

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MIDWAY BALLROOM

When the moon glistened on Cedar Lake on a warm summer evening, it created an almost magical feeling that everyone loved when they filled the Midway Ballroom dance floor. It was a time to be gay and have fun, to dance the night away and enjoy wonderful music with friends.

George Hetzler bought what was then known as Midway Gardens from a group of Chicago doctors in the late 1920's. Who would have known that one day it would be the hot spot in Lake County that would bring hundreds of famous musicians through Midway Ballroom's doors. Today, people from all across the nation stop in at the Cedar Lake Chamber of Commerce looking for the Midway. Some can't wait to share their memories of dancing in the giant ballroom that was built on pilings over the water. They talk about the massive windows that filled three sides of the building, allowing cool breezes to fill the room. They also remember sitting on the wood pier and watching other dancers in motion. But some didn't pay at the door, they enjoyed the music from boats that were docked in the water around Midway and got an entire evening of music free. Others were lucky and met the love of their life on a magical night!

While George Hetzler had "Dime A Dance Night" in the early days, he was only open during summer months. His activities went on for many years until his nephew James Kubal, the son of his sister Mary, was discharged from the Navy and bought the business in 1946, naming it "Midway Ballroom". Jimmy, as he was called by friends, wanted to have a ballroom. According to his wife Marti, he was a wonderful dancer and loved Big Band music of the era. To bring the bands and orchestras to Cedar Lake, Marti said he would go to Chicago in January and meet with a booking agent. At that point they would go to a large map and mark out where musicians would travel. Marti remembers at that time there were big ballrooms in Chicago like the Aragon and Trianon, but very few in small towns. The musicians would be scheduled for appearances at Midway, usually on Mondays when they left Chicago on buses to begin touring other parts of the Midwest.

Jimmy proved that a small community like Cedar Lake could have Big Band music greats like orchestra leaders Stan Kenton who also played the piano, Ralph Marterie, trumpeter band leader, Woody Herman who played a fantastic clarinet, and the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra. But they were just a few of the orchestras and band greats that

visited Cedar Lake. Others included Les Brown, Sam Donahue, Billy May, Les Elgart and Buddy Rich.

Jimmy and Marti had many pictures taken with these people who became personal friends. The dress code at the time was sharp and snappy. No jeans then, it was suits and fancy dresses and ladies work nylons with seams!

In looking back to those early days, Marti remembers when the first big band was to appear. She said Jimmy was very nervous because it was a rainy day and there was thunder and lightning, not conducive to a ballroom on the water. But Mother Nature didn't fail them. According to Marti, when the weather improved, Jimmy saw hundreds of people standing in a line that stretched to the street just waiting to get in. The ballroom was packed and rocking. While it was 100 degrees, musicians wore their suits and were very friendly to the huge crowds. Everyone had a wonderful time.

Marti still remembers local talents like Kenny Nowlan and his musicians who were known as the house band. They were very popular, she recalled, and had their own following. While music might have been Kenny's love, Marti said he went on to become a well-known dentist. Another favorite was Dick Sterling and his sax! Al Morgan, a well-known piano/organist in Chicago also a hit in Cedar Lake.

In the late 1950's, the Big Band music was on the decline and while it might not have made Jimmy Kubal happy, he realized that other projects had to fill Midway and other music was on the horizon. He accepted the change grudgingly and through the years Rock and Roll and Country and Western Music stars played at Midway. To ease the change, Jimmy and Marti were later joined in the operation by son Brian who eventually took it over. Marti recalled many Big Band era musicians did not like Country and Western music. She remembered Stan Kenton was not a fan of the change and was not afraid to say so.

But country stars came to Midway, and the first was the pint-sized Little Jimmy Dickens who had the top ten hit, "Hey Good Lookin". He was followed by such big names at the beautiful Dottie West who parked her classy RV right in the Midway parking lot. Also billed were Barbara Mandrell, Mel Tillis, and Waylon Jennings to name a few.

Marti has many memories of the entertainers, especially Tillis. One night, while his group was on stage performing, Tillis was nowhere to be found. After searching the ballroom, they found him in the flashy jacket that he was well-known for, out on the pier with a fishing pole in his hand.

Andrell was another favorite who played 5 instruments. Her sister who played drums was included in her act along with her father who also sang. Marti said while she did not like country music in the beginning, she came to enjoy it and liked the entertainers who were like family.

When Rock and Roll appeared, teen heart throbs like Bobby Rydell with his smoother back hair, brought hundreds of young people. Also, the Everly Brothers were another popular act but very expensive. While the brothers did not get along off stage, on stage they were showbusiness buddies. Marti recalls when the late Fats Domino appeared, he did not draw the crowd that was expected. The Diamonds of Doo Wop fame also took the Midway stage as well as the Beach Boys who are still performing.

But as we all know, even Rock and Roll changed and Brian Kubal brought in such acts as Steppenwolf, a Canadian Rock Band, Iron Butterfly, Foghat, Flirtin' With Disaster, Rare Earth, Survivor and many more.

There were the great bands of Brian's era and brought in crowds of people. It was a time when the ballroom had hundreds of names on a mailing list to keep everyone in touch with what was happening at Midway. To keep current, Brian had the radio station WJOB host on site programs. He also had live interview shows with local music critic Tom Lounges.

And the Ballroom might still be featuring acts, if not for a sudden fire in April 1987 that totally enveloped the building. Brian said the building was stocked and ready to open. People watching the fire that night were in tears when they realized that the fire could not be put out.

But if there is any consolation, thousands of people have wonderful memories of Midway Ballroom and memories never die. In fact, you can find them on Facebook any time you look.