

## **Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J. P. Richardson were Here in 1959**

by Stuart Clark

"Would you like to hear the song that I made famous?"

Those words were spoken by Ritchie Valens to Esther Wenck of Tipton 29 years ago when he, Buddy Holly and J. P. Richardson, the "Big Bopper," made an unscheduled stop at the Meet and Eat Restaurant in Tipton **Jan. 30, 1959.**

Four days later, all 3 were dead, victims of an airplane crash north of Clear Lake.

The death of the 3 rock 'n roll stars stunned the nation and Feb. 3, 1959 became known as "The day the music died."

Yet, most people in Tipton had no idea who the young entertainers were, even though they rocketed to the top of the charts with songs like "Peggy Sue," "Donna," "That'll Be the Day," and "Chantilly Lace."

Although it has now been 29 years since the group was forced to stop in Tipton because of a malfunctioning bus heater, those who saw them remember the day well. Ever since the entertainers' deaths, they have felt a connection to the legend of the singers.

The recent movie "La Bamba" was about the life of Ritchie Valens, whose song "Donna" had sold a million records.

According to George Horton, a Buddy Holly memorabilia collector from Vining, Ia., the entertainers were traveling from Davenport to Ft. Dodge Jan. 30, 1959. They decided to stop in Tipton because the heater on their bus wasn't working and it was a typically cold January day in Iowa.

A short story in the Feb. 5, 1959 Tipton Advertiser was headlined "THREE ROCK 'N ROLL STAR PERFORMERS VISIT HERE; KILLED IN PLANE CRASH."

The story said Holly, Valens and Richardson had stopped at **Gaul Motor Co.** to have their bus repaired. "While in Tipton they entertained several local people who happened to be about the **Meet and Eat and McGregor Shell Station.** They were clean-cut attractive young men."

Gene Sissel of Tipton was one of the first people to see the recording artists when they stopped here. Employed in the parts department at Gaul Motor Co. in 1959, he remembers the day well.

"Their bus heater was frozen," he said, "and the band was right up front (in the Gaul building). I remember one of the guys took a tractor seat off the parts counter and got on the floor with it and said he was a reindeer salesman. I guess he thought it was pretty cold here."

Sissel said nobody really knew who the young men were, but they knew they played in a band. "They were very nice and they never acted like they thought they were real important."

He called news of their deaths 4 days later "quite a shock."

Al Hendricks is retired now, but he was the owner of **Al's Meet & Eat** back in 1959. He was flipping hamburgers in the kitchen of his small restaurant on Cedar Street when the entertainers came in.

"I didn't pay much attention to them," he said. "They were just customers as far as I was concerned. I didn't know at first that they were members of a band. I didn't follow Buddy Holly's music."

"I remember that they sat down and then noticed the juke box. Somebody put money in and played one of his own records and sang along with it. I knew then that they were stars, because his voice sounded the same as the record."

Hendricks said it was sometime around 10 a.m. Jan. 30 when the young men walked into the restaurant and he thinks they just had coffee or pop to drink.

"The waitresses were excited," he said, "and they felt very bad when they were killed. I felt kind of bad too, it all came as kind of a big surprise."

Esther Wenck remembers Valens wearing an iridescent jacket, which changed color from black to brown.

"When they told me they were famous singers, I thought they were kidding," she said. She doesn't remember who accompanied the 3 singers into the restaurant, but she said the small building filled up.

Forty-four years old at the time, Wenck said the rock 'n roll Holly, Valens and Richardson played wasn't her kind of music. However, she said she felt especially bad when they were killed, because she hadn't believed them when they first said they were big time stars.

Retracing the route of the musicians through downtown Tipton, it is known that

the young men stopped in at least 4 business places, including **T & M Clothing**, which was then owned by George Tevis and the late Glen Mosher.

"I believe Bob McGregor (at the McGregor Shell station) sent them down here, Tevis recalled last week, "I remember they bought a lot of clothes and they paid cash. They had all kinds of money."

Tevis said the young men spent between 10 and 20 minutes in the clothing store. He said his clearest memory of that day 29 years ago was one of the men taking a pair of pants and putting them on behind the sales counter, bypassing the dressing room.

"They were a good bunch of boys," Tevis said.

McGregor, the man who sent the rock 'n roll stars to the store, said he remembers the men coming into his station a couple of times during their 2-1/2 hour stop here.

"We talked to the guys, but really didn't know much about them," he said. "We talked about their records, about the weather and where they were going."

"I think about that day every year now," McGregor said. "We could hardly believe it when they were killed. We had just seen them days before."

"It was quite exciting when they were here."

The singers were not interviewed when they were in Tipton, which was another indication that they were simply not well known among Tipton residents, especially those over 30.

H. E. Clark, publisher of The Tipton Conservative and editor of the newspaper at the time, said nobody at the paper knew who Buddy Holly was until after the plane crash.

The following editorial appeared in The Conservative Feb. 5, 1959:

## **Dig These Squares. . .**

It is somewhat embarrassing to realize that you have become old and are also "a square." The case of the late Buddy Holly is convincing evidence that we don't "dig" this modern music and have apparently lost communication with the younger generation.

It was shortly after noon Jan. 30 when a call came to The Conservative that there

was a celebrity in town and that it might be well for somebody to have a talk with him.

"Who is it?"

The answer was Buddy Holly, but not being in tune with the latest in music, the name didn't register. As a matter of fact the name came through wrong, as Buddy "Holliday."

Being moderately curious, we checked with the boys in the back shop. One of them commented that if it was "Doc Holliday" he might be interested and another suggested that if it was "Judy Holliday" we would all go interview her.

It was a busy afternoon and the celebrity got lost in the shuffle.

It wasn't until 5 p.m. Feb. 2, about 20 hours after Holly was killed in a plane crash north of Clear Lake that it finally got through to us who the celebrity was. His relative importance was shown in the banner headlines of his death in the daily newspapers.

Still curious we checked the front and back shop for the second time. It was something of a relief to find that nobody had ever heard of Buddy Holly until that night.

But next time somebody calls and says that they have a celebrity, there will be no questions asked - we'll go out and talk to him.

-H.E.C.

Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J. P. Richardson were killed 29 years ago today, the day the music died.

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This article is from Krista Clark at the paper in Tipton. She said that her father was the editor when Buddy Holly, Big Bopper and Ritchie Valenz came through in 1959 and their bus broke down.