

• Stage • Presence •



*How two theatre companies
built artistic community and brought
live performance to the rural West*

Anika M. Hanisch



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Ben as the young Rip Van Winkle

~ 1 ~

Virginia City, Montana

They thought they'd found gold—several pounds of it. Ben Tone and Harry Smith were helping to dig the pit at the old Virginia City Opera House in April 1954 when they hit the vein of glittering rocks. The two actors-turned-construction-workers set the stones aside and called in a local miner to confirm their find.

“I think you’ve hit the biggest vein of chuck rock I’ve ever seen,” the old timer said.

“Chuck rock? What do we do next?” the two young men asked, ready to cash in their treasure.

“Chuck it! It’s worthless.”

The fool’s gold wasn’t worth a cent. But the efforts of the founding members of the Virginia City Players, would become priceless, not only in southwest Montana, but throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Sitting in the living room of his home in Bozeman, Ben laughs recalling the early days of his theatre career. Both he and Harry were working for their friend Larry Barsness. All three men had the same theatre mentor in Oregon. Larry had been vacationing with his wife Dorrie in Montana in 1948

when they met the eccentric entrepreneur and history buff Charlie Bovey in Virginia City. Charlie had bought out most of the town with the hope of rebuilding and preserving it.

When Charlie found out that Larry and Dorrie were entertainers, he asked them to put together a short show for an upcoming miners convention at the Wells Fargo Coffee House in Virginia City. That gig went well enough that it evolved into a request to form a complete theatre company the following summer.



Larry contacted Ben and Harry, and both men agreed to help with the new theatre in 1949. The adventure began. Salvaged World War II trailers were set up as actor housing. There

was no running water, it got damn cold at night, and hailstorms sometimes made it impossible to hear in the theatre. When power went out during a performance, the solution was to aim a car's headlights through a side door near the stage so the show could go on. Pay was poor, and the actors supplemented their income doing after-hours performances at the Bale of Hay saloon—they'd pass a clean spittoon to take up donations. It was not an easy life.

They loved it.

The "theatre" was actually in the town's old livery stable. A few improvements had been made, but it was a simple space. It would be five years before they dug the pit for the Cremona and put in a slanted floor. Those first seasons, the stage was four feet above the audience who sat on folding chairs on the flat wood floor. Anyone seated toward the back of the house might have a challenge hearing and seeing the performers.

And occasionally, a drunken audience member might try climbing onto the stage.

The flat floor had some advantages though. Initially, the actors performed every day but Monday, which was amateur night. Community members were invited to perform music and variety numbers. There were square dances too; the chairs could be folded up and the space became a perfect dance hall. Local families came and got to know the actors.

That first year, the new Virginia City Players (VCP) endeared themselves to locals and tourists alike with a performance of *Old Phil's Birthday*, a sentimental piece that left many audience members with tears in their eyes.

Larry focused on producing classic American theatre including *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *All That Glitters is Not Gold*, *The Doctor In Spite of Himself*, and *She Stoops to Conquer*. While the VCP have often been associated with "melodrama," Ben clarifies the use of the word. The tag, often blurred with vaudeville references, has been applied to many theatrical forms, including the villain/hero farces of the 1920's, which made fun of earlier classic melodrama. The word's meaning is no longer very clear. So, it is not entirely appropriate to refer to the VCP's earliest productions as "melodrama."

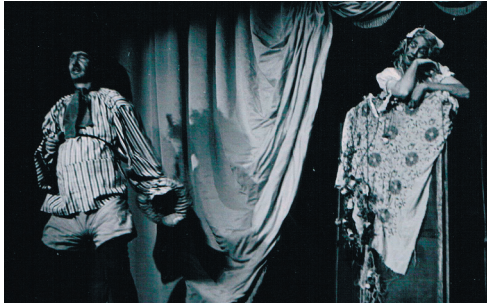
In fact, if there is any single word that could summarize their offerings in that first decade, it would simply be: diverse.

In the winter, Ben and Larry often went to New York to find off-season work. They read through *100 Lost Plays* and made note of productions that could be done by a smaller cast. Larry found public domain scripts in the library and brought copies of the period plays back to Virginia City the following summer. Performance nights lasted as much as four to five hours, providing a mix of serious drama, farce, and variety numbers.



At the end of their summer theatre season in town, five to eight members of the core professional acting company would hit the road for a couple months, eventually touring as far as Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Utah, and the Dakotas.

The roads were rough, audiences slim, and phone lines sketchy or non-existent. Booking was word-of-mouth only. So, Larry and the group's promotion director, Dick Pace, drove ahead of the actors on a set route. Running a few days ahead of the group, Larry and Dick would try to get formal contracts in each small town on the route. When the actors arrived, they knew the two had been successful if there were posters tacked up around town. If not, they spoke with the local community hall and tried to line up last minute gigs.



"I remember playing to audiences of sixteen," Tone recalls. The group survived on room and board compensation. "We were young; we didn't have to have a lot of money, just enough to survive," he says. "You really felt like you had accomplished something when you built theatre from scratch."



PHOTOS: A *Romeo and Juliet* spoof played by Harry Smith (Romeo) and Ben Tone (Juliet); on tour in the 50's.

He remembers sometimes those early audiences weren't entirely friendly too. Fellow actor, Vicki Smith, who was a member of the company in the fifties, remembers moments of culture clash in some communities.

On tour in 1957, the group performed in Helena. After the show, the actors typically stopped in at local bars and then tried to find a good breakfast before heading back to their hotel.

"I was dressed to the nines after the show—pretty dress, high heels—and we walked down to the 4-B's and sat in a booth," Vicki recalls. The men in the company were sporting Elvis-style sideburns, and this wasn't always well received in rural communities. "A couple local toughs came in and started to mouth off. Ben was closest to the door and the guy kept banging him on the shoulder and then whacked him hard. Ben grabbed the guy, and they went outside."

Harry quickly followed. Then Vicki joined the fray, jumping on the back of one of the toughs. The cops soon arrived and broke up the parking lot brawl.

The actors were surprised when the police were apologetic. The cops knew the punks who started the fight and didn't want the acting troupe to be put off. The restaurant manager also approached them to let them know their food was cold and added, "Sorry you had to go through that."

"We had quite the long walk back to the hotel," Vicki says. "My heels were scuffed from the fight." Then, halfway to the hotel, they realized a car full of young people was tracking them.

"When we get to the corner, it's every man for himself," Ben said out of the corner of his mouth. Vicki took off her heels, ready to make a mad dash. But at the corner, the car pulled up and blocked their way. She was terrified.

A window rolled down, and a kid ducked out and said, “Hey, you’re from the Virginia City Players; we’re gonna’ make sure you’re safe.”

Reflecting on the incident, Vicki adds, “They were going to be our saviors, and here we were ready to run for our lives.” Throughout their travels, occasional hostilities were negated by such plainspoken support.

For about a decade, the after-season touring group performed in tiny communities like Hinsdale, Montana where audience members helped with set-up. They also began to perform to full houses at the Great Falls Civic Center and the Fox Theatre (now the Mother Lode Theatre) in Butte. There were shows in grange halls, at air force bases, and in school gyms. The touring season brought theatre to people who rarely got to enjoy live performance. In turn, it also spread the word about Virginia City, and this publicity brought in more tourists in the summer.



Vicki Smith

The summer theatre thrived. With a mix of professional actors from Seattle and New York and a growing internship program that provided theatre courses and acting opportunities for students, the blooming theatre community established a tight camaraderie. Local families embraced the actors, and many performers returned year after year, falling in love with the region and its people.

In the winters, Ben, like many other VCP actors, would head to Seattle or New York to

find acting work. But they kept coming back to the mountain west. Ben grew more attached to the area when he met Nina, a Ruby valley schoolteacher who was cooking at the Wells Fargo where he liked to go for breakfast. Later, Nina would help with sewing costumes for the VCP.

Ben and Nina married in 1958, and for several years, they pieced together a living through Virginia City summer theatre, productions in Seattle or New York, one-man shows, and part-time teaching opportunities at Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman — Ben had gotten to know several locals there while touring. Vicki kept in touch with the couple as they began to spend more time in Bozeman. “Ben and Nina had some real tough times because there wasn’t much work, and they were having children,” Vicki shares. “Ben was very close to the local people, and people took care of each other. It was just wonderful the openness and kindness.”

In 1961, on the cusp of possibly leaving Bozeman for good, Ben was offered a full-time teaching position in MSU’s theatre department and summer work at The Loft Theatre, which performed in what locals now know as the red barn by Café Zydeco on Main Street. Finally, Ben didn’t feel like he might be forced to leave Bozeman to find work. He took the building-from-scratch experience he had in Virginia City and applied it to growing the tiny theatre community in Bozeman and, in the process, helped establish the art scene that the town is now so well known for.

