

Interview with Marjorie McCourt  
Nancy Butler May 7, 1997

I just wrote down that Mrs. Norris built her \$10,000 movie and vaudeville house in 1913 and she called it "The Kitchener" after Lord Kitchener. And around the same time, George Reid, who had a paint and wallpaper store on Queen Street, opened his \$1,000 theatre down the street, just near where the clock tower is now. (Of course it wasn't built until later.) Mr. Reid called his theatre, "The Royal George". When "The Royal George" burned down some years later, George Reid bought Mrs. Norris's theatre and decided to change "The Kitchener" to "The Royal George". He painted the new name over "Kitchener". But in spite of his expertise as a painter, the "Kitchener" kept coming through.

With the depression, in 1929, the theatre closed for a number of years and in the late thirties, it was reopened, refurbished and renamed "The Brock" by the new owner, John A. Allen, who had three other theatres in Thorold, Dunnville and Fort Erie.

In the 1940s Johnny Allen sold the business only, to G.D. Fairley and Peter Barnes. Pete was from Texas and they introduced "Foto Nite" to the area. People registered and if their name was drawn and they were in the theatre, they won the pot, which they claimed by selling their photo. At times the pot grew from one to two hundred dollars. My husband, Dewey, was the manager of Fairley's Palace Theatre in St. Catharines and after the Brock manager was found pilfering, Dewey came weekly to the Brock and conducted "Foto Nite". When later Peter Barnes pulled out, Dewey bought a half interest in the show, and then in 1946 bought the business outright.

Nancy Butler: At one time I was asked to look at a movie camera somebody had in Port Dalhousie. He said that this movie projector was used in the Royal George. It was one of the earliest projectors made. It had a candle.

Not a lamp? It could have been a lamp. I know that I offered. Now who was it I offered it to? To the museum. An old projector - a "Simplex" - and they turned it down.

And at that time too they used to have - I never saw it - prior to the electric, they had a huge turntable for "talkies" and they used to get a boy to turn it by hand. And while the movie was running, this boy would wind it up. Of course as he tired, the voice went deeper and deeper. That was a long time ago. I never saw it.

And another thing that bothers me is that, of course,

we had to send all the advertising back. All that advertising - if I had kept some of those stills. I did keep the clock that we had in the theatre - a huge clock - for Towne Taxi, because as you know, we had Towne Taxi and the Brock theatre here. I offered it to my son and he said that as soon as he got settled, he'd put it in their recreation room. But in the meantime, I was talking to Jimmy Smith, who collects memorabilia, and I told Howard, my son, about him and he said, "Give it to him", so I did. My daughter has the [sign with the] time the movie started and ended, that hung over the ticket booth. Both kept the ice cream chairs that were in the projection room. One of the chairs had arms. You know, the fancy chairs. They are very special.

Nancy Butler: When did you close it down?

I didn't close it down at all. We just kept going right through. When my husband died in 1971 - he died in March - and it went on the market and I sold it to the Canadian Mime to Ray Wickens, manager, and Adrian Packnold. They bought it and I took the mortgage. After a couple of years, they had some internal problems. They wanted speech. They thought people wanted that. I don't know. They were breaking up, so John Brooks came to me. He was the Shaw manager. I don't know what he was, actually. He asked if the Shaw could then take over the mortgage exactly as it was and we did that and they paid off the mortgage.

Nancy Butler: So it came around 1973?

Around that. I can't recall exactly. It seemed to me that the Canadian Mime had it for a couple of years. I remember driving somebody by the theatre one day - a customer in the taxi - and he said, "Oh look! What's a mimi theatre?" Their shows were good and fortunately, Adrian and Harro Maskow, who is still with them. He is excellent.

You were asking what people thought about the Shaw coming to town. Of course, as usual in Niagara-on-the-Lake, they were either on one side or the other. You were either for Shaw or against Shaw. Well, my husband was a business man and he was for Shaw, because he knew that it would be a shot in the arm for this community. We had struggled through a few years here with television coming. There were times when people just didn't come out to shows. So we were very pleased.

I remember that they were trying to choose a site for the Festival Theatre (my husband was still living at that time) and one of the places was where Fort Mississauga is. Wouldn't that have been a beautiful [site]? You could

just visualize it. But after the theatre was built where it is, it just melded right in. I think that it is lovely. A lovely building.

Nancy Butler: Did you ever feel that it would be a threat to your movie business?

No, we thought that we would work things in with it and we did. What we tried to do - I am saying "we", my husband was the showman - what we tried to do was through the summer because of the way Shaw used to play - they didn't do it the way they do now - they would play - say "Mrs Warren's Profession" and it would be on every night for - say, three or four weeks. So people would come and see that play and then they'd leave. Where, I remember [Dewey] saying to Brian Doherty, if they worked in different ones [plays] it would work out much better. You would have people - maybe stay for a week or more.

We thought that if they came to see that, then if we played something that was a little more arty, then they would come to the theatre. So we tried to work it in. We would see what Shaw was doing, then we would work in what would be fitting. People, who came to see Shaw, might want to see that. So that is how we went along.

Then too in the winter, while they were at the Court House, Shaw always had a film festival and we played all the old films - the foreign films, Chaplin films - some of those old films. We would always book for them. [Dewey] always got a good rate. Then Brian decided that he would go over and do it on his own. Well they saw him coming and they charged him, knowing he wanted them. Where we could get them maybe for ten or fifteen dollars, Brian would have to pay fifty, sixty, seventy dollars. But that went over quite well - Shaw 's Film Night.

It was very interesting when they first started and they just had the Court House. Of course everyone in town knew what the Court House was - the structure and so on. The people who came from out of town, they had no idea what it was like back stage. The space was limited back there. The first artistic director that I remember coming was Andrew Allen and he did "Androcles and the Lion" and we were sitting there watching, knowing that backstage there were 23 Christians. I think they had two portable toilets back there and all the actors and actresses had to change there too. They only had a space of probably 8 feet by 16 feet. We could just visualize them standing there pressed together like sardines,

But they were always excellent plays and performances. I don't know. It just grew and then we had a lot of the people in town who volunteered their services to do the

sewing and so on. Betty Taylor, do you know Betty? You know Rita Brown. You ask Rita about Betty. Because Betty, oh she gave so much of her time and loved doing it. And of course Rita went on to bigger and better things.

Nancy Butler: She is still there.

I don't know too many of them now, but at one time there were so many that I knew, and I drove them a lot in the taxi.

When I sold the theatre, I was the only licensed female projectionist in Ontario and possibly Canada. While my husband was ill, I had been running the shows and then when he died, I thought, he was the showman. He was the one who used to say, "Marjorie if I relied on you to do the bookings, we would be out of business in a month". Because I would play what I wanted to see - you know - the pictures that I liked. So he would say, "I'll book what I want", and I would say, "Gee. 'Where the Boys Are'". Any way we brought in people.

I was the projectionist, but I'd never learned to drive. And I was 50 years old. And he had told me the last time he took me out to teach me to drive, there were some people who were not psychologically geared for driving and I was one of them. I didn't want to learn to drive. Any place I wanted to go, he would take me anyway. But when he died, we had both businesses, the taxi and the theatre and I decided to sell the show and learn to drive. And that was quite an experience. To drive a taxi, which I did for 20 years.

You know when you are a taxi driver, but you have to go out in all weather. If I had just learned and hadn't any reason to go out, I wouldn't have gone out in the rain, but when it snowed, and the weather was bad, people called me. As a result I met a lot of people from the theatre and Jan Hicken was the head of publicity. She was always calling me to take various ones, Paxton Whitehead -

I'll always remember Paxton Whitehead and Noel Willman. Noel Willman was directing "The Apple Cart". Are you familiar with "The Apple Cart"? I remember saying to him when I was driving him to the Buffalo airport, if that had been a book I might have gotten through the first chapter, but I think that I would have put it down. Instead, it being a performance, Paxton Whitehead walked on stage and from then on, the audience just ate out of his hand. He transformed anything he did. He was an interesting person in himself, you know, beside what he did on the stage.

I remember taking Noel Willman to the Buffalo airport.

He went on to New York and came back. He tried to get across the border but he had left his passport in New York City at the hotel. And he said "I remember I left it there!" But he didn't remember to bring it. So I took him to Lewiston and left him at the Clarkson House there. I called Paxton Whitehead and he said, "You come on back. Tell him to stay put and I'll be right over." I don't know how he got him back over the border.

I always remember Paxton and Tony Van Bridge. Did you ever see "Thark"? Did you ever see them in "Thark"? Seeing "Thark" was not enough. You have to see Paxton Whitehead and Tony Van Bridge in "Thark". And at the same time, Heath Lambert was playing the part of a reporter - a very small role. Who was the man - I should know - he died during a performance. He had a heart attack. Somebody had to step into his role as a butler and it was Heath. From then on he reigned supreme. All those wonderful farces. Heath was excellent.

Another person I loved a great deal was Frances Hyland and her beautiful Irish water spaniel, Wallop. I used to go to Toronto and collect Wallop and bring him back here. He wouldn't get on the seat. He'd lie on the floor in the back. A beautifully behaved dog.

Nancy Butler: She never had a lead for him.

She never had to. She'd leave him outside a store. She'd go into the store and he wouldn't move. And I never will forget the morning I went over to pick up Fran to do some laundry. We brought the things out and I asked, "Where is Wallop?" He'd been poisoned. She'd moved into a house on King Street and didn't realize that he could open the screen door. He was such a dear gentle dog. Somebody around there didn't like dogs. I guess he saw some poison and ate it and he died. Poor Fran. That was very difficult for her.

And Hilary Corbett was also an old favorite of mine. I used to drive her back after dress rehearsals, which would end late and I'd drive her to Toronto and come back alone. I remember one night, after leaving her place and heading back to the Gardiner, I noticed this van that had psychedelic colors and paintings on it. It seemed to be dogging me and I thought, "Oh, gee". It was 2 o'clock in the morning. I kept going, making sure that my doors were locked. I had a beautiful old Electra. And I got to the Gardiner, and he went around me and just took off. He wasn't interested in me. It was just the hour and the way the van was all painted.

No, I took Hilary. She was fabulous. Her designs were beautiful. She was a purist. If it was a certain era, they

didn't have zippers in the flies in men's pants - no way. I remember in "Mrs Warren's Profession". It was a different type of opening, not on the side and not in the middle. It had to be just right. Kate Reid, as far as I am concerned, Mrs. Warren is Kate Reid, or the other way around. She was so good.

Nancy Butler: Hilary Corbett's costume designs were beautiful.

Yes, it would be lovely to have one. In fact they can be purchased, or could be at one time. The originals.

Nancy Butler: The Shaw has one or two but I don't think people were purchasing them then.

It is a sad thing really. Of course they have to be somewhere.

I think that I mentioned Tom Kneebone. He was quite a gentleman and lots of fun. He was just great.

After his accident, I had him scheduled. I was going to pick him up in Toronto. He was in Montreal, where the accident occurred. He remembered to have somebody notify me that he was injured. Later I saw him very briefly. Just in town here. A very nice chap.

And Barbara Worthy. Of course she lived just down the street from me. Do you know Barbara? She is a very nice person.

And one I drove a lot was Carole Shelley. She had played in "The Millionairess". She was very nice. She and her mother lived on Gate St. I drove Shelley a lot. Now they bring somebody here to do the photo shoots. But at one time, you used to have to take them either to Hamilton or Toronto. And individually. Now they are saving by doing it this way. But I would have to take them over and be paid for waiting time and so on.

I remember one call we had and it took pretty well all day. and it was to go to - I think we hit the St. Catharines Standard first and then the [Hamilton] Spectator and then we would go on to Toronto. No I guess Toronto was first and we would go to various papers there and then we would go to the Hamilton Spectator and then the Niagara Falls Review, and then Niagara Falls, New York. They had couple of papers there. It took all day to do this. I was dropping off photos and it was crucial that we got them there on time. It seemed to me that in Toronto it took a bit longer. I can't remember how many papers they had then.

That's why I learned to drive well. I remember my first trip to Toronto, I said to my son, "You take it, Howard." And he said, "No, Mom, you are the one who needs the experience. Just remember that whether you are driving ten miles or a hundred and ten miles, you use the same good driving practices." So I'm driving on the Gardiner and thinking - yes but when do you get into the lane to get off? So I am saying, "Dewey, help me." My husband, you know. But I soon got used to going to London, Toronto and all over the place. There was a girl I had to drive to the university hospital in London. She had injured her knee so I made several trips there.

Nancy Butler: Did you like driving for the Shaw? Were they good customers?

Oh yes they were. And at one time I was the only one who drove them. Well I say "I", but my son whenever he was around. He would help me too. He drove Wendy Hiller and her husband when they were here.

I remember I had Walter Kerr and his wife, Jean Kerr. She had written "Please Don't Eat the Daisies." He was the drama critic for the New York Times. I picked him up after a performance at the Court House - I believe it was, "The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles". I can't recall the man, Tom somebody, he was so good. Anyway when they got into the car, I said to Walter Kerr, "What did you say to that?" "I never talk about anything I've seen until I have written my piece on it." But he liked it.

It was interesting. For my part - I enjoyed it. I know my husband would have as well.

Going back to who was pleased about Shaw coming to town. There are some people who are critical about anything that happens in town. But as far as we were concerned, we thought it was the way to go.

We went a few times to Brian Doherty's apartment. We'd have breakfast there. He had great ideas about the theatre - our theatre, which didn't materialize. But when Johnny Allen died, we had the first refusal. Brian was with Bill Martin's law firm in Niagara Falls. If you knew Brian, he was sort of - everything was theatre as far as he was concerned. He didn't come down to earth too much, but Bill Martin was negotiating for us, trying to get the theatre at a reasonable price and Brian was working trying to get it for the Shaw and working against us.

Nancy Butler: And yet he was supposed to be your lawyer?

No, he wasn't our lawyer, Bill was. Bill Martin was the man who owned the law practice. He was head of the law

practice.

Nancy Butler: What was Brian's role. What was he supposed to be.

It was Martin, Shepherd, Calvert and Bates so he wouldn't have been a partner. He wasn't in on [our negotiations] at all. He never knew what was going on for some strange reason, because we would go to Bill Martin all the time and talk about this and that - about how much we were going to pay for the theatre until we realized that Brian was working against us, but he didn't know that we were trying to get the theatre. He just didn't acquaint himself with those facts. Bill had to just tell him and things settled. We bought the theatre.

We had rented the theatre from 1946 and we paid the exorbitant sum of \$200 a month to rent the theatre. We operated the movie business. Then when Johnny died, it had to be early in the 60s and the Shaw started the plays in the Court House. Johnny Allen died and it was written right into our contract, we would have first refusal so we decided to buy it.

I liked Brian. He was pleasant enough as a customer, when we drove him. He was quite knowledgeable. He was always on stage himself. I heard different ones say things against Brian but I liked him. He talked a lot about his background, (he was an Upper Canada College boy), about his brother, and so on. He was very proud of that but no he was okay. Whenever we were together, by that I mean, my husband, Brian and myself, we discussed theatre mostly, because that was the thing closest to his heart and to ours really. What would be good for the theatre and what the town needed and all those things. Brian was very nice.

I felt rather sorry for him later on because things escalated and passed him by. He started it all and then suddenly it got out of his hands and it went on without him. I was glad to see that they had a nice bronze done of him. If it hadn't been for Brian, it would never have gotten off the ground. Because he actually hounded people and wasn't the least bit apologetic about it. He went right to the source of wherever there was some money like Eatons - he'd go. It was a good thing he went then, because Eaton's might not have been able to help now. But no, he had no qualms about asking for money.

He loved to tell the story about how he produced "Father's Malachy's Miracle" and lost a million dollars. He'd produced this play, and it didn't go over very well. But he liked the whole idea. He had some strange ways about him, but I liked Brian.



I loved Paxton. He was very gentlemanly. He just exuded talent. I didn't miss anything he did, because he did them so well. I was sorry to see Paxton go, because things did change then. It is altogether different now, the choices and the way things are done.

And then there were some people who stayed on and were others who, because Paxton went, didn't want to stay. No, I found those very enjoyable years. I drove a lot for Shaw. I don't recall anybody who gave me any problems. No we really had a good association with the Shaw.

## Appendix To Marjorie McCourt's tape

There was one woman - Amelia Hall. She was a character. She would get into the taxi to go some place, but she didn't know where it was. "Find it," she'd say. Fortunately, my son usually drove her. I would say, "You take her," if he were around. One day he told me she asked to be taken to a place in north St. Catharines. She knew approximately where the street was, but she didn't know the name of the street. After they had drove for a while, she asked, "Where are you going?" "Well, north St. Catharines." "Well this isn't familiar."