

Sun-Herald Interview: 50 years of Gulfport Little Theatre  
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**Caption article:** Remembering A Life of Theater

Ethelynd Baxley has spent her life in the theater. For this 94-year-old Gulfport woman, there's nothing like the sound of applause. Baxley is one of the founding mothers of Gulfport Little Theater. Some aspects of theater have changed over the past 50 years, but one thing remains the same. Says Baxley, "The people who work in theater are strictly a group of people that do it for love." Staff writer Betty Attaway takes a look at Baxley and the first 50 years of GLT.

**Article:** The show goes on / Gulfport Little Theater celebrates 50 years of theater  
by Betty Attaway

Ethelynd Baxley smiles when she hears the word theater. Her eyes sparkle and fill with tears when she looks at her collection of albums that record the life of Gulfport Little Theater. The 94-year-old woman is one of the founding mothers of GLT. To celebrate its Golden Anniversary, directors from the past and present, now living all over the world, have been invited to the opening-night champagne gala Thursday. The season kicks off with "Tea and Sympathy," a Robert Anderson drama.

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**This woman's dream**

Baxley, a native of New Orleans, spent most of her professional life as a private speech teacher, devoting her spare time to the theater. Her first play on the Coast, "The Visitor," was staged at Gulfport High School in 1945 by her former students. "Gulfport was so small then," said Baxley. "And this was during the Great Depression years." Money was tight during the 1940s, and people learned to live without luxuries, especially entertainment. So this play was an uplifting experience for the children and their families. "Everyone was so excited to see their children on stage," said Baxley. The play also served as an inspiration to Baxley to promote theater on the Coast. But she needed help.

In 1945, she found it with Lee and Betty Zollman. "He was a big man, a graduate of Princeton University" Baxley said. "He was in the position to do something about organizing a theater group." The Zollmans owned a music store in downtown Gulfport, located across the street from Woolworths and the movie theater. In the summer of 1946, Lee Zollman composed and mailed a letter inviting all the well-known people of the area to the first meeting, held at the Gulfport Recreation Center. "Everyone who was interested in arts, literature, or anything of culture was invited to join," said Baxley. "About 40 people responded, and they decided to organize and promote the little theater. The next step for Baxley was organizing the director's group, which is still in existence today. The group reads and selects plays for the board to review. There were three productions the first year, four for several years after that. Now there are five regular shows, one children's production, a fund-raiser show in the summer and the show selected to go to the state competition.

**The first season**

In 1946, the group staged its first production, *The Night of January 16*. The mystery, directed by Lee Zollman, depicted the era. "We were around the war time," said Baxley. "Two characters were German servants who were spies. They were sinister people who spoke with heavy accents." The play was a hit and drew the most prominent people on the Coast. "Opening night, everyone dressed in formal clothes," said Baxley. "There was coffee served at intermission and we used only the finest silver and china. Everyone enjoyed the play a great deal." Membership

grew to about 600 the first year, with Zollman and Baxley being the mainstays of the directors. In 1961, the group felt it was time to expand and take on a musical. *Brigadoon*, under the direction of Zollman, was accompanied by a full orchestra. The musical was staged at West Side Elementary because the high school stage was too small. The group and its audience had outgrown the stages in the area.

### **Building a home**

After years of fund-raising and work, GLT was able to plan construction of its home at the corner of US 90 at 25th Avenue. The project was led by Zollman, who died before its completion, and Ellsworth Rauth, who carried out the plans. Baxley cut the ribbon at the Lee Zollman Playhouse in 1964. The theater was not only large enough for musicals, it managed to hold Baxley's large children's productions, including *Wizard of Oz*. But the playhouse was short-lived. On August 16, 1969 Hurricane Camille blew their dreams away, leaving a concrete slab. Baxley dug through the debris in search of something -- anything that might have survived. She found one crystal punch glass intact. "We found costumes hanging in trees three blocks away," said Baxley. "That playhouse was in fragments. Nothing was left." The group did not give up. For about three years they used an abandoned grocery store off Thornton Avenue as their stage. It was called the Second Street Playhouse. "We used folding chairs and everything else you can think of until we scraped the money together for a new playhouse," said Baxley. By 1972, the GLT board had raised the money to build the Deborah Place Theater on land donated by Harold Barber and Lula Anderson.

### **Looking back**

Baxley has kept up with theater from 1945 to now. Her home is like a museum of theater, complete with countless literary books, scripts and a dozen scrap books that holds 50 years of theater memories and other keepsakes. Then there's a small statue of a lion, who brings a smile and a tear to Baxley's face. "This is King Henry, you know from the story of Henry in his declining years," said Baxley. "He was a small gift from one of the casts." Baxley's devotion has been repeatedly recognized. But for her work in the 1977 - 78 season, she became the first recipient of the Tommy Gilbert award, named after a popular Coast disc-jockey and dedicated actor. The award is given each year to the person who gave the most effort and time to the theater. "This award was a honor," said Baxley. "These are wonderful memories." "These are my treasures."