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Ray Beller's Music Legacy Remembered, (Part Two of Two)

Benny Goodman with clarinet leading his orchestra in 1946. Behind him on the left is 26-year-old Ray Beller, raised on Mountain Street, Willimantic, playing lead alto sax.



Continued from last week, an interview with Willimantic's own Ray Beller, one of the nation's leading Big Band saxophonists during the 1940s. Ray was recalling his early days in Willimantic during the 1930s.

"Willimantic was a lively little town in the 1930s. There was Lindy's Restaurant, but I had little chance to socialize because I was out two or three nights a week playing in the band. We played at the "Tab" on Valley Street. It was a wonderful place for people to meet, dance and make friends.

I left Willimantic in 1938, and went out to Indiana University to study music. It was a great school. I majored in clarinet. When the war broke out, I went to New York City to join up. But before I went into the Navy, I played in several bands. I eventually enlisted in Norfolk, Virginia, with a good friend of mine, Dean Kincaid, who was a big-time arranger who wrote some wonderful things for Tommy Dorsey. We played in the Navy Band. I played lead alto sax and Dean did the arranging. Every Friday we did a radio show, "This is your Navy" which went coast to coast. We did a lot of recruiting on Barbara Hutton's yacht (the Woolworth heiress) around the Chesapeake Bay area. We were then recruited to go on a new aircraft carrier called the Franklin. The leader of the band then was called Saxy Dowell, who wrote a lot of songs. We went out to the Pacific and had a rough time there. But we survived that and came back to New York City at the end of 1945.

I checked in the Piccadilly Hotel up on 45th street in New York, and soon afterward Benny Goodman's band manager came to see me. I was unemployed at the time, just having left the navy. He asked me what I was doing, and then said that I had to go over to the band as Goodman's lead alto player, Bill Shine, was laid in the hotel elevator, unable to go on. I went over to the Paramount Theater, and a not long afterwards I was on stage with the Benny Goodman Orchestra! After the show, Goodman came over and asked what I was doing, and I explained that I had just left the Navy. He asked me to join the band full-time. After that engagement, we played the 500 club in New York for eight weeks. It was a marvelous experience.

I later got the opportunity to play for Glenn Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra, out in California. I think it was in 1947 that we played at the Hollywood Academy Awards at

the theater out there, but it wasn't the big thing then, that it is now. But we wore white tie and tails. I can't recall who won the awards that year, because I was too involved in my music. I was with the Glen Gray outfit for about 18 months, then Ray McKinley, from Glenn Miller's Orchestra, called me to tell me that he was starting a band and asked me if I'd like to join him. I had a good reputation as a sax player and was highly rated for years in the Down Beat magazine, reaching as high as number five in the country in 1948. We traveled coast-to-coast playing at hotels and one night stands, even locally like the State Theater in Hartford. I got sick of the one night stands, and the band music, which was becoming too commercial, and gave McKinley one month's notice and came back to Willimantic.

I arrived back in Willimantic around 1950 and took over the Rock Garden Restaurant. I met my wife, who is from Holyoke, Mass, when I was at the restaurant. I used to have some top name artists at the Rock Garden, and people came from miles around to see them perform; people I had known in the Big Band days, like Buddy Hackett, Glenn Miller's trumpet player, and Horace Silver, a famous jazz pianist. We had a big following from Hartford, particularly among the Black population there, who would travel all the way to Willimantic for the performances, at "the hottest spot in Connecticut!" He needed a operation. I later worked as a salesman for smoking (tobacco) pipes, doing a complete West Coast tour for them with my wife before returning to Connecticut to settle down, and opening a music store in Manchester."