

Tommy Van and His Orchestra

By Lori Adams

Thomas C. Vanosdall, Sr. was born on July 19, 1911, in Ashland. He was the son of Charles and Maude Burns Vanosdall.

Tommy had an interest in music from the start. He was given a bass drum with a cymbal attached to it. The drum was once used by the first military band from Ashland and dated back to the Civil War. It was given to him by Joe Abby who conducted the band. Tommy's uncle, Billy Vanosdall, also played in the band. Joe Abby and Uncle Billy also gave him a cornet and a tuba.

Tommy lived at 400 Sharp Street as a boy and would take the drum out in the backyard on hot summer days. He learned how to play the drum and cymbal, which was designed for one person to play. Tommy often walked in imagined military parades up and down Sharp Street along with a neighborhood friend or two.

In 1918, World War I ended; and at age seven, Tommy recalled learning of this news from his mother and hearing shouting and guns being fired on Main Street. Recognizing the celebration taking place, he immediately grabbed his bass drum and headed to his Uncle Billy Vanosdall's grocery store.

Tommy began to beat the drum and play the cymbal; but before he arrived at the grocery store, two men approached him and asked him his name. They learned he was Billy's nephew and asked if they could borrow the drum for the day and return it to the grocery store in the morning. They told Tommy he was too small to deal with the celebration around the downtown area, and they would see that the drum didn't get broken. Tommy agreed to let them use it.

The next morning, Tommy found the drum at the grocery store in good condition along with \$20 on top of the cymbal. He thought he was rich. He said it only cost him a dime to go to the picture show and get a bag of popcorn, so he used the money to start a savings account.

Eventually, Uncle Billy and others taught Tommy how to play the tuba, violin, and bass violin.



Tommy Vanosdall was a sailor and accepted a sailing award in 1961

Although Tommy loved music, science was his field. He graduated from Ashland College in 1932 during the depression. He was immediately able to find a teaching job at Hayesville High School.

In 1933, Tommy formed a band of his own and hoped that, if the economy improved, he would be able to start booking jobs. He named his band "Tom Vanosdall and the Ohioans." For the next 25 years or so, the band booked play dates all over North Central Ohio, except for a period of time during World War II. The players in the band changed over the years, and the band was eventually referred to as "Tommy Van's Band."

TOMMY VAN AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Sometimes, Tommy Van and his band played as many as three engagements over a weekend. They traveled by bus, but never went “on the road” because all the musicians had day jobs. They often returned in the morning as milkmen were delivering milk to local homes.

Tommy and the band played big band music, but not everyone liked that genre of music. Some Hayesville residents equated the music to “a form of vice,” and Tommy received anonymous complaint letters while teaching there. Vanosdall started teaching at Ashland College in 1939, but at that time dancing was not permitted on campus. He did not play any local engagements because it was felt it would not be good for the school.

Tommy Van’s Band was a very popular group and often played at country clubs and hotel ballrooms in Cleveland and Columbus, including the Neil House, Carter House, Statler, and Lake Shore Hotel. If there was an amusement park or any other venue with a ballroom, the band probably played there. They often played at Summit Beach, Ruggles Beach, Buckeye Lake, and Chippewa Lake.

Every Wednesday night, the group played at the Junior Order of United American Mechanics Hall, which was later the UAW Local 1910 Hall upstairs at 120 East Main Street. One of their biggest fans was Robert Beer from the Ashland Times-Gazette.

The Tommy Van Band was also featured on the radio and recorded some of their music.

The band also played on Ohio College campuses. They played at Ohio State, Ohio Wesleyan, Ohio University, Denison, Wooster, and Case to name a few. In 1957, Ashland College President Glenn Clayton asked Tommy if the band would play for a freshman mixer in the Redwood Dining Hall. This was the first dance held at Ashland College.



Tommy Van and his band were a popular area attraction from the 1930’s through the 1950’s. Pictured here (L-R) in the first row are Gene Cole, Barbara Taylor Jones, Scotty Kaylor, Gene Burns, Jim McDowell, and Dick “Duco” Lutz. The second row are George Marble, John Schaum, Leo Jones, Vanosdall, and Emory Marble. Lutz, who is in the inset at the top left, fronted the band.

There are too many people to list that played for Tommy Van’s Band over the years, but the 1967 homecoming dance at Ashland College included an all-alumni band which brought together Vanosdall, Chester Fair, Joe Denbow, Leo Jones, George Marble, Bob Kreider, Marshall Smith, Bob Soka, Tim Workman, Don Workman, Dave Hamilton, Dick Johnson, and Dick Topper. Many went on to start their own bands after playing in Tommy’s band.

Tommy married his wife Helen in 1939, and they had one son, Tom, who passed away in 1962. Tommy was a member of and Sunday school teacher at the First Christian Church and loved to sail. He received a sailing award in 1961. He passed away on September 4, 2001.

Tommy listed his favorite band leaders of the big band era as Bennie Goodman and Count Basie, but he most certainly made his own mark in the world of swing music here in Ashland and the surrounding area.

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