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Names: Lee Williams, Ben Marcelino, Bob Calame, Albert J Larson, Gene Krupa, Ray Pearl, Lawrence Welk, Jan Garber, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Les Brown, Duke Ellington, Clyde McCoy, Victor Lombardo, Blue Barron, Sammy Kaye, Little John Beecher, Al Hudson, Ray Palmer, Preston Love, Lee Williams, Mal Dunn, Eddie Haddad, Paul Moorhead, Lambert Bartak, Ray Backman, Morton Wells, Jess Gayer, Harry Collins, John Thoene Jr

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From Skylon Ballroom to Oscar's Palladium: Dancing in Nebraska, 1948-1957

By E. Kay Dalstrom and Harl A. Dalstrom

"Get Up a Party! Let's Dance at Arlington * Sell the Cows * Wreck the Tractor * Lock up the Cats because Skippy Anderson and his Orchestra is Coming to Arlington."¹ Although this 1954 ad in the *Fremont Guide and Tribune* was exceptionally flamboyant, it bespoke the popularity of dancing as a recreational activity in the Midwest and Great Plains after World War II. In Nebraska dances were held across the state from the smallest towns and villages to the largest cities. You could attend a dance in Naper, population 188; in Hayes Center, population 361; in Hay Springs, 1,091; or in Big Springs, 527.² Almost no town was too small to host an "occasional" dance, and dozens held them regularly. From 1948 to 1957, there were more than 300 dance bands playing in the state. Nationally known "name" bands sometimes visited comparatively small Nebraska communities. People also danced to "territory" bands which traveled all through the area. Polka or "old time" groups, known as "oompah" bands, performed around the region, as did groups which might travel 30 to 40 miles from their home towns to play for a dance. In many places all types of bands played in the course of a few months.

The date or engagement books of "Bob Calame and His Music," an Omaha-based territory band which operated from October, 1948, to September, 1957, were a general guide to dancing in Nebraska during this period. Calame played 560 dances in 62 of Nebraska's 93 counties, and by checking his itinerary in newspapers in representative communities in all parts of the state, information on his performances was obtained. More importantly, by following Calame around Nebraska in this manner, material on many bands and other

aspects of dancing emerged. Omaha and Lincoln were not included, because dancing was but one of many recreational choices in the state's two largest urban centers. Moreover, some of the Omaha-Lincoln appearances of Bob Calame and His Music were at U.S. Air Force bases and represented a unique situation. Since Bob Calame was the father of one of the authors, personal and family recollections have been used. The name is of French origin with the accent on the last syllable and the "e" pronounced as a long "a."

Although dances were held in all parts of the state, there was a different flavor between east and west sections. The physical environment of eastern Nebraska made possible a far greater population density than was the case in the Great Plains portion of the state. Consequently, dance halls and community centers where dances were held were more numerous in the east. Yet, Nebraska's development was molded by the culture of its settlers as well as the physical environment. Parts of eastern Nebraska were heavily settled by Bohemians, Poles, Germans, and Scandinavians, and these areas retained many of their ethnic traits. For example, dancing was popular in Butler, Cedar, Colfax, and Dodge counties. Each of these counties had a significantly higher percentage of people of fairly recent European background than did the state as a whole. Butler and Colfax counties had large numbers of people of Bohemian extraction, while Cedar and Dodge counties had many persons of German origin.³

Cedar County (1950 population, 13,843) had at least seven places within its borders and two other sites nearby which held dances in 1952. At Hartington, the county seat (1950 population: 1,660), one could dance at the City Auditorium or the American Legion Hall. The recently established Skylon Ballroom, located at the intersection of two state highways at the south edge of town, was emerging as one of the most prominent dancing places in northeast Nebraska. Some eight miles north of Hartington was Bow Valley Hall, a popular dancing spot close to the hamlet of Bow Valley (1945 population, 78). The Bow Valley Hall dated from the 1890s. Its founding was associated with the *Schuetzenfest*, a summer sporting event and festival which reflected the German heritage of the area. In far northern Cedar County another hamlet, St. Helena (1950 population, 77), was the site of many

dances. Northwest of Hartington was Fordyce (1950 population, 165), another well-known dancing location. About 12 miles south of Hartington was Coleridge (1950 population, 621), where dances were held at the American Legion Hall. Just over the southwestern boundary of the county from Randolph (1950 population, 1,029), was the rambling West Randolph Ballroom, which was, as its advertising put it, "Where the Good Bands Play." At the village of Crofton (1950 population, 630), also just beyond the western edge of Cedar County, was the Crofton Auditorium, another popular dancing place.⁴

Several arterial highways placed Cedar County dancing within relatively easy reach for residents of northeast Nebraska. A highway bridge across the Missouri River enabled persons in southeast South Dakota to come to dances in Cedar County. Yankton, a community of over 7,700 persons, lay at the north end of the bridge. The vigor of Cedar County's dancing places in the 1950s, whether commercial ventures or otherwise, may be explained in part by location and road connections. Still, many dancers were local people, and the fact that Cedar County was unexcelled by any other part of Nebraska in its attachment to dancing may also rest on cultural intangibles. Perhaps there was a musical heritage among the people of German background which partly manifested itself in dancing. Well before the mid-20th century, house dances and barn dances had been common to this area.⁵

In Cedar County and in other sections of eastern Nebraska, wedding dances, a characteristic of some European cultures, were frequent. Such dances were held at a local hall in the evening. It was a common practice to include the wedding party and guests, including children. These dances were often open to the entire community and were advertised in the local press. Such announcements were frequently as prominent as other dance advertisements and also indicated the band which would perform. Admission was sometimes charged.⁶

Since eastern Nebraska had important concentrations of people of central and eastern European origin, the Catholic Church was particularly strong here. Accordingly, dances were sometimes related to the religious calendar. A Corpus Christi dance in Milligan marked a church festival day and a St. Mary's pout dance in Schuyler undoubtedly had its origin

in a Czech *pout* (pronounced like "poat" with "t" sounded as in "tune") or pilgrimage.⁷ Dancing was sometimes suspended during Lent in predominantly Catholic communities, although dances on St. Patrick's Day were common even in non-Irish areas. "Last dance before Lent," "Pre-Lenten Dance," or "Last Dance until St. Patrick's" might typify February ads. Some ballrooms, such as the Oak in Schuyler and the Firemen's Ballroom in Snyder, closed during Lent.⁸ Lee Williams, a prominent band leader, found that the solution to this business problem was to obtain bookings in Colorado.⁹

All kinds of bands played in eastern and northeast Nebraska, but there was an obvious appreciation there for the old time or polka bands. The WNAX Bohemian Band from Yankton, and other oompah bands were popular. The WNAX Band began in the late 1920s as part of staff entertainment provided by the station before the days of network programming. In addition to regular WNAX broadcasts, it played engagements each year in the area until the mid-1950s.¹⁰ However great the popularity of polka bands, dancers enjoyed a choice in types of bands. In the largely Bohemian community of Milligan, an appearance by Ben Marcelino and his Orchestra was heralded as "a dance designed for the pleasure of those who like both Czech music and our modern music." Dancers in Cedar County could hear the music of oompah and modern bands, and dance advertisements show that the latter groups enjoyed great popularity.¹¹

Neither distance nor relative sparseness of population kept people in north-central and western Nebraska from dancing to the music of name and territory bands. There were fewer dancing places in counties in these areas than in the east, but if advertising is any criterion, they drew crowds from a considerable distance. For example, the Rainbow Ballroom at Halsey, a Thomas County hamlet (1945 population, 141) in the Sandhills, held frequent dances.¹² Oscar's Palladium at Sargent, a northeast Custer County community of 818 persons (1950), was not a large dance hall, but it offered its patrons ample choice of bands, as was the case with other important dancing places.¹³ The Crescent Ballroom in Grant, Terry's Arena in Terrytown, and the American Legion Hall at Lisco, a Garden County hamlet (1950 population, 150), were some



Couples danced during the 1950s to Bob Calame and His Music at Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City, South Dakota.



Bob Calame in costume during comedy routine.

important western Nebraska dancing establishments. As was the case in eastern Nebraska, adequate road and highway connections were essential to the success of dancing places in the Sandhills and western areas of the state. As in the east, both name and territory bands came to central and western Nebraska. Polka bands played in the west, but with less frequency than in the east. Bands with a western flair were not unusual, long before country-western music became nationally popular.¹⁴

On a Saturday night a territory band from Omaha generally could earn a higher fee in western Nebraska than in the eastern part of the state. The greater the distance a band traveled, the greater the sum its leader might collect for a performance. By comparison, the larger population and greater density of dance halls in eastern Nebraska created a more competitive business environment. Other circumstances had a bearing upon how much money a band leader might receive for a given engagement, but territory bands commonly found work in western Nebraska to be quite profitable.¹⁵

Practically every holiday saw a dance somewhere in Nebraska: Christmas, Easter, New Year's, Thanksgiving, Labor Day, and other special days were all reasons to have a dance. A dance recalling victory in Europe in World War II (V-E Day) was held at Sargent, and one commemorating victory over Japan (V-J Day) at Valentine. There was a Columbus Day dance at Butte, a non-Italian community, and an Armistice Day dance at Spencer. A Pre-Decoration Day dance was held at the Blue Hill Legion Ballroom, and one might attend a Halloween dance at the Veterans' Memorial Building in Cozad.¹⁶ Rodeos and county fairs were sometimes occasions for dances as were other local events. A Friendly Festival complete with parades, baseball, air show, grain show, and dancing was held at Hay Springs. The Southwest Nebraska Equipment Show at Wauneta included a dance.¹⁷ The Annual 1884 Dance at Valentine included black jack, roulette, and dice, and was advertised as "A Real Western Party," although music was furnished by Duffy Belorad, an oompah band.¹⁸ The local contests for the Miss Nebraska Beauty Pageant sometimes included dances.¹⁹

A dance was a fitting way to conclude the celebration of a special community event. In May, 1951, the small town of

Stockville, by a narrow victory in a special election, retained the seat of Frontier County. That August the leaders of the campaign to prevent the removal of the county seat to Curtis sponsored a celebration, which some 2,000 people attended. After a sweltering day of picnicking, speech-making, a ball game, and rodeo, anyone who had energy left could dance to the music of a Grand Island Bohemian band.²⁰

"Battle dances," in which two bands would compete for the crowd's approval, were occasionally held. The winner usually finished the dance.²¹ This type of dance was held at King's Ballroom in Norfolk, Terry's Arena in Terrytown, and at the Sun-Glo Ballroom, a Hartington establishment which became a bowling alley in 1951. In Milligan a battle dance was ironically combined with the observation of Armistice Day.²²

Dances were also a common way to raise money for charity or civic projects. Some towns had dances, usually in the early months of the year, to raise funds for their baseball teams.²³ Valentine held a benefit to buy fixtures for the new Veterans' Memorial Building.²⁴ A dance was also held in that Sandhills community to raise funds for band equipment, and a dance at Coleridge was a fund-raiser for band uniforms.²⁵ Hay Springs, like a number of places, had a firemen's ball, and in 1950 used the money raised to help purchase a first-aid truck.²⁶ At Rackett, a remote hamlet in Garden County (1945 population, 5), a benefit dance was held to aid victims of the 1952 flood which hit Missouri Valley communities 350 miles away.²⁷ The Annual Polio Benefit Dance at Elgin raised \$250. At Lisco, \$200 was raised for the Garden County cancer drive.²⁸ It was requested "that all ladies and girls attending wear their formal dresses. . . . It will be a colorful affair that way and the girls and ladies will have a chance to wear those beautiful gowns which are not worn near enough."²⁹ (No mention was made of appropriate male attire.)

A great variety of organizations sponsored dances, sometimes occasionally, sometimes regularly. In both instances the most frequent sponsors were the American Legion and/or the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The groups were co-sponsors in Lisco, Albion, and elsewhere. In many cases the Legion held dances in its own clubs, halls, or buildings.³⁰ In other places the Legion sponsored dances in community halls, auditoriums, or pavilions.³¹ Other military or ex-service

groups also sponsored dances. The War Dads were functioning in Crawford, Alliance, and Minitare.³² The Ex-Servicemen's Club operated in Ogallala and the Servicemen's Center was active in Kimball.³³ A VFW ceremonial firing squad was the beneficiary of a dance in Hartington and the sponsor of one in Hay Springs.³⁴

Although Legion and VFW posts were active in the entire state, they had a heightened visibility in the west, perhaps because of the sparser population and the comparatively fewer number of dances. Most areas of the west lacked the strong ethnic ties of many eastern counties, and as a result, the Legion appears to have been more central to social activities.

A host of fraternal groups across the state were active dance sponsors: Elks, Lions, Eagles, Moose, Masonic Lodges, Job's Daughters, and the Knights of Columbus.³⁵ Catholic parishes, altar societies, and COF (Catholic Order of Foresters), largely located in the east, sponsored dances.³⁶ Sokols (Bohemian physical-culture associations) held dances in addition to other functions. Groups in Schuyler and Wilber were particularly active.³⁷ The ZCBJ (Western Bohemian Fraternal Association) occasionally sponsored dances.³⁸

Other groups—the Ogallala Sea Scouts, the Twin City Agricultural Club (Scottsbluff-Gering), the Valentine Baseball Club, Company L of the 34th Infantry Regiment of the Alliance National Guard, the Retail Division of the Alliance Chamber of Commerce, the Gordon Roping Club, the Sandhills Cattle Association, the Willing Helpers' Club of Burwell—sponsored dances at one time or another.³⁹ The Junior Chambers of Commerce of Holdrege and Ogallala had dances, as did the Chamber of Commerce in Crawford. In Crawford one dance, a free, public event at the City Park Pavilion, was billed as an "Inaugural Ball honoring the 1951 Chamber of Commerce President."⁴⁰ In North Platte, a railroad center, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers in the spring of 1954 held its 72nd Annual May Ball at the Jeffers Pavilion, a prominent dancing establishment.⁴¹

The places in which dances were held differed widely. Community halls or auditoriums were often used for special events or for dances sponsored by civic groups.⁴² Fairgrounds were an appropriate place for dances held in conjunction with fairs or rodeos, but their use was not limited to such events.⁴³

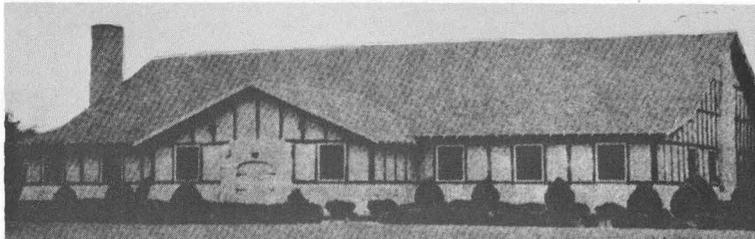
OAK BALLROOM

Nebraska's Finest

* * *

Dance Calendar

- SUNDAY, SEPT. 16—**
BOB CALAME and His Music
- TUESDAY, SEPT. 18—**
Wedding Dance—JERRY HAVEL Orchestra
- WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 19—**
Square Dance
- THURSDAY, SEPT. 20—**
Wedding Dance—BOBBY MILLS Music
- SUNDAY, SEPT. 23—**
JACK COLE and His Orchestra
- WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 26—**
Nationally Known TINY HILL Orchestra
- SUNDAY, SEPT. 30—**
DELL CLAYTON and His Orchestra
- WEDNESDAY, OCT. 3—**
Square Dance
- SUNDAY, OCT. 7—**
HANK WINDER and His Wonder Orchestra
- SUNDAY, OCT. 11—**
LEE WILLIAMS and His Orchestra
- WEDNESDAY, OCT. 17—**
Square Dance
- THURSDAY, OCT. 18—**
Wedding Dance—JERRY HAVEL Orchestra
- SUNDAY, OCT. 21—**
JACK SWANSON and His Orchestra
- WEDNESDAY, OCT. 24—**
JAN GARBER, Nationally Known Orchestra
- SUNDAY, OCT. 28—**
RAY PALMER



Oak Ballroom, Schuyler, Colfax County....(Below) Territory bands traveled in sleeper buses (Left) Dance Calendar, Oak Ballroom, about 1950. Photos courtesy of Mrs. Jan Calame.



Armories were used in Hastings and Ogallala.⁴⁴ In Alliance a series of public dances sponsored by the VFW was held at the Alliance Air Base.⁴⁵ One of the more unusual sites was the Chadron Municipal Airport where the Chadron Squadron Civil Air Patrol logically held a "Hangar Dance."⁴⁶

Nebraska ballrooms differed widely. King's in Norfolk or the Oak in Schuyler came close to rivaling Omaha's Peony Park or Kansas City's Pla-Mor. Some, such as Terrytown in Scottsbluff, included complete food service, and most sold snacks and beverages. Many occupied large quonset huts. Most pavilions, such as Riverside Park in Central City or the Arlington Pavilion, operated only in summer, since no heating was provided.⁴⁷

One resort, Hidden Paradise near Long Pine, held its own hazards. Located on a stream at the bottom of a canyon, the stage of the ballroom sat under a large bluff. When it rained the stage roof leaked, causing the musicians to scramble for cover to protect their instruments and music. The ceiling of the stage was also low. On one occasion a trombone man stood up to "take a chorus" and put his head through the flimsy ceiling.⁴⁸

At Terry's Arena in Terrytown (Scottsbluff), the ballroom was in a large auditorium-like building. Behind the stage was a three-or four-cell jail. To some musicians, who because of their unorthodox lifestyle distrusted the police—even then called the "fuzz"—this was disconcerting.⁴⁹

Because most ballrooms operated only one to three days a week, they also provided other activities. Oscar's Palladium in Sargent, the Rainbow in Halsey, the Skylon in Hartington, and the Crescent in Grant, offered roller skating on various days of the week.⁵⁰

Sometimes the sharing of facilities led to unusual combinations. On the same day that Bob Calame played at the Crofton Auditorium, the building was used by "Dee Jay Nelson with reptiles of North America. Exhibits of live specimens. Odd interesting facts about snakes."⁵¹

Some small towns, even hamlets, had large, active dance halls. Bow Valley in Cedar County did not appear as a separate community in the 1950 Census. Nevertheless bands performed at the Bow Valley Hall.⁵² Perhaps dance halls helped to prolong the existence of such rural places.⁵³ In

research conducted in 1962-1963, Albert J. Larson, a geographer, found a total of seven dance halls in the 341 hamlets in Nebraska. He noted that these dance halls were still functioning but did not operate on a regular schedule as private establishments. Larson also noted that there were 170 community halls in Nebraska's hamlets, which he defined as having populations of from 10 to 250 persons. Although Larson did not discuss the specific use of community halls, it seems reasonable to assume that they were occasionally used for dances.⁵⁴

People were willing to travel many miles to dance to their favorite bands. Some ballrooms employed primarily local bands; others hired territory or traveling bands. Name bands were brought in when travel schedules and finances permitted. King's at Norfolk, Oscar's Palladium in Sargent, the Oak in Schuyler, the Skylon in Hartington, and the 1733 Park Ballroom in Kearney are examples of active enterprises which hired a variety of talent.⁵⁵

Many prominent ballrooms were privately operated commercial ventures. The business was competitive, especially in the more populated areas. In eastern Nebraska a single issue of a newspaper might carry as many as four or five ads for dances.⁵⁶

Prices varied with the quality or reputation of the band. Admission costs ranged from 50 cents for local groups to \$2.40 per person for name bands.⁵⁷ The most common price range was \$1.00 to \$1.25. Some places distinguished between prices for men and women. Ladies were often admitted at a considerably reduced rate, or even "free until 9:00,"⁵⁸ probably in an effort to attract more single women, thereby attracting more single men.

Ballrooms and communities vied for appearances of the better bands. When Gene Krupa was booked into the Oak, the local newspaper said, "Schuyler has been assured that Krupa is not playing anywhere else in this vicinity, as his next stop is in Iowa."⁵⁹

Pride and community reputation were also reflected in the type of bands which came into a town. An ad for the appearance of Ray Pearl in Milligan included, "We are so proud to be one of the spots where this fine band will stop on its swing out of Chicago."⁶⁰ At Chadron a dance promotion

organization was formed to "produce the better types of dances and entertainment that Chadron is capable of handling, but at present is not provided."⁶¹ The city had a new auditorium and hoped to "present bands of national renown" which "could establish Chadron as the ballroom of Northwest Nebraska."⁶²

Name bands did appear in most parts of the state. Lawrence Welk, a particular favorite, appeared at Schuyler, Norfolk, Holdrege, and York.⁶³ Jan Garber appeared at Holdrege, Schuyler, Terrytown, and Hartington.⁶⁴ Other name bands performing in the state included Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Les Brown, Duke Ellington, Clyde McCoy, Victor Lombardo, Blue Barron, and Sammy Kaye.⁶⁵

The mainstay of the better ballrooms was the territory band, comprised of full-time musicians. The orchestras traveled most of the year and in the case of Bob Calame played in 27 states. Other territory bands included Little John Beecher, Al Hudson, Ray Palmer, Preston Love, and Lee Williams and His Stepping Tone Music.⁶⁶

Local bands were those whose musicians played on a part-time basis. These bands could not usually travel more than 200 miles from their home base because most of the musicians had full-time jobs in other occupations. Many of these groups headquartered out of Omaha or Lincoln and performed in eastern Nebraska or western Iowa. Mal Dunn, Eddie Haddad, Paul Moorhead, Lambert Bartak, Ray Backman, and Morton Wells worked out of Omaha. Jess Gayer and Harry Collins worked out of Grand Island. Bands from Denver played in the western part of the state.⁶⁷

By necessity, distances and travel methods often limited a band's range. The local bands usually traveled by car or station wagon, sometimes pulling a trailer carrying their equipment.⁶⁸ The WNAX Bohemian Band traveled in a car and pick-up truck and could stay out overnight only if it arranged to cover Yankton broadcast commitments by pre-taping programs.⁶⁹ Since these bands returned to their home towns at the end of each dance, sleeping arrangements did not have to be considered.

Obviously, the territory bands had to have another method. Because these bands were on the road all the time and might travel as much as 500 miles between jobs, they used a "sleeper

bus." The sleeper bus had accommodations for the musicians in tiers of bunk beds and greatly resembled a Pullman car. The band members could sleep while traveling to the next job. Some sleepers were custom-built rigs, usually a semi-trailer pulled by a truck tractor, and might have running water and shower facilities. Some were wired for AC-DC electricity and included private compartments for female vocalists. Others were converted school buses.⁷⁰

Since the business was competitive, advertising was important. Posters were placed in local businesses, but newspapers were the usual method of announcing a dance or an attraction. Madison Avenue techniques and imagination were not unknown to dance managers.

King's Ballroom in Norfolk advertised in area newspapers. One ad included "8 of the many reasons why Northeast Nebraska Dances at King's":⁷¹

1. 2 acres of graded graveled parking
2. Canopy for two autos, keep dry when it rains
3. Booths for 900 persons
4. A clear view of the entire ballroom from every booth
5. Comfortable dancing. Warm in winter, cool in summer
6. Over 5,000 square feet of fine dancing surface
7. America's finest Modern and Bohemian bands appear at King's
8. Regular schedule. The best music at the lowest prices every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday.

Just as King's proclaimed its accessibility, the 1733 Ballroom in Kearney heralded its "All Newly Lighted and Graveled Parking Area—Capacity 1,500."⁷²

At the Oak big attractions were sometimes covered as front page news stories. The pending appearance of Lawrence Welk included biographical information about him, as well as prices for the dance (\$1.50 per person) and the fact that the Oak was air conditioned.⁷³ Jan Garber's Oak appearance was also covered as a front page news story:

The Idol of the Air Lanes and his array of radio stars always make a big hit on their Oak ballroom appearances.⁷⁴ . . . The new floor in the ballroom "received" its initiation on Sunday night at the big Easter dance. . . . It was the biggest Easter dance on record as almost 1,200 people attended.⁷⁵

The *Crofton Journal* in northeast Nebraska carried a front page story about a Bob Calame appearance which included biographical facts about him, including that he wrote Welk's theme, "Bubbles in the Wine."⁷⁶ The copy, supplied by

Calame's booking agency, was reprinted *verbatim* by papers in many towns where the band played.⁷⁷

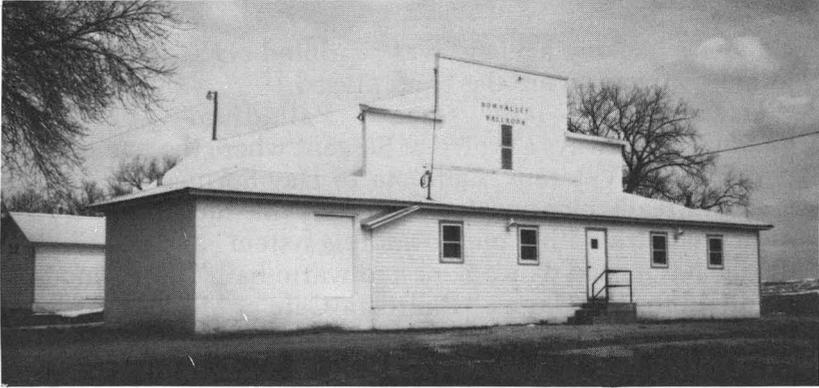
Oscar's Hall—later Oscar's Palladium—at Sargent announced “always a crowd at Sargent where the name bands play.”⁷⁸ The Veterans' Ballroom in Hay Springs was “a nice place for really nice people.”⁷⁹ In Eddyville they hired “a good little orchestra with a public address system” and added “Eddyville has a good dance floor and warm hall.”⁸⁰ Less modestly, an ad for the Gayway Ballroom-Cafe at McCook declared itself “the finest between Omaha-Denver.”⁸¹

Advertising reflects its time and society. A 1952 dance at Anselmo advertised “Narcisse White and his Soo Stompers—an All-Indian Orchestra.”⁸² The Crescent in Grant touted “Nat Towles and his 14-piece Colored Orchestra.”⁸³ Earl May Osborn's “colored band” played for the Crawford Rodeo.⁸⁴ The Mallard Club in Terrytown concluded its ad for a 1955 dance with “restricted [to] white race.”⁸⁵

A few all-female bands or bands with female leaders were advertised. Alice and her Band played in northeast Nebraska. Ruth Coleman (or Colman) and her All Girl Orchestra appeared at Halsey and Hartington. Joy and her Orchestra performed at Valentine.⁸⁶

One unusual ad in 1948 suggested that differing styles of dancing required some regulation. The Jeffers Pavilion in North Platte requested its patrons to “please bear with us, there will be no jitterbugging, only when announced.” Probably the space needed for the jitterbug led to dance-floor collisions, perhaps to the annoyance of persons who preferred other steps.⁸⁷

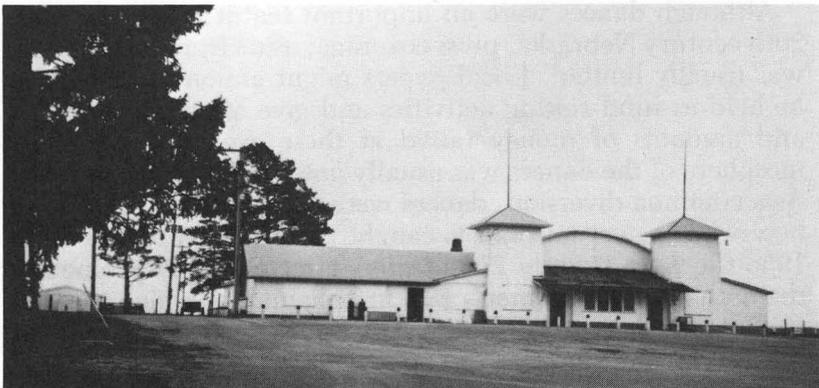
Although dances were an important feature of life in mid-20th century Nebraska, press coverage, aside from advertising, was usually limited. Local papers might announce dances to be held as fund-raising activities and give attendance figures and amounts of money raised at these events, but the atmosphere of the dances was usually not portrayed in the press. As a common diversion, dances were not normally considered newsworthy, yet journalists caught the spirit on occasion. In 1956 the *Burt County Plaindealer*, after carefully promoting the 65th Annual Firemen's Ball in Tekamah at which the Bob Calame orchestra from Omaha played, described the dance at the City Auditorium:



Bow Valley Hall, Cedar County.



Howells Ballroom, Colfax County.



Firemen's Ballroom, Snyder, Dodge County. Photos by Harl Dalstrom.

Volunteer firemen had attractively decorated the hall in the black and red colors of the fire department.

The grand march of red coated firemen and their ladies, the part of the ball looked forward to with eager anticipation each year by spectators, was an attractive affair.⁸⁸

What happened to these dance halls or ballrooms? In 1951 the Sun-Glo Ballroom at Hartington installed bowling alleys and later went up in flames.⁸⁹ In Rushville the management announced that "due to the lack of attendance at past dances we are compelled to cancel our remaining 1953 bookings of the larger and better bands and this will be the last good dance for some time."⁹⁰ A 1964 issue of the *Butte Gazette* carried only one ad for what had once been a strong dancing area.⁹¹ By 1966 Riverside in Central City, formerly a weekly summer place, had traditional bands only on special occasions. The regular dances were played by such groups as the Chancellors, the Challengers, the Panics, and the Phaetons.⁹² As the 1960s ended, the character of the Oak in Schuyler had changed. The bands were smaller and their ads were smaller; "rock nites" were now included.⁹³ In Cedar County the Skylon is still operating but now books mainly rock groups and has a young clientele. The older crowd goes to a relatively new VFW club in Hartington.⁹⁴ The Bow Valley Hall is still in operation and hosts many wedding dances. It attracts people of all age groups. According to John Thoene Jr., president of the Bow Valley Recreation Association, the groups which are hired are usually four- or five-piece "country-rock" bands. He added that these groups will often play more traditional music until around 11 p.m. and then bring up the tempo as the older people thin out.⁹⁵

King's Ballroom in Norfolk is an entertainment complex which includes bowling and four movie theaters in addition to the ballroom. A four-page mailer sent out quarterly listed 10 dances in September of 1982. The bands playing for these dances included several old-time bands, some rock groups, and one traditional dance band.⁹⁶

Travelers along State Highway 91 will notice a large, clear sign which reads "Howells Ballroom, 1 mile." The ballroom, located in the community park, appears to be of fairly recent vintage. Dances are held regularly on Sunday nights and include a mixture of old-time and traditional dance bands.⁹⁷

Although the coming of television to Nebraska between 1949 and the mid-1950s provided an alternative form of entertainment, its impact upon dancing is debatable. Lee Williams, who sold his band and joined an Omaha booking agency in 1952, studied the ballroom business in Nebraska and found that it had declined sharply between 1940 and 1950 with further deterioration between 1950 and 1955. This decline, he said, began shortly after the end of World War II and reflected a growing economic prosperity which permitted people to have more choices of entertainment. Williams concluded that it was prosperity, not television, which fostered the passing of the heyday of ballroom dancing.⁹⁸

In any event, the appearance of rock and roll, changing tastes, and a new generation made the larger bands obsolete. Some of the bands folded; others picked up the slack by traveling farther and playing at air bases and military installations across the country.⁹⁹ But that was only a stop-gap, and most of the territory bands are gone. Some of the local bands still play hire part-time musicians who do not depend on music for a living. Some dancing places still operate, but the spirit and the vigor of the 1940s and 1950s have disappeared.

NOTES

1. *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, May 11, 1954. For another treatment of this general topic, see Harl A. Dalstrom and Kay Calame Dalstrom, "Dance Band on the Northern Plains: Bob Calame and His Music in North Dakota, 1949-1957," *North Dakota History*, 46 (Summer, 1979), pp. 4-14.

2. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*, Vol. II, *Characteristics of the Population*, Part 27, Nebraska, Table 6—Population of Counties by Minor Civil Divisions: 1930 to 1950 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), pp. 10, 12-13, 17.

3. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, *Population* Vol. III, Part 2, Table 19, Nebraska: Native White of Foreign or Mixed Parentage, "By Country of Birth of Parents, for Counties and for Cities of 10,000 or More: 1930" (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), pp. 99.

Professor Frederick C. Luebke of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in "Regionalism and the Great Plains: Problems of Concept and Method," *Western Historical Quarterly*, XV (January, 1984), pp. 19-38, provides a most sensible approach to understanding the relative importance of physical environment and human culture in the development of the Plains area. Luebke's "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly*, VIII (October, 1977) 405-430, is a fine summary of the ethnic dimension in the settlement of the Plains.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1950*, Vol. II, *Characteristics*

of the Population, Part 27, Nebraska, Table 6, p. 11, *Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide*, 76th Edition (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1945, pp. 248-249; *Cedar County News* (Hartington), January 17, February 21, March 13, April 10, May 8, June 19, July 3, October 9, November 6, December 11, 1952; Interview by authors with John Thoene Jr., president of the Bow Valley Recreation Association, Bow Valley, Nebraska, March 23, 1983.

5. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1950*, Vol. II *Characteristics of the Population*, Part 41, South Dakota, Table 6—Population of Counties by Minor Civil Divisions: 1930 to 1950 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952), p. 20; Interviews by authors with F. J. Pietz, retired owner-manager of the Skylon Ballroom, Hartington, Nebraska, March 22, 1983; Mrs. Renetta Norris, Hartington, Nebraska, March 23, 1983; John Thoene Jr., March 23, 1983. Both Mrs. Norris and Thoene noted the significance of house and barn dances in Cedar County. Although no one interviewed tied the high level of interest in dancing to Cedar County's German heritage, Thoene of Bow Valley observed that local people had a musical inclination.

6. Recollections of Kay Calame Dalstrom (hereafter cited as "Recollections, KCD"): *Cedar County News*, December 23, 1948, May 5, 1949, June 8, 1950; *People's Banner* (David City), October 27, 1949, April 13, 1950.

7. *Cedar County News*, April 10, 1952; *Milligan Review*, June 8, 1949; *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, August 9, 1948. The authors thank Dr. Bruce Garver, Department of History, University of Nebraska at Omaha for an explanation of the term *pout*. They also thank Dr. Zdenek Stary of Charles University, Prague, Fulbright Professor at UNO, for explaining the pronunciation of *pout*. For statistical data on religious denominations in Nebraska by county, see U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1936*, Vol. I, *Summary and Detailed Tables*, Table 32—Members in Selected Denominations by Counties, 1936 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941), pp. 783-786.

8. *Butte Gazette*, January 25, 1951; *Cedar County News*, February 21, March 13, 1952; *Colfax County Call* (Schuyler), February 24, 1949; *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, March 14, 1952; Recollections, KCD.

9. Interview by authors with Bramner Leacox (Lee Williams), Omaha, Nebraska, May 8, 1983.

10. Interview by authors with Rex Hays and John Matuska, former WNAX Bohemian Band musicians, Yankton, South Dakota, March 24, 1983. See also Reynold M. Wik, "Radio in the 1920s: A Social Force in South Dakota," *South Dakota History*, 11 (Spring, 1981), p. 98.

11. *Milligan Review*, February 16, 1949; *Cedar County News*, November 6, 1952, May 14, October 15, 1953, October 7, 1954, February 17, 1955.

12. *Grassland News* (Thedford), May 20, June 3, 17, August 26, 1954; *Custer County Chief* (Broken Bow), April 24, August 10, 1950, June 19, November 16, 1951; *Rand McNally Commercial Atlas*, 76th Edition, p. 248.

13. *Custer County Chief*, April 19, September 21, 1950, February 14, 1952, May 7, 1953, May 10, 1956; *Brewster News*, May 7, 1954; Interview with Rex Hays and John Matuska, March 24, 1983.

14. *Tribune-Sentinel* (Grant), October 7, November 18, 1948, June 16, 1949; *Keith County News* (Ogallala), July 7, 1949, May 25, August 24, 1950, May 7, July 26, December 27, 1951, January 24, 1952, October 20, 1955; *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, October 24, 1952, July 12, September 6, 1953; *Sheridan County Star* (Rushville), September 25, 1952; *Chappell Register*, August 19, 1948; *Garden County News* (Oshkosh), November 8, 1951, April 17, May 18, 1952, April 7, 1955, May 24, December 27, 1956; *Rand McNally Commercial Atlas*, 76th Edition, p. 249.

15. Interview with Brammer Leacox (Lee Williams), May 8, 1983.

16. *Cozad Local*, October 25, 1949; *Custer County Chief*, May 2, 1949; *Cherry County News* (Valentine), August 7, 1952; *Butte Gazette*, October 7, 1954, November

10, 1955; *Blue Hill Leader*, May 26, 1950.

17. Recollections, KCD; *Crawford Tribune*, June 16, 1950; *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, August 26, 1948; *Sherman County Times* (Loup City), August 17, 1950; *Hay Springs News*, August 17, 1950; *Wauneta Breeze*, May 10, 1956.

18. *Cherry County News*, April 20, 1950.

19. *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, July 24, 25, August 8, 1948.

20. *McCook Daily Gazette*, August 6, 1951.

21. Recollections, KCD.

22. *Cedar County News*, June 8, 1950, September 6, 1951; *Pierce County Leader* (Pierce), March 16, 1950; *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, September 6, 1953; *Milligan Review*, November 9, 1949.

23. For examples of baseball fund-raisers see *Cedar County News*, April 18, 1957; *Garden County News*, May 18, 1952; *Cherry County News*, May 11, 1950.

24. *Cherry County News*, May 4, 1950.

25. *Ibid.*, August 30, 1951; *Cedar County News*, December 11, 1952.

26. *Hay Springs News*, February 16, 1950.

27. *Garden County News*, May 29, 1952.

28. *Elgin Review*, February 5, 1953; *Garden County News*, May 8, 1952.

29. *Garden County News*, April 24, 1952.

30. For examples of Legion facilities, see *Alliance Times-Herald*, November 21, 1951; *Burwell Tribune*, October 27, 1949; *Benkelman Post and News-Chronicle*, February 16, 1956; *Gordon Journal*, July 8, 1951; *Imperial Republican*, February 25, 1954.

31. *Cherry County News*, August 7, 1952; *Beatrice Daily Sun*, December 1, 1950; *Harlan County Journal* (Alma), August 2, 1951.

32. *Crawford Tribune*, February 4, 1955; *Alliance Times-Herald*, November 20, 1951; *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, January 20, 1950.

33. *Keith County News*, December 28, 1950; *Western Nebraska Observer* (Kimball), April 20, 1950, December 1, 1955.

34. *Cedar County News*, November 6, 1952; *Sheridan County Star*, October 5, 1952.

35. For examples of fraternal organization sponsorship, see *Nebraska City News-Press*, January 17, 1949, February 6, 1952, February 13, 1953; *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, December 22, 1954; *Hastings Daily Tribune*, December 4, 1948; *Garden County News*, May 17, 24, 1956; *Crawford Tribune*, May 18, 1951; *Butte Gazette*, October 7, 1954.

36. For examples of church-related sponsorship see *Cedar County News*, October 9, 1952, November 19, 1953, February 17, 1955; *Crofton Journal*, January 31, June 19, 1952; *People's Banner*, June 2, 1949.

37. *Beatrice Daily Sun*, March 17, April 21, 1949, January 6, 1950; *Colfax County Call*, March 25, 1948.

38. Conversation by Kay Calame Dalstrom with Joseph Drozda, January 25, 1983; *Holt County Independent* (O'Neill), July 7, 1949; *Butte Gazette*, November 13, 1951; *Beatrice Daily Sun*, January 20, March 4, 1949; Bruce M. Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in Frederick C. Luebke (ed.), *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), pp. 157-160, has useful information on the Sokol movement in America and the ZCBJ.

39. *Keith County News*, December 29, 1955; *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, December 30, 1949; *Cherry County News*, May 11, 1950; *Alliance Times and Herald* (later *Alliance Times-Herald*), October 8, 1948, March 21, 1952; *Gordon Journal*, February 10, 1954; *Grassland News*, May 13, 1954.

40. *Keith County News*, January 1, 1953; *Oxford Standard*, October 11, 1951; *Crawford Tribune*, December 29, 1950.

41. *North Platte Daily Telegraph-Bulletin*, April 27, 1954.

42. For examples of community halls or auditoriums, see *Beatrice Daily Sun*, April

13, 1950; *Hastings Daily Tribune*, November 4, 1953; *Keith County News*, April 30, 1951; *Harlan County Journal*, December 18, 1952.

43. *Crawford Tribune*, June 16, 1950; *Sherman County Times*, August 17, 1950; *Fremont Guide and Tribune*, April 14, September 23, 1949; *Harlan County Journal*, August 2, 1951.

44. *Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 25, 1955; *Keith County News*, December 29, 1955.

45. *Alliance Times and Herald*, July 29, 1949.

46. *Chadron Record*, August 9, 1956.

47. Recollections, KCD; *Keith County News*, January 24, 1952.

48. Recollections, KCD.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Brewster News*, May 7, 1954; *Grassland News*, June 3, 1954; *Cedar County News*, May 14, 1953; *Keith County News*, October 20, 1955.

51. *Crofton Journal*, September 21, 1950.

52. *Cedar County News*, 1948-1957 *passim*, demonstrates the vitality of Bow Valley as a dancing location.

53. Conversation by authors with Professor Charles Gildersleeve, professor of geography/geology, University of Nebraska at Omaha, January 27, 1983.

54. Albert J. Larson, "The Hamlets of Nebraska" (Lincoln: Unpublished, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1969), pp. 8-15, 88, 101.

55. Recollections, KCD; *Kearney Daily Hub*, January 14, 1949, May 20, 1950, June 14, 1951, October 19, 1956.

56. For examples of multiple dance ads, see *Cedar County News*, August 2, 1951, December 11, 1952; *Colfax County Call*, March 25, 1948.

57. *Neligh News*, June 18, 1953; *Custer County Chief*, August 21, 1950.

58. *Cherry County News*, August 10, 1950; *Neligh News*, January 22, 1953.

59. *Colfax County Call*, July 6, 1950.

60. *Milligan Review*, June 22, 1949.

61. *Chadron Record*, May 29, 1952.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Colfax County Call*, July 12, 1951; *Pierce County Leader*, November 25, 1948; *Oxford Standard*, November 3, 1949; *Milligan Review*, November 2, 1949.

64. *Hastings Daily Tribune*, May 16, 1952; *Colfax County Call*, April 22, 1954; *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, July 12, 1953; *Cedar County News*, October 15, 1953.

65. *Neligh News*, June 18, 1953, August 8, 1957; *Alliance Times and Herald*, July 28, 1948; *Colfax County Call*, February 24, 1949, May 24, 1951; *Custer County Chief*, May 7, 1953; *Pierce County Leader*, April 19, 1951.

66. Recollections, KCD.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*

69. Interview with John Matuska, Rex Hays, March 24, 1983.

70. Recollections, KCD.

71. *Pierce County Leader*, January 26, 1950.

72. *Kearney Daily Hub*, July 27, 1951.

73. *Colfax County Call*, July 12, 1951.

74. *Ibid.*, April 22, 1954.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Crofton Journal*, April 28, 1949.

77. Recollections, KCD.

78. *Custer County Chief*, May 10, 1956.

79. *Crawford Tribune*, March 25, 1949.

80. *Custer County Chief*, February 14, 1952.

81. *McCook Daily Gazette*, August 17, 1949.

82. *Custer County Chief*, February 14, 1952.

83. *Grant Tribune-Sentinel*, October 7, 1948.
84. *Crawford Tribune*, June 16, 1950.
85. *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, May 13, 1955. It should be noted that this was the only such "restricted" ad found.
86. *Custer County Chief*, November 16, 1951; *Cedar County News*, November 6, 1952; *Cherry County News*, August 7, 1952.
87. *North Platte Daily Telegraph-Bulletin*, August 12, 1948.
88. *Burt County Plaindealer* (Tekamah), February 9, 16, March 1, 1956.
89. *Cedar County News*, September 6, 1951; interview with F. J. Pietz, March 22, 1983.
90. *Sheridan County Star*, March 5, 1953.
91. *Butte Gazette*, November 19, 1964.
92. *Central City Republican*, June 17, 24, July 8, 1966.
93. *Schuyler Sun*, May 22, 1969.
94. Interview with F. J. Pietz, March 22, 1983.
95. Interview with John Thoene Jr., March 23, 1983.
96. "King's Entertainer," September-October-November, 1982. Courtesy of Mrs. Renetta Norris, Hartington, Nebraska.
97. Mailer sent by Howells Ballroom to interested persons. Courtesy of Mrs. Renetta Norris, Hartington, Nebraska.
98. Interview with Bramner Leacox (Lee Williams), May 8, 1983.
99. Recollections, KCD; See also Harl A. Dalstrom and Kay Calame Dalstrom, "Dance Band on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History*, 46 (Summer, 1979), pp. 12, 14, and Russel B. Nye, "Saturday Night at the Paradise Ballroom; or, Dance Halls in the Twenties," *Journal of Popular Culture*, VII (Summer, 1973) p. 20.