

The Town Hall Players: Off Broadway, On To The Training Field

From 1947 through 1949, West Newbury was on the map as a stop on New England summer theatre's straw-hat circuit. A non-profit, community-sponsored venture featuring a core troupe of Broadway professionals, the Town Hall Players brought culture and vibrancy—and much drama. West Newbury summer theatre flared with intensity, its brevity testimony to grand scale vision and ambition in a very small town.

In the fall of 1946, West Newbury resident Burton Noyes gathered local luminaries in the lower Merrimack Valley to achieve his plan (conceived while stationed with the WWII Navy in Guam) to develop a non-profit community-sponsored professional summer theatre. “West Newbury, described by Lowell Thomas as ‘the garden-spot of America,’ [was selected](#) ...after a thorough survey of the area, because of its public-spirited interest in community affairs, its traditional New England charm, and its location on a central highway between Newburyport and Haverhill.” An “[antidote](#) for war time blues and jitters,” this was to enrich the area's [cultural life](#).

By the spring of 1947, the Town Hall Players, Inc., secured additional financial [sponsors](#) (more always [welcomed](#)); [celebrity backers](#), a [director](#), a [professional cast](#) of 10 (some of whom became familiar faces on TV, in movies, and on stage); [apprentices](#) (allowed to work at “no charge to the amateurs”); a local [business manager](#) experienced in college theatricals; local [households](#) to provide room, board, laundry and taxi services at distinctly non-profit rates, and [delirious press](#) (“It is perhaps the most important post-war undertaking yet...in this, the best part of the best country of the world.”) Declared an “[epochal success](#),” the July 1, 1947 gala opening featured celebrities (not least L'il Abner's [Al Capp](#) of South Hampton and tenor [Roland Hayes](#) of West Newbury), an audience of over 300, and the comedy *The Male Animal*. John Steinbeck's wrenching drama [Of Mice and Men](#) with an novel commenter/troubadour musical element followed. The remaining four 1947 productions comprised three comedies, with a suspense drama [finishing the season](#) on August 9.

Presented with several bids, in May 1948 West Newbury's Selectmen chose New York producer and Summer Theatre Handbook editor [Carl Friedan](#) as producer of that year's summer theatre. [David Lifson](#), who not only had professional theatre experience but

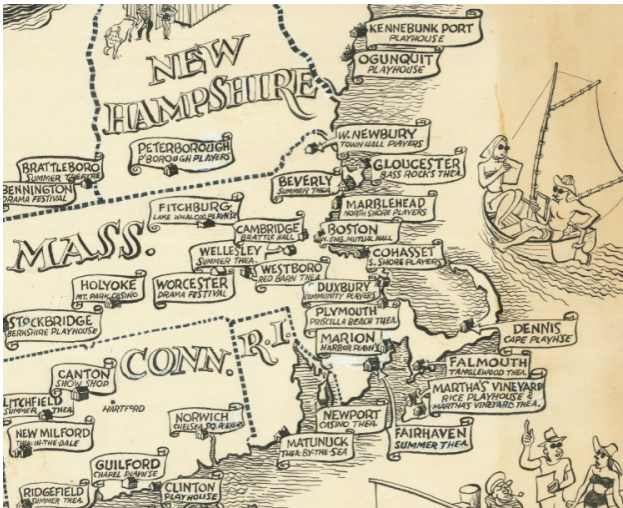
also was president of the 20th Century Paint and Varnish Co., became the new director. The season opened in inauspicious circumstances: 1948's summer was blistering. Actors in the opening comedy virtually melted and “many in the audience [suffered in sympathy](#).” Within days it was [announced](#) that “henceforth the hall would be cooled ‘by many fans.’” Fans notwithstanding, the troupe rehearsed on the relatively cooler [Training Field](#). The successful 1948 season featured seven comedies (typified by [Arsenic and Old Lace](#)) and [one drama](#), which dealt with the racism a Black WWII hero encountered when returning to the Jim Crow South. That show's Black star, who reprised his role in the original Broadway cast, spoke of the “genuine, openhearted, openminded way the people” [welcomed him to the community](#).

In 1949 unwelcome drama began to encroach. The West Newbury Summer Theatre continued its hectic [pace of shows](#) typically running from Monday through Saturday with a Wednesday matinee. Each week leading actors arrived and left (at Equity pay rates), lines were memorized, rehearsals run, and sets, props, and costumes procured. This consumed Town Hall (the Selectmen were [relegated to the boiler room](#), their offices commandeered for the theatre) and considerable amounts of money.

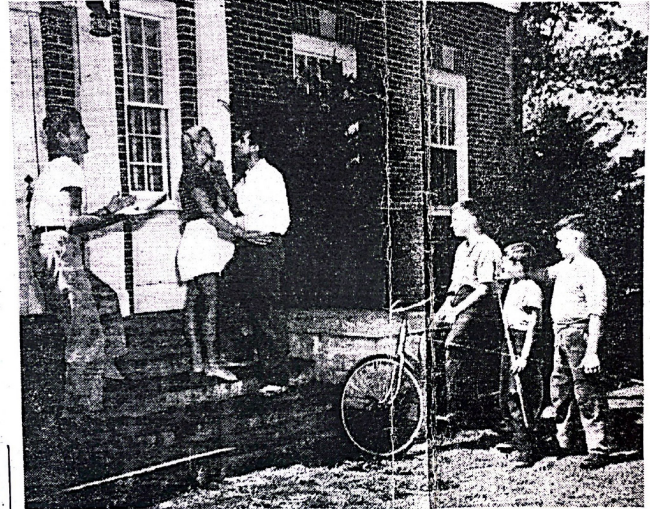
Before the 1949 opening, ads ran offering local organizations an opportunity to “[r]un a [benefit theatre party](#)!” The shows went on, a mix of eight recent hit comedies and dramas, until the final curtain closed on August 20. When the Groveland-Haverhill Bridge closed for repairs the [season was cut short](#), leaving two plays unproduced. At the time producer Carl Friedan observed, “‘The West Newbury Summer theatre is definitely not a commercial enterprise. About 85 per cent of the summer theatres lose money.... Why do we go on with it?’ He paused. ‘That,’ said his wife, hard-working, energetic Betty Friedan [who later became one of the foremost [feminists of the latter 20th century](#)], ‘is something I’d like to know.’” Summer stock, he explained, is like an anchor—“you come back, year after year.”

Annual town meeting voted in [1950](#) that “care and renting of Town Hall be placed in the hands of the Selectmen and that they do not again let it to the Summer Theatre players of last year until the [\$40] balance of the rent is paid.”

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Source: Raremaps.com

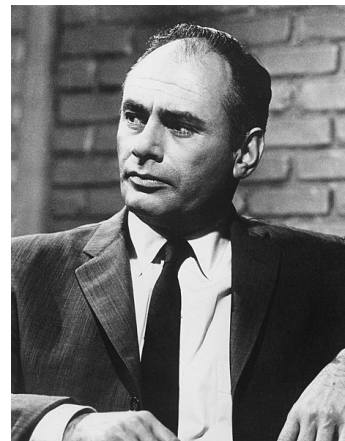


FREE SHOW—All thoughts of fishing were temporarily shelved by these West Newbury boys, John Sargent, Paul Grey and Charles Fowler (left to right), as they came upon this love scene in rehearsal on the front steps of the West Newbury Public Library. The girl and boy are Dorothy Culver and her husband, John Culver, with Lee Gergere directing and urging more emotion.

Source: 8/1/1948 Boston Globe



Source: G.A.R. Library Historical Collection



Actor Martin Balsam, three-year member of West Newbury theatre's resident cast

Source: Wikipedia

