

The Duplin Story and Other Legacies, Part I

The Duplin Story: An Historical Play With Music, was apparently the idea of Robert (“Bob”) Grady, founder and Editor of The Duplin Times. He persuaded a friend, Broadway actor Sam Byrd, born 1908 in Mount Olive, to write an outdoor drama comparable to the works of Paul Green. (The Roanoke Island Historical Association of Manteo lent the lighting equipment.) It was sponsored by The Duplin County Historical Association to celebrate the Bicentennial of the County (1749-1949), originally part of New Hanover County, and was staged in the Kenansville Amphitheatre 22-24 September, 1949, and performed again in 1950. Heralded in the media as “a miracle in a cornfield,” it brought attendees from across the state and beyond.

The frame of The Duplin Story is a London park where “Johnny Lambert, Naval Chief Petty Officer” (Byrd) tells the story of his County to English youths Jennifer and Tony Carrington. It covers Duplin from its birth through “Victory Sunday Morning . . . , August 19, 1945.” Included along the way are scenes with Henry McCulloch, who brought in the first Scotch-Irish (1736) with land granted to him by the British Crown; the command post of Col. James Kenan at Rockfish Creek in the American Revolution; the Duplin Rifles in the War Between the States; Liberty Hall (1865), home of the Kenan family; a political rally at John W. Gresham’s General Merchandise Store in Beulaville (1908); graduation at James Sprunt Institute (1910); and leave-taking for WWI at the Warsaw Railroad Station (1917). Scenes of local life (e.g., a tobacco field) are interspersed.

The play is a legacy. In turn, its preservation and seemingly everything connected with it are a legacy of Margaret Gurley Fussell, who played Mrs. Owen Kenan and served as a Costume Assistant. Born 25 March 1913, she married (16

August 1933) Lucian Holmes Fussell (who played Col. Tom Kenan), Principal in Magnolia, where she taught sixth grade and had Maude Pickett as a student. The couple boarded with Maude's family when she was a little girl. Mrs. Fussell placed the play and its memorabilia in a cardboard box carefully covered with bright green, gold, and orange individual strips and near-squares cut from patterned foil paper. Her sister-in-law, Mrs. Elizabeth ("Lib") Lanier, of Rose Hill, passed it to Maude Pickett Smith. Maude passed it to me, and I had the honor, as the Editor of Footnotes, and on behalf of the Duplin County Historical Society, to "return" it to Duplin County.

Sam Byrd, the son of Frances Lambert and Attorney Samuel A. Byrd, wrote, produced, and directed *The Duplin Story*, "a record of the birth and growth of a county, the work-tracks of a people's passage through time" (foreword, official program). He received a Life-in-America Prize for the book *Small Town South* (1942) about his hometown. When, after the death of his father, his mother remarried, he remained with her Cherry relations and attended school there until going to Sanford, Florida, to live with his stepfather and her. He majored in journalism at the University of Florida, then went to New York, where he acted in thirteen Broadway plays. He was Dude Lester in *Tobacco Road* for 1,151 consecutive performances [1,157 according to Claude Moore, who saw it in 1936 and went backstage to meet him] and Curley in *Of Mice and Men* and toured in *Street Scene*. He enlisted in the Navy (1942) and was commissioned Lieutenant Commander. On D-Day, he was "beachmaster" of a section of Omaha Beach and received two decorations for his conduct under fire. Also in the battle for Okinawa and the occupation of Japan, he accepted the surrender of the seaplane base at Sasebo, Kyushu. His experiences in Normandy brought his second book, *Hurry Home to My Heart* (1946). He was awarded Guggenheim fellowships in Creative Writing (1946, 1948) and was in the Naval Reserve. After lecturing for the

American Information Service in England, he taught Sociology at the College of Charleston.

While in Britain, Byrd gathered experience, also, for his lead role as Johnny Lambert in *The Duplin Story* and met the English girl, Patricia Bolam, who came to America with him and played Jennifer Carrington. My husband Emory, who, as a child, had a small role (mascot of the 1910 graduating class of Kenansville's James Sprunt Institute) in the play, remembers his mother telling him that "Pat" was an orphan from near Plymouth, England, whose parents were killed in the war and that "Mr. Byrd" had made her his "ward." At least one local paper refers to her as his "daughter." She is believed to have had one sibling, Tony, and, interestingly, her character's brother in the play has that name. She married Sam Byrd in May, 1951, and is the "Mrs. Patricia B. [Mrs. Bruce] Draper" who, via a letter from Ann Arbor, Michigan (2 November 1967), granted rights to *The Duplin Story* to The Duplin County Historical Society, which copyrighted it in 1969.

After the Byrds were married, they went to New York, and he had a role in *The Chase*. They returned to Wayne County in 1954, and he edited *LaGrange's Weekly Gazette*. He spoke (on dramatics in small high schools) that year to the PTA of Sampson County's Herring School, where Claude Moore was Principal. Diagnosed with leukemia, he, after a stay at Duke Hospital, returned to Mount Olive to live with his cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Cherry. After a relapse, he died 14 November 1955 and was buried in Mount Olive's Maplewood Cemetery.

Corwin Rife (born in Ohio) was Technical Director and scene designer. Stage Director A. M. ("Johnny") Davis studied Dramatic Arts at the University of North Carolina and was involved extensively with them while working "on the business end" with various North Carolina newspapers. He predicted that *The Duplin Story* would be "one of the most spectacular shows ever seen in North Carolina," adding

that “getting five hundred people off and on stage isn’t going to be an easy job.” The play garnered wide attention.

Mrs. Fussell’s “bequest” includes what may be the only complete extant copy of the play, though James F. Strickland, who played Gordon Middleton and assisted with special battle effects, believed it could be found in Warsaw’s “school storage”; a search was unsuccessful. Rebecca Grady Briscoe and her sister Margaret (my half-second-cousins!) did not find the script among their father’s papers. East Carolina University’s archives had the “program book” (which sold for \$.50 and was published by J. R. Grady and printed by Wilmington Printing Company) but not the play. [I later sent it to the collections there.] Sam Byrd’s papers (approximately 250 items) went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill but do not appear to include it per se: “Chiefly correspondence, clippings, and other material, 1940-1955, relating to Byrd’s activities in the United States Navy in World War II; his novel, *Hurry Home to My Heart* (1945); the staging of a historical pageant in Duplin County, N.C., in 1949 [my italics]; and especially his proposed co-production, with Oliver Sayler, of stage adaptations of Edgar Lee Masters’s [sic] *Domesday Book* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in New York City, 1954-1955. Volumes include a photograph album and a European travel notebook, 1953.”

Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler, of Burlington’s *The Village at Brookwood*, a former college president, is widely published in academics and creative writing and works as a writer and an editor. She was born in Hallsville, grew up in the Friendship Community outside Warsaw, and remained in Duplin County through her junior year in high school.