

## Jazz Age Dance Halls Viewed By Many as Menace to Society



*Seen here is the dance pavilion at Funk's Grove, about 1928. Billed as the "Wonder Dance Pavilion," it was one of more than a dozen dance halls and platforms scattered throughout McLean County in the 1920s. (Photo courtesy of the McLean County Museum of History)*

One of Central Illinois' hottest dance halls in the wide-open Roaring Twenties was O'Neil's, located on a former dairy pasture just beyond Bloomington's western edge. In July 1922, area residents petitioned the City of Bloomington to cut off water and sewer services to the hall. Neighbors were up in arms over the unwelcome noise and all-night gallivanting, with the last straw the discovery one morning of an "insensibly intoxicated" girl on the dance hall grounds (today, this area is O'Neil Park).

"We can't get to sleep until midnight," complained one resident. "Even our children are becoming contaminated. One of my young girls came home the other night demonstrating some foolish step she had seen at the dance." This resident then "went thru a peculiar shuffling of the feet" to demonstrate the dance, *The Pantagraph* reported, a display which "shocked" the city commissioner investigating the complaints.

Jazz Age dance halls and platforms, many scattered throughout the rural reaches of Central Illinois, offered the promise of illicit liquor, the mingling of the sexes and other unwholesome extracurricular activities for the era's "Flaming Youth."

An incomplete list of area dance halls would include Shadynook, located east of Normal town limits; Bob Mikel's Jungleland near Downs; Hinshaw's, two-and-a-half miles southwest of Danvers; Crystal Garden in or near Cooksville; Orendorff Springs, four-and-a-half miles southeast of Bloomington; Funk's Grove Park; Mackinaw Dells Park near Goodfield; and Bon-Go located on the southern edge of Bloomington.

The tuxedo-clad dance bands (or "orchestras," as they were often called) of the 1920s played post-ragtime, pre-swing jazz. Bands that performed at area dance halls and platforms included the Moonlight Melody Boys; Fred O'Brien and his Silvertown Juniors; Abbott Parson's New Orleans Blue Boys; Maurer's Black Cat Orchestra; Tucker's Original Night Owls; Noonan's Syncopators; and Pinky Green

and his Red Birds. In the mid-1920s, the area's most popular bandleader was George C. Goforth of Bloomington, who had a financial stake in Bon-Go Park.

A convergence of factors contributed to the dance hall phenomenon. The 1920s was a period of relative economic plenty for the middle class, bringing with it revolutions in consumption patterns and leisure. The automobile gave young people mobility unthinkable a generation earlier. Motion pictures and radio further loosened parental restraints. Prohibition, which went into effect in 1920, made cornfield dance halls and hastily erected platforms more attractive to those interested in not only dancing, but also drinking alcohol far from the prying eyes of local law enforcement.

Women, recently guaranteed the right to vote with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, also made gains in the workplace and began exercising independence at home. A sampling of period movies playing in Bloomington theaters reveals the changing role of women, especially in regards to public displays of sexuality. The movie titles included "The Sporting Venus," featuring a "reckless and pleasure-mad" girl of London night life; "Proud Flesh" ("She danced on the hearts of men!—and she was some stepper!" read the tagline); "A Kiss in a Taxi" ("Oui, Oui, It's a Wow!"); and "Don't Tell the Wife." And more often than not, these modern girls with their open sensibilities listened to jazz music. "Moral disaster is coming to hundreds of young American girls through the pathological, nerve-irritating, sex-exciting music of jazz orchestras," warned the New York *American* newspaper.

In the summer of 1925, four McLean County Sheriff's officers patrolled the numerous dance halls and platforms in the countryside. "Now and then," *The Pantagraph* reported, "the officers find bottles hidden under the cars and just inside the rear wheels where it is thought the officers would not look." It's clear that McLean County Sheriff J.E. Morrison was no fan of dance hall jazz. "I am opposed to dancing in any form," he said. "I believe dancing is a menace to society. It leads boys and girls to the bad and has an injurious effect upon married persons."

Bloomington's Florence Fifer Bohrer, the first woman to serve in the Illinois Senate, campaigned on the promise to cleanup dance halls. She then played a leading role in the passage of a 1925 act that required county boards to license dance halls and roadhouses located in unincorporated areas. Under the new law, a county board could revoke a dance hall license for a variety of reasons, such as allowing "disorderly or immoral practices" on the premises.

Crackdowns like those led by Sheriff Morrison and State Sen. Bohrer, the Great Depression and repeal of Prohibition all helped deflate the dance hall craze, though a few local venues survived into the post-war years. By the 1950s, though, a new type of music supplanted jazz as the new menace to American youth: Rock and roll.