

CHASE CITY — Like a lot of small-town kids in the '60s, Beverly Wood grew up going to movies at her hometown theater.

For Wood, the experience proved more than simply an amusing way to pass the time. [She was inspired by what she saw at Chase City's Mecca Theatre](#) and — to make a long story very short — she wound up turning her love for film into a remarkable behind-the-scenes Hollywood career for herself.

Like a lot of small-town theaters, the [Mecca](#) fell out of favor and closed in 1980. Whenever Wood made visits home to Mecklenburg County and Chase City during the years that she lived away, she was always disheartened when she saw the [state of the Mecca, which grew more bedraggled with every passing year of disuse.](#)

After retiring and moving back to Chase City in 2016, Wood visited the Mecca with the idea of possibly acquiring it. The owner brought her through the lobby and into the auditorium, at which point Wood noted the place looked different, and not just because the seats were piled in the middle as the place was being used for storage.

Wood soon realized what was so different: "I've never been on the first floor."

Wood grew up in the waning days of segregation, so throughout her childhood at the Mecca she had watched movies only from the balcony — the designated seating area for Black filmgoers. Blacks entered the theater through a side door — the "Negro entrance," as Wood recalled — and purchased their tickets at a window separate from where whites bought theirs. If they wanted popcorn, they told the

ticket-taker, who would go into the lobby — where Blacks also were not permitted — and return with a box of popcorn.

Then they would climb the stairs to the balcony, where she still remembers being greeted by the stench of urine, as there were two bathrooms at the top of the staircase that apparently were rarely cleaned.

And yet ...

Wood, 67, harbors warm memories of the Mecca — including seeing Elvis Presley movies, of which she says, “I was enjoying Elvis just like they were on the first floor.”

There was much to despise about the way things were back then and the way she and her family were treated, but Wood said her parents emphasized what they could control, such as working hard at everything they did, and stressed that it is “who you are as a human being that makes a difference.”

Recalled Wood: “It was, ‘Get your homework done, do your chores, get to bed early, be respectful of other people no matter who they are (or) what color they are.’”

Also — and this was relentlessly hammered home to Wood and her older sister and brother by parents, Garrett and Lillian, whose first jobs were as a butler and maid for a well-to-do white family before they went on to clean churches and businesses and work in factories, and who never had the opportunity to pursue higher education — “you’re going to go to college.”

And all three did. Wood's late sister, Victoria, an opera singer, graduated from Virginia State University; her brother, Larry, became an IT system analyst.

As Wood puts it, "I watched movies from the balcony, but it didn't change my dreams."

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**Sir Roger Deakins**, an internationally acclaimed cinematographer, will be in Chase City [on Saturday](#), sharing stories about his career, answering questions and autographing copies of his book, "Byways." The event is a fundraiser for Save Our Heritage, the historic-preservation nonprofit working to restore the Mecca, an effort led by Wood. Tickets are available at [meccatheatre.org](http://meccatheatre.org).

What brings such a Hollywood luminary to Mecklenburg County?

Another Hollywood luminary who lives there, Deakins said.

Wood is "a legend in Hollywood," Deakins remarked.

"James and I had the pleasure of working with Bev Wood in Hollywood for many years," said Deakins, referencing his wife, in an email. "She was and is quite a star in the post-production world.

"You can mention her name to anyone who was involved in film production ... and a smile comes onto their faces. It doesn't surprise us that, in her new phase of life, she continues to be a force. Hollywood's loss is Virginia's gain!"

Deakins, who has been nominated 16 times for an Academy Award and has won twice, for both "Blade Runner 2049" and "1917," says he and his wife have been following Wood's work on the theater from afar.

"We have such respect for Bev that it was a no-brainer when she proposed our visit," he said.

Wood earned her reputation in Hollywood not from what she did on movie sets, but from what she did in laboratories.

She is a chemist by training, with an undergraduate degree from what was then Mary Washington College and a master's from the University of Georgia, and went to work as a research chemist for Eastman Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., where after a few years she wound up in the motion picture division, a dream pairing for Wood.

She moved to the West Coast and ultimately went to work for Deluxe Laboratories in Los Angeles, where, in a world dominated by white men, she became a sort of — in her words — “film whisperer.” Her mission was helping filmmakers attain the “look” that they wanted for their movies: a feat that Wood managed to achieve by developing chemical processes or using different methods of printing. She went on to help filmmakers get the same desired effects, through digital technology, as the industry moved from film to video.

Her first big film was the 1995 crime thriller “Seven.” After that, numerous big-name cinematographers including Quentin Tarantino, Ron Howard and the Coen brothers worked with Wood. Her name never showed up in the credits, but filmmakers knew and still know. In 2020, she was awarded the prestigious Natalie Kalmus Award for scientific contributions to filmmaking.

In a Team Deakins podcast in 2020 — in which Roger and James Deakins interviewed Wood — James Deakins described Wood as [“the goddess of post,”](#) as in “post-production.”

She was so successful, it seems, not just because she knew her stuff like nobody else but because, in an industry of transient (or worse, fake) friendships, Wood was genuine and

kind and treated people the way her parents taught her. She also worked really hard.

“She became someone (filmmakers) could rely on,” said Andy Edmonds, director of the Virginia Film Office, which is one of the sponsors of the Deakins event. Wood was so influential, Edmonds said, that, since her retirement, filmmakers who come through Virginia have made a point of making a “pilgrimage” to Chase City to visit Wood.

“She’s a bundle of energy and creative enthusiasm, and just a sweet, sweet person,” Edmonds said. “I love her passion to do what she’s trying to do to support the community she came from and to give back to what created her story.”

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**Why would Wood** want to return to Chase City?

Easy, she said.

“It made me who I am,” she said. “Why wouldn’t I want to come back here?”

She and husband, Brian Holt, a musical composer, live on the same farm just outside town where Wood grew up. The old house was beyond repair, so they built a new home in its footprint. Every morning when Wood looks out the door, she enjoys the same view she had as a child.

They have taken happily to country living after a life in Los Angeles — they raise pot-bellied pigs and chickens, grow assorted fruits and vegetables on their 12 acres and enjoy the company of a gentle Great Pyrenees named Shep. In trying to breathe new life into the Mecca, which Wood envisions as a second-run movie theater and community center for special performances and events, she hopes to

bring in Hollywood friends who could help inspire young people in Chase City, in much the same way the Mecca helped inspire Wood.

The theater is mostly a dusty shell at the moment. Wood hopes construction will begin before the end of the year with a target of opening in 2025. She estimates the price tag for the project to be \$2.5 million, with the funds coming primarily from grants.

A revived theater would be a welcome boost in Chase City, a town of 2,500, which has been trying to rebound for years after losing the manufacturing upon which it once relied heavily for its economic lifeblood, along with tobacco and timber. Microsoft coming to its doorstep with a new data center will be a big help, said Mayor Alden Fahringer, and a reopened Mecca would be a significant development on the town's Main Street.

"We're a community that's seen a lot of loss ... having lost so much industry, and with that you have families that have to move away because the jobs just aren't there," Fahringer said. "But we're a community that has a lot of hope. With Microsoft coming so close, we're seeing new interest in the town."

The Mecca restoration project is "a huge opportunity for us, we're just so thankful for Bev and her work on this," Fahringer said, adding with a laugh, "and she does not get tired. She's making things happen."

She comes by the hard work naturally. Through their lifetime, her parents worked multiple jobs. In later years, her father became the first Black bank teller in Mecklenburg County, Wood said, and her mother worked as a study hall assistant at the local high school. When they were still doing

custodial work, the entire family would pitch in to clean churches, something Wood did to earn money for college.

Through it all, though, her parents always made this clear: you are not what you do.

“Just because you wash toilets, it’s not who you are,” Wood said. “The content of your character is what’s important.”

Wood cannot help but think of her parents, who are both gone now, whenever she visits the Mecca, and not only because they courted there, sitting in the balcony.

“My parents would be happy and proud, but not surprised,” he said. “You know, my dad used to tell my friends who’d come and visit and say, ‘How was Bev growing up?’ And Daddy would say, ‘I knew she was going to do something. She came out of the womb asking questions.’”

Added Wood, “If I’m good, it’s because they were great.”