

# Jamestown's Theater On Lake

BY WILL MOLINEUX

The organization which produces "The Common Glory" this year marks its 25th anniversary.

And the Jamestown Corp. has good cause to celebrate. Its show, still going strong after more than 1,350 performances, has been seen by nearly two million persons — near records for theatrical endurance and public acceptability.

The 1971 season of "The Common Glory" — the story of Thomas Jefferson and Virginia's role in the American Revolution — opens Thursday in the Lake Matoaka Amphitheater in Williamsburg.

The idea of producing an outdoor drama of Virginia history was first expressed in 1942 after the success of Paul Green's "The Lost Colony" on Roanoke Island, N. C., was apparent. State Sen. William Wright of Tappahannock, chairman of the Virginia Conservation Commission, and Albert Sidney Johnson of Smithfield, head of the James River Bridge System, are generally credited with advancing the idea which had to be held in abeyance until the end of the Second World War.

Unknown to them, Paul Green, who had visited Williamsburg and Jamestown, had thought of it, too.

Sometime in 1945 Senator Wright, his assistant, George Prince Arnold, and Johnson met in Williamsburg with local leaders who readily endorsed the project; they enlisted the help of Gov. Colgate W. Darden Jr.

"He plunged into 'The Common Glory' with characteristic enthusiasm and distinct success," recalls Bela Norton, then a Colonial Williamsburg vice president and one of the drama's founding trustees. The support of Governor Darden was to be, indeed, essential.

These men, and others, formed the "advisory committee for the Jamestown pageant," so named because the original concept was to present a play about the Jamestown settlers in an amphitheater to be built on Jamestown Island.

By the beginning of 1946 the committee had received its state charter as "an educational, historical, literary and benevolent corporation." Governor Darden, who then was about to leave office, was named president of the Jamestown Corp.; Williamsburg Mayor Channing M. Hall, vice president; Senator Wright, secretary, and Samuel H. Plummer, a Newport News banker, treasurer.

The task which faced these men was great: they had no money, no script and no theater — just a desire to stage a play to instruct and inspire Americans, especially young Americans. They approached their venture as if it were an adventure.

Soliciting financial support was the initial concern. Contributions to build a theater and produce the show were sought across the state from industrialists and club women, from philanthropists and school children. The state, through the Conservation Commission, matched funds collected to meet the goal of nearly \$200,000.

Early in 1946 plans proceeded simultaneously on two fronts: building an amphitheater and obtaining a script.

Preliminary drawings were made for an amphitheater on Jamestown Island, but by late summer it was obvious it would not be feasible. The roadway to the island wasn't good; there were problems with utilities and sanitary facilities which couldn't be solved, and it was feared noise from the James River ferry, which then docked at the island, would interfere with the show. And besides, as Darden later confessed, the ticks at Jamestown "frightened" him.

The College of William and Mary offered 12 acres of woodland adjacent to the road to Jamestown and on a lake named Matoaka, for Pocahontas, and the property laws leased. A gently sloping curve at the shore was selected as the site for the 2,400-seat amphitheater. Robert Edmond Jones, the noted stage designer, called it "the most beautiful natural amphitheater site I have ever seen."

The amphitheater was designed in the shape of a large horseshoe by Charles Major, the college architect. Dual pathways to the theater were laid out through the dogwood, oak and pine by a Richmond

landscaper, Charles F. Gillette, in what he called a "Mount Vernon gallop."

Darden and the other sponsors had always thought that Paul Green, a Pulitzer Prize winner and chief exponent of the symphonic drama, should write the Virginia drama. At the time, however, Green was in Santa Monica, Calif., writing a screen play for MGM. Darden called him and Green, who expressed his long-held interest in such a project, agreed to meet

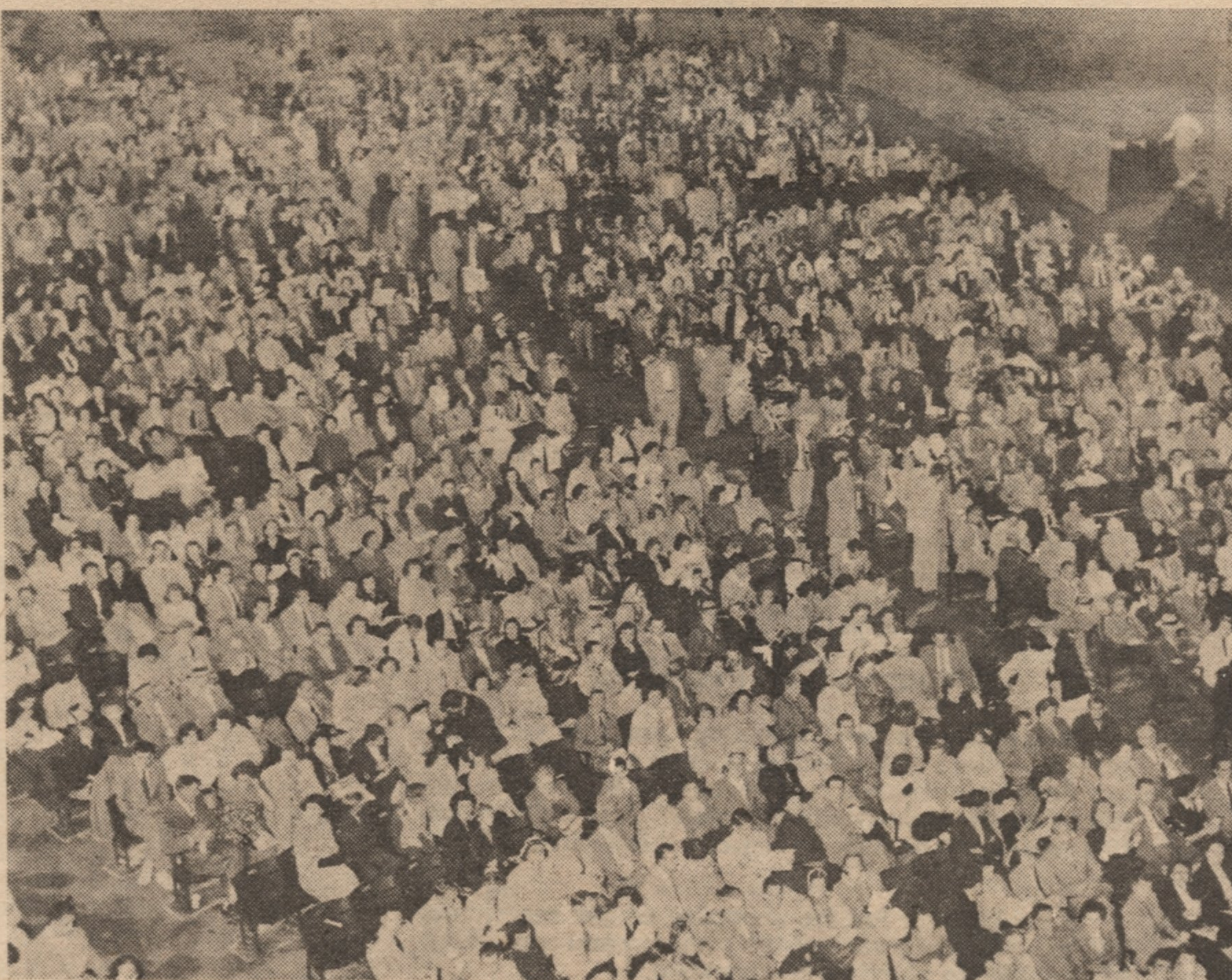
with corporation officials in Williamsburg on June 24, 1946 — exactly 25 years ago from this season's opening night.

"I am going to give you," Green promised the producers, "the greatest show of its kind that has ever been given in America."

Green, who immediately began his research for the Virginia drama in the Huntington Library in Pasadena, soon reported to Darden that he was



IN THE BEGINNING there was only the gentle sloping curve at shore of Lake Matoaka.



AND THEN the "first nighters" jammed the theater on the night of July 17, 1947.

"head over heels at work on the drama and am digging up some good stuff." He decided to focus his drama on the Revolutionary period and call it "The Common Glory." He took the name from a statement made by Samuel Adams in 1776: "For my own part, I ask no greater blessing than to share with you the common danger and the common glory."

Early in 1947, while Green was working in California, a production staff was organized in Williamsburg. The director of the University of Virginia Players, Roger Boyle, and the director of the William and Mary Theater, the late Miss Althea Hunt, were selected to direct the more than 150 actors, dancers and singers in the premiere production.

Howard Scammon, the current director, was an assistant director. Others recruited from the William and Mary faculty were Dr. Carl A. Fehr, the musical director; Al Haak, technical director who continues in that post this year; and Roger Sherman, scenery and lighting designer who still is associated with the Jamestown Corp. as executive vice president.

In addition to Scammon, Haak and Sherman, R. Bruce Johnson of Richmond, assistant technical director, and Mrs. Rachel Hitchens of Williamsburg, wardrobe mistress, have been members of the production staff for the past 25 years.

Construction of the amphitheatre was slow. "The weather has immobilized us here," Darden wrote to Paul Green in March. Two months later he reported: "The progress being made on the theater is most discouraging and its cost is almost prohibitive," even though bricks for the light and sound towers and the backstage dressing rooms were made at the state penitentiary and some convict labor was used laying them.

In June Green moved to Williamsburg and stayed in The Brafferton on the William and Mary campus to polish the script and attend rehearsals.

Two New York stage actors were given the key roles. Robert Dale Martin was the narrator and William W. Smithers, who often appears in TV dramas, portrayed Jefferson. (Walter Brooke, who also is a television performer, was Jefferson in 1948 and 1949.)

Most of the other cast members were Virginians as one of the principal objectives of the Jamestown Corp. was to serve, as Darden put it, "as a vehicle for the training of Virginia talent."

In the final hectic days before opening night — what Paul Green called "the turmoil of launching"—everything was made ready. The amphitheatre was completed with the help of choir members and Governor Darden who pitched in to paint the wooden seats. The script was finished in time for rehearsals. Hundreds of costumes were made. Tickets went on sale. And a deluge of publicity heightened public interest.

"The Common Glory" opened to a full house July 17, 1947. A special train brought dignitaries from Richmond. Drama critics from New York and



Paul Green, left, confers in 1947 with former Governor Colgate Darden Jr., who spearheaded the venture.

Raleigh and most Virginia cities were on hand. So was Virginia-born Lady Astor, the first woman member of the British House of Commons.

For a while approaching thunderstorms threatened to damped the gala occasion, but they passed by on both sides of Williamsburg. The only unfortunate event that night happened to Walter C. Martin, a corporation trustee. He fell and broke a leg — literally carrying out the old theatrical adage!

"The Common Glory" was widely acclaimed, confirming Green's prideful promise. More than 90,000 persons saw the drama that first summer.

Over the years "The Common Glory" has had some other exciting times — during the 1957 Jamestown Festival, for instance — and some dismal times when rain, excessive heat and economic reverses threatened.

The Jamestown Corp. produced another Paul Green drama, "The Founders, The Story of Jamestown," which was presented in the afternoons in a small, rustic amphitheatre in 1957 and 1958 while "The Common Glory" was given in the evenings. "The Founders" replaced "The Common Glory" in the Lake Matoaka Amphitheatre in 1964 — hence the show itself is now only in its 24th season, although it is 25 years-old.

At least three times — before the seasons of 1951, 1959 and 1965 — Virginians helped rescue the financially troubled Jamestown Corp. with noninterest-bearing loans, all of which were repaid, and outright gifts. The recurring problem of financial loss because of inclement weather was resolved in 1967 when an agreement was reached with William and Mary to put on the show in Phi Beta Kappa Hall when it was rained out at the nearby amphitheatre.

In carrying out its obligation as an educational corporation, the Jamestown Corp., in the past quarter century, has awarded more than \$25,000 in scholarships and in the commissioning of new dramatic works about American history. The corporation also has spent \$20,000 on the Summer Theatre Institute, established in 1967 in conjunction with William and Mary.

More than 1,250 persons — most of them Virginians — have appeared in "The Common Glory" cast. And some very successful theatrical careers have been launched from the Lake Matoaka Amphitheatre: the Bray Brothers from Yorktown, Jim and Ben, both have written for the stage and teach drama; Linda Lavin is a sought-after star on Broadway and Goldie Hawn, for two years a dancer, has charmed her way in Hollywood to become an Oscar winner.

The Jamestown Corp. has supported the work of the Shakespearean Players, the cast members who present Shakespeare on their nights off. It also has supported summer choir concerts and dance programs.

And, too, the Jamestown Corp. has helped advertise the Historic Triangle of Jamestown, Williamsburg and Yorktown by promoting tourism to Virginia.

The accomplishments of the Jamestown Corp. do, indeed, merit notice on its 25th anniversary: it has focused attention on Virginia roles in establishing America's democracy and it has fostered interest in drama.

The Jamestown Corp. believes that it has much to be proud of, but the thing in which Del. Lewis A. McMurrin Jr. of Newport News, currently the corporation president and chairman, takes the most satisfaction is that through "The Common Glory" Americans are reminded that the struggle to keep freedom is a continual one.

Thomas Jefferson, speaking in "The Common Glory," "says it best," McMurrin believes, when he says:

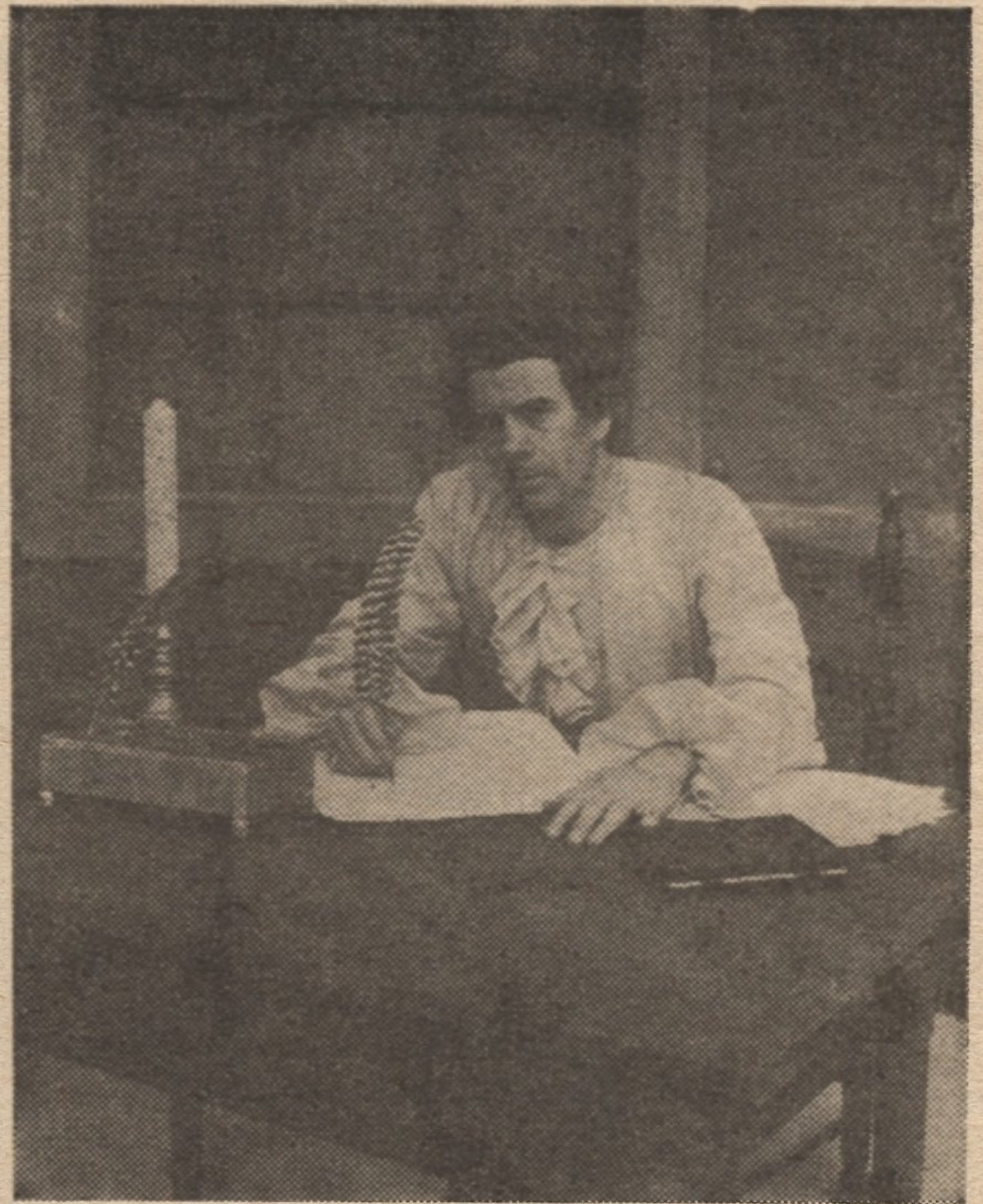
"Today we are calling for men, today we are calling for women, for consecration of character, for stamina — that the principles in which we believe may live! This is not to be a government of a few people, but of all the people. These are the things we must fight for — must be willing to die for. And the struggle to make these principles prevail shall be the common glory of us all."



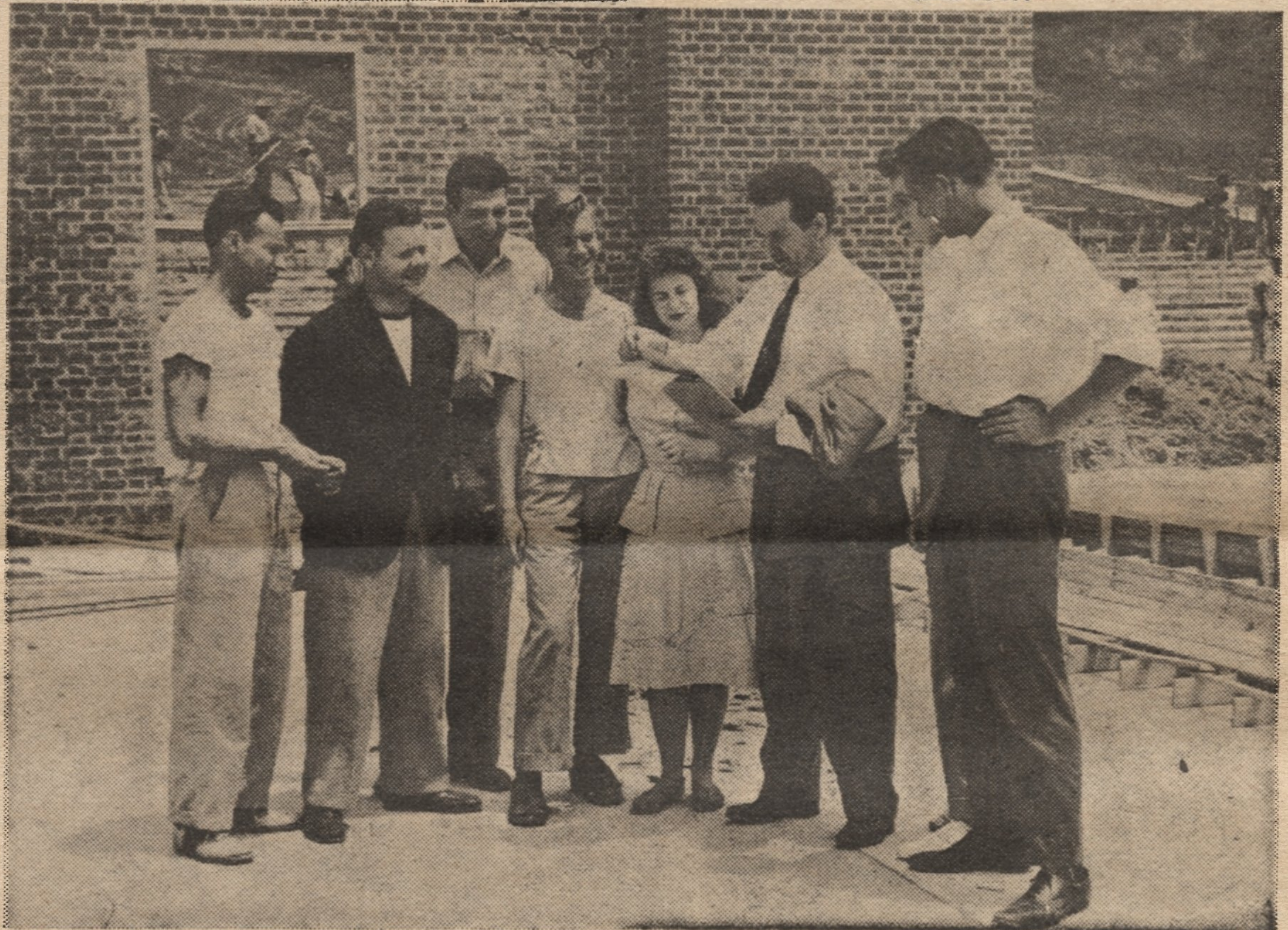
Green does some "sidewalk superintending" as the amphitheater begins to take shape around him.



Some of the cast members in the first season are, left to right, Ronald King, Virginia James, Ken Lassiter and Eugene Black. The performers shared in the gate receipts Sept. 14, the closing night of the 1947 season.



New York actor Walter Brooke (above) who portrayed Thomas Jefferson in 1948 and 1949.



Paul Green, in necktie, goes over the script with some of the actors who appeared in the first production while work on the Lake Matoaka Amphitheater continues early in the summer of 1947.



Paul Green, left, and Howard Scammon, director of "The Common Glory," discuss the opening of one of the early seasons.