

# Recalling the glory days of



**Sunny Dale Acres at Lake Dore was most likely the most popular dance hall in the Ottawa Valley for many years. Opened in 1948 by Charlie Martin, it was the place to go for dancing and fun for the next 20 plus years. The dance hall was home to scores of wedding dinners and receptions and the always popular Saturday night dances.**

By Johanna Zomers  
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

*"On the beautiful shores of Lake Dore  
On a night that was made for romance  
Let me tell you a real true love story  
Of a boy and a girl and a dance..."*  
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These lyrics (in the *Lake Dore Waltz*) by John McNab 'Mac' Beattie, an Arnprior native, signalled the bittersweet last dance of the evening for the *Ottawa Valley Melodiers* who graced the stage on Saturday nights at Sunny Dale Acres on Highway 41, about 8 km from Eganville.

The legendary Ottawa Valley band raced to the dance hall each week after their weekly live radio show in Pembroke, arriving just in time to strike up the music for the eight o'clock opening.

Mac Beattie wrote the *Lake Dore Waltz* about meeting his wife, Marie McMunn, at Sunny Dale Acres but it could fit dozens of other couples who found love while swaying to the music in the famous dance hall. Mac and Marie Beattie's son, John, who went on to work at CJOH, CBC and ultimately became Peter Jennings's producer at ABC television in New York, remembers how his father, "offered people the songs and stories about the Ottawa Valley. He was a dream-sharer who could take people along for the ride".

"This was where you went to fall in love," says Terry Martin whose father, Frank, and Uncle, Charlie, owned the farm which sloped down to Highway 41 as it curved around Lake Dore. "A lot of people met their mates at that Saturday night dance or at a wedding there. In those days all your neighbours, friends and acquaintances had a blanket invitation to your wedding so you met people from all over."

**Opened In 1948**

The Martin brothers built the barn-like structure in the late 1940s and installed what many called the best dance floor in the Valley. Frank Martin's niece painted the huge block letters that spelled **Sunny Dale Acres** on the lower part of the shingled roof. It was a simple structure, open to the high rafters, with shuttered openings instead of window glass, and wooden benches nailed down around two sides. There was an area where coffee and hot dogs could be purchased by the dancers, but no alcohol was sold. However, that was no deterrent to the fun and, for decades, Sunny Dale Acres was where locals, cottagers, young and old gathered to dance squares and listen to the fiddles.

"If you didn't have a date by the time they played the *Lake Dore Waltz* and people were gathering up their jackets and purses, you were leaving alone," Terry Martin remembers.

It was the heyday of square dancing and Sunny Dale Acres had three popular callers. Harold Hass was the caller with *The Pine Tree Mountaineers* from the Opeongo Line and played with Walter and Edna Felhaber, their two sons, Howard and Darcy, and their first cousin, Ellard Felhaber.

"I used a tube PA which ran on batteries like the big old radios," Mr. Hass remembers. "There would be three squares and then three rounds. It was all fiddle and piano tunes. If it was a wedding, there would be a couple of hundred people there. It might get a bit rowdy after midnight."

Mr. Hass, who still lives just up the road from his childhood homestead

on 'the mountain', recalls that his father, who had a sawmill on the Opeongo, sawed the square timbers for the dance hall which finally closed around 1970.

"The young people started listening to Elvis and the *Beatles* and country music wasn't as popular anymore," remembers Don Derraugh who grew up in Golden Lake. He chuckles that he "survived Sunny Dale Acres" as a teenager. Mr. Derraugh, who attended high school in Eganville, went on to teach in Arnprior.

"Mac Beattie and Reggie Hill both lived in Arnprior and the *Melodiers* had a radio show in Pembroke at the time. They would play live for half an hour in the CHOV studio and then drive to Sunny Dale Acres and play there until closing time.

"You had to be 21 to drink and a lot of us weren't so we would go see the bootlegger and keep the bottle outside in the car trunk. You had to be careful if the cops saw you going out to the car too often; they would get suspicious."

Not everyone behaved themselves as the night went on but the Martin brothers kept a close eye on known troublemakers.

"There was rarely any problem inside the hall because one of them would take the belligerent young men outside and tell them to go at it out there," he recalled.

**Strapping Men**

Both Martin brothers were big strapping farmers and they didn't need any other bouncers to enforce their rules.

Mr. Derraugh remembers how, "the lads stood at the back of the room and shot the bull and the girls would sit on the benches around the walls. Charlie and Frank knew all the guys who might start a fight and everybody would keep an eye out for trouble. Frank, who was the outgoing brother, would say 'I don't want you making a fuss. Take it outside'."

Muriel and Ralph Verch, parents of Canadian fiddle icon April Verch, often danced at Sunny Dale Acres.

"In summer, even with the open windows, it would get very hot inside and some people would go down to the lake and have a swim to cool off after the dance," Mr. Verch recalls. "There wasn't really a beach there and the water was pretty deep."

He also recalls that dancers would hide their drink of choice either behind a car wheel or behind a fence post in the field rather than leave it in their car, since the police sometimes stopped by to take a look. If somebody took a drink out of the wrong

bottle, whether deliberate or not, a fight could break out."

"They came from miles around and no doubt some of the tragic car accidents on winding rural highways on summer Saturday nights resulted from the parties in the parking lot," says one woman who asked to remain anonymous.

She remembers the long drives home after midnight in a car full of teenagers.

"There wasn't any age limit to go

to the dance, because no alcohol was sold or served. But, of course, they couldn't control what happened outside."

Mary (Dick) Etmanski of Renfrew recalls one of the best parts of singing at Sunny Dale Acres was getting there.

"We'd all be sitting in the back of a cube van with the instruments and maybe a mickey of cherry brandy," she remembers. "Everyone helped set up the equipment. I remember the

smell of the wood fire on cold nights. Terry Martin would be there firing up the stove."

Mary started singing with Mac Beattie when she was just 10 years old and performed with the *Melodiers* at the Renfrew Hotel and on live radio and television.

"I never sang with Mac at Sunny Dale but I performed there every Saturday night with Gary Perry's band during the sixties. The floor was always full. The energy in the room

was amazing."

"They looked after me," Mary says. "We were like a family. I know there was a lot of alcohol outside at the dances, but I never felt in any danger. You could say that tailgating parties were invented at Lake Dore. I have wonderful memories of those days."

**Hurricane Hazel Didn't Interrupt Reception**

Hundreds of people relived those memories at a Sunny Dale Acres reunion at the Renfrew Armouries. The 2008 fundraiser for Renfrew Victoria Hospital drew an overflowing crowd to the party which featured memorabilia and memories from musicians and dancers alike.

"There were lots of weddings. You had to have your wedding reception on Friday because Saturday was the evening of the regular dance," recalls Earl Hein of Eganville whose wedding reception on October 15, 1954 had an unexpected guest in *Hurricane Hazel*.

"It got pretty windy," he recalls. "The skylight in the roof blew off and the lights went off a couple of times. But we kept going."

Earl and his bride, Marlene had already left the reception to go to their rented cabin when the worst of the storm hit.

"It was pretty exciting with all the wind and the rain," he remembers. "There wasn't too much damage but the band that evening was the Felhabers, Edna and Walter and a couple of their sons from up on the mountain. There were so many trees down. They only had an old dull axe with them and they didn't get home until the next afternoon!"

April Verch noted, "The tales of Sunny Dale Acres have been part of my life for as long as I can recall. My parents courted there and danced to the *Melodiers*. The band would play a waltz, a polka and then a square dance and repeat that over and over so there were several squares in an hour, not just a couple per night like we have now. There were no tables or chairs in the hall, just a bench that went around the perimeter of the floor -- because people came to dance!"

She remembers visiting the remains of the old hall with her parents when she was young.

"What remained was not very safe to climb around on, but still I carefully got up on what remained of the stage so Mom and Dad could take my picture. I also have a piece of the hardwood floor that Dad pulled out from the wreckage for me as a souvenir. He said it was one of the finest floors he and Mom ever danced on."

It's a rare resident of the Valley who doesn't have memories of those summer Saturday nights when the fiddle music spilled out into the warm evening. But eventually, television, shopping malls, rock and roll, and better highways lured young people toward lights brighter than the bare bulbs that lit the old dance halls. It was the end of an era as Sunny Dale Acres closed its doors for the last time around 1970.

April Verch recorded her last album as a heartfelt homage to the fifties and sixties classic country music and the Ottawa Valley musicians who played it.

"Dad and I sang the *Lake Dore Waltz* as a duet on that album," says Ms. Verch. "Every time I hear Mac Beattie's music, I think about those dances at Sunny Dale Acres. It's as close as I can get to those times now, and I cherish it".



**This photo was taken December 25, 1958 either before or after the midnight dance at Sunny Dale Acres at the Walter and Phyllis Buelow home along Bulger Road. Mac Beattie and his band would pass it on the way to Lake Dore. The Beatties and Buelows became close friends after a funny incident one night when a case of beer fell out of the back of Mr. Buelow's truck around Kelly's Corner and the Beattie band picked it up and followed the truck to the Buelow home. In the photo in the front are, from the left, Horace Blanchette, Mr. Buelow, Terry O'Gorman and Garnie Scheels. In the back are Gaetan Falfield, Mac Beattie, Mrs. Blanchette and Annie and Jim (last name unknown). Mr. O'Gorman and Frank Martin were the best of friends.**



**An early 1950s photo of the dance hall. It was located on the old Highway 41 on a sharp curve and on the opposite side of Lake Dore.**



# the Sunny Dale Acres hall



Mac Beattie and the Ottawa Valley Melodiers were always an attraction at Lake Dore dances.



A Christmas Eve 1958 dance at Sunny Dale Acres.

## One of many weddings at Sunny Dale

By Gerald Tracey  
News Editor

Many couples from the area held their wedding dinner and reception in the 1950s and 60s at Sunny Dale Acres, dancing the night away on the shores of Lake Dore before embarking on their new life together.

Among the couples who used the facility for their celebration was Lila Ashick, a native of Rankin, and Herb Martinat, a native of Eganville who were married on Friday, June 17, 1955.

Lila was the daughter of Raymond and Emma (Grife) Ashick and Herb was the son of Adam and Augusta (Reinert) Martinat of Eganville. Pastor Norman Lang presided at the wedding ceremony which was held in Grace Lutheran Church, Rankin, while Rev. Henry Schmieder, who was the pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Eganville also participated.

Back in the early 1950s, Lila came to Eganville and worked at Dittburner's Convenience Store and Lunch Counter on Queen Street. Herb worked as a butcher at the Eganville Creamery. Back in those days, before the days of freezers, most farmers in the area butchered animals in the fall, had them cut up at the creamery and then rented cold storage lockers.

"They'd bring it (the animal) in and we'd hang it in the cooler and then

we'd cut it and put it in the lockers," he recalled. "They would rent the lockers and they would have a key for it. Eddie Zadow worked upstairs and he would check off the meat people were taking out."

Herb used to drop by the convenience store frequently and his visits became even more frequent when he found Lila working there.

"I made him the best banana splits and he always came back," she said with a chuckle.

When they were courting, Sunny Dale Acres was the place to go and Herb and Lila rarely missed a Saturday night dance with their friends. It was also a popular venue for wedding dinners and receptions, but if people wanted to rent the facility the marriage had to occur on a Friday since Saturday night dances were never pre-empted.

They were married at 2:30 and then it was off to Artona Studio in Pembroke to have their pictures taken before heading to Lake Dore.

"Our mothers made the supper," Mrs. Martinat recalled. "They made all kinds of salads and what have you. I don't remember how many people we had for supper, but it was quite a big gang." The meal consisted of ham and roast chicken accompanied by several salads. It was so hot. The jellied salads

were all water."

Lila made her own three-tiered wedding cake and it was decorated by a Mrs. Zadow from Eganville. Eunice (Griese) Bestvater was a hairdresser and she did her hair.

Local musician Gordie Bochert had a band and they provided the entertainment that evening. Some of the musicians from Mac Beattie's Ottawa Valley Melodiers were part of the band for their reception.

The Martin brothers had just completed a new addition to the dance hall and the Martinat's wedding was the first to Christen it. Herb thinks it cost about \$50 bucks to rent the hall, "but you had to bring your own ice and that kind of stuff".

Since the hall did not have a bar, those who rented the premises were responsible for bringing their own alcohol. Beer was \$4 a case at that time and Herb bought 50 cases for their guests to enjoy.

"It was a very hot night and everyone was very appreciative," he recalled with a smile.

The Martinats said Sunny Dale Acres was the place to go back in its day. Even after they were married and until it closed they enjoyed the Saturday night dances.

"It was good, especially when Mac's Melodiers played," Lila said. "Gordie Bochert played with them. We have fond memories of all the musicians."

After their marriage, Lila began working at Len's in the clothing department until their first child, Daryl, was born in 1957. Herb continued working at the creamery until 1960 when they moved to Pembroke after Herb landed a job in the meat department at the A&P on Prince Street. He later went to work at Loblaws in the West End Mall and retired in 1993 after 29 years as a butcher.

They would eventually have three children: Daryl and Connie, Laurentian Valley Twp.; Lynn (Jay O'Neill), Desjardinsville, and Terry (Pauline) of Pembroke.

At age 86, the Martinats, like thousands of other people across the Valley and beyond, have fond memories of Sunny Dale Acres. They cherish those many moonlit nights on the shores of Lake Dore, have vivid memories of police officers from the Pembroke OPP detachment visiting the parking grounds every Saturday night to keep the outside activities at bay and capping off a wonderful night of dancing to the *Lake Dore Waltz*.

"You know, he never danced much before I met him," Lila shared. "He could hardly kick up his heels. Now he's a better dancer than I am."



Herb Martinat of Eganville and Lila Ashick of Rankin held their wedding dinner and reception at Sunny Dale Acres in June, 1955.



One more couple, just one more couple needed at the back of the hall to get this square started.



Frank and Lillian Martin. Mr. Martin died in 1959 at age 46 after playing a game of tennis. His sons, Jack and Terry continued to operate the dance hall for another decade.



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