



August 3, 2001

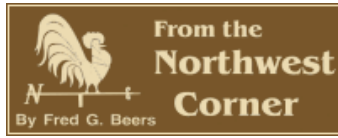
Ruminating about a few Perry area dance halls the other day in one of these columns, I listed a few that came readily to mind but I knew that inevitably some people's favorite hangouts would be overlooked. My personal knowledge of these pleasure palaces was limited owing to my tender age when many of them were experiencing their heyday. Still, I remember them very well today because many of the young adults who used to hang out at our drug store in the 1930s talked about them a lot when I was in earshot. The teens and their peers of that generation loved ballroom dancing and jitterbugging to the big band sounds. The dance halls mostly were rather rustic, but the floors were level and well-lubricated with corn starch, and popular music of the day was provided by live bands or a coin-operated nickelodeon. Dance halls were great for relaxation and socializing. Saturday was the big night, but some of the smaller places also were open during the week. Some people thought such places were sinful, but to my limited personal knowledge they were just there for innocent fun.

One of the ballrooms omitted from my column the other day was Kirchner Hall, a second-story location on the south side of the square. The building has had several owners in recent years, but for a few decades it was the home of Monroe-Lang Hardware & Appliances, operated by Charles Monroe Sr., his son, Charles Jr., and son-in-law, J.E. (Tiny) Lang, a former catcher for the Perry Merchants semipro baseball team. The store handled a complete line of hardware, furniture and household appliances, including some of the first RCA television sets seen in Perry. Also featured was a plumbing department and a crew of service specialists who repaired anything the store sold. At that time, the upstairs portion served as a warehouse. A freight elevator raised heavy crates from the lower floor to the second story. I am told that the elevator is still there. The building is now owned by Glenn and Jill Zimmer, who are converting the upstairs to a residence while they live in an apartment on the lower floor.

In the early 1930s the building was owned by the W.H. Kirchner family and the second story was a large ballroom known as Kirchner Hall. Patrons entered by making an exciting walk up a steep steel stairway on the west exterior wall. The stairway is still there. Except for the freight elevator, it is the only way to reach the upper floor. When public dances were held, guests were met at the top of the stairs where entry tickets were purchased. A rubber stamp imprinted the back of guests' hands to prove that they had already paid if they needed to leave and return during the evening without paying an additional fee.

Kirchner Hall, with its wide open spaces, also was used for other purposes. My sister, Jeanice, took dancing lessons there from her friend, LeOla Dotts. Jeanice was graceful and flexible, a natural-born dancer. She eventually was teamed with one of the muscular Patton boys for a rather violent form known as apache dancing. Her partner's main function, as in ballet, was to hold her while she executed a variety of steps and movements. The team performed in the courthouse park for some of the Cherokee Strip celebrations and were offered a contract to tour with the 101 Ranch Show, but my mother nixed any such thoughts because she felt Jeanice was too young. LeOla's sister, Bonnie Dotts, also was a dance student.

So, that's some of the story about another one of Perry's numerous dance halls. Perhaps you had a favorite that hasn't been discussed here. If so, let me hear from you.



August 7, 2001

Some folks in Oklahoma City have been causing a bit of a stir because of the plan to tear down the geodesic dome at Northwest 23rd and Classen. It would be replaced by a building with more contemporary architecture, the present owners say. Most likely, it would be one of those mega-pharmacies that seem to be springing up everywhere, at least in the big cities. However, preservationists have been demonstrating and otherwise protesting to such an extent that the idea is being re-examined, with the possibility of converting the futuristic dome to use as an ice skating rink, an indoor playground, a shopping mall, and so forth. This is happening in Oklahoma City, where the municipal planners allowed their entire downtown area to be demolished a few decades ago and thus to effectively terminate that area as a retail center. It has never recovered from that stupendous blow. The Bricktown area, east of what used to be downtown Oklahoma City, is luring people back with entertainment, RedHawks baseball, canal rides and other gimmickry, but you won't find Rothschild's, Kerr's, Brown's, good movie theaters and all the other things that used to bring hundreds of people to Main Street in Oklahoma, City. They're all at the malls or scattered elsewhere in the municipality.

Personally, I hope the old dome comes safely through all this. It was considered a radical style when first erected nearly 50 years ago and most of us believe it is still too far out to appreciate. In that respect it is like the old Mummers Theater on Sheridan in downtown OKC—weird, but at the same time very serviceable. Most importantly, though, is the fact that both those buildings are symbols of the generation that gave birth to them. They are historically interesting for that reason.

Citizens of Perry can appreciate the battle now being waged in Oklahoma City, featuring those who think of progress as tearing down the old and building up the new versus those who yearn to retain as much of the past as possible. We have, for example, the Church on a Perch now rotting on its foundation in CCC Park. Our community spared the old wooden building from a wrecker's ball at Seventh and Grove streets, then swept the evidence under a carpet, figuratively, by hauling it out to the city park with no plans for restoring or preserving it. We still have the historic building but you can watch its decay daily by driving through the park. Makes you sad.

Oklahoma City already has lost the Bell Isle tower, its entire downtown retail center, and countless other buildings through lack of planing. Visitors from other countries, where buildings continue to be used for more than a century, are astonished that our public buildings are considered decrepit after such short periods of time. The Main Street program is doing a great deal to make our community conscious of its dramatic origin and dynamic creation. That philosophy should be retained and applied whenever someone talks about progress and new beginnings. Americans need to savor and preserve the past while there are still remnants worth keeping.

On another subject now, don't forget the opening of the Perry high school girls fast pitch softball season tonight. We have a team that's eager to begin competition and a new coach to lead them. Check the sports page for details as the season progresses.



August 10, 2001

Those recent columns about some of the dance halls that used to be located in the Perry area brought back a few special memories to John Skinner. John was a young polio victim when the disease was raging in every part of the U.S. and he was left with a permanent disability. That never stopped him from making his way in the world on his own, or from raising money to fight polio. When the annual March of Dimes campaign was at its peak in the battle to wipe out that crippling disease, he served again and again as Noble county chairman, despite his youth and the physical problems that became part of the residual effect of his sickness. A partner in the campaign was President Franklin D. Roosevelt, another battler who refused to let polio slow him down.

In the early 1940s, John began staging March of Dimes dances in Perry to raise money for the polio campaign. He also persuaded John B. Terry, operator of the Perry; Roxy and Annex movie theaters, to put on shows with ten-cent admission prices, and most of the proceeds went to the charity. A magazine, Oklahoma Publisher, used a photo of the young John seated at Mr. Terry's desk which was piled high with stacks of dimes from one of those shows.

John remembers booking the Merl Lindsay and Leon McAuliffe bands for benefit dances at the Kennedy Skating Rink and the Perry armory. He also arranged some dances at the Perry American Legion Hall with music provided by Ashley Alexander and his three sons, Artie, Alan and Ashley Jr., with Hank Voise also sitting in. When John was a bit older, he became a booking agent for Mr. Lindsay. Once, when John was working for Marvin Jirous at the Sonic Drive-In in Alva, Merl brought his entire Western swing band there when passing through en route to another engagement. He knew John was there so he and the boys just went by to say "Hello," John remembers.

Even before John began his efforts, March of Dimes benefits, were being held in Perry and throughout the U.S. The initial impetus came from President Roosevelt, who refused to be photographed in his wheelchair or being assisted to a speaking podium but still acknowledged his physical limitations. Mr. Roosevelt also popularized the healing pools at Warm Springs, Georgia, as a place where victims such as himself could receive therapy.

Yes, the old Perry area dance halls were not fancy and the bands weren't the greatest in the land, but they served a recreational need for many local folks, and they were always available for special projects such as the March of Dimes. Remembering all that makes one wonder, whatever became of those places? Here's a salute to John Skinner and his benevolent exercises that helped produce the vaccine that wiped out polio.



August 14, 2001

In another age, Perry restaurants were identified as favorites largely because of the personality of their proprietors. That may still be the case, but usually it takes the passage of several years to make that determination. Also, the eating places themselves have to disappear before the rest of us can look back and say, "yes, that was a fine restaurant." Another case of absence making the heart grow fonder, perhaps.

This bit of philosophizing emerged from a recent trip down Memory Lane occasioned by an afternoon of enjoying some newly acquired miscellany at Carol Steichen's shop on the south side of the square. Some of the pieces were from estate sales and others were acquisitions from here and there. A number of wonderful old photographs, showing unfamiliar views

of Perry, also were included and we'll have more to say about them later. But let's concentrate on the old restaurants today.

Perry has had an abundance of good eating places, and we still do. But you'll hear old-timers reminiscing fondly about some diners that have vanished. The good ones each had their own coterie of followers, and those who remember them usually pay a little tribute to the men and women who ran the places. For instance, here are some of the restaurants that still provoke sighs of praise from those with long memories: The Palace Cafe' on the east side of the square; the Gem Cafe on the south side; the Elite Hotel Restaurant on the north side; and of course one that is still there, the Kumback, also on the north side. This is an incomplete list, of course. Many good eating places have come and gone through the years, and thank heaven we still have some good ones.

In the 1930s, you went to the Palace Cafe' if you had a friendly relationship with Billy and Lucile Reckert, who ran the place. The Palace also was the local bus station and many travelers passed through there. Or perhaps the friendly personality of Wes Marcy and his excellent chef, Homer Thompson, persuaded you to dine at the Gem Cafe'. The Elite was operated by its owner, Walt Kehres, and in the early years the Rueb brothers were cooks there. In the mid1930s, after the Elite Hotel was transformed from the last frame building standing on the Perry square into a magnificent two-story brick structure, the first story eatery became even more popular. Mr. Kehres' straight-faced sense of humor amused his friends for years.

Just up Delaware street from the Elite was the tiny but beloved Kumback Cafe. It's still in the same location and is operated today by Tony and Marilee Macias, but if you are old enough you can't help remembering the jolly greeting and warm smile offered by its long-time operator, Eddie Parker. Since the mid-1920s the Kumback has held a special place in the hearts of Perry residents and visitors. Eddie himself used to stand at the griddle turning hamburger patties and other aromatic and gastronomic delights with the result that even if you arrived with no appetite you suddenly were seized with a great desire for some of the Kumback's goodies.

How did menu prices stack up in comparison with today in those great eating places? We'll take a look at that in .another Northwest Corner. Meanwhile, bon appetit!



August 17, 2001



This was the Elite Hotel Restaurant as it looked in the mid-1930s after owner Walt Kehres completed a new building on the north side of the Perry square.

We speak of "the good old days" and think of them fondly as a period of time when life was more pleasant and relaxed, when the pressures that we know today were for the most part non-existent. We blame part of the current stress on our inflated cost of living compared to that which some previous generations experienced. Lots of things, including personal disposable incomes, have changed (for the better) and that makes today's higher prices seem more reasonable. But, we think, wouldn't it be nice if we had today's wealth and yesteryear's modest prices? Dream on, friend. Still, there's no harm in thinking "what if?"

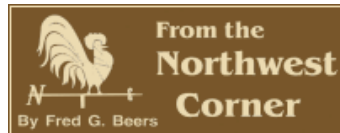
Along that line, let's peek at some of the prices charged at Billy Reckert's Palace Café, which for years was one of Perry's finer restaurants in the middle of the block on the east side of the square. The menu turned up in a collection of articles at Carol Steichen's shop on the south side of the square, and I thank her for letting me look it over. It is printed on one side of a sheet of heavy green paper. The reverse side is filled with an ad for the O.K. Filling Station, where Shell gasoline was sold for years on the southeast corner of the intersection of Seventh and Delaware. The O.K. Station, by the way, offered 24-hour service.

The Palace Café menu on the other side begins with a statement from the proprietor, Billy Reckert: "It is our earnest desire that the foods served in this restaurant shall be of the highest quality and served to please the most fastidious patrons." The jovial Billy also had a loyal coffee crowd among his patrons. They gathered at least once daily to discuss topics of current interest in the community. The coffee cost them five cents a cup, or ten cents for a pot. If they wanted a piece of pie, that was an additional ten cents per slice. All of the cafe's pastry was homemade, the menu stated.

Meals evidently were a la carte. A T-bone steak was 65 cents. Add another 15 cents for french fries or hash browns. Vegetables such as stewed corn, stewed tomatoes, spinach and stringless beans were 15 cents per serving. Perhaps you

only wanted a salad. Chicken salad was 35 cents per serving, as was fruit salad with whipped cream, and Waldorf salad. A tomato stuffed with chicken salad was 40 cents. Hungry for a sandwich? Billy served a club house sandwich for 40 cents, baked ham sandwich for 15 cents and a chicken sandwich for 20 cents. Hamburgers were not on the menu. At the bottom of the menu was this statement: "Ten cents extra charged for one portion served to two people."

This menu from Billy Reckert's Palace Café probably would have been used in the mid-1930s, when the Great Depression was at its worst and few people ate out very often. The friendly conversation with Billy and his wife, Lucile, attracted many people to the Palace Café during that period, and they appreciated the quality of the offerings as much as the conversation with their host and hostess. In that respect, those really were good old days.



August 21, 2001

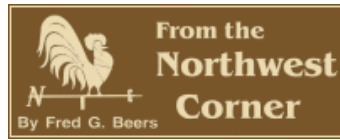
It's really good to see police, city and school officials looking at traffic problems in Perry. Among the most pressing considerations are ways of clearing the flow of vehicles and pedestrians in areas near the elementary school and the middle school where young students are delivered and picked up by parents. If you have ever been in those zones when classes are dismissed for the day, you know the problem. Congestion results in numerous near-accidents. The newly designated one-way streets should bring some relief, but they won't eliminate the need for careful driving. Youngsters have a way of moving suddenly in unexpected directions. We've been very lucky in avoiding some tragic accidents up to now. I say this as the grandfather of two young ladies whose safety is one of my principal concerns.

Other problem areas under scrutiny are the busy intersections at Fifteenth and Fir and at Seventh and Fir. Surveys indicate that many accidents occurring there are the result of faulty vision from left-turn lanes. Not too long ago this column suggested that left-turn-only traffic lights are needed at some of the busiest intersections around town, and it's reassuring to read that signals of that sort are now being considered. Let's hope all of our traffic problems can be solved before someone is badly hurt. These are tough issues and they may seem expensive to correct, but nobody profits from a bad smashup. Good luck to those who have the responsibility of looking into these matters.

Another community matter under scrutiny is the survey being made of our parks and other recreational areas. One of the most pressing problems seems to be the CCC Park southeast of town. When the Civilian Conservation Corps converted Perry's "city farm" from a little-used rural area into a proud, scenic recreational site in the 1930s, local officials were delighted. In a rustic area, families could safely spread picnic tables, go fishing, enjoy boating and even swimming in a small but picturesque setting. The park has had its ups and downs in many respects, but to a casual observer it seems the area has been frequently neglected. We are aware that municipal budgets can only be stretched so far, but that little park seems destined to become unkempt and unsightly if something isn't done. We hope the park survey will bear this out and that some kind of positive action will be forthcoming. If you haven't visited the park lately, spend a few minutes one of these late summer evenings and drive through it. Be careful, though. The roads are not in the greatest shape.

Some who use the park regularly believe the CCC Park is still the scene of frequent criminal acts, despite officers' attempts to curb such things. Obviously it is difficult to patrol the park on a regular basis, but we need to find a way to stem such things if they really are being carried out there. The Perry CCC Park has the potential of becoming one of our greatest assets. I'm anxious to learn what the survey says about all this.

Other parks within the city limits appear to be in good shape. Tennis courts at the Lions West Park and Leo East Park are well maintained as are other facilities. Century Park is a very popular place for walkers and as a children's playground. Certainly we need such things and they deserve to be kept in the best shape possible. Residents of this city are proud of our facilities and we appreciate the care they are given.



August 24, 2001

In the previous dissertation regarding some long-gone Perry restaurants, I purposely held back on one of them, simply because it seemed to merit a moment in the spotlight all by itself. I am referring to the dining room at the St. Louis Hotel, perhaps one of the finest in its time and certainly a favorite for the traveling salesmen who frequented this city on their regular trips through here.

The St. Louis Hotel was a two-story red brick building just off the southwest corner of the courthouse square, at 716 Cedar street, where Dr. Bryan Busby's dental office now stands. Dr. Busby's single story brick building was constructed from some of the bricks salvaged from the St. Louis Hotel's demolition. The hotel was a large one and its bricks were sold to contractors and others in many parts of the state when the old building was torn down. Many of the finest homes in Oklahoma City were partly built with bricks from the St. Louis Hotel in Perry.

It was a fairly large hostelry and one of its most endearing qualities was the family dining room on the ground floor. Food was served there family-style, meaning all you could eat, and it was tastefully served. Tables were covered with real cloths and most times the flowers were freshly picked. The atmosphere was a restrained gentility, not hustle and bustle. In the early 1900s, long before the interstate highway era dawned, the St. Louis was a regular stopping point for traveling salesmen and families on vacation. Some of the drummers scheduled regular stops here and kept room reservations at the St. Louis because they found it a safe, clean, friendly place to spend a night or two while on the road.

In the early 1900s Mrs. A.H. Kite was the hotel "proprietess," according to an ad in the 1904 Perry City Directory. The ad also states that the hotel had steam heat and baths, plus new sample rooms where merchandise could be displayed for prospective purchasers. Room rates were \$2 a day. The directory shows that Roy Kite, who may have been the son of Mrs. Kite (they had the same residential address), was owner-operator of the Bijou Theater at 603 Delaware street, where some of Perry's first motion pictures were seen. The directory gives the hotel address as 716 Cedar and refers to it as "the New St. Louis Hotel." That adjective must have been dropped after the business came of age. Perhaps that also was when the restaurant was closed because of declining clientele.

In my own personal memory bank, I recall that the hotel and restaurant were operated by Mrs. Kite's daughter and son-in-law, John and Ella Vandenberg. The Vandenbergs had a son, John Jr., and a daughter, Virginia, who helped out at the hotel. For a time, the St. Louis Hotel also was the local Western Union office. Prior to World War II, one of Mr. Vandenberg's daily weekday duties during the noon hour was to deliver to the *Perry Daily Journal* newsroom a rather lengthy report on Oklahoma livestock and grain markets for use in the paper that afternoon. I still retain the image of Mr. Vandenberg trudging north up the alley between the St. Louis Hotel and the newspaper office to deposit that report. John Jr. later graduated from the University of Oklahoma law school; Virginia and her husband operated a Victorian-era restaurant in

Edmond and called it "Vandenbergs." The menu featured miscellaneous information about Perry, the Cherokee Strip and Virginia's family here.

As stated at the outset of these pieces about early Perry restaurants, this is not a truly comprehensive report because a large number of good eating places are not included, but perhaps from this readers can detect at least a small taste (pardon the pun) of what our ancestors experienced in another age here on the prairie.



August 28, 2001

In those recent columns about some local restaurants of days gone by, I named just a few of them. Many readers remember several more in addition to those I listed. Through the years, Perry diners have enjoyed a large number of eating places with cuisines that ranged from so-so to pretty darned good. In many cases, the good-natured and colorful proprietors were as important an ingredient as the quality of the food they served, and I named a few of those. Just in case one of your favorites was overlooked, here's a little bit about several that can be added to the list. Even so, there probably are others that I have not thought of. Perhaps your personal choice was not previously included. To correct that oversight and to make the point that our town has been privileged to enjoy some pretty fair eateries, here are the additions in alphabetical order:

The Auto Eat Café, operated by Speck and Stella Roads at 402 Sixth street, right next door to the Scott Chevrolet dealership (present location of the Exchange Bank & Trust) on the northeast corner of the square; Guy Babcock's Babcock Café at 302 Sixth street, next door to the First National Bank on the east side of the square; Grover Haga's Corner Lunch at 123 Seventh street, a block south of the south side of the square; Helen Folan's Folan's Café on the north side, 619 Delaware; E.V. Hunt's La Fonda Café on the south side at 525 Cedar.

The Seventy-Seven Drive-In Café, operated by Daisy Cain on the south side of the Cain Hotel, at Sixth and Fir; the Temple Lunch, operated by Leo and Helen Robinson at 709 Delaware, right behind the Fred A. Davis & Son Furniture Store, present location of the First Bank & Trust; the U.S. Café at 638 Cedar on the south side of the square, operated by Ted Workman; the West Side Café, on the west side of the square, of course, at 307 Seventh, operated by Wilbur Huffington; and the Whiteway Café at 407 Sixth street, operated by Virgil Walkling as part of the Whiteway Hotel, also operated by Mr. Walkling.

I've relied heavily on the 1940 Perry City Directory for some of the information in this list, and I hope it is fairly complete. If you have a favorite that has not been mentioned, let us hear from you. In the meantime, go enjoy some of the delicacies being served up by today's Perry cafes.

Virginia Eggers has provided a menu from Myers'4-Way Café, which once did business at Bill's Corner, 12 miles east of Perry, when the corner was a busy bus stop, among other things. The breakfast menu at the 4-Way offered doughnuts at a nickel each, French toast at 35 cents, fruit juice at 15 cents, or dry cereal at 30 cents. You could have juice, two eggs, with toast, jelly and coffee for 60 cents, or bacon and coffee at 70 cents. Two hot cakes with one egg, two strips of bacon and coffee were only 70 cents, or you could have an egg, a pork chop, toast, jelly and coffee, also for 70 cents. The menu advised patrons, "If you like our food, tell others. If not, tell us."