

Banjos In Action - Playing for Fun & Entertainment, Anywhere - Anytime

OAKLAND BANJO BAND (A NON-PROFIT CORPORATION)

GLENN SPENCER, Director
VELMA McKOWN, Secretary



PLAYING EACH THURSDAY EVENING IN YE OLDE BANJORAMA ROOM, 8 to 10:30 P.M.

STRAW HAT PIZZA PARLOR — 14680 WASHINGTON AVE., SAN LEANDRO

ADMISSION BY MEMBERSHIP CARD ONLY

You can join the OAKLAND BANJO BAND as a PARTICIPATING AFFILIATE MEMBER, even though you do not play a banjo. Dues are 25c for one calendar year.

BRING YOUR FRIENDS and sing-a-long or play a kazoo with "Banjos in Action"

If you play a banjo, join the Band; if you do not play, we will teach you.

OAKLAND BANJO BAND

Claude Causley

Shortly after WW II, interest in the banjo, so prevalent in the minstrel days and later in the era of Eddy Peabody, Perry Bechtel, Harry Reser and others, seemed to surge. Locally, Billy Starr, Earl Collins, Chuck Ray, Jad Paul, Paul Martin, Freddie Morgan, Don Van Palta and others were up and coming, wonderful banjo players all. They began to afflict many with "banjoitis".

A local hub for this interest was The Red Garter, a beer, peanuts-on-the-floor type of banjo emporium on Broadway in San Francisco. It was opened in 1950 by Jack Dupen and Quina Hillstrom. As more and more folks became afflicted, small groups evolved around the veteran performers, groups willing to spend the time required to learn to play the banjo. Mostly, these were groups of five to eight players who soon recognized that a good bass sound was lacking and began adding a gut-bucket.

PLACE: Oakland, California

DATE: 1957 or 1958 (only God remembers and he won't tell me)

LOCATION: Basement of Best Music Co.

It would appear that "Banjoitis" is more contagious than I thought. (I'm positive that this same event was happening all over America). A small group of afflicttees are engrossed in their weekly rites known as rehearsing (actually re-infecting each other). A middle-aged attorney (Glenn Spencer) came out of the woodwork, using his former stage name of Glenn Davis, and picked up one of his many banjos. He goofed while tuning up his plectrum and tuned the outside two strings one whole tone too high. Thus was born a new tuning, D-G-B-E. He entered the domain of the "Best Music Bunch". Glenn brought with him every item a fully organized banjo band would need: a music book five inches thick, a library of music which filled a four drawer filing cabinet, an attorney's degree (and the ability to use it) and a thorough knowledge of how to organize a band. With this background he helped the group develop nonprofit corporation status, committee duties, by-laws, opportunities to advance everyone's abilities, places in which to play, the concept of a banjo band playing for money to be used for benevolent purposes and a positive name, The Oakland Banjo Band.

Many ideas that Glenn initiated are used by banjo bands today everywhere, not that evolution would not have produced all the same facets by equally talented banjo players. But, I have seen copies of Oakland Banjo Band Music in areas from Florida to Maine and back to California. It is a good feeling to know that sharing is the best way to fortify our friendships.

Glenn was not a "banjo player's banjo player". But he read music well, played from the score and, consequently, so did we. He tolerated zero fooling around. He always had your attention and respect. He was a stickler for dress code. But, you always need an Admiral-type leader if the ship is going to stay on course.

We initially played in a large room at the headquarters of the Straw Hat Pizza Parlors in San Leandro. Soon, however, a larger room had to be built to seat the 400-500 people who gathered when we played. There were lots and lots of tables and chairs and a Keno-type lighted board to alert the diners that their "gourmet" pizza was done. Entrance to the Big Banjo Room was controlled by a "Door Person". Twenty-five cents bought a kazoo and a non-playing membership. Songbooks were also available. The room overflowed every Thursday night. I still talk to 40-50 year olds, now grandfathers, who remember "the good old days". At one time we had a membership of 400, counting non-players and associate members. This near-pandemonium reigned for about three years.

The success of the band finding playouts was phenomenal. We eventually attracted the attention of the local Musicians Union. The Oakland Band was blacklisted on the basis that the band was taking union jobs. However, most of our playouts were only for an hour and were jobs that union musicians would never seek. Also, our fee was way too low for a legitimate band to work for. Other banjo bands were notified by the Union not to allow us to play with them. The Union finally organized pickets at the Straw Hat in San Leandro on Friday and Saturday nights. They also threatened to picket all Straw Hat Pizza Parlors whether

the banjo band or individual banjo musicians played there or not. So, we had to give up the Big Banjo Room.

However, we subsequently found a new home and had a two year run at the Straw Hat in Oakland at 63rd and Telegraph. During that time, Glenn's health deteriorated and he swapped his banjo for a harp. Russ Presting stepped forward and led the band for some time, along with Ken Smith and Big Don Oleson.

Even though we continued to be challenged by the Musicians Union, we were able to play for the next three years at the Straw Hat at 51st and Telegraph in Oakland. By this time the Musicians Union's Business Agent was no longer in office or even in the Union. After that period, a group of our leaders found a family-owned haven for our practice sessions and we are still there after 20 years. We have a great participating crowd every Thursday evening from 7:30 to 9:30 P.M. at Porky's Pizza Palace, 1221 Manor Boulevard, San Leandro, phone (510) 357-4323. Our main interest is to create a club type atmosphere so that members experience playing in front of a live audience as a group, learning new tunes and creating rapport with our crowd.

Our dress code is black trousers and shoes, white shirt and the dubious pleasure of wearing one of our dwindling reserve of notorious green vests. Banjo players are welcome to sit-in, other instrument players should call 510-483-4455. There are no dues. Dues would be imposing on the gracious gift of time and talent our guests and members bring to us. We are furnished refreshments by our wonderful hosts and we welcome top flight players to sit in and slap us around. If they would like to join us on stage, we even take them with us to banjo shows. Hence, our stage name, "The Oakland All-star Banjo Band".

As for playouts, we still hire out sporadically, as many of our members are unable to travel great distances to play. We have a fairly bulky sound system that gets a little heavier every week. We play just enough jobs to keep our treasury on an even keel. We did one good deed this last year when our great Russ Presting passed on. We elected to donate funds to The Capital Kids Banjo Band in Sacramento in memory of Russ. The decision has been very rewarding and we will continue to donate to this young group as a show of our support. (For additional information, you can write to me at 14723 Martell, Apt. B, San Leandro, CA 94578).