

# How death of a bandleader reflected upon a long-ago era

In the 1940s, Seaside was witness to a curious and disturbing incident.

Despite an abundance of musical clubs and dance halls — Club Monterey, the Lodge, and the Bungalow — race relations were tense.

Oregon's Democratic Sen. Wayne Morse, a champion of civil and labor rights, joined progressive politicians in calling for equal rights for all races with the passage of a national Civil Rights Act.

Many Oregonians — including the editor of the Signal in a 1948 editorial — feared Morse's stance would create a backlash and lead to "even more terrible persecution in America."

In the '40s, Sandy Winnett worked as a waitress at the ice cream shop adjacent to the Bungalow. Today she is a volunteer at the Seaside Museum and Historical Society.

Winnett remembers an "open-minded attitude" among most Seaside residents, a time when people of all backgrounds "came to dance" in Seaside.

"Dancing in those days was a much bigger social event than it is today," added longtime Seaside resident and author Gloria Stiger Linkey. "We danced every Friday night at the high school. After the basketball and football games, we had a dance. We danced all the time."

Linkey remembered a time when teens would drive their cars — or their parents' cars — to Seaside's Cove, turn their radios on and dance through the night by the beach.

## A mysterious death

It was into this environment that bandleader and alto saxophonist Jimmie Lunceford arrived in July 1947 to play the Bungalow, the city's preeminent dance hall.

It wasn't just white bands like Glenn Miller and Tex Beneke that headlined Seaside's top club, but groups like Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway and Fats Waller.

"To the local teenagers, the Bungalow was heaven," Lunceford's biographer Eddy Determeyer wrote.

Lunceford was considered to be on an equal with Count Basie and Duke Ellington, Linkey said. "He had a master's degree in music. He was a very educated man."

But Lunceford's arrival was said to be anything but civil. Lunceford and his band were an all-black ensemble, although Lunceford had in the past led integrated bands.

Rumors have circulated throughout the years that a racist restaurant owner poisoned Lunceford.

According to accounts presented in his biography of Lunceford, 2009 "Music is Our Business," Lunceford's musicians learned the Bungalow dance was to be played for a segregated crowd — whites only.

Management asked Lunceford's black valet to stand out front and discourage black couples who came to purchase tickets from buying: "They don't want to sell to people like us."

Lunceford band bass player Truck Parham remembered that band members walked into a restaurant on Downing, not far from the Bungalow.

On scanning the group, the waitress is said to have told the musicians: "Can't serve you. We don't have no food."

Determeyer writes that Lunceford, normally even-tempered, even restrained, pounded the table with his fists.

"What the hell do you mean, you can't serve us?!" Lunceford demanded. "Call the manager!"

The waitress panicked and hurried back to the kitchen.

After a minute or two, Determeyer wrote, she came back and said the men could order after all.

The guys ordered hamburgers.

"No, I'm sorry," the waitress said. "We don't have nothing but beef sandwiches, hot beef sandwiches."

The grumbling musicians ordered the sandwiches, with the exception of bassist Truck Parham.

"The rest of the band ate it," Parham said. "Lunceford had it." Parham left without eating.

According to Determeyer's account, after the meal, the band members returned to the Bungalow, except for Lunceford, who complained he was tired and wasn't feeling well.

He headed across the street to Callahan's Radio and Record Shop at 411 Broadway, next to the Broadway Café, to autograph albums for fans.

There Lunceford collapsed and died. He was 46 years old.

## End of an era

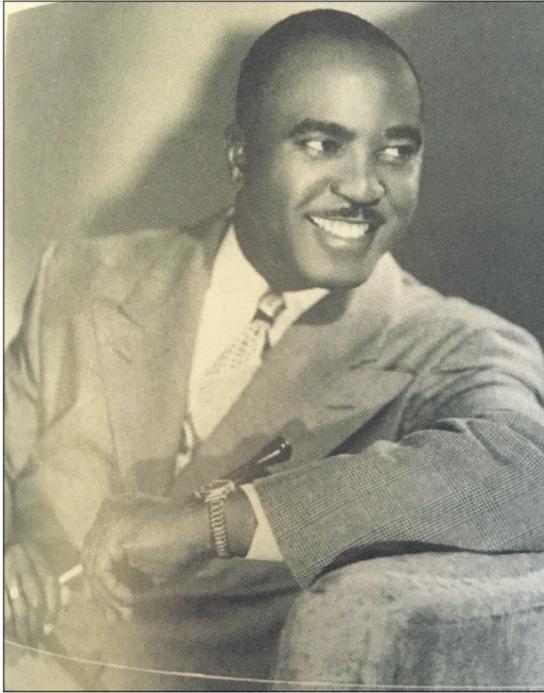
According to the news story in the July 1947 Signal, Lunceford was about to autograph Callahan's record store wall, reserved for musical celebrities who came to Seaside, when owners Edward and Walter Hill noticed the bandleader looking weak and ill.

A moment later Lunceford collapsed and was seized by severe convulsions, according to the report in the Signal.

The owners called the police and an ambulance, but Lunceford died before reaching Seaside hospital.

The show, despite Lunceford's death, went on that night, Determeyer wrote, but one musician after the other left the bandstand and headed to the restroom.

"I'm the only one that didn't get sick," Parham said. "Botulism, you know."



Jimmie Lunceford

SUBMITTED PHOTO

doubt on the coroner's report.

"Simple, plain racism is really the key word here," Determeyer said via email last week.

## Controversy lingers

But Seaside residents and even a jazz musicologist, disagree. Seaside's Linkey thinks it's not plausible Lunceford and his bandmates were sickened or worse, or even asked to be turned away.

"Oh, he was served," Linkey said. "There was no animosity. No racism at all. At least growing up in Seaside, I didn't feel it."

As a tourist town, the goal was to sell as many tickets as possible, she said. "Because if you can serve tourists, you can serve an African-American."

Linkey added the biographer "takes giant leaps" in suggesting a racial incident was a factor in Lunceford's death.

Linkey said while there "weren't many blacks in the area," there were no segregated dances. "We did have African-Americans in the summer from Portland. There was an influx during World War II. They worked in the shipyards."

Seaside's Mary Cornell, who attended dances since she was in eighth grade in the war years, said people of all ages were welcome at the Bungalow. She said she never saw anyone turned away.



R.J. MARX PHOTO

Gloria Stiger Linkey and Mary Cornell both remember the halcyon days of big bands in Seaside.

African-Americans also came to Gearhart and Seaside as domestics for wealthy families, Cornell said.

Sandy Winnett said Determeyer's account was "extremely unlikely."

Even a jazz musicologist, Lewis Porter, pianist, Rutgers University professor and author of "Jazz: From Its Origins to the Present," doubts the poisoning rumor.

"It was probably not a good idea for Determeyer to throw in at the very last sentence of the chapter that Jimmie may have been poisoned for being black," Porter said via email.

Botulism is not a poison and cannot be "manufactured" or "planted," Porter said. "It's simply a severe form of food poisoning that can occur in, for example, rotten meal. But he (Lunceford) died from a heart attack — nothing to do with the food! He's not the first guy to die suddenly at a relatively young age from unsuspected heart trouble, especially in those days."

Poisoning is not the only rumor to survive surrounding the cause of Lunceford's death, which range from "Lunceford ate a double portion of chili con carne while on tour and died almost immediately" to a theory he was shot by a gangster while signing records at Callahan's.

Lunceford band member Truck Parham died in 2002. Trumpeter Joe Wilder died in 2014. With them go their eyewitness accounts.

Are the still lingering suspicions about the Lunceford death akin to the mistrust so many black Americans still feel about the police and other authorities?

Maybe the best way to reflect upon this incident is by stressing the goal of diversity that Lunceford, progressive politicians like Sen. Wayne Morse and Seaside's young music lovers of the 1940s — in love with the bands, the swing and the dance — were so desperately attempting to foster.

Lunceford, a teetotaler, was "a perfectly healthy man who had boxed, run track, and played softball," according to trumpeter Joe Wilder. "It was one of the saddest days of my life."

At the request of his wife, Crystal, Lunceford's body was flown to New York City on July 14 for the funeral service.

The leader was buried in Memphis, his hometown.

A memorial service with remaining band members took place that week at Rockaway Beach, the last concert before the Lunceford Orchestra permanently disbanded.

But before long, Determeyer wrote, "the myth surrounding Lunceford's death was in full swing."

The Clatsop County Coroner declared Lunceford died of "coronary occlusion, due to thrombosis of anterior coronary artery due to arteriosclerosis" — in other words a heart attack caused by a blockage.

Determeyer's telling casts

# Centennial celebration at Seaside High

Alie Zagata had a good idea about a centennial celebration for Seaside High. Most of my siblings went there — at least five of them and I remember my own years fondly. The old restroom library sounds interesting. I always wondered where it was and am surprised that Miss Gillman was its first librarian. She was also a librarian at the high school in its early days and lived across the street from us. Her house has been replaced with a more modern type, but memories linger.

SCENE & HEARD  
CLAIRE LOVELL



All of the local papers do a fantastic job of sports reporting. Their terrific pictures add so much to the stories they have to tell. It's so vastly different from what my generation likes to call "the good old days." I was in high school during depression times when some of us couldn't afford the price of a season ticket to sports events. Today it seems that sports are the "be all end all" of school. Even for it to exist. Parents are often driving their athletes to various venues for games. It's perhaps more than once a week and could be a real hardship. It may even be that these excursions have nothing to do with the school. If the kids manage to get in some reading, writing and arithmetic during their school days, it's a miracle. Will we have a workforce of jocks or do they have time to learn something?

We little-bit-South County folk are maybe just as interested in the goings on in Gearhart as are its residents. While we understand profit and loss as well as the next guy, it will be hard to think of Gearhart without a grocery store. (Perhaps if the owners had had more sales once in awhile, people would be more inclined to shop there.) Maybe they do. In my familiar territory, "the good old days," there were two groceries in Gearhart. Regrettably, N.E. Willis and Son's corner grocery, which the Gearhart Grocery was once called, was less thriving than Cutler's across the street where the restaurant now holds sway. The proprietor there was younger and more affluent, while Mr. and Mrs. Willis (my sister Alta Mae's in-laws) was an older couple, pretty much worn out from the battle. They had a delivery truck that doubled as a school bus and would never pass today. My sister picked up the kids, delivered them to school and took them home later. I rode with her on one of those occasions. The truck was equipped with a bench along either side of the back where the kids sat. Most of them lived in the McCormack Gardens area and I remember the route — in at the north entrance and out at G St. I forgot if the school was the artists red building by the restaurant or if that was the gym. It was in the 30s when I lived with Al for a while. She had a house on the ridge path about 3rd or 4th. Gearhart, like Seaside, has changed so much since then. Every town has its metamorphoses — not for the better always, but different. And, we usually appreciate the familiar and the reliable. As to the brewpub, certainly one element of the population will be pleased. If we can't always have our way, we learn to adjust.

## Laugh lines:

Q. Why do some party givers like to invite ghosts?  
A. They bring the boos. (Courtesy of Dana Perino.)  
When you put "the" with "IRS" it becomes "theirs."  
(Courtesy of Leila Vernor.)

## LETTERS

### No more

An open letter to the Gearhart Planning Commission regarding transient lodging dwellings proposal(s): First, the quiet opportunists lent out their single family homes in Gearhart for short term use by friends. Then they realized it was so easy, they started charging rent to friends, relatives and acquaintances.

Next came the small investors, who realized that they could buy single family homes and capitalize their investments by renting them out regularly. More recently came the barbarians, who solicited single family home after single family home in Gearhart with promises of riches by managing their rental. Amazing, finally came the city government who saw they could augment the general fund by imposing a tax on rents.

They all have one thing in common: Money.

There is no question the city government has been too slow to react to this growing onslaught of commercial use in residential neighborhoods. Now, the matter is being resolved.

Frankly, I was initially ambivalent on the matter. After sincere effort and research, I am convinced the allowance or use of transient lodging rentals violates the letter and spirit of the Gearhart Comprehensive Plan and should be denied.

The city is required to "limit commercial activity in the City," "prevent the City from becoming a tourist destination," and "maintain the predominately residential character of Gearhart through appropriate zoning and land use development regulations." Allowance of transient lodging flies in the face of these policies.

When revising the plan, "The broad community interest must be served by the change and not for just any private interest." Well, changing the plan, etc., as proposed, other than providing more money to the government coffers, only serves to allow commercial "private" interests to prosper. Frankly, the use doesn't even qualify for allowance under the 1994 Gearhart Comprehensive Plan and should be denied now.

This is a concise description of some of my objections to the proposals. Just because many have been getting away with this commercial activity in residential zones doesn't mean it should be allowed to continue at all. To be more than kind to

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