

THE MOUNTAIN WHEN THEATRE WAS SUPREME

Just over one hundred years ago, before the advent of movie film, radio and television, live theatre was the pre-eminent form of entertainment. An impressive mountain theatre operated by the Summers family was a celebrated focal point of Hamilton's theatrical world. It was a favorite venue every summer from May 24 to September during the decade before 1915. The name Summers Lane is now part of its legacy at Hamilton Place.

The Summers Theatre was perched on the edge of the escarpment at the top of the Wentworth Street incline railway, beside a large mountain picnic park. Today, the site is occupied by a mountain brow parking lot and observation point. The theatre attracted a large crowd of over 800 theatre patrons every evening with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday. In respect for the Sabbath, a band concert was held on Sunday evenings.

A new play was performed every week, drawing upon the Summers Stock Company's extensive repertoire of established and new plays, some of them written by George Summers, head of the theatrical family and stock company enterprise. Nevertheless, weekday rehearsals must have been intensive, demanding great feats of memory work to perform up to 14 different plays in three summer months. A carpentry shop was needed to meet all the staging requirements, which according to records were quite creative. Some plays involved thunder storms, baseball games, court rooms, outdoor scenery etc. Wardrobe demands were quite comprehensive too, keeping George's wife, Belle, very busy in the dual role of seamstress and leading actress.

In those pre-air conditioned days a century ago, the theatre proved to be especially popular during summer heat waves because it was well ventilated with louvered walls that opened to the mountain breezes. In fact the north facing wall had removable partitions that opened the auditorium to a garden patio overlooking the city, bay and lake, thus providing a safe haven for smokers.

Also adding to the theatre's popularity was the outstanding performances of George Summers, considered at the time to be one of Canada's finest comedic actors. A master of humorous foreign dialects, he was universally known for his role as Rip Van Winkle. However, publicity for the isolated mountain top theatre was always a major concern and expensive because Hamilton had three newspapers at that time. George Summers found that travelling bill boards were the cheapest and most effective way to advertise.



This Hamilton Street Railway trolley carries an advertisement for the Summers Theatre on its front grill for the week of August 15, 1910. The trolley is stopped at the head of Wentworth Street with the escarpment and incline railway in the background. A TH&B freight car can be seen passing at the base of the escarpment. According to the destination sign in the street car window, the trolley is about to return to the Jockey Club on Barton Street.

Photo courtesy of Ross Taylor

The Summers Theatre came to a tragic end on December 21, 1914 when vagrants seeking shelter in the closed barn-like playhouse accidentally set it on fire. There was no fire station on the mountain and the incline railway was closed for the night. Although George Summers had great plans for a bigger and better 1,500 seat theatre, the City would not approve a building permit.

The next time you are at the escarpment edge on the corner of Upper Wentworth and Mountain Park, stand beside the George Summers plaque and as you peruse the scene, let your mind wander. Perhaps you might imagine that you hear the uproarious laughter and applause that once filled the air at this "supreme" theatre site; a majestic piece of mountain history.

Mountain Memories, written by historian Robert Williamson on behalf of HMHS, generally appears monthly. See the Society's website (Hamiltonheritage.ca) for information on events and publications