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By CRAIG LITTLE
Special Writer

PROVINCETOWN — On Friday, July 28, 1916, the Provincetown Players introduced the public to Eugene O'Neill with a world premiere performance of his play "Bound East For Cardiff." The stage was housed in a shack on an East End wharf that jutted out into Provincetown Harbor.

One of the members of the audience in that shack, where the atmosphere was thick with real fog and the sound of foghorns at Long Point and Wood End, was a young boy whose mother, Mary Heaton Vorse, was one of the founders of the Provincetown Players and the owner of the wharf.

Now 79, Heaton Vorse is one of the few living links to those early days in Provincetown when his mother and her friends gathered in each other's homes to read their plays, criticize their writing and party.

Vorse still lives in the house at 466 Commercial St., which his mother bought in 1907. Nearby, in those days, before America entered the first world war, O'Neill struggled to write his plays.

Susan Glaspell, her husband George "Jig" Cram Cook, Hutchins Hapgood, Wilbur Steele, Harry Kemp, Jack Reed and his wife Louise Bryant, and, on occasion, Sinclair Lewis rubbed elbows in Provincetown.

Reed became famous as the leftist reporter who is the only American to be buried in the Kremlin, and for his book about the Russian Revolution, "Ten Days That Shook The World."

Almost two years ago, film star Warren Beatty interviewed Vorse in Boston in

preparation for a film he was directing about the life of John Reed. Set in Greenwich Village, Moscow and Provincetown, the film, tentatively titled "Reds" and slated for release later this year or next, will feature Beatty as Reed, Dianne Keaton as Louise Bryant and Jack Nicholson as O'Neill.

"Everybody asks me if I knew John Reed," wheezes Vorse, who refuses to wear false teeth. "Beatty asked me, too, but I said, 'Look, I was 12 years old and all I wanted to do was play baseball.' John was a merry, witty soul, but beyond the fact he was around the house as my parents' friend, I had little to talk to him about."

Vorse's father died in 1910, and his stepfather, a writer and reporter like his mother, died in 1915. His half-brother, radio announcer Joel O'Brien, who also attended that first performance of "Bound East For Cardiff," also lives in Provincetown.

Mrs. Vorse died in 1966.

"They were a very colorful group," recalls Vorse, "but they weren't just a group of amateurs putting on plays on social subjects. They were successful, professional writers who wanted to see what they could do in the dramatic field."

Vorse was born in New York. When he was a small child, he traveled with his mother through France and Italy. He says he picked up enough Italian as a youth to later work as a translator of Ezra Pound's radio transmissions from Fascist Italy during World War II.

After the first world war, Vorse's overseas travels ceased, and he settled into a peripatetic life of what he calls "doing writing and music, and all kinds of work." During the

1920s, he even worked on Broadway for a while, "holding a spear" in a few shows.

"Wherever there was trouble I'd dash off," he says. "My mother was mainly known as a labor reporter, and I did that too. As a male I could get into union halls and then turn the stuff over to Mother for more comprehensive articles — I was sort of an unofficial leg man."

After World War II and work in several government plants, he remained a factory worker into the 1950s. He tried his hand at fiction that didn't sell, was in ill health for a long period, and finally came back to Provincetown as the Eisenhower years waned.

"I never called any other place but Provincetown my home, even though I didn't settle down in town until I retired. Provincetown is a mine of stories — Mother mined the neighborhood she was in for her fiction."

Mary Heaton Vorse left behind a warm memoir called "Time and the Town," subtitled "A Provincetown Chronicle," published by Dial Press in 1942. In it, she wrote, "The success of the Provincetown Players was, in a small degree, one of those explosions of talent which from time to time transform art and science."

For some years, Heaton Vorse found inspiration in Provincetown for a column he wrote for the local weekly newspaper, then saw it dropped when the ownership of the paper changed.

"The new owner and I, we don't share the same viewpoints," he huffs.

But the column was saved when Vorse and his longtime friend Helen Fernald went on a shopping trip to Orleans. "We went by a newspaper there, she said get out and see

what happens." He did, and the result was that the column, called "South Wind," still has a weekly readership.

"Once you come down off High Head you're still on Cape Cod," he says about the sandy bluff on the approach to Provincetown," but it's different. After all, Cape Cod is a Republican enclave but Provincetown has voted Democratic since God knows when.

"At one time I was on the radical side," he says, recalling John Reed's socialist leanings. "But Mother and I took one look at Russia going into Spain (during the Spanish Civil War) and that turned our attitude toward the communist movement here. But I stayed liberal."

Life in Provincetown for the young Vorse didn't just consist of going to new plays by Eugene O'Neill. "When I was a youngster of 12, I mowed the lawn, shook out the ashes and kept Harry Kemp ("The Poet of the Dunes") the hell out of the house." He laughs. "He was a colorful figure, went around saying, 'I'm the greatest poet in the world.'

"Meanwhile, other people in Provincetown were writing stuff that was being published and paid for. Hutchins Hapgood wrote like Lincoln Steffens; John Reed was always a well-known reporter; Henry Hall taught at New York University, George Iram Cook was another professor. Nearly all of that group owned property here and called it home, but they spent four to six months of the year in New York to be next to their publishers. Most of that group lived in Greenwich Village, mainly to be near each other and because it was more or less the literary center."

Vorse knew O'Neill well enough to stop by the old Coast Guard station in the dunes which the playwright rented, and ask him for a drink of water after a hot day's walk.

"They all knew each other, sat around, had cocktails and said, 'Let's write some plays and see what we can do with them,'" recalls Vorse.

The plays may have been put on for their own amusement, but as Joel O'Brien recalled in his Provincetown Heritage Series for radio, they "had effects beyond Provincetown," especially in the case of O'Neill.

For two seasons, 1915 and 1916, the Provincetown Players produced plays in Provincetown. In 1916, of 19 original plays produced that summer, six were by O'Neill.

After that, the Provincetown Players established themselves in an old carriage house at 133 MacDougall St. in New York's Greenwich Village, just off Washington Square Park. On Nov. 30, 1917, they produced O'Neill's play "Ile" about a grim search for oil in Arctic waters.

Today the Provincetown Players are still housed on MacDougal Street, where Off-Broadway plays are regularly staged.

As the little theater in Greenwich Village is a link with the Provincetown Players, so is Heaton Vorse.

Right now, he is spending a lot of time at home recuperating from a recent cataract operation and has lots of time to reminisce. But Vorse's feisty nature has been in no way subdued. He left the hospital, he asserts, "Because I raised so much hell they kicked me out."