

The Operettas

Crouse Community History & Photo Project

For much of the twentieth century the closing of the school year at Crouse School was a community event that stretched across several days. The whole school took part, parents and neighbors filled the auditorium, and the program mixed speeches, debates, class exercises, and music. At the center of many of those evenings stood an operetta, sometimes the main attraction, sometimes one piece of a longer commencement. The notices that follow, drawn from the *Lincoln Times-News* and the *Lincoln County News,* show how that tradition ran for nearly fifty years.

In May 1915 the commencement of Crouse High School ran from Tuesday through Friday, with a sermon by Dr. Vines of Charlotte opening the week. There were no regular graduates that year because the eleventh grade was being added for the next session. Eight pupils were already listed for it: Misses Jennie Warlick, Prue Heafner, and Emma Clark, and Masters Claude Warlick, Lee Beattie, Lawrence Carpenter, Arnel Heafner, and Rodney Stover. Miss Prue Heafner graduated in music that session. Enrollment stood at 165.

Thursday evening's program opened with the chorus "Red, White and Blue" and "I'm Afraid of the Big, Big, Moon." Beulah and Connie Heafner played a piano duet of "Rough Riders," Prue Heafner and Mazel Carpenter offered a piano duet of "Danse Rustique," and Nellie Hoover and Mazel Carpenter sang a vocal duet. The evening closed with the operetta "Flower Nymphs Surprise," performed by the primary and intermediate grades.

The following year the schedule again filled several days. Wednesday night brought exercises by the grammar and primary grades. Thursday morning at ten o'clock Rev. W. E. Abernethy gave the literary address; at two o'clock the debate "Resolved that We Should Greatly Increase our Navy" was held along with the graduating exercises and that night at eight the play "Hiawatha" was presented, and Friday night at eight the play "The Thread of Destiny" closed the week. The public was cordially invited.

By 1923 the commencement exercise pattern was clear. Thursday night opened with the operetta "Jack and the Bean Stalk," with songs and recitations between acts. Friday night belonged to the senior class, history, poem, last will and testament, prophecy, statistics, and the class song. Saturday night brought the high-school play, the only event for which a small admission was charged.

The next year the school offered "Miss Cherry Blossom," an operetta in three acts set in Japan. The synopsis, printed in advance, told of an American girl raised as a Japanese maiden, a scheming secretary, and a happy resolution. Admission was twenty-five cents for adults and fifteen cents for school children.

There was a break in the published notices for a time, this could be due to that in 1932 the eighth through tenth grades were transferred to Lincolnton, and Crouse became an elementary school; then in 1940 the twelfth grade was added to Lincolnton, and the eighth was brought back to Crouse.

Japan returned as a setting in 1936 when the school presented "O Cho San," a Japanese operetta in two scenes, on Saturday evening, May 9, at eight o'clock in the Crouse School auditorium. Sue Alice Beattie appeared as O Cho San the

daughter of a merchant, with Hugh Heavner as her older brother, Helen Tutherow as her cousin, and Ralph Eaker the brother's friend. Martha Sue Heafner played O Cho San's best friend, Kathryn Beam her younger sister's companion, and other roles were cast once again from the same Crouse families, Beattie, Heavner, Heafner, Beam, Huss, Eaker, Elmore, McLurd, Dellinger, Yoder, and Smith—that appear throughout school and community records.

After the war the operettas continued, now more often presented as single evening events rather than as one part of a multi-day commencement. In May 1954 Crouse Elementary School offered "Polly Make Believe" on Friday night, May 14, at eight o'clock. The public was invited. The evening belonged to the elementary pupils and the families who came to watch them. Kay Heafner appeared as Polly Make Believe, Francis Mauney as Lassie, Jimmy McClurd as Mack her brother, Reed Huss as Jimmy, and Bud Dellinger as Ebenezer, a cook. Shirley Avery played Mrs. O'Toole, Johnny Reel her son, Jerry Chapman as Bud, Linda Reynolds as Dot, George Dellinger as Billy, Jean Jones as Lil, a girl from the city, Allen Heafner as Buttons, and Sue Avery as Rose, a French maid. Don Heafner was the pianist. Supporting groups filled the stage: Apple Blossom Fairies, Girls from Town, Vegetables, Rabbits, Dutch Boys, and Italian Girls.

The production also featured a fourteen-member Chorus that included Carolyn Heafner, who later built a distinguished career as a lyric soprano. Her career began as a scholarship winner in the Metropolitan Opera National Auditions; she sang leading roles for five years with the Bremen Opera Company in West Germany and appeared with companies including the Santa Fe Opera. In retirement she and her husband, fellow opera singer Robert Williams, established the Heafner/Williams Vocal Competition in Lincolnton, which for more than twenty-five years has given young singers from the Southeast performance experience and scholarship support.