

FIRST DRAFT

Dances were big entertainment in Colorado's rural communities

By **BOB SILBERNAGEL**
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After a long night of playing piano at the Summit School in Unaweep Canyon, "the tendons in my arms were sore for a week," Anita Clark of Grand Junction recalled.

"When we played there, they never let us quit until the sun came up," she added. Dances were usually scheduled to end at 1 a.m. or 2 a.m., but, Clark said, "They would pass the hat to keep us going. Then we'd usually go to somebody's ranch for breakfast."

Even so, "we thoroughly enjoyed it," added Clark, 91, who was Anita Black back then — in the early 1940s — and was part of a family musical combo called the Purdy Mesa Cowhands.

The group included Anita and her younger sister, Wanda — they both played accordion and piano — a friend, Don Robb, who played guitar, and her brother-in-law Bill Raber, who played saxophone and was the combo's leader.

Alpha Rae Keenan, née Thurston, had similar experiences in Grand County.

"During the 1940s, we played all over Grand County," said Keenan, now 89 and living near Palisade. "During the war, there weren't many young men around, but there were plenty of other adults and they liked to get out."

Keenan was also part of a family combo called the Music Makers. It included Alpha Rae's younger sister, Margaret, who switched with Alpha Rae on accordion and piano, and brother Victor on accordion. Their mother played drums, and others would occasionally join in on horns or guitar.

Although they made little money — about \$5 per band member for each show — both combos were in demand in the small rural communities of western Colorado because there wasn't much else to do.

Movie theaters and other entertainment were available in larger towns, but were too far to drive regularly for rural families.

The community dances carried on a long tradition in the West. Check out nearly any regional history book with stories from early pioneers, and you will likely find references to dances at local schools, in town halls or in ranch houses and barns.

Children also attended these dances, often sleeping on blankets or coats strewn along the walls as the nights wore on.

In the Blue Mountain region, on the Colorado-Utah border



ANITA CLARK/Special to The Sentinel

The Purdy Mesa Cowhands, from left, included Wanda Black, Winifred (Black) Raber, Don Robb and Anita Black (now Anita Clark). Winifred did not play in the band but was married to band leader Bill Raber (not shown).

between Dinosaur and Jensen, Utah, the Red Onion schoolhouse frequently served double duty as a dance hall.

One old-timer quoted in the book "Blue Mountain Folks" recalled, "I went to two or three dances at the Red Onion. They were surveying up there and one of the surveyors played the fiddle, and one played the banjo. The guy that played the banjo had two thumbs on one hand. He could really pick that banjo."

Another early resident of the same region remembered dancing at the Bare Valley School in 1924. "They were having the school elections up there, and they had a big dance. I didn't dance much, though. I took one drink of Charlie Mantle's whiskey. It was about 200 proof ... I passed out and laid out under a serviceberry bush all night."

Alcohol appeared frequently in stories of the early community dances. It was still prevalent when Clark and Keenan were playing.

"Everybody had a bottle in the car," Clark said, a statement echoed by Keenan.

But booze almost never made it into the dance hall itself. Both Clark and Keenan said there were very few incidents when an inebriated participant caused problems inside the dance hall.

In addition to the Summit School, the Purdy Mesa Cowhands traveled frequently to play at the Gateway School, and to other locales such as Cow Creek outside of Ridgway.

Once they traveled up John Brown Canyon, on the road that had just been opened in 1943. "We had to use a troop carrier because the road was so

rough," Clark recalled. Later, with another combo, she played at Fairmont Hall and the La Court Hotel in Grand Junction.

Purdy Mesa Cowhands wasn't just a name. Clark and her band mates were true cowhands and cattle ranchers, and they helped move cattle to and from summer grazing on Grand Mesa. So naturally, they also played at a dance on the last day of the mesa roundup each fall.

"We played at the Claybough Cow Camp," not far from Lands End Road, she said. "The cowboys had to carry a piano up to the second floor of the cabin for us to play. It was still there the last time I checked, about 10 years ago."

For Keenan and her siblings, work was at their father's dairy near Tabernash. "We had to milk cows before we left," she said. "Then we would go to a dance and play until 2 or so. We'd be keyed up and drink coffee until 4 (a.m.) and go milk again. We'd catch a little sleep and then go deliver milk."

Both combos performed then-popular music, as well as polkas and waltzes. "I remember we played 'The Beer-Barrel Polka' a lot, and 'Little Brown Jug,'" Clark said.

Additionally, when someone was available to act as caller, square dances were very popular. "We played the Virginia Reel quite a bit," said Keenan.

After World War II and in the 1950s, the era of community dances began to fade. Theaters, bowling alleys and bars with juke-box dances came to small-



ALPHA RAE KEENAN/Special to The Sentinel

Alpha Rae Thurston, now Alpha Rae Keenan, practices her accordion in the snow outside her home in Tabernash.

er communities. Better roads and cars made it easier for rural residents to travel farther.

And, in the late 1940s, both Anita Black and Alpha Rae Thurston got married. Anita to Keith Clark and Alpha Rae to Larry Keenan. Their musical careers were sidelined as they each began to raise families of their own.

Information for this column came from interviews with Anita Clark and Alpha Rae Keenan, as well as from the books, "Blue Mountain Folks," by Doris Karen Burton; and "Gateway/Unaweep Canyon at Some Point in Time," by Jean Moores.

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REGION SENTINEL WIRE SERVICES

Bear cub caught near Spanish Fork

SPANISH FORK, Utah — Utah wildlife officials have caught a bear cub that was seen wandering near Spanish Fork.

The Salt Lake Tribune reports that the state Division of Wildlife Resources used drugs to immobilize the 80-pound female cub on Saturday.

Agency spokesman Shawn Bagley says the animal was treed in a drainage area just south of a golf course.

Spanish Fork police say there have been sightings of the bear several times in the area in the last week.

It is estimated to be between 12 and 18 months old. The cub will be relocated.

1 person dead after vehicle hits a horse

KERSEY — One person is dead after a vehicle hit a horse and rolled over on Saturday.

The Colorado State Patrol says as many as four vehicles may have been involved in the crash. Authorities are trying to determine if the horse was dead prior to the collision.

The accident happened on U.S. Highway 34 between Greeley and Kersey.

No charges against officer in shooting

AURORA — No charges will be filed against an Aurora police officer who shot a man waving a pellet gun inside a McDonald's bathroom.

District Attorney Dave Young says officer Alfred Eways was justified when he shot Dillon Safford in both arms last May.

According to the Denver Post, customers called police after they saw the man had a gun and was mumbling to himself.

Safford suffered non-life-threatening injuries and was treated at a hospital.

Investigators said Eways did not turn on his body camera before the shooting, and the cameras worn by other officers were obstructed from a clear view.

The police department is still trying to determine if Eways will be disciplined for failing to turn on his body camera prior to the incident.

Mine emergency grants awarded

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — Six groups will share \$1 million in grants to develop training for emergency preparedness and accident prevention in underground mines.

The U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration announced the Brookwood-Sago grants last week.

Among those receiving grants are the University of Arizona, the Colorado School of Mines and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

The grant program is named in remembrance of 25 men who died in mining explosions in Alabama in 2001 and at the Sago Mine in West Virginia in 2006.

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State tourism office looking for new ideas

By **SENTINEL STAFF**

The Colorado Tourism Office will be coming to Grand Junction and other cities around the state next week to gather more ideas to help it promote the state.

Since the state kicked off a major national promotion campaign in recent years, Colorado has seen a 34.2 percent increase in traveler spending since 2011, while adjacent Western states saw a 71 percent drop, according to a preliminary report released by the office.

"This is some of the best and most positive evidence we've seen that increased media budgets and a concerted strategy can yield the desired results," Colorado Tourism Office Director Cathy Ritter said. "These shifts in travel behavior not only infused new dollars into Colorado's business economy, but generated a significant increase in state and local tax revenues."

Still, most of those increases were centered in the Denver metropolitan area and in the resort mountain communities,

even though a lot of places tourists have been visiting over the past five years are not in those areas.

That's why the office is holding sessions in Grand Junction and elsewhere, to get ideas on how to market those areas better, the office said.

Primarily, tourists have been coming from such places as California, New York, Texas, Florida and Illinois, but Colorado still attracts large numbers from such surrounding states as Wyoming, New Mexico and Ne-

braska, the report shows.

Last year, those tourists were part of a record 77.7 million visitors to the state, who spent about \$19.1 billion and generated about \$1.13 billion in tax revenue.

The Grand Junction public input session is scheduled for 8:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. Friday at the City Hall Auditorium, 250 N. Fifth St. Other sessions next week are scheduled in Durango, Vail, Salida and several locations along the Front Range and Eastern Plains.

BLOTTER COMPILED BY SENTINEL STAFF

Suspect accused of fraud

The Grand Junction Police Department jailed a man Thursday who officers suspect may be part of a check-cashing ring.

The man, Shawn Richard Roberts, 50, was jailed on suspicion of identity theft, theft of between \$2,000 and \$5,000, fraud by check of more than \$2,000, forgery, criminal possession of a forged instrument, issuance of a

bad check and complicity.

According to his arrest affidavit, Roberts, who also is known as Shawn River, allegedly opened several bank accounts and deposited checks that were later determined to be fraudulent.

Regardless, Roberts continued to withdraw money from the account before his ATM card was frozen, according to the affidavit.

"(Roberts) is very clearly the leader of

a substantial fraud ring in town," Chief Deputy District Attorney David Waite said during a court hearing on the matter.

According to the Mesa County Sheriff's Office:

- Erica Dibble, 31, was issued a summons Oct. 1 on suspicion of petty theft in the 500 block of 32 Road.
- Someone broke into a building Thursday in the 3400 block of C Road and burglarized it.

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