A jazz all of the Biogee

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- Members of the public are welcome to visit the search room, where professional archival staff can assist with enquiries. For those people unable to visit the archives in person, staff can provide a research service for straightforward enquiries for a fee of $15 per hour, including copying and postal service.
- For further information, phone 02 6252 3666, email archives@csu.edu.au or access the website at www.csu.edu.au/services/archives for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.

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Wayne Doubleday

F rom the early 1930s through to the early 1950s, one of Wagga's most popular attractions was the unique venue known as "Dixieland". Nestled on the bank of the Murrumbidgee River at the end of Little Gurwood Street (now Sturt Street) among the willow trees was a dance floor which truly was one of a kind.

The dance floor was initially laid down in 1933. However, due to the popularity of the venue and the large crowds which flocked to the dances held at Dixieland, it was necessary to enlarge the floor space and install adequate seating in 1935.

The original dance floor actually floated on a number of forty-four gallon drums. However, after it was washed away by floodwaters on a number of occasions a more permanent floor mounted on brick piers was constructed.

Dixieland was maintained by the Wagga Wagga Brass Band with all work and upkeep of the dance floor carried out by volunteers. The area was lit at night with electricity and coloured lights to enhance the atmosphere, which obviously made for an incredible sight.

Arthur Malhey, the Australian Test cricketer, visited what he called the "jazz hall on the Murrumbidgee" in late 1952 when on a tour with the NSW Cricket Team. He later wrote of his impressions of Dixieland, saying that "the night clubs of Europe and America could not hold a candle to this place. The ripples, the willows, the lights, the hush here, the stars, the pleasant-faced man at the gate, and the horse outside seem to be sections of a wonderful combination that harmonise and blend, giving birth to an atmosphere that is healthy, sincere and natural."

Malhey and his fellow cricketers were amazed to discover that as New Year's Eve in 1933 fell on a Sunday, that the dancing, music and frivolities at Dixieland would not begin until the Sabbath had concluded. Advertisements for the night promised that the action would commence promptly at one minute past midnight.

Along with the Wagga Brass Band, other regular performers at Dixieland included the Riverina Revelers and the Dixieland Melody Makers. The latter was formed in February 1936 and comprised of: Mr Allan Turner (pianist), Mr J.D. Groch (banjoist), Mr Don Bruce (trumpeter), Mr G.D. Hames (saxophonist), Mr W. Thompson (drums) and Mr W. Austin (saxophonist). Waiters, footmen and one-step were the dances of choice, while spectators could watch from the tiered terraces dug into the riverbank.

As well as hosting regular dances and children's fancy dress parties, Dixieland was also the venue for a number of dance competitions and championships.

In January 1936 the Riverina Pottot Championships were held at Dixieland, which attracted a large number of participants and a huge crowd of spectators. For the next several years Dixieland hosted many regional dance championships which saw competitors travel great distances to compete. This was complemented by professional dancers travelling to Wagga to perform dance exhibitions at Dixieland. Classical recitals and Christmas fairs were also common place.

Dance marathons were a novelty which appeared to be particularly popular at Dixieland. These events lasted for six hour with the winning couple being the one which completed the most laps around the dance floor in the allotted time.

In a more extreme version, Frank Speerin, an Australian Dance Champion, chose Dixieland as the site for his attempt to break his own world record for non-stop dancing in May 1951. Incredibly Speerin lasted for 152 hours, breaking his existing record. He danced from 9pm on Saturday, May 16, until midnight on the following Saturday, May 23.

The growing popularity of Dixieland was also evident through the increasingly large number of patrons particularly on New Year's Eve. In 1953 a total of 1000 people paid for admission to the venue on New Year's Eve. This number rose to 1800 in 1955 and an amazing 2000 in 1956.

Even through the Great Depression of the late 1920s and the early 1930s Dixieland continued to flourish.

The CSU Regional Archives holds a wonderful scrapbook (RW1143) which tracks the history of Dixieland from 1933 until 1953. Looking through this scrapbook it is undeniable that at its height Dixieland was the most popular recreational venues in Wagga.

References: Wagga Wagga, A History — Sherry Morris; RW1143 — Dixieland scrapbook (CSURA collection); back to Wagga Souvenir 1927 (CSURA); Daily Advertiser 25/05/1931.