

Remember when

Sunday Aug. 23, 1992

Vanity Fair



Playing at the Club Vanity Fair, approximately 1944, are from left, Bruce Parsons, Jimmy Small, Harry Rose, Eric Gustufson, Bill Boyle, Louis Yanover and band leader Kay Martin.

Great times at the Vanity

At 9 o'clock sharp the band struck up the first notes of the evening and within minutes the dance floor at Club Vanity Fair on Front Street, Belleville, was packed.

Patrons had to climb three flights of stairs before reaching the club. Sam Pappas opened about 1944, above his billiards business. Kay Martin and his Orchestra played there each Thursday, Friday and Saturday night. Belleville resident Bruce Parsons played trumpet in the band starting at \$3 a night. He remembers the hoards of service men coming to the club, the inevitable fights, the bottles kept under the tables, the ballroom dancing and the infectious beat of the music.

The orchestra played a lot of waltzes, like the popular Charmaine, as well as faster numbers such as Stardust, The Sergeant Was Shy, Dreamland and a few Glenn Miller songs.

In 1944 Canada was at war and Belleville was a city full of service men. Picton supplied the army personnel, Trenton and Mountain View supplied

the air force men, and the two groups seldom got along.

"There was always this rivalry, with the army calling the air force pigeons and of course a fight would break out," says Parsons. Some fights were minor skirmishes. "Sometimes the very guys who did the fighting walked out together to find some place to have a beer. In those days it was probably a bootlegger." On other occasions it was pandemonium. Parsons recalls one incident in which a fight came too close to the bandstand for saxophonist John Higgins to tolerate. The usually reserved Higgins grabbed a nearby Coke bottle and knocked a guy over the head with it.

"The guy was out for 30 or 40 seconds and when he got up he didn't know what hit him. (Higgins) just kept on playing, hardly missed a beat."

Fighting aside, the dances were something to look forward to. The ladies wore long cocktail-length dresses or the nicest street clothes, and the men wore suits or sports jackets and always wore a tie.

"It wasn't regulation, they just did this. And in those days most of the guys would go to a shoe shine before going to a dance."

A concession stand sold pop and cigarettes but no alcohol. This never deterred patrons from imbibing as they brought their own liquor.

The band played from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. on Thursdays and Fridays but couldn't legally play past midnight on Saturdays.

One night at the club stands out in Parsons' mind more than any other. It was during the Battle of Crete (the Greeks were taking a pummeling from the Italians) when Greek-Canadians began organizing relief efforts. Sam Pappas donated the hall and the orchestra played for free. Admission was canned goods or clothing. After the performance, John Kikes, owner of the London Lunch Restaurant, treated the group to a fantastic meal. Parsons doesn't know where Kikas got the steaks (scarce during wartime) but he

says they were 1½ inches thick.

Parsons and the orchestra continued playing at the Club Vanity Fair until the late 1940s. Fire eventually claimed the top floor of the building but fond memories still linger for many Quinte residents.

*'Being in band
a status symbol'*