



THE BANDON LIGHT

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A PUBLICATION OF THE BANDON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Bandon's Pleasure Palace: The Silver Spray Gardens

By Gary Topping

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree.*

The enterprising Bandon businessmen who decided in 1924 to invest in what became the Silver Spray Gardens dance pavilion probably did not have Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem in mind. The pleasure palace they created, though, certainly became the most exotic and celebrated establishment in the history of Bandon. It is an improbable story with a disastrous ending.

During the 1920s the United States was on the move. With the horrors of the late war a receding memory and the prosperity of a booming economy, people began to hit the road. Western states began a Good Roads movement, entrepreneurs invented a new institution called the motel, and chambers of commerce began advertising nearby attractions for the new tourists.



Bandon came to this new idea almost suddenly, in the spring of 1924. Though the city government supported the new emphasis, it was carried out almost entirely by private enterprise. One thing the city did do was to open up the city park to campers. The newspaper, the *Western World*, began running pictorial advertisements touting the beauties of the Bandon beach and the salubrious climate. Developers began creating tourist facilities near the city park at the west end of 11th Avenue on the bluff overlooking the beach. The first was the "natatorium," the indoor swimming pool known as the Wecoma Baths, filled with sea water heated by a furnace stoked with driftwood. Close by was a gradually in-

creasing complex of tourist cabins.

The anchor to all this development, though, was an immense dance pavilion unlike anything ever seen on the coast. As construction got under way, the newspaper sponsored a contest, offering an extravagant prize of five dollars to anyone who could suggest the best name for this oceanfront marvel. The winning name was "Silver Spray Gardens."

The catalyst for the pavilion was a Portland promoter named Bob Gee, "an experienced amusement director." In February Gee convinced a group of far-sighted businessmen to form a "Bandon Investment" company to raise \$10,000—an immense sum for a small town in 1924—for the extravagantly ambitious project scheduled to open June 1.

The architecture of the building was stunning in its scope. "The dance floor will be 84 X 100 feet in size and of first-class construction," the newspaper reported. "The roof will be supported by trusses, thus eliminating the necessity of having posts as supports. An orchestra stage and sounding horn will be built at the most suitable place in the hall." As actually built, the dance floor was extended to 97 X 100 feet.

Besides the floor, the bandstand was the most important part of the structure. Making the music heard over such a vast space, in the infancy of electronic amplification, was a challenge. Finally, the instrumentation of the band was a critical factor in its acoustical projection. Chosen by Vane "Bum" Gartin, a well-known musical *empresario* in southern Oregon who became the longest-serving bandleader at the Silver Spray, the band relied heavily on brass instruments and banjos. Gartin led the band from behind the drum set. There was nothing much subtle about it, but it was audible.

With such an ambitious project, it is little wonder that the opening date of June 1 was pushed back to June 14 and fi-

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A publication of the
**Bandon Historical Society
Museum**

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The Board meets the fourth Tuesday of each month,
4:00 pm at the Museum. All members and guests
are welcome to attend.

Newsletter Layout Jim Proehl

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If you are interested in Bandon's history and
would like to help preserve our past for future gen-
erations, call us—we need you.

The Museum is OPEN Monday through Satur-
day 10-4 and 7 days a week June through Septem-
ber.

Volunteers are waiting to help you and answer
your questions about Bandon's history.

Enjoy Bandon's rich, wonderful history!

Located at: 270 Fillmore Avenue, Bandon, OR

**On the corner of
Fillmore Ave. and Highway 101**

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FROM THE DESK OF THE DIRECTOR

I can only imagine what
the Silver Spray Dance hall
was like, but Gary Top-
ping's article in this news-
letter on the story of the

Silver Spray gives the best description I've seen.

It also brings back all kinds of good memories of
my mother. My mother (Faye) was raised in a very
musical family.

As I look through the old *Western World* newspa-
pers, I can find where my grandmother Mabel How-
ard used to play the piano for dances at the Dew Val-
ley club house. As my mom got older, she played at
Dew Valley with her mom.

My mom played the piano, accordion, organ and
the drums. My uncle Jim Howard played the guitar.
My aunt Velma Crew had a beautiful voice, so there
were always jam sessions at the house. Everyone was
musical. My mom
played at Lloyd's in
Bandon, Whalen's in
Langlois, The Balboa
in Empire, and Jot's
in Gold Beach. Those
are the ones I remem-
ber.

My poor mom; she
tried to teach me how
to play the piano and
the drums. She finally
had to give up. She told me that I "couldn't carry a
tune in a bucket."

I'm afraid she was right!

I hope you enjoy the story of the Silver Spray as
much as I did.

Gayle Nix
Executive Director



New Members

New Members:

John Jessup family, Jeff Scott,
Donna Junge, Dianne Frank

New Life Members:

Garey and Kathleen Mark,
Rudy and Pamela Hiley,
William and Corliss Burgher



Sponsors Support Several “History at a Distance” Projects

Sponsors helped the museum extend and expand the “History Minutes” program broadcast over the Bi-Coastal Media radio network.

The Bandon Inn, which has sponsored gatherings commemorating the 1936 Bandon Fire in recent years, chose this year to sponsor the broadcast of a series of special “History Minutes” related specifically to the 1936 Fire.

Elli Schulz, who has worked at the museum as a student summer employee, is the voice of several of the spots. A Bandon High Senior, Elli is the daughter of Mike and Jennifer Schulz and the reigning Cranberry Queen.



When employees of Oregon Overseas Timber, located adjacent to the Bandon Airport, produced this phone booth out of a stump in 1989, who would have predicted that phone booths would soon be a historical memory? OOT donated lumber for museum picnic tables.

A grant of \$2,500 from the First Interstate Bank Foundation will keep the “History Minutes” on the air through the coming year.

The museum is providing send-home materials to school classes courtesy of grants by the Cardas Family and The Human Bean.

A lumber donation by Oregon Overseas Timber provided three new picnic tables to enhance the museum’s outdoor space. Volunteer Jim Proehl built the tables.

A Recent Acquisition

The Scoutmaster’s whistle is a recent addition to the museum’s collection. Clayton Duval used the whistle when he was Bandon’s Scoutmaster in the mid-nineteen-sixties when his sons were Scout age.

When his great-grandson Jared joined Scouts, Clayton passed the whistle on to Scoutmaster Chris Butler.

Jared Duval earned his Eagle Scout rank in 2018. Clayton passed away in 2020. Scoutmaster Butler donated the whistle to the museum.



Vets Celebration Moves Outdoors

The museum celebrated veterans with an all outdoor event on the Saturday before Veterans Day. Rick Hinojosa organized the event.

The museum’s Veterans Day celebration typically features a guest speaker, special exhibits, and a display of military vehicles in the parking lot to draw attention to the event.

With restrictions on indoor gatherings, the outdoor display was the focus this year.



Point Man Ministries, Outpost 101, which brought a rare, Vietnam era, ambulance to the event, used the occasion to conduct a drawing for a motorcycle. The raffle proceeds are being used to add to the DeWitt Area Veterans Memorial north of Coos Bay.

Bring Us Your McKay’s Receipts—And Visit Us More Often

McKay’s Markets continue to support local organizations by giving a return on McKay’s receipts collected by organizations. The McKay’s Market Advantage Sales Receipt Program has been a source of museum funding for many years. The program used to accept receipts up to a year after the purchase date but has reduced that time limit to six months.

So, continue to bundle up those McKay’s receipts, bring them to the museum and use them as an excuse to drop in and see us more often.



McKay’s Market at its grand opening in 1960. A Schamehorn Collection photo.

Western World: “*The huge floor space proved none too large.*”

“The Silver Spray Gardens,” continued from Page 1.

nally to June 28. But open it did, and it was an affair of almost unbelievable scope. A reported 2,000 cars showed up, from points as remote as Eugene and Roseburg. “The huge floor space proved none too large,” said the newspaper, “and was soon thronged by dancers, as many as 750 couples being on the floor at one time. The space reserved for spectators was jammed to capacity and many failed to get in at all.”

Western World predicted; “There will be dancing both afternoons and evenings during the holidays, when it is expected that the crowd will tax the capacity of the hall to the limit.”

Alas, it was not to be. Already, in October, the establishment closed, announcing that revenues had not been sufficient to cover indebtedness and the Bandon Investment company passed into receivership. On November 26 it was announced that the dance pavilion had been sold, apparently to the city, for outstanding debts. The place a huge financial disaster.

At the end of January, George P. Topping came to the rescue. Although primarily a lawyer, Topping had had substantial business experience as well. He himself had grown up in Josephine County, had studied law in Jackson County and had practiced all over the southern part of the state including trying several cases before the Oregon Supreme Court. He had connections.

But he had another compelling motive as well. An avid musician, he had been a primary organizer of the Bandon Concert Band and its first cornetist and sometime conductor. “In taking the lease [on the pavilion] Mr. Topping has in mind the interests of the Bandon Concert band as well as his own,” the *Western World* reported.

Although the building was barely half a year old, Topping planned some major renovations. When the Silver Spray Gardens reopened, it would be something new.

The *Western World* described it in some detail: “The gardens have been completely remodeled and re-decorated on the interior.” Most interesting, perhaps, is the “new portable orchestra stand with resonating shell sounding board.”

We have a photograph of the new sounding board, a parabolic reflector designed to resemble a clamshell (appropriate to a seaside facility) which would enhance projection of the sound.

A. N. Young’s interior decorating skills did indeed change the appearance of the place. Whereas the walls of the original structure had been decorated with a fishnet motif, “through the use of hundreds of rolls of green and white crepe paper Decorator A. N. Young and his corps of assistants have converted the enormous pavilion into a most pleasing and inviting place.”

In preparing for the May opening of the new facility, Topping applied all his business acumen. He sent his son Paul on a long trip through the southern counties distributing advertising material, capitalizing on his family connections and reputation. Also, he showed an awareness that people also came to dance pavilions for other reasons than dancing, and he began a tradition of offering door prizes and floor shows to diversify the experience. Finally, he carefully tied the Silver Spray pavilion in with Bandon’s other tourist attractions: “Many will come for the week. . . to enjoy the beach and Wecoma Baths as well as . . . to dance.”

As things turned out, his preparations paid off handsomely. Some 1,200 people paid the cover charge of twenty-five cents on opening night and stayed to dance. And as time went by, the crowds got even bigger: in the 1929 season, some 2,000-3,000 people were reported in attendance. Perhaps not surprisingly, crowds that large created a traffic jam on the narrow, crooked Coquille River road.

Dancing at pavilions like the Silver Spray was a different experience from where a couple just gets up and dances whenever the mood strikes. One did pay an entrance fee, which varied from perhaps as little as twenty-five cents to a dollar or more. Then one would buy a ticket for each individual dance. Those tickets could vary in price, but “jitney rates” were very popular—a nickel apiece. The dance floor was roped off; when one dance ended, an attendant would move the rope across, sweeping the dancers off through one gate while ticket holders for the next dance would come on to the floor from another.

Behavior at the Silver Spray was similarly decorous. The liquor prohibition of the 1920s did not mean that alcohol was not present, but Topping was apparently a stern manager who would tolerate no misbehavior. On only one recorded occasion did a patron step out of line during a weekend dance, and Topping had him arrested and hauled into court on Monday, where he pled guilty and was assessed a fifteen-dollar fine—a pretty stiff amount which



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“They estimated that the crowd numbered close to 3,000.”

“The Silver Spray Gardens,” continued from Page 4.

would have paid for much more than a whole weekend of dancing at the pavilion.

Managing the Silver Spray Gardens involved the entire Topping family, from carrying advertising throughout Coos and neighboring counties, to refinishing and preparing the floor at the beginning of each season, updating decorations as appropriate, to taking tickets, managing the crowd between dances, and even playing and singing with the band.

One of Topping’s most popular and innovative decorations was installation of a “Myriad Reflector,” a huge rotating ball of small mirrors suspended from the ceiling. Its intended effect, Topping said, was to create “a marvel of kaleidoscopic charm—a brilliant fairyland of flashing, changing, living colors.” It would transport patrons of the Silver Spray Gardens into a fantasy world perhaps not too dissimilar, after all, to Kubla Khan’s “stately pleasure dome.”

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the Silver Spray Gardens’ success is the emergence of competition. At the beginning of the 1931 season, a second dance pavilion, the Azalea Gardens, was erected about two miles east of Bandon. A slightly smaller facility—overall dimensions of 64X100 feet with a dance floor of 40X80 feet—it was still a very large structure. It is an amazing tribute to the popularity of those dance pavilions that for the next five years, until the 1936 fire, both facilities profitably existed side by side. And dances were held at smaller venues throughout the county all the time.

Topping was aware that people could be lured to the Silver Spray Gardens by other features than dancing, as shown by the offer of agate jewelry door prizes. Over time, those special features became more and more elaborate, and even bizarre. Floor shows were among the most common. At one point, Mrs. Orris Knapp’s children’s dance class put on a performance. On another occasion, “The ‘Tap, Tap,’ New York’s newest dance sensation,” was introduced as an intermission feature, danced by a couple called “The Masked Dancers.” To spice up interest in the Wednesday night dances, Topping offered a “special intermission entertainment. “A fast one is promised for next Wednesday night when Lee Weber and Bart Woodyard [two of the band members] do their double acrobatic stunt. . . . There was a good crowd present,” the newspaper reported, “and the comedy went over big. Even the iceman made a hit.” (One wonders how the iceman fit into the act.)

One of the pavilion’s biggest floor shows, the “Silver Spray Dancers,” appeared during the 1928 season. A sextette of local girls, Katherine Topping Davis, Marie and Evelyn Manciet, Dorothy Lorenz, Betty Zentner and Elizabeth Littlefield, developed a “repertoire of dances” which they performed each week under the direction of one W. A. Stanchfield. “Since disbanding at the end of the 1928 season some of the members of the group have moved away or married,” the newspaper reported, but the group reunited in 1930 to perform

on Wednesday night one of their most popular routines, “Dancing Scarecrow.”

The Silver Spray Gardens reached the height of its popularity during the 1935 season. Manager Topping spared no effort to advertise the June opening, traveling in person from Medford to Salem with stops at all points between. The resulting crowd was the biggest ever: “Traffic officers in charge of the parking in the vicinity of the hall,” the newspaper reported, “estimated that there were some 500 more people in attendance than last year. They estimated that the crowd numbered close to 3,000.”

How to account for the ongoing popularity of the Silver Spray Gardens, which began in 1924 at an almost unbelievable level and seemingly just continued to grow, even after the stock market crash of 1929 widened into the Great Depression? Several explanations are possible. Careful maintenance of the hall is one: patrons could expect the floor to be in excellent condition and the decorations to be replaced or touched up frequently. Good enter-

Continued on Page 7.

FREDDIE JEANNETS
SHORT TERM
12 HOUR—NOON TO MIDNITE
WALKATHON
SILVER SPRAY
BANDON, OREGON
Aug. 2nd
THRILLING and SPECTACULAR
\$50.00 Cash Prize
CONTESTANTS—Apply Walkathon Headquarters, Bandon, Oregon.

This flyer advertised a variation on the dance marathons of the era, at the Silver Spray August 2, 1931.



The Wecoma Cottages and Wecoma Baths, a salt water natatorium, were part of the tourist complex at the west end of Eleventh Street on Coquille Point. The peak of the Silver Spray is visible over the roof of the Wecoma Baths.

Found in Collection

“Hit of the Week” Records Hold a Piece of Bullards History

Sometimes objects within objects come to light. When Donna Mason was rethinking how to display a hand-cranked, floor model, Silvertone phonograph, she “rediscovered” some records in the cabinet under the turntable.

The cabinet record player was donated by Rick Gearhart of Port Orford. It was given to his aunt, Bessie McFarland, by Christine Evans when Christine moved away from the property that became Bullards Beach State Park. Mrs. Evans was one of six children of Robert and Malinda Bullard.



An ad from a 1916 Sears catalog depicts a phonography similar to the one in our collection from the Evans household.

The “Hit of the Week,” records were produced from 1930 to 1932 and were made of a sturdy, brown-paper base coated in Durium, a lightweight synthetic resin. Promotional articles for “Hit of the Week” records often featured a man wielding a hammer, meant as a testament to the durability of Durium.

One song, played at 78 rpm, was recorded on one side of the disk. The paper side sometimes bore a picture of the recording artist. As the title suggests, a new record came out every week. They were sold at newsstands (or by mail order) rather than record stores.

As a consequence of being coated on only one side, the records had a tendency to curl. All the specimen’s in the museum collection have tape on the edges, suggesting they had to be taped down to play.

The record player and the records stored inside it give a glimpse into a specific slice of life on the lower Coquille River.



Santa Claus is Coming to Town

Rowena Porter and children Michael, Patty and Lorrie greet Santa outside the Bandon theater in 1956. The Lions Club prepared to help Santa (Bob Hiley) give treats to 1,000 children. Theater owners Kamara and Raleigh Greene provided a free matinee.

A Schamehorn collection photo



Memorial Donations

A memorial donation has been made in memory of:
Jill Chappell Sumerlin,
Don Goddard,
James T. Reilly



Memorial donations have been made by:
Christopher Ray, Steve and Cindy Gant, Lila Huron-Albinger, Mary Schamehorn, Marianne Sheahan, Virginia Weaver, Melody Gillard Juarez, William and Corliss Burgher, Edward N. and Gloria Reilly, Margaret Cormier

2020 In Our Rearview Mirror

We began 2020 with big plans for events and gatherings. With the onset of COVID 19, those plans changed. We closed our doors for 72 days, cancelled all group events, and cautiously reopened the exhibit floor in June.

Our visitor count is trending toward half of what we've averaged the past few years. The daily traffic is about the same but we don't have those days of large numbers generated by events, programs or classroom visits.

The museum's finances have basically evened out. We spent carefully. Revenue is down but we received two COVID relief grants. Member donations have been generous. The checking account is in the black.



First Street Bandon during the March stay-at-home order.

We've used the quieter time to catch up on some record keeping, organize storage space and fine tune exhibits.

We're finding ways to share history "at arm's length:" more radio sports, self-guided history hikes and **more newsletters**—this edition being the sixth, and last, of 2020.

"The Silver Spray Gardens," continued from Page 5.

tainment is another, for Topping, a musician himself, always hired good musicians, often local people who would have their own followings, and he was always on the lookout for good floor shows and other entertainment to complement the music. Finally, one speculates that during the increasingly hard times people welcomed a weekend escape valve to help them forget the problems of their workaday world.

Whatever the reasons, that popularity continued through the 1936 season, so much so that Topping announced that there would be a fall season, beginning on September 26. It was not to be.

September 26, 1936, became the most fateful day in Bandon history. Bandon already had a long history of devastating fires, but the extraordinarily dry season of 1936 rendered the city especially vulnerable to the conflagration that broke out that morning and visited a holocaust upon the community that beggared everything that had gone before. On September 27, Bandon was little more than a heap of ashes and the twisted concrete shells of formerly proud and prosperous buildings.

Like virtually everyone else, the Topping family lost everything. The Radio and Electric company where Rex Topping was a partner with his brother-in-law Rufus Truman was gone. The Bank of Bandon where George P. Topping had his law office with its extensive law library was a burned-out skeleton. The family home up on Douglas Street where Paul Topping once ran his agate jewelry business was a pile of ashes. And nothing remained of the Silver Spray Gardens but its concrete foundation. The dance pavilion, on the far western side of town, may have been one of the last structures to go, and one can barely imagine the inferno its all-wooden construction would have created.

There is no scale of values upon which one could rate the relative levels of devastation wreaked by the loss of home and livelihood. Everyone lost in the Bandon fire. But destruction of the Silver Spray Gardens was a community deprivation of the first magnitude. That dance pavilion was more than the crepe paper ocean waves, the Myriad Reflector, the clamshell bandstand with its pulsing music. Those were only the raw materials out of which people created their own Xanadu, their weekend escape from the travails of the Great Depression, the late mortgage payment, the lost job, the troubled marriage. It provided a fantasy land of enchantment, a world of escape. One could have expected much less from an establishment that was, after all, only a dance hall.



The furnace at the Wecoma Baths was the most visible reminder of the resort complex on Coquille Point to survive the 1936 fire.

Gary Topping (toppinggary@gmail.com), a retired historian and archivist living in Salt Lake City, is a grandson of George P. Topping. His research notes for this article are on file at the Bandon History Museum, though his sources also include unrecorded reminiscences of Rex Topping.

This article has been abridged to fit The Bandon Light. To read the full text of the article, visit the museum website, open the "Collections" tab and choose the "Bandon History" feature bandonhistoricalmuseum.org/silverspray.html.

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