

Holyoke Public Library History Room and Archives

Finding Aid for
The Valley Players Collection (1941-1993)
(HPLA2007.527)

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The Valley Players Collection Abstract

The Valley Players was a summer stock theater company that occupied the stage of The Mountain Park Casino for 21 years from 1941-1942 and from 1944-1962¹. Although they were not the only theater group to occupy the Mountain Park Casino, whose history dates back to 1895¹, they were the longest. The husband and wife team of Carlton and Jean Guild began the company after the dissolution of the Farragut Players, “a small Equity stock company at the former coach house of the Farragut Hotel in Rye Beach, NH.”² Carlton and Jean, along with the remnants of the Farragut Players; Dorothy Crane, Lauren Gilbert, Jackson Perkins, Joseph Foley, Walter Coy, and Louie Mudgett, started the Valley Players and rented the Mountain Park Casino from its then owners, the Holyoke Street Railway Co., in the summer of 1941. The time that the Valley Players occupied the Casino is often referred to as its “Golden Age~” Attendance for the 239 performances between 1941 and 1962 peaked in 1950 at 65,563. Total attendance from 1941-1962 was 970,270. The most notable veteran of the Valley Players was Hal Holbrook, a Television and Film actor who, as an unknown, starred in 26 plays from 1951-1953 and 1957. He debuted his well-known solo performance of *Mark Twain Tonight* at the Mountain Park Casino in 1957. Madeleine L’Engle, the well-known author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, also spent time in the company. Due to dwindling attendance, increasing debt, and competition from television, the Valley Players gave their last performance (*The Glass Menagerie*) on September, 1 1962. There was a reunion at the Holyoke History Room in 1993 of several members of the company.

¹ There was a World War II era ban on “pleasure driving” in 1943 so there were no performances that season

Volume (cubic feet) 6.006

Acquisition: The Valley Players Collection was donated to the Holyoke Public Library by Carlton Guild in 1984.

Access: Unrestricted

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Preferred Citation: The Valley Players Collection

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The Valley Players Collection Historical Sketch

The Valley Players were born out of the ashes of the Farragut Players, a small Equity stock theater company in Rye Beach, NH. Jean Guild, an actress who joined the Farragut Players sometime in the 1930s, and her husband Carlton Guild suggested to the company that they relocate when it became apparent that 1940 would be the last year of performances. The Guilds were joined by Dorothy Crane, director, Lauren Gilbert and his wife Jackson Perkins, Joseph Foley, Walter Coy, and Louie Mudgett. Canton Guild was responsible for the business side; advertising, press releases, etc as well as some acting. Jean Guild, in addition to acting in many of the plays, acted as executive manager by scheduling and casting all of the shows and finding housing for the actors. Dorothy Crane was the production manager.

The Guilds passed over Bar Harbor, ME, Westerly, RI and “several locations in Massachusetts”³ for the Mountain Park Casino in Holyoke, MA. The Mountain Park Casino had been in existence since at least 1895, offering afternoon and evening performances of Vaudeville stars in an open-air pavilion.⁴ An enclosed pavilion was erected in 1898 and in 1900 new chairs were placed in the pavilion and the stage was improved. In 1901 an all-new casino building was constructed that was open on all sides. The Casino was a part of the Mountain Park Amusement park, owned by the Holyoke Street Railway Company.

Various tenants had occupied the Mountain Park Casino before the Valley Players, including the Mt. Park Opera Company, the Holyoke Oratorio Society, the Casino Stock Company, the New Casino Players, the Mt. Tom Players, the Federal Theater, (a Work Progress Administration {WPA} project), and the Pioneer Valley Drama Festival.

The Valley Players began their residency at the Mountain Park Casino in 1941. The entire project was financed by the Guilds alone. Evidence for the quick turnover of tenants became clear when it was discovered that the Casino required a union stage crew and had been a “white elephant” for years.⁵ The Valley Players’ first years at the Casino were not made any easier by the fact that Mountain Park was closed in 1943 for wartime gasoline rationing. Despite these obstacles, the Valley Players remained at Mountain Park for 21 years, the longest residency at the Casino.

The Valley Players were counted amongst the many summer stock theater companies that populated the northeast, and were regularly featured in the New York Times as a potential summer destination for theatergoers. Valley Players productions mostly consisted of popular Broadway comedies, dramas, musicals and mysteries; including *The Cradle Song*, *The Desk Set*, *Father of The Bride*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Little Mary Sunshine* and *Our Town*.

The company would perform between 10 and 12 performances each season, which would typically start in June and run until September. There were 7 performances a week; 6 evenings and 1 matinee.² The rehearsal schedule was rigorous. The actors were often performing one play while rehearsing the next. Rehearsals were held in 3 locations throughout the lifetime of the Players; from 1941-1942 at Mountain Park in the old Merry-Go-Round building and Ballroom, from 1944-1947 at the summer home of the Steiger family at Wyckoff Park, and from 1948-1962 at the barn of Lincoln & Dorcas Smith (later owned by the Barthellos) at 1425 Northampton St., which was a stone's throw from the Guild's home at 176 Lincoln St.

There were a total of 239 performances from 1941-1962 (excluding 1943), including some performed twice. Post-war attendance steadily rose to a peak of 65,563 in 1950. Besides their last season in 1962 of 26,392, the lowest attendance was their first season in 1941, of 26,882. Average attendance fluctuated between 45,000-60,000 a year.

The Valley Players were a tight-knit company. There was a cooperative spirit that ran throughout the performers, and craftspeople. Many actors returned for multiple years and would return after they had left. During the years 1944-1947 most of the company was roomed and fed at the Steiger summer home in Wyckoff Park where rehearsals were held. Carlton and Jean Guild appeared as a kind of mother/father figure to the company, offering up their home at 176 Lincoln St. as company headquarters and general gathering place.

The Valley Players most recognizable performer was definitely Hal Holbrook. Holbrook, who joined the company with his then wife Ruby, was a cast member in 25 productions. In addition, his well-known one-man show, *Mark Twain Tonight*, was staged with the Valley Players for the first time in 1957 as the season opener. Other notable members of the Valley Players include; Ted Tiller, who wrote and performed *Count Dracula* in several countries, Madeleine L'Engle who became a well-known author of such novels as *A Wrinkle in Time*, *My Sister Eileen* and *Isa*⁶, and Hugh Franklin, L'Engle's husband, who had future roles in *As the World Turns*, *Dark Shadows*, and *Love of L~fe*

The Valley Players were very community oriented. It was not uncommon for the Players to perform benefits for local charities such as the Holyoke Hospital Aid Association, or to hold Christmas sing-a-longs during the off-season. Local artists were granted wall-space in the lobby of the Casino throughout the season. Apprenticeships and classes were offered to local high school age youth interested in theater production.

Many factors contributed to the demise of the Valley Players. High overhead, competition from other theaters, low attendance and the increasing influence of television all played a role. In addition, Canton and Jean, who had been financially responsible for the company's survival, could not sustain their patronage. The 1959 & 1960 seasons were particularly grim, with the lowest attendance in 15 years of 31,936 in 1960.

² all Sunday performances required the company to post all unmentionable words and phrases in the lobby that the state censor had ordered deleted from performances

The 1960 season most likely would have been the last if not for the generosity of Jacob Barowsky, a Holyoke resident, who had made his fortunes inventing Lestoil, the all-purpose detergent. Barowsky spent over \$24,000 on the Players. \$15,000 was spent on renovations to the Casino. The lobby was re-painted, bathrooms renovated and a new audio system was installed. The rest of the money was spent on hiring an ad agency to promote the Valley Players in newspapers, TV, direct mail, and radio. The 1961 season saw an improvement in attendance over 1960, but it was still below 1959 levels. A final attempt to increase attendance in 1962 was made, but it was not enough. Attendance was the lowest ever at 26,392. Despite a desperate plea in the November 1962 *Saturday Democrat* for individual and corporate support to keep the Valley Players alive, 1962 was the last season. In 1963 a new company, the Pioneer~ Valley Theater Foundation, attempted but failed to keep theater alive at the Mountain Park Casino. They performed 9 plays with a net loss of \$25,000.

A reunion of some of the actors (Jean Bums, Gaylord Mason, Peter Harris & Ruby Holbrook) was held in 1993 at the Holyoke History Room for an exhibit of materials from the Valley Players Collection.

The Valley Players Collection Scope and Content Note

The Valley Players Collection consists primarily of material dating between 1941-1962. The Holyoke History Room Local File on the Valley Players has related newspaper articles up to 1993. The collection consists of photographs, scrapbooks, typed histories and vital statistics, photocopied newspaper articles and a ledger of financial accounts.

The scene photographs located in SERIES 1 were taken by Neil Doherty, a well-known photographer in Holyoke. These were used for promotional purposes. There are photos for most plays in most seasons. Currently, no photos exist for 1962. There is discussion in the 1983 correspondence between Carlton Guild and the Holyoke Public Library about obtaining copies of the 1962 photos from Mr. Doherty, but currently they are not part of the collection. Hal Holbrook, Madeleine L' Engle and other well known company performers are featured in some of these photos. There are several candid photos of a picnic from 1952. These also contain photos of Hal Holbrook. There are 8 photos of individual performers. 6 are autographed. There are also several photos from the Valley Players reunion at the Holyoke Public Library in 1993.

The scrapbooks in SERIES 2 contain most, if not all, articles written in local and regional newspapers about The Valley Players from 1941-1962. There are letters to season ticket holders, local librarians and theater departments, and fan letters from prominent members of the community including Mayor Samuel Resnic.

SERIES 3 contains both loose and bound copies of the weekly programs that accompanied each performance.

SERIES 4 contains a ledger of financial accounts, correspondence, listings of plays, authors, cast and crew, attendance, a press release and a history of the company written by an unknown author. There is also a history of the Mountain Park Casino written by the Valley Players in 1960. Along with these materials, is a list of what was donated. Some of the materials referred to in this list are not currently in the collection. These include: Five (5) 6" x 9.5" notebooks with a list of all of the artists or groups of artists who showcased their work in the lobby of the Casino from 1948-1962 and statistics on authors, actors, directors, as well as Three (3) albums with 85 photos of 73 featured performers that appear to be missing from the collection. The letter mentions that the History Room will eventually inherit these items, but at the time of this writing, they are in an unknown location.

The Collection was donated by Carlton Guild, the chief financial/promotional officer and sometime actor of the company. It was processed by then Holyoke Library director, Mary E. Kates in 1984. In 1993, Paul Graves, the curator of the Holyoke History Room at the time, held an exhibit of Valley Players material and invited a handful of actors to Holyoke for a reunion. In October 2007, the photographs, which were held in acid-free folders in an archival box were re-boxed into several smaller legal size archival boxes, due to excessive wear on the original box. Each individual photo was placed into either a plastic polyester L-velope or a polyester negative envelope and then re-filed in the same acid-free folder. The folders were relabeled in pencil. Because the photos were used as promotional devices, their condition is varied. Most of the

photos have bent corners and holes from staples, thumbtacks, and tape. Several candid and other photographs of the Valley Players were removed from the yearly scrapbooks because they had become loose from the pages that they were attached to. Yellowing tape was clipped from the edges and the photos were placed in polyester negative sleeves. A finding aid was created for the first time in October and November of 2007.

Related collections include several folders in the Local History cabinet. These include:

Mountain Park Casino 1895-1940/Valley Players, 1941-1962

Mountain Park Ballroom 1971 Fire

Mountain Park After Closing 1988-present

Mountain Park 1894-1987 Years of Operation Additionally, there is 1 **box** of original materials on the Casino

Mountain Park Casino, 1901-1963

The preferred citation for this collection is “The Valley Players Collection, Holyoke History Room and Archives”

Valley Players Collection Series Description

SERIES 1: Photographs, 1941-1993, 227 Folders.

Series 1 includes over 700 scene stills, 8 individual photos of performers, and several candid photographs of Valley Players that were removed from the yearly scrapbooks (see SERIES 2). The scrapbook photos contain photos of a picnic with cast and crew of the Valley Players including Hal Holbrook. There are currently no photos for the 1962 season or the *Hasty Heart* from 1946. There are additional performances without photos as well. On the back of each photo is information in either pen, pencil or typed labels with play title and year. There are occasional cropping instructions as well. Several photos taken at the 1993 exhibit and reunion at the Holyoke Public Library are included.

SERIES 2: Scrapbooks, 1941-1962, 17 volumes, Arranged Chronologically

Series 2 contains 17 scrapbooks that cover every season. Some scrapbooks encompass two years. The scrapbooks contain most, if not all, articles and advertisements printed in local and regional newspapers related to The Valley Players from 1941-1962. The 1962 scrapbook contains articles up to 1993. Additionally there are letters to season ticket holders, local librarians, local theater departments, and fan letters from prominent members of the community including Mayor Samuel Resnic. The scrapbook from 1952 contains candid photos of members of the company having a picnic at their rehearsal site on Northampton St. Some of these photos contain Hal Holbrook.

SERIES 3: Programs, 1941-1962

SERIES 3 contains bound and unbound originals of Valley Players programs from all of their productions. These contain cast lists, photos, and advertisements from local Holyoke businesses.

SERIES 3, Sub-Series 1: Bound Programs, 1941-1962, 5 Volumes, Arranged Chronologically

Series 3, Sub-Series 1 contains bound volumes of every Valley Players program from 1941-1962. These generally were 16 pages long and included advertisements from local Holyoke businesses alongside profiles of the cast and descriptions of the performances. The 1961 programs doubled in size from 16 to 24 pages and were then reduced to 20 pages in 1962. The programs are bound as such:

Vol. 1. 1941-1946

Vol. 2. 1947-1950

Vol. 3. 1951-1954

Vol. 4. 1955-1958

Vol. 5. 1959-1962

SERIES 3: Sub-Series 2: Unbound Programs, 1942-1962, 4 boxes

Series 3, Sub-Series 2 contains 4 boxes of unbound programs. There are no programs for 1941 and several other performances.

SERIES 4: Administration, 1941-1984, 1 box

Series 4 contains a business ledger kept by the Valley Players from 1941-1962, correspondence, data on attendance, performances and performers, a history of Mountain Park Casino written in 1960, and a brief history of the Valley Players. Contained within the documentation acquired with the collection are references to several items that are not, at the time of this writing, in the possession of the Holyoke Public Library.

SERIES 4, Sub-Series 1: Correspondence 1983-1984, 1 folder

Series 4, Sub-Series 1 contains one folder of correspondence between Carlton Guild and Mary Kates, then director of the Holyoke Public Library, regarding the donation of the collection

SERIES 4, Sub-Series 2: Listings of Plays, Authors, Dates, Attendance and History, 1941-1984, 1 Folder

Series 4, Sub-Series 2 contains several pages of data written by and about the performances of the Valley Players. This folder includes a written history of the Mountain Park Casino, with a timeline (as well as a handwritten and a typed draft), attendance figures, number of performances per actor, cast and crew information, and a history of the Valley Players with detailed statistics on a range of elements of the company.

SERIES 4, Sub-Series 3: Business Ledger, 1941-1962, 1 ledger,

Series 4, Sub-Series 3 contains compiled financial accounts for the entire run of the Valley Players. A note on the cover states that "all but '41 and '62 are consolidated in typescript".

SERIES 5: Photo Negatives, 1942, 1 box

Series 5 contains 5 groups of photo negatives from 1942 including scene photos from: *3 Men on a Horse*, *Private Lives*, *Scenes From Skylark*, *Watch on the Rhine*, and *Out of the Frying Pan*

Valley Players Collection Box and Folder List

SERIES 1: Photographs, 1941-1993

Box 1 1941-1945 34 folders

Box 2 1946-1949 45 folders

Box 3 1950-1953 40 folders

Box 4 1953-1957 50 folders

Box 5 1957-1993 57 folders

SERIES 2: Scrapbooks, 1941-1962

SERIES 3: Programs, 1941-1962,

SERIES 3, Sub-Series 2: Unbound Programs, 1941-1962

Box 1 1942, 1944-1950 84 programs

Box 2 1950-1954 60 programs

Box 3 1954-1957 52 programs

Box 4 1957-1962 64 programs

SERIES 4: Administration, 1941-1984,

Box 1: Folder 1: Correspondence

Box 1: Folder 2:

History of Mountain Park Casino, 1960.

Handwritten draft of History of Mountain Park Casino (unknown author).

Typed draft of history of Mountain Park Casino (unknown author).

Timeline of Mountain Park Casino, 1895-1940.

1957 Press Release.

History of Valley Players, (unknown date).

Cast, crew, performance data, (unknown date).

Box 1: ledger

SERIES 5: Photo Negatives, 1942

Box 1: Folder 1: *3 Men on a Horse*,

Box 1: Folder 2: *Private Lives*

Box 1 : Folder 3: *Scenes From Skylark*

Box 1: Folder 4: *Watch on the Rhine*

Box 1: Folder 5: *Out of the Frying Pan*

Repository Information

The Holyoke History Room and Archives, a department within the Holyoke Public Library, houses the Library's special collections. In accordance with the Holyoke Public Library's mission statement, the History Room staff provides free access to Holyoke's historical documents while preserving these fragile items from damage and theft. Housed within the Local History Room and Archives are collections documenting the history of Holyoke, a city whose industrial developments during the late 1860s and early 20th century played an influential role on the paper and textile industries both nationally and internationally.

The Holyoke Public Library History Room and Archives is available for public use 20 hours per week. None of the collections stored in either the History Room or the Archives are circulating. In addition, items stored in the Holyoke Public Library Archives are not accessible for browsing. However they are available for use in the Holyoke History Room. Given the fact that the Curator of Historical Collections is the only full time employee working with the Holyoke Public Library Archives, and as they are stored outside the reading room patrons must request the use of these items ahead of time. Requests may be made via the phone, mail or email. Please provide the Curator with as much information about your research needs as it will not only help in retrieval of the records but will also help to preserve them. The History Room's contact information can be found on the first page of this guide. Walk-ins maybe allowed to use these items provided that there is a second attendant available. These items are not available for use if the Curator is offsite. Please leave your name and number and requested items with the attendant and the Curator will set an appointment to allow these items to be used. You may use one box at a time and may use one folder at a time to prevent these items from getting out of order. Please put an "in use" slip in the vacant spot to hold the file's place.

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NOTES

¹ History of Mt. Park Casino: Typescript of July 1960. The Valley Players

² The Valley Players: A Brief History. Unknown Author

³ The Valley Players: A Brief History. Unknown Author.

⁴ History of Mt. Park Casino: Typescript of July 1960. The Valley Players

⁵ The Valley Players: A Brief History. Unknown Author

⁶ The Valley Players: A Brief History. Unknown Author