

FEATURE

# Hap Miller Made Music, Memories

by Tom LaRocque

Hap Miller, 76, the celebrated band leader who delighted dancers for decades in the Sun Valley Lodge, died in an Arizona hospital on Oct. 29.

Miller left behind a mountain of fond memories in Sun Valley and Ketchum. More than a musician, he was a legendary entertainer with a reputation that reached far beyond Idaho.

Ed Laverty, who began playing clarinet and saxophone in Miller's Sun Valley Orchestra in 1958, recalls Miller's retirement in 1972. Sun Valley Co. sponsored a huge, high-spirited party in honor of the popular band leader.

"He got congratulatory telegrams from Nixon and Gov. Cecil Andrus, and (Sen.) Frank Church," Laverty said. Former Idaho Gov. Robert Smylie took the stage with Miller and sang "Mack the Knife."

Laverty was a frequent member of a foursome of golfers who played the game year-round, driving to Buhl to play in the winter. "Hap played constantly. He played with anybody and everybody," said Laverty. The band leader sported a handicap ranging from 5 to 7.

were made, and the Sun Valley Lodge's dance bar was named the Duchin Room. But Duchin was forced to cancel the engagement due to a prior commitment.

Duchin called Miller's boss, Harl Smith, in Minneapolis and asked him to fill in at Sun Valley. The Smith boys were packing their golf clubs and preparing for a winter in Florida. They were reluctant. "Some of us didn't even know where Idaho was, let alone Sun Valley," Miller said. But Duchin persuaded them to take the job.

dinner, and dancing late at night. They had all this energy, I guess, that they were going to use for skiing," he said.

After several days it snowed, and the guests took to the slopes. Miller himself became a very good skier.

Members of the Harl Smith Orchestra took a liking to Sun Valley, and began returning every summer and winter with their families. Miller brought his wife, Arvilla, a childhood sweetheart from his hometown of Massillon, Ohio.

He first played professionally with a band at the age of 12. A local grocer's son invited him to play at a dance hall upstairs from the grocery. Hap's father agreed to let him go only on the condition that he return home by 10 p.m. When the band took its break at 10, Hap announced his curfew. The band leader paid him half a night's wages and fired him.

In his teens Miller took piano lessons and played with another local orchestra. His big break came at the age of 23, when he was asked to join the

stumped, the band would pack up for the night.

### Sense of Humor

The band leader's sense of humor was as well known as his music around Sun Valley, according to Taylor. One day while she was having her hair done at Maria's House of Beauty in Ketchum, Miller walked in with two bottles of beer in hand. "That was at a time when men did not go into beauty salons," she said.

He began clownishly arranging Mrs. Taylor's hair with a comb, and then announced that he needed "a musician's haircut." Miller, who had a large nose, instructed the stylist to "leave enough hair on the back so I don't fall over on the piano and break my nose."

Miller was interviewed by former *Mountain Express* editor Martha Poitevin in 1979. He told Poitevin of a couple who agreed to come to church one morning if Hap would play "Joy to the World" at the service.

Conducting the service was a rather straight-laced reverend from Twin Falls, but he agreed to the song. Miller struck a chord on the organ and bel-



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On one occasion radio commentator Paul Harvey came to Sun Valley and challenged Miller to a game of golf. The men wagered heavily on the game. Miller put up his entire orchestra, and lost. Harvey then spent several months boasting that he "owned" the Sun Valley Orchestra. But he lost it back to Miller in a subsequent golf game.

Harvey recently paid tribute to Hap Miller in a radio-broadcast eulogy.

Miller, a piano player, wrote and frequently performed the tunes "I'll be in Sun Valley," and "The Sun Valley Twist." Although his band traveled throughout the country during the "slack" seasons, he remained primarily a resident of Sun Valley after his arrival in 1936.

**No Snow**

At that time he was a member of the famous Harl Smith Orchestra, which came from Minneapolis to Idaho for Sun Valley's grand opening.

Miller recounted the band's arrival in a taped interview now on file in the Ketchum Community Library's regional history department. The interview was conducted two years ago by Marcia Jones of Bellevue.

Union Pacific, which owned the resort, first planned to hire the Eddy Duchin Band for the event, he said. Preparations



*Hap Miller's Sun Valley Orchestra in 1959 or 1960: standing left to right, Wally Roth, Ray Raino, Ed Laverty, Hap Miller, Johnny Martizia, and Brute Hurley. The drummer, Juhl Kauffman.*

The band took a train to Shoshone on Dec. 18 or 19, 1936, he said. They rode a bus to Sun Valley, anxious about their job at the new ski resort, and wondering why there was no snow on the ground. When they arrived at the resort, workers were putting the finishing touches on the newly built Sun Valley Lodge.

"The guests were coming in the front door and the debris was going out the back door," said Miller.

Still, there was no snow. The resort went ahead with its gala opening, promising to put up its guests at no charge until snow began to fall.

The Harl Smith band played for hours on end, said Miller. "People didn't have anything to do, so they were dancing in the afternoon, and dancing during

**Football Crazy**

In the Community Library interview, Miller described Massillon as "a football-crazy town," where everyone was obsessed with high school athletics. His father was a railroad engineer.

His family was religious, and Hap began his musical career playing a pump organ in church. While his longer-legged brother pumped the pedals, young Hap played "Jesus Loves Me" with one finger and several mistakes.

He started playing the piano at home, where his sense of humor began to take shape along with his musical skills. To his mother's consternation, the hymnal words "At the cross, at the cross..." became "At the bar, at the bar, where I smoked my first cigar."

Harl Smith band. He agreed, and toured the country with the band for five years. Then came the offer from Sun Valley.

Miller stayed with the Harl Smith band until 1951, when Smith retired. He then took over as the leader, and the band became known alternately as the Hap Miller Orchestra and the Sun Valley Orchestra.

Dorice Taylor, author of the book "Sun Valley," recalls that Miller and his band would often play a game called "Guess That Tune" with his Duchin Room audiences. At the end of the evening, the band began playing a medley of familiar tunes.

As long as audience members could continue supplying the names of the songs, the band would continue playing. When the audience was

short on the organ and followed, "Jeremiah was a bullfrog!"—the words to a song entitled "Joy to the World" by rock band Three Dog Night The reverend looked stricken.

Miller and his wife Arvilla moved to Sun City, Ariz. in the 1970s to escape Sun Valley winters. They maintained a home in Hulen Meadows, however, and spent summers there. Arvilla Miller still lives in Arizona. The couple had two sons who now live in Salt Lake City and Phoenix.

As recently as the summer of 1983, Miller was entertaining in the Sun Valley Lodge Dining Room. One of his accompanists was Joe Maccarillo, who now runs a music shop in Hailey. As a boy, Maccarillo worked a floor show while the Hap Miller Orchestra made music in the Dining Room.

Macarillo and other friends of Hap Miller have initiated a scholarship fund in his memory. Contributions toward the education of high school students aspiring to careers in music should be sent in care of the Third Fret, Box 2750, Hailey 83333.

"Hap was a wonderful man who never said a bad thing about anybody else including other musicians," said Macarillo. "Even at his age he always worked very hard. He was always a part of Sun Valley."

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