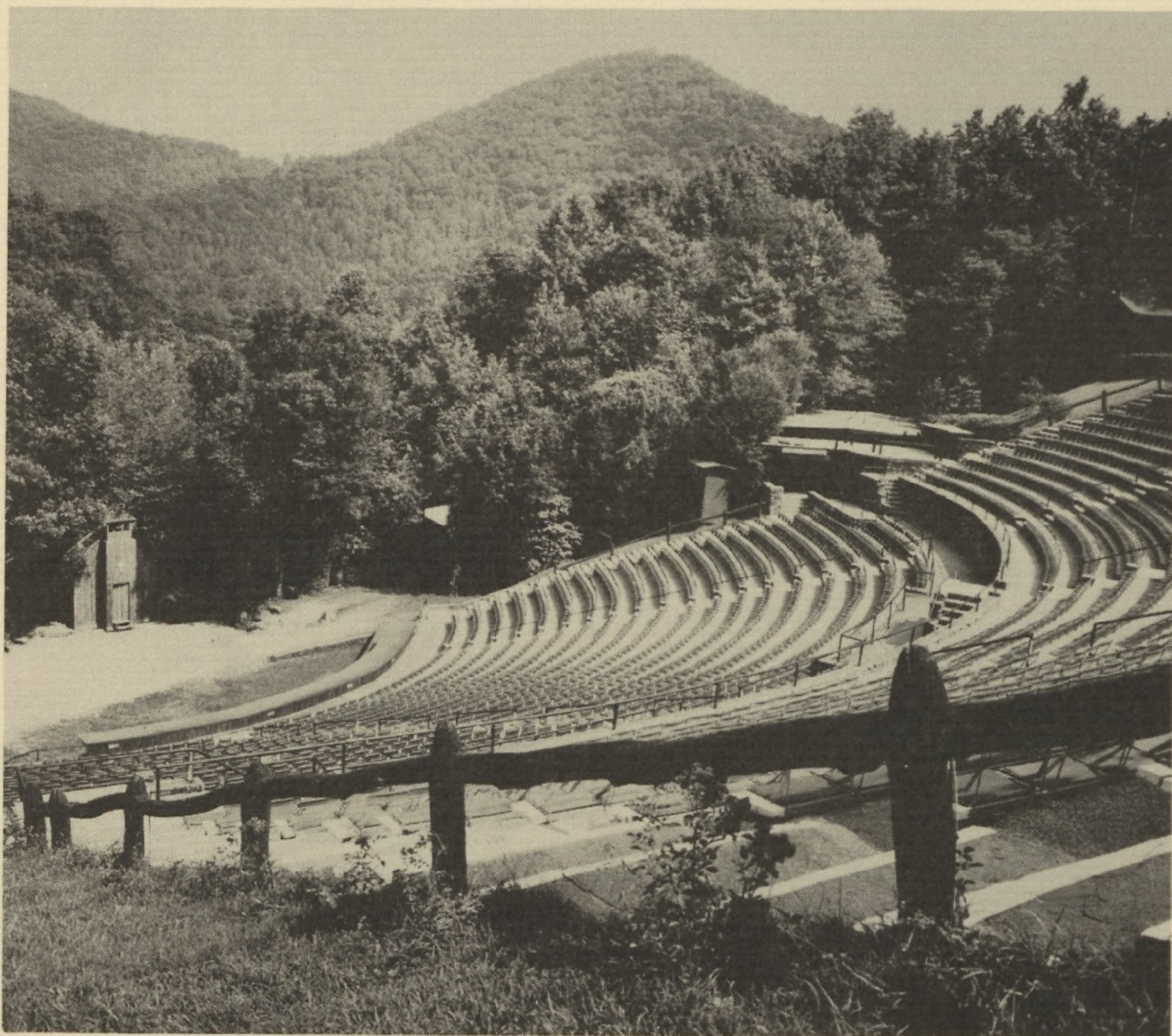


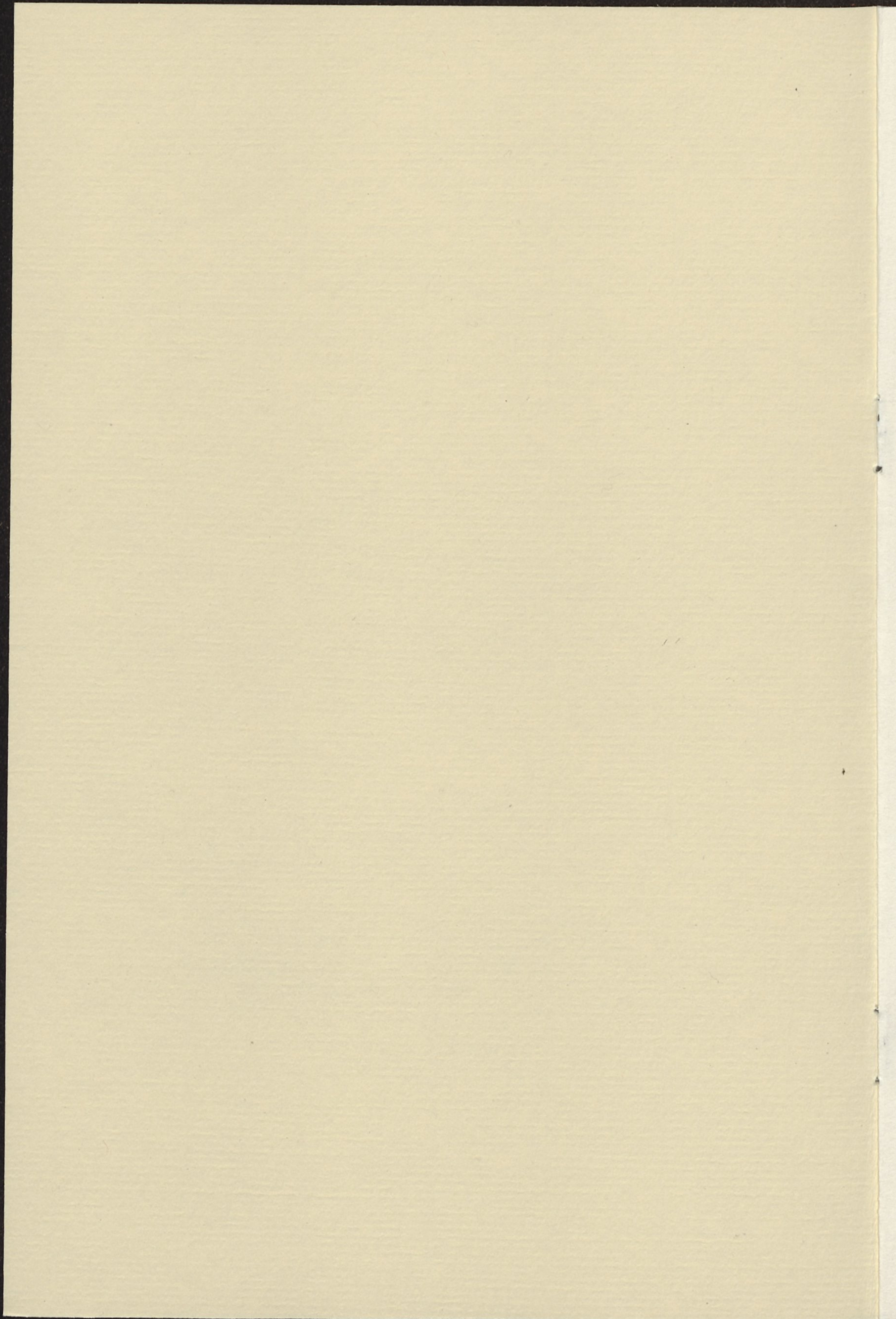
THE FIRST TEN YEARS

of

THE INSTITUTE OF OUTDOOR DRAMA



THE INSTITUTE OF OUTDOOR DRAMA
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514



INTRODUCTION

We have been informed by notes and articles in public journals that the yearly attendance at the theatres of the big cities — those that used to be regarded as the “dramatic capitals” of the country — has been steadily declining. Playgoing has been shifting from the metropolitan centers to points inland. Theatre production and attendance are becoming “regional.”

One of the more striking growths has been that of the kind of drama that can be presented outdoors. The attendance at just thirty of the forty-two open-air plays performed in amphitheatres in the summer of 1973 totaled more than 1,300,000.

As the public's interest in outdoor drama has grown, individuals and organizations have needed advice and information to make their drama plans materialize and succeed. With their unique problems, outdoor productions drew limited benefit from people experienced or knowledgeable only in the field of regular indoor drama. An advisor who was familiar specifically with outdoor drama was needed. The team often turned to as most experienced in the development of outdoor plays was at The University of North Carolina. Eventually, the staff of the Department of Dramatic Art found it impossible to handle all the requests for aid.

In January of 1963 the Institute of Outdoor Drama was established to fill the need for a central source of information for outdoor theatre production. A full-time director was appointed, and an administrative board composed of people actively engaged in the writing and production of outdoor drama was selected. In addition, an advisory board composed of leaders in all types of American theatre was appointed to assist in research and planning.

For the past seven years, outdoor dramas have played to audiences of over a million annually. The five plays in three states of 1955 have now grown to a total of forty-two annual outdoor productions of all types and sizes.

Today an impressive array of technical material about outdoor drama is available. A select bibliography of outdoor drama runs to eighteen pages. Theatre equipment manufacturers design lighting and sound equipment to meet the special needs of outdoor theatres. Equity actors take roles in fully paid casts. All this is a far cry from 1963, when the Institute of Outdoor Drama at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill came into existence.

The Institute was founded as a non-profit research and advisory agency sponsored by the Carolina Playmakers and the Department of Dramatic Art. It serves as a communicative link between the operating dramas in the nation, advises and assists with various problems, conducts research, helps to locate staff and performer personnel, maintains records, and arranges for advisory and consulting services to planning groups and governmental agencies.

When the Institute was established, only five or six of the fourteen dramas operating regularly then were in contact with the Institute. By the end of 1964, some fifteen dramas were supplying information to the Institute on a regular basis. Forty-seven regions, cities, and towns from Alaska to southern California, from Vermont to Florida, received information and advice directly through Institute channels during its first year of operation.

At the time of the Institute's formation, about fifty percent of the outdoor dramas which were produced were successful. Since 1963, about eighty percent of the dramas have been successful.

Outdoor drama has been around for a long time. Its most common present form was born on Roanoke Island, North Carolina, in 1937. The local citizens wanted to commemorate the 350th anniversary of Virginia Dare's birth on the island and the tragic settlement which Sir Walter Raleigh had attempted there. Paul Green wrote what he called a "symphonic drama," *THE LOST COLONY*, for the celebration. Besides dramatic dialogue, the play included solo and massed singing and several dances.

The play was meant to run for only nine weeks, but it proved so popular that it has run every summer since, except for a wartime blackout. In 1939 the people of Fayetteville, North Carolina, celebrated the founding of their town by staging *THE HIGHLAND CALL*. Thomas Jefferson's fight for democracy is dramatized in *THE COMMON GLORY*, first produced at Williamsburg in 1947. Kermit Hunter wrote the tragic story of the Cherokee Indians, *UNTO THESE HILLS*, in 1950. His *HORN IN THE WEST*, first staged in 1952, told of the Revolutionary history of the North Carolina Piedmont.

Outdoor drama survives and continues to grow because it is bold, inspiring theatre for every kind of people in America. Thousands of families leave their comfortable air-conditioned motels and homes to see grand spectacle, history and heroic action, and to listen to the music of our ancestors. They are rewarded with the stories of such impressive historical figures as Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Boone and Sir Walter Raleigh. They also see the epic heroism of lesser known characters in history, from the Cherokee Tsali to Baranof in Alaska. The pride and pioneer spirit of Americans are awakened by action big enough to fill the whole outdoors.

People feel close to the heroes and struggles of history when they see them recreated on the spots where their stories occurred. America's rich heritage comes alive in broad action on a large scale. It is only fitting that Americans should celebrate their past in the limitless outdoors.

Since those early plays, outdoor drama has become big business, with budgets totalling millions of dollars. But it still employs the same art form it used in 1937. Communities celebrate local history with extroverted drama, larger-than-life protagonists, and colorful pageantry. With all the technical advances and huge crowds, the important ingredient is still the story — the story of tragic suffering, epic struggles, and victories — heroic action.

In the ten years since the birth of the Institute of Outdoor Drama in 1963, much has been done to improve the quality and professional finish of outdoor theatre. The Institute has hosted annual auditions to acquaint the directors and producers with the best talent available. Annual promoters and managers conferences bring together leaders from operating

dramas and planning groups throughout the country to exchange ideas and experiences. Information bulletins and a monthly newsletter from the Institute keep the widely scattered companies abreast of the latest statistics and developments in the field.

One of the most important advances in outdoor drama professionalism came in 1971, when an agreement was reached, with Actors' Equity Association in New York, on a special contract to allow union performers to appear in the outdoor dramas without requiring a union shop.

Special research has continually been carried out with architects, lighting engineers, and manufacturers of theatre equipment. When quartz-iodine stage lighting lamps were demonstrated at the 1965 national outdoor drama conference, it was predicted that they would revolutionize outdoor stage lighting.

A small research contract with the U.S. Office of Education in 1966 allowed a study of performance techniques on a national basis, leading to suggestions for improved training for young performers and designers.

The latest of these research projects in the field is described in an article on basic acoustical requirements for amphitheatre construction, prepared by acoustical engineer Barney F. Goldberg.

Over the years, articles about specific outdoor dramas have appeared in a number of travel and trade magazines. In 1973 arrangements were made to mention the outdoor drama activity in the United States in Humble Oil's *Happy Motoring News*. The company prepared a brochure listing the dramas and also included an article on the dramas in *Energy* magazine, their trade publication. This series of notices reached millions of people.

In short, the past ten years have seen outdoor drama, with the help of the Institute of Outdoor Drama, become a national industry. In the process, the drama has not lost its art and message, but has steadily increased in quality and aesthetic success.

There are now sixty planning groups in contact with the Institute, all hoping to stage original, exciting plays celebrating America's rich heritage. The future looks bright for outdoor drama — the theatre of the people.

— Thomas Scarritt

