

Dance Band on the Northern Plains: Bob Calamé and His Music in North Dakota, 1949-1957

by Harl A. Dalstrom and Kay Calamé Dalstrom

In the mid-20th century, dancing was a popular diversion in North Dakota and in all of the Plains states. Many small towns held dances on a weekly basis through the summer; others had dances on special occasions such as fairs, baseball tournaments, high school proms, weddings or annual celebrations. Music for these dances was supplied by a variety of bands, some of which were fairly local in nature and which traveled a distance of less than 200 miles to fulfill their engagements. Occasionally a "name" band of national reputation might be brought in from Chicago or the East, but a large percentage of the dances were played by what were known as "road" or "territory" bands.¹

Territory bands differed from local bands in several respects. Local bands were usually comprised of musicians who made their livings in some other occupation and supplemented their income by playing one or two "jobs" a week. These bands generally traveled by car and were limited in the distance from home which they could travel, especially on a week night when the musicians had to be at their regular employment on the next day. Territory bands, on the other hand, were composed of musicians whose full-time occupation was music. These bands would travel more or less continuously and might play in from seven to 20 or more states. Dancers tended to respond with more enthusiasm for the territory bands since they were full-time operations whose musicians might come from all parts of the country. A popular territory band could also be expected to command higher fees than the local bands.²

The method of transportation which enabled a territory band to travel continuously and which was singular to the occupation was the "sleeper bus." A sleeper bus was a vehicle which had sleeping accommodations for the musicians in the form of tiers of bunk beds. It somewhat resembled a Pullman car on wheels and allowed the performers to sleep as the bus was driven to the next engagement. The buses used varied greatly in style and comfort from converted school buses to custom-built semi-trailers pulled by truck tractors. Facilities might include electricity (battery and/or 120 volt), water system, bathroom, and private compartments for female singers. The buses could accommodate from seven to thirteen or fourteen people and although none were luxurious, some were fairly comfortable. The great advantage of the sleeper bus was that it enabled the band to travel up to 450 or 500 miles between engagements. Territory bands might have their headquarters in one city and return only five or six times a year.³

One such territory band was known as "Bob Calamé and His Music" and had its headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska. The band was in existence from October, 1948, to September, 1957. Calamé (1914-1967), a native of Grand Island, Nebraska, was a sax man who also composed and arranged. He learned his trade in the 1930's, playing with groups in the Midwest and also the East. He was with Lawrence Welk at the Hotel William Penn in Pittsburgh where he served as Welk's arranger. It was then that he composed "Bubbles in the Wine," which was specifically intended to be the Welk theme song.⁴

Setting off on his own, Calamé organized a road band which toured Nebraska and adjacent states by automobile between 1938 and 1941. After American entrance into World War II, Calamé worked for the Union Pacific Railroad as a brakeman and conductor, but his interest in music

¹Recollections of Kay Calamé Dalstrom. (Hereafter cited as "Recollections, KCD.") An example of a nationally-known band playing in the state was Duke Ellington's performance at the Crystal Ballroom in Fargo in 1940. This appearance resulted in one of Ellington's best recordings. See Nat Hentoff, "In 1940, the Duke Was King," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 27, 1978, review supplement, 24.

²Recollections, KCD.

³*Ibid.*; Date Books of Performances of "Bob Calamé and His Music," 1948-1957, in possession of Mrs. Jan Calamé, Omaha, Nebraska. (Hereafter cited as "Date Books.") The authors used these date books as a guide to the newspapers cited in this article.

⁴Interviews by authors with Jan Calamé, Longbow Lake, Kenora, Ontario, July 4, 1978, Omaha, Nebraska, October 22, 1978 (Hereafter cited as "interview, JKC."); Recollections of Bob Calamé during performance at American Legion Pavilion, Breckenridge, Minnesota, during recording of broadcast by radio station KBMW, Breckenridge-Wahpeton, September 10, 1950. A copy of this recording has been deposited at the State Historical Society of North Dakota (Hereafter cited as "KBMW broadcast."). Bob Calamé erred in this recollection of his dates of service with Lawrence Welk.

Kay Calamé Dalstrom, daughter of Bob Calamé, and her mother, Jan Kahley Calamé, often traveled with the Calamé band through North Dakota and other states.

persisted. In 1948 he decided to start another band and return to the road.⁵

In style, the Calamé band combined features of Jan Garber, Sammy Kaye and Guy Lombardo. The band was what was known as a “two-beat” band, i.e., emphasis was placed on the first and third beats. While this style was sometimes frowned upon by more sophisticated musicians, the “boom-chuck” sound of the rhythm section made this kind of music highly danceable and brought return engagements in North Dakota and elsewhere. The style was not easy to play and required the ability to read music as well as dexterity on the individual instrument. Among musicians the style was

⁵Interview, JKC, July 4, 1978; Recollections, KCD.

⁶*Ibid.*; Persons who recalled Calamé’s North Dakota appearances emphasized the danceable quality of his music. Telephone interviews by authors with Mrs. Willard Jenner, Antler, N. Dak., and Mrs. William Haines, Binford, N. Dak., December 29, 1978; Telephone interview by Harl A. Dalstrom with Mrs. Olga Shuman, Antler, N. Dak., January 8, 1979; Donald V. Shuman, Antler, N. Dak., to authors, January 3, 1979. Mrs. Jenner described Calamé’s music as “relaxing and liting.” Harry Kline, Westhope, N. Dak., in telephone interview with authors, January 8, 1979, recalled that the music of Bob Calamé’s band was pre-World War II in style. Eugenia I. Frigaard, Cooperstown, N. Dak., to authors, November 6, 1978; Harry Middaugh, Lansford, N. Dak., to authors, November 13, 1978; Walter Butler, Gardena, N. Dak., to authors, November 16, 1978, and Mrs. Garnet Flack, Edinburg, N. Dak., to authors, January 2, 1979, had favorable recollections of the Calamé band.

⁷Interview, JKC, July 4, 1978.

⁸Telephone interview by authors with Monte McDaniels, McVile, N. Dak., December 29, 1978.

⁹Recollections, KCD.

¹⁰Interview, Monte McDaniels, December 29, 1978.

¹¹Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978. At least one dance advertisement noted McDaniels’ local origins. See *Griggs County Sentinel-Courier* (Cooperstown), July 21, 1955.

¹²Interview with Monte McDaniels, December 29, 1978.

known as “Mickey” (from the term, “Mickey Mouse”) because virtually every note played was written and there was very little opportunity for the improvisation which most musicians like to do. The normal instrumentation for the Calamé band was three saxes, two trumpets, one trombone, piano, bass, drums, male vocalist and Calamé himself sometimes doubling on sax. With the exception of about a half dozen tunes, Calamé wrote all the arrangements for the band.⁶

Personnel for the band was made up of musicians from all over the country, including many from the Midwest. Over the years, the age range was from 18 to 55. Some were right out of school and were having their first professional experience. Many men, particularly those in lead positions, were older and had experience with other groups and road bands.⁷

One vocalist, Monte McDaniels, came from Glenfield, North Dakota, and was hired under somewhat unusual circumstances. The band was playing at the Red Willow Lake Resort north of Binford. The wife of the dance manager asked Calamé to let McDaniels, then a college student, sing a number or two with the band.⁸ As a rule, band leaders dreaded such requests because the “vocalists” usually were far from good and could even be an embarrassment. Yet such requests were normally honored. McDaniels was an exception because his voice was excellent.⁹ He was hired on the spot and joined the band the following night at Minto, North Dakota.¹⁰ Due to his good voice and personal charm, McDaniels proved to be one of the band’s most popular singers.¹¹ Returning to college that Fall, he worked again with the Calamé band, several summers later.¹²

By 1957, the Calamé band had extended its territory to 27 states, ranging from Florida to Alberta, Canada, still con-

Bob Calamé and His Music (ca. 1949)

—Courtesy Jan
Kabley Calamé



**Bob Calamé and His Music:
North Dakota Performances**

Size of Community: (1950 Census)*	Number of Communities:
Under 500	21
500-999	7
1,000-2,499	16
Over 2,500	11

**Bob Calamé and His Music:
Four or More Performances
in North Dakota**

Size of Community (1950 Census)*	Number of Communities
Under 500	9
500-999	1
1,000-2,499	4
Over 2,500	5

*U.S. Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population: 1960*. Vol. 1, *Characteristics of the Population*. Part 36, North Dakota, Table 7 — Population of Counties, By Minor Civil Divisions: 1940 to 1960, 36:13-36:19 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing office, 1963.)

Some performances were not in towns proper. For example, date book references to Binford were actually performed at nearby Red Willow Lake.

tinuing to play frequently in North Dakota. From its first appearance at Mott on April 20, 1949, to its last performance at Antler on July 25, 1957, the band played 219 engagements in 36 of North Dakota's 53 counties. The towns in which Calamé played ranged in size from the cities such as Grand Forks, Fargo, Bismarck and Dickinson to very small places such as Antler (Bottineau County), Portal (Burke), Starkweather (Ramsey), and Minto (Walsh). Performances at small communities predominated, yet because many people drove a considerable distance dance attendance might far exceed the population of the host town.¹³

The sleeper bus in which the Calamé band traveled after mid-June, 1952, consisted of a semi-trailer pulled by a Ford F-750 tractor. This vehicle replaced a smaller, less comfortable bus which the band had used since it went on the road in the autumn of 1948. Calame decided to use a Ford tractor because he felt that it was easier to find Ford garages in the rural areas than to find other manufacturer's dealerships. Maintenance and repair on the tractor were absolutely essential to making dance engagements. Since Ford equipment was common, a good filling station mechanic could work on the tractor if necessary. Despite hundreds of thousands of miles of travel, including some grueling jumps between engagements, the Calamé band never missed a performance until it ceased operation.¹⁴

The 1952 sleeper bus was moderately comfortable, albeit hardly a glamorous way to travel.¹⁵ The trailer was equipped with an air conditioning unit operated by circulating water through an absorbant material while a fan forced air through this medium. The circulation of air had a cooling effect if the humidity of the area was not excessive. The nose of the trailer [see cover photo] was the storage area for the equipment and also housed the water tanks. To the rear was the compartment for Calamé and his family. Behind this were the bunks for the ten band members. The trailer had a water system, but no restroom or shower facilities. When the bus reached its destination, it would be parked at a service station or other facility where an external source of electrical power could be utilized. Here the water tanks would also be filled.¹⁶

There were four categories of sponsorship for dances in

North Dakota and other states in the region: (1) privately-operated establishments, such as the Crystal Ballroom in Fargo or the Red Willow Lake Resort north of Binford; (2) private clubs, such as the Elks Clubs in Bismarck and Dickinson; (3) small town dance halls or pavilions operated by the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, and (4) special event dances, such as town celebrations, college proms, wedding dances, and National Guard balls. Since small town bookings were especially important to the road bands, the sponsorship role of the veteran's organizations, especially the American Legion, should be emphasized strongly. It is very unlikely that dances would have been as important as they were in the leisure activity of people in the Midwest and Great Plains had it not been for the Legion and VFW. Moreover, dance profits allowed these organizations to contribute to civic projects or charities.¹⁷

The facilities in which the band played varied a great deal. Naturally, the larger towns tended to have better appointed ballrooms or clubs. The typical small town dance hall consisted of a pavilion, the sides of which could be opened to let in fresh air. These pavilions were often equipped with screens to negate the mosquito problem. In some places, the building might serve a multi-purpose use and function as a roller skating rink and movie hall.¹⁸ Most of the smaller towns did not have year-around facilities. In smaller communities,

¹³Date Books, 1949-1957; Recollections, KCD. See above tables.

¹⁴Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, July 4, 1978. Apparently, not all bands were as reliable as was Calamé in meeting their engagements. See *Bowman County Pioneer* (Bowman), October 4, 1951.

¹⁵Recollections, KCD. Interview with Monte McDaniels, December 29, 1978.

¹⁶Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978.

¹⁷For examples of special event dances see *Dickey County Leader* (Ellendale), May 16, 1957; *Mott Pioneer Press*, June 7, 1951; for illustrations of the many Legion and/or VFW sponsored dances, see *Mouse River Farmers Press* (Towner), June 23, 1949; *Kenmare News*, June 15, 1950. Interviews with JKC, Omaha, Nebraska, January 7, 1979, and Mrs Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978, also stressed the importance of the American Legion as a sponsoring organization.

¹⁸Recollections, KCD; interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978; *Renville County Farmer* (Mohall), May 24, 1951; *McKenzie County Farmer* (Watford City), September 1, 1955; *Foster County Independent* (Carrington), June 17, 1954.

dances were commonly held from mid-May through mid to late September. Some pavilions might be a part of a city park, as was the case in Minto; others were located out of town on county roads as at Stump Lake.¹⁹

The Minto Park Pavilion and the Red Willow Lake Resort were very popular dancing spots in the eastern part of the state. Minto, which held its dances on Wednesday evenings, sported "a new hardwood floor" to mark its 25th anniversary in 1949. The following year, the great flood removed the Minto Park Pavilion from its foundations, but it was soon back in operation.²⁰ Red Willow Lake, still operating, had been a resort since 1917. With lakeside cottages, an abundance of trees, a dining room, and softball and baseball facilities, Red Willow Lake was a very enjoyable place. In the 1950's most dancers came from within a 40-mile radius, but if a popular band, such as Bob Calamé's, were playing, some people might come from as far as 80 miles distant. For Calamé, Red Willow Lake was a Tuesday booking, normally a poor dance night, yet his band would draw from 400 to 600 persons. The numerous gravel roads did not deter persons from seeking good entertainment.²¹

Dances at Antler in Bottineau County were also extremely popular. The Antler Memorial Park pavilion, owned by the American Legion, was situated about a mile and one-half north of town on a scenic, wooded 15-acre tract on Antler Creek.²² The pavilion had an excellent dance floor measuring

¹⁹Recollections, KCD.

²⁰*Walsh County Record* (Grafton), June 9, 1949, July 27, 1950.

²¹Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978; Interview, Mrs. William Haines, December 29, 1978. The Haines were proprietors of the Red Willow Lake Resort in the 1950's and continue in that capacity.

²²Interview with Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978; Donald V. Shuman to authors, January 3, 1979. Mrs. Jenner, wife of the late Willard Jenner who was dance manager at Antler, worked at the pavilion on dance nights. Mr. Shuman's recollections were based upon his membership in the Antler post of the American Legion and his attendance at the dances.

²³Donald V. Shuman to authors, January 3, 1979.

²⁴Interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978.

²⁵*Ibid.*; Donald V. Shuman to authors, January 3, 1979; telephone conversation by Harl A. Dalstrom with Mrs. Olga Shuman, January 8, 1979; Interview with Mr. Harry Kline, January 8, 1979. Mr. Kline was dance manager at Antler until 1950. Although recollections as to how far people came to dances at Antler varied, there was general agreement that many persons came a considerable distance.

²⁶Interview with Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978; Donald V. Shuman to authors, January 3, 1979; Harry Middaugh to authors, January 5, 1979. These estimates of attendance at Calamé dances differ somewhat, yet they agree that his band drew very well.

Like Antler and Red Willow Lake, the Hillcrest Pavilion at Tower City was a very popular place, drawing average crowds of 500 persons from a fifty-mile radius. Mr. Charles Measor, Tower City, to authors, March 13, 1979.

²⁷Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978.

²⁸*Bowman County Pioneer*, October 4, 1951, July 17, August 21, 1952, May 28, August 27, October 8, 1953, July 21, September 15, 1955. Later Calamé appearances in Bowman were at the Flagstone Terrace. See *Bowman County Pioneer*, August 9, 1956, January 24, 1957.

²⁹Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978.

³⁰Recollections, KCD.

³¹Interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978.

³²Recollections, KCD.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Dickinson Press*, August 30, 1952, October 13, 1953, May 12, 1954.

³⁵Recording of broadcast of Bob Calamé and His Music from the Crystal Ballroom, Fargo, radio station KFGO, Fargo, September 29, 1951. (A copy of this recording has been deposited at the State Historical Society of North Dakota.); KBMW broadcast.

120 feet by 40 feet, which was rather large for a small community.²³ Aside from dancing and roller-skating at the pavilion, swimming and picnicking were available.²⁴ There were few dance halls in the immediate area; hence, people drove from 30 to perhaps as much as 100 miles each way to attend dances at Antler. Quite a few people came from Minot, 54 miles south. Since the pavilion was approximately one-half mile from the international boundary, many Canadians were present. The port of entry normally closed at 10:00 p.m., but the American Legion had an arrangement, approved in Ottawa, whereby Canada Customs reopened from 2:00 to 3:00 a.m., on dance nights.²⁵

Although Antler had a population of only 217 in 1950, popular bands, such as "Bob Calamé and His Music" and "Whoopie John's Orchestra" from New Ulm, Minnesota, drew very large crowds. Attendance at Calamé dances has been estimated at from 300 to 600 persons.²⁶ At other places, the dance crowd would start to thin out about one-half hour before the music ended, but at Antler people stayed in large numbers "until that very last note was blown." On several occasions, Calamé and the dance manager arranged for the band to play for another half hour. Even so, many of the dancers were not ready to go home.²⁷

Bowman was a very important spot on Bob Calamé's itinerary. There, most dances were held at the Quonset Ballroom.²⁸ This large structure had some serious acoustical problems and after his first performance there, Calamé suggested that piano wire be strung back and forth below the ceiling. This was done and the difficulty was largely corrected. Bowman crowds were large and the many people from the surrounding cattle country "whooped it up" in an orderly way. Unlike places in the eastern and northern part of the state, dances at Bowman had a distinctly western flavor.²⁹

As was the case in all rural areas in the Plains, pavilions had electricity, but usually lacked running water or heat.³⁰ At Antler, for example, the pavilion had its own lighting plant which sometimes faltered during dances. This system was used for several years after REA lines brought electricity to the area.³¹ Bands carried their own equipment such as a public address system, spot lights, music racks, and music lights, but did depend upon the dance hall to provide the piano. The quality of the pianos varied. Sometimes one or several keys did not work and many needed tuning. Exposure to extremes of temperature made it difficult to keep pianos in the best of condition.³²

The larger towns and cities often had more elaborate facilities.³³ Elks Club members in Dickinson could dance to the music of Bob Calamé and enjoy a dinner costing from \$1.25 to \$1.50 per person.³⁴ Sometimes remote radio broadcasts from such places as the Crystal Ballroom in Fargo and the American Legion Club in Breckenridge-Wahpeton were used as advertising for the ballrooms. People were encouraged to "come on out" and future band appearances were announced periodically during the broadcast.³⁵

Bookings for the Calamé band as well as some other territory bands such as Lee Williams, Little John Beecher, Al

Hudson, Preston Love and Jay Jamonte were handled by the National Orchestra Service in Omaha. The agency and its field representatives were responsible for setting up the dates, writing the contracts and filing them with the American Federation of Musicians, keeping the "jumps" or distances between the jobs down to manageable proportions, and supplying advertising material, if desired. For this, the agency received a commission of ten percent of the band's contracted fees.³⁶

Local arrangements for the dances were made, usually months in advance, by the dance manager and the booking agency. The contracts specified the date, hours, number of musicians, and fees. A minimum fee for a dance in a small town on Monday or Tuesday evenings in the 1950's was \$250. As might be expected, week-end performances brought the best contracts. Although a good contract on a Wednesday night might stipulate a fee of \$350, a Saturday night might bring to Calamé a gross of from \$500 to \$700. In short, a variety of circumstances governed the fees. Although Antler was a very small town which was almost always booked for Thursday performances, the popularity of the place resulted in contracts for up to \$400.³⁷

Subtracted from this gross income were all costs of operation, such as maintenance and operation of the bus, the booking agency fee, musician's wages and the "union tax," a sum paid to the local musician's union in the area in which the band was performing. Musicians on the Calamé band received weekly wages of approximately \$50 to \$85. The union tax was ten percent of the local wage scale. As elsewhere, there were a number of local unions in North Dakota and each had its own scale. In sum, operating a territory band entailed an extremely large overhead and did not provide an easy path to financial security; yet by the mid-1950's Bob Calame was successful.³⁸

The role of the dance manager differed from place to place. In some cities in which dancing was combined with the operation of a club which served meals, the manager might hold a full-time position. In smaller communities the dance manager might be a volunteer or part-time employee for the local chapter of the American Legion or VFW which sponsored dances or owned the pavilion. If the dance hall or pavilion were privately owned, the manager might be a local merchant or farmer. In the border town of Portal, the dance manager was also a U.S. Customs Agent.³⁹ In Antler, one dance manager was a rural mail carrier who received a small stipend for managing the pavilion.⁴⁰

Advertising, although encouraged by the booking agency, was left to the discretion of the dance manager or sponsoring group since the costs incurred were theirs.⁴¹ Many operators purchased standard newspaper cuts from National Orchestra Service; others composed their own copy, often using banner announcements which ran the entire width of the front page of the local newspaper.⁴² The locally-composed ads might be elaborate as in the case of Flaxton (Burke County) where a front-page billing proclaimed: "The Band which is often featured at the Pla-mor Ballroom in Kansas City and the Rainbow Ballroom in Denver will be in Flaxton, Wednesday,

June 6th." The same issue also carried a banner ad: "You've heard on the air 'Bubbles in the Wine' written by Bob Calamé — See him in person." It was normal practice to emphasize Calamé's having composed Lawrence Welk's theme song, but this was particularly true in Welk's home state.⁴³

Some dance managers chose to stress that the band was not local. For a dance in Portal, a front page ad included a press picture (supplied by the booking agent) and the statement: "Direct from National Orchestra Service, Omaha, Nebraska . . . 11-Piece Nationally Famous Orchestra."⁴⁴

Some dance managers were more creative than others:

Ladies are asked to wear formal dresses for this dance, if possible. The men are asked to attend in uniform — if you can still get into 'em. However, do not let this keep you from the dance. All military men and women, former military men and women, and the public are invited to attend and enjoy one of the finest social events of the year in Hettinger.⁴⁵

This dance was sponsored by the National Guard and admission was \$2.00 per couple.⁴⁶

Other dance managers also incorporated a sense of humor into their ads. For a dance in Bowman, an ad said: "If you are overworked, in a rut, having family troubles or other ailments Bob Calamé is your doctor. Meet your friends, relax and dance on a good floor to the music of Bob's soothing music." [Sic]⁴⁷ A Fargo proprietor chose to emphasize the prestige and decorum of his establishment:

Dance Tonite Crystal Ballroom
Clean Beautiful Refined
Well Disciplined Modern
It's A Mark of Distinction
To Be Seen At The
Crystal
Only 57¢ plus tax
Bob Calamé [sic]
And His Orchestra⁴⁸

Newspaper dance ads generally did not mention the cost of admission. Those which did typically gave the charge as \$1.00 per person, although admissions might be as low as fifty cents. At Kenmare, season tickets were sold for the American Legion-VFW-sponsored dances.⁴⁹ Admission prices

³⁶Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, July 4, 1978.

³⁷Interviews, JKC, July 4, October 22, 1978. Harry Kline, interview, January 8, 1979, confirmed Mrs. Calamé's recollection of early fees at Antler.

³⁸Interview, JKC, July 4, 1978.

³⁹*Ibid.*, October 22, 1978; Recollections, KCD.

⁴⁰Interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978.

⁴¹Interview, JKC, July 4, 1978.

⁴²For examples of advertising copy supplied by National Orchestra Service, see *Bowbells Tribune*, August 20, 1953; *Emmons County Record* (Linton), September 7, 1949, June 16, 1955; *Mott Pioneer Press*, April 14, 1949, June 6, 1951. Examples of banner ads are found in the *Bismarck Tribune*, April 17, 1953; *Dickinson Press*, August 30, 1952; *Foster County Independent*, June 10, 1954.

⁴³*Flaxton Times and Portal International*, May 31, 1951. See also: *Bottineau Courant*, May 10, August 3, 1950, for emphasis upon Calamé's past association with Welk.

⁴⁴*Bowbells Tribune*, August 20, 1953.

⁴⁵*Adams County Record* (Hettinger), May 12, 1954.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Bowman County Pioneer*, August 21, 1952. See also *Grant County News* (Elgin), September 16, 23, 1954, for enthusiastic locally written advertising of Calame dances.

⁴⁸*Fargo Forum*, September 29, 1951.

⁴⁹See *Griggs County Sentinel-Courier*, July 21, 1949, August 21, 1952, July 21, 1955; *Bismarck Tribune*, April 17, 1953; *Kenmare News*, August 31, 1950.

to dances in North Dakota were similar to those charged in both large and small communities elsewhere in the region.⁵⁰

Not all dance advertising was done through the newspapers. For example, Red Willow Resort, in addition to newspaper ads, would distribute from 60 to 100 posters in restaurants, filling stations, and bars. Cards announcing the monthly dance schedule were sent to the regular Red Willow patrons, while at Minto cards listing bands and the dates of their appearances in the May to September season were distributed.⁵¹ The Minto dance schedule cards included short advertisements for a variety of local firms, including taverns and liquor stores which were open on dance evenings. The manager of the Antler Pavilion placed posters in businesses in the

⁵⁰Bob Calamé press book, in possession of Mrs. Jan Calamé, Omaha, Nebraska. It also cost \$1.00 to attend a Calamé dance in Omaha, the headquarters of the band.

⁵¹Interview, Mrs. William Haines, December 29, 1978; Dance Programs, Minto Park Pavilion, 1950, 1954, Bob Calamé press book.

⁵²Interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978.

⁵³For example, see *Bottineau Courant*, June 22, 1950; *Bowman County Pioneer*, September 3, October 18, 1953; *Foster County Independent*, June 17, 1954; *Griggs County Sentinel-Courier*, July 3, 30, 1953; *Pembina New Era*, June 10, 1949; *Walsh County Record*, May 28, 1953.

area and ran an occasional ad in the *Minot News*. Yet people simply knew that Thursday was the dance night at Antler and the manager felt that advertising was for the most part unnecessary.⁵²

Whatever the advertising, the number of territory and local bands playing in North Dakota in the 1950's was considerable. Aside from those groups already mentioned, one could dance to the music of "Chub Widdel & his Westerners," Buddy Bair's band, Eugene Kahn's band, "Ruth Coleman and her All-Girl Orchestra," the "Bohemian Band of Dickinson," "The one and Only WNAX Bohemian Band" from Yankton, South Dakota, and "Juel Johnson's Rhythm Rascals," to name but a few. Some Black bands, including Preston Love's group from Omaha, "Little Jack Johnson" ("One of Kansas City's finest Colored Bands"), and the "Dixie Ramblers" came to the state. Naturally, holidays brought the greatest influx of musical groups. On the Memorial Day week-end in 1953, for example, seven bands played in the Grafton area.⁵³

Dances were often held for special occasions. A "sunrise" dance, usually held on the night of July 3-4, would

Touring dance bands depended upon publicity prepared by their booking agents and managers. This example of the art of ballyhoo stresses Calamé's connection with Lawrence Welk, a well-recognized name in North Dakota, and was prepared by the National Orchestra Service of Omaha.

—Courtesy Jan Kabley Calamé

IT'S A SMALL WORLD-----



Lawrence Welk, of Champagne Music fame, and Bob Calamé, co-composer of the famous Welk theme song, "Bubbles In Wine", again cross paths. The two orchestra leaders were playing engagements within thirty miles of each other and arranged to get together "just for old times".

After a ride in Welk's new convertible, the two spent more than an hour bringing each other up to date on what had happened since Bob Calamé resigned as arranger with the Welk band to organize his own orchestra.



begin at 11:00 or midnight and last until 3:00 or 4:00 a.m.⁵⁴ Each August 2, the town of Mountain (Pembina County) hosted a long-established Icelandic celebration at which Bob Calamé's band made several appearances. Aside from the dance, the August 2 celebration included a carnival midway, baseball, and other attractions. The local American Legion post sponsored this event.⁵⁵

Special town celebrations were also a reason to have a dance — or sometimes two:

Thousands of visitors are expected in Cavalier Monday, July 2, when the city will host at pre-dedication ceremonies marking

1954 Dance Program
Minto Park Pavilion
Minto, N. D.
 Dance Every Wednesday
 Rain or Shine

32nd SUCCESSIVE YEAR
 OF GOOD ENTERTAINMENT

Featuring the More Popular Bands

★

* May 5—Russ Carlyle
 May 12—Bob Calamé
 May 19—Del Clayton
 May 26—Verne Beyers

June 2—Little John Beecher
 June 9—Ronnie Bartley
 June 16—Kliff Riggs
 June 23—George Schoen
 June 30—Bob Calamé

 CUT out and place in billfold

MINTO CAFE
 Home Cooked Foods
 MEALS LUNCHES
 Roms, Evelyn & Earl Osowski

GILL'S BAR
 Open Wednesday Nights 'Til One
 Booth Service

MINTO CO-OP OIL CO.
 Ray Narloch—Joe Lisakowski
 Mobilgas Phone 4491 Mobiloil

JOHN'S BAR
 Open Dance Nights 'Til One
 Wine—Liquor—Beer
 Off and On Sale

MINTO BAR
 Harry's and Ewald's
 Off and On Sale
 Open Dance Nights Until One

Local dance managers used several ways to advertise the visits of touring bands, including the wallet card. Minto was a favorite stop for Bob Calamé and His Music; the band played at the Park Pavilion 20 times between 1949 and 1957.

the new pavement, while a dance in the auditorium will feature Bob Calamé and his orchestra. Committee members said a charge of 50 cents will be made for the auditorium dance.⁵⁷

Dignitaries who were invited for the event included all United States Senators from North Dakota and Minnesota, the governors of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota, the premier of Manitoba, and the mayors of neighboring communities.⁵⁸ Despite this enthusiasm, apparently only Averell Harriman and the mayor of Cavalier attended.⁵⁹

Dances in rural areas were very much family affairs. Sometimes entire families, including the children, attended and the result was a good mix of age groups. As Mrs. Bob (Jan) Calamé said, those persons attending in rural North Dakota ranged from "babes in arms and infants to elderly — some handicapped elderly on crutches or walking with a cane would come to the dance . . ." simply to watch and listen to the band. It was not uncommon, as the evening progressed, to see babies on improvised palates or younger children asleep on chairs or benches along the sides of the dance floor. Prior to dances or during intermission at some pavilions, children might play or slide on the freshly waxed floor. Many of the children would visit and sometimes the girls, perhaps learning the social graces, would dance with their fathers.⁶⁰

Aside from the clubs in the cities, most North Dakota dance halls had no liquor or beer licenses, although soft drinks were usually served. To compensate for this, some people brought their own bottles, left them in their cars, and then left the hall periodically. Mixed drinks carried into the pavilion usually were consumed discreetly. Dance managers, sensitive to the reputation of their establishments, did not allow drunkenness or rowdiness. One local law officer was commonly present and sometimes several attended.⁶¹ At Antler, for example, two Legionnaires would be deputized for dance nights and occasionally a deputy from the Bottineau County Sheriff's office was present.⁶² The fact that many of the people in the dance crowds knew each other also encouraged good conduct.⁶³

Dances in North Dakota were unique in one respect. The standard hours for a dance in other parts of the country were

⁵⁴Recollections, KCD; See brief reference to a July 3 "sunrise dance" in *The Sun* (Jamestown), June 25, 1956.

⁵⁵*Cavalier County Republican* (Langdon), July 27, 1950; *Walsh County Record*, August 2, 1954.

⁵⁶*Cavalier Chronicle*, June 28, 1956.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, July 5, 1956.

⁶⁰Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978. Mrs. Willard Jenner (interview, December 29, 1978), Mr. Donald Shuman (letter, January 3, 1979), Mr. Harry Middaugh (letter, January 5, 1979), and Mr. Harry Kline (interview, January 8, 1979) agreed that there was a good mix of age groups at Antler, although Mr. Middaugh recalled that young married couples were the most evident group. Recollections of the presence of children at Antler dances differ slightly. Mrs. William Haines said that at Red Willow Lake the 18-26 year-old dancers were the most numerous but that persons in their 60's were also present. She remembered that entire families were especially likely to come when an "umpah" (polka-style) or a western band was playing.

⁶¹Recollections, KCD; Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978. Mrs. William Haines and Mrs. Willard Jenner, interviews, December 29, 1978, emphasized the concern of dance proprietors for good decorum.

⁶²Interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978.

⁶³Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978.

near completion of a half-million dollar street project, and the annual Pembina County Veteran's day will be observed . . .⁵⁶

Other events for the day included an opening address by Governor Averell S. Harriman of New York, then a contender for the Democratic Presidential nomination, the Miss North Dakota beauty contest, free baseball, a parade, and a water sports exhibition.

Evening events at the Monday celebration will include a fireworks display at the airport grounds at about 9 PM, and two dances. A free dance, with music by the Happy Five, will be on

**BOB CALAMÉ AND HIS MUSIC:
NORTH DAKOTA PERFORMANCES**

1953

PLACE AND DATE OF PERFORMANCE	PLACE AND DATE OF PREVIOUS PERFORMANCE	APPROXIMATE ROAD MILEAGE
Bismarck (4-18)	Oldham, So. Dak. (4-17)	346
Gordon, Nebr. (4-20 . . .)*	Bismarck (4-18)	409
Oakes (5-6)	Crofton, Nebr. (5-5)	309
Ghent, Minn. (5-7 . . .)	Oakes (5-6)	205
Cando (5-12)	New Ulm, Minn. (5-11)	463
Sauk Centre, Minn. (5-13 . . .)	Cando (5-12)	374
Devils Lake (5-26)	Hoven, So. Dak. (5-25)	277
Chamberlain, So. Dak. (5-27 . . .)	Devils Lake (5-26)	359
Fingal (5-29)	Forestburg, So. Dak. (5-28)	247
Halstad, Minn. (5-30 . . .)	Fingal (5-29)	91
La Moure (6-1)	Breckenridge, Minn. (5-31)	91
Langdon (6-2)	La Moure (6-1)	192
Minto (6-3)	Langdon (6-2)	75
Starkweather (6-4)	Minto (6-3)	82
Bowman (6-5)	Starkweather (6-4)	427
Lusk, Wyo. (6-6 . . .)	Bowman (6-5)	291
Langdon (7-7)	Bemidji, Minn. (7-5)	217
Battle Lake, Minn. (7-8)	Langdon (7-7)	257
Starkweather (7-9)	Battle Lake, Minn. (7-8)	255
Pekin (7-10)	Starkweather (7-9)	67
Halstad, Minn. (7-11 . . .)	Pekin (7-10)	98
Binford (Red Willow Lake) (7-14)	Breckenridge, Minn. (7-12)	175
Antler (7-16)	Binford (7-14)	230
Portal (7-17)	Antler (7-16)	89
Mission, So. Dak. (7-18 . . .)	Portal (7-17)	497
Devils Lake (8-14)	Ortonville, Minn. (8-13)	275
Aberdeen, So. Dak. (8-15)	Devils Lake (8-14)	201
Binford (Red Willow Lake) (8-18)	Mentor, Minn. (8-16)	140
Minto (8-19)	Binford (8-18)	116
Starkweather (8-20)	Minto (8-19)	82
Fingal (8-21)	Starkweather (8-20)	160
Halstad, Minn. (8-22)	Fingal (8-21)	91
Langdon (8-25)	Halstad, Minn. (8-22)	159
Portal (8-26)	Langdon (8-25)	216
Antler (8-27)	Portal (8-26)	89
Bowman (8-28)	Antler (8-27)	338
Gettysburg, So. Dak. (8-29 . . .)	Bowman (8-28)	227
Minto (9-30)	Soo Valley, Minn. [sic] (9-27) [location uncertain; apparently Jackson County, Minn.]	388
Starkweather (10-1)	Minto (9-30)	82
Portal (10-2)	Starkweather (10-1)	192
Halstad, Minn. (10-3 . . .)	Portal (10-2)	351
Devils Lake (10-13)	Rapid City, So. Dak. (10-11)	538
Dickinson (10-14)	Devils Lake (10-13)	305
Bowman (10-15)	Dickinson (10-14)	78
Pipestone, Minn. (10-16 . . .)	Bowman (10-15)	477
Bismarck (11-14)	Oldham, So. Dak. (11-13)	346

* . . . indicates a series of performances outside North Dakota

9:00 p.m., to 1:00 a.m. In rural areas of North Dakota, however, dances did not begin until 10:00 p.m., and lasted until 2:00 a.m. Due to the northern latitude, darkness fell at a later hour, enabling farmers to work longer in the fields; hence, the later starting time. The usual practice was to take a "supper" or "lunch break" at midnight. The refreshment stand, which did not always serve sandwiches during the rest of the evening, would prepare a "plate supper" consisting of cold sandwiches or a "sloppy-Joe"-type sandwich, sometimes called a "tavern burger," baked beans, potato chips or potato salad and garnish. If the dance were sponsored by an organization such as the American Legion, it was often the Ladies' Auxiliary which was responsible for the meal. In places with pleasant surroundings, one might eat outside the pavilion. During the break, Bob Calamé would often visit with the patrons or the dance manager, sometimes arranging performances for open dates on the band's schedule.⁶⁴

The life style of the musicians and performers traveling on road bands was unique. Due to the working hours involved, most musicians slept until the mid-hours of the day. Breakfast was taken in the early afternoon. Dinner was usually eaten around five or six o'clock because the normal custom was to be at the dance site two to three hours in advance to allow time for setting up the equipment, dressing for the job, and "warming up" on the various instruments. After the dance, the common practice was to have "night lunch." After eating, and as the bus was rolling, some persons would go to bed; others might read or talk. Some might get into a card game, played standing up and using someone's bunk as a table. As a general rule, everyone was in bed by 4:00 a.m.

A part of daily life was governed by the distance between jobs. The jumps might vary from under 70 miles to almost 500 miles. Anything over 300 to 350 miles was considered a long jump. If a long jump were coming up, Calamé would announce to his men at the closing of the dance the night before that there would be no stopping except for gasoline. Everyone was advised to go to the grocery store and get whatever they might want to eat in the way of canned goods for the next night and day. The bus would be loaded as quickly as possible after the job.

Many of the small towns had no cafes which were open late at night. If this were the case, the musicians were again advised to prepare themselves for "no eat stop" after the job. Occasionally the band would be in a small town on a holiday and would find no cafes open. Most of the men learned that it was a good idea to carry a few emergency supplies. It was also standard practice to carry emergency provisions during the Winter in the Plains states.⁶⁵

Since some of the places in North Dakota and other Plains states at which the Calamé band played were off the main highways, travel over gravel roads was fairly common. Although the bus was well-constructed, dust still filtered in, and it was sometimes necessary to stop and let every one out for fresh air. When the bus finally pulled on to pavement, the men might herald the smooth ride with a spontaneous whoop. Likewise, spring flooding sometimes caused long detours and occasionally the rig would become stuck and have to be towed from the mire.⁶⁶

Everyone would look forward to having a night or two off. The band leaders would try to schedule the routing so that the time off could be spent in as large a town as possible. In North Dakota, Grand Forks, Jamestown, Fargo and Minot were desired stop-over places. Maintenance and repair work could then be done on the equipment. In addition, everyone could get laundry and cleaning done. If the town had a music store, musicians could get what they needed in the way of supplies.

The general practice was to check into a hotel on a night off. For the men who traveled in buses without bathing facilities, this was an opportunity to bathe. For entertainment, many would go to a movie or to a baseball game. In the cities, some might go to a club to hear another group play. After a couple of days in one spot, many were glad to be on the road again. Frequently, those who had had a lot of road experience would be unable to sleep well if the bed were stationary!

Mail for the men was handled by the booking agency because of the constant traveling. All mail would be sent to the agency office and then be forwarded to General Delivery twice a week — in the case of the Calamé band, on Tuesdays and Fridays.

The constant traveling was hard on those who had families. As a result, the majority of the men at any given time were usually single. Married men on the Calamé band would often move their families to Omaha since this was the headquarters and therefore the one place the band would return to whenever possible. The life on the road was a hard one and one to which many could not adjust. Consequently, after a month or two, some would resign and return to a more normal existence. For a great many however, the nomadic existence was one which got into the blood. They truly became the Gypsies of the road.

The Calame band was in existence until September of 1957. At that time while traveling in Alabama, the bus hit an open culvert. Although no one was seriously injured, the bus was totally demolished. Replacement cost was estimated at \$40,000. Due to the cost involved and to the changing tastes in music, Calamé decided not to re-organize. The decision was probably a correct one, for the end of the era of road bands was impending.⁶⁷

It is impossible to say with certainty why this was so. The growing popularity of "rock and roll" music may well have had a negative impact upon ballroom dancing.⁶⁸ Moreover,

⁶⁴*Ibid.*; Recollections, KCD; Interviews, Mrs. William Haines and Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978; *Walsh County Record*, June 28, 1954.

⁶⁵Recollections, KCD.

⁶⁶Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978.

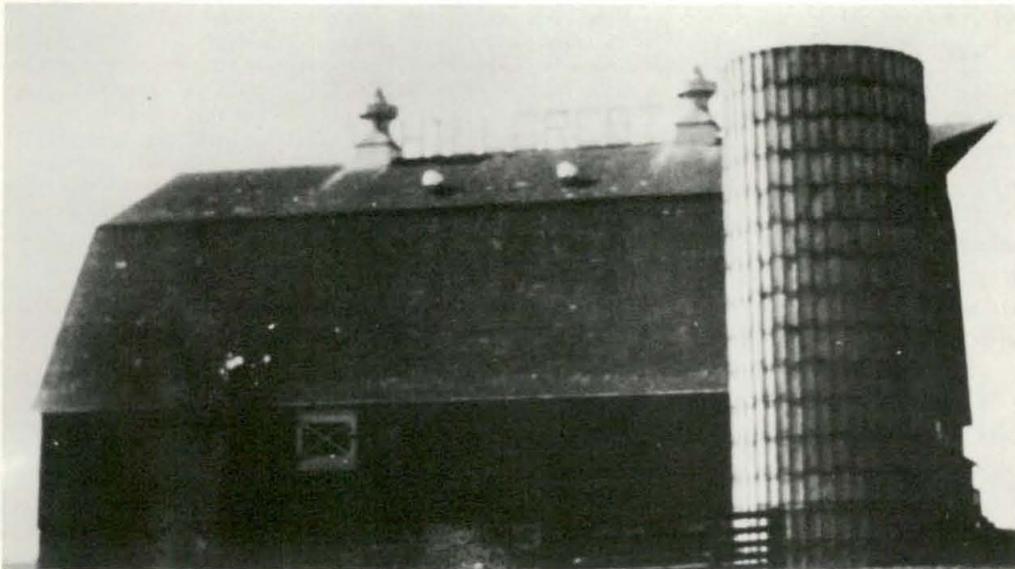
⁶⁷Recollections, KCD; Date Book, 1957.

⁶⁸Recollections, KCD; Interviews, Mrs. William Haines and Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978. Mr. Donald Shuman (letter of January 3, 1979) doubted the impact of "rock" as a decisive reason for the decline of the road bands. Mr. Harry Middaugh (letter of January 5, 1979) contended that there would still be some market for a "name band" coming to his area.

⁶⁹Interview, Mrs. William Haines, December 29, 1978. Mrs. Haines noted that the Red Willow Lake Resort adjusted to the changing tastes very successfully. Although Sammy Kaye made three appearances and Harry James came once to Red Willow Lake in the 1960's, dances there in recent years have been oriented toward teenagers. Yet in the late 1970's, Myron Sommerfeld's band from Valley City, playing music similar in style to Calamé's made July 3 appearances which brought many people who enjoyed the music of a generation past to Red Willow Lake.

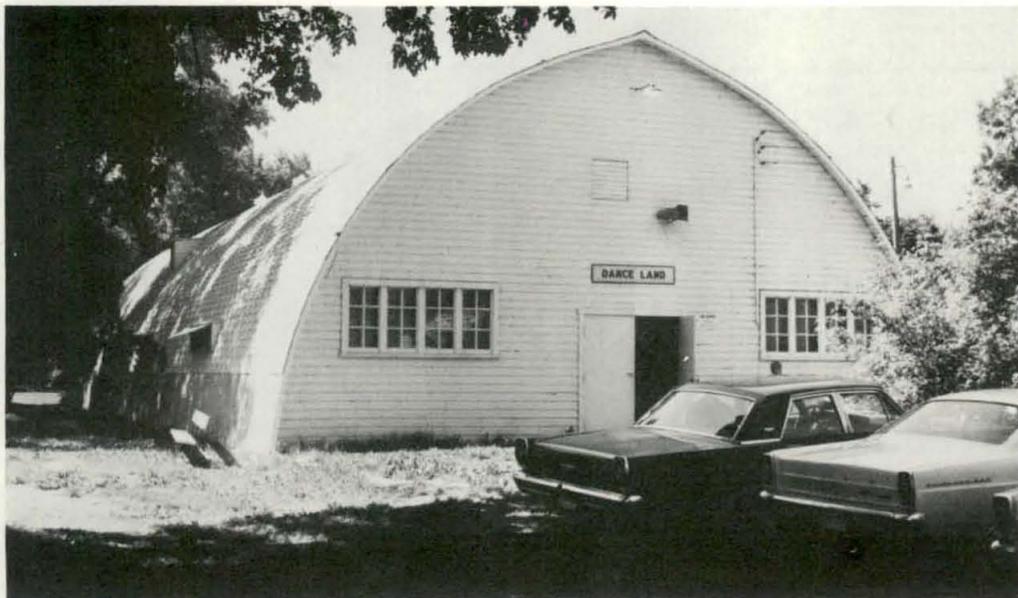


Courtesy Minot Daily News



Courtesy Charles Measor, Tower City

Courtesy Minot Daily News



Bob Calamé and His Music played in halls of every size and description in North Dakota. The Portal Community Building (top), shown here as it appeared in July, 1952, was typical of small town halls. The Hillcrest (center) near Tower City was a converted barn. Pavilions in regional parks, such as "Dance Land" in the Renville Memorial Park near Tolley, also hosted bands and drew large crowds; the photo dates from July, 1966.



The Hillcrest, located near Tower City, was a popular area dance hall. The photo was taken on August 21, 1945, one week after V-J Day, as North Dakotans welcomed a new era.

—Courtesy Charles Measor, Tower City

some band operators and dance proprietors did not adjust to the changing public tastes.⁶⁹ In North Dakota, the legalization of dancing in taverns may have contributed to the decline.⁷⁰ A variety of outdoor sports were increasingly popular diversions in both summer and winter.⁷¹ Television offered a convenient and passive form of leisure. In 1953 television stations in Fargo came on the air and within a few years the new mode of entertainment had reached the western part of the state.⁷² Still, although opinions differ, it is doubtful that TV contributed in a decisive way to the decline of ballroom dancing.⁷³ Subtle and unspoken changes of how the American family perceived itself, as a unit and as individuals, may have altered leisure activity. Whatever the causes, "territory bands" soon became a thing of the past.

⁷⁰Donald V. Shuman to authors, January 3, 1979; Interview, Mrs. Olga Shuman, January 8, 1979.

⁷¹Harry Middaugh to authors, January 5, 1979.

⁷²*Bowman County Pioneer*, August 9, September 27, 1956; *Edgeley Mail*, June 4, 1953; *Walsh County Record*, June 4, 1953; Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 535-536.

⁷³Recollections, KCD; Interview, Mrs. William Haines, December 29, 1978; Interview, JKC, October 22, 1978. Mrs. Haines suggested that the Korean War may have had a negative repercussion for ballroom dancing in that young men uprooted from their normal environment may not have learned to dance. Mrs. Calamé was very emphatic in denying that television promoted the demise of the road bands, yet Mrs. Willard Jenner (interview, December 29, 1978) and Mr. Harry Middaugh (letter of January 5, 1979) felt that TV did contribute to their passing. Russell B. Nye, in "Saturday Night at the Paradise Ballroom: Or, Dance Halls in the Twenties," *Journal of Popular Culture*, VII (Summer, 1973), 20, looking at the nation as a whole, also saw a variety of reasons for the decline of dance halls by the 1960's.

Specific local conditions brought an end to some pavilions. At Antler, a tornado struck the pavilion in the 1960's and although the structure was rebuilt, heavy snow later caused the roof to collapse. The building was then torn down. (Interview, Mrs. Willard Jenner, December 29, 1978.)

Probably the most famous of North Dakota's dance halls was the Crystal Ballroom in Fargo. Shown here as it looked in the 1940's, the building was later demolished in an urban renewal project.

—Courtesy Forum Publishing Company

