

# An Island Of Memories

## Milltown’s Island Park Ballroom To Be Inducted Into S.D. Rock Hall

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A hot summer night, cool chicks and a band in the groove ... that was Island Park at Milltown during the heyday of rock ‘n roll.

Generations of teens and young adults hung out at the popular dance hall/roller rink during the 1950s, ‘60s, ‘70s and 1980s, before a devastating flood of the James River in 1984 closed the pavilion doors forever.

But, for those who chased girls, let off steam on weekends and made lasting friendships there, they can still catch a few strains of music in the breeze that blows through the trees at Island Park. The pavilion is just a memory now, victim of floodwaters that failed to recede for a month. But oh, the memory is good ... tied up with the pangs of adolescence, the macho-ness of the thumping beat of the bands, and the pure joy of being alive.

Island Park was recently chosen to be inducted into the South Dakota Rock ‘n Roll Hall of Fame next April. It is one of those things to.... well, be there or be square.

Bob Maag, the last owner before Island Park was sold in 1994 to Our Home, Huron and Parkston, a facility for troubled teens, still waxes nostalgic. Now a farm loan specialist for Farm Service Agency, Huron, Maag, 63, had been one of those guys who learned to play the guitar in junior high, formed a band — The Postmen — while in Tripp High School, and went on to have dreams of hitting it big in the entertainment world. After criss-crossing the country with several well-known bands, such as The Talismen and Nickle Bag of Soul, Maag jumped at the chance to buy Island Park from Alan Schilling in 1975.

Maag said he had roller-skated at Island Park as a youngster, and then when he was 13 or 14, he and the Postmen started playing there, and then he played there over the years.

Maag recalled being at a baseball game in Tabor or Lesterville: “It was early evening and mom pulled up with a trailer. ‘Hey boys,’ she said, ‘you’ve got to go play at Milltown,’ the band had cancelled. It was really exciting — we thought we made it into Hollywood.” It was just the beginning, he said.



Maag

“We always thought we would make it big eventually, one day,” recalled Maag. “Once in the real world, we found it was pretty tough.”

With his purchase of Island Park, as well as Groveland Park near Tyn-dall, Maag was in a position to hire the bands, rather than play in them. He brought in Fats Domino, The Grassroots, Tommy James and the Shondels, Ivory and Johnny Holms,

to name a few.

“Before my time, there was Gene Pitney, Jerry Lee Lewis, Conway Twitty ...” Maag said.

“I had some groups there that were just tremendous. I used to go to band showcases, where bands market their sound, and book the ones to use.”

Island Park had “a million other activities, but the big draw was the dances and the softball tournaments,” said Maag. Both men’s and women’s leagues of softball took up four nights a week, plus tournaments on the weekend.

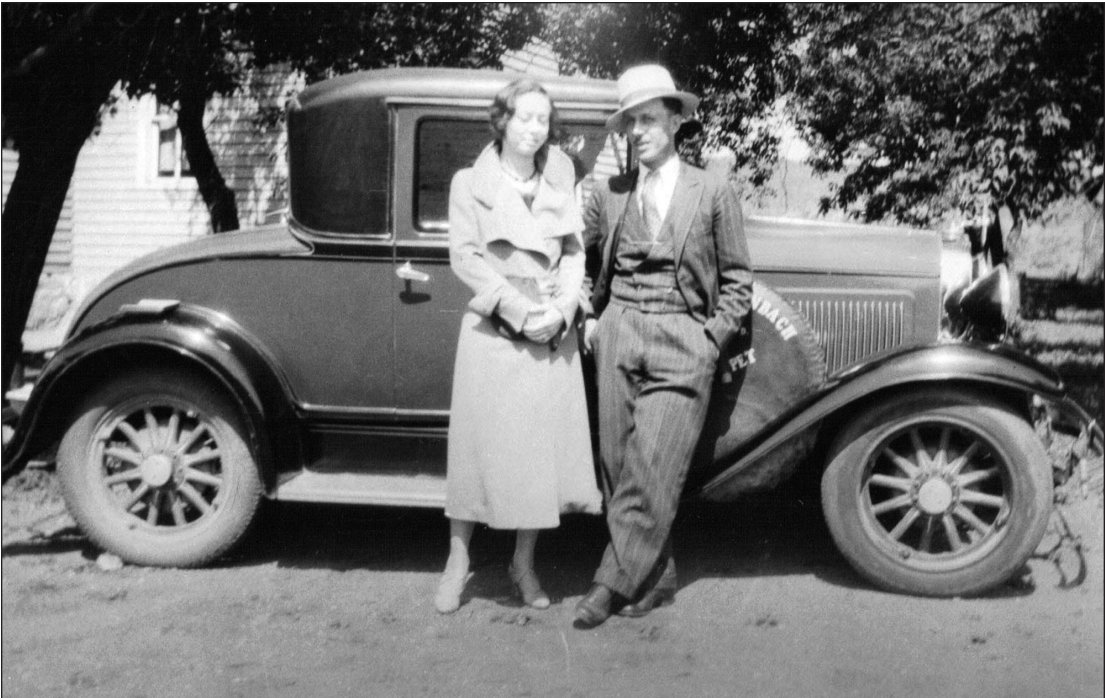
There was roller skating, boating, fishing and camping, he said, adding, “I just loved it.”

Maag said it was “a fun, family place to enjoy the outdoors.”

Actually, Island Park was a hopping place from the summer of 1919, when E. J. Gray leased ground just north of the Milltown Colony, according to a news item from the *Freeman Courier*. Gray “will conduct a pleasure resort during summer. He intends to erect a dance pavilion, refreshment and eating places, etc.,” noted the June 26, 1919, newspaper, which said it was quoting the *Parkston Advance*.

Another report notes that Charles Zehnpfennig constructed cabins in the 1920s and the ballroom was built at a later date.

Area historian Donna Zeeb, Menno, who served as Hutchinson County Director of Equalization for years, quoted the official record when she said the park was purchased from the Milltown Colony in 1922 by W.H. Shaw, F.M. Wright and Zehnpfennig, “whose project had gone to considerable expense and labor in endeavoring to give the people of the area of the state an ideal summer resort.”



COURTESY PHOTO

This photo shows Opie and Helen Benson, who ran the Island Park ballroom in Milltown from 1943-1960, which was the era in which rock and roll was born. Island Park was a popular music venue for decades before it was gutted in a 1984 flood. The facility is going to be inducted into the South Dakota Rock Hall of Fame in April.

Charles Zehnpfennig Jr. eventually became the sole owner and borrowed \$4,000 from Harry Benson, paying him only the interest on the money each year. On Nov. 29, 1939, Benson got Island Park back from Zehnpfennig and it was deeded to Benson’s sons, Opie and Dewey.

The Benson family, said Zeeb, operated the park with hired help. In 1943, after Opie Benson had to quit farming due to his health, he and his wife, Helen, took over the operation of the park and ran it until 1960. The Bensons and Zeeb became close, personal friends during the time both she and Helen worked at the Hutchinson County Courthouse.

The Bensons had their own power plant at Island Park, and pumped water from a well by hand. Out-houses, Zeeb said, were “down by the creek.”

But, there was roller skating on Friday nights and Sunday afternoons.

“Skating parties were when young love began and sometimes ended,” said Zeeb. Dances were on Tuesday and Saturday evenings. Entertainers were known

names in the Midwest, she said, many of whom went on to become nationally famous. In between dances, there were ball games, picnics and horseshoe tournaments.

Dance admission was \$1, plus tax.

The Bensons sold the park in 1960 to James L. Thomas on contract for deed, and three years later it was returned to Opie and Dewey Benson.

That same year, Allen Schilling bought it on contract for deed, completing payment Feb. 4, 1975. Schilling sold it to Maag the same year.

Some of the acts playing in 1940 and ‘41, said Zeeb, were Tiny Little and his band, Cliff Kyes and his band, Dick Mills and his 12 Merry Millers of Music, Bobby Griggs and his Shaker Rhythm Band, and many others.

In the late 1940s, other bands who played at the park were Mac’s Merry Makers, Don Shaw, Jimmy

The following babies were born at Avera Sacred Heart Hospital in December 2011:

ABRAHAM	DANIEL	KAELEIGH	PARIS
ADRIENNE	DEWAYNE	KHLOE	PARKER
ALEXANDER	DRAKE	KINZLEY	PARYS
ALLISON	DYLAN	LOGAN	PATRICK
ANN	EDEN	LUKE	QUINTON
ARMANIA	ELLYANA	MADDOX	SADIE
AVA	EVAN	MARIA	SCARLETTE
AXDON	FOREVER	MARIAH	SOPHIE
BENJAMIN	GEORJA	MARY	SUTTON
BERKLEY	HADLEY	MARY-VIRGINIA	TAYLOR
BRODY	HUNTER	MASON	THADDES
CALEB	JILLIAN	MEGAN	
CARTER	JOSIE	NOAH	
CHLOE		OWEN	

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YANKTON DAILY

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Sunday, January 29

Bridal Registration Starts at Noon

Exhibits Open Noon-4:00pm

Fashion Show 3:30pm

Riverfront Events Center, Downtown Yankton