

# Garrett County Historical Society Museums: *Exploring Local History*

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People interested in Western Maryland history can choose from several excellent places to visit. For instance, the Garrett County Historical Society operates three museums. Step through the doors of any of these buildings and step back in time.

The Grantsville Community Museum on Main Street in Grantsville focuses attention on the work of photographer Leo Beachy, who skillfully recorded the early days of the twentieth century. The Transportation Museum on Liberty Street in Oakland houses numerous vehicles of yesteryear, from wagons to boats. The Historical Museum, nearby on Second Street, exhibits military uniforms, the tools and furniture of pioneer life, Victorian era clothing, and many other artifacts of local culture from years past.

Visits to these museums are always worthwhile. However, the historical society also provides another under-utilized service — access to rich archives on a number of topics.

As an example, Bob Boal, of the Garrett Historical Museum, pulls out documents and photos about the Garrett County Playhouse, a summer theater that operated for many years near Deep Creek Lake. Listings of the plays presented in each of the thirty seasons reveal that six to nine weeks of performance took place each summer. According to this compilation, the first offering was *Blithe Spirit* by Noel Coward; the final play was *The Paisley Convertible* by Harry Cauley.

Programs from all the performances have been carefully preserved, so it is possible to learn about the actors and directors, and to review the advertisers and patrons who supported local summer theater. Each program carries the motto: "...a theatre for residents of and the visitors to our community..."

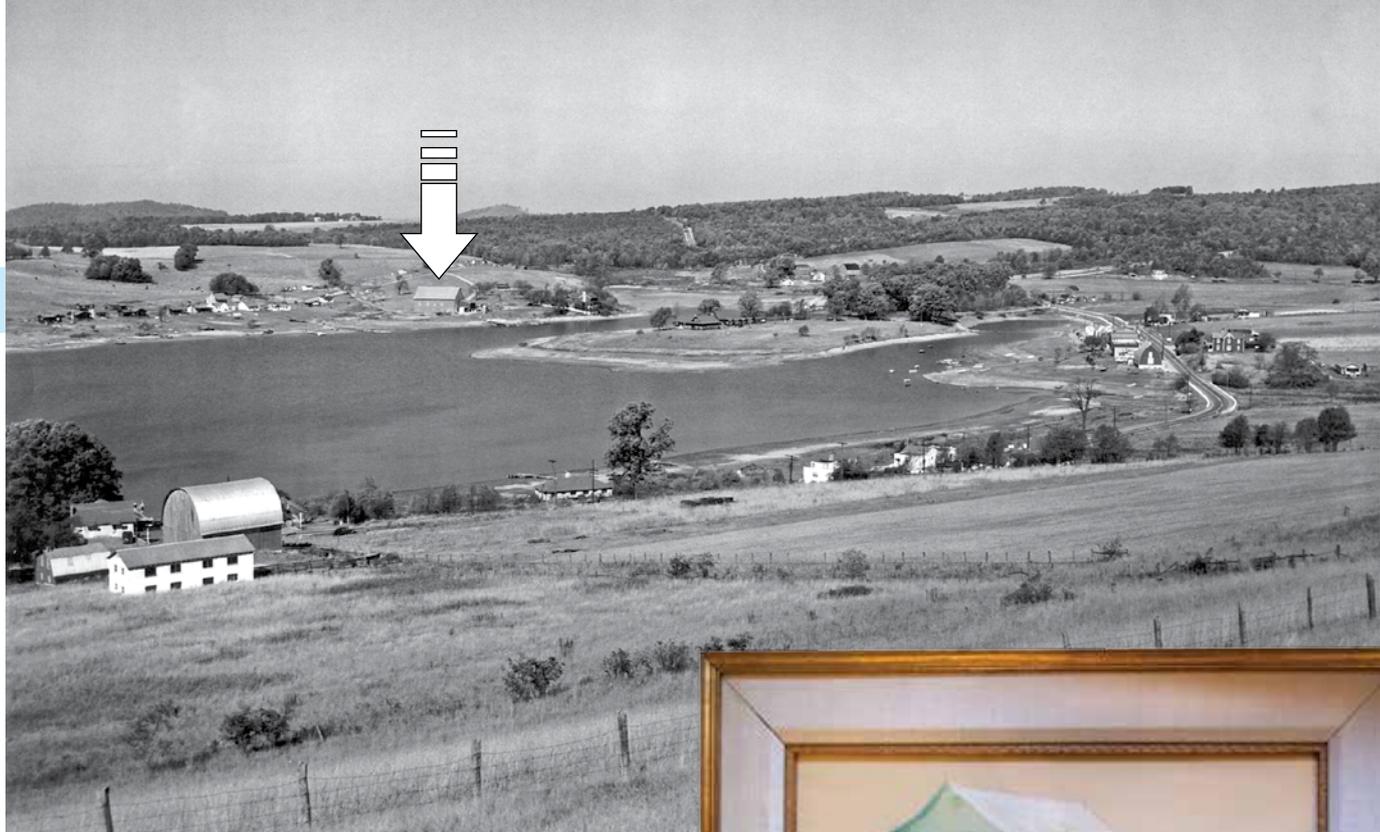
Photographs and postcards document the two major locations of the summer theater. Starting in 1955, plays



**Postcards of the  
Garrett County Playhouse.**

**Top:** The "Blue Barn" at its 2nd location on Beckman Peninsula Road. **Bottom:** Deep Creek Lake at McHenry Cove, looking towards Marsh Mountain (Wisp). The Playhouse is the white barn in the middle of the photo.

were performed in the former Arden Boat Club, a lakeside property in McHenry. The lower level had served as a beautifully furnished nightclub during prohibition years. The upper level was converted for stage and audience. When this playhouse burned in 1962, the company moved temporarily to a school auditorium, and then found its second home in a barn near another part of Deep Creek Lake. Plays were performed at this venue, the "Blue Barn," for the remainder of the theater's thirty year span.



The files also contain newspaper articles from 1975, 1977, and 1985 outlining the history of the theater group and its founders, Barbara and Gene Yell. The Yells spent summers at Barbara's family vacation home, Hemlock Hollow in Pleasant Valley. They had met as theater students, and he taught theater at the University of New Mexico. He realized that by bringing his students to perform in Garrett County, the students would experience intensive training in front of a live audience, and community members would see live performances.

The acting troupe lived at Hemlock Hollow, which in addition to the old farmhouse had a bunkhouse and a swimming pool. Milburn Melhop was the best-known and longest-running member of the group. He was also an accomplished artist. Many playhouse patrons loved his charming watercolors, and a few of his works can be seen at the museum.

Many people still fondly remember the Garrett County Playhouse, especially the Blue Barn, where the rain sounded like artillery fire on the metal roof and the bats swooped over the audience nightly, but the theater itself has been closed for three decades.

If you want to know more about this and other aspects of local history, the Garrett County Historical Society has some exhibits — and some archives — that you'll thoroughly enjoy.



**Top photo:** Original location of the Garrett County Playhouse, the former Arden Boat Club; a lakeside property at McHenry Cove, Deep Creek Lake. Note all of the open spaces around the Lake.

**Middle photo:** Painting of the "Blue Barn" by Milburn Melhop, the best-known and longest-running member of the acting troupe that performed at the Garrett County Playhouse.

**Bottom photo:** Playhouse owners Barbara and Gene Yell with some of the student actors.