

Rural Bohemian Bands of Southern Linn and Northern Johnson Counties 1910 – 1960

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Chapter One: The Times

"Have you heard of the big band era?"

"Oh, yeah. You mean, like, the Great Depression and all?"

"Yeah. Have you heard of some of the bands, like..."

"Glen Miller, Guy Lombardo, uh, Tommy Dorsey...."

This conversation is a hypothetical exchange between two people who could range in age between their thirties and possibly their fifties. The conversation is about to take a unforeseen twist though.

"Well, those were pretty famous groups, but I was wondering about some of the local groups. Do you know of the Hickory Hollow band? The Swisher Bohemian Band? How about Leonard Reyman's group? I think there was a band out of Ely. Those...Odd Fellows. Yeah, that was it. The Ely Odd Fellow's Band. Do you remember those?"

(silence)

Not surprisingly more silence. The sound of a head shaking is not readily audible. However, these groups did exist as did a multitude of others. While the big name bands were out playing day after day in many of the larger cities, the smaller communities would rely on local bands for their listening and dancing entertainment. Frequently these groups were made up of people who were amateur musicians by night and farmers or factory workers by day.

No story of Iowa bands in 20th century would be complete without some mention of the influence of Bohemian communities and their culture. Immigrants from Bohemia originally sought out the rolling hills, plains and small towns typical of Iowa due to the resemblance of the terrain of Bohemia. Once established, more immigrants gravitated to these areas and communities of "their kind" of people.

The strong musical ties of Bohemian immigrants is well known and it is commonly agreed that the polka and waltz, though not entirely indigenous to the Bohemian peoples, were spread and popularized in America due in great part to the efforts of these immigrants and the subsequent generation. Their efforts and desire to retain the songs of the Old Country in their lives in the New World are evident today. President Eisenhower's favorite song was Beer Barrel Polka, which was initially published as "Skoda Lasky" (which approximately translates to "forsaken love") by the Czech composer Jaromir Vejvoda. Another example is the Blue Skirt Waltz (originally the Red Skirt Waltz {Cervena Sukynka}).

The immigrants formed fraternal organizations as an effort to retain the language, customs and general culture of the motherland. Alternately these groups served as a social group and provided insurance and loan services to members. These fraternal organizations also provided a physical facility for dances, plays and dramatic events. The ZCJB (Západní Cesko Bratrská Jednota) now known as Western Fraternal Bohemian organization was in the forefront of this movement. Another important group was the CSPS (Ceska Sesterska Podporujici Spolecnost) or Czech Sisterly Support Society which later became the CSA (Czechoslovak Society of America).

The rural area immediately south of Cedar Rapids near the communities of Western, Ely, Shueyville, Swisher and Solon generally were (and continue to be) smaller Bohemian family farms. The combination of the predominant Bohemian culture with its strong inclination to music and the desire to have musical entertainment in these areas provided a ripe environment for bands to develop. Indeed in this area bands such as the Hickory Hollow band, the Ely Odd Fellows band and the Swisher Bohemian Band flourished between 1910 and 1960. While these groups never attained the notoriety of the "big" big bands, they were nevertheless a vital link in the history of Bohemians in the Linn and Johnson county area. This is a small part of their story.

Chapter Two: The Bands

In an attempt to step back to the time frame between 1910 and 1960 it was quite useful to consult old pictures, historical publications, books and magazines. However, these paled by comparison to the wealth of information gathered through personal interviews with the people personally associated with these bands. For obvious reasons this is why information prior to 1925 is sketchy and the activities of area bands prior to 1910 is so sparse as to not be included here.

The earliest band in this category seems to be the Hickory Hollow Band. Joseph Krivanek Jr., an area farmer, claims that they played as a "pickup" band for his parents' wedding in 1912. The reception dance was held near the end of the Sandy Beach area on what was later the Coralville Reservoir. Krivanek continues that "it was all a dirt road and (all) the people (were) there and it started to rain. Nobody could get out to leave. They all had to stay for the night. The band and everybody." Whether or not this was the first overnight booking for the Hickory Hollow band is still speculation.

The name "Hickory Hollow" comes from the hilly area near today's Sandy Beach. The Bohemians referred to it as "Skopcasi" and "Old Country". There is a road near Solon today that still bears the name Hickory Hollow. The date this band began performing is unknown. The testimony of Krivanek as well as several other local musicians mentions the advanced age of several of the members when they ceased playing under the Hickory Hollow name somewhere in the late twenties. It would seem entirely possible to speculate that the group began before the turn of the century. As best as can be determined the music was nearly entirely handwritten manuscript scored for 6-9 players. The "chicken scratch" used was nearly illegible according to several sources. Further complicating the problem was the many stains and smears on the paper, presumably caused by beer! The arranger or arrangers of the library are buried in obscurity. However, the music as a whole played a dramatic role in the future bands of the area as it was passed on for quite a few years.

Krivanek adds that the band typically played on Sunday afternoons. He mentions how his parents would go see the band play when they were courting- approximately 1910. Eddie Ulch mentions how the local farmers could hear the music drifting distantly over the fields and rush to put on their dancing shoes and head to the bandstand. The dance hall was a small building near the town of Western on a piece of property owned by the Becicka family and thus commonly referred to as "Becicka's". Krivanek continues, "On a Sunday they had a keg of beer and the band would be playing before they'd (his future parents) come there. (They would) have a picnic and then dance and always the Hickory Hollow band played. I don't think there were many (other) choices!"

Becicka's was an interesting place. The property seems to have been a short distance east-southeast of Western. By all regards it was the average rural dance hall with a modest dance floor skillfully crafted of 2-inch maple planks. One end was the bar and the other the stage. It is estimated that the exterior dimensions were approximately 75 by 120 feet. Use of the dance hall seems to have declined with the dissolution of the Hickory Hollow band in the early depression years. The last recollection of a performance at Becicka's seems to be around 1932. The building was later used as storage for oats and was eventually destroyed.

The members of the Hickory Hollow band seem to have been all Bohemian farmers of the surrounding areas. As can be inferred from the other bands of the area, membership probably was not consistent one year to the next. Some of the band members follow.

The Hickory Hollow band

- * Aldrich Rigel: alto
- * ?Joe Topinka: ?alto
- * Leo Rigel: trumpet
- * Ed Kopecky: clarinet
- * ?Charlie Mikulicky: E-Flat Clarinet (earlier years)?
- * Alfred Rigel: E-Flat Clarinet (later years)
- * Charlie Bys: clarinet
- * ?Joe Novotny: bass (tuba) ?

The remainder of the musicians is a mystery. One can nearly assume there probably was an accordion player, a drummer and possibly one more trumpeter. As with many of these bands it is doubtful if there ever was a trombone player. Traditional Bohemian music rarely called for one.

Joe Ulch is the name of a man who led a Bohemian band that booked out of Cedar Rapids under the name, "The Royal Entertainers." It is said that they performed for radio station WMT in Cedar Rapids in the very early years of radio. It seems possible that they could be the first local Bohemian band to take to the airwaves. They are said to be the predecessors of the Leo Cole's WMT band which broadcast from the Cedar Rapids station for many years. Family lineage is obvious in the lineup.

The Royal Entertainers

- * Ralph Sedlacek: reeds
- * Wes Sedlacek: reeds
- * William Sedlacek: reeds
- * Mrs. Ralph (Marie) Sedlacek: piano
- * Leo Sedlacek: drums

- * ? Fuller: trumpet
- * ? Lumir Lovar: trumpet
- * Leo Cole: (part-time) drummer

Another example of a quality Bohemian family band is the Vanourny family from rural Amana. The Vanourny farm is described as six miles from all of the following: Amana, Walford, Fairfax and Swisher, although the mailing address was Amana. Jim Vanourny, 73, who currently resides in Marion states that the Vanourny band dates back to the beginning of the Depression. He regrets that his father's recent poor health prevents a personal interview at this time. His father, Ed, is one month short of 100 years old.

"He has always had a love for music, particularly Czech music." the younger Vanourny says. "Every Sunday morning he says he has the right to turn his radio up for four hours (to hear the Sunday Morning Czech Party on KCRG)."

Ed Vanourny had a button accordion that he had learned to play "by ear". He picked up the violin and likewise learned to play by ear. After his third son, Jim, was born, the elder Vanourny took a cornet course from the Virtuoso Cornet School of Kansas City. Motivated by a drive to better himself he persevered. With some hard study in the Arban trumpet book he eventually earned a diploma, which he proudly displays to this day in his room in the care center. Thus he became the family's music teacher.

The three older boys worked under their father's supervision and by 1932 had a band. Augmenting the immediate Vanourny family were the Sedlaceks, who were cousins. The lineup:

The Vanourny Band

- * Ed Vanourny Sr.: accordion / trumpet
- * Ed Vanourny Jr.: clarinet
- * Allen Vanourny: cornet
- * Jim Vanourny: baritone
- * Louis Sedlacek: piano (baritone, violin)
- * Mrs. Louis (Emma) Sedlacek: drums
- * Frank Cerveny: tuba*
- * Wesley Sedlacek: violin*
- * George Sigmund: tuba*

* indicates irregular players. The tuba was omitted "if the people who hired us didn't have the money to pay for seven pieces in the band; we played without a bass."

The Vanourny band played in the surrounding rural communities and Cedar Rapids but is particularly noted for the friendly competition held between it and the Cerveny band with which it alternated many dances with in the Swisher ballroom.

Jim adds that the wages for a night's work (during the Depression) were around sixty cents per musician for the whole evening. In the beginning they played strictly by ear. Soon his father had accumulated a few arrangements by purchasing them through the Vitak-Elsnic company in Chicago. Each full arrangement would cost 40-60 cents. Jim tells of how his father continually added to the library.

"Whenever he had some money from a dance job, he would sit down and read some of the fine print (the sample score reductions) which he got from Vitak-Elsnic. He would either play this on his violin, which he could now play by note, or on the trumpet. He would decide which numbers he would want. He would then place an order and it would come to us RFD (Rural Free Delivery) on the Amana Mail Route. One thing Dad did when this package of music came: He would take it and put it away. Then he would say, "One of these nights, boys, after we get done with chores and everything else, we're going to sit down and play this!" He would never let us look at it in advance! He said, "You're gonna learn to sight-read this" and that was a very good experience." This music was all carefully bound in neat, well-marked leather books for the band. Today the books are part of the library of Cedar Rapids Czech Plus Band which Jim still plays in.

The Vanourny band ran for about 15 years with bookings becoming less and less frequent as the 'boys' grew up, married and moved on. Ed Vanourny never seriously considered taking on outside musicians. "He always felt this was a family thing -that's what he wanted. He was happy with what he was doing and he didn't try to pull in any outside musicians," adds Jim. The Vanourny band played together for the last time around 1946, with the library going into storage in Ed's barn until 1988.

The Swisher Imperial also known as the Swisher Bohemian Band seems to follow in the tradition of the Hickory Hollow band years before. Just as the Hickory Hollow band, the Swisher Imperial members were not necessarily consistent year to year. Under the leadership of Frank Stangler of Swisher, the group was popular through the forties and appears to have played into the fifties. Stangler, a bass player who also owned the dance hall in Swisher, no doubt was influential in their success.

The Swisher Imperial is probably the first band in the area to cut a recording. There is a 10 inch 33 1/3 RPM disc which was mastered in 1949 with one microphone in the studio at radio station KSUI. This is one of the few occasions when the group was referred to as "The Swisher Bohemian Band" which is the way the record label appears. The music which they used was quite likely the same infamous "chickenscratch" manuscript once used by the Hickory Hollow band. Jim Vanourny adds, "Sometimes you had to use your imagination to know what you're playing!"

The teamwork that went on between Leo Rigel and Charlie Kos was well known to area musicians. These two cornetists frequently played together in various groups, and when a pickup band was formed, they were considered a team. Leo Rigel at age 93 remembered Charlie Kos with a smile adding, "that was years ago!" Jim Vanourny relates that "Leo Rigel and Charlie Kos were the best trumpet team that I and many other people heard. It seemed when they played together, each one knew when the (other) one was going to take a breath. They were a team. I can still see them playing their gold-plated Conn cornets." One other note: the alto player Wes Serbousek was a grandfather of the current mayor of Cedar Rapids. Here's their lineup.

Swisher Imperial (Swisher Bohemian Band)

- * Leo Rigel: cornet
- * Charles Kos: cornet
- * William Stepanek: clarinet & announcer
- * Frank Vrba: clarinet*
- * Jim Vanourny: baritone
- * Louis Sedlacek: baritone*Ý
- * Aldrich Rigel: alto
- * Wes Serbousek: alto
- * Frank Stangler: bass (tuba)
- * Marvin ("Sid") Sedlacek: Drum?*
- * Eddie Ulch: drum

* Did not regularly play or assisted on recordings

In the 1940's many small communities in the area felt a void when local schools quit sending their bands out to celebrations such as Memorial (Decoration) Day. The common feeling among the area musicians was that somebody ought to do something on Decoration Day. It would not be the same without a band of some sort.

With this sense of duty, the Odd Fellows Club of Ely responded and formed a band some time around 1945. The Ely Odd Fellows Band initially had a few of the older players from the Hickory Hollow band, some from the neighboring bands and several additional players for an average total of nine. The Odd Fellows Club owned a building in Ely supposedly used for rehearsals and weekly meetings. Not quite as widely known as some of the other bands, the Odd Fellows Band generally played locally but did travel, occasionally venturing as far as Mason City. Known primarily for their holiday and festival playing (one Decoration Day they played in five different locations), they carried a legacy of humorous stories as related through Eddie Ulch and Joe Krivanek. Joe Krivanek talks of the humorous incidents associated with the band.

"On the way to Mason City (to do a benefit dance), a player's wife had a fifth of whiskey and she offered fifty cents a tip for the orphans. So we said, "No, here's a dollar. You take a sip too!" When we got to Mason City, she had to be carried off the bus! No kidding."

"We used to drink a little before we'd play. Joe Holets was walking with the bass drum. We were going someplace (for a parade) and walking on the sidewalk. He never saw (the curb) and fell on the bass drum! Ripped his goddam suit pants! We had more fun."

Evidently they did have more fun.

Joe Krivanek relates how they were following horses in another parade. Acknowledging the tendency of horses to be less than convenient in dropping street potatoes he makes it clear that he was able to see the "obstacles" on the street ahead of him as he marched but Leonard Jansa, a cornetist, wasn't so lucky and slipped in the stuff.

They performed with a fair sized library of quality ("stock") band marches, polkas and so on. Some of the various members of the band:

Ely Odd Fellows band

- * Lou Dvorak: leader
- * Joe Krivanek: clarinet
- * Bob Hach: alto
- * Dick Hach: baritone
- * Joe Holets: (bass) drum
- * Joe Topinka: alto horn
- * Charlie Mikulicky: E-flat clarinet
- * Leonard Jansa: trumpet
- * Frank Vrba: clarinet*
- * Eddie Ulch: drum
- * Leo Rigel: trumpet
- * Charlie Cerveny: ?
- * Joe Stastny: trumpet
- * Aldrich Rigel: alto horn
- * Bill Stepanek: clarinet
- * Bob Zeman: trumpet*

* infrequently

Chapter Three: The People

An alphabetical listing of the players and additional information when possible.

Boddicker, Arlene (formerly Arlene Reyman)

Accomplished area accordion teacher and leader of the Polka Dots and several other accordion groups. Born the sister of local bandmaster Leonard Reyman, both siblings had to bring out their instruments to entertain all company (including the local assessor, Ed Vanourny) who set foot in the house.

Brabbit, Charlie

Local clarinet player and musical instrument repairman. Later founded Brabbit-Taylor Music Co. which later became Taylor Music Co. in Cedar Rapids. Often spoke of Frank Vrba's clarinet as the best instrument he ever saw. Charlie played in a variety of different local bands.

Bys, Charlie

One of the members of the Hickory Hollow band. Charlie Bys is one of the few references to players of the old Albert system clarinets (with rollers). There likely was another Bys, possibly a son, who may have played too. There is at least one reference to a Bys band as well.

Cervený, (father) Joseph, (sons) Joe Jr., Charlie and Milo

Rural Fairfax area. Three brothers who ran their own band and played in a number of groups. Joseph played snare drum (only), Joe Jr. plays tuba, Charlie played clarinet and saxophone and Milo, tuba. Lumir Louvar played trumpet in the Cervený band. The band utilized ordinary music stands but they were graced with red velvet signs with a big, flowing "C" on the front for the band's symbol.

Cole, Leo

Local drummer and owner of the Leo Cole WMT band.

Blask, George and Stan

George, a lifelong Cedar Rapids trumpet player presently performs with the Leonard Reyman band. George played in one of the service bands during World War II as did his brother Stan, an accomplished trombonist. Following the war, George played in a number of local bands including Leo Cole's WMT band while Stan played the big band circuit and settled in Nebraska.

Holets, Joe, Ely.

Local drummer, typically played bass drum. He is known to have played in the Ely Odd Fellows band. By day he ran the bank in Ely.

Kos, Charlie (?1898-1961?), Swisher, IA

President of the Swisher bank in Swisher. A fine trumpet player, he commonly teamed up with Leo Rigel. He played in a number of local bands.

Krivanek, Joseph Jr. (b. 1923) 115 Wright Bros. Blvd. SW (or R.R. #2); Cedar Rapids, IA
He was taught clarinet by Cliff Burke in Shueyville High School. "Music lessons cost fifty cents. The neighbor kids got a balloon tire bicycle from Sears Roebuck for \$28.88. Boy I was howlin' and howlin' that I wanted a bicycle and there was a band starting up. My folks told me, "Joey, you can have an instrument or you can have a bicycle. You can't have both." I got a metal clarinet. It cost \$33.00." He played with Leonard Reyman in the early '40s. In 1942, Reyman suggested he also play alto sax.

"So I went to Katz (pawn shop) and bought one. It was a King. They wanted \$135 dollars for it. It was pretty near new. I opened my pocket book up and said, "this is what I've got." It was \$85. I counted 'em out. He said, "I can't do it." I said, "I can't do it either! That's all I got." I started putting it away and he said, "aw...I'll let you have it." So I put the horn in the case, put my money up and I played that for a long, long time. Then when David (middle son) started in band, it wasn't good enough, so I traded it for a Conn. Aww. That's like blowing on a goddam three-quarter's inch of galvanized pipe! This Conn, you couldn't get a vibrato out of it. It wouldn't resonate. The King could get a (good) vibrato."

Krivanek also played in the Ely Odd Fellows band and sat in with several area bands and pickup bands often with Frank Vrba. Admittedly not an improviser, he respects those who do.

Lekin, Harry and Dewey

Two brothers from the area who later ran country-western style bands. One was reportedly good natured and the other one quick tempered. The story is told that Joe Novotny was playing tuba in Leonard Reyman's band in the ZCJB park when one of the Lekin brothers was critical of his playing. Joe sat his horn down and lunged off the bandstand at him. Nobody saw either one for over a half hour!

Merta, Frank (d. 1991?)

Local accordion player. Recalled as hiring Ed Vanourny and his son Jim for a dance job (no written music) in 1931 at the Becicka dance hall in Western. Ed played violin, Jim played trumpet. Jim recalls it was the first time he was paid for playing. Frank gave him a whole 25 cents which was more than adequate at the time.

Mikulicky, Charlie (?1880-?1953)

Probably a charter member of the Cedar Rapids Musician's Union, Cedar Rapids Municipal Band and a member of the Hickory Hollow band, he also played in the subsequent bands utilizing the handwritten music. Charlie is remembered for maintaining a sweet tone on the difficult to play E-flat clarinet. Still a fine player into his older years, Mikulicky is quoted as saying that the regular B-flat clarinet section of every band needs "that higher sound that rides across and over the others." However, he added that the E-flat clarinet is difficult to play because it goes shrill easily. He concludes that the player must give it that little spice; the sound must sparkle.

Modracek, Irma (formerly Irma Rigel)

Daughter of Leo Rigel

Novotny, Joe

Local bass (tuba) player. Owned an upright tuba.

Reyman, Leonard

Owner and operator of the Leonard Reyman band for over 50 years. Still active as a accordion player, Leonard takes his entire band south to Texas for the winter months.

Rigel, Aldrich (1895-1972), **Alfred** (1901-1984), **Ed** (1893-1918) and **Leo** (1899-1994)

R.R. 2, Cedar Rapids, IA

Leo Rigel's farm was due west of the Krivanek property on Wright Bros. Blvd. The Rigel's were well known musical brothers from area. Ed, baritone player, died of tuberculosis in 1918.

Aldrich played alto, Alfred played E-flat clarinet, Leo, presently a resident in a Cedar Rapids care center, played trumpet. Leo and Jim Vanourny were the only two surviving members of the original Swisher Imperial at the original writing time.

Sigmund, George

An accomplished tuba master once said to be one of the best tubists in the Midwest. Played in the early Cedar Rapids Municipal band, the Czech Heritage band and many others. He is said to have played a stint with a circus band.

Stastny, Joe (b.?1883?)

Initially played clarinet, but did the later majority of his playing on trumpet. One of the members of the Hickory Hollow band.

Sedlacek, Louis, Wes, Ralph and Marvin

A very musical family. Relatives of the Vanourny's, the Sedlaceks played in a number of various groups and continue to be well known as important musical figures in the area.

Ulch, Eddie, 6.3 miles south of Mt. Vernon on Hwy. 1

Eddie has been involved in bands since his high school days in Shueyville. Commonly remembered for owning and operating the popular "Jolly Bohemians," he has drummed with a number of bands including the Ely Odd Fellows and the Swisher Imperial. His groups played a wide area and created several recordings. Eddie's second son, Joe was named in honor of Joe Holets of Ely.

Vanourny, (father) **Ed** (b. 1893); brothers **Allan** (b.1915), **Edward** (1916-1983), **Jim** (b. 1919) **and Louis** (b.1925), R.R. Amana, IA

Ed is currently in a Williamsburg care center; Jim lives in Marion. Ed learned button accordion and violin by ear, then learned trumpet through the Virtuoso Cornet School of Kansas City, thus becoming the family music teacher. Vanourny band established in 1931 and played for numerous events including shivarees. Money gained through shivarees was pooled and after the proceeds of several were put together a dance hall could be rented and a dance held. Ed's wife was related to the Sedlacek family and thus they were included in the family band. Youngest son Louis was also a musician, but was too young for inclusion in the band.

Vrba, Frank (1921-1968), R.R.2; Cedar Rapids, IA

Vrba operated the farm northeast of the Jos. Krivanek property on Wright Bros. Blvd. A legendary clarinet virtuoso, his name is still well known in musical circles in the Cedar Rapids area. Always a perfectionist and hard worker, Vrba played in nearly every band in the area at one time or another. He may have run his own band at one time. Easily able to read the "chickenscratch" manuscript music when other musicians could not, he was also adept at sightreading and transposing nearly anything put in front of him. When the Ringling Brothers & Barnum Bailey circus arrived to perform in Cedar Rapids one year (1954?), their lead chair clarinet suddenly fell ill. The local Musician's Union Office told the circus bandmaster that there was only one guy who could handle the job- Frank Vrba. When later asked how he could sight-read the difficult music so well, he modestly replied, "aww, music is music".

Chapter Four: The dickens, you say!

The Bohemian bands typically used some instruments not common today. This includes the E-flat clarinet and the alto horn (pitched either in E-flat or F). The alto horn parts nearly always was a "doprovod" or accompaniment part. This is a euphemism for afterbeats. True to form as the brass bands do to this day in Czechoslovakia, the doprovod player could expect to play four hours of afterbeats only. Precision is the key in such a tedious task. The combination of the tuba on the downbeat and a pair of alto horns on the afterbeat created the strong tonal-rhythmic pulse to accompany the melody. For this reason, it was not uncommon to hear of bands playing without a drum.

However, the doprovod players could soon tire, and in addition, the effect of too much beer sometimes led to interesting results. It must have been at least a bit amusing when this happened toward the end of the evening.

According to tuba guru Clifford Bevan, the tuba player has historically borne a disproportionate burden of jokes and innuendo and this seems particularly true for the Bohemian bands. The older musicians are not so adept at remembering the tarnished old trumpets or the pianos with broken ivories but the stories of corroded, dented old tubas flow with regular veracity. There are stories of one eastern Iowa tubist with a particular affiance for beer who climbed the roof of his house after he had a "few" and sat on the chimney to practice his tuba. It is undetermined what made more commotion; the loud blating and whooping of the tuba or the exhortations of the vexed wife shaking her fists in the air from the front yard.

Apparently this was not an isolated incident. A different tuba player of the same area regularly trudged quite a distance to attend rehearsal in one of the rural Johnson county bands. During the course of the rehearsal the good man would become quite inebriated and have to find his way home. It is rumored that the rehearsal was only a cover for a card party that the men regularly held. Regardless, the old housewife was tired of this regular routine and decided to put an end to it by hiding the tuba mouthpiece. Undaunted after a lengthy argument, the old man was not to be bested. He hoisted the tuba on his shoulder and proceeded out the door without his mouthpiece. If he attempted to play a note at that evening's "rehearsal" is up to conjecture. It is probably also irrelevant.

Controversy as to the relative ability of one player or band as opposed to another was also common. The famed Frank Vrba joked about another bass player by saying, "He don't {sic} even know how to blow his nose!"

The ability of Frank Stangler as a tuba player ranged from stories that he sat in with Lawrence Welk to comments like "not so good". A third comment was that both statements could be true, which is no compliment to the early days of the Lawrence Welk band! History has shown that Frank was very good at attracting big-name bands to his dance hall in Swisher. Something history has not borne out is his prohibition-era reputation as "the moonshine supplier for all of Johnson County." The story goes that one of Swisher's own down-home boys was headed off to the service. Wanting to impress his new navy acquaintances and shed his "farm-boy" image, he told everyone who asked that he came from Cedar Rapids. It was but a very short time before an

inquirer shot back, "How far is that from Swisher?" It seems that the Stangler reputation as an alcohol distributor had found its way to members of the navy thousands of miles away!

One listener to radio station WMT was evidently disgusted with the singer of one Bohemian group. It seems this singer and his band occupied a prime-time spot in the programming schedule while another band with an apparently more appealing singer was limited to a less desirable spot. The disgruntled listener wrote, "Keep that goddam dog off! Put him on (another) night so nobody can listen to him."

Chapter Five: The end

The years have gone by and slowly silenced first the horns and then the mouths of many of the old musicians. They never achieved the stardom or publicity of Artie Shaws, the Benny Goodman's or the Guy Lombardos, but then again that wasn't their aim. Given the wages paid it sure wasn't the money either. Even in the 1940's, three dollars or so for a night's work was not cafe society standards. Why did they do it then? Why did they work so hard? Jim Vanourny seems to sum it up rather succinctly.

"To us, music was not work. We would play for nothing. Music to us was our entertainment; it was our livelihood. When we got through (working) in the evening, we sat down and we played. That was our way of life. Music was not a job; it was pleasure. To this day, that's the way I feel about it."

And well it should be.

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