

Newell's Casino: a place of adolescent memories

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WHITEFIELD – The first left off of Forrest Lake Road is “Newell” and second, just a few feet away, is called “Casino.” Together these Burma-Shave looking signs are the only remaining evidence of the popular dance hall that for forty-years became a summer Saturday night staple drawing crowds of as many as a thousand young people. For many—who are now grandparents or great-grandparents themselves — the memories of adolescences remain and are possibly an uncomfortable reminder that kids will be kids.

What made Newell’s Casino so unique was its longevity. In the late 30s, Bette Davis came to dance to the big bands and decades later in the mid 1970s, when rock ‘n’roll was taking hold, Aerosmith performed there. More than anything else it was a place for young people to congregate, socialize and, like many adolescents, to feel and sow their oats. There was of course dancing, illicit drinking and the occasional parking lot duel, but because it regularly drew crowds from all over the North Country, it was also a place that helped break down regional rivalries and spark many romances that ultimately turned to marriage.

People must have thought Hilton Newell was crazy when he announced he was going to build a large – 75 x 80 foot – dance pavilion on the dark and desolate shores of Forest Lake in 1938. It was a daring move. The country was in turmoil — marred in the Great Depression, tensions growing about Hitler, a huge hurricane ravaged the region, and Orson Wells’ fictitious “War of the Worlds” radio announcement and the polio epidemic left people fretful. If that wasn’t enough, he intended to build it in Whitefield; a place well known for their formal piety having years earlier been widely considered a model of temperance.

Newell, a World War 1 veteran, building contractor and clever entrepreneur, was a man of big ideas

and ambitions for himself and Forest Lake. In the 1920s, his wife's family bought much of the land around Forest Lake, and by 1935 sold off 397 acres to the state of New Hampshire to create one of the first state parks simply for the promise of building a passable road. Newell's own father among other things designed and built a water works system that provided metered water to the Mountain View hotel and surrounding properties. Hilton Newell took over the operation from his father managed it for several years, but when the state deemed his operation a private utility and required him to escrow money for maintenance; according his son and namesake, Hilton "Buddy" Newell, "he didn't want any part of that" and sold it to the town. This windfall gave Newell's dream the cash to make it a reality.

He purchased the remains of two old buildings – the Mount Pleasant hotel, in Bretton Woods, and Maine Central Railroad Depot, in Whitefield, to build his casino, a term often associated with entertainment in those days, and more recently with gambling. With an occupancy limit of 1,100 people, the dance pavilion rivaled Whitefield's population at that time.

The structure along with the setting was quite an unusual sight and a study of sharp contrasts. To get there, as a former band member Peter Wonson, of Roanoke, Va remembers, you had to take one of those "God-forsaken roads in the middle of nowhere and then there was this big rustic club, that was like a gigantic screened porch." David Savage, a Whitefield native and now resident of Falmouth, ME, said, "It was quite dark inside, with a bluish light at the front entrance, where you paid a couple of dollars." There was a mystique about the place with large screened windows open to the summer air, a hardwood dance floor that extended with being interrupted by a single post, and beyond the doors were two large balconies – an upper and lower – which jettied out 30 feet into the lake and thus creating a feeling of being on a ship.

Newell found a Concord-based booking agent that represented high quality "big bands" popularized by the Swing Era (similar to Jazz) of that period. Whitefield became a perfect stop over mid way between regular venues at Lake Winnepesaukee and Burlington.

"People were surprised," by Newell's bold move, said Fred Elgosin, who operated market in the Whitefield village during those years, "they didn't think it would take off." But it did, and Elgosin's store benefited by supplying Newell with hot dogs, and a lot of beer to customers, who drank it in the parking lot because it was not permitted inside the dance hall. "Business (at the store) was always good on a dance night," he said.

Newell knew that the people were entrusting their children to his care, and he took this responsibility to heart. Buddy Newell added his Dad "was old school" and was not about to change. Elgosin agreed, "he had a strict code. You had to dress up nice" and behave, he added. "If a guy got out of line," Elgosin said, "he'd just tap them on the shoulder" and they were gone. While Newell kept a watchful eye inside the hall, he hired the Whitefield Police Department to ensure that there was no trouble outside. One of the town's overzealous chiefs, used to close both access road to and from Forest Lake with road blocks. This led many underage drinkers to store bottles of booze in the brooks around Forest Lake earlier in the day and retrieve them as the dance commenced.

Whitefield's longtime Police Chief Tom Gage, who paroled the sometimes spirited parking lot for

more than two decades, took a more conciliatory approach. "I didn't pick on young kids," Gage said, "I believed you could get more done, if I had people on my side." He remembers one of his officers chasing a kid into the lake, but the officer stopped at water's edge. Gage added, "He eventually came out."

Newell's Casino was family enterprise with Hilton at the door, his wife, Christy, in the kitchen, and other relatives and the Newell's son, Buddy, when he was old enough, filling in as necessary. He recalls that the bands had no place to change, so they often took over his parent's home. This introduced a completely new world to a youngster, who regularly missed two weeks of school in the spring when mud overtook their road. He still recalls meeting film star Bette Davis, who occasionally would reserve the lower balcony so that her party could dance privately without being pestered by fans.

Things were tough at the casino during the war years with rations forcing people to conserve what meager resources they had and the depleting of the region of young men to the war effort. Hot dogs and hamburgers were replaced with uncooked Spam sandwiches. "They sold like hot cakes," Buddy Newell said.

When the war was over, the returning GIs once again filled the casino with dancing and welcomed the addition of roller skating. Kenneth A. Jordan, of Whitefield, remembers playing a game called "snap the whip," where a procession of skaters formed a line holding on to each other and then last skater would bears the brunt of any quick moves. Once, he said, "the one at the end of the line let go and went out the doors, onto the porch and right into the lake." Marge White, of Dalton, met her future husband, while her cousin was trying to teach her to roller skate. "Roland was going around and around, and finally my cousin asked him to teach me." He did and a romance ensued; they were married at the casino in 1949 on roller skates. It was the large balconies that overlooked the star-lit sky and the still lake that became the romantic respite from the rumpus dance floor. Buddy Newell remembers those hectic days of cleaning the hall and ground and especially preparing the floors after a Saturday night dance and before Sunday afternoon roller skating. This included applying a homemade concoction of resin and water to dull the floor before skating and then waxing before dancing. On holidays that created long weekends, they'd have even a tighter schedule with dances starting at 12:01 on Monday morning because law prohibited dancing on Sunday and concluding at 4 a.m.

By the mid 1960s, the popularity of roller skating and big bands began to wane, and it appeared that Newell's Casino would too fall victim to the changing times, or the senior Newell's stubbornness to adapt. Clubs that served alcohol became popular, but Buddy Newell said his father "didn't go for that at all." Then one day, as the younger Newell remembers, "a hearse full of hippies" pulled down the drive and told the two Newells "We're the Checkmates, and we'd like to play here." The senior Newell just walked away shaking his head, leaving the younger Newell, who was now running the day to day operation, to listen to their proposal. They finally struck a deal to play there and split the proceeds fifty-fifty. "I figured it's pretty hard to lose on that kind of deal," he said. Rock 'n' Roll saved the Casino and introduced a new generation to the Newell Family.

"This was every bit as successful as the big band days," Buddy Newell explained.

Marilyn deLozier, of Whitefield, who as a young girl remembered watching her four older brothers get dressed up and go to the casino, welcomed the change. "It was all about dancing and the music was so unique." On several occasions during those years, a little known "garage band" that went on to fame as Aerosmith entertained large crowds. Bob Comeau, of Dalton, was there when Aerosmith performed, but as good as they were, he said, they weren't as good as Gunnison Brook, a band noted for their talent, but not for making it big. Kenneth M. Jordan, of Whitefield, remembers Aerosmith too, but his most vivid memory is of a summer night in 1967 when the Lewis Block (near the present day Laconia Savings) in the village of Whitefield burned to the ground. The fire caused the electricity to go out, and the casino went absolutely pitch black, the lead singer told everyone to "just stay put." They did and no one was hurt.

Jordan, whose father frequented the casino two decades earlier, said Newell's Casino helped break down barriers between parents and children and also regional rivalries.

Newell's opened just as transportation between towns improved; it was not until the mid 1930s that a cement road was laid between Whitefield and Lancaster. Generally, beyond competitive sports, there was little interaction between people from neighboring towns. "Newell's," Jordan said, "was a friendly link that broke down the rivalry." Possibly, it also helped usher in a regional school between Whitefield, Lancaster and few other towns in the late 1960s.

By the mid 1970s, change was again in the air. Increasingly it became, in the words of Buddy Newell, "not cool to dance" and concerts became popular. So people would stay outside in the parking lot and listen to the music for free.

In 1974, he decided to close down the casino, but not before a big finale during Whitefield's bicentennial celebration. For the next few years, he kept paying taxes on it and tried to keep up with the maintenance, finally to reduce the taxes; Newell razed the building. The next year, his taxes tripled. "It still bothers me," he said, "I wish we had the old days back. Life was so good."