



Lew Wallace, Indiana author of Ben-Hur on the steps of his Crawfordsville study.

Lew Wallace and *Ben-Hur*

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Since its publication in 1880, Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* was a best seller, was produced as a play, and was made into a mini-movie and two full-length motion pictures. Probably no other single product from Crawfordsville has created so much interest and publicity, and been so lucrative monetarily. How did all of this start? Here is what Wallace said:

How did I come to write *Ben-Hur*? The very beginning of the book lies in a quotation from St. Matthew:

'Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him.'

Far back as my memory goes of things read by or to me, those lines took a hold on my imagination beyond every other passage of Scripture. How simple they are! But analyze them, and behold the points of wonder!

Wallace describes the scene in some detail and then goes on:

In 1875—the date is given from best recollection—when I was getting over the restlessness due to years of service in the War of Rebellion, it occurred to me to write the conceptions which I had long carried in my mind of the Wise Men. A serial upon

the subject would admit of any number of illustrations, and might be acceptable to one of the magazines.

So I wrote, commencing with the meeting in the desert, numbering and naming the three upon the authority of the dear old tradition-monger, Father Bede, and ending with the birth of the Child in the cave by Bethlehem.

At that time, speaking candidly, I was not in the least influenced by religious sentiment. I had no convictions about God or Christ. I neither believed nor disbelieved in them.

The preacher had made no impression upon me. My reading covered nearly every other subject. Indifference is the word most perfectly descriptive of my feelings respecting the To-morrow of Death, as a French scientist has happily termed the succession of life. Yet when the work was fairly begun, I found myself writing reverentially, and frequently with awe.

This was purely natural; for it is with me, presumably, as with every writer who creates as he goes. My characters are essentially living persons. They arise and sit, look, talk, and behave like themselves.

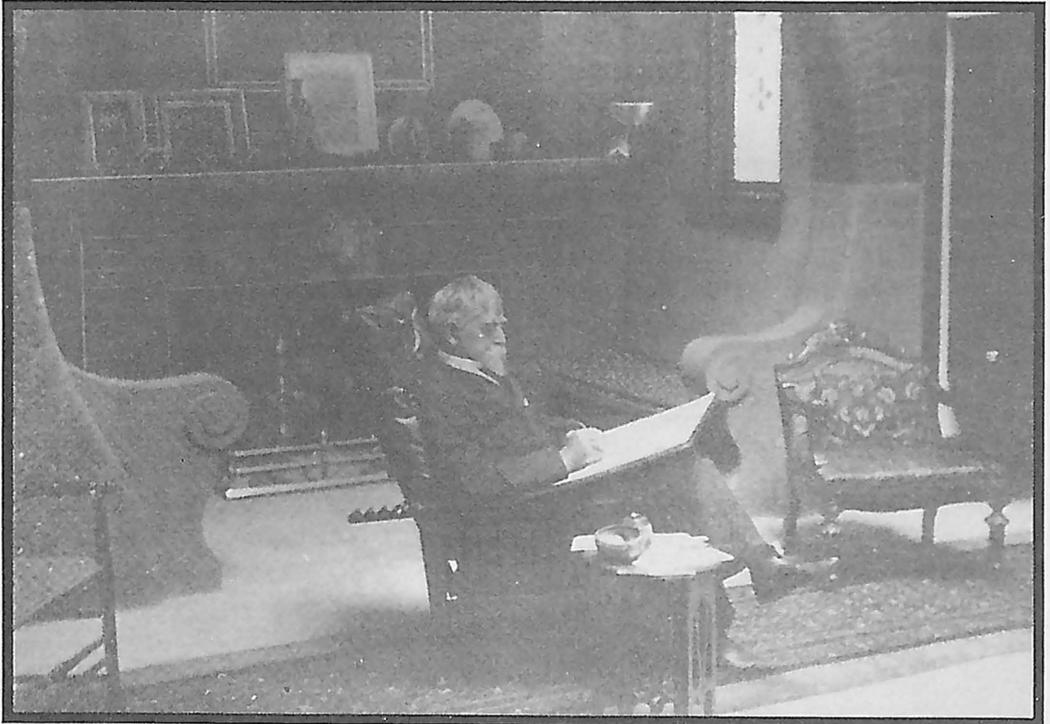
In dealing with them I see them; when they speak I hear them. I know them by their features. They answer my call. Some of them I detest. Such as I most affect become my familiars. In turn they call me, and I recognize their voices. Such being the case, think of the society to which the serial directly admitted me!

With this idea in mind, Wallace visited the Library of Congress and read a great deal about the Jews. Returning to Crawfordsville, he brought back many books and maps and from much research the story developed. He first thought about preparing a serial for *Harper's Monthly* so he wrote a 20,000 word story, but this later became the first part of the book. Most of the writing was done in Crawfordsville, but the novel was completed in Santa Fe while he was serving as territorial governor.

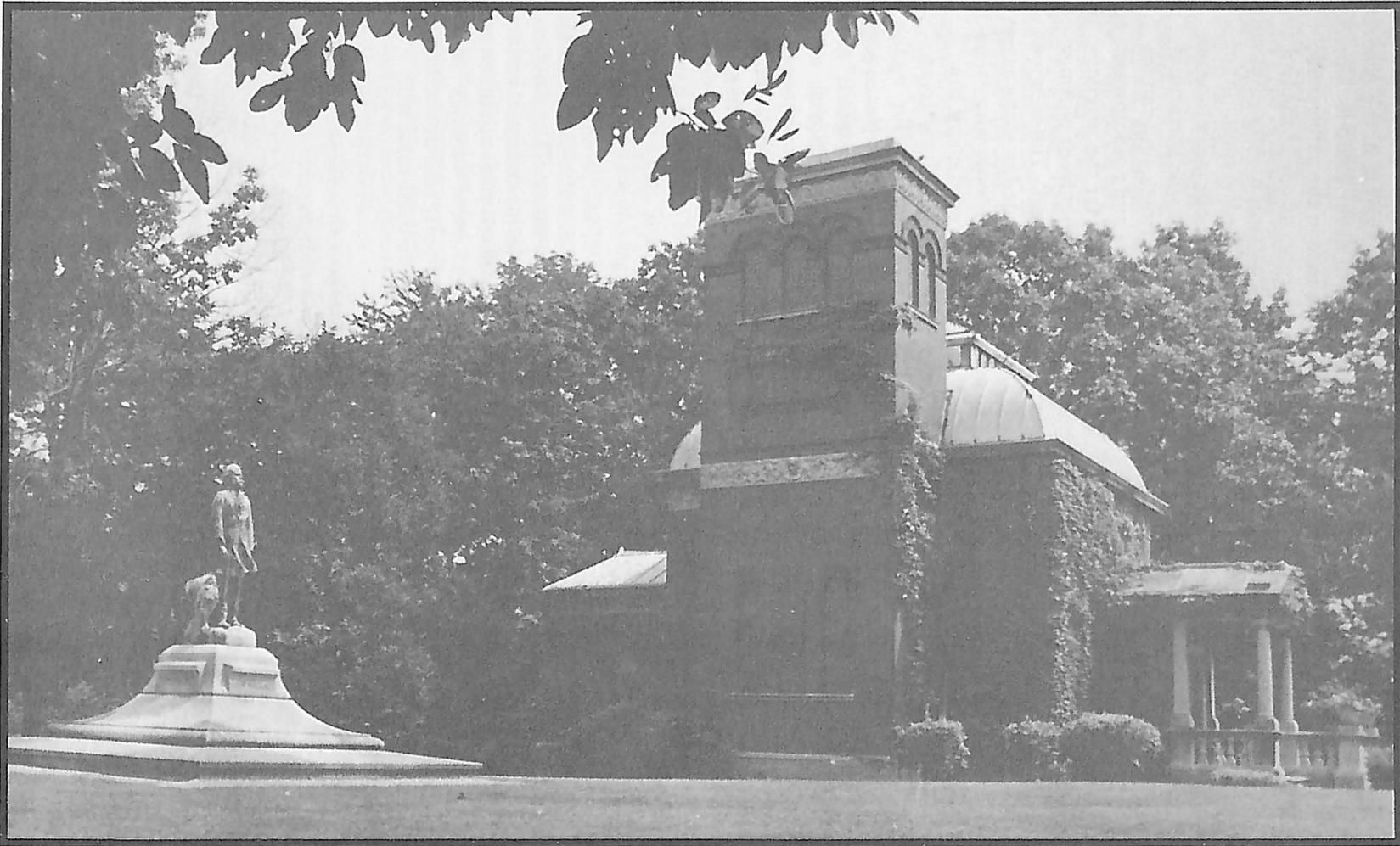
When the novel of two hundred thousand words was completed in March, 1880, Wallace took it to Harper Brothers in New York City and it was published on November 12, 1880, at a dollar and a half. In the first seven months only 2,800 copies were sold, but by 1886 sales were 4,500 copies per month. By 1911 sales had passed the million mark and in 1913 Sears Roebuck ordered a million copies at thirty-nine cents each. The book was published in several differ-

ent American editions and was translated into many languages. In 1944 Harper's estimated that more than 2,500,000 copies had been sold. It still ranks among the top best sellers by American authors. In connection with the release of the 1959 motion picture, several different editions were issued including deluxe, abridged for teenagers, children's classic, four paperbacks, comic book, coloring book, giant fun-time book, and motion picture souvenir book.

After publication in 1880 the book was received with mixed reactions by literary critics and the public. Paul Hamilton Hayne, a well known southern writer, wrote to Wallace: "It is . . . a noble and very powerful prose poem . . . of course, in the ordinary sense of the term, *Ben-Hur* is not likely to become popular, but by scholars and thinkers of every conceivable grade this singularly graphic performance must be cherished." John Hay said *Ben-Hur* was one of "the finest novels of our time." A San Francisco newspa-



Wallace in his study at Crawfordsville.



The Lew Wallace Study and Memorial, Crawfordsville.

perman suggested that "Governor Lew Wallace is a 'Literary Feller,' chiefly given to writing novels of an uncertain sort. He is following up *The Fair God* with *Ben-Hur, a Story of the Christ*. I protest, as a friend of Christ, that He has been crucified enough already, without having a territorial governor after him." For the religious press, *The Baptist Quarterly Review* said "In all respects we gladly commend the book" and *The Catholic World* found it "a most pleasing story." Other literary critics also had kind things to say but, whatever the critics attitude, the public liked the book as the sales figures show. Selections of the book were included in anthologies and it inspired a large number of novels.

Soon after its publication, several attempts were made to dramatize *Ben-Hur*. Leonard Barrett requested permission in 1882 but Wallace refused because he thought the theme was too sacred and the outdoor scenes too large for a stage. Others tried without success but pantomime and tableaux were permitted. Finally, in 1899, Abraham Erlanger and Marc Klaw contracted with Wallace to produce a play with William H. Farnum and William S. Hart. The first performance was held on November 29, 1899.

One of the real technical problems was how to run the race on the stage. This was solved with the use of treadmills which made such a noise that the actors could not be heard. *The New York World* reported that "wilder enthusiasm has seldom manifested itself in a theatre." When Wallace saw the treadmills and other elaborate scenery he exclaimed in amazement; "My God! Did I set all this in motion?"

Charles Frohman, a theatrical impresario, spent three and one-half hours at the dress rehearsal and then

said to the producers: "Boys, I'm afraid you're up against it; the American people will never stand for Christ and a horse race in the same show." His remark rates as one of the bad guesses in theatrical history. Not only did Americans like the combination, they loved it. Twenty million people saw the play which was performed more than 6,000 times, and ran for twenty-one years and paid upwards of ten million dollars for the privilege. It was produced in hundreds of American cities and abroad. The religious and moral tone made the stage easier to accept by many people who generally thought little good about the Theatre. William Jennings Bryan said, "I have enjoyed *Ben-Hur* as the greatest play on stage when measured by its religious and moral effect," and Billy Sunday exclaimed, "I wish a hundred million people could see the play." Stuart Holbrook, historian, stated that "Ben-Hur rode that gilded chariot right through the front door to enter the homes of hard-shell Baptists and Methodists and other non-novel-reading sects, and to an eager welcome." There were many other remarks and reviews, pro and con, with these as two examples: "The chief value was a pictorial and spectacular one. The producers were mistaken as to the true function of the stage" and "the horses, camels, and dromedary involved enacted their roles with credit."

The story was first filmed in 1907 in one reel and sixteen scenes and advertised as "positively the most superb moving picture spectacle ever made in America." The producers forgot to obtain permission so the publisher (Harper) and the Wallace estate sued and were awarded \$25,000 in damages. Years later the publisher and the Wallace estate sold the rights to a syndicate for \$600,000, the biggest deal of its kind of the time. The Syndicate in turn sold it to the

Goldwyn Picture Corporation for fifty percent of future earnings which eventually amounted to several million dollars.

In 1926 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer spent four million dollars and three years in Rome and Hollywood making the first full-length motion picture of *Ben-Hur*, starring Ramon Navarro, Francis X. Bushman, and May MacAvoy. The movie ran on Broadway for a year which was something of a record, then and later. It was shown around the United States and abroad for several years and, revived with sound in 1931, and is said to have made between nine and ten million dollars for both productions.

Preparations were made on a grand scale. It took a year and a half in an Italian shipyard to build the vessels for the navy. For the chariot race there were thousands of extras and nearly two hundred horses. For many of the sequences there were

Shining coal-black beauties from the illegal slave marts of the Sahara; grandly limbed Nubians from the Nile Cataracts; Syrians, Arabians, and Yemenites; a procession of camels from Tripoli; equine coursers from Transjordan; sheiks of Iraq and Hedjaz; Jews, Greeks and Romans, whose features reproduced the aquiline or straight-nose types of their ancestors. 'Twas a veritable mart of the world, and here flowered forth the Roman holiday; for all Rome made the big days of the filming festival events and poured out into the Campagna, thousands upon thousands, headed by the Italian Deputies and Fascist chiefs, and kept back out of the historic sequences by strong columns of stout Bersaulieri. . . ."

A new film, released in the fall of 1959, cost more than fifteen million dollars and ranked as the most expensive picture ever produced to that time. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer opened a casting office in Rome in 1958 to select the thousands of people who would

appear in the movie. Members of the aristocracy from Italy, Spain, Austria, Hungary, and Russia were included. A special restaurant on the set could feed five thousand extras in twenty minutes. Much of the film was made at studios near Rome. More than three hundred sets were built from fifteen thousand sketches on one hundred and forty-eight acres. A staff of more than one hundred people started making costumes in Rome a year before filming began. More than two years of research preceded the writing of the music score. The filming was done by six cameras, each valued at one hundred thousand dollars. The stadium covered eighteen acres and was the largest single movie set ever built. Seven thousand extras occupied it for the race with took three months to film, cost one million dollars, and had two hundred miles of running for the fifteen minutes on the screen. The movie starred Charlton Heston, Haya Harareet, Stephen Boyd, and Jack Hawkins. One M-G-M official said, "There aren't more than half of the Commandments you could really call interesting. We figure we've got a superior story."

Some traditions and legends were built up over the play and film. There was the time the play was running in Boston when Messala actually won the treadmill race on the stage. During the filming of the sea battle off Italy in the 1926 picture, a Roman galley carrying smudge pots actually caught on fire. Everyone in full battle dress went over the side and, in the melee, three people came up missing. Two days later they showed up on a fishing boat that had rescued them and demanded new clothes.

Some other things happened during the 1959 filming. Responding to a notice in Rome newspapers asking for men with beards, more than five thousand answered. There were two

doctors and two nurses on duty during the filming of the chariot race, and a twenty-bed infirmary was maintained. Many Italian women furnished hair for beards and wigs and a blacksmith had to be trained to care for the horses. During the filming in Italy the studios and sets were part of a sight-seeing tour. An entire mountain village became Nazareth and its three hundred people were drafted as extras.

The premiere of the 1959 film was held at Loew's State Theatre in New York City on November 18, 1959. During the rest of 1959, openings were held in ten other cities. The Indiana premiere was held in Indianapolis on February 23, 1960. It was a formal occasion and was attended by many well-known people.

Crawfordsville had its own celebration on November 13-14, 1959 in recognition of the anniversary of *Ben-Hur's* publication. On November 12, the Mayor issued a proclamation for "Ben-Hur Day":

WHEREAS, General Lew Wallace was an illustrious citizen of Crawfordsville;

WHEREAS, General Lew Wallace wrote of *Ben-Hur* at the Wallace Study in Crawfordsville;

WHEREAS, *Ben-Hur* has been published in more than 100 editions and 23 foreign languages and is currently being republished at 14 leading publishers;

WHEREAS, M-G-M Pictures is planning to launch a multimillion dollar color road show entertainment spectacle of the story;

WHEREAS, Civil War Round Tables, Historical Societies and other groups are becoming interested in both Lew Wallace's exploits and his literary achievements,

BE IT PROCLAIMED, That it behooves the citizens of Crawfordsville to have our city take its proper place in this international recognition

of this great literary work, and that the citizens of Crawfordsville join with other admirers of General Lew Wallace in taking part in the National observance of the publication of *Ben-Hur*—Nov. 14—by participating in Ben-Hur Day.

On the evening of November 13 a Lew Wallace Forum was held at the Lilly Library at Wabash College. Walter Fertig, Wabash College, spoke on "Lew Wallace, the Student": Hubert Hawkins, Indiana Historical Society, spoke on "Lew Wallace, the Soldier": and Arthur Shumaker, DePauw University, spoke on "Lew Wallace, the Author." On the morning of November 14, there was a Ben-Hur Day post office cancellation ceremony and then a parade with officials' cars and units from the American Legion, schools, boy and girl scouts, and other. Just before noon a special ceremony was held at the Wallace Study with the presentation of foreign language editions of *Ben-Hur* to the Wallace Study and a talk by Ted Gronert. The festivities ended with a luncheon at Wabash College. There was a "Ben-Hur Anniversary Contest" for the Crawfordsville public schools. Copies of Dr. Gronert's book *Sugar Creek Saga* were given for the best essays on "The Moral and Religious Significance of Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur*."

Many dignitaries were invited to Ben-Hur day. Charlton Heston sent his regrets because he had to start rehearsing for a play. Others who signified their intention to attend were newsmen, television personnel, a representative from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and government officials. An editorial in the *Crawfordsville Journal-Review* for November 13, 1959 commented on the recognition for Lew Wallace:

It is comforting to learn that the idea of observing Ben-Hur Day on November 14, to celebrate the first publication of Gen. Lew Wallace's world-respected novel, has attracted wide spread attention. It is

BEN HUR is a story of people . . . as human as any you know today . . . the rich, the poor, the cruel, the kind. The lovers and the loved, the haters and the hated. Men of violence and men of peace . . . people of every kind, whose lives become entwined with that of the prince who became a slave.



Judah Ben-Hur

Prince of Judea, who challenged the evil might of pagan Rome.

CHARLTON HESTON, who was born in Evanston, Illinois, and is a graduate of Northwestern University. He began his professional acting career in radio and made his Broadway debut with Katharine Cornell in "Antony and Cleopatra." Has starred in a number of stage plays and television dramas. During the past 10 years has appeared in twenty important motion pictures, including "The Greatest Show on Earth," "The Big Country" and "The Ten Commandments," in which he portrayed Moses.



Esther

The Beautiful, whose love was stronger than the bonds of slavery.

HAYA HARAREET, who was born in Haifa, Palestine, and lived most of her life in Tel-Aviv. While serving the required two years in her country's armed forces, she began acting in service shows. Once out of uniform, she joined Tel-Aviv's Chambre Theatre and acted in dozens of plays. Speaks five languages fluently and won the feminine lead in *BEN-HUR* after William Wyler remembered having met her briefly at the Cannes Film Festival and ordered her tested.

Drawings of *Ben-Hur's* Cast of Characters are the work of Joseph J. Smith, native Philadelphian and graduate of the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art. Mr. Smith has become one of the most famous artists in Hollywood.

about time that Indiana should pay respect to its famous writers. There was a time when men of letters gave the Hoosier state its prime products, and we were known as a state that nurtured and encouraged literature and the arts. How many of Indiana's renowned writers can you name?

All too seldom are men of the pen honored with special memorial celebrations. Men of the sword are frequently paid tribute with anniversary observances. Battles are memorialized and statues erected. Scientists and inventors often have their day in the sun. But Ben-Hur Day will be the first widespread observance in honor of a writer that we can remember in a long, long time.

Ironically, Gen. Lew Wallace, who wrote of peace and saintly inspiration, was also a man of the sword and his statue bears the inscription: "Soldier, Author, Diplomat." His monument in the Capitol's Hall of Statuary is one of two—out of the 80 or more standing there—that won its place as an author. The other writer so honored was Will Rogers.

Reports say that more than 1,500 libraries in 20 or more states are taking cognizance of Ben-Hur Day and that even more schools are focusing on "Ben -Hur."

The two-day celebration was extended by one day when Haya Harareet decided to come to Crawfordsville to see the birthplace of *Ben-Hur*. Hasty arrangements were made, including a reception by city authorities and a visit to Wabash College. Perhaps the most enthusiastic welcome was given by Wabash students. It was early on Sunday afternoon and her appearance on the campus was not generally known. As she walked into the Lilly Library word got around quickly and students appeared from everywhere. They escorted her through the building and to the Campus Center for the reception. She dutifully shook hands with the dignitaries but her heart was not in it. She seemed to be more at ease

sitting on the floor around a low coffee table talking with students. When her manager reminded her that they were running late and must leave she said: "I'm in no hurry. I'm having too much fun here."

To celebrate Ben-Hur's 100th birthday a Ben-Hur Centennial was held in Crawfordsville during the first week of November, 1980. There were displays of Wallace memorabilia, showings of the 1926 and 1959 films, a Cub Scout chariot race, and a Historic Landmarks walking tour. William Noble Wallace was the guest speaker at the annual dinner of the Montgomery County Historical Society. Six Wallace scholars presented papers in two symposia. Robert and Katharine Morsberger gave talks and autographed copies of their newly-published book *Lew Wallace, Militant Romantic*. The Crawfordsville *Journal-Review* published a special section and one issue of *Montgomery Magazine* was devoted to Wallace.

During the week of July 19-26, 1986, Lew Wallace and *Ben-Hur* were again honored. For several years the Friends of Indiana Literature (sponsored by the Indiana State Museum Society) has honored Indiana authors, and Wallace was the 1986 honoree. In Indianapolis there were lectures, films, concerts, and other events. In Crawfordsville there was a tour of the Wallace Study, a visit to Wallace's grave, and lunch at the Crawfordsville Country Club (formerly Wallace's summer home.)

Ben-Hur has had a lasting influence on American culture. Several towns have been named after the novel, a Ben-Hur rose was developed, spices were marketed by Ben-Hur Products, Inc., and toys, candy, cigars, and other products have carried the name. Ben-Hur carousels were operated in the United States and



Wabash College students visit with Haya Harareet.

England; in 1978 a float in the Tournament of Roses parade featured the chariot race; and there is a Lew Wallace high school in Gary, Indiana. Crawfordsville has a General Lew Wallace Motor Inn, a Ben-Hur drive-in theater, a Ben-Hur home, a Ben-Hur Sports Shop, Ben-Hur Stables, the Ben-Hur Life Association, and at one time a restaurant offered a Ben-Hur salad bowl and sandwiches called The General and the Brigadier.

Lew Wallace would probably appreciate being remembered. He said to his wife on two different occasions: "I shall look back on *Ben-Hur* as my best performance" and "I am looking to you and *Ben-Hur* to keep me unforgettable after the end of life."

All photographs are courtesy of Lilly Library, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, IN.