

❧ Broadway Comes to Fussville ❧

The Great Depression marked a time of struggle, but it was also a period when the human spirit proved its resilience. For those who lived through it, the Depression became a measuring stick for all the years that followed. Money was scarce, farm prices plummeted, jobs were few, and every resource had to be stretched. But in Fussville, even in the darkest days, the community found a way to escape their burdens through the simple yet powerful medium of drama.

Tonie Claas, a keen observer of her community, kept a journal that chronicled not only the births, marriages, and funerals of Fussville but the small, creative acts that brought people together during tough times. In the midst of hardship, the young people of Fussville, teenagers and early twenties, yearned for something more than the occasional dance or a Hollywood film at the Falls Theater in Menomonee Falls. They wanted to tell stories, to express themselves in ways beyond the reach of everyday struggles.

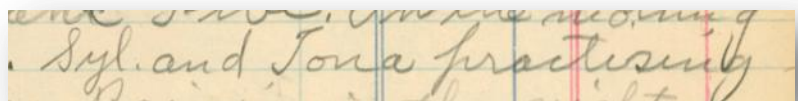
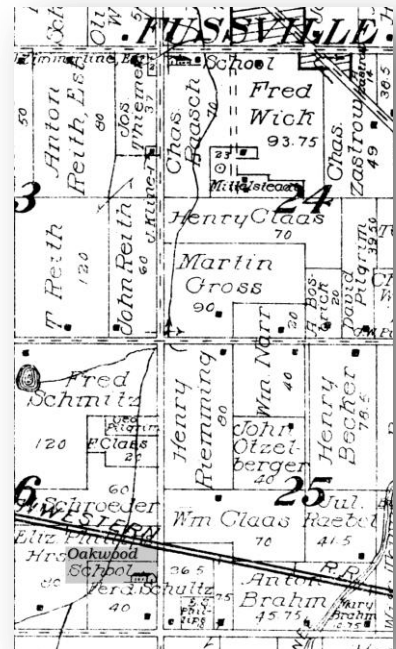
In 1930, this youthful energy coalesced into a community theater group, born from a partnership with the Oakwood School PTA.

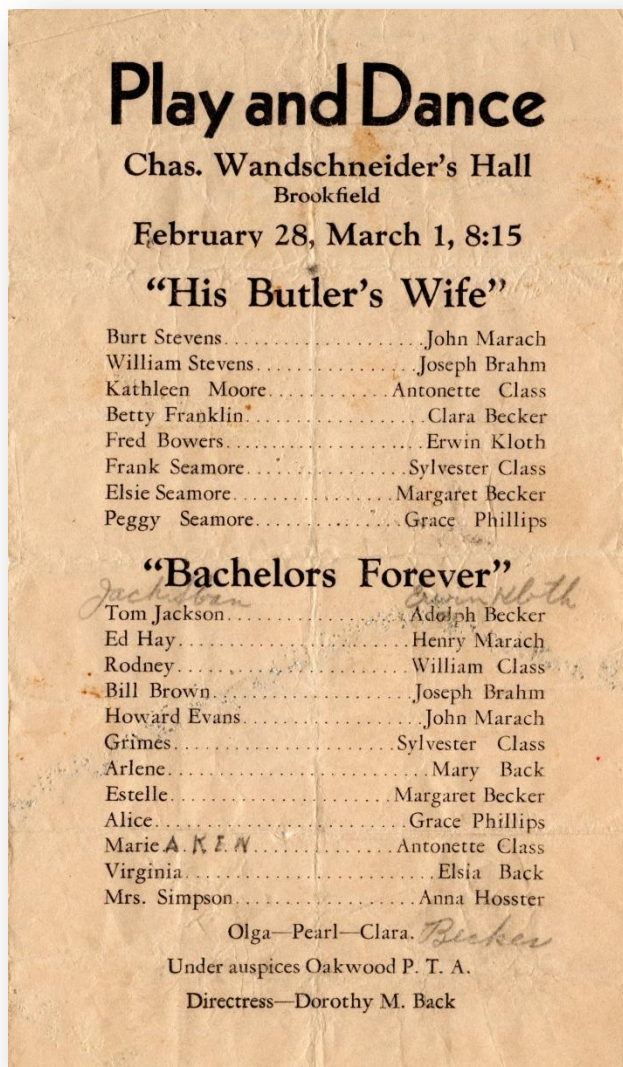
Oakwood School, with its brand new building on Lilly Road became the perfect spot for rehearsals. A small band of hopeful actors began preparing their first production, two comedies: “His Butler’s Wife” and “Bachelors Forever.”

The First Performance - A Winter’s Dream

As winter deepened in 1930, the Depression’s grip tightened, but in the hearts of Fussville's young performers, the show went on. Tonie documented the flurry of activity, noting on February 23 that her children, Sylvester and Tona (who was mistakenly listed as “Antonette” on the playbill), were hard at work rehearsing.

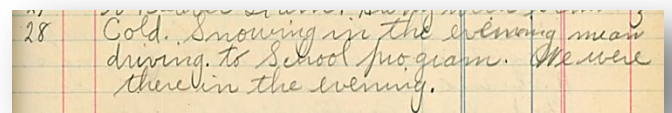
February 23, 1930 - “Syl and Tona practicing.”





The plays were scheduled to be performed on February 28 and March 1 at Charles Wandschneider's Hall in Brookfield, a mere ten miles from Fussville.

Tonie's entries reflect a mix of excitement and anxiety as opening night approached. Capturing the struggle of driving through winter's chill to support the community effort, Tonie wrote ...

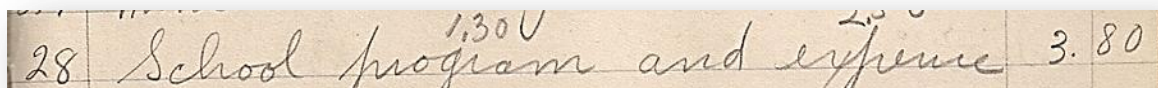


February 28, 1930 - *"Cold. Snowing in the evening mean driving to School program. We were there in the evening."*

For the cast, getting to the venue early was crucial, not only to prepare the stage, but to settle their nerves. There were costumes to change into, lines to rehearse, and for many, this was their first real taste of the spotlight.

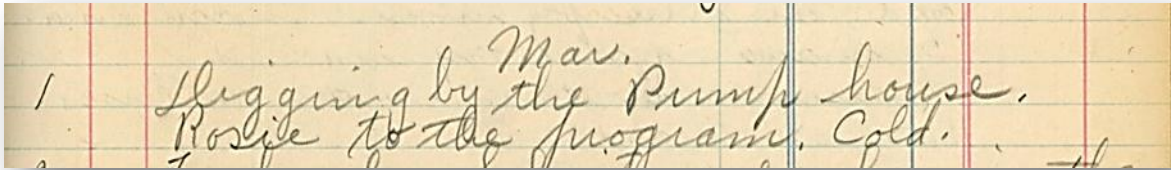
A Night to Remember

The performances were simple but memorable. Admission was only \$1.30 for Tonie and her family, along with \$2.50 for refreshments and snacks.



February 28, 1930 - *"School program ... \$1.30 and expense ... \$2.50 \$3.80"*

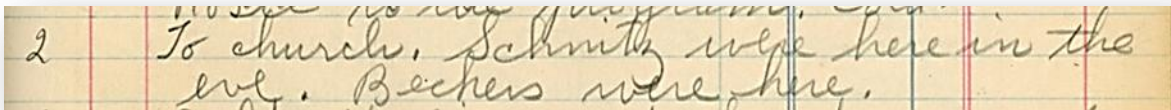
After the final curtain fell, the cast enjoyed a lively dance to unwind. Tonie didn't write a review, but the evening was certainly a success, with the laughter and camaraderie carrying them through a long winter night. The show was repeated the following evening.



1 Digging by the Pump house. Rosie to the program. Cold.

March 1, 1930 - *"Digging by the Pump house. Rosie to the program. Cold."*

It was cold again on Saturday evening when sister Rosie made her way to Wandschneider's for the second performance. The community was resilient, and the cast gave their all. Tonie reflected on the aftermath, recording that the day after the performance, part of the cast came by the Claas home to celebrate.



2 To church. Schmitz were here in the eve. Beckers were here.

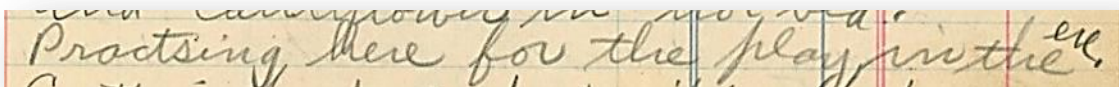
March 2, 1930 - *"To church. Schmitz were here in the eve. Beckers were here."*

For a moment, the worries of the outside world faded, and the sense of achievement lingered.

A Fortunate Calamity - 1932's Spring Revival

Two years later, in the spring of 1932, another play took the stage. "A Fortunate Calamity," was a comedy by Charles Pendry. While Tonie didn't write much about the production, it's clear that the creative spark in the community was still burning bright.

The cast rehearsed diligently. Reflecting the closeness and familiarity of the group, Tonie hosted some of the practices in her home.



Practising here for the play in the eve.

March 29, 1932 - *"Practising here for the play in the eve."*

Apr. 1932
1 Practising for the play by us.

April 1, 1932 - *"Practising for the play by us."*

The performance was held at a new location, Math Schmitz' Hall in Fussville.

3 To church. Harry and Tona fixing the stage for the play by M. Schmitz.

April 3, 1932 - *"To church. Harry and Tona fixing the stage for the play by M. Schmitz."*

On Sunday afternoon, the crew gathered at the hall to build out a stage. They worked hard to finish since they wouldn't have time to spare before the opening performance on Wednesday, April 6, just three days later. It might seem unusual that the play was held on a Wednesday instead of a weekend date. But perhaps that was because Math Schmitz was donating his hall for the performance. He couldn't afford to give that space up for a weekend date. The weekends were most likely his busiest for other events.

Finally, the day of the performance arrived. It cost a total of \$2.00 for tickets for the family.

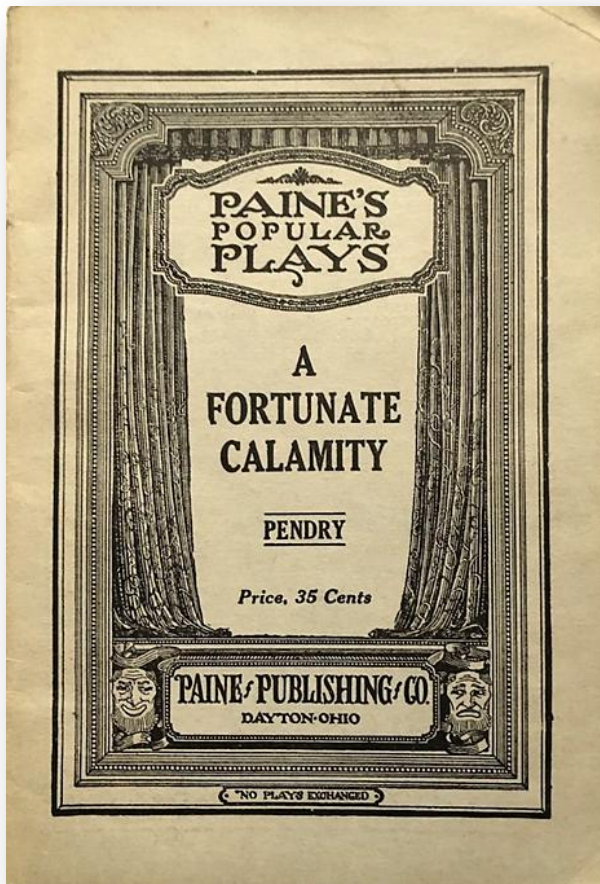
35¢ ticket V 2.00
6 Program

April 6, 1932 - *"Program (35 cent ticket) ... \$2.00"*

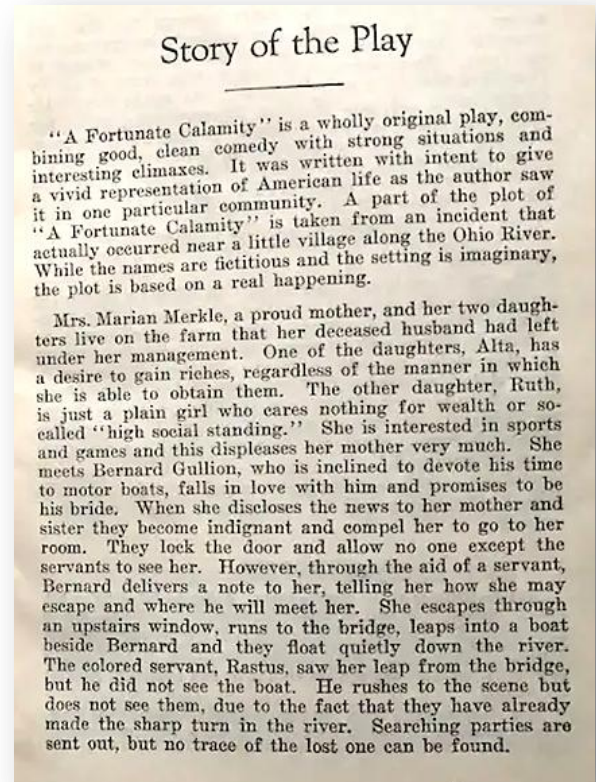
The weather that day was, as Tonia so often described so many of them, a "fine day."

6 Fine day V. In the evening to the Program by M. Schmitz Tona was in it. Fortunate Calamity.

April 6, 1932 - *"Fine day. Laying tiles. In the evening to the Program by M. Schmitz. Tona was in it. Fortunate Calamity."*



“A Fortunate Calamity,” was a three-act comedy written by Charles Pendry in 1923. The story centers on the Merkle family and their two daughters, one of whom is ambitious, one of whom is not, and the complications that ensue from this.



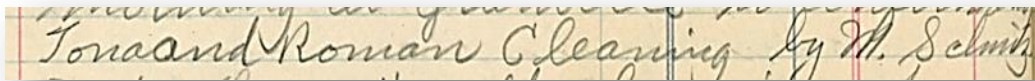
Story of the Play

“A Fortunate Calamity” is a wholly original play, combining good, clean comedy with strong situations and interesting climaxes. It was written with intent to give a vivid representation of American life as the author saw it in one particular community. A part of the plot of “A Fortunate Calamity” is taken from an incident that actually occurred near a little village along the Ohio River. While the names are fictitious and the setting is imaginary, the plot is based on a real happening.

Mrs. Marian Merkel, a proud mother, and her two daughters live on the farm that her deceased husband had left under her management. One of the daughters, Alta, has a desire to gain riches, regardless of the manner in which she is able to obtain them. The other daughter, Ruth, is just a plain girl who cares nothing for wealth or so-called “high social standing.” She is interested

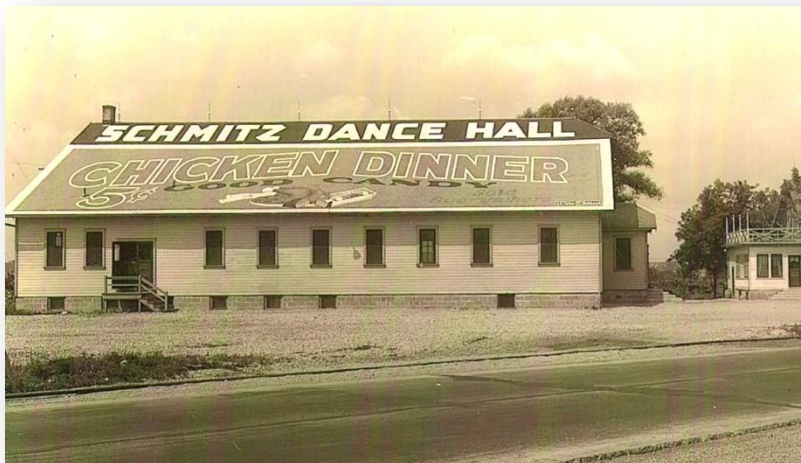
in sports and games and this displeases her mother very much. She meets Bernard Gullion, who is inclined to devote his time to motor boats, falls in love with him and promises to be his bride. When she discloses the news to her mother and sister, they become indignant and compel her to go to her room. They lock the door and allow no one except the servants to see her. However, through the aid of a servant, Bernard delivers a note to her, telling her how she may escape and where he will meet her. She escapes through an upstairs window, runs to the bridge, leaps into a boat beside Bernard and they float quietly down the river. The servant, Rastus, saw her leap from the bridge, but he did not see the boat. He rushes to the scene, but does not see them, due to the fact that they have already made the sharp turn in the river. Searching parties are sent out, but no trace of the lost one can be found.

Tonie didn't write a review or commentary for us about the play. Surely there were plenty of laughs. Her only mention was that the next day, Thursday ...

A photograph of a piece of aged, yellowed paper with handwritten text in cursive. The text reads "Tona and Roman Cleaning by M. Schmitz". The paper is slightly wrinkled and has some faint markings.

April 7, 1932 – *“Tona and Roman Cleaning by M. Schmitz.”*

... there was some work to do, putting the hall back together for Math Schmitz.

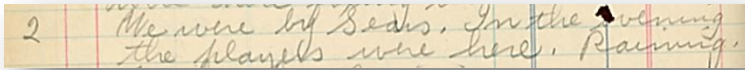


That concluded the 1932 Fussville theater season. All the work that went into the production was worth it for the fun and laughter it brought to the community. In a small, tight-knit community like Fussville, every performance was a celebration.

A Winter of Change - *Here Comes Charlie*

The years continued, and in 1934, a new play was on the horizon. “Here Comes Charlie,” a farce written by Jay Tobias, was slated for a spring performance.

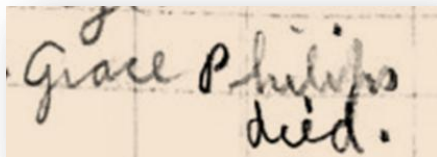
The play, filled with witticisms and social satire, offered a lighthearted distraction for the people of Fussville. Tonie reported that in December, the cast and directors began to meet. The group gave themselves plenty of lead time for a planned springtime performance.



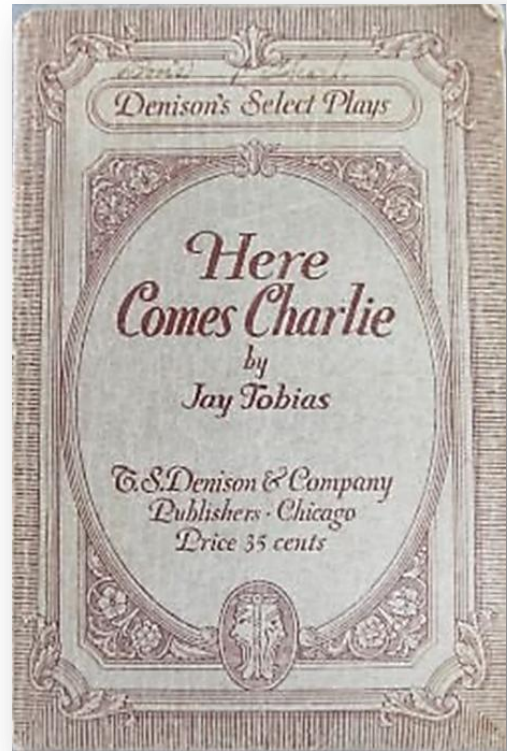
December 2, 1933 - “We were by Sears. In the evening the players were here. Raining.”

This group comprised a collection of “young people of St. Anthony’s Congregation.” There were certainly many familiar names, including several of the folks who were cast in the previous plays.

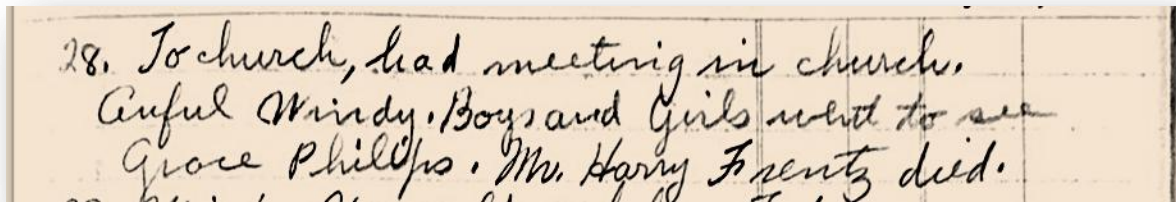
In the months leading up to the planning for the play, one of the young cast members became gravely ill. Grace Phillips, who had taken prominent roles in earlier plays, was diagnosed with diabetes in April 1933. Managing diabetes in those days meant adhering to a starvation diet resulting in great suffering by patients. It wasn’t until the 1920s that a new miracle treatment had been discovered in Canada. Unfortunately, mass production of insulin did not become available in time for Grace. Tragedy struck when she died on Friday, January 26, 1934 at the age of eighteen after falling into a diabetic coma. Her death cast a shadow over the production.



January 26, 1934 - “Grace Philips died.”



It was a shock to all of the performers who had come to know her. The cast and crew had grown close over the years. Although there was turnover from year to year, there was a camaraderie among the young men and women who worked hard to pull off each performance.



28. To church, had meeting in church.
Awful Windy. Boys and Girls went to see
Grace Phillips. Mr. Harry F. senty died.

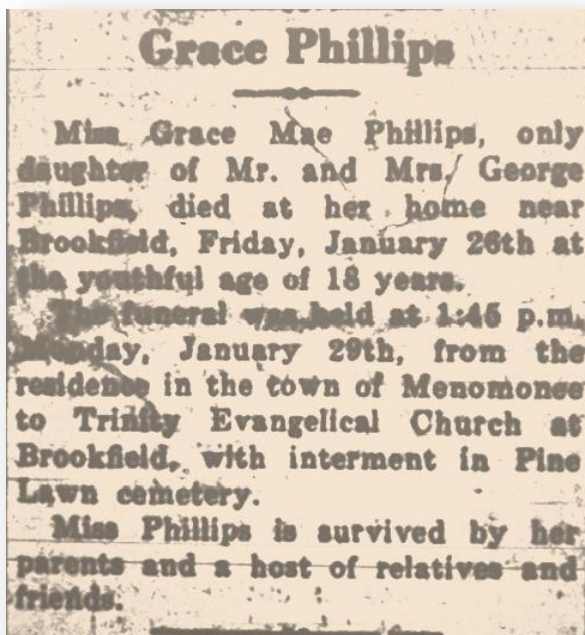
January 28, 1934 - *"To church, had meeting in church. Awful windy. Boys and girls went to see Grace Phillips."*

Grace Phillips

Miss Grace Mae Phillips, only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. George Phillips, died at her home near Brookfield, Friday, January 26th at the youthful age of 18 years.

The funeral was held at 1:45 p.m. Monday, January 29th, from the residence in the town of Menomonee to Trinity Evangelical Church at Brookfield, with interment in Pine Lawn Cemetery.

Miss Phillips is survived by her parents and a host of relatives and friends.



Grace Phillips

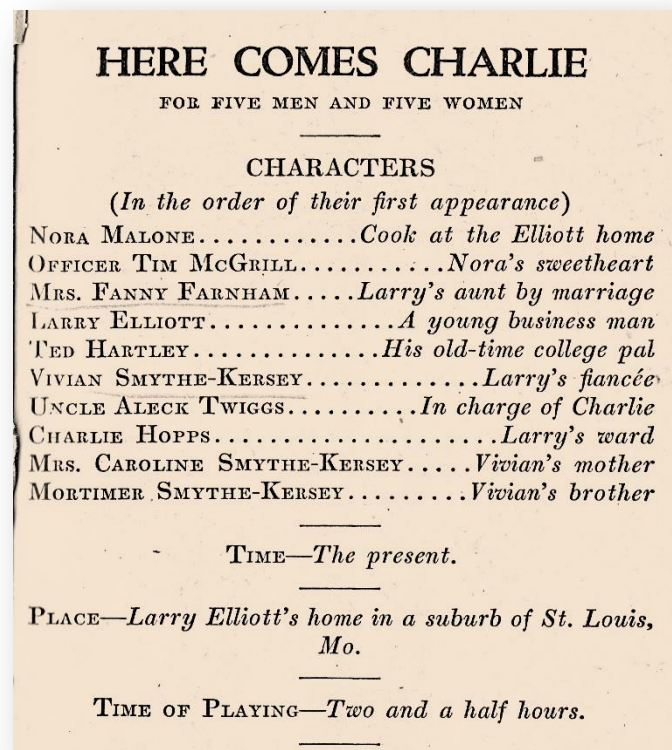
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Surely the death of their friend was heart-wrenching for everyone in their circle of friends. But the show had to go on. The cast continued to rehearse in Grace's memory.

Tona Claas (Antonia) was the only Claas family member included in the cast, but Harry and Tonie hosted a number of the practices. Their parlor and dining room were roomy enough to accommodate the cast rehearsals. Once again, the cast consisted of many familiar Fussville names: Theine, Gross, Schneider, Wick, Kleinert, Claas, and the future husband and wife team of Fuss and Michels.



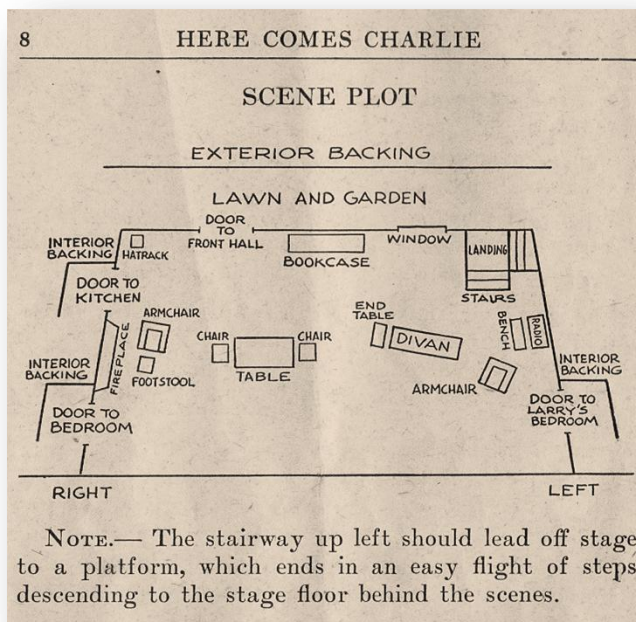
25 To church. In the afternoon to church.
 Practising play here. Aunt Minnie
 and the girls were here.

March 25, 1934 – “To church. In the afternoon to church. Practising play here. Aunt Minnie and the girls were here.”

3 Raining Election day. Practising Play here.

April 3, 1934 - “Raining. Election day. Practising Play here.”

By Monday, April 9, the rehearsals for the play moved to Math Schmitz' Hall. It was also time to finalize plans for the staging and set.



It also gave the cast a chance to get comfortable with the setting.

In the eve. by Schmitz practising play.

April 9, 1934 - "In the eve. by Schmitz practising play."

"Here Comes Charlie" was a three-act play. It was written by Jay Tobias in 1930 and became a popular presentation for community and school theatrical groups. It was filled with "clever witticisms" and was "highly amusing." The stage didn't

require any scene changes. That simplified things. Surely the cast would have a lot of fun in presenting it.

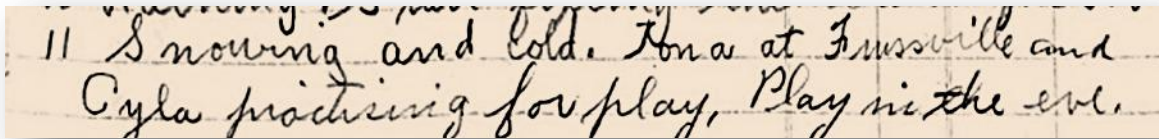
Here was a synopsis of the Fussville production:

Larry Elliott (played by Edward Schneider) is a young broker. After learning that he is to become the guardian of a small boy, he is shocked to learn that instead, his ward is really a pretty, seventeen year old girl. Her name is Charlotte, but she's called Charlie (played by Leona Wick), hence the misunderstanding. Why the shock? Well, Larry is engaged to the arrogant Vivian Smythe-Kersey (played by Lucille Kleinert) and is further dominated by a snobbish aunt, Fanny Farnham (played by Rosaline Fuss). To have another female in the house becomes a problem for Larry, and it certainly doesn't delight his fiancé Vivian or his Aunt Fanny.

Charlie arrives from Arkansas accompanied by Uncle Alec Twiggs (played by Norbert Wick), like herself a true product of the Ozarks. She starts by calling Larry "Papa," and by displaying warm but awkward affection toward him. Larry likes the affection, but it fails to smooth Charlie's way with the women. They plan to oust the "hillbillies." Farcical situations develop from the social blunders of the new arrivals, especially when Aunt Fanny, determined to make Uncle Alec earn his board and keep, tries to turn him into a society butler. The conspiracy against the "Ozarkians" backfires, but Larry's position is made so

uncomfortable that, to save himself from punishment, he and Charlie depart, only to return a year later.

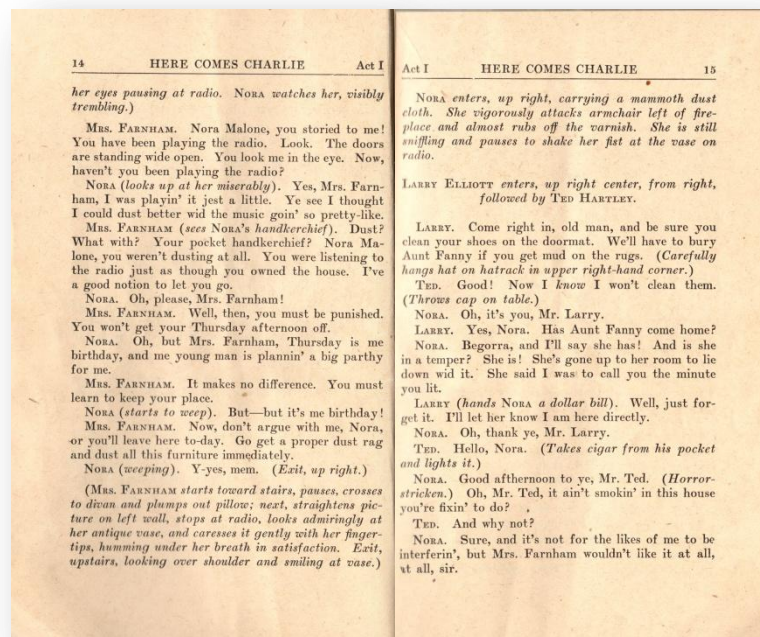
Supporting cast members were Marie Theine (as cook Nora Malone), Lawrence Gross (as Officer Tim McGrill), Leander Wick (as Larry's college friend, Ted Hartley), Tona Claas (as Vivian's mother, Caroline Smythe Kersey) and John Michels (as Vivian's brother, Mortimer Smythe Kersey).



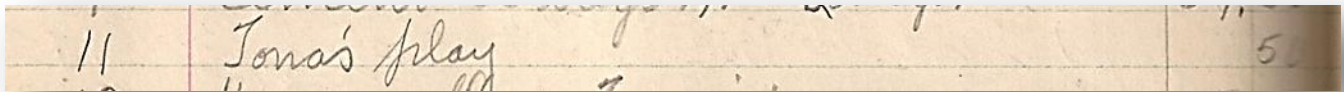
April 11, 1934 - *"Snowing and cold. Tona at Fussville and Cyla practicing for play. Play in the eve."*

On the afternoon of the performance, the cast came together for a last opportunity for a quick rehearsal, to run through some "rough spots" in the script. It also gave everyone a chance to settle their nerves. Play acting was new for many in the cast. But being together helped to assure everyone and provide a level of confidence that "they could do this." They also took some time to remember their friend, Grace Phillips. They dedicated their performance to her.

A good crowd of people gathered for the 8:00 p.m. presentation. The parishioners of St. Anthony wanted to show their support for their young members. The sponsors of the play were many of Fussville's fine businesses: Math Schmitz and Vogl's Taverns, Adam Guenther Blacksmith, M.J. Wick Trucking, Schwister's Service Station, Torn's Market and Andersek and Wick masons. Admission to the play was only 10 cents. Proceeds went to St. Anthony Congregation.



Tonie, Harry and their unmarried children, Sylvester, Roman and Cela attended the play. In her ledger, Tonie noted that she spent a grand total of 50 cents for “Tona’s play.”



April 11, 1934 - “Tona’s play50 cents.”

“HERE COMES CHARLIE”
Presented by the
Young People of St. Anthony’s Congregation
MATH SCHMITZ HALL, WED., APRIL 11 - 34

CHARACTERS IN THE ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE

Nora Malone, Cook at the Elliot home.....	Marie Theine
Officer Tim McGill, Nora’s Sweetheart.....	Lawerence Gross
Mrs. Fanny Farnham, Larry’s Aunt by marriage.....	Rosaline Fuss
Larry Elliot, A young business man.....	Edward Schneider
Ted Hartley, His old-time college pal.....	Leander Wick
Vivian Smythe Kersey, Larry’s fiancée.....	Lucille Kleinert
Uncle Aleck Twiggs, In charge of Charlie.....	Norbert Wick
Charlie Hopps, Larry’s ward.....	Leona Wick
Mrs. Caroline Smythe Kersey, Vivian’s mother.....	Antonia Claas
Mortimer Smythe Kersey, Vivian’s brother.....	John Michels

Time—The Present
Place—Larry Elliot’s home in a suburb of St. Louis, Mo.

SYNOPSIS OF ACTS

ACT I. Living room of Larry Elliott’s suburban home, about three o’clock of an afternoon in late summer. During the act the curtain is lowered for a few moments to indicate the lapse of one hour.

ACT II. Same as in Act I. Two weeks later at about 4:30 P. M.

ACT III. Same as in the previous acts. Late afternoon in June, eleven months later.

COMPLIMENTS OF

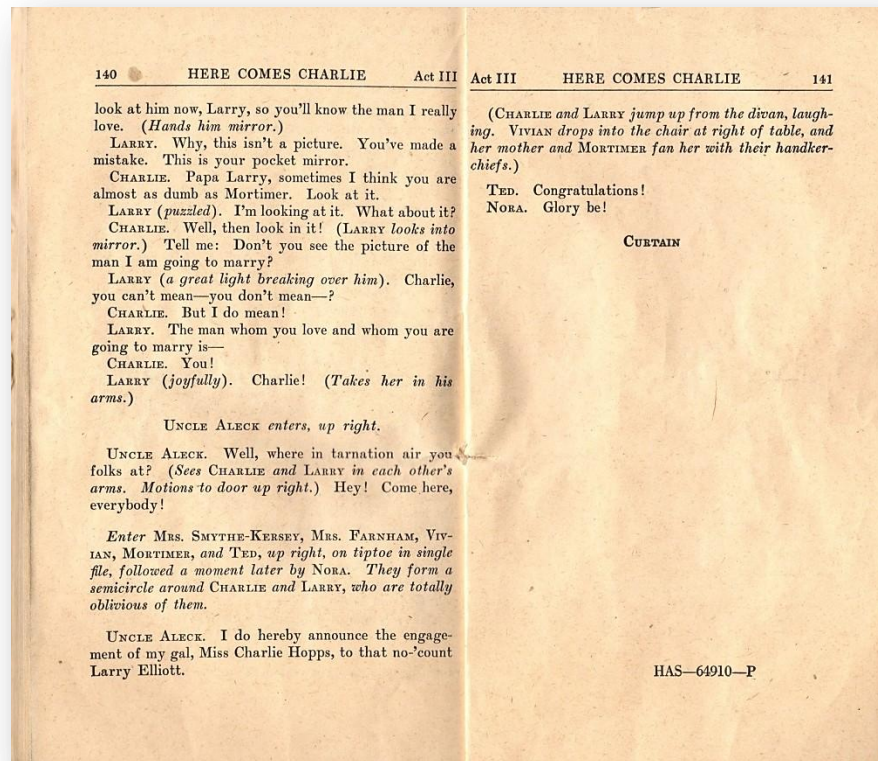
Math Schmitz Tavern
Adam Guenther, Blacksmith
M. J. Wick, Trucking
Frank X. Vogl Tavern
Schwister’s Service Station, General Repairing
Torn’s Market, Fresh and Smoked Meats
Andersek & Wick, mason, cement and plaster contractors

Playbills were handed out to all of the attendees. The audience was mostly made up of family and friends from Fussville. It was fun for everyone to put names and faces to the characters, sharing with them in nervous anticipation. Finally, it was “show time.”

The audience was treated to a warm and amusing performance. Even though the date of the play had been pushed back into spring, it must have seemed appropriate that it was snowing and cold. Somehow, the winter-like weather seemed to be connected to the Fussville players. How ironic!

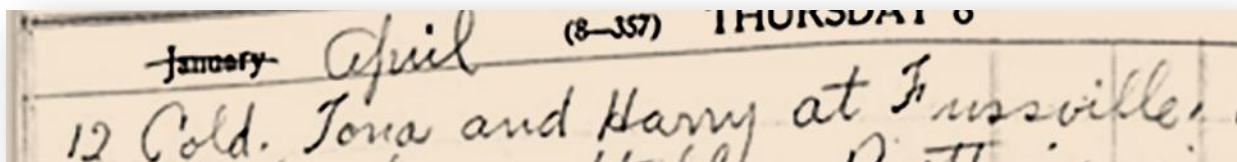
It would have been good to say that everything went off without a hitch. It didn’t, but the more satisfying thing was that in spite of a few missed lines, some glitches in stage placements or some awkward timing mistakes, no one except the cast really knew.

At the conclusion of Act Three, the audience came to its feet for a rousing show of support for the young cast. It was a success.



The Final Curtain

The following day, the cast and crew were back at Math Schmitz' Hall, cleaning up after their performance. Tonie's journal entry on April 12, 1934, simply reads...



April 12, 1934 - "Cold. Tona and Harry at Fussville."

That was the last mention of any Fussville productions in her journals, signaling the end of an era. The young people who had come together to create something beautiful in the face of hardship had given all they could. They had no aspirations of Broadway fame, but their love for each other, their craft, and their community was enough.

A Legacy of Laughter

Though none of the Fussville players ever made it to Broadway, the spirit of those productions remains in the community's heart. They came together, despite all odds, and created something lasting: a sense of connection, a feeling of belonging, and a shared memory of the power of laughter in dark times.

For Tonie Claas, and for all who lived through those hard years of the Great Depression, these little theatrical moments became a touchstone, something they could always look back on with pride. The productions were more than just plays, they were a testament to the strength of a small town united by its love of storytelling and each other.

