

“She Was BTL”

The Louise Rodgers Story

Sometimes the best ideas come at the most unexpected of times and, given the proper care and attention, these small ideas can grow beyond our wildest hopes. That is the case with a simple idea for a small fundraiser that has resulted in the entertainment of approximately 1.4 million people in Huntsville over the last 60-plus years.

Local resident Louise Rodgers, who volunteered with numerous non-profit organizations, came up with the idea for a fundraiser sometime in the early part of 1958 that would become Huntsville’s Broadway Theatre League. While watching the popular television program, “The \$64,000 Question,” Louise saw an advertisement that the show’s host, Hal March, would be going on tour with the musical production of “Two for the Seesaw,” which had recently had a run on Broadway in New York City. Louise thought, “Why can’t this show come to Huntsville?” This proved to be the perfect thought at the perfect time.

Louise, the executive secretary of The Huntsville Business and Professional Women’s Club, had a sideline seat as the boom decade of 1950 transformed Huntsville from a town of some 16,000 at the start of the decade to 72,000 at its end. She knew a Broadway show would be a great attractant to the area’s growing masses. She took this idea to the president of the Huntsville Business and Professional Women’s Club. Lois Robertson recalled that Louise suggested inviting a Broadway Show to the city and selling advertisements to local businesses in the playbill to raise funds.

With Lois’ blessing, Louise contacted the booking agent in New York for “Two for the Seesaw” and was told that Hal March didn’t play for audiences of less than 1,000 patrons. This was a problem because Huntsville did not have facility of that size. The agent probably considered the matter closed, but he did not know the very determined Louise Rodgers, who called back several days later and asked if the show would come if there was a guaranteed fee. Of course the answer was yes.

Louise had to learn the history on touring Broadway productions. Starting in the 1950s, New York booking agents and show producers started a nationwide network of “theatre leagues” across the U.S. for a two-fold purpose. The first purpose was to test new shows that would someday be promoted to larger audiences on Broadway. The second was that shows would have a life outside of Broadway if they could tour the country, which would obviously lead a show into bringing in more profits. Thanks to Louise Rodgers, Huntsville went on to become one of the first cities to be added to this new theatre league. Huntsville’s Broadway Theatre League is thought to be only one of three of original league members. Some history indicates that Huntsville’s BTL may be the oldest subscriber theatre group in the country or at least the second oldest.

Once the stars aligned for the Huntsville and Broadway to work together, there were still obstacles, namely finding a venue to hold the events. The Huntsville High School auditorium proved to be the one of the few choices, but the facility was not quite Broadway-ready. Louise gathered her volunteer forces and raised \$4,000 to have lights, power lines and stage equipment installed in the Huntsville High Auditorium. Huntsville was ready for Broadway, but would the audiences come?

Lois Robertson recalls that “New York bookers said you will never sell out in Huntsville, Alabama, and we did it in three days. After we sold out they said we did such a good job that they convinced us to do a matinee which didn’t sell out because it was during the week, not a weekend.”

The interest was there so one show soon turned into four shows and an unintended local Broadway Season was born. “We didn’t envision having a series,” Lois Robertson said. “It just kept rolling and Louise kept talking to people in New York.”

Backed by The Business Professional Women’s Club the 1959-1960 season kicked off with “Odd Man In,” starring film star Ann Sheridan. *The Huntsville Times* even called the show’s opening "a historic date in the entertainment life of Huntsville."

The shows were so successful that the high school auditorium would often be sold out for the evening performances. Many patrons have told stories of watching the obituaries to see if any season pass holders had passed away, longtime patron and BTL volunteer Wilarlie Barto recalls “that tickets were just impossible to get.” One divorcing couple even ended up in Louise’s office so she could mediate who got to keep the tickets. BTL tickets were a hot commodity for Huntsville, and because this was operated as fundraisers, there was little-to-no advertising. Word of mouth and the local newspapers’ stories brought in the fans. BTL shows continued at Huntsville High School until the 1975-1976 season, when they moved to the concert hall at the newly opened Von Braun Civic Center.

As the years rolled on and shows got bigger and audiences grew, BTL was still run exclusively by Louise Rodgers and a small band of volunteers. According to many who worked with her, she was highly intelligent and kept the seating charts of all those season ticket holders in her mind. To this day, Barto talks about people coming by the BTL office on Governors Drive and giving her a check and saying, “Tell Louise I want my regular seats.” Louise knew all the patrons, and knew all about them. Barto, who spent more than 40 years volunteering at BTL, describes Louise this way: “She *was* BTL. She enjoyed wanting to get the shows to town and wanted to share them with everybody.”

So how did Madison County girl Louise Rodgers get so wise in the ways of Broadway shows? Retired VBC Director Ron Evans provided the answer to this question. “Louise didn’t have anyone to teach her the business, she just did it on her own. She worked with a New York booking agent Tom Mallow, that showed her the ropes, but she did it on her own.” Several

people who worked alongside Louise said she had a great relationship with Tom and that he always tried to help guide her to shows that would sell well in Huntsville.

Tom was also there to help Louise out of a real tight jam in 1963. The trucks bringing the set and musicians for musical “The Premise” made it to Huntsville through a snowstorm, but the cast did not. Tom Mallow flew the Broadway cast from New York to Huntsville where they performed before catching a quick flight back.

Part of what made BTL and Louise so unique and popular was her unyielding attention to detail. "She was in charge," said Lois Robertson.

Robertson recalled Rodgers' passion for personalized letters. For years, Rodgers required that each letter from BTL be hand-addressed with a first-class stamp. Computer-generated labels and bulk mail were not acceptable. "She said, 'People don't read envelopes that are labeled,' " Robertson said.

Rodgers eventually allowed the labels but insisted they not be "slapped" on the envelopes.

Longtime BTL member and current BTL board member Barbara Kearns recalls that during shows, Louise never watched but sat in the box office in case someone came in. She also spent most every day at the small Governors Drive BTL office where she ran the day-to-day operations, solely as a volunteer. Her tenacity and dedication to the cause kept BTL running through good times and bad.

The Broadway world is still “show business” and the times in such a tumultuous industry are not always good. Louise herself summed this up best in a 1974 interview saying, “There is nothing harder to vary than a 15-year variety show.” There were shows that didn’t do as well as expected, unexpected bills, and other problems but she faced them all in her own particular manner. She also faced challenges as a woman in a male-dominated business. “She had a graciousness about her that was wonderful and backed by a strong will. She never let the industry change her. She was a very solid person” said Ron Evans, who served as director of the VBC from 1990-2007.

Her character and strong will were beneficial to a cause extending well past the lights of Broadway – segregation. In the early to mid-1960s, most of the touring Broadway shows were racially integrated, but The Huntsville High School auditorium was not. Once again Louise and her volunteer army jumped into the battle and succeeded in changing that restriction.

After BTL moved from the Huntsville High Auditorium to the VBC, the amount of tickets to be sold for a show more than doubled. Louise struggled through a few years at the civic center before turned to an old friend for help. Ron Evans started work for the local Stagehands Union when he was only 16, helping with shows at Huntsville High including the BTL shows. When he began working at the VBC, he was the event coordinator for BTL so he had spent lots of years working alongside Louise and was more than happy to partner with her and BTL.

This is not to say the two didn't butt heads, though (in case you missed the part about Louise being strong willed). One continual debate the two partners had was Ron thought that BTL needed to move to five performances per show on the weekends, and Louise disagreed wanting to keep to weekday performances.

After more than 30 years of "being Broadway Theatre League," Louise finally decided that it was time to retire and the 1992-1993 season was her last season with BTL. That season saw Ron Evans and the VBCC partner with local promoter Donn Jennings to keep BTL running. That season, BTL brought in the national tour of "Les Miserables," which is one of the most popular and profitable shows to ever come to Huntsville. When asked about taking BTL over after Louise, Evans said: "She had the organization and vision that it could happen in Huntsville and we just stepped in to help. She brought a level of entertainment to Huntsville that we could never have had without her."

While we are celebrating 60 years of Broadway Theatre League and the contributions of Louise Rodgers, we would be remiss to overlook some of her many other contributions to arts and civics in Huntsville.

- She was a charter member of The Arts Council (now known as Arts Huntsville). She served on the board of directors starting in 1962 holding every office, including president.
- She served on the board of directors for The Community Ballet Association starting in 1969.
- She served as chairperson of the awards committee for Fantasy Playhouse beginning in 1961.
- For her years of contributions to the arts in Huntsville, she was awarded the Virginia Hammill Simms Memorial Award.
- She was a president and served as chairperson to all committees for The Business and Professional Women's organization.
- She was a president and chairperson to all committees for The Altrusa Club of Huntsville.
- She was instrumental in raising funds and creating the Blount Hospitality House.

Current BTL Executive Director Andrew Willmon was recently speaking with Louise's granddaughter and asked about Louise's contribution. She said: "These past 60 years and all the joy she has brought to the community and all she has done for the arts. That's her legacy."

Ron Evans said: "I'm not sure anyone rises to the top like Louise Rodgers. I hope her story lives on; this community owes her a great debt."

In telling the story of Broadway Theatre League, there are hundreds, even thousands, of other people who have continued Louise's legacy by helping to bring entertainment to Huntsville. The organization has grown with the city.

In researching Louise's story, I found a *Huntsville Times/AL.com* article about BTL's 50th anniversary in which the author wrote: "Rodgers, who passed away in 2000 at age 80, probably wouldn't recognize the league she created." This is the only thing I have found about Louise Rodgers that I disagree with. She would most certainly recognize Broadway Theatre League today because she is still there in spirit and her legacy looms large in the halls of the Von Braun Center.