

Honky-Tonk, TX

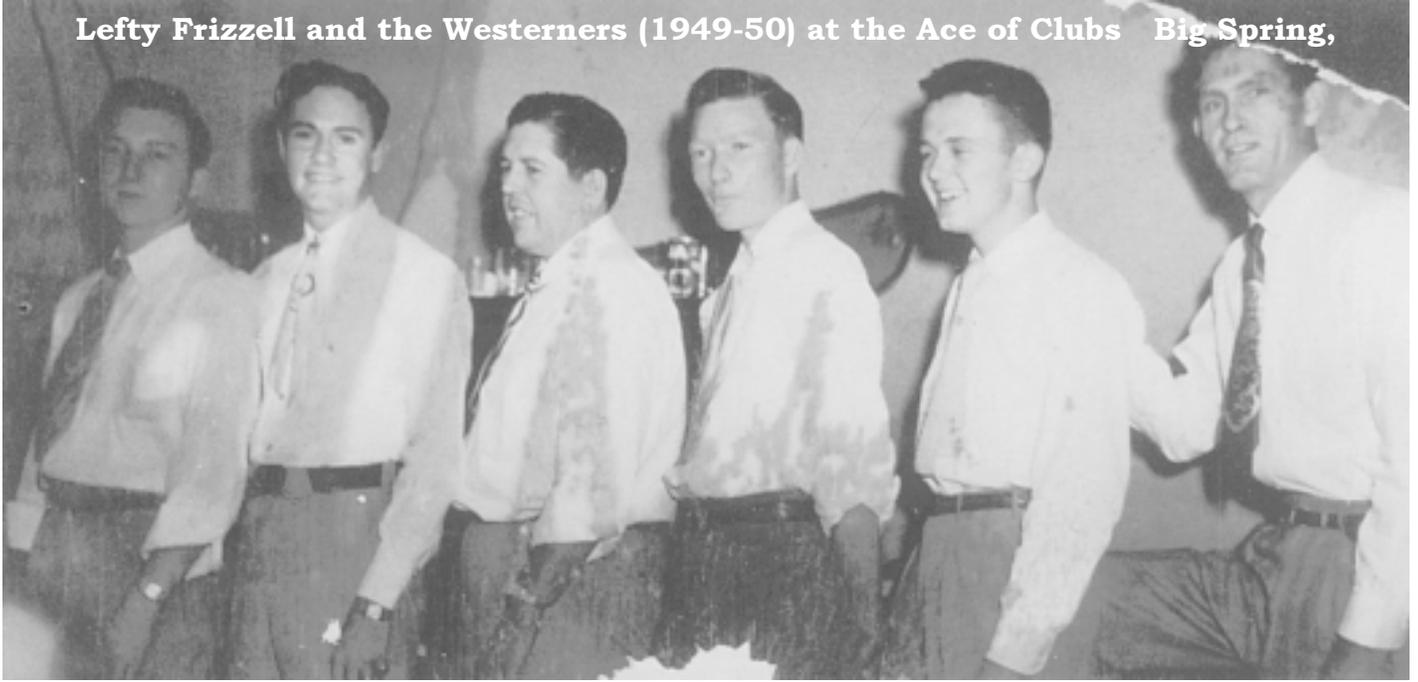


The remains of the celebrated Ace of Clubs
aka The Bloody Bucket, on Highway 80 (1999)

Old-Timey & Country Music Notes From Big Spring, Texas

DOYLE PHILLIPS

At one time the Howard County area was filled with music-making families. On Saturdays people would play on a street corner in Big Spring and rake in a respectable amount of money. The Castles, the Winslows, the Pikes, the Cambells, the Warrens, the Kilgores, the Madrys, the Kings and the Nixes are a few of the families musical. There are a lot more.



Unidentified Lefty Frizzell Bill Madry Charlie Stewart Slim Agnew A. R. (Jelly) Reed

Lefty Frizzell's hit song *Always Late* typified the honky-tonk country songs that he and many others brought to Big Spring audiences. Especially during 1949-54 Big Spring attracted performers who would go on to fame and sometimes fortune. At that time there was a host of honky-tonks and dance halls in operation and ready to hire unknown musicians—not uncommonly at the risk of their life and limb when the crowd got wild.

Some of the club names: The Ace of Clubs *aka* The Bloody Bucket; Miller's Casino *aka* The Casino Club; The Black Cat; Yale's Inn *aka* Yell's Inn; The Roundtop; Not exactly honky-tonks but open for business were Gomez Hall, The Blue Moon (a restaurant and bar for Blacks); The Park Inn, Donald's Drive-in and Ray's Inn

Honky-Tonk thoughts: The more-or-less traditional working-class saloon was usually located in the heart of town, where stores and commerce drew the citizenry. As horse-power dwindled under pressure from the automobile and transport was easier, saloons could move to the edge of town. Frequently they would be established on the highway.

Physically, the honky-tonk offered few amenities. A car parking lot. A one-bulb glowing BEER-DANCING. A little dance floor. Eventually a bandstand (though the performers might have to play bent over from the low ceiling). A bar and tables. A jukebox. The outhouse could be, naturally, outside.

The West Texas honky-tonk was not for church people, Mexicans or Blacks. Patrons were mostly wage earners from the Permian Basin. They worked the railroad, farms, ranches, oilfields and truck lines. Military bases contributed soldiers and civilians workers. Weekends there could be groups of teen-age girls in attendance.

The volatile ingredients of beer, live music and a big crowd could result in explosive situations. The cops often came to clean up the mess. Bouncers were not gentle.

The Ace of Clubs (or Bloody Bucket) was a quintessential honky-tonk. It was a proven school for aspiring musicians—and many of them would hit the big-time in Country Swing, Rockabilly, R & B and Rock 'n' Roll. Honky-Tonk, TX gave Lefty Frizzell his first opportunity to bid for stardom (shortly after his six-months in jail for statutory rape when he was just 19). Reportedly, the Ace of Clubs owners (the Hugh Simpsons), Oscar Glickman and others saw to it that Lefty could afford a \$100 recording session in Dallas.

Other soon-to-be-famous performers that came to Big Spring honky-tonks: Bob Wills, Johnny Cash, Earnest Tubb and Slim Willett.

One local resident says that he once read the credit ledger of the old Anderson Music Company. When a musician couldn't pay, Mr. Anderson would have him sign for what he needed. Among other signatures were Lefty's and Johnny's. They were so broke that they had to get guitar strings on credit.

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We'll All Go Down:

A Brief History of The West Texas Cowboys

*Big ball's in Cow Town
Big ball's in town.
Big ball's in Cow Town,
We'll all go down.*

By Jean Warren

The year was 1946. Hoyle and Ben Nix put together a five-piece band they called the *West Texas Cowboys* and set about making memorable music. The brothers had grown up with music, Hoyle playing fiddle, Ben the guitar. While still in school, they had played in a group named the *Centerpoint Serenaders* (Centerpoint, Texas), and in the late 30s another band the *Flash Cowhands*.

Joining them was their cousin Loran Warren, home from the army after World War II. Completing the combo after returning to Big Spring after stints in the Seabees were Low Allen Wheeler and Charlie Smith.

They began performing at the old *Yell's Inn*, located on West Highway 80 (across from *C&M Garage*). Charlie admits that at first he wondered if the band would make it. "But the crowds kept getting bigger and bigger, and then we started going out of town to play in Stanton and Colorado City."

Somehow packed inside a 1941



Mercury with their amplifiers, instruments and suitcases, all five musicians began to travel 'round the country.

"The music we played then was not much like the Western music of today," Charlie says. "It was true Western, without all the different kinds of electronic deals. What came out was what we were really playing." For three-and-a-half years he played tenor banjo and helped record the band's first and probably most famous song *Big Ball's in Cow Town*.

"One reason I played with Hoyle was that he never allowed any drinking by a band member. I respected him for that."*

The *West Texas Cowboys* entertained fans of Western music for a total of thirty-nine years, until Hoyle's death in 1985. The band had a circuit of engagements in a 250-mile radius of Big Spring, in addition to their regular Saturday night appearances at the *Stampede*. They also played for countless rodeos, barbecues and club functions.

Larry and Jody, Hoyle's sons, began at very early ages to play with the band. Larry played bass fiddle and guitar, Jody on drums and fiddle. Today Jody Nix and his *Texas Cowboys* continue the long family tradition of bringing

Western music to fans throughout the region.

Jean Warren married Paul Warren who was related to the band members. She could write a book about the history of these music makers. And, in a previous issue of Signal, we hoped that The Stampede would someday be designated a historical landmark—Editor

*A sign painter by profession, Smith provided all the signs for the band. He also painted the mural that's still on the bandstand at *The Stampede*, the dancehall built by the Nix brothers in 1954. (More photos on next pages.)



Hoyle and Ben Nix



Forerunners of the West Texas Cowboys were the Flash Cowhands, pictured here in the Crawford Hotel studio of KBST Radio.

From left to right: Alpha Turney, Announcer, Loran Warren, Hoyle Nix, Ben Nix and Donald Atkins.



The original West Texas Cowboys in 1946.

Pictured left to right: Charlie Smith, Hoyle Nix, Loran Warren, Low Allen Wheeler and Ben Nix



The Big Spring City Auditorium has been the showplace for various kinds of music since it was erected. There is more to come about the events such as the one above--soon.