

The Houghton Lake **Resorter** Houghton Lake, Michigan

'Gone, but never forgotten' Memories shared at last Music Box reunion

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SHARING MEMORIES (Above) alleryary and Peggy Wescott (right) talk with Dr. Jim Sullivan about memorabilia from the Music Box June 30 at the last reunion dance, held at the Houghton Lake Historical Playhouse. Peggy ended up buying the plaque in her hand, as another memento to add to their collection. Peggy and Gary met at The Box and were married after she finished college. Sullivan, who was a bouncer at the open air dance hall, enjoyed sharing stories and showing photos of The Box, which was operated by the late Lee and Shirley Kelly. Gary Wescott came prepared to dance, dressed in his saddle shoes!**By Cheryl Holladay**

Memories and music mingled at the last Music Box reunion June 30.

Couples gathered at the Houghton Lake Historical Playhouse to reminisce once again about the former landmark that attracted teens from all over Michigan.

“It’s sad. It’s an era – we just hate to see it end,” Peggy Wescott, a member of the Great Lakes Swing Dance Club, said.

Wescott, who met her husband, Gary, on her first visit to what was commonly called “The Box,” said they were sorry to hear there will be no more reunions.

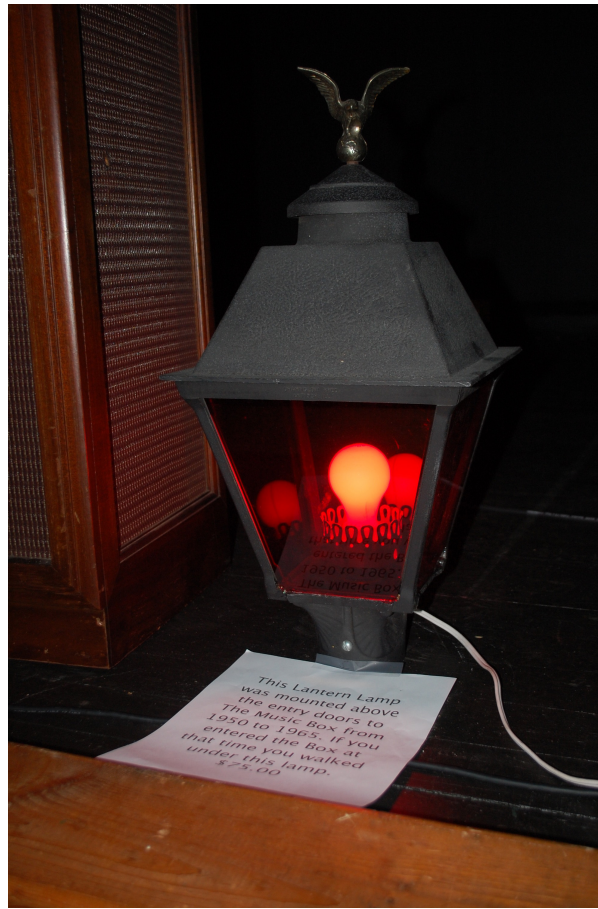
“There was a line a mile long to go there,” she said of the Music Box, which was operated by the late Lee and Shirley Kelly.

It was the place to go

Mark Barnhart Sr., a member of the Music Box Historical Society, provided another anecdote about the widespread legacy of the Music Box.

Barnhart said he spends winters in Florida

and he once encountered someone who recognized him. Upon discussing how the



GATEWAY FOR SALE On display at the reunion dance was the original red lantern that hung above the entrance to the blue metal door of the Music Box from 1950 to 1965. It is for sale for \$75.

two might have met, he said, they discovered they knew each other from the Music Box!

Arriving from quite a distance to the reunion were Bob and Debbie Elkins of North Carolina.

Bob Elkins, a 1962 graduate of Waterford Township High School, worked at Johnson's Rustic Resort during the summers.

"I learned about the Music Box from a friend in Waterford," he said.

He said his favorite memory of his time at The Box was when he was in the record tower with Lee (Shirley usually played the records from their collection). He said Lee got a phone call and it was obvious she was giving Lee directions to

their bedroom. He said when she discovered Bob was in the booth with Lee: “Click!”

A friend of Elkins, Dr. Jim Sullivan, who worked at the Music Box as



VISION AND MISSION Lee and Shirley Kelly’s formal portrait was on display at the dance. DJ Clark Harder said that while serving in the Army Air Corps in the Philippines, Lee Kelly saw people dancing in the street to a wind-up Victrola and knew he wanted to provide a place of entertainment for teens. Shirley used her background in architecture to design the open air dance hall.

a bouncer, said he has the door knocker to the record tower.

Sullivan also has other memorabilia, as well as a rendering of the Music Box he painted in 1969.

Barnhart said some of the items being sold to raise money for a historical marker at the former site of the Music Box are a piece of redwood trim from the Swiss-themed open air dance hall, floor tiles – some signed by Lee Kelly – and two of

the nine speakers from which was heard the hits of the 1950s and 60s (the other seven were already sold).

He said the Kellys' collection of 5,000 45s has already been purchased by a single buyer. Anyone interested in purchasing the remaining items may call him at 366-8980.

DJ Clark Harder kept the tunes going at the reunion, interspersed with some information about Lee and Shirley Kelly, who operated The



Box from the weekend of July 4, 1946, to 2001.

“Parents knew it was a safe place to leave their kids for the evening,” he said.

Harder introduced Deborah Gouin, who gave a toast to the Kellys (whose formal portrait sat on the Playhouse stage). Gouin said the Music Box was a place to socialize and fall in love.

“We were the lucky ones,” she said. “We all had the Music Box to go to.”

Harder said, “I think all of you who danced at the Music Box were the lucky ones.”

He said Lee Kelly had been serving in the Philippines during World War II and informed his wife he wanted to open a dance hall at Houghton Lake after seeing

people dancing in the streets to a wind-up Victrola. He said the Kellys operated the Music Box as an alcohol-free establishment, but that the last reunion would be



MUSICAL EXERCISE Mary Boyle of Lake James and Bob Selleck of Houghton Lake (left) and Ron and Nancy Schubert of Houghton Lake were among the couples dancing to songs like “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” and “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” Debbie Elkins (not pictured), who attended with her husband, Bob, said she was raised Baptist, so she did not dance much growing up, but she later took lessons with her husband. “It’s been fun,” she said of dancing, “and it’s been good exercise.” (Photo by Cheryl Holladay)

done differently, in that the after-party that started at 9 p.m. would have an open bar.

Harder said the goal of the MBHS is to leave a lasting memory.

“It’s gone, but it’s not forgotten,” he said, paraphrasing the group’s motto, “Gone, but never forgotten.”

Dancing at the last dance

Ron and Nancy Schubert of Houghton Lake were among the couples attending the reunion.

Ron Schubert said he lived in West Branch during the years he went to the Music Box. He guessed he went there 600 to 700 times.

“It was open in the summer seven days a week,” he said.

He said Nancy got to see the inside when it reopened temporarily before being torn down.

“It was a great place,” he said. “It kept a lot of kids out of trouble.”

Esher Biggs, who attended the reunion with Dallas Tevis, said she is a music buff and remembers where she was



A LITTLE BOPPER The “Teenie Weenie Bopper,” Deborah Gouin’s dog, Jazzi Rai, made its entrance at the dance, in honor of “Big Bopper,” the Kellys’ St. Bernard.

(at a dance on New Year’s Eve) when it was announced Ricky Nelson died.

“I always wanted to go in it [the Music Box],” she said.

Bob Selleck of Houghton Lake said he has attended the Music Box reunions every year.

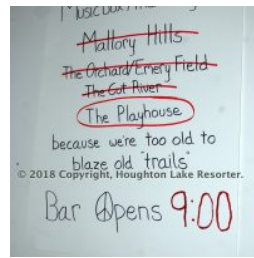
He danced at The Box from “1956 to 1963, 64, 65, somewhere in there,” he said.

Keeping the musical memory

Barnhart, who restored the “Music Box Blue” letters that make up the “dancing” sign near the Playhouse stage, said there is almost enough money to erect the

historical marker. (Currently, Pirate's Cove putter golf is located where the Music Box once stood.)

Information about becoming a member and contributing toward the marker is available at the MBHS website, musicboxhs.wordpress.com. Member Becky (Marra) Davis has plenty of photos and can be reached via Twitter. The group also has a Facebook page.





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