

CRANBROOK



St. Dunstan's Guild Records

Records, 1932-1990
1.7 linear ft.

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History

St. Dunstan's "Theatre" Guild has long been a part of Cranbrook. On February 14, 1932, Jessie Winter, Headmistress of Brookside, acted as secretary of a small meeting of people interested in forming an amateur theatrical society. It was held in Christ Church Cranbrook's Guild Hall. The "ambitious objective", as reported, "was to bring drama to the area and work for the development of a community theatre which would make a real contribution to the arts." The meeting took favorable action, electing Henry S. Booth, Ellenna Cochran (Mrs. Maurice D.), Jessie Winter, Harry D. Hoey and Burt A. McDonald as a committee with power to act in creating the desired organization.

By fall it was organized as "St. Dunstan's Guild of Cranbrook" with McDonald as president and Miss Winter as secretary. The group was named after St. Dunstan, a ninth century English churchman who was Archbishop of Canterbury and has always been regarded as a patron saint of the arts. Because George Gough Booth came from the small village of Cranbrook in Kent, where Canterbury is located, it seemed a fitting name to apply to this theatre organization. Henry Scripps Booth, George's youngest son, is credited with naming the group. St. Dunstan's Feast Day is May 19, and that, by tradition, has become the date of the Annual Meeting at which time elections are held for the Board of Directors.

Two months after its founding the group was well enough organized to put on its first play-- "Married But No Wife" -- on the tiny Meeting House stage, which was only 13 ft. wide by 10 feet deep. This is where the majority of the early productions were presented.

In June of 1933, the Guild had its first production at the outdoor Greek Theatre, King and Commoner, which started the tradition of an annual June show in the Greek Theatre. The Greek Theatre, designed by Detroit architect Marcus R. Burrowes, was the first of many buildings commissioned by George and Ellen Booth for the general public. It was built in 1915 and immediately put to use as a performing arts venue and made available to local groups for non-commercial purposes. The facility at first consisted of the amphitheatre, the stage and peraskene (platforms downstage left and right), and the terraces surrounding the pool and bathhouse to the north. In 1924, George Booth commissioned a backstage area north of the bathhouse for dressing rooms, set construction, make-up, costuming, and storage. Originally to be done by Burrowes also, Henry S. Booth persuaded his father to allow him to design it and the area became known as the Actors' Court.

In 1935, St. Dunstan's Guild began renting the Brookside Auditorium for \$25.00 a show with an additional \$10.00 if proceeds allowed. Before this, all the productions, except the June show at the Greek Theatre, were at the Meeting House stage.

Occasionally the Guild would utilize the Cranbrook School Auditorium, where it produced its first full length, three-act play, Outward Bound in May of 1936. It was this show, which set the group of amateurs on a course, which would eventually lead to

professional standards with their other productions. Allowing St. Dunstan's Guild to produce plays in the Brookside and Cranbrook Auditoriums was found to be inconvenient for the schools because of their being denied use of facilities during times of play preparation. So the Guild began looking around for another structure while worrying about the cost and practicality of such a venture. In 1946, the problem was at least partially solved when the Cranbrook Foundation agreed to lease to the Guild the Pavilion adjacent to the Greek Theatre. This structure, designed by Albert Kahn, was originally built in 1924 as an open-sided structure with graceful stone arches supporting a pitched tile roof. The Pavilion was enclosed with glass walls in 1930 to allow for enhanced use of the building. George Booth upgraded the toilet facilities and installed an improved heating plant in the building in 1932. Two years later a decision was made to convert the Pavilion to a gallery and lecture hall for the Cranbrook Academy of Art and Institute of Science. This renovation, designed by Eliel Saarinen, replaced the glass walls with masonry, added the entranceway at road level, reworked the basement areas into office and storage, and installed a rudimentary air-conditioning system in the building. Saarinen retained the outlines of the arches, however, keeping the flavor of Kahn's original design.

From 1934 until the Art Academy Museum opened in 1942, the Pavilion served as the primary exhibition gallery for Academy shows. It was also the site of several Academy bashes, including the famous "Crandemonium Balls" of 1934 and 1936. In 1934, George Booth submitted a study by Eliel Saarinen to relocate the Cranbrook Science Institute along Lone Pine Road and connecting it to the Pavilion. This plan was disapproved by the Cranbrook Trustees because no adequate operational funds were in sight. When the new plan to expand the Institute in its current setting was approved, the Pavilion provided temporary quarters for the Cranbrook Institute of Science's staff from April 1936 until the new Institute building was completed the following summer. During this time, the CIS staff offices were placed in the basement of the Pavilion and public lectures were held in the upstairs main hall.

In 1946 the Pavilion was totally vacated leaving the space available for St. Dunstan's Guild. When the Guild first acquired the Pavilion in September of 1946, there were vacated office spaces below and an empty auditorium above. Having no stage, the first production, Noel Coward's Blithe Spirit, was theatre "in the round" without an elevated stage. Not long afterward, members built an ingenious stage consisting of a series of interlocking aluminum metal "tables" with tops of a balsa-aluminum sandwich (made by the Cycleweld Division of Chrysler Corporation) on the west end of the building in time for the next production, Shaw's "Of Arms and the Man", presented in December of 1946. There was, however, no back-stage stair from the dressing rooms so the casts of all plays presented for a year or more had to track outside through the elements to reach the stage. Cutting a stair through the concrete slab in the south-west corner of the building was the next improvement undertaken.

On Dec. 19, 1949, St. Dunstan's Guild had its first carol sung in the choir of Christ Church Cranbrook with refreshments following at the Pavilion. This has become an annual event for the group. Within the church is a vaulted chapel dedicated to St. Dunstan. Other traditional parties are an integral part of the group. Besides parties on the opening and closing night of each production, a Presidents Party/Dinner Dance is held, an Open House Punch at the beginning of each new season, and other spontaneous parties and celebrations.

In 1950, St. Dunstan's Guild of Cranbrook was incorporated as a non-profit organization under the laws of the State of Michigan.

June 28, 1956 there was a review of the arrangements of the use of the Pavilion and Greek theatre. This was so a formal agreement could be reached so there would be no mix-up with the Cranbrook Summer Theatre School (C.S.T.S). The C.S.T.S. is a group that was established in 1942 by Carl and Annetta Wonnberger to provide students between the ages of eight and nineteen the opportunity to experience all aspects of stagecraft and they utilized the same facilities but usually during different periods of time during the year.

1957, Leonard Bernstein was a guest of the Sepeshy's while in town to conduct for the D.S.O. He asked for a studio space so that he could compose. Sepeshy responded by having St. D's playhouse set aside for his private use. The Steinway piano from Cranbrook House was moved down from Cranbrook House, and Bernstein said he used this opportunity to compose some of the material for "West Side Story".

September 24, 1964, a pre-dawn fire destroys the backstage storage area and the season opener, *The Moon Is Blue*, is moved to the Birmingham Village Player's playhouse. Financed by insurance and a loan from the Cranbrook Foundation, the '64'-65 Board undertook a major remodeling effort, adding a workshop bay, the dressing rooms beneath, the new stairway to "stardom", and the two restrooms opposite the furnace room. As to the cause of the fire, there were various theories but no hard facts.

1967, the Cranbrook Foundation loaned St. Dunstan's Guild \$12,000 to finance adding a wing to the Pavilion stage. The loan was to be paid at the rate of \$1,000 per year. The addition contained set storage at stage level with several dressing rooms below. This freed the back stage area for construction and painting of sets and eliminated much of what had been a firetrap.

In June of 1979, St. Dunstan's Guild completed its twelve \$1,000 payments to Cranbrook for the loan the Foundation had made in 1967 to finance the addition to the Pavilion. The Guild marked the event with a party prior to the opening of the annual Greek Theatre show. At that party Henry S. Booth was honored as a Guild Founder and one who had participated in about every aspect of show business but makeup.

Due to the harsh winters and constant use of the facility, the Greek Theatre and Actors' Court were in severe disrepair and were restored in 1990-91. In September 1991 there

was a rededicatory production of The Cranbrook Masque, first staged at Cranbrook's Greek Theatre in 1916, which involved the help of members of St. Dunstan's.

Scope and Content of Collection

The records in this collection cover St. Dunstons from its inception in 1932 to 1991.

There are four series in the St. Dunstons Guild collection: **Administrative**, **Ephemera**, **Productions and Events**, and **Publications**. Materials in these series are arranged alphabetically by subject, then chronologically within the subject.

The **Administrative** series consists of by-laws, correspondence, annual and board meetings minutes and reports, and various papers relating to administrative work.

The **Ephemera** series contains miscellaneous paperwork such as newspaper and magazine clippings, history, and papers relating to the group and certain individuals.

The **Productions and Events** series consists of announcements, calendars, notices, and postcards relating to the various plays and productions, and also events held by the group.

The **Publications** series contains copies of the newsletter The Guilder, programs of the various plays and productions, a copy of the 1979 St. Dunstan's Recipe Book, member rosters, season brochures, and yearbooks.

Related Collections

- Henry Scripps Booth and Carolyn Farr Booth Papers (1982-05)
- Cranbrook Foundation RGI: Office Records (1981-05)
- George G. Booth Papers (1981-01)
- Cranbrook Masque/Greek Theatre Rededication (1992-02)
- Annetta and Carl Wonnberger Collection (1991-14)
- See also: Posters (oversized)

Box Number--Description

Series I: Administrative

Box 1

1. Annual Meeting and Reports, 1940, 1980-1983
2. Board of Directors-lists, 1968-1986
3. Board of Directors-meeting minutes and reports, 1932-1983
4. Benefit Performance Contract, "n.d."
5. By-Laws, 1932, 1938, 1984
6. Correspondence, 1938, 1946-1950
7. Correspondence, 1952-59
8. Correspondence, 1960-1969
9. Correspondence, 1970-1977, 1980
10. Expense and Income Reports, 1947-1983
11. Pavilion Additions and Alterations Specifications, 1965
12. Prospective Member-Lists and Requirements

Series II: Ephemera

Box 1

13. Clippings, 1949-1980
14. Dunstan Carol, "n.d."
15. History, 1962
16. Jervis "Jerry" McMechon, 1946-78

Series III: Productions and Events

Box 1

17. 50th Anniversary, 1982
18. Event Notices, 1940, 1962-1988
19. Production Announcements and Audition Notices, 1971-1997
20. Production Postcards, 1948-1972
21. Season Calendars, 1969-1975

Series IV: Publications

Box 2

1. Guilder, 1953-1967
2. Guilder, 1968-1975
3. Guilder, 1975/76-1979/80

4. Guilder, 1980/81
5. Guilder, 1981/82
6. Guilder, 1982/83
7. Guilder, 1983/84
8. Guilder, 1984/85
9. Guilder, 1985/86
10. Guilder, 1986/87
11. Guilder, 1987/88

Box 3

1. Programs, 1939-1949
2. Programs, 1950-1954
3. Programs, 1955-1959
4. Programs, 1960-1964
5. Programs, 1965-1969
6. Programs, 1969-1972
7. Programs, 1973-1975

Box 4

1. Programs, 1975-1977
2. Programs, 1978-1979
3. Programs, 1980-1982
4. Programs, 1983-1989
5. Recipe Book, 1979
6. Rosters, 1939-1969
7. Rosters, 1973/74-1981/82
8. Rosters, 1982/83-1990/91
9. Roster Additions and Changes, 1979-1987
10. Season Brochures, 1967-1990
11. Yearbooks, 1972/73-1974/75

Index

Anniversary, 25th, 1:7, 1:13,
Anniversary, 50th, 1:17
Barker, The, 1:13
Bicentennial, 1:9
Bloomingham Eccentrics, 1:13
Booth, Henry S., 1:3, 1:5, 1:6, 1:8, 1:10
Booth, George Gough, 1:6
Brigadoon, 1:13
Building Improvements, 1:7, 1:11
By-Laws, 1:12
Carol Sing, 1:18
Constance Binney Award, 1:1
Costume Parade, 1:18
Costume Storage, 1:7
Cranbrook House Auxiliary Benefit, 1:18
Cranbrook-Life Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, 1:1, 1:18
Cranbrook Masque, 1:9
Damn Yankees, 1:13
Dramatic Library, 1:6
Dunstan Carol, 1:14
Duval, Mrs. G. E. (Trudy), 1:9
Fire Inspection Report, 1:6
Fire Damage Report, 1:8
Franklin Donegan Bequest Statue, 1:1
Greek Theatre, 1:9, 1:10
 --Light Tower, 2:3
Green Room Dedication, 2:2
History, 1:15, 1:17
Hoe Down, 1:18
Hoey, Harry D., 1:3, 1:5
Impresario, 1:13
Joint Resolution, 1:7
Jonah Pool Ruling, 1:8
Las Vegas Night, 1:18
Lerchen, Edward, 1:8
McMechon, Jervis (Jerry), 1:7, 1:8, 1:9, 1:16
Murder at St. Dunstan's, 1:18
Newhall, Patricia, 1:8
Opening Punch, 1:18
Pavilion, 1:6
 --Addition, 1:9, 1:11, 2:1
 --Maintenance, 1:8
 --Rewiring, 1:10

Political Rally, 1:18
Porter, Nancy, 1:7
Program Donations, 1:8
Puttin On The Ritz, 1:18
Rental Charges, 1:8
St. Dunstan's Theatre Fund, 1:3
Sepeshy, Dorothy, 1:7
Sepeshy, Zoltan, 1:1
Sheldon R. Noble Memorial Scholarship, 1:7, 1:9
Theatre Art Books List, 1:9
Winter, Jessie, 1:3, 1:5
Winter Wonderland Tea Dance, 1:18