

# VALLEY FORGE MUSIC FAIR

Joyce A. Post

## SUMMER THEATER IN A TENT

World War II had ended and it was the age of the feel-good 1950s. People were out and around again and the first tent music theater-in-the-round in the Delaware Valley was the Lambertville Music Circus in Lambertville, New Jersey started in 1949 by St. John Terrell. It stayed in existence until 1970.

The idea in the Tredyffrin/Easttown area first surfaced on February 12, 1951 with Theron Bamberger, a producer, who proposed using the Devon Horse Show grounds “as a place of amusement during the summer of 1951 and succeeding summers for the operation of a tent theatre and such activities as are customarily incidental thereto.”—cited by Herb Fry, “Club Members Remember: Valley Forge Music Fair,” *Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly*, January 1998, p 4. Adjacent homeowners in Devon protested the probable increased traffic and noise and on November 26, 1951 the Easttown Township zoning official denied the request.

## MUSIC FAIR BEGINNINGS

Sheldon H. Gross, Edward Felbin, and Lee Gruber announced their intention on April 12, 1955 to apply to the Tredyffrin Township supervisors to conduct a business with the name of Valley Forge Music Fair at the intersection of Route 202 and Route 83, two miles from the Schuylkill Expressway (*Daily Local News*, April 4, 1955).

“Shelly” Gross was a WFIL-TV announcer and personality. Edward Felbin was the WPEN radio broadcaster widely known as Frank Ford. Lee Gruber was a hotel man and night club owner whose first wife was media personality Barbara Walters.

By 1956 Gruber and Gross had the largest theater-in-the-round chain—publicly-held Music Fair Enterprises, Inc.—in the U.S. In addition to the Valley Forge Music Fair, they operated the Camden County Music Fair in Cherry Hill, N.J., the Painters Mill Music Fair in Owings Mill near Baltimore, the Shady Grove Music Fair in Gaithersburg near Washington, D.C., and the Westbury Music Fair in Westbury, Long Island. The idea at first was to use the music fairs on a rotating basis for performances by the road

companies of Broadway musical shows.

Only the Westbury Music Fair is still in operation at this writing. It began in a tent in 1956 which, in 1966, was replaced with a year round fully enclosed theater. In February 2005 it became the North Fork Theatre at Westbury. It is owned by Clear Channel Entertainment and is one of the top 5 U.S. theaters with 3,000 seats or less ([www.livenation.com/venue/getVenue/venueId/1216](http://www.livenation.com/venue/getVenue/venueId/1216)).

## VALLEY FORGE MUSIC FAIR

The land Gross, Felbin, and Gruber had their eye on for the Valley Forge Music Fair was 10½ acres owned by Ronald and Penrose Reichman that previously had been a farm owned by David Abraham in the latter part of the 19th century. The area was just north of the Philadelphia and Chester Valley Railroad tracks. Today it is the Valley Fair shopping complex at 150 West Swedesford Road near Route 202.



Property Atlas of the Main Line, Penna. Volume Two Embracing the following municipalities in Chester County: Townships of Tredyffrin, Easttown, Willistown, East & West Whiteland, East & West Goshen and the Borough of Malvern. . . . Philadelphia: Franklin Survey Company, 1963. “Part of Tredyffrin Township,” plate 6.

Construction was under way by early May 1955 for a bowl-shaped amphitheater at the west end of the area. It had a round stage in the center surrounded by terraced seating for more than 1,600 people over



Early Valley Forge Music Fair tent. Courtesy J. Michael Morrison.

which a striped waterproof tent was erected. This tent was supported by 18 poles located throughout the audience area and meant there were seats with obstructed views of the revolving stage. The architects were Thalheimer & Weitz of Philadelphia. Parking for 800 cars, a box office, electrical booth, restrooms, dressing rooms, and theater office were also included.

The partners raised the \$100,000 they needed to get started by asking 100 friends to contribute \$1,000.

The first season opened June 23, 1955 with *Guys and Dolls* starring Pat Harrington, Marilyn Ross, and a role for Ed McMahon, a local WCAU-TV personality at the time. It had an 8-piece orchestra in a pit. The day before there had been a preview to benefit Emergency Aid of Philadelphia's 29th annual United Christmas Bazaar. There were 9 other summer stock musical shows that season and ticket prices ranged from \$1.20 to \$3.50. For children, there was a series of four Wednesday afternoon matinees by Pied Piper Productions which included *The Emperor's New Clothes*, a puppet show, a magic show, and a show about Pennsylvania folklore. The 4-performance series cost a total of \$4.00. The entire 13½ week first season of the Music Fair had a profit of \$52,000.

The second season opened June 1, 1956 with *Kismet* and included performances of *Finian's Rainbow* with Joel Grey as the leprechaun, *Pal Joey*, *Carousel*, and the always popular *The King and I*.

On Friday June 14, 1957, a late afternoon thunderstorm ripped and blew the tent down on top of the stage and much of the lighting equipment. The opening of *Silk Stockings* scheduled for the following week was delayed (*Daily Local News*, June 15, 1957 and June 17, 1957).

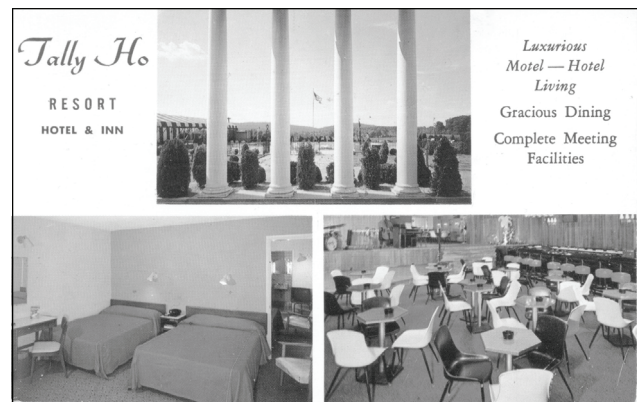
## EXPANSION

By 1958 the organizers tried moving away from entire seasons of musicals. The season that year opened with the play *No Time for Sergeants*.

The 1959 season opened with the musical *Li'l Abner*, but also included Yiddish humorist, Menasha Skulnik, in *The Law and Mr. Simon*. That same year the organization accepted a limited number of boys and girls, 18 years of age or over, as apprentices for the season to help with set design, props, costumes, and sometimes acting. Unlike other similar programs, the Valley Forge Music Fair didn't charge tuition.

The Music Fair printed 170,000 tickets for the 15-week 1959 season which had performances every weekday night and 2 performances on Saturday evenings. They found that 95% of the attendees were from outside the immediate area.

The area around the Music Fair was expanding to accommodate audiences from a widening geographic area. They liked the free parking and safe environment. Two places to stay overnight were right next door. The Reichmans built and opened the Talley Ho Resort Hotel Motel in May 1955 just west of the Mu-



Postcard. Courtesy C. Herbert Fry.

sic Fair. The Valley Forge Motor Court squeezed in between West Anthony Wayne Drive and today's Route 202 is still standing. The Tally Ho advertised that playgoers could have dinner and a cocktail before the show and drinks afterwards and that it was an easy walk between the theater and their facility. Juan Kamuca and Lee Gruber's Valley Forge Tavern, where you could get a prime sirloin steak dinner for \$4.00, and the Howard Johnson's restaurant were down the road from the Music Fair near what is now the intersection of Route 202 and Gulph Road.

The 1960 season was a time of major changes. It returned to a season of all musicals and began with *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Before the season opened, however, extensive physical changes were made to the theater and the entire bowl area was rebuilt in concrete. The old tent was replaced with a new red and orange striped tent supported by a patented cantilever system called NOPOLE and audiences no longer had





Looking south across Swedesford Road to the red and orange striped tent. The sign at the left edge gives information about the box office and the sign on the right side of the entrance road gives parking instructions. The parking lot was on the left. 1963 photograph by William Warnock. Courtesy Tredyffrin Township.

to wonder if a seat was behind a pole. They also found better levels in the seating area, a new sound system and all new landscaping. The total cost of all these improvements was said to be \$25,000.

An aerial photograph taken about this time shows the red and orange striped tent in the area near where today's Linens-n-Things store is located and a long parking area extending all the way to about where today's Barnes & Noble book store is.

Also in 1960, to draw audiences from Philadelphia, the Music Fair and PTC, the main Philadelphia transportation system, made arrangements for new round trip door-to-door bus service between the southwest corner of Broad and Market Streets in downtown Philadelphia and the Music Fair. Buses departed from there one hour before curtain time. There were combined ticket and bus packages and the total price for a matinee package, for example, was \$2.45; down \$1.25 from the cost of a regular \$2.50 matinee ticket plus the \$1.20 bus fare.

During the 1960s, musical tastes were changing and the Gruber and Gross chain began booking rock, pop, jazz, soul, country, family, and comedy performers. Gradually they started to dominate the shows at Valley Forge Music Fair. Through the 1967 season—13 years of mostly summer musical theater—a total of 81 different shows had been presented.

### A PERMANENT THEATER

In 1971 the red and orange striped tent came down and a new year-round air-conditioned heated facility with more luxurious seating was built to better accommodate the performance requirements of the increasingly staged revues and concerts now at the Valley Forge Music Fair. The seating capacity was increased to 2,750 and, with a good sound system, the theater also became popular for local community and

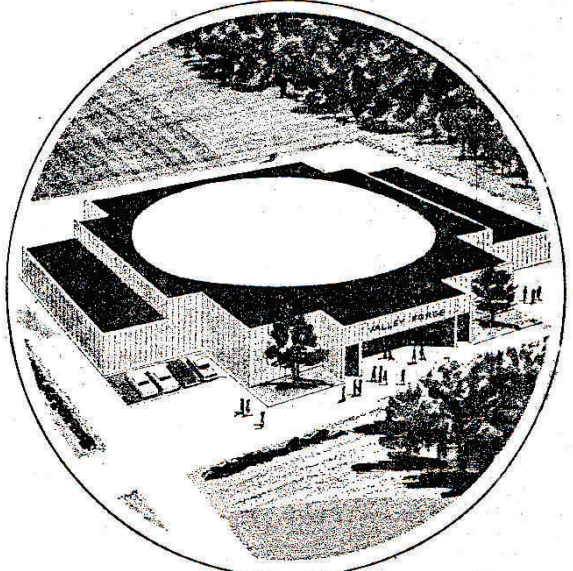
corporate meetings as well as high school graduations when space for large audiences was required. It was also the location for a piano warehouse sale. The Valley Forge Dance Theatre, established in 1980 by Sharon Atkinson, performed its annual *Nutcracker Ballet* there for 17 years. The theater was usually dark in January and February.

The first show in the new facility was 1776 opening on July 11, 1972 with Hugh O'Brian as John Adams. The second offering was a concert by Tom Jones and the third offering was *Company* starring George Maharis and Vivian Blaine.

In 1973 *The Sonny & Cher Show*, *The Carpenters*, *The Peggy Fleming Show* complete with an ice rink, *The David Brenner Show*, and *My Fair Lady*, were all at the Music Fair. Perry Como came in 1976. Frank Sinatra performed on March 5, 1979 and May 8, 1981. Arlo Guthrie performed on August 15, 1983.

## Our Greatest Season Ever In Our Great New Theatre!

AIR CONDITIONED! PERFECT ACOUSTICS! LUXURIOUS SEATING!



## VALLEY FORGE MUSIC FAIR

After 17 years of successful operation, the Valley Forge Music Fair is being converted from tent to hardtop. The new theatre will be expanded to a capacity of 2750 with luxurious, comfortable seating and an unobstructed view from every seat. Air conditioning and heating guarantee year-round comfort.

Advertisement. Courtesy Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society.

1986 was a particularly impressive year. A series of *An Evening With . . .* performances starred Bonnie

Raïtt, Roger Whittaker, Wynton Marsalis, George Carlin, Charles Aznavour, Victor Borge, and Chuck Mangione. Other performers that year were Fats Domino; the Kingston Trio; Sha Na Na; Peter, Paul and Mary; Jermaine Jackson; the Everly Brothers; The Clancy Brothers; Dionne Warwick and Gregory Hines; Bo Diddley; Perry Como; Liza Minnelli; Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme; Merle Haggard; B.B. King and Lou Rawles; and The Vienna Boys Choir. There was a 1-night *Giants of Jazz* concert with Dave Brubeck, Stan Getz, and Dizzy Gillespie; a 1-night *Golden Boys of Bandstand* concert with Frankie Avalon, Fabian, and Bobby Rydell; a 1-night *Comedians of the 80s* with Yakov Smirnoff and Jerry Seinfeld; and a 2-night *The [Harry] Blackstone Magic Show*.

The Beach Boys came on June 14, 1988 and November 21, 1993. Rosemary Clooney presented a Christmas show on December 23, 1990.



Postcard showing the interior of the permanent theater. Photograph by Robert O'Leary. Date unknown. Courtesy Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society.

## THE LAST FIVE YEARS

By 1991 the Valley Forge Music Fair had put on 165 shows grossing \$7.4 million and the Westbury Music Fair had put on 206 shows grossing \$10.5 million.

Beginning with the 38th season in 1992, Shelly Gross, now 71 years old, turned over the presidency of Music Fair Group, Inc.—a wholly-owned subsidiary of Music Fair Enterprises, Inc.—and owner of the Valley Forge and Westbury Music Fairs, to his son Rick Gross, who had been working at the Valley Forge Music Fair since his high school days. Lee Gruber had died suddenly in 1988 and Edward Felbin/Frank Ford had left the group in the 1960s. Kolson quotes Shelly Gross in 1992: “Our presentations have become more and more youthful.” He said Rick knew the contemporary music scene better and

would make regular trips to Los Angeles and Nashville to view all segments of the market and decide which of these the local audiences would like best.

Gross usually booked stars from the middle of the performance spectrum. Comics like Joan Rivers and Tim Allen were favorites as well as Tony Bennett and Bob Dylan. Jay Leno opened for Johnny Mathis. Kenny Rogers held the record for the most appearances at the Valley Forge Music Fair with over 100; his Christmas Show was always popular. So were the children’s shows. They booked the Artie Shaw Orchestra for an older audience. There was also still an occasional Broadway musical show road tour.

The 1992 season opened with a show featuring Shirley Bassey, country music singer George Strait, the Temptations, the Four Tops, Queen Latifah, and comic Andrew Dice Clay.

Johnny Cash had April 17 and September 11, 1994 appearances, Aretha Franklin performed on July 19, 1994, the Kinks on July 16, 1995, Crosby & Nash on November 16, 1995, and Gordon Lightfoot was a regular between 1987 and 1996 with 5 performances.

## 40 YEARS OF PERFORMANCES

By 1996 the land Valley Forge Music Fair stood on had a higher value as a future supermarket.

A full 1996 season was booked. Regulars Tom Jones and Julio Iglesias performed as did Barry White, The Temptations, The Monkees, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, and John Denver. There was a run of *My Fair Lady* with Michael Moriarty as Professor Henry Higgins. The last regular show was the annual *Kenny Rogers Christmas Show* on Sunday evening December 29, 1996. The absolutely last show was *Mystical Magical Musical*, a children’s show by Darren Romeo on January 2, 1997. The children’s shows were particularly missed by parents and many local children saw their first live stage performance at the Valley Forge Music Fair.



The Music Fair marquee, photographed on January 10, 1997 by Herb Fry, invites people to “Join the Inner Circle” and to “Follow the Stars.” Courtesy C. Herbert Fry.



The owners insisted that performers at the Atlantic City casinos and the Tweeter Center in Camden attracted different audiences and were not a factor in the decision to close the Valley Forge Music Fair. It was purely a business decision, they said.

At the time it closed the Music Fair had 20 full-time and 60 to 80 part-time employees. The closing affected local businesses. The Valley Forge Hilton estimated it would lose about 5% of its annual business. Denny's, a restaurant next door, estimated it would lose about 25% of its business.

In May 1997 the Music Fair was bulldozed. By 1998 and 1999 it was today's Valley Fair complex.

## T/E SCHOOL DISTRICT AMUSEMENT TAX

The School District of Tredyffrin Township initiated a 5% tax on the price of admission to each amusement venue within the school district boundaries effective July 6, 1959. Valley Forge Music Fair, Inc. protested, saying that Tredyffrin Township already collected a similar 5% amusement tax and that they had paid a total of more than \$35,000 to the township for the tax years 1956, 1957, and 1958 (*Daily Local News*, March 14, 1960).

In 1985 Valley Forge Music Fair, Inc. sued the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District to return the tax, stating that it was the school district's largest amusement site and that the school district didn't levy the tax on bowling alleys, arcades, and similar venues within the township. In 1993 the school district appealed the earlier decision for the Music Fair, but it was denied under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and also under similar Pennsylvania laws.

The court ruled that the over \$1.2 million in taxes that had been collected by the school district could not be refunded directly to the Music Fair since that would be a windfall because it was the patrons and not the Music Fair who had paid the tax. The \$1.2 million, instead, was placed in a trust fund—established June 1994—in what is now the First National Bank of Chester County, to pay for theater programs for school students in Chester County. In 1995 the trust fund paid the Music Fair \$40,500 for each of 4 performances, including transportation; a total of \$162,000. In 1996 a total of \$202,500 was paid to the Music Fair for 5 performances. Additional amounts, up to a total of about \$500,000, went to pay for a trust fund administrator, accounting services, and legal fees for the Valley Forge Music Fair attorneys.

It was getting harder to find interested students to

attend performances and attempts to recruit attendees from local nursing homes and veterans facilities were not successful. When the Music Fair closed in 1996 original founder Shelly Gross tried to work out an arrangement for holding performances and involving high school students at Immaculata College.

In 2003 *Main Line Life* attempted, unsuccessfully, to trace activity in the trust fund between 1997 and 2003. The last available accounting was in 1997 and the amount in the fund at that time was more than \$900,000. The reporter estimated that with interest, the amount would be over \$1 million dollars in 2003.

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