

*Saturday Night Fun in the Old Hayloft!*

Program



Program

# NATIONAL BARN DANCE

**FIRST SHOW**

Starts 7:30 P. M.

ALL TIME IS  
CURTISS Candy Time  
Buy Baby Ruth Candy

**SECOND SHOW**

Starts 10:00 P. M.

BY DAVID WYLIE

Chicago's own National Barn Dance was the most important single force in the history of country music. Without the phenomenon of radio and especially WLS's clear channel signal, country music might never have become the great industry it is, and there may never have been a Grand Ole Opry.

The National Barn Dance was first broadcast on April 19, 1924 from WLS mezzanine studios in Chicago's Hotel Sherman. A week earlier, Sears Roebuck had put the station on the air. The call letters stood for "World's Largest Store".

Grace Wilson, "the girl with a million friends" sang "Bringing Home the Bacon" on the first broadcast. It became her signature song, and she was the show's only charter member still with the show when WLS cancelled it 36 years later, on April 30, 1960. In 1924, at age 34, Grace was already a veteran performer with a stage vaudeville and musical comedy career that she began at the age of four.

George Hay, a Barn Dance announcer during the first year, transferred to WSN, Nashville in 1925. Hay felt a show similar to the Barn Dance, which mixed

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*David Wylie is a country music fan and an authority on the WLS National Barn Dance.*

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much fiddle playing with vocals, could be successful on WSN. Hay founded the WSN Barn Dance in 1925, and it later became the Grand Ole Opry.

Other early artists on the National Barn Dance included Irish tenor Bill O'Connor, harmony duo Ford and Glenn, banjoist-singer Chubby Parker, and the Maple City Four, a barbershop quartet. The latter group, like O'Connor, remained with WLS until the early 50's.

From the beginning, the Barn Dance mixed popular music with folk music and early country music, then called "Hill-billy." Country artists would be criticized for this decades later. However, George C. Biggar, at various times program director of WLS and director of the Barn Dance, contended that popular music was very much a part of life in rural areas.

Bradley Kincaid, one of the most influential early country and folk artists, joined the show in 1926. He sang "Barbara Allen" every Saturday night for four years by request. A native of Kentucky (like many Barn Dance artists (Kincaid was discovered when he came to George Williams College in Chicago to study to be a YMCA director.

George Biggar recalled that for roughly the first two years, Sears had no advertisers on the station! WLS was



**NATIONAL BARN DANCE GANG** — from left — Lulu Belle and Scotty, Hoosier Hot Shots, Pat Buttram, Arkie, the Arkansas Woodchopper.

simply identified as the “Sears-Roebuck Station.” By 1928, Sears officials decided to sell the station. By then it had many advertising clients and it was profitable, but did not represent a great percentage of total Sears profits. Sears sought a buyer that would preserve WLS as a station with a rural orientation. Such a buyer was found in *Prairie Farmer* magazine, a Chicago based publication which dated to 1841. *Prairie Farmer* president Burrige Butler promised to maintain the station as Sears management wished.

Arkie the Arkansas Woodchopper (Luther Ossenbrink), actually a Missouri native, joined the Barn Dance in 1929, remained until 1959, and became a regular on the show’s WGN revival from 1961 to 1969. Arkie’s familiar square dance calls introduced the show and various half-hour segments. A skilled master of ceremonies and ad libber, Arkie won au-

diences with both humorous and sentimental songs.

Another early favorite, Pie Plant Pete (Claude Moye) sang with his own guitar and harmonica accompaniment. Pete inspired a young listener named Les Paul, who joined the Barn Dance in the 30’s as “Rhubarb Red” (“pie plant” was once a common name for rhubarb in rural areas).

In 1928, the Barn Dance moved to the new WLS studios in the *Prairie Farmer* building at 1230 W. Washington Blvd. In 1932, the show moved to the Eighth Street Theater at 741 S. Wabash, behind the Stevens Hotel. Performers often walked from the side door along 8th Street to the side door on the hotel (later named the Conrad Hilton) and congregated for snacks in the hotel drug store. Except for 1944 to 1945, when the army took over the theater, the show remained at the Eighth Street Theater until 1957. During the one-year World War

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In his absence, the show was broadcast from the Civic Theater in the Opera House.

In the long Eighth Street Theater run, nearly three million people paid admission. There were two shows each Saturday night, at 7:30 and 10:00 p.m.

A studio directly above the theater stage was used for other shows before the 7:30 start and from 9:30 to 10:00 p.m. when the theater changed audiences. The latter slot was filled in the 1950's by "Hymn Time" with various Barn Dance artists. During this audience change, John Dolce called a square dance on stage, often with Chicago Park District groups he had organized.

In 1930, Bradley Kincaid brought three Mount Vernon, Kentucky natives, Karl Davis, Harty Taylor, and Doc Hopkins, to Chicago to join the Barn Dance. The schoolmates then brought their former school teacher, John Lair, to WLS and they formed the Cumberland Ridge Runners. At various times the group included Red Foley, (who began his rise to fame on the Barn Dance), High Cross, and Fiddler Slim Miller. The Ridge Runners introduced Linda Parker, "The Sunbonnet Girl."

Lair became WLS music librarian, and eventually returned to his native Renfro Valley, Kentucky to found a country music radio and stage show, "Renfro Valley Barn Dance" which continues today.

Linda Parker had her career sadly shortened in 1935 at age 23 by her death from appendicitis, but she is still remembered by fellow artists, listeners, and record collectors.

Karl and Harty wrote landmark songs such as "Kentucky" and "I'm Here To Get My Baby Out Of Jail," both of which were revived by the Everly Brothers in the 1950's.

Gene Autry used the Barn Dance as a springboard to Hollywood during his



GRACE WILSON

tenure in Chicago from 1931 to 1935. He still acknowledges his debt to the show and enjoys reminiscing about it. Smiley Burnette joined Gene for road shows and occasional Barn Dance guest appearances.

Mac and Bob, the well-loved blind harmony team joined the Barn Dance in 1931. In 1926 they had made recording history with their recording of "When The Roses Bloom Again," under their full names, Lester Mc Farland and Robert A. Gardner. Mac's mandolin and Bob's guitar accompaniment influenced many country artists. They are credited with establishing the mandolin as a country music staple with Mac's often imitated style.

Milly and Dolly Good, the Girls of the Golden West, were Barn Dance fixtures in the 30's with their singing and harmony yodelling. They received a fan letter from Patsy Montana, who already had radio and recording experience, and encouraged her to audition for the Barn Dance. This she did during the 1933 World's Fair, from which the Barn Dance and other shows had remote

broadcasts. Patsy met other favorites of hers, such as Mac and Bob, and was introduced to Mac's nephew, Paul Rose. He was Mac and Bob's manager and all around man. Patsy and Paul were married in 1934, and the marriage, like Patsy's career continues to flourish today!

Patsy joined the famous Kentucky string band, The Prairie Ramblers and made many landmark recordings with them. The Ramblers, consisting of Chuck Hurt, Jack Taylor, Salty Holmes, and Tex Atchinson, had elements of gospel, western swing, blues and bluegrass in their extensive work. Patsy's "I Want To Be A Cowboy's Sweetheart" with Ramblers accompaniment was the first million seller for a country girl singer.

Red Blanchard is best loved and remembered as a comedian in the Barn Dance's post war years. Continuing into the 50's and finally on the Barn Dance revival on television in the 1960's, Red traditionally greeted the audience with his rural humor before the show went on



GENE AUTRY

the air. He was a multi-talented man with Barn Dance roots dating to 1931, when he joined as part of Rube Tronson's Texas Cowboys. Red was the "The Texas Yodeler" (despite Pittsville, Wisconsin roots that all listeners later knew). Red sang, played a fiddle and did guitar instrumentals.

As a child in Chicago, George Gobel (then spelled Goebel) listened to the Barn Dance, sent for the show's song book and learned guitar. In 1932, at age 13, George joined the barn dance as "Little Georgie Goebel, the Boy Yodeler." A ukulele was substituted for his guitar so he wouldn't have to be paid union scale! Gobel grew up on the show, eventually being sworn into the army during World War II on the Eighth Street Theater stage. All his life Gobel's photographic memory recalled all the events of his Barn Dance years.

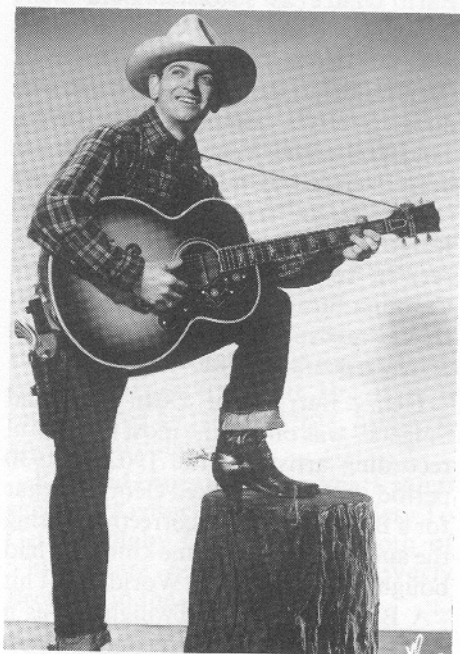
Lulu Belle and Scotty were North Carolina natives who grew up 20 miles apart and never met until they joined the Barn Dance as soloists. Lulu Belle (Myrtle Cooper) and Scotty Wiseman were married in 1934 and became one of the most beloved of all husband and wife duos. Scotty's composition "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You" has been recorded by numerous artists, including Bing Crosby, Elvis Presley and Ringo Starr. Lulu Belle and Scotty retired to the Spruce Pine, North Carolina farm in 1958, but made occasional personal appearances until Scotty's death in 1981.

Henry Burr, "The Dean of Ballad Singers" was one of the most successful recording artists of the 1902 to 1930 period. In 1934, he asked George Biggar for a Barn Dance spot, correctly guessing the audience was the same kind who had bought his records. His World War I hit "A Baby's Prayer at Twilight" was a Barn Dance favorite. Burr continued until his death in 1941.

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The Barn Dance went on the NBC network in 1933 with an hour portion sponsored by a new product it helped to establish, Alka Seltzer. This lasted until 1946, with Joe Kelly as M.C. before his Quiz Kids days. The Alka Seltzer portion, with orchestra conducted by Glenn Welty, had more pop music than the locally heard portion. Since most of the surviving broadcasts from the late 30's and early 40's are Alka Seltzer shows, it creates a picture of the Barn Dance as more of a popular music show than it was.

"Are You Ready, Hezzie?" was the famous signal that started a song by the novelty band, the Hoosier Hot Shots. Paul "Hezzie" Trietsch played an elaborate washboard mounted with bells and horns. Charles "Gabe" Ward played clarinet, Hezzie's brother, Ken, played guitar, and Frank Kettering played bass. The Hot Shots also served as accompanist to Uncle Ezra (Pat Barrett)



**BOB ATCHER**

as he recited old vaudeville pieces.

Pat Buttram joined the Barn Dance in 1934, billed as "The Winston County (Alabama) Flash." Pat often recited "A Sleepin at the Foot of the Bed." He remained until his move to Hollywood in the mid-1940's.

Christine, "The Little Swiss Miss" was on the Barn Dance in the 30's and 40's, specializing in Swiss yodel songs and country ballads. Her husband was long time Barn Dance announcer Jack Holden.

New Mexico natives Louise Massey, her brothers, Curt and Allen, and husband Milt Mabie made up Louise Massey and the Westeners. Louise was co-author of "In My Adobe Hacienda." Curt had a long successful solo career after Louise and Milt returned to their New Mexico ranch in 1944. In the 1960's, Curt was musical director of "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "Petticoat Junction."

The Three Little Maids, who joined the show in the early thirties, were Lucille, Eva, and Evelyn Overstays. Lucille changed her name to become soloist and song writer Jenny Lou Carson ("Jealous Heart" is her composition); Eva married Red Foley; Evelyn became a Barn Dance soloist in the late 40's.

The Barn Dance always had a full orchestra as well as the various string bands. Drummer Roy Knapp had a drum school and taught Gene Krupa. Cellist Ted Dumoulin and violinist-conductor Herman Felber divided their time between the Barn Dance and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra! In the post World War II years, violinist Dave Chausow conducted the orchestra, played fiddle with the WLS rangers, and was part of an octet on an album called "Courtly Music of Mendelsohn."

Rex Allen began his rise to fame on the Barn Dance from 1945 to 1949, before moving to Hollywood. First he starred in westerns, later he did voice overs for



THE DINNING SISTERS

Walt Disney. Rex always asked himself, when choosing songs, if the WLS audience would like it.

Long time Barn Dance favorites in the 40's were Wisconsin natives, the DeZurick Sisters, Caroline and Mary Jane. Eventually Mary Jane was replaced by younger sister Lorraine.

Another post war addition to the Barn Dance was Dolph Hewitt, "The Boy From The Hills Of Pennsylvania." Dolph started as a member of the Sage Riders, with Din White, Red Blanchard, and Ray Klein. Soon his role as a soloist was increased. His recording of "I Wish I Knew" was a favorite. Hewitt, a champion fiddler like his father, often played "Listen To The Mockingbird."

In 1949, George Biggar imported Captain Stubby and The Buccaneers from WLW, Cincinnati. They sang a wide range of hymns, country songs, comedy songs, and old time popular songs. The group consisted of Tom "Stubby"

Fouts, Tiny Stokes, Sonny Fleming, Kerry Richards, and Tony Walberg. Tiny was replaced by Pete Kane after Tony's death in 1952. One of their many favorites was "Beyond The Sunset" with Tony's vocals and Stubby's recitation.

WLS had been willing to develop Rex Allen as a new star. However, as Rex prepared to leave for Hollywood in 1949, the station decided the best replacement would be an established radio and recording artist, Bob Atcher. Bob had introduced "Cool Water" and "You Are My Sunshine." He became an important fixture of the Barn Dance as singer and M.C. for the rest of its history. Bob also maintained at the same time a heavy schedule of weekday radio and television appearances.

The beloved comedy duo, Homer and Jethro, came to WLS in 1950. Homer (Henry Haynes) and Jethro (Kenneth Burns) had first performed together at age 12 in 1932. Their many song parodies, such as "Don't Let The Stars

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Get In Your Eyeballs” were always done with permission of the copyright owners. Some writers, such as Frank Loesser, asked them to do parodies of their songs!

Versatile violinist Johnnie Frigo joined the show in 1951. Johnnie divided his time between the Barn Dance and club engagements where he played piano and bass. Today, Johnnie is known as a jazz violinist, but still does country fiddle tunes such as “Devilish Mary.”

For many years, there were remote broadcasts from the Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin State Fairs.

The WLS Artists Bureau, headed by Earl Kurtze and George Ferguson, booked the station’s talent at fairs, parks, and theaters through the United States and Canada.

In 1950 Mac and Bob ended their partnership as Bob went into religious work. Mac was teamed for three months with Karl and Harty as Karl, Harty, and Mac, before Karl and Harty left the station. Karl continued with WLS as a record turner well into the station’s rock era.

As the 1950’s progressed, the show continued to average 350,000 letters a year, and strongly resisted the increasing competition of television. However, the rural population was decreasing. The show had always drawn roughly half its audience from outside of Chicago. Eighth Street Theater audiences declined, but capacity crowds could still easily be drawn when the show went on the road.

ABC had wanted to buy WLS for many years, because of its strong clear channel signal. However, Burrige Butler’s will forbade his trustees to sell the station within ten years of his death, which occurred in 1948. The management simply did not want to invest heavily in the Barn Dance and other programs as the decade drew to an end. The sale came in March of 1960, and the last WLS National Barn Dance program was

broadcast on Saturday night, April 30th, 1960.

Dolph Hewitt approached WGN about reviving the show, and it returned over WGN on March 11, 1961, as the WGN Barn Dance. ABC refused to release the full name of National Barn Dance. The show featured Arkie, Bob Atcher, Red Blanchard, The Johnson Sisters, (Ruth and Edith) and the Sage Riders. Maple City Four baritone Al Rice was producer, as he had been in the last WLS years. Hewitt’s position as the head of the show is not known to many listeners as he left master of ceremonies duties to others. Ratings on the revival were high, but for some reason the number of sponsors did not match the ratings. Possibly clear channel signals were not understood by space salesmen and buyers. A TV version, added in 1963, was sold into syndication and was more profitable to WGN.

The radio show finally off the air in January, 1968 and the TV show closed in April 1969. The WGN era saw the occasional return of LuLu Belle and Scotty as guests and the 40th anniversary show on both radio and TV saw a reunion of Mac and Bob with thunderous applause and “not a dry eye in the house.”

Much has been said about the importance of the Barn Dance program as a developer of talent such as Gene Autry and George Gobel. While this was certainly valuable to the show, its endurance was ultimately due more to those who remained for years. Lulu Belle and Scotty had many offers to go elsewhere, as did others. But they liked Chicago, the scene of early success. Scotty cited more practical reasons. They could finish the Barn Dance at midnight Saturday and be in a park in Pennsylvania or Maryland to perform on Sunday afternoon. ■

(ED. NOTE: The final WLS broadcast of the National Barn Dance, from April 30, 1960, will be presented on *Those Were The Days*, Saturday, April 16, 1994.)