, he said he'd give his share, and we eventually received \$500.

There were disappointments, though no real no's on the first day. Mike Anderson at Gate City Savings and Loan was excited to have the check all ready for us -- it was only \$100. The man at Lampert's Lumber had a check ready for us too; it was

for \$20.

One of the biggest ups of the first day was Pat Wentz at Northwestern Bell. We had met when she invited me several months earlier to speak at a professional woman's organization, Community Input. She was warm, friendly and pledged \$500.

The first day was probably the best day -- about \$2,000, if I remember correctly. The second day was pretty good. The 3rd was a disaster, except for the manager at Red Owl grocery store who could pledge nothing from his bankrupt company, but who gave us \$50 of his own. We wasted a lot of time trying to see Francis Scheder, President of First Bank, and never did, though several months later a call from the mayor got \$600 from him.

We had about \$6,000 pledged and contributed on December 31. It was a Friday and the Herald's Friday "Spotlight" section had the Fire Hall on the cover. University of North Dakota International Student Advisor Doug Erickson called to praise the article and ask where he should send his check. Then Hal Gershman called and upped his pledge to \$6,000, to pay for seating in the Fire Hall. He explained that he was influenced by Patty's comment about classes for kids and thoughts of his parents' love of GGFCT. I gasped "God bless you!", though his tying the pledge to the seating bothered me, knowing that there were lots of things to pay for first.

Then I went to the post office and got a double shock: \$1,000 from the Kolstoos (Psychology Professor Ralph Kolstoe had told me to expect a big check) and \$5,000 from the Myra

Foundation.

That was a big surprise. I had been counting on about that much from Myra, but when I had called Foundation President Ed Gillig about 3 weeks before to find out when we could hear, his response that we would hear by the end of the year "either way" made me very nervous. I had gone by the mayor's office and asked Pat Owens if the Mayor had any friends among the Myra trustees. She responded, "Isn't Mrs. Harriman one of them," and my double response was that of course she is, and "oh my God." After that I tried to call a few people who might intercede with her on our behalf.

Gillig's letter showed the influence of Emma Lou's feelings about the Fire Hall. He said that despite their reservations, they were giving us \$5,000 (we had requested \$7,500) because of all the good things we had done over the years, and we could use it as we saw fit (I immediately thought of the unbudgeted \$3,700 light board we had just bought). His letter did hold out the hope of our receiving an additional \$2,500 in the future.

I hope that I can find somewhere my response to him. I consciously tried, while thanking him, to persuade him to give us the other \$2,500, without, I believe, ever referring to it even indirectly. About a month later he wrote and asked for a tour of the Fire Hall, and I suspected my letter had worked. When we finally arranged the tour, he pledged the other \$2,500 which I had in another couple of weeks.

December 31, 1982, brought us to \$18,000; the Dayton pledge

of "probably" \$3,000 got us up into the 20's. Fanny Gershman's check for \$4,000, given to Patty, and which technician Amoret McCoullough told me about at a cast party, when she was drunk enough that I didn't know if I should believe her, boosted us well into the 20's.

Meanwhile work had slowly begun on the building. I should say something about Charlie Frank. At times I was really infuriated at the slowness of things, and I'd call him ready to fire him. But he's so disarming that I'd end up apologizing for being impatient. I mentioned earlier that Charlie had done some remodeling work in my home, and I had encountered the same frustration with the pace of his work. But on the other hand, he is a Jehovah's Witness, and I knew that it was against his religion to be dishonest or even devious. I will always remember one day driving by a cemetery with him in his pickup, when out of the clear blue he muttered, "I wonder what they're going to do with that." In response to my "huh?", he wondered aloud what would happen to this and other cemeteries following the second coming and the resurrection of the dead.

I think that initial progress, the heating system in December, and the plumbing dragging through January and February and into March, could have gone much faster. But when it came down to making our deadlines in April, nobody could have been more dedicated and efficient. I'm getting ahead of my chronology, but lots of credit should go to Charlie for pulling everything together for the art auction and opening of

Children's Hour in April. He even went out himself to buy paper towels and toilet paper, and while the first customers arrived, he was finishing hanging the bathroom doors. The failure of the painters to show up on the Wednesday before the Saturday auction could have been a showstopper, but he pulled that one out too. A real trooper, Charlie Frank.

I need to relate one other anecdote: at a Rotary meeting in February, 1983, Mark Sanford, Superintendent of Schools, approached me with a proposal: he had a new home for us -- in the Roosevelt School. I dutifully went to look at it. Mark had two angles. Central High School will be enlarging across the street into a lot right next to the Fire Hall, and would find it convenient to get us out of there; and he would have a better chance at some Pillsbury money for Roosevelt remodeling if he could show a great community need for the school building.

The space was attractive, but I decided we had already gone too far (the heating system was installed) and had too much enthusiasm going for the Fire Hall. I think I was right. But it was hard to say no to a School Superintendent.

In March, Community Development recommendations were forwarded to the City Council through the Urban Development Committee. I went to the Committee meeting with Charlie in the Council Chamber, determined to increase the Community Development recommendation of \$6,000 to the \$20,000 it appeared then that we would need to finish the building. When the

meeting started, I had noted optimistically that Royce Lagrave was not there, but he arrived in time for my presentation. Royce suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease, and at this time drove himself around in a little motorized cart. Without having to turn around, when I heard the chamber door open and the sound of his electric cart, I knew he was there. I made a little speech, quoting from the Community Development guidelines, to prove that urban blight was not just exterior. But in response, from the back of the room, came Royce's irritatingly emotionless voice intoning the "blight equals exterior" message I had heard so often. But he did suggest that there might be more to exterior renovation than sandblasting. Charlie and I caucused for 15 seconds and found doorways and electrical fixtures that were also exterior and quickly settled on a \$10,000 figure which the Committee approved.

I should point out that this Committee was chaired by Dennis Johnson, the Council member who a year earlier had been the only negative vote in the decision to sell us the Fire Hall. I had groaned about this unfortunate coincidence at a Board meeting, and Bonnie Reilly said she would talk to Dennis. And she did.

Walking out of this meeting, which the Mayor had attended and at which he had spoken on our behalf, I asked him if we should settle. He said no, that we should still push for more. So I came back to the Council meeting the next Monday with Patty, prepared to fight for "our \$20,000." I made a good speech (Patty told me later I was wonderful) and so did she.

Royce gave his usual response, but always looking for positive signs as I tend to do, I thought I detected in his reference to the contingency fund a possibility of more money. But when the motion of the Urban Development Committee, with the \$10,000 recommendation, was approved by the whole Council without a single response to my speech, I felt beaten. As I left the Council meeting. I avoided looking at Royce, but out of the extreme corner of my eye, I thought I had caught him looking at me sympathetically.

I was very dejected, perhaps for the first time dejected and discouraged. I had foreseen a possibility of getting out from under, of finishing once and for all the fund-raising for the building, at a time when I was seriously concerned about a glaring deficit in our operating budget. Despite the approval of \$10,000, considerably more than the \$6,000 I had originally requested, I was really down for a few days, and blamed myself for not having approached a few Council members before the meeting.

I ran into City Council member, future mayor, and University colleague Mike Polovitz later that week in University President Tom Clifford's office, and asked if any lobbying at that point would have helped our cause. He made me feel better by saying that at that point in the process, there was really little hope of changing the amount. At least I stopped reproaching myself for not having talked to him before the Council meeting.

A few days later Charlie and I went to see Royce about getting the \$10,000. I said, trying to be pleasant, "I'm here for my check." In kind he responded, laughingly, "As they say, it's in the mail." We were obviously off to a good start.

He explained the rigamarole and the two month delay it would take before we could actually get the CD money. This was harder on Charlie than on me since we were required to let bids on all the work. He had expected to be able to start in right away and not to have to compete for the contract. He was kind of down about that and even a little bitter as he admitted later. I at first thought I'd have a lot of paper work to do, "plans and specifications." But in fact Al Sonneberg from the Community Development Office did everything. But there were three more Urban Development Committee meetings I had to go to before the Council finally approved bids.

Very early in this story, Mark Browning had proved to be a good and effective friend of the theatre. Mark and his wife Emma had moved into town shortly before this and opened a downtown art gallery and frame shop. Mark is an extremely imaginative painter who works mostly in watercolor; Emma creates beautiful stained glass works. Before I even knew who they were, Mark appeared at a Board meeting, the one in which we voted down Emma Lou and the Berg Building, and encouraged us to go ahead with the Fire Hall. Sometime after that he volunteered to do an artist's sketch of the building if we needed one, and I took advantage of the offer when we did the brochure. I used that

drawing also when I spoke to the Community Development Citizens' Advisory Committee, and it was effective.

Sometime during the winter, he proposed a fund-raising art auction. I sent Patty to him to arrange it, and they decided on April 23, a Saturday when we projected that the Fire Hall might be presentable. Early in the spring, he sent out an appeal to area artists, asking them to contribute their works for our project. It was a very nice letter, full of praise for our project, and the response was good: we had 50-55 works promised. The Theatre was to receive 60% of the sale price of each item. Mark also designed and had printed a publicity brochure for the auction which Patty and I mailed out to 2,000 people in the area.

I've already referred to Charlie's heroics getting the building ready. During this 3rd from last phase of activity we had to finish the plumbing, finish sheetrocking, paint the walls, install vinyl on the bathroom floors, install a suspended ceiling, and finish the electrical and heating installations. It all got done, and the building looked good for the auction. The choice of blue paint for the interior walls caused some controversy. A group from the Board selected it, but I okayed semi-gloss instead of flat without realizing that that would encourage light to spill from the stage.

During this phase I worked out a new budget for the renovation which showed us about \$10,000 short of what we needed to complete the building, assuming that CD would pay for

Marguerite Duras' Yes, Maybe for three nights in the art museum on the third floor of the University's Student Union. The Duras was an anti-war, feminist play I had seen in Paris in 1979. I had translated it into English with my wife's help and persuaded Trudy Baumgartner and Nancy Heidelbaugh to perform it with me. I sent a copy of my translation to Marguerite Duras, seeking her approval of my text, authorization to perform it, and royalty information. I got back a very long and friendly letter praising my translation. She said that normally royalties would be 100 francs per performance, but that she was willing to waive the fee if our organization was hard pressed for funds. We were, and so I thanked her for her generosity, and told her that I would contribute the \$60 not paid in royalties to the building fund. A close reader of the plaque in the Fire Hall lobby acknowledging building fund contributors will find the name of one of France's most famous 20th century authors among the contributors!

Unfortunately the performances, while receiving critical acclaim, flopped at the box office. English Professor Jim McKenzie told me he was delighted to see GGFCT performing difficult literary plays. But for two of the three performances, the attendance was single digit, and the total number of attendees was in the thirties.

Much of the mounting debt was covered by a spring season ticket drive. Patty's plan for selling 500 season tickets was to put an ad in the paper. The ads came out a week earlier than

she had thought, contained 5 errors and cost \$600. But they sold nearly 100 tickets (at \$22.50). A rummage sale in June brought in another \$550, and so we more or less made it through the year. A command performance of the Sunshine Boys in June brought in another \$400. We had to pay \$500 in advance royalties on Tintypes (August, 1983), but Board member and insurance agent Brenda Mattson delayed sending us an insurance bill on the building so we could pay it out of 83-84 funds.

In January I had written our North Dakota Council on the Arts (NDCA) grant application; Carolyn supplied some clarification and additional useful information. I was invited to appear at their hearing in Bismarck (250 miles away) on April 8th, a Friday on which I was also supposed to appear in Yes, Maybe. I was somewhat reluctant to go, fearing that I might not get back in time for the show. But I felt that my presence before the panel might make a difference, so I traveled to Bismarck with Ray Bostrom, president of the local Coca Cola Bottling Company, who was representing the symphony; we fortunately got back in plenty of time for the show.

We had put together our budget in January, a budget that called for us to sell 500 season tickets and hire a PR Coordinator, a Tech Coordinator and a Business Manager. To make the budget, we requested a \$9,700 NDCA grant. While I was in Bismarck, they informed me that the staff recommendation was \$7,700. My appearance was worth \$1,000 as the final grant amount, announced to me in a phone call from Bruce Jacobsen, was

\$8,750. Bruce was Dean of the University's College of Fine Arts, our local representative on the Arts Council, and a good friend.

In January or February we were turned down by Pillsbury. I wrote to ask the reason and learned that the local people hadn't rated us very high. I learned a lesson from that and asked Mayor Bud Wessman to talk to the local Burlington-Northern people (I had written that proposal in November). At the North Dakota Community Theatre Association Convention in March, which we hosted in Grand Forks and which the Mayor attended, I had a chance to talk to him again about our Burlington-Northern grant. He reported that unfortunately we would not get a grant from them, but that we should try again, and we'd get a better reception the second time.

One of my big disappointments with Patty was that she did nothing about writing grants. I had given her a list of granting agencies that librarian Kurt Baumgartner had made for us. I asked her to write them for proposal information, and she never did.

One day early in May I went to the Post Office, hopeful as always. Ever since the early days of the fund drive, when big checks occasionally showed up unexpectedly and gave me a high that lasted until the next big bill followed, I had gotten into the habit of checking the mail on an almost daily basis, even though the post office was out of the way. Lucy and I were going to a public meeting downtown on the war in Nicaragua,

featuring a couple of local activists who had visited there. I stopped by the post office on the way and found a letter from Burlington-Northern. I really thought it was the rejection Bud had warned me of, and was therefore truly astonished to find that they were awarding us \$4,000! This good fortune preoccupied me throughout the Nicaragua meeting and caused a high which lasted for four days, until the day when Charlie handed me the bills for the last phase of renovation, which cost \$4,000 more than I had anticipated. The art auction had left us within \$7,500 of completing the project. For four days I thought we were within \$3,500. This was almost as devastating to my morale as my failure to get interior renovation money from the City Council.

During most of the 82-83 year, the Board gave me free rein. They made some efforts to check my impulsiveness, and I tried to respond to their expectations. A good example of this was my attempt to get the IBEW to donate labor. It was an idea that had kept coming up at Board meetings, because the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre had gotten a lot of free labor from local unions when they built their theatre. My inclination was to let Charlie go with whatever contractor he wanted, but I dutifully called Bill Couchigan, President of the Union. He was at the time running for state representative and asked me to call again after the election. I did and then continued to get a run around for about a month, til I said the hell with him and let Charlie contract with Mel's Electric, as he had all along wanted

to do.

My experience getting bids, at the Board's request again, on the heating system was similar but with a curious twist. My inclination was of course to let Charlie choose a contractor. But Bonnie insisted that I get a bid from Vilandre Heating and Air Conditioning, and then try to get a deal from Casey Vilandre. We waited about 3 weeks for the Vilandre bid to come in. When it finally arrived, it was for \$12,000 -- about 4 times what we expected. Meanwhile Charlie had a \$2,500 bid from Steve Krokke at A&P Heating. But he couldn't get back to him and eventually learned that A&P had gone out of business. But then he learned that Steve Krokke had gone to work for Vilandre, and would still give us the A&P heating system for \$2,500. So we went with it.

After that, the Board let me let Charlie choose his contractors, and I think he did pretty well.

I've almost forgotten the last chapter in the Community Development story: Al Sonneberg at CD said he would write up plans and specifications if I would write out for him in my own terms what we wanted done. Charlie helped me of course and Al came over to tour the building and suggested some things -- a lot of things in fact. Among the three of us we suggested several items that no one had previously considered doing such as roof repair, window replacement, sidewalk extensions. He added shutters, which we had talked about but assumed were an extravagance. During all of this I thought about Royce's

allusion to the Contingency Fund (I knew we were well over \$10,000) and wondered if he really would try to get us funding for a lot more.

I told the Board that I had no idea what we should do with the south façade. We had Mark Browning's drawing of the north side which became part of the plans. We decided to hold a contest for a drawing of the south façade. I won! No one entered our contest; so I did what I could. Al later called me and told me the dimensions didn't work out. I told him to rearrange things, which he did. But I will take credit or blame for the south façade.

So the plans were published, and we waited for bids. I wasn't there for the opening, but Charlie was, the only contractor who had bid all the items (he and Al both thought that others had stayed away out of a sense of fair play). There were 2 other contractors who had bid on sandblasting only -- 1 very high and the other a little lower than Charlie's. The total bids were around \$28,000!

So we went to the Urban Development Committee with the bids. Dennis Johnson was absent; Elliott Glassheim and Jack Lien were present. They didn't seem concerned at all about the price. They were worried about the effects of sandblasting on the bricks. We discussed this for awhile, and finally they decided that they wanted to talk to the sandblasters before making a decision.

So we came back a week later. This time Dennis was there.

As were the sandblasters, Charlie and downtown businessman Sam Silverman, on some other business I presume. This was the first time that Dennis had seen the \$28,000 figure. He was surprised, but Elliott pointed out that that's what happens when you miss a meeting. We discussed what would happen to the brick, and the blasters were very reassuring. I was sitting next to Charlie and asked him if these blasters were the ones he had bid for at \$7,000 or the ones who had bid against him at \$5,000. He gave me a funny look and I thought I heard him say both. Finally Jack Lien moved acceptance of the low bid, after Elliott had done a little selling job on Dennis ("Shutters? They're in the drawing, aren't they?" -- Charlie pulled out the drawing, and they weren't, but...) Somehow the lighted sign board was left out. I guess it is a little extravagant (\$1,000) for Community Development. The motion, which Royce dictated to Dennis, passed, and we left. Charlie and I noticed the sandblasters literally dancing with joy as we went out, and he explained to me that if they hadn't submitted their bid of \$5,000, they would have gotten it as subcontractors on his bid at \$7,000. He said he hadn't been able to get in touch with them when he submitted his bids and just guessed at \$7,000. I hope those guys never figure out that they underbid themselves by \$2,000!

The next step was the meeting of the whole Council on June 6 (the date on which I began this chronicle, while seated in the Council Chamber, waiting for our motion to come up). I saw we were towards the end of the agenda, but I got there early

anyway, with the idea of starting this narration. (It is now one week later, by the way.) I got pretty far along in the narration before our item came up. And as I noted, the Council voted the \$28,000 with no discussion. The motion didn't state the amount, merely that the bids be accepted and necessary funds transferred from contingency. I believe that the Mayor was smiling at me when he very quickly called for a vote on the motion. I'll never know if he consciously left the amount out of the motion. At any rate, I left the Council meeting feeling very good, and I was grateful to the mayor.

I will try to finish quickly this part of the narration -- events through today, June 13, 1983. In May we had elected new Board members: Shirley Goodwin, the wife of my family doctor, who was very active in community activities, her friend Joann Sayler, Marcia O'Kelly, who was a Law Professor at the University and the wife of my friend and Dean, Bernard O'Kelly, and Judy Beeck, an actress and wife of an Air Force officer stationed in Grand Forks. There was some question about the presidency because of my plans to go to France for 83-84. But these plans began to look doubtful, and I let myself be re-elected. Bert Garwood was elected vice president, Judy Beeck, Secretary, and Bonnie Reilly was reelected Treasurer.

Staff appointments for the new season caused us a lot of concern. In addition to hiring a business manager, who would certainly be Board member Carolyn Ruccolo, we needed to decide what to do about the Public Relations Coordinator position we

had created for Patty Lazarus, and we wanted to hire a permanent Technical Director. For a number of reasons, we voted to cut the PR position from 1/2 to 1/4-time. We felt that the Business Manager could take over many of the responsibilities for which we had originally created the PR Coordinator position, and we all felt that Patty had not performed to our expectations. We interviewed another candidate and then ultimately rehired a rather disappointed Patty Lazarus to the reduced position. We hired Amoret McCullough as Technical Director, even though we had some reservations about her reliability and many of us had been impressed by the technical work of a young man named Kevin Gaul. I had to break the news to Patty and Kevin (both already knew, but I had to try to explain our decisions). This part of theater management was too much like real life work, and I wondered what had happened to the time when theater was an escape for me! I asked Kevin if he would nonetheless be willing to build the stage for the Fire Hall. He seemed grateful for that vote of confidence, and eventually he did build a solid and adaptable stage.

At the meeting at which we finally selected Patty, I brought up the necessity of borrowing \$8,000 to finish the project, and I left the meeting convinced that everyone had agreed to it. I went to the First National Bank, and the banker Bev Langley told me that Secretary Judy Beeck would have to come in with me to sign for the Board, even though I was making myself responsible for the amount. I called Judy, and she

didn't remember at all that we had approved such a loan. She called Fanny and had Fanny call me to say that \$8,000 was too much to borrow.

I was irritated and depressed by all the possible consequences of this. I called Charlie, to whom we owed \$2,000, to ask if he could wait, possibly a month, to get the rest of his money. He was very nervous at this idea. So I called Judy back and told her we would have to borrow at least \$2,000. She agreed, and we went to the bank and did it.

At this point it looks like we're only about \$6,000 short of our goal. We will be getting \$800 from the North Dakota Community Foundation (NDCF) and I've talked Lucy into letting me pledge \$1,000. I've just submitted a new \$7,500 grant application to Pillsbury, and the Mayor says he'll call them on our behalf.

I should go back a minute to talk about the NDCF grant. Pat Owens from City Hall called me last September, telling me about a meeting in Park River, about an hour north of Grand Forks, to learn about NDCF grants. I dutifully drove up there and was disappointed to learn that grants are only usually for \$500 and that the money wouldn't be available for a year. And then on the way home my Renault 5 kept filling with smoke. I eventually figured out it was the headlights, drove 5 miles back to Grafton with them off, and called my friend and colleague Jerry Bakken to come pick me up. He did: 2 and 1/2 hours later. I had waited outside for an hour, actually was

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questioned by a policeman, as a citizen had reported a suspicious character lurking on a street corner, and eventually went into a bar to call Jerry's wife Terry for the 3rd time, when Jerry walked in. We had a beer, and then decided I would drive back to GF tailing him closely with my lights off. The trip back went without incident and we eventually got \$800 for my trouble.

A few months later there was a sequel: one night in October of 1983, after a quick supper, I got in the car to drive to the Fire Hall for a performance of Dracula, in which I was performing. As I drove away from the house, I once again smelled something burning, and decided to take Lucy's car. As a precaution, I left the Renault out on the street instead of pulling it into the the garage, just in case. Later that evening, I was backstage waiting for curtain time, when I was told I had a phone call. It was Lucy; she wanted to know where the hood release lever is located on the Renault. I explained that it was in a recessed area just above the radio, and innocently asked why she wanted to know. "So that the firemen can open up the hood and disconnect the battery now that they have put out the fire." The car was a total loss.

There is some concern about getting the next phase of work done for the August 11th opening of Tintypes. Early in the spring, we contracted with high school English teacher Larry Damico to direct the musical review Tintypes. Larry and his musician wife Barbara had a lot of experience directing in the

Twin Cities, and we all felt confident that he could produce the kind of blockbuster musical that we wanted to open our inaugural season.

We had run the art auction in the Fire Hall in April as well as a production of Lillian Hellman's Children's Hour. But we had done that with temporary seating, lighting and stage in place. I asked Charlie if he thought we would be able to open doors to the public with the outside renovation complete, all of the wiring finished, the stage built and the seating in place by August 11. He has assured us that it would. It will be tight, but Charlie knows I'm counting on him. The seating will pose a bit of a problem. Thanks to the money contributed by the Gershmans, we have been able to order 100 beautiful and comfortable theater chairs. I actually got into a shouting match with the representative of a local office supply store, because I had been able to get what everyone agreed was a great price through a friend, Larry Heinle, and had not opened the purchase to bids. But when I called Larry Heinle today, he told me he expects the seats to arrive during the first week in July. That will be too soon, and I've asked him to try to delay shipping.

There are still problems: financial and building, as there have been all year. It's hard for me by nature not to be optimistic. Looking back over the past year, \$67,000 raised, only \$6,000 to go, it's hard not to be [over-]confident. But one thing I have learned: optimism pays off. And another

thing: this is a very up and down business, and you've got to enjoy the ups -- and even the downs too.

(To be continued.)

July 22, 1983

It gets harder and harder to enjoy the downs.

On July 2nd we returned from a 3-week vacation. On July 3rd I went by the Fire Hall and found that absolutely nothing had been done -- despite the signed contracts and sworn promises. I spoke to Amoret -- I don't remember why -- and learned that the command performance of the Sunshine Boys on June 23 had gone all right (a view later contradicted by the detailed narrative of the evening provided by one of the actors, Bob Baab), but that the June 25th reprise at the Windmill had failed to come off.

On the 4th we went to the Red River Valley Peacemakers picnic at University Park and had the chance to talk to Carolyn and Patti about what had happened in my absence. Carolyn was kind enough to suggest that I shouldn't go away, as everything had fallen on her: the failure of the renovators to renovate, the drama of whether or not the Sunshine Boys would be revived at the Windmill, the "problem" of the season brochure I had left for Simmons to prepare, Director Larry Damico's worries about what the hell was going on; the piano fiasco (Scott's Music and Sound, which had promised us, at Emma Lou Harriman's urging, a used but serviceable piano, had given us a clunker, and as of

this date I don't know if we'll get another better one.) The one piece of good news was that Burlington-Northern had delivered their \$4,000 -- at a press conference for which Carolyn was given only 20 minutes' notice.

The real downer of the picnic (a very down affair: cold windy weather, few people) was a brief conversation with Maureen Srur who told me that Board treasurer Bonnie Reilly had told her she was thinking of quitting the Board for fear of being incriminated in the misuse of \$8,000.

All kinds of metaphors can serve to describe my reaction to that bit of news. At that very moment my three-year old son Judson was tugging at my arm to take me to see a clown who was making the rounds distributing business cards. I numbly followed Jud, and in fact did everything numbly for about 24 hours.

It had occurred to me several times that the \$8,000 contributed by the Gershmans for chairs and spent on general contracting could raise some eyebrows. And while I still felt that the borrowing from one account (seating) to pay bills in another was OK, I wasn't too eager for this to become the talk of the town. I imagined stories in the Herald and calls from dozens of concerned donors.

A restless night produced the reaction to call Bonnie and CPA Robbin Rendall to find out if my actions were reprehensible. Both calls were soothing to my aroused anxieties: Robbin said I was OK, and Bonnie regretted her rash statement to Maureen, and

was tempted to resign only because she felt her fiscal conservatism was inconsistent with my policies.

During the week I spoke to Al Sonneberg at Community Development and the sandblasters to find out how to get that going (they started on Friday the 8th), learned more about the piano and the Sunshine Boys fiascoes, and faced the worst moments of my GGFCT association at a Board meeting at Fanny's home on the 7th.

The meeting lasted over 5 hours, and there was a definite "Get Paul" overtone. Three imprudences dominated the meeting: 1) Using the Gershman money for general renovation; 2) Hiring Amoret on June 15th instead of July 1 as authorized by the Board; and 3) pursuing the revival of the Sunshine Boys at the Windmill without Board authorizations.

An outsider might well have wondered why I did all that on my own. However, any objective consideration of the previous 6 months' GGFCT activities would reveal that more and more I was lead to rely on my initiatives and judgments, and that those 3 decisions -- not at all bad ones -- are no more improper than dozens of others I had made. Unfortunately, these 3 decisions hadn't turned out very well, and that was mainly because I had left town. Starting Amoret early was necessary for the revival of the Sunshine Boys, which could have brought in hundreds of needed dollars. If the Sunshine Boys revival had been a success -- and I think it could have been had it been publicized properly -- the censure would have been less severe. As it was,

even Bert criticized my judgment, and Patti self-righteously sniped at me.

The Board at the July 7th meeting authorized me to borrow another \$1,000 on my signature, but at 8:30 the next morning Bonnie called me to suggest another course. Her husband Ray wanted to advise us and suggested a meeting that morning. By 10:30 Carolyn and I were at Ray Reilly's office hearing him advise us to take out a \$15,000 real estate loan on the building and tell us how to go about it. It took about 24 hours for me to realize fully what a wonderful idea that was. I was a little afraid that the Board or bank or both would say no to the idea. I wanted Ray to convince the Board, but only Bert and Bonnie showed up for an emergency Board meeting to listen to Ray. But we decided I could at least consult with bankers and then take the bank's answer to the Board.

I started with Community National as I didn't want to go back to First National for a Real Estate loan when I had just negotiated a signature loan with them. Don Miller, President of Community National was very cautious. He agreed to take my proposal and documentation to his Board of Directors (containing a lot of people who had already shown interest in GGFCT). Carolyn did some heroic work preparing financial statements for them. I think she was as anxious as I to get the loan.

When I called Don Miller after his Board meeting, he reported that his Board wanted to give us the loan, but felt it would like to share the risk with another bank. He suggested I

call First National and Valley. (Ray Reilly had predicted that this would be the bank's attitude.) So I called Dick Wold, President of First National (who had given us the \$1,000 contribution which got our fund drive going) and explained the whole story. Community National had been concerned about the reversion clause in our contract with the city, which stipulated that the building would revert to the city if we failed to make a go of it as a theatre. This would naturally be discouraging to a lien-holder. However, City Attorney Jay Fiedler had given me a favorable interpretation of the clause in the event of a lien on the building. At any rate, Dick Wold felt that \$15,000 was too little to require banking cooperation, and said that he would make the loan. He referred me to loan officer Mike Compton.

I reported this at a regular Board meeting the next night. The tone at this meeting was much lighter, friendlier and supportive. The loan was unanimously approved.

Banker Mike Compton gave me some uneasy moments with his delays processing the loan, and his treating me like any other customer (even though I had President Dick Wold's word). Eventually he approved it and in mid-August we got our money -- just in time to pay for the seats which were delivered on schedule around July 29.

In the week after our return from California, I got stuck with the job of mailing out our season brochure to 2,000 people. Judy Beeck (who had already announced her imminent resignation

to move away) helped me as did Terry Bakken. But I spent a nine-hour day sticking labels and sorting the brochures after having prepared a newsletter I wanted to send out at the same time.

The response to the brochure was excellent. We had already sold about 90 season tickets for 1983-84. We sold another 60 in the 2 weeks following the brochure mailing, and probably 100 more during the August run of Tintypes.

Construction progress had its ups and downs during this period. When I returned from California nothing had been done - - 3 weeks had been lost. Charlie still promised that he'd have the building up to code by showtime; the main problem was the doors, which depended on some brickwork which couldn't be done until the sandblasting was done. All of that was more or less done in due course, though the exterior was still very much unfinished and unattractive at showtime.

Some unfinished electrical work caused more serious problems. I didn't even realize that the lighting positions needed to be rewired; it didn't get done until late Tuesday afternoon before the Wednesday preview performance. Tech rehearsal couldn't take place until 9 that night while the cast and crew waited for Amoret to install the lights. That night I had a call from assistant director Donna Oltmanns to come to the theater: the Damicos needed me. I found a very bitter Larry Damico who had some understandable but still unkind words for GGFCT.

I'm still sorting out Larry Damico. I had a very good conversation with him today (August 23, 1983) in which he admitted being testy. He also admitted that Amoret had ultimately done good work. It's undeniable that Larry did an incredible job on the show and that in his dealings with me and other GGFCT people he was very unfair. He did encounter enough difficulties to render a calm person to distraction (I remember my own turmoil at dress rehearsal for our one-acts this year), and since his attitude today was conciliatory, I am willing to attribute his attitude (which rubbed off on his cast) to temporary and understandable testiness.

The success of Tintypes surpassed our wildest hopes: all 7 shows sold out and lots of good will was created, some of which translated into season ticket sales. We received remarkable media coverage. A Channel 4 new team filmed and then televised a large segment of the production, interspersed with interviews with Larry Damico and myself.

Our search for a gambling site has fizzled again. We had not aggressively sought a gambling site because much of our enthusiasm for gambling was dulled by a report from Patti several months earlier that it would cost us \$20,000 to start up a gambling site. But in early August we had a meeting with Jim Rockey of Praire Public TV, which had profitable gambling sites, who told us we could get started for \$3,000. So Patti and I had decided to pursue a possible opening at McMenemy's Tavern; Patti had been negotiating with them, but I just learned accidentally

that another group has now moved in there.

May 23, 1984

Nine months have passed since my last entry in this history. As a result of an Executive Committee meeting held today and the financial report we received from Carolyn, I am now confident -- for the first time -- that we will make it through our first season in the Fire Hall Theatre. We have succeeded!

During the past nine months there have been ups and downs, but not nearly so intense as those of the previous year. The only constant concern has been money. My sluggishness as fund-raising chairman, and faith in people and granting institutions to give us the money we need were the main problems we had to overcome. A raffle (\$2,000), and art auction (\$1,200) and a big grant (\$4,500 from Burlington-Northern) later, it appears that with our rummage sale next week, a benefit dinner late in June and probably a second raffle, we'll come out of the year with a nearly balanced ledger. This is astounding considering the huge apparent deficit we faced in January, which was in fact responsible for waking me from my stupor. The denial of our Pillsbury Grant, the limiting of this year's Myra Grant to building renovation, and the meager \$1,000 we got from Dayton's were all disappointments to me and potentially disastrous, had it not been for the "encouragement" I received from fellow Board members to run the raffle and the rummage sale and Fanny's

eagerness to do a Russian dinner.

Only once did the Board get a chance to slap my wrists in the past few months -- I authorized Amoret to purchase curtains from Norcostco rather than the company the Board had approved. On the contrary, the Board was usually pushing me to do more -- especially in the fund-raising area -- and I have gradually given up authority in all other areas.

I think I've done a good job of fading out, a process which will conclude on June 21, when a new president is elected.

For the past few months, my overwhelming desire has been to get out; I've been counting the remaining time of the term by how many meetings I had left to chair. I really am tired of it all -- burnt out -- but I can say with some pride that I've hung in and carried out my responsibilities, being dependable, cheerful, and still going out of my way to do things for the theatre. During a week when Carolyn was dangerously burnt out, and despite her letter to the Board which was hard on me, I filled in at the theater for her for two days, and since that time I have been handling the season ticket sales.

Patti has decided not to continue after July 1. She wrote a letter to the Personnel Committee, apparently outlining her frustrations, but Mary Seaworth has found it wise not to give me a copy of that letter.

Amoret has been the object of much deserved criticism. She may be kept on after July 1, but probably with another Tech Director in charge of her. All that will be resolved in the

next month.

All the predictions about the difference our new home would make have come true. We have achieved identity, respectability and self-confidence as a result. All of our shows were successful at the box office; at least four were good productions of which we could be proud. After the late summer production of Tintypes, whose success astounded us all, we opened the season officially with a Halloween production of Dracula. Set-building for the show was seriously delayed as we had to wait for the installation of a circular stairway joining the backstage area to the upstairs dressing rooms. Just hours before showtime, several of us were frantically painting flats. However, promptly at 8 P.M., the mayor joined me on stage for a ribbon-cutting ceremony before a full house; in fact most of the performances were nearly sold out. In December we performed A Christmas Carol over three weekends with 2 shows on Saturdays and Sundays. I had to play Scrooge after both Clyde Morris and Bill Gard had backed out. The show was nonetheless well received by large audiences. Our spring production was A Streetcar Named Desire. Fortunately, Don McCaffrey who directed the show, found someone else to play Stanley Kowalski, and we achieved our first critically successful drama in our new home.

We get lots of media coverage. Fifty people came to our annual meeting.

June 20, 1997
Dallas, PA

The Last Chapter

Thirteen years have passed since I wrote most of this narrative. I started revising it during the past winter, unaware that Grand Forks, North Dakota, would become the number one story on the news for several nights in a row in April, and two of the characters in this narrative, Mike Maidenberg and Pat Owens, would become national heroes. At this moment I have no news of the Fire Hall itself. I do have an aerial photo of downtown Grand Forks during the height of the April flood, with the burnt out buildings in the foreground, and the Fire Hall clearly visible beyond, the flood waters reaching about halfway up the back of the building. In about two weeks I will leave for Grand Forks, to visit friends, tour the destruction, and learn the Fire Hall's fate.

In the meantime, I want to finish quickly the narration of my own involvement in the Fire Hall. That involvement I am pleased to say did not end when, two months after the last installment of this narrative, I flew off to France for a year.

When I came back in the summer of 1985, I renewed my association with the Theatre, happily as a civilian. Between 1985 and 1987 I performed in a few productions, but took more satisfaction in the growing theatrical interest of my children.

But in 1987, then Board President Mary Seaworth approached me. I imagine that the decision must have been somewhat

difficult for them to reach, as I had left behind the reputation of being too independent. But the Theatre was in trouble financially, and I had a good track record raising money. I think I did not hesitate to accept Mary's request that I once again become president. I had a lot of respect for her, and was especially pleased that Mark Browning's wife Emma was playing a key role on the Board. I hardly mentioned her in the preceding narrative, but at the time of the first art auction in 1983, she proved to be a dependable and energetic volunteer. And I'll never forget opening day of Dracula in the fall of 1983, when hours before opening, several of us were on the sidewalk behind the theatre furiously painting sets. Emma happened to come by and vigorously pitched in, in fact took charge of getting the rest of the theater ready for the opening night crowd.

And the Theatre had another new key player: Maribeth Swalley. I had known her as an actress and mother of aspiring actors. She had become the new Business Manager, and as I soon learned during my second two-year stint as president, she was the most dynamic, creative and courageous Business Manager any theatre group could hope to find. Because of her and Emma, and other hard-working members of the Board, my second tenure as President was easy and fun.

Another new Board Member was Jon Bonzer, a young businessman who had opened a pub in downtown Grand Forks, simply called Bonzer's. Jon's contribution to the theater was good business sense, a willingness to work hard, and his pub's board

room. Most of our Board meetings during 1987-88 and 1988-89 were held there with plenty of draft beer, peanuts and bratwurst. The pub became a symbol of the good times of my association with GGFCT. I know now that the pub was in the block of downtown Grand Forks destroyed by the fire at the height of the flood in April.

We did raise money. In one of our early conversations, I told Maribeth that in those difficult days after we had bought the Fire Hall and before we had raised any money to renovate it, I occasionally walked or drove by the building and imagined that it was suddenly and magically transformed into a theatre. That became the theme for the first of several "Dream Campaigns" through which the theatre raised many thousands of dollars.

We institutionalized the annual ethnic dinner fund-raiser, which Fanny Gershman first created (the theme was Russian; we ate borscht and blintzes), and which grew until we annually filled the basement of the Masonic Temple to eat Greek, French, Italian and Canadian food in succeeding years. There were rummage sales, and benefit performances and finally THE GRANT, which in my opinion set the stage for the continued success of the Fire Hall through the 90's. THE GRANT was for \$10,000 from the Knight Ridder Foundation. And we received it because Mike Maidenberg, publisher of the Grand Forks Herald, supported our application. The grant was perfectly free of strings, for general operating expenses. But it permitted us to engage in a very risky venture, which helped to define the theatre's role in

the community and to achieve financial stability.

The Board had agonized over a suggestion from Maribeth that we rent the University's Chester Fritz Auditorium, a 3,000 seat hall, for a fall 1989 production of Oliver. The estimated production cost was over \$20,000, a huge gamble. One prudent Board member resigned over the decision to go ahead, saying that he did not want to be involved in the decision which would make the Theatre go belly-up. I was optimistic about pulling this off, mainly because Maribeth was optimistic. She foresaw that a show like Oliver with a large cast of young people would easily fill the auditorium one time with parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, in a community like Grand Forks. And hiring a director like Larry Damico, who could attract a talented cast and create a dynamic production, would fill the auditorium two or three more times. When Mike Maidenberg asked me what we were going to do with the Knight Ridder \$10,000, and I described the project to him, he said, "Sounds like you're putting it all on red!" We did and we won.

That ultimately happened in the fall of 1989, after I had left Grand Forks for Pennsylvania. I left town just a few weeks after the \$10,000 check arrived, and I felt good leaving the theatre solvent and in Maribeth's hands. At the final Membership meeting of the year, on June 6, 1989, I made a very little speech, which I reproduce here:

This is the second time that I have concluded a two-

year term as President of the Greater Grand Forks Community Theatre. The contrasts are striking: in 1984, it was with a great sense of relief that I left the Board, Grand Forks, in fact, the country. Now it is rather with a sense of wonder and sadness, wonder at how much fun it has been, sadness because the fun is over. In 1984 I left with a real concern about the theatre's survival. Now, looking at what has been accomplished, and what is projected for the coming year, I have no fears: 89-90 will be a successful year artistically and financially for Community Theatre.

I would like to say to my fellow Board members that you have been an unforgettable Board of Directors. You have worked hard and accomplished much. You are a great group of people. Working with you has been easy, satisfying, inspiring and fun -- that word keeps popping up. I sincerely hope that next year at this meeting I can get elected back on to the Board.

I should leave you with some words of wisdom. The best I can come up with is the following: always listen to Maribeth and Emma and do what they tell you to do. And if ever they disagree, then pray.

My sincerest thanks to you all for the privilege of working with you. Best wishes and God bless you.

The meeting is adjourned.

I returned to Grand Forks for a brief visit in the summer of 1995. I walked into the Fire Hall to see what was going on, and was pleased to find a group of people gathered around a piano in the lobby, rehearsing a musical number for an upcoming show, led by Maribeth's successor as Executive Director, Steve Saari, whom I had known as an extraordinary actor, playwright and director. I was warmly greeted, and noted with satisfaction that the 1983 ribbon-cutting photo of Mayor Bud Wessman and myself (in my Van Helsing costume for the opening of Dracula) was back on the wall in the lobby (it had disappeared from its spot sometime during

the 1985-87 period of my absence). That evening the theatre was sponsoring a line dance fund-raiser on the street in back of the theatre. I got to eat some of Jon Bonzer's bratwurst (he was there pouring beer and grilling sausages) and to talk with some old friends. We were all about the same age, and the conversation focussed on our kids and others of the same generation, who were off on their own in different parts of the country, doing theatre.

Saturday, July 12, 1997, 3:10 PM
Grand Forks, North Dakota

I visited the Fire Hall yesterday, and was quite elated by what I found: Technical Director Jim Rock and Executive Director Steve Saari working away at the restoration of the building, thanks to a \$43,500 SBA loan and a \$12,500 grant from the Bremer Foundation.

I arrived in Grand Forks on Wednesday evening, July 9, and walked downtown with Michael Anderegg to tour the city's destruction. We walked up North 4th Street past the burnt out shell of the First National Bank, and the pile of rubble that was all that remained of the adjoining complex which had housed Bonzer's pub. Further up the block Browning Arts was still standing, but I had learned from a newspaper interview with its new owner (the Brownings moved to Montana in the early 90's)

that the fate of the whole block is in doubt until final plans for new dikes have been approved. As I rounded Central High School, I wasn't sure what I would find, but was relieved to see that the Fire Hall was still there, and even more relieved to find a Building Permit on the door which said everything:

**CITY OF GRAND FORKS
BUILDING PERMIT NO. 57083**

has been granted to **Firehall Theatre**
To erect, alter, repair, move **risers for seating,**
rebuild stage, sheetrock FLOOD '97
Address **412 2nd Ave N**
Contractor **Self**
Date **5-22-97** **HMS Building Inspector**

In the alley to the side of the building the old seating was piled up waiting to be carted off. Through the window I could see that all of the interior walls had been removed, and were in the process of being rebuilt.

I learned from Steve Saari that until the flood, the theatre had been enjoying tremendous success: 600 season tickets sold and the ten performances of every show sold out. He had gotten funding from several new funding agencies, and had greatly expanded the number of patrons and contributors. And despite the flood, the theatre was continuing, hardly missing a beat. They had created a revue called "High Water Follies", and were continuing rehearsals for the opening show of the Fall 1997 season, by which time the interior will be completely renovated with a slightly greater seating capacity (114 versus 100). He

and Jim Rock, and several volunteers in the days following the flood had cleaned out the basement, torn out the sheetrock, studs, risers, seats and carpeting, and had immediately begun rebuilding. Larry Hill on a visit to Grand Forks in May had spent five days working with them, redesigning the interior space and rebuilding the interior walls.

I returned this morning to the Fire Hall, and worked with Steve for about an hour. The effort is obviously more important to me than to the Fire Hall. We had a chance to continue the conversation of the previous day and I learned more about the Theatre's recent successes. It is quite clear that the Fire Hall Theatre is an integral element of the city's geographical, social and cultural landscape.