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### First Theatre Majors Appeared on Television Twice During Four Years

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CAMPUS NEWS

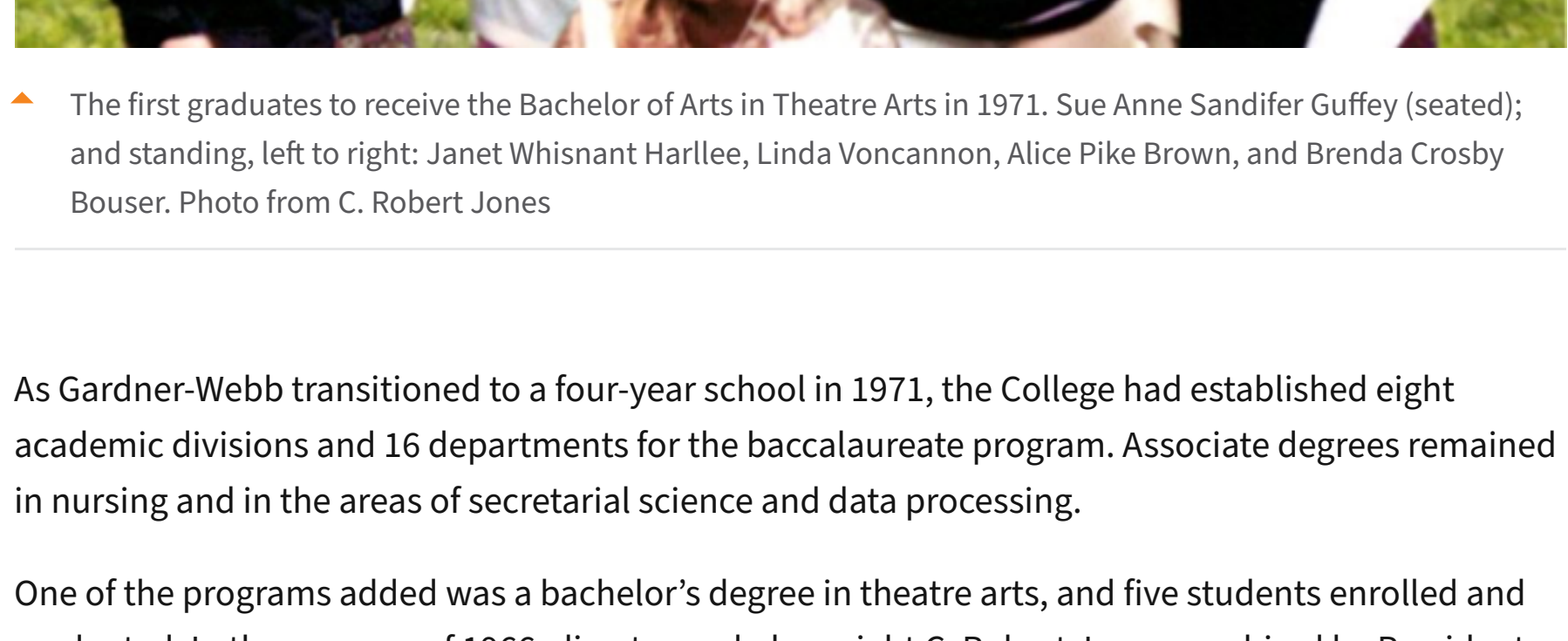
First Theatre Majors Appeared on Television  
Twice During Four Years

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON MARCH 8, 2021



Playwright, Director C. Robert Jones Hired to Build Program

**To our readers:** Gardner-Webb University celebrates a historic milestone in 2021—the 50th anniversary of senior college status. Transitioning to a four-year college in 1971 was the result of 10 years of planning and meeting goals. To celebrate this anniversary, Gardner-Webb will publish a series of articles highlighting the stories of former faculty, staff, alumni and supporters who experienced this significant achievement. [View the history timeline here.](#)



▲ The first graduates to receive the Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts in 1971. Sue Anne Sandifer Guffey (seated); and standing, left to right: Janet Whisnant Harlee, Linda Voncannon, Alice Pike Brown, and Brenda Crosby Bouser. Photo from C. Robert Jones

As Gardner-Webb transitioned to a four-year school in 1971, the College had established eight academic divisions and 16 departments for the baccalaureate program. Associate degrees remained in nursing and in the areas of secretarial science and data processing.

One of the programs added was a bachelor's degree in theatre arts, and five students enrolled and graduated. In the summer of 1966, director and playwright C. Robert Jones was hired by President Dr. E. Eugene Poston to join the faculty and build the four-year program. Jones came to Gardner-Webb after serving four years as director of Savannah Georgia's Little Theatre. The college had a theatre group known as the Playcrafters, but there was only one formal class in drama, a generic play production course.

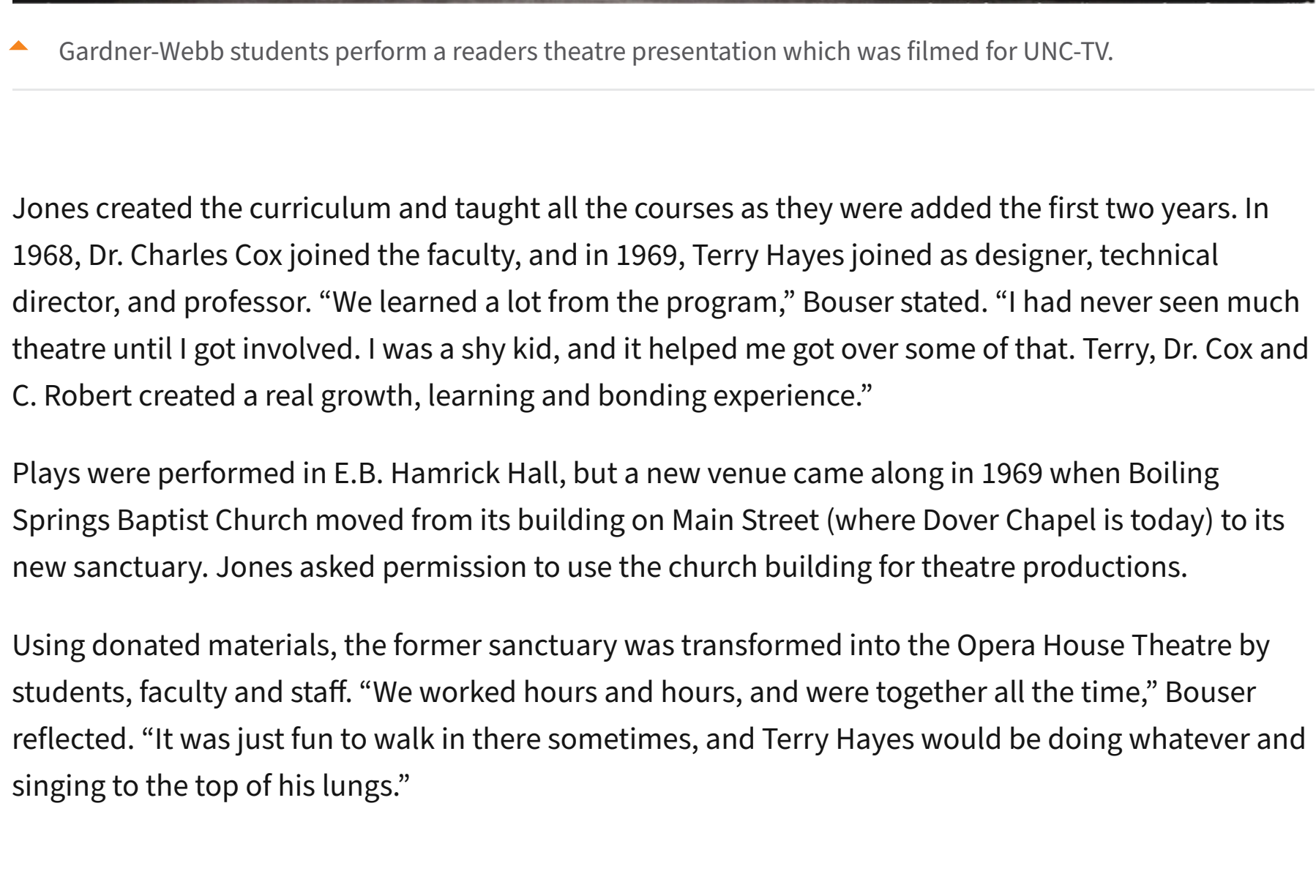


▲ Janet Whisnant Harlee as Lillian Russell in an olio act from "Pure As The Driven Snow" in 1970. Her gown, a gift to the Theatre Arts Department, belonged to former N.C. First Lady, Fay Webb Gardner.

"It was my great pleasure to be a part of that exciting transitional era and to work with an exceptional group of five students, the first to have majors in theatre arts: Brenda Crosby Bouser, Alice Pike Brown, Sue Anne Sandifer Guffey, Linda Voncannon, and Janet Whisnant Harlee," Jones reflected. "Our journey as professor and students over those four years created friendships that have continued for over half a century."

Harlee is the only one in the group who made a career of acting as a professional storyteller, inspirational speaker and the Drama Ministry Coordinator at her church. She is also an author and worked in public relations, marketing and communications. "Being blessed in having opportunities to study and work in theatre has made a tremendous impact in my professional life," she related. "It gave me confidence, stage presence and poise in communicating with people on stage as a speaker and off stage."

While Jones was at Gardner-Webb, the theatre group was invited to be on television twice. They presented a one-act children's musical he wrote on WSPA in Spartanburg, S.C. Then, in 1970, the students were invited to Chapel Hill to present a readers theatre presentation written by Jones and filmed for UNC-TV.

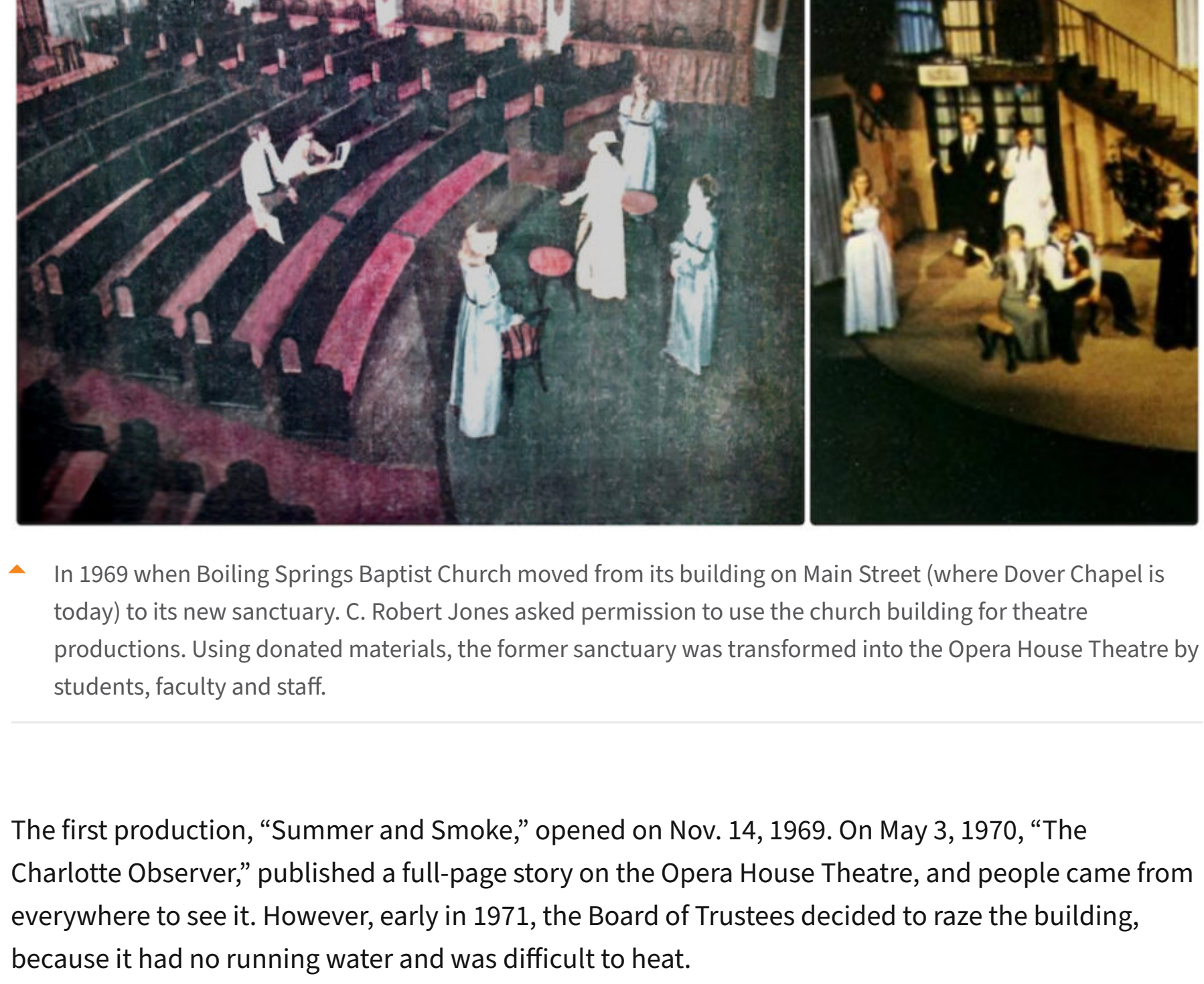


▲ Gardner-Webb students perform a readers theatre presentation which was filmed for UNC-TV.

Jones created the curriculum and taught all the courses as they were added the first two years. In 1968, Dr. Charles Cox joined the faculty, and in 1969, Terry Hayes joined as designer, technical director, and professor. "We learned a lot from the program," Bouser stated. "I had never seen much theatre until I got involved. I was a shy kid, and it helped me get over some of that. Terry, Dr. Cox and C. Robert created a real growth, learning and bonding experience."

Plays were performed in E.B. Hamrick Hall, but a new venue came along in 1969 when Boiling Springs Baptist Church moved from its building on Main Street (where Dover Chapel is today) to its new sanctuary. Jones asked permission to use the church building for theatre productions.

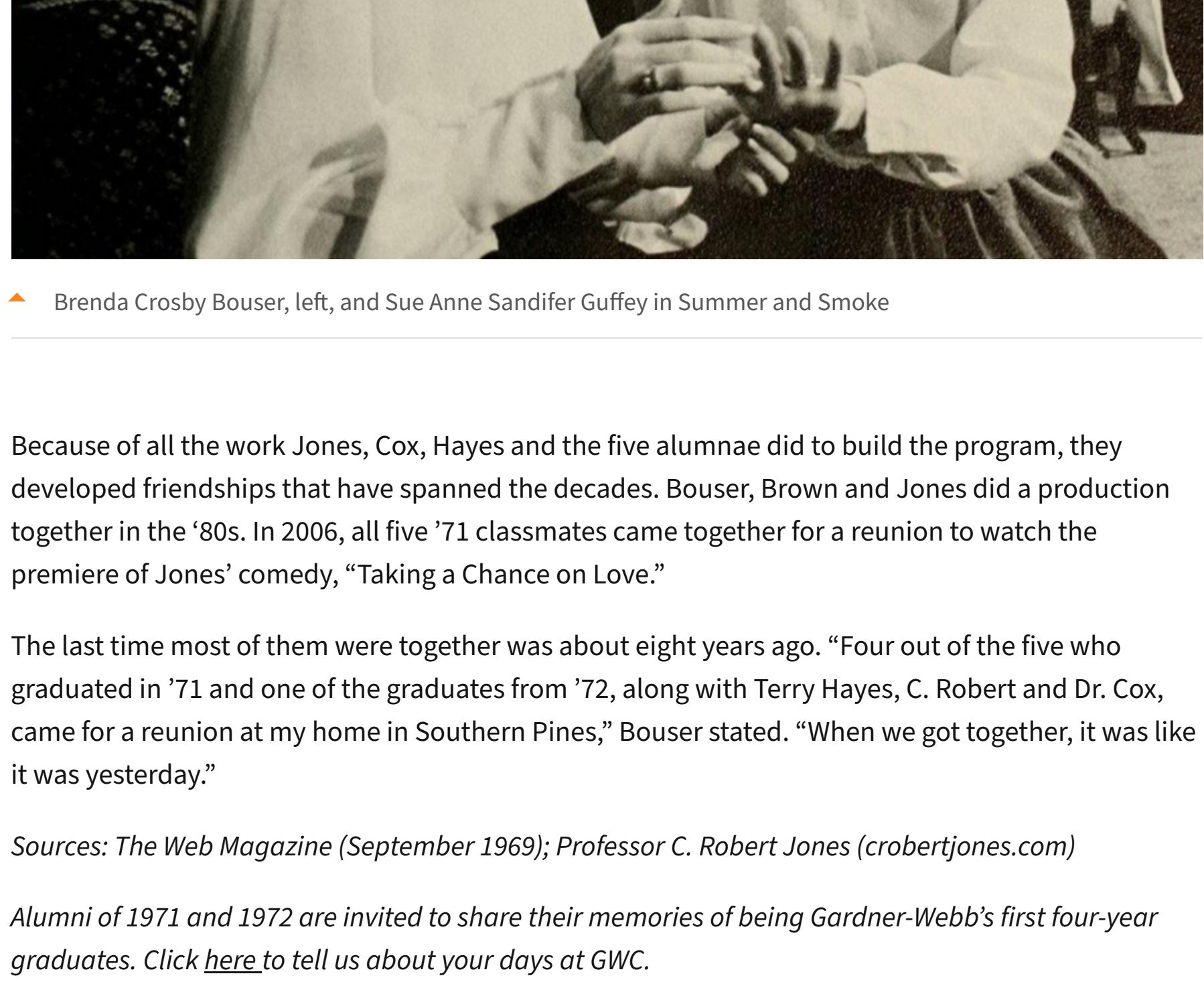
Using donated materials, the former sanctuary was transformed into the Opera House Theatre by students, faculty and staff. "We worked hours and hours, and were together all the time," Bouser reflected. "It was just fun to walk in there sometimes, and Terry Hayes would be doing whatever and singing to the top of his lungs."



▲ In 1969 when Boiling Springs Baptist Church moved from its building on Main Street (where Dover Chapel is today) to its new sanctuary. C. Robert Jones asked permission to use the church building for theatre productions. Using donated materials, the former sanctuary was transformed into the Opera House Theatre by students, faculty and staff.

The first production, "Summer and Smoke," opened on Nov. 14, 1969. On May 3, 1970, "The Charlotte Observer," published a full-page story on the Opera House Theatre, and people came from everywhere to see it. However, early in 1971, the Board of Trustees decided to raze the building, because it had no running water and was difficult to heat.

After graduation, the five went separate ways, but never lost touch. In the fall of 1971, Jones took a position at Mars Hill College. Brown got her master's degree at the University of South Carolina, and Voncannon got her master's degree in religious education from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. Brown became a teacher, and Voncannon moved into horticulture. Bouser continued to act and direct in community theatre and also became a respected journalist, working for several newspapers and finishing her career as editor of FirstHealth Magazine. Guffey became a successful businesswomen in Roanoke, Va.



▲ Brenda Crosby Bouser, left, and Sue Anne Sandifer Guffey in Summer and Smoke

Because of all the work Jones, Cox, Hayes and the five alumnae did to build the program, they developed friendships that have spanned the decades. Bouser, Brown and Jones did a production together in the '80s. In 2006, all five '71 classmates came together for a reunion to watch the premiere of Jones' comedy, "Taking a Chance on Love."

The last time most of them were together was about eight years ago. "Four out of the five who graduated in '71 and one of the graduates from '72, along with Terry Hayes, C. Robert and Dr. Cox, came for a reunion at my home in Southern Pines," Bouser stated. "When we got together, it was like it was yesterday."

Sources: *The Web Magazine* (September 1969); *Professor C. Robert Jones* ([crobertjones.com](#))

Alumni of 1971 and 1972 are invited to share their memories of being Gardner-Webb's first four-year graduates. Click [here](#) to tell us about your days at GWU.

Other stories in this series:

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