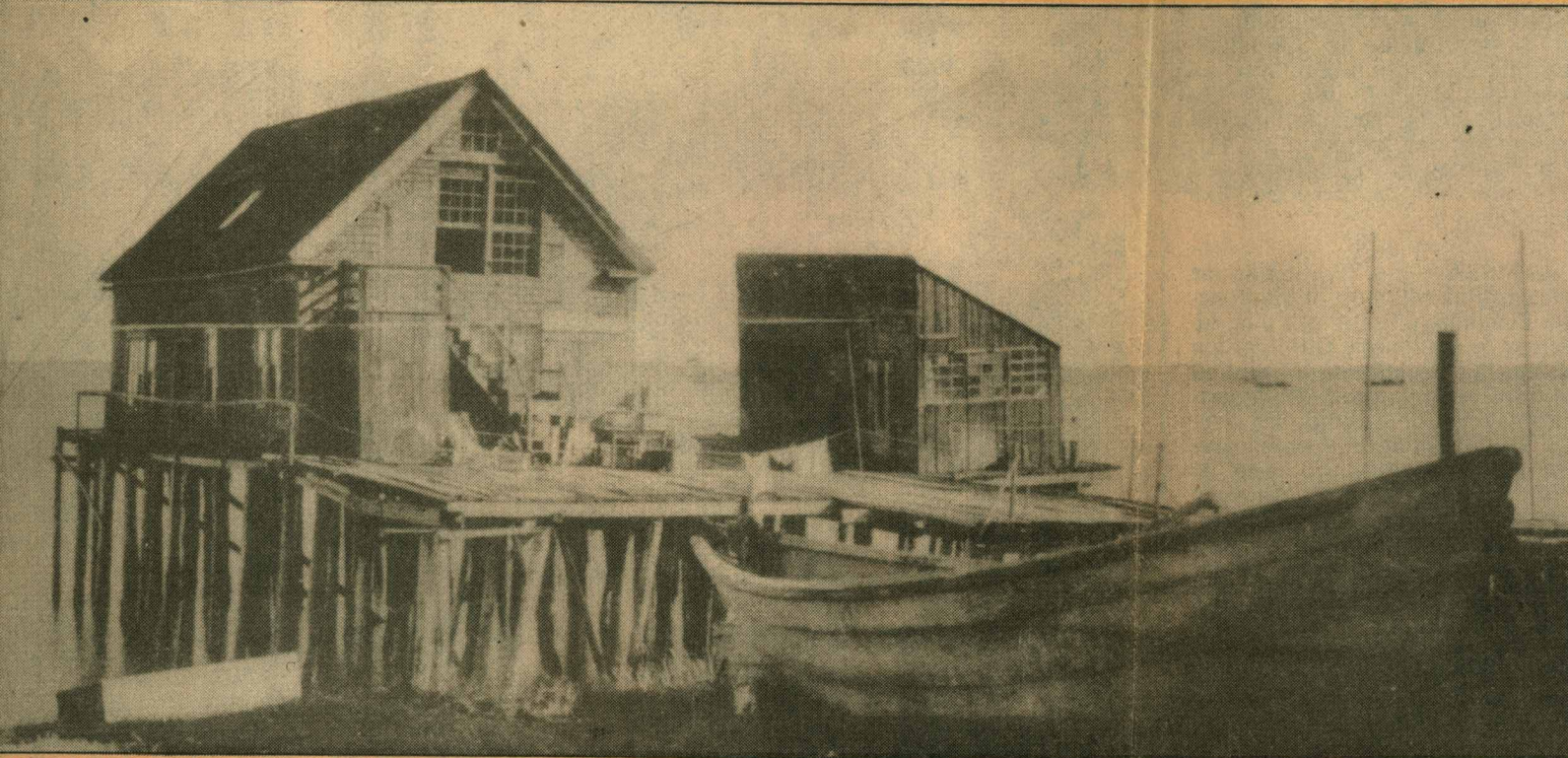


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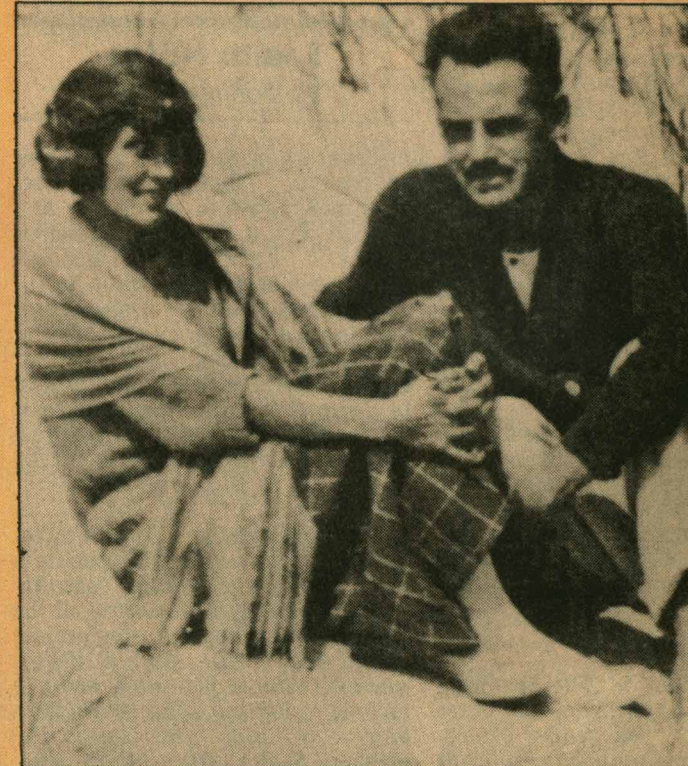
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SUNDAY CAPE COD TIMES, APRIL 5, 1987



First playhouse of the Provincetown Players.

FROM A POST CARD IN THE CAPE COD PILGRIM MEMORIAL MUSEUM COLLECTION



Agnes Boulton and Eugene O'Neill in the Provincetown

Remembering a 'cultural moment'

Conference to mark renaissance spawned by Provincetown Players

By ALLISON BLAKE
STAFF WRITER

Provincetown

LIKE most children, Miriam Hapgood DeWitt at age 8 had her bedtime. Her parents, she recalls, "were quite strict about that."

And so she did not get to see a particular social evening in 1915 in the Hapgood's summer house in Provincetown.

Her mother, Neith Boyce, had written a one-act play, and a group of friends decided to perform the love story, called "Constancy," for their own pleasure. Another play, "Supressed Desires," a spoof on Freudian disciples by Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook, was also on the evening's playbill.

"'Constancy' was performed on the porch, then the audience turned around and 'Supressed Desires' was performed in the living room . . . the two rooms were joined," recalls Mrs. DeWitt, who lives in Provincetown.

"I was not allowed to attend; I was considered too young," she says. "I heard the commotion downstairs."

The "commotion," as it turned out, was the genesis of a theatrical breakthrough in American culture, the opening night of the Provincetown Players, the group that produced Eugene O'Neill's first play in 1916.

To celebrate what that little renaissance — that slim window of time — has meant, a four-day conference titled: "1915: The Cultural Moment," will take place this summer in Provincetown.

Set for June 14 to 17, the program is organized around four themes: feminism, art, psychology and radical social thought, which "all came together" in the first four plays of the Provincetown Players, says Adele Heller of Provincetown, who is organizing the event under the auspices of the Provincetown Playhouse, a grandchild of the original.

The program includes productions of the first four plays produced by the Provincetown Players in 1915: "Constancy," about the new woman; "Supressed Desires," about the new psychology; "Change Your Style" by George Cram Cook about the controversy in Provincetown between traditional and post-Impressionist art; and "Contemporaries" by Wilbur Daniel Steele, about the plight of the homeless.

There also will be panel discussions on the four themes.

O'Neill biographer Barbara Gelb, whose play, "My Gene," was recently produced in New York, and Theodore Mann, artistic director of the Circle in the Square Theater in New York, will speak.

An exhibit of posters, programs and photographs from 1900 to 1920 will illustrate the beginnings of little theaters in America. An exhibit of paintings and prints of Provincetown artists of 1915 is also planned.

Events will take place at the Provincetown Inn and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

The program is funded by a \$107,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and \$14,980 from the private, non-profit Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy, a program of the National Endowment, says Mrs. Heller.

The Provincetown Players spent the summers of 1915 and 1916 performing in Provincetown, then moved to the Provincetown Playhouse on MacDougal Street in New York's Greenwich Village in the fall of 1916. They continued in New York until 1922, devoting themselves solely to new works by American playwrights, Mrs. Heller said. Since then the Provincetown Playhouse, both in New York and Provincetown, has undergone many changes.

Those historic two summers in Provincetown saw the Provincetown Players performing in an old chandlery called the Ariquippa on Lewis Wharf — the "most easterly wharf in town," says Joel O'Brien, born in 1914, and the son of labor journalist and early player Mary Heaton Vorse.

The wharf belonged to Ms. Vorse and her husband, Joe O'Brien, and the younger O'Brien recalls later living on the wharf when the family home on Commercial Street was rented out.

"I remember the town as wharves everywhere," says Mrs. DeWitt. "There were boats, fishing activity, drying nets on the shore. There were jiggers, low slung carts that kids could hitch rides on, that hauled the nets for weirs, and dried fish, called scully joes.

"There were wooden sidewalks, sand streets, few cars — I don't think there were any in 1912 — and big trees along the streets. I remember two of the big fishing schooners, the Iris, and the Little Jenny . . . one was black and one was white," she says.

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Photos from family albums of the original Provincetown Players show George Cram Cook, upper left, and his wife, playwright Susan Glaspell, top right; Hutchins Hapgood, left center, and his wife, Neith Boyce, lower left; and Joe O'Brien and his wife, Mary Heaton Vorse, lower right. The photo of Eugene O'Neill and Agnes Boulton at the top of the page is also from a family album.

...Players

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Heaton Vorse, of Provincetown, who was 12 in 1914, was known to his mother's friends as "General Public."

"I was a precocious brat," he says. "I had read a lot. I liked baseball and playing with the kids, but I was interested in what the older folks were doing, too."

"I'd sit there quietly, listening, and if they started getting esoteric and sort of fancy, I'd stick my nose in and say, 'What do you mean?'"

The friends of Mary Heaton Vorse and her husband, Joe O'Brien, and the friends of Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood were some of the best writers, journalists and thinkers who migrated to Provincetown in the summer from Greenwich Village. George Cram Cook, better known as "Jig," is widely considered to be the energy behind the early players, which included his wife, the writer Susan Glaspell; the writer Wilbur Steele and his wife Margaret; and Provincetown's "poet of the dunes," Harry Kemp.

They were catapulted into the history books with the later success of O'Neill, a major American playwright.

Of O'Neill, Mrs. DeWitt says, "He was just kind of there. I remember his place very well, and I remember his wife much better." His wife, Agnes Boulton, lived with him in the old Peaked Hill Lifesaving Station on the dunes in Provincetown, a place they had converted into an unusual home, complete with widow's walk.

Passages have been written about O'Neill's wooden writing chair, built to flow in and out with the tide while the playwright placidly concentrated. O'Brien recalls a visit he and his mother made to the O'Neills — and that his mother wound up doing what all mothers do with young children: looking for him. O'Brien was playing in the chair, a quarter-mile out to sea. O'Neill was less than enthusiastic about swimming the child back in.

Journalist and strike organizer John Reed, the only American buried at the Kremlin, was part of the group. His reputation enjoyed renewed interest several years ago with the release of the movie "Reds." All Mrs. DeWitt remembers of him was a visit to the family's winter home in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., when he performed coin tricks for the children.

Much of the group's summer activity for both adults and children was centered at the Vorse household. Mrs. DeWitt remembers that all the players' children and many children of Provincetown's Portuguese families gathered there. Vorse can tell you why:

"The Vorses bought that large piece of property to keep the kids the hell out of the house while they were writing," he says.

"Between 9 in the morning and 1, the kids — my sister and myself — we had to be beyond that tree" — he



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PROVINCETOWN PLAYHOUSE

The old fish shed on Mary Heaton Vorse O'Brien's wharf was used as an artist's studio prior to its being converted into a theater by the Provincetown Players. Artist Margaret Steele, wife of Wilbur Steele, writer and active member of the players, is pictured in front of her studio.

pointed to an imaginary boundary in the backyard.

□

Although they were amateur actors, Vorse stresses that the members of the group were very well-established writers.

"They were people who were smart, they realized they'd started something. That's why Jig Cook took it to New York," he says.

The period "was the beginnings of maturation of American culture. It was kind of a prelude of our established national personality," says Mary Henderson, a theater scholar from New York who is helping to organize the June conference.

What the so-called Little Theater movement did — the Provincetown Players being the third such recognized group in the United States — was to deal with reality. The players set themselves apart by working entirely as a repertory group, with playwrights, actors and business

roles changing hands with each play, and they also performed only new plays, Ms. Henderson says.

O'Neill is the biggest gift the Provincetown Players gave theater, but they also opened the door for all types of theater. At first, they attracted radicals, but as time went on, they became a trendy draw to the regular theater-goer, she says.

And Hutchins Hapgood, his view direct and unromanticized by time, wrote that "success and ambition of some of the players later killed the theater as a significant personal and social expression. It grew to be what it had been a protest against.

"It lost its personal life and its social meaning, but in the meantime it had lived a relatively lovely life."