

THE SUMMER OF picnic

by Bill Shaffer

far from the bright lights and shining stars of Hollywood and New York, Kansas might not seem like a prime location to achieve motion picture fame. Yet, the heartland has not been denied, and famous names have visited our state to shoot such films as *The Day After*, *Kansas*, *In Cold Blood*, *Bad Company*, *Paper Moon*, and more recently, *Twister*. Yet of all that have been filmed in Kansas, the picture that perhaps most captured the public's fascination and imagination was based on a work by native son William Inge. And as this blockbuster, *Picnic*, now prepares to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, it seems an appropriate time to look back at the film's production, which occurred during one memorable Kansas summer in 1955.

Originally written for stage, *Picnic* opened on Broadway in early 1953. Although Inge once stated that "*Picnic* would never win any prizes in a best-plot contest, but I hope and feel that the play is rich in character, mood, and atmosphere," his play was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Picnic is the story of Hal Carter, a drifter who shakes up the lives in a small Kansas town during its annual late summer picnic. He falls in love with the beautiful Madge Owens, who ends up staying in her emotionally stifling environment after he departs. Late in 1953 Columbia Pictures picked up the rights to the play for \$350,000, commissioned writer Daniel Taradash (Academy Award-winning writer for *From Here to Eternity*) to write the screenplay (Taradash changed the play's ending to have Madge run away to meet Hal in another town), and brought in top Broadway director Joshua Logan to direct it. This crew looked to Inge's background in Kansas as a starting point for filming, and they traveled to the Sunflower State initially in the early spring of 1955 to scout locations. In all, five cities and towns—Salina, Hutchinson, Halstead, Sterling, and Nicksen—in the heart of the state were selected to provide the authentic Kansas backdrop for the picture. As exciting as this may

Exactly fifty years ago Hollywood's greatest excursion to Kansas came when Columbia Pictures brought its stars, cameras, and technicians to the heart of the Sunflower State to film the story of a stranger in a small Kansas town.



All photos courtesy
Halstead Heritage
Museum & Depot

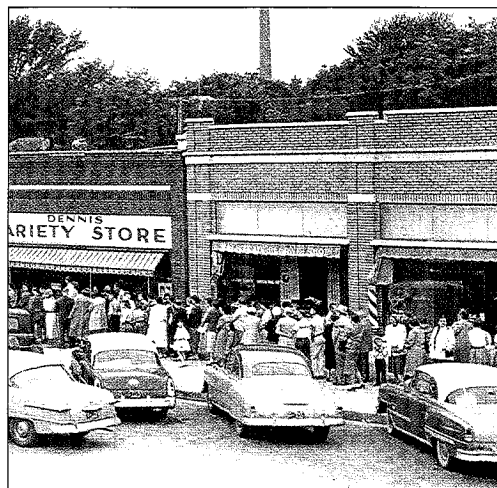
have been for local citizens, an even greater thrill came when Columbia announced the cast of *Picnic*.

Taking center stage as Hal was heartthrob William Holden. Fresh from a string of successful parts, including the popular *Stalag 17* (for which he won the Academy Award for Best Actor) and *The Bridges of Toko-Ri*, Holden was a top box-office attraction at this time. Kim Novak, rapidly becoming the most photographed beauty in Hollywood, was cast opposite Holden as Madge. Rumors abounded that studio boss Harry Cohn, who personally supervised Novak's career, demanded she have the leading role. But according to Josh Logan the rumors were untrue. "All he asked," the director purported, "was that I consider her carefully." Logan had wanted Janice Rule, who had played the same part on the stage, but Rule proved so nervous and unsure of herself during her screen test that she literally sabotaged her chances by making everyone watching the test equally nervous. The film's producer Fred Kohlmer recommended taking a chance on Novak, and so she was cast, along with Rosalind "Roz" Russell, a known film star in need of a strong comeback role in a quality picture. For her role as a lonely and unhappy schoolteacher, Russell insisted on using very little make-up. "Don't even ask [cameraman] Jimmy Howe to blot out my wrinkles. I want to look like a real leathery Kansas dame," she said.

The part of Hal's best friend, Alan Benson, originally had been played on stage by Paul Newman. But Newman, now a rising screen star, had already signed with Warner Brothers to do another picture. To replace Newman, Logan hired relative newcomer Cliff Robertson, whom he had seen in a few plays. Susan Strasberg, daughter of acting-school legend Lee Strasberg, seemed perfect for the kid-sister role. (She would celebrate her seventeenth birthday during the location shooting.)

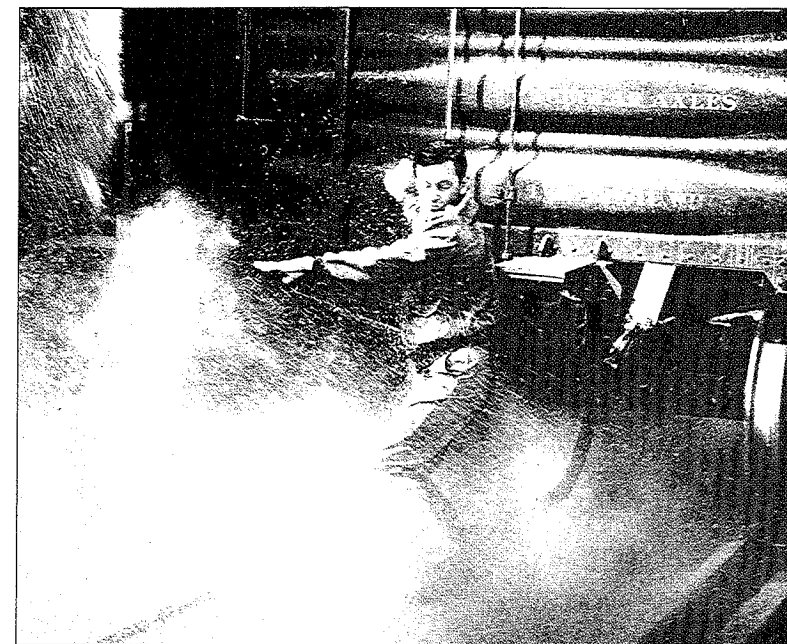
Excitement mounted as the beginning of the shoot approached. A local Kansas welcoming committee greeted the cast and some fifty-five members of

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the production crew, which had planned a six-week stay in the state. Holden and Novak arrived with the crew in Salina on May 14, 1955. Kansas cherry pie baking champion Barbara Brown presented Holden with one of her tasty creations as he deboarded the chartered plane. The actor declined to sample the pie, claiming it looked too good to eat, but he agreed to pose for pictures.

On his initial visit to Kansas, Logan had become captivated by the huge grain elevators scattered across the plains, and he quickly replaced the oil fields setting of the original play with the towering elevators that stored a wealth of Kansas grain. The Union Pacific rail yard in Salina was selected for the opening scene where Hal arrives in Kansas after bumming a ride on a freight train. The Salina home of Joe Rauh facing the Country Club golf course became the movie home for the characters played by Cliff Robertson and Raymond Bailey (his father and patriarch of a grain empire). During the shooting, the fictional town was referred to as "Salinson" (a Hollywood contraction of Salina and Hutchinson), although the name does not appear anywhere in the finished film.



On May 16, just two days after the actors' arrival in the state, Holden and Novak were due to perform their most difficult scene: a romantic interlude near a waterfall. Logan described the scene, the dramatic center for the picture, as symbolic of "a sexual climax . . . since we were not allowed by the censors to be more explicit." The scene involves a lovers' embrace as a train passes in the night, and it required a great deal of emotion from both Holden and Novak. Logan, however, immediately began to doubt his decision to hire Novak, because as the crew set up for a take, the actress pleaded with the director to pinch her in order to draw out the tears necessary for the scene. Logan tried to talk his way out of the request but ended up doing as Novak wished. This scene apparently drew Salina's largest crowd of onlookers. Both it and part of a car chase sequence were filmed just north of the East Iron Avenue bridge along the Smoky Hill River that runs through the town.

After ten days of shooting in Salina, on May 20 and 21 the film troupe moved its twenty-two trucks of cast, crew, and equipment to Hutchinson. Here the Security Grain Elevator at Fourth and Halstead became the focal point for exterior and interior shots, including a sequence on top of the structure.

The cast and crew moved into one hundred rooms at Hutchinson's downtown Baker Hotel, and it was here that William Holden executed his best stunt. At a party for cast and crew at the Baker, Holden decided to tease director Logan about his morbid fear of heights. Holden opened the window of his room on the fourteenth floor, then stepped out and casually clung to the windowsill with one arm and held his drink with the other, swinging perilously above East Second Street. Logan, terrified at the prospect of losing his star, watched in horror as Holden leapt back into the room amidst the relieved party guests, hardly spilling a drop of his martini. When Logan went downstairs for some much needed fresh air, he encountered Kim Novak just returning from Mass. She announced that on her way



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: William Holden and Kim Novak in a lovers' embrace; casting day in Halstead draws a large crowd of hopefuls; the *Picnic* cast poses for a group photo; a scene shot in Nickerson shows William Holden's character deboarding the freight train that brings him to the fictional Kansas town; during a break in filming, Rosalind Russell captivates Halstead residents.

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into the hotel, she had noticed someone hanging out of a window several floors up and, from his body movements, felt sure it was Holden. "Bill Holden!" exclaimed Logan, hiding his relief, "That is ridiculous!" Novak agreed, shrugged it off, and went upstairs to bed.

On May 23 the film company moved on to Riverside Park in Halstead to shoot the actual picnic sequence at the center of the movie, but rain and hail shut down work during the first two days. Shooting resumed on May 26, although the weather had not completely cleared. As the crew set up the shot at sunset, a funnel cloud appeared on the horizon. While Logan remained absorbed in checking the script, his cast began to take cover. Soon he stood alone, shouting for the cast and crew to resume work. A booming civil defense alarm sounded, but Logan continued to wave his arms, signaling people to return. A stern Roz Russell called to him from a ditch, "Josh! Get down here! That's a tornado! It's coming right at us!" She was lying face down in the ditch; Logan leaped in just as a barrage of wind and debris blew overhead. Actors and crew arose a few intense minutes later after the storm had passed. It had hardly touched the Halstead picnic location, but it devastated Udall, a small town a few miles away. The film crew quickly departed with trucks and equipment to help clean up the town, where out of two hundred homes only twenty remained standing.

When shooting at Riverside Park resumed a large crowd of spectators drifted into several shots. Although unplanned, the locals enhanced the scenes, which looked more impressive than with only the few hundred hired extras. But as the evening wore on, the larger crowd began to disappear. Seeing the problem, Logan and his assistant prevailed upon Miss Russell to step up and keep the crowd entertained. Like the real trooper she was, Roz rose to the occasion and regaled the crowd with Hollywood

gossip. The people were mesmerized . . . and they stayed.

Logan faced yet another problem during shooting at Riverside. Novak was to appear as the newly crowned queen of the Neewollah celebration ("Neewollah" is "Halloween" spelled backwards, and a similar celebration is still held annually in William Inge's hometown of Independence.) The scene features a large crowd gathered around a small lake and on a bridge, chanting "Neewollah" as Novak floats by on a small barge decorated as a swan. Inside the swan prop sat a crewmember driving the barge powered with a small boat motor. The cameras rolled, the crowd chanted, Novak appeared all in perfect time . . . and then the boat motor failed. Several special effects men quickly dived into the water and pushed the boat through the scene, although apparently not without some colorful language once the shooting ended.

Another memorable and romantic scene shot at this location is the dancing sequence on the dock. However, when time came for Holden and Novak to trip the light fantastic, neither felt they could perform well enough. After considerable haggling over dancing ability and camera positions, it was decided to shoot the pair close up to avoid showing their awkward feet. Holden reportedly had to down several drinks to survive the scene, and

Logan used dancing stand-ins for the long shots.

The troupe moved on to Nickerson on June 4, using the homes of Mildred McFarland and E. L. Beauchamp for exteriors, and a third home, belonging to Guy Houston, for the kitchen interiors. (Houston's home also had been used in the first Hollywood feature film shot in Kansas, the 1952 *Wait 'Til the Sun Shines, Nellie*.) Also in Nickerson, the production crew used a train engine and ten railcars to augment Holden's arrival and departure scenes. The old high school building appears in one or two shots, but it has since been torn down and replaced.

On June 9 the crew utilized a helicopter to film the final shot of *Picnic*. From high above Nickerson, the camera rolled as Novak boards a bus to follow Holden to Tulsa, past grain elevators and wheat fields to the railroad and the freight train on which Holden rides. This possibly was the first helicopter shot in a feature film.

Before departing the Kansas location on June 16, the cast and crew threw a "wrap" party on the stage of Hutchinson's Fox Theatre. Enthusiastic fans filled the theater, and the entire cast appeared on the stage to share their favorite moments of their stay in the Sunflower State. The cast sat at a pair of long tables on the stage and took turns stepping to the micro-

CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Actress Verna Felton, as Helen Potts, performs with William Holden on the porch of E. L. Beauchamp's Nickerson home; after being crowned "Neewollah" queen, Kim Novak glides in the swan boat across the lake in Halstead's Riverside Park; Roz Russell, portraying schoolteacher Rosemary Snyder, poses with boyfriend Howard Bevens, played by veteran actor Arthur O'Connell; games, such as the ring toss, were part of the memorable Picnic fun filmed in Riverside Park; top box-office star William Holden graces the cover of Time magazine for Picnic's premier to the general public in February 1956.

phone to address the crowd. William Holden, wanting to perpetuate his macho image, vaulted over his table to get to the microphone, but as he did the table collapsed, and the audience roared with laughter and applause. Only Holden's pride was injured.

On Sunday, June 19, the final piece of *Picnic*'s location shooting took place at Sterling Lake in Sterling. Work began early with a love scene between Kim Novak and Cliff Robertson under a cottonwood tree. And it was here that Holden's diving board scene was filmed. Extras



During their six weeks in the Sunflower State, Picnic stars enjoyed interacting with Kansas fans. CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Kim Novak frequently found herself surrounded by admirers; William Holden basks in the attention of local ladies; Roz Russell mugs for the camera during an autograph session.

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AND BEST FILM EDITING.**

flooded the area—adults were paid ten dollars per day, and children five. Shooting went extremely well, and the crew started back to Hollywood that night. The remaining interior shots for the *Picnic* production were filmed in Hollywood and at the Columbia Ranch.

Unfortunately, *Picnic* did not have its world premiere in Kansas, although such an idea was pitched to studio executives. The film was completed and put into limited release in November 1955, probably to qualify for Academy Award competition. It received a general release in February 1956 and went on to become one of the top movies of that year, earning 6.3 million dollars in box-office rentals. *Picnic* also garnered six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director (Josh Logan), Best Supporting Actor (Arthur O'Connell), Best Musical Score, Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, and Best Film Editing. Columbia had wanted to campaign for Roz Russell to receive a Best Supporting Actress nomination, but Roz refused, feeling she should have been placed in the Best Actress category.

Playwright William Inge never cared for the movie's upbeat ending, and he later wrote a second version of the play entitled *Summer Brave*, but it proved unsuccessful. *Picnic* remains a popular play and film, being twice remade as a television movie (1986 and 2000), but neither was shot in Kansas. New generations continue to see it and to appreciate its distinctive midwestern charm. Meanwhile, memories of the original still remain warm in the hearts and minds of many Kansans who witnessed, fifty years ago, the filming of a Kansas *Picnic*.

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BILL SHAFFER is a native of Hutchinson and the son of a theatre manager who worked "behind the scenes" during the filming of *Picnic*. Bill currently is a producer/director at KTWU/ Channel 11 in Topeka; has written, produced, and directed several programs that have aired across the state and the country; and is a regular contributor to the weekly *Sunflower Journeys* series on KTWU.