

St. Michael Historian



Official Newsletter of the St. Michael Historical Society, St. Michael, Minnesota

February 2012, Winter

Volume 6, Issue 1

Dancing

The early German immigrant groups that came to Minnesota brought their native dances of schottisches, polkas, and waltzes with them. As they settled here they mingled with people from other countries and more dances developed like jitterbugs, jigs and reels.

Good neighbor parties became popular during the 1940s. One room was often turned into a dance floor by moving the furniture and rolling up the rugs. The guys provided the music with guitars, fiddles and mandolins; and the ladies supplied a pot luck lunch. Some had a piano, accordion and drum set that rounded out the band. Dances were held in neighboring towns in the city halls. They walked to these dances, sometimes a mile or two at night, in mud or in snowstorms.

Dances were also held in homes, but sometimes in barns and outbuildings as well. Many farm families swept and washed the floor of the hayloft for at least one dance in spring. Some people charged up to 25 cents for admission, which included lunch. Dishpans full of sandwiches, cakes, beer and pop were served to the guests in the barn. All the neighbors and relatives were invited. The owners boarded up the hay chutes so no one would fall into them.

People of all ages learned to dance by trial and error and many of them met their future wives and husbands at these dances. It was a great way to meet others that you weren't related to and it was a way to have fun, stay active and keep off winter's chill.

Prom Center and Marigold Ballroom



In 1941 Glenn Miller and his Orchestra played the grand opening of the new Prom Ballroom on University Avenue in St. Paul. Close to 6,000 people packed inside and another 3,000 had to be turned away. It was the age of the big band, when swing was king, and it seemed the Prom was the only place big enough to contain all the excitement!

The Twin Cities had many dance halls and night clubs, but it was the two luxurious ballrooms - the Prom and the Marigold - that attracted the big names and largest crowds.

Photo Courtesy of Bob Zahler

Over the years, some of the bands that performed included Les Brown and his Band, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Count Basie, Harry James and, of course, the champagne music-maker himself, Lawrence Welk.

Lawrence Welk not only got his start in the Twin Cities, but he brought together two people who would keep them dancing at the Prom for 35 years. Lois Best was Lawrence Welk's first Champagne Lady, and Jules Herman was in the brass section on trumpet. The home for the Jules Herman Orchestra had a reputation as one of the finest ballrooms anywhere. The Prom was built like an airplane hangar with a 9000 square foot floor, made of hard maple -- where ballroom dance was practiced each and every week by thousands of dancers. The giant 35 foot stage was framed in blue light. At about 12:35 the music was geared to a romantic ending of the evening. The blue lights were turned down for the last 20 minutes of the last dance. And when the theme songs of "Auld Lang Syne" or "Goodnight Sweetheart" were played at the end, people were euphoric.

The Marigold Ballroom on Nicollet Avenue opened as the Marigold Gardens in 1919 in Minneapolis. It was so popular in the 1920s and 30s that the Nicollet streetcars stopped in the middle of the block in front of the Marigold to let off dancers. The sign read "Never Grow Old Dancing at the Marigold", and aside from all the big names, local bands like Cece Hurst and Norvy Mulligan kept the regulars coming back for more. There were 300 couples in the "Cupid Club", people who met at the Marigold and danced all the way to the chapel!

The Prom and the Marigold had modern dancing three or four nights a week and one night of "Old Time" music. To attract the "Old Time" crowds, Harry Given at the Prom was notorious for his wild promotions, including the time the Prom gave away a live baby!

When the Welfare Department learned of the contest they threatened to arrest Harry Given and revoke his dancing license. An excited couple came up on stage to accept the bassinet from a uniformed nurse. When they pulled back the covers, a piglet's snout stuck out. The Welfare Department was furious, but the crowd loved it.

Meanwhile, local jazz musicians were getting their start in the smaller clubs around the Twin Cities. In the 1930s dancehalls and pavilions sprang up. By the 1950s they were referred to as ballrooms. There were ballrooms in Avon, Kimball, Lake Henry, Medina, Bel Rae in Moundsview, New Munich, Richmond, St. Anna, St. Augusta, St. Anthony, Sauk Centre, Spring Hill, Cold Spring, Eden Valley, St. Martin, the Granite City Coliseum and the Fairgrounds in St. Cloud and a few more in other places.

The birth of rock-n-roll in the fifties meant the end of the big bands and ballroom dancing. For a short period, the Prom had both big bands and rock-n-roll bands on the same nights. The older crowd would dance to their music while the teenagers took a break, then after a few songs, the bands and dancers changed places. But by the 1970s, dancing at the Prom dwindled to one night a week and Harry Given turned to full-time catering.

On May 24th, 1975 the Marigold Ballroom held its last dance, and in September, the aging hall at the curve in Nicollet Avenue was torn down to make way for a new hotel. It was only a matter of time before the Prom would follow. On September 29th, 1987, the Prom kept its date with the wrecking ball. A small crowd gathered on University Avenue to say good-bye to the cavernous old building and share their memories of a bygone era.

About the Author: *Genny Kieley, is a non-fiction writer. She was born in Little Falls and moved to Northeast Minneapolis at the age of six, a place that deeply influenced the writing of her first book, **Heart and Hard Work: Memories of "Northeast" Minneapolis**. She moved to St. Michael in 2002 and has a strong interest in history with four published books on historical memories. Her latest book **Green Stamps to Hot Pants: Growing up in the 50s and 60s** continues to do well.*

Addendum to above article

The towns northwest of the Twin Cities certainly were no exception to the dance hall popularity era. Such popular places for weekend dances were the ballrooms in St. Michael, Rogers, and Maple Lake, named after their respective towns. Others were Playland in Kimball; Cedar Point in St. Augusta; Lake Sarah in Loretto; and Medina ballroom in Hamel (the only one currently still operating at this time).

Most of the local ballrooms in the rural towns back in the 30s, 40s and 50s, were smaller venues, because there simply wasn't the population to support a large ballroom like The Prom Center and Marigold Ballroom. They had a tendency to hire smaller bands, especially German Polka bands from New Ulm and Saint Cloud, and Country & Western style bands, which were more popular with the local folk.

As Genny said in her article, many farmers had their own barn dances on weekends with local musicians. My mother recalled they had barn dances on weekends in their new machine shed, when her parents farmed between Delano and Watertown. My wife, whose parents farmed north of Albertville, recalls some local musicians would play on Sundays in her grandparent's parlor on the farm next door.

I recall the time when St. Michael Ballroom started having teen dances on Friday nights back in the late 50s, and Saturday nights were reserved for old time dances and wedding dances. St. Michael's parish had built a high school in 1953 (now the Dist. 885 Community Center building) and in order to fill it, they sent buses out to the northwest suburbs. Parents were encouraged to expose their kids to a good Catholic education at a reasonable price and so teens from up to 20 miles away were coming regularly to St. Michael.

When the teen dances began on Fridays, the St. Michael Ballroom would then draw their clientele from this larger population area, thus it became the "place to be" on a Friday night. This increase in attendance allowed the ballroom to hire not only local teen bands, but regional, and occasionally national bands. The downside was that when the "out of town" boys would start mixing with the local girls, and vice-versa, jealousy reared its ugly head and fights soon began, almost on a weekly basis. I recall that when my rock and roll band, The Profiles, played, we had to stop playing and put our guitars over our heads to use as a potential defensive weapon to protect our equipment. At one dance, the violence progressed into the street in front of the ballroom and the fire department was called in to hose down the rioters. Unfortunately for the firemen, their water pressure wasn't what it is today, and the perpetrators started throwing apples back at them. The firemen soon gave up and that was the last time they were called into action in that capacity.

Throughout its lifetime, St. Michael ballroom has endured many name changes and as many owners. For example, in the early 40s when it was owned by Leo Zahler, it was called "Zahler's Hall" but everyone still just called it "the dance hall". Some of the names I can remember were, in the 50s, St. Michael Ballroom and in the decades to follow the R&R Club and Big Tom's Supper Club.

While Bob Zahler, author of **Faith, Family, and Farming** and contributor to this article was doing research for his book, he found a number of newspaper ads that he was originally going to put in his book, but unfortunately lacked space to include them.



Newspaper ad from 1969



Newspaper ad from 1947

*All photos courtesy of
Bob Zahler*



Newspaper ad from 1971

(continued on next page)

**St. Michael
Historical Society**

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Phone: 763-416-7967

We're on the Web!

See us at:

Www.stmhistsoc.org

Meetings held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the library meeting room.

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Publisher:

Sheldon Barthel

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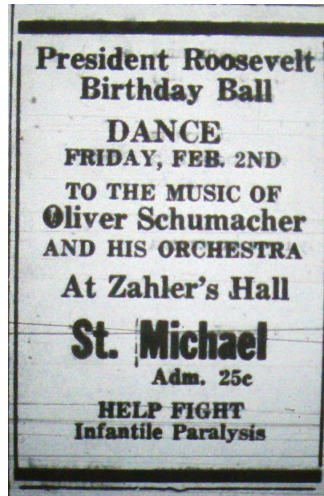
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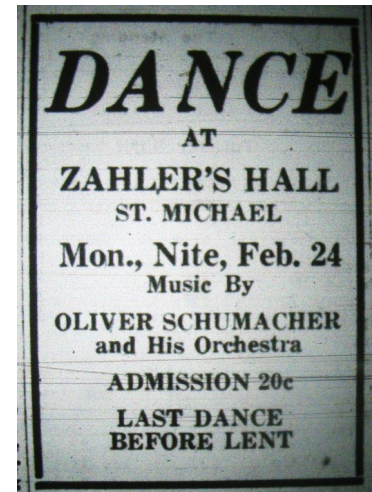
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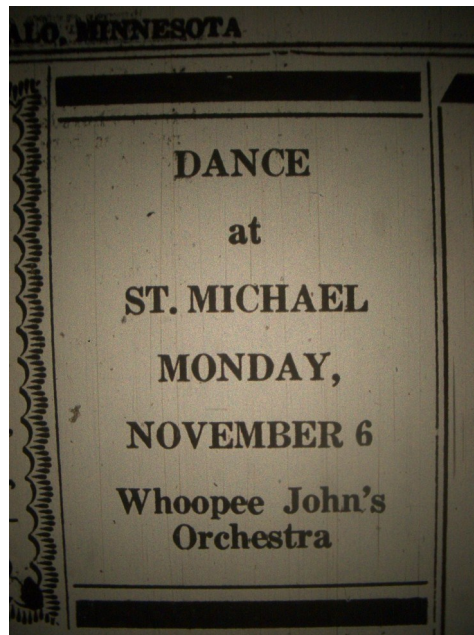
Some of the interesting ones include announcements about "the last dance before lent" and ones mentioning "Oliver Schumacher and his Orchestra".



Newspaper ad from 1940



Newspaper ad from 1941



Newspaper ad from 1944

Located on the northeast corner of Central and 1st, St. Michael Ballroom only exists now in memories, as a gas explosion in 1978 leveled the structure.

Today's kids will never know, or experience, the times that were had at the local ballroom. With all the electronic gear available such as MP3 players, I pads, IPods, and cell phones, all the entertainment they need now seems to be at their fingertips.

About the Author: Sheldon Barthel is currently Vice-President of the St. Michael Historical Society. He and his wife Marilyn have lived in the St. Michael area most of their lives.

2012 Membership dues are due

This is just a reminder to those who have not yet paid their dues for 2012 that now is the time to do so if you wish to remain a member in good standing. Our annual dues are still at \$10 per person or family. In order to keep the cost down, we do not send out self addressed stamped envelopes for renewals. Please help us by sending your 2012 dues to either address listed below.

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