

Dance Halls

(Music playing)

Narrator: The dance hall tradition is one of the defining parts of Texas history and Texas culture.

N: Texans of different heritage, including German, Czech, Mexican, French, and African, share a common love of music and fellowship, and dance halls are where these communities have gathered, celebrated, sung, danced, and shared in each other's lives

N: Hundreds of dance halls grace the landscape, reflecting the unique cultural diversity of the Lone Star State and perpetuating a way of life found in Texas for generations.

N: Some remain vibrant, some are empty and in disrepair, yet all of these hallowed structures have stories to tell, stories that help us understand and celebrate our past and present alike.

N: Here, we will take a look at four different dance halls, each illuminating a different part of the history and culture of Texas

(Music playing)

N: In the 1840s, Germany was experiencing political and economic turmoil, and the numbers of Germans relocating to Texas increased greatly

N: Aided by groups including the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas, or Adelsverein, the Germans sought to recreate their society, building communities that would enable their folk culture to persist.

N: As with other immigrant groups, one of the first buildings erected would be the Gruene Community Center, a place for meetings, weddings, and holiday celebrations that were the hub of activity in burgeoning towns.

N: Music was a big part of social life, and whether hosting a dance, a wedding reception, or one of the popular Sängerrunde, or singing circle, music has always been a part of these halls.

(Music playing)

N: Anhalt Hall is one of the many halls built by German immigrants in Central Texas.

N: The dining hall, beer garden, stage, and dance floor have welcomed folks to their Maifest and Oktoberfest for over one hundred and thirty years.

(Music playing)

Gene Moeller: On the west side over there, where they built a small hall, they made a little money and they had another festival and they added on to it, added on to it twice.

GM: In 1908 they built the big hall.

GM: This is Maifest of the Germania Farmer Verein; let me put it in German, Germania Farmer Verein.

N: The word verein means an association or society.

N: The Germania vereins, like others, was formed as a collective effort to protect and serve the farmers in the area.

N: The Germania verein still owns Anhalt Hall, although the name Anhalt refers to something entirely different.

GM: The people in the area contacted a store owner and said, "We'd like to have postal service." So, he invites the Post Master and they said, "Yes, we can do that," and he asked the Post Master, "What do we call it?" and the storekeeper said, "The Stop."

N: The band plays polkas and waltzes, as well as big band jazz and other styles.

N: Its sound relies heavily on traditional instruments, including the accordion, horns, and tuba.

N: Although the population has shifted and changed over the years, the sense of community to be found at a place like Anhalt Hall continue to bring people together, young and old, to celebrate and dance.

(Music playing)

N: Built in 1952, La Villita became the premiere venue for música tejana in South Texas.

N: Música tejana, simply translated, means the music of Tejanos, or Texans of Mexican heritage.

(Music playing)

N: The South Texas town of Alice has a legacy of música tejana that includes the dance hall known as La Villita.

N: Built by the late Armando Marroquín, Sr., La Villita was the home base for a popular singing duo, featuring his wife Carmen.

N: Carmen y Laura's career had a unique start.

N: In the 1930 and early 1940s, Armando Marroquín had a thriving jukebox business throughout the South Texas region.

N: World War II had a major impact on the music business, with many musicians finding themselves out of work.

N: In an effort to help compensate unemployed musicians, the union called for a ban on music recordings in an effort to secure higher royalty payments from the big record labels.

N: When the ban went into effect in 1942, Marroquín had little new music with which to stock his jukeboxes.

N: He decided to record his own.

Carmen Marroquín: During World War II, he used to have jukeboxes and, because of the war, they stopped recording, the big companies, so my husband bought a small thing, you know, and he started to make the recordings at home. We used to make them in the garage.

N: Marroquín first recorded Carmen with a neighbor accompanying her.

N: He continued to record and provide acetates to his jukebox customers throughout the war.

N: The popularity of his recordings led to a partnership with Paco Betancourt and when the ban was lifted, they formed **Registros Ideal**, or Ideal Records.

N: With acts including Beto Villa's Orchestra and conjunto pioneer Narciso Martínez, Ideal Records came to define a new sound created by Texans, born of all the influences found in the region.

N: These acts were popular throughout the Southwest and toured extensively.

N: Carmen, with two young sons, wanted to get off the road.

N: Originally constructed as a dance patio, La Villita opened in 1952.

N: Carmen y Laura and the other Ideal artists performed from there, and they soon began booking touring acts.

CM: We started getting all the conjunto here and it was real nice, you know, because we had plants all over and trees. It's a patio like in Mexico. As a matter of fact, an architect from Mexico did the work. We had weddings, and we had quinceañeras, birthdays, and all of that. It was more like a family thing.

Armando Marroquín, Jr.: Oh, if this place could talk. It's got a lot of stories.

N: Carmen's son, Armando, Jr., ran La Villita for years.

N: in addition to having a local radio station, KUKO, that played Tejano music, he and his brother Mario grew up in the club helping out.

Mario Marroquín: We learned out to sweep the floors, clean the bathrooms, yes we did...

AM: ...And then park cars. Especially like on holidays there were, I mean masses of people.

N: Now retired, Armando decided to close the club that for decades had hosted nearly every act in tejanó music, including Selena, Emilio, and La Mafia.

(Music playing)

N: In 1939 a prosperous African-American entrepreneur C.A. Dupree and his wife Anna built the Eldorado Ballroom.

N: With its cutting edge streamline modern style, it was immediately distinctive in the neighborhood.

N: Dowling Street, the main artery through the neighborhood, became a thriving commercial center.

N: Houston's Third Ward experienced a residential boom between 1900 and 1920 and over the next decades, as white residents began to move out toward the suburbs, the Third Ward became predominantly African American.

Roger Wood: Most Texans when they hear the phrase Eldorado they think of Spanish and they think of the definite article El and they think of the word Dorado, but that's not what this place is, this is the Eldorado Ballroom and from its inception as you see on the awning outside its always been written as a single word and no one's sure how that name was acquired other than the fact that Eldorado was a mythic name associated with gold and a legendary wonderful place.

N: The Duprees wanted to give the black community an upscale alternative to juke joints, a place where an upperly mobile black middle class, still feeling the sting of Jim Crow, could get dressed up and enjoy chic surroundings.

RW: And like the famous, much more famous, Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, it built itself as 'the home of happy feet' and it was a dance place, and folks would put on their fine eveningwear and come here and sit at tables and enjoy bands and dance, but then on Saturday afternoons and Sunday afternoons with the radio broadcasts and the talent shows, it was also a place where young people, teenagers who weren't of legal age to be here in the evening, had a chance to experience the place, had a chance to perform here or at least dance here during the radio programs and it kind of became a part of their history too.

N: Black owned and run, the Eldorado was not only a destination for onlookers; it was a launching pad for new musical talent.

Texas Johnny Brown: Eldorado, that's big time.

JB: I don't care where you traveled outside of Houston, outside of Texas; if you said that you were from Houston, Texas the name would be mentioned.

JB: "Oh, you know the Eldorado Ballroom?" and "Yeah, the Eldorado Ballroom."

N: The Eldorado featured top-quality house bands and like its Tejano cousin La Villita, it became a premiere stop for touring artists.

RW: The house bands worked two ways.

RW: They would have their own shows they would do but they also often frequently worked back in touring artists who didn't have their own band with them.

RW: Different guys told me different times about backing Big Joe Turner when he would come through town, T-Bone Walker played here with the house band.

RW: When Count Basie came he had his own band, they didn't get to play with Count Basie, you can understand that.

RW: Etta James came here, Ray Charles played with the house band here.

N: As musical styles evolved throughout the midcentury, the Eldorado began to showcase a widening diversity of African-American musical genres.

RW: When you think about the history of the Eldorado Ballroom you think, first and foremost, big band music, jazz, and blues, and then R&B as it was evolving, but as early as 1955 Clifton Chenier was doing big shows in here and his career was kind of up and down.

RW: He had periods of being prominent and then periods of obscurity through the 50s, but as early as 1955 he was headlining big shows that not only were staged here, but big enough to merit an article in the paper.

N: Today the Third Ward is feeling the effects of suburbanization, and many of the homes and businesses fell victim to neglect and sometimes demolition.

N: Project Row Houses, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rebuilding the Third Ward, now owns the Eldorado Ballroom and has periodic functions there, keeping its legacy alive.

(Music playing)

N: One of the most unique and attractive types of dance halls to be found in Texas is known as a round hall.

N: Its structure was six, eight, twelve, or sixteen sides.

N: One round hall is located in Milam County in the cluster of Central Texas counties founded and populated by Texans Czech heritage.

(Music playing)

N: Czech immigration to Texas began in the 1800s and continued steadily throughout the early nineteenth century.

N: Like their German counterparts, Czech Texans founded benevolent societies to support their new communities including SPJST, an acronym for the Czech words meaning Slovak Benevolent Order of Texas.

N: Mandy SPJST lodges are still in use, including the round hall located in Buckholts.

N: Built in 1936, it has hosted dances for generations.

Doug Williams: The local lodge built the dance hall or the lodge facility here for the members to have a meeting place for meetings and also for entertainment, and it has been that from the early 30s.

Frank Thomascik: We started in March, somewhere along the first of March, in 1936 and they've had their first dance in June the 18th, I believe.

FT: It was something for this little town to have such a big building.

N: The octagonal shape of the building ensured that all had good sight lines to the stage and access to the dance floor.

FT: Oh, we had benches all the way around the hall and the benches were high enough to where the mothers could put the pallet down and put their children on top of those pallets.

DW: In high school I would come down and we would watch through the windows, which were all the way around the hall, and we would watch everyone dancing.

DW: There wasn't air conditioning, the windows were up and then at eleven o'clock they stopped selling tickets. Then, all of the younger people would rush in and there was a bull ring out in front of the stage and you could stand in the bull ring, as they called it, and you could tag dance. There would be couples dancing and the couple, the guy, would honor your tag and you could dance with his partner, so we got a free dance for about an hour.

N: The music heard at the SPJST lodge is and has always been a mixture of popular music and traditional Czech polkas and waltzes.

N: In the 1950s, radio station KTAE out of Taylor used to broadcast live shows, which featured acts including Jimmy Heath, Hank Thompson, and Bob Wills.

Jerry Haisler: When I first started playing when I was about eight, nine, or ten years old, I used to come to this hall, there used to be picnics and things here, dances every weekend, so I used to come here with my family and it was very family oriented, and I came here and listened to bands and sat right here by the stage and just watched the bands intently and listened and got interested

in music that way. Then the hall was not closed in like it is, the windows opened up, so it was a really nice airy thing. You could hear the music out across the yard. It was really pleasant.

N: Today, reflecting the changing nature of the communities, the hall is in demand for an expanding range of uses.

DW: We do have a lot of quinceañeras, we have a lot of weddings and wedding receptions no in the bookings, and more and more people are finding that this particular lodge or hall has a lot of personality for what they want to do.

N: Throughout the Lone Star State, dance halls remain a place to celebrate our heritage and to come together in our ever-changing communities and spend time with families and friends, enjoying music and camaraderie.

(Music playing)