

# Walled Lake Casino Razed By Fire

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The Casino finally burned itself out. It was hot -- THE place to go for generations of dancers and for the folks who liked the hot bands. The Casino was one of the biggest. The fire was a fitting end.

This had been one of the slower nights -- not even the Casino is packed on Christmas. But where else but at the Walled Lake Casino would over a hundred kids show up to frug, twist, jerk, and swim on December 25? They danced their way through the evening, then left; the place was empty at 11:30.

Novi Firemen got the call at 11:43.

Assisted by six other departments, Walled Lake, Wixom, Commerce, Northville, West Bloomfield, and Farmington, the Novi Fire Department fought the blaze. Along with them, the Casino fought death.

It had been built in 1928 to cash in on the big band sounds, and to give Detroiters a place to do those outlandish new dances: the Lindy Hop, the Charleston, and the Bunny Hop. Even then it was THE place to go.

Then came the thirties and the sound of swing, and the big bands got bigger. The Walled Lake Casino got bigger too. Red Nichols and his Five Pennies were there an entire season, and the great Louis Armstrong stayed a short while, packing them in as Louis always did. The crowds came out to dance, or to sit sipping their soft drinks and listening. The Depression took a real beating from the bands -- hard times were forgotten as the music captivated a generation.

The war was but a brief interlude in the operation of the casino; a breather between eras. Beginning in 1946, the Casino reopened bigger than ever. Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey pulled them in. Les Brown pulled them in, Vaughan Monroe, Guy Lombardo, and Sammy Kaye pulled them in. The Walled Lake Casino pulled them in too. It was ranked with the Glen Island Casino in New York, the Meadowbrook in New Jersey, and the Trianon and Aragon Ballrooms of Chicago. It was still THE place to go. All through the fifties the Casino hung on; the others had all died.

In 1958, the Casino became a meeting place and dance hall for the teen set. The Casino again saw a new era replace the old. The music, the dances had changed through the years, but the people were the same. A good time, an evening of dancing and fun to forget your troubles -- that's what drew them and that's what the Casino had to offer. The big bands were replaced by bigger bands and bigger stars, and the Casino had never been bigger. In the early sixties, disc jockeys from Detroit packed the Casino nearly every night. Thousands came to see the Four Seasons. Over five thousand turned out to see Fabian; hundreds had to be turned away. It was indeed THE place to go.

Recently the name had been changed to the Club A-Go-Go -- but it was still unmistakably the Walled Lake Casino. The 120 by 140 foot polished maple dance floor where teens performed the swim and the watusi was the same one where other dancers of other years jitterbugged and swung. And the big bandstand where the bands once sat -- Where Jimmy Dorsey played and where Guy Lombardo signed autographs during intermission -- where the Hurricanes drew applause as "Satchmo" had done years

before -- that's where the fire began. Fire investigators theorize that a careless smoker had thrown a cigarette there during the dance that evening. In minutes the end of the weathered old building was ablaze. A passing couple called the Novi Fire Department. They called for help.

More than 100 men and 20 pieces of equipment answered the call. Through the early hours they fought the blaze and won. The fire was brought under control. Then the water supply gave out.

The pumps were connected, the hoses run into the lake. In just three minutes they had water again. In those three minutes the Casino died. A gust of wind carried the fire along the decorative sub-ceiling, a flimsy lattice-work covering that flared up, igniting the roof. By the time lake water was put into use, it was too late. The framework collapsed from the heat soon after.

Firemen saved two homes that had burning material on the roofs, and they kept the flames from a restaurant just 15 feet away from the Casino, but the Walled Lake Casino itself is gone. It died in a burst of flame -- a big, showy finish. The Casino was still drawing crowds on its deathbed. It had always been hot; there were always bright lights -- but the Casino has finally burned itself out.