

The Day The Music Died ...And The Music Man Lives On

By Bob Paszczyk

With the advent of fall it is only natural to think of a 38 hour-800 mile whirlwind trip to northern Iowa to visit the corn and twin cities of Clear Lake and Mason City while turning the clock back 55 years. Okay maybe they are not really twin cities, but in my mind and for this trip they were.

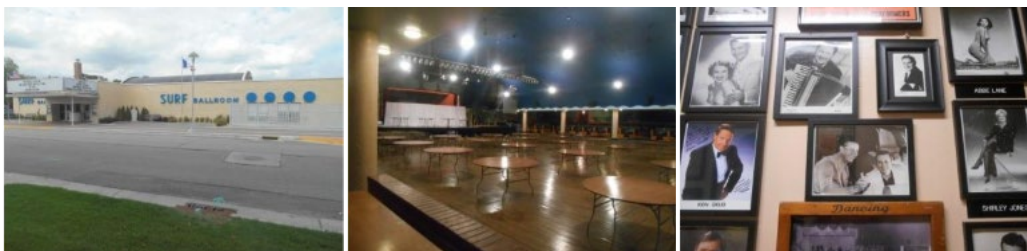
Historians note that Clear Lake and Mason City were originally the summer home to the Sioux and Winnebago tribes. I always thought of Indians as a struggling people and not in terms of pulling skiers behind their canoes at summer homes.

Mason City, with a 2010 census figure of 28,079, is roughly four times larger than Clear Lake whose official 2010 census was 7,777. (Guess what Pick 4 number the residents played when this figure was announced?)

But the area is best known not for its luck but for a series of events that would shock the world of rock and roll in its infancy.

For on February 3, 1959 the lives of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, J.P. Richardson (The Big Bopper) and pilot Roger Peterson came to an end in a cornfield just minutes from the Mason City airport.

Our first stop was the last (other than the abrupt one in the cornfield) for the musical trio: the Surf Ballroom. The Surf is a working ballroom that to this day hosts concerts, weddings and other occasions. Originally built in 1933 and rebuilt in 1948 at its current location due to fire, this 30,000 foot establishment offers entertainment to Clear Lake from the biggest names in show business. Visitors take a self-guided tour viewing the autographed photos and memorabilia of these notables. On one wall there were actually pictures of my distant cousin Lawrence Welk.



Holly, Havens, Richardson, Waylon Jennings, Tommy Allsup, Carl Bunch and Dion DiMucci (later of Dion and the Belmonts) were on a “Winter Dance Party” tour scheduled to cover 24 cities in three weeks. Clear Lake was not originally planned but filled in by tour promoters who felt they could squeeze in another show before a performance in Fargo the next day.

The group had been traveling on a bus with mechanical problems and a heating system that repeatedly failed. This led to drummer Carl Bunch being hospitalized in Michigan with frostbitten feet. Frustrated, Holly decided to charter a plane. JP Richardson suffering from the flu asked Jennings if he could have Jennings’ seat. Valens and Allsup had local DJ Bob Hale toss a coin to determine who would “win” the final slot. DiMucci opted out of the arrangement because he could not afford the \$36 fare.

When the group left for the airport, Holly allegedly told Jennings “Well, I hope your ol’ bus freezes up.” Jennings, in jest replied, “Well I hope your ol’ plane crashes.” It was a comment that is said to have haunted the country singer for the rest of his life.

The V-tail Bonanza rolled down runway 17 at Mason City airport and made a climbing turn to the northwest. In less than 4 minutes N3794N traveled to its fateful end less than 6 miles from the airport.

The NTSB ruled the official cause of the accident to be “spatial disorientation. The pilot was not qualified to fly in IFR (instrument flight rules) conditions.”

As we left the Surf Ballroom I played Don McLean’s *American Pie*, the tribute to that night and these men. The next destination was the crash site.

There are no signs pointing to the location, no booths selling t-shirts or records. For the actual site, in the middle of a private cornfield, can only be reached after a half mile walk. The entrance way of a graveled road is indicated by a huge set of horned rimmed glasses. The spot where the wreckage came to a rest is marked by simple memorial to the three performers with a set of pilot’s wings nearby.



Holly's wife, Maria Elena, first learned of the accident while watching television. She lost the child they were expecting the next day, widowed after six months of marriage.

As we left the area, *American Pie* once again was played.

The next morning we were off to Mason City to visit the home and museum of Meredith Wilson-*The Music Man*. Wilson used his small town experience playing in the Mason City Symphonic Band to create the characters and the musical. *The Music Man* successfully opened in Broadway in 1957 winning 5 Tony Awards running for 1,375 performances



It was then on to the Mason City airport to replicate the final flight on that fateful night. As we entered the airport there was a V-tail Bonanza, the same type the foursome rode, eerily parked on the flight line. Ceiling this day was 5,000 feet overcast...exactly what it was that night. We taxied to runway 18, the same one used that night. (In 1959 the runway was designated 17 but due to the earth's magnetic shift it is now 18.)

As we began our take-off roll one couldn't help think of what was going on in the plane that night. Was there excited chattering? Or did they close their eyes out of fatigue, grateful they were not suffering the hardships of the bus ride? As the Bonanza dove uncontrollably did they panic or resign themselves to what was about to occur? Whatever happened, it would be over in four minutes.

We circled the memorial twice and then turned to Clear Lake to make two aerial passes before heading back to Mason City airport with a deeper understanding of the day the music died.

It was then back to Clear Lake for a treat of a root beer float at the Barrel, a genuine 50's drive-in. With a full stomach and on glucose overdrive, the wife and I headed to the center of town for a ride on *The Lady of the Lake*. Because of high winds and choppy waters the tour was limited to 1 hour, 30 minutes shy of normal. This gave us a fact filled scenic tour of the 7 mile long lake. It was no wonder why those Indians chose this area for their summer homes.



A friend defined a vacation as nothing more than four different walls. In deference these 38 hours were walls, a plane, a boat, a ballroom, a cornfield and a better understanding of what happened that day 55 years ago.