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## Joyce Tarro Memoir

**T177. Tarro, Joyce** (1923-1976)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 40 mins., 15 pp.

Tarro discusses the history of the Coliseum Ballroom in Benld, Illinois: events, bands, and the structure of ballroom. She also mentions her family, Pearl Harbor, and the town of Benld.

Interview by David Logsdon, 1973

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by David Logsdon for the Oral History Office at Sangamon State University, October 18, 1973.

Joyce Tarro was born in Benld, Illinois, December 9, 1923 and died February 15, 1976. This brief but interesting interview highlights the history of Benld's well-known Coliseum dance hall which was first owned by Miss Tarro's father in 1923.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Joyce Tarro, October 18, 1973, Benld, Illinois.

David Logsdon, Interviewer.

Q. First of all, I'd like to know your father's and your mother's name.

A. Well, my father's name was Dominic.

Q. You just go right on ahead at your own speed. And your mother's name?

A. Marie.

Q. Marie. Do you remember precisely the birth dates and maybe where they were born?

A. Well, my mother was born in Mount Olive, and I think my father was born in Michigan.

Q. Michigan. Is that in the northern part, southern part?

A. Well, now, really what part I don't know. (laughter)

Q. Do you know what he did up there when he first was a young boy?

A. No, I don't.

Q. Do you know anything about his past . . .

A. I think the family moved down here shortly, I mean that's where . . .

Q. Was it a big family? Did they have a lot of children in the family that you know of at all?

A. Well, let's see, he had two brothers and three sisters, I guess.

Q. Was he the oldest, the youngest, somewhere in the middle?

A. Oh, he was more in the middle. I have an aunt that was older than him.

Q. Are there any of them living right now?

A. Yes, I've got one uncle living and two aunts living.

Q. Where's he live at?

A. My uncle? He lives in Benld.

Q. Oh he does? And what's his name?

A. Ben Tarro.

Q. Ben Tarro. Does he run the market down here?

A. Well, his son does. He used to, he's retired.

Q. What about his sisters, your aunts?

A. Well, one lives in Benld and then there's one in St. Louis.

Q. St. Louis. Are they in some kind of business themselves?

A. No.

Q. I just wondered if it was a family extension, this getting into things.

A. Oh, no.

Q. I would like to know personally and especially for the records a descriptive narrative of your father. What was he like, what did he look like, everything about him.

A. I don't know if I can tell you a whole lot about that. I was only six when he died. They said he was a real quiet man, and yet, he was stern. I know when us kids would do anything my mother always said that all he had to do was walk in the room and point his finger and we jumped.

Q. Was he tall?

A. Yes, he was pretty tall.

Q. Was he burly or anything like that?

A. No. I do have some pictures at home of him.

Q. If I can come back later, I can get hold of these pictures too. What did he die of at such a young age?

A. Well, actually, I don't know. I'd just rather not talk about it.

Q. Okay, fine. That's absolutely all right. Why did he ever build the Coliseum in the first place?

A. Well, I tell you, he was in the first World War and when he came out of the war he went into the grocery business. Then he had a small skating rink in town here, where the post office is now. That burned down, so he decided to come out here and build this.

Q. Did he ever really tell your mother, or anybody, really the idea behind this, why he decided to build it out here? Was it just for the entertainment of people?

A. Well, yes.

Q. I thought maybe it was a projected image he had had all of his life of doing something. I wasn't sure.

A. Well, I guess when the skating rink burnt down--of course, all these mines were going real good around here then--it looked like a good potential because liquor had just come back from the Prohibition days, and as I said, all these mines was sunk around here. I guess he figured, well, this would be all right.

Q. Do you know if there were any towns around here at that time like shanty towns for miners or was it sort of set up within a town?

A. Oh no, there was several small towns around here where they had what they call company houses. The company built these small frame houses with outdoor facilities, you know, just for the miners.

Q. Are any of them standing at all now?

A. Oh yes, there are some still around.

Q. Is that in Wilsonville or Staunton?

A. I think there's probably still some in Sawyerville there. That was #2 mine over there. There probably should still be some company houses over there. Eagerville, that's what we called #1 mine; there's still company houses out there.

Q. Very good.

A. I just found out not long ago that they still don't have any water or any facilities out there.

Q. That's amazing. Are most of the mines pretty well closed up now?

A. Yes.

Q. Are all of them closed up?

A. There's one reopened up here, oh, between here and Carlinville, called Monterey. I think that's the name of it.

Q. That's the last of the mines?

A. This is a new mine, but these others have been shut down for years.

Q. Was it just running out of coal; do you have any idea?

A. No, they claim that there's still coal under there.

Q. They just literally moved on to somewhere else?

A. Well, most of the people stayed. They've been here all of their lives. Most of them stayed. Their families, most of them now work, you know, Granite City or Alton, St. Louis or Springfield. They all commute.

Q. They didn't become ghost towns in other words like out West? So often a gold rush town where everybody just disappeared.

A. Well, not really, because at one time Benld was--well, we had a lot of gambling here and everything. That was one thing Benld was noted for. All these other towns didn't have gambling and everybody wanted to gamble.

Q. Was this back in the 1930's or the 1920's?

A. Oh, a lot of it started around 1935, 1936. Well, during the last war it was going strong then. Well, just about every tavern had a crap game and everybody was busy too.

Q. Why did he build in Benld?

A. Well, I guess he settled down here. He had this meat market; he and my uncle ran it together. As I said, this is when he came out. When the skating rink burned down, he had an idea of a lot of different things out there which we have had. We've had basketball games. At one time we had skating out here, too.

Q. Did you flood the floor?

A. Yes.

Q. Did it last very long; was it successful?

A. Yes, the only problem there was, we'd skate two or three nights a week and have a dance on Saturday night. The problem there was one of them had to go. There was a different preparation for the floor; the wax had to be taken off for the skaters and then it had to be put on for the dancers. Of course, at that time we never had tables or any of that. In fact, when the place was open, all we had was a bar right in here.

Q. That was the extent of it?

A. That was it.

Q. The bar, in other words, was at the first part of the building itself.

A. It was put in when the building was built.

Q. Yes, it was up here, but it didn't go the whole length of the building.

A. Oh no, now there's a bar over here, one over there, and one upstairs.

Q. Is this picture, the one we were looking at, is that the original place? Where is that located?

A. This is upstairs.

Q. When did you first see the Coliseum? Were you a little girl or what?

A. I can't actually remember when I first saw it.

Q. Were you little then?

A. Yes. It was built the year I was born. Whenever I was able to see, I guess.

Q. That must have been quite an excitement for him to have a pretty little daughter and to also have himself a brand new hall.

A. Well, I had a brother too, but he died when he was young too.

Q. Were you allowed to come to the dancehall when you were young?

A. Well, if I came out, I came out with my mother. My mother would sell tickets, and of course, I couldn't run around. I was still a little kid, but she'd let me come out here for maybe an hour or so with her.

Q. To see all the excitement?

A. Yes, naturally that's a big thing when you're a kid, you know. I even like to come in here now when it's empty and look at it.

Q. When did you actively participate in the operation of the place?

A. I ran a place of my own uptown for quite a while. I helped out here; my mother passed away in 1955 so actually I've been on my own out here since 1955.

Q. Since 1955. You've seen a lot of bands come through here.

A. Oh, I saw a lot of them even when I was smaller.

Q. What really big name attraction do you remember first? The first big attraction?

A. I don't know.

Q. What period in time was it? What decade?

A. They started playing--the name bands--when they were traveling; I guess that's in the 1930's era.

Q. That's back in the 1930's, that's when it first started, right?

A. That's right.

Q. How did they get the first group to come over here in a town like this? It's a little town.

A. Well, that's no problem. At that time they had agents all over the country and once they hear of a place--in fact, that's how I book them right now. They may call me up this afternoon and say so-and-so is available on such-and-such a night. Then, if we agree on a night, then we've got to agree on the price. They usually say a price, and I usually say another price, and then we usually come to an agreement.

But you see, they have to be in the territory when they go and make a tour. If they make a two or three week tour, they might have three or four hundred miles to go tomorrow night to the next job--which at that time they were doing a lot of, but they don't do much of that anymore.

Q. Do they travel by bus mainly? Was the train ever used?

A. No, they traveled by bus. Now in the last seven or eight years we have had some of them that would fly in to St. Louis and rent a car to come out.

Q. That's lately, right?

A. Yes, that's lately, but at this time [referring to 1930's] everybody got on to the bus.

Q. Greyhound helped you a lot.

A. Yes.

Q. Was Greyhound around back then? Was there some other kind of bus line?

A. I think it was Greyhound as long as I can remember.

Q. Did people travel a long way to come here back in the 1930's and 1940's?

A. I don't know. That's kind of hard to answer because nowadays they still come from quite a distance, but then, there's more cars now. It used to be we had a bus ourself locally that would go around from town to town and would pick up--in other words, all the dancers would meet at the bank corner at 8:30 in the evening, such-and-such a time, and the bus would come by and pick them up; then they'd go into another small town and pick them up. I'm talking about a place that was fairly new.

Q. Was there any charge for the bus?

A. No. I think the admission then was about a quarter.

Q. Must have had a lot of fun in those days, didn't they?



A. Yes, I guess they did because I know I see a lot of them out here for the different occasions we have or something, and they say, "I haven't been out here for twenty years," or "I used to come out here when I was a kid and dance."

Q. Do you remember much of the Depression?

A. No, not really. I was too young.

Q. Do you know what the initial effects on the family were?

A. On my family? I guess we felt we had a little more than what the average people did.

Q. Your father died around that time for one thing.

A. Yes.

Q. That must have made it tough on you. Did you have another industry or business that was going on at that time?

A. Well, he built a lot of property.

Q. Did he build houses and the like?

A. No. He built a building in Wilsonville and he built four buildings in town, here in Benld.

Q. He seems to have been quite an industrious man.

A. Yes, he was.

Q. Never quiet at all as far as his hands went.

A. Well, he built a building on the other side of this parking lot too [East side].

Q. Is it still standing?

A. No, it burned down.

Q. What kind of building was it?

A. It was a tavern.

Q. The types of bands that emerged in the 1930's, do you remember any of the dancing crazes of the 1940's or 1930's ever developing around here?

A. Yes, they used to do the Blackbottom and the Charleston.

Q. In modern times things travel so quickly that you don't have any problems keeping up with the crazes, but in those days, were they sort of behind the rest of the country as far as dance crazes were concerned?

A. Oh, no.

Q. They were right up with them?

A. Yes.

Q. I always wondered about that because, you know, things were slower in those days; the radio seemed to be the only media.

A. They picked it up from the radio, just like kids pick up this rock stuff now from television and the radio.

Q. Chautauqua. Did your mother ever talk about Chautauqua in the Litchfield area? That was a series of log cabins and a lake. Was that before Tarro's was built?

A. It could have been built, but I never heard of it.

Q. Were there any religious events held around here, in this building? Crusades or anything at all? It's such a big building.

A. I don't remember if it was the twenty-fifth anniversary for the priest here or what, but they bought a car for him and brought it right in here. Of course, they had a big dinner in here, and all the nuns and the priests and everybody came to this. It was something a little different to see than the ordinary customer.

Q. Do you know what his name was?

A. Father Guido.

Q. Is he from Benld?

A. He was from Benld then, and then they moved him to Edwardsville and he's back in Benld now.

Q. What did the clergymen regard a dancehall like way back then? Did they like it? Did they interfere with it?

A. No, they really never interfered with it. Of course, some religions are more lenient than others and all. The Methodist, they don't approve of dancing or anything like that, but it didn't seem to have any effect on the activities.

Q. The prices of tickets apparently started at around a quarter, right? What are they right now?

A. Well, ordinarily Saturday night we get two dollars. Of course, it depends on the band. If I brought in a name band we'll get maybe five dollars, six dollars or so.

Q. A good name band, nationally known?

A. Yes.

Q. Do they still come by here? I understand you have some very good bands.

A. Oh yes. Guy Lombardo has been here; now he wasn't here this year. I don't know what happened, but he usually makes the same tour every year.

Q. He still does?

A. Well now, this year he didn't; I don't know what happened. He always made the same circuit. Of course, he is getting up there in age and he might have just discontinued his tours. They didn't call me on it this year.

Q. How about Fats Domino, wasn't he here one time?

A. Oh, he's been here several times.

Q. When was the last time he was here?

A. Well, it hasn't been too long ago. A year ago in June.

Q. You had Chubby Checker and a long list of names. Who do you consider the most exciting band you've ever had--drew a good, active crowd?

A. I don't get excited too much. I'm just interested in the door.

Q. Did you see any particular band that drew consistently though or that you would consider the best band you'd ever seen?

A. The only one that ever really impressed me was Ray Charles. He'd just come out with this song, "I Can't Stop Loving You." It was top record then when I had him out here. I went to the cashier to get something, to get some change maybe, and he started playing that. I think that's the only time I've really ever stopped to listen. Most of the time I don't even hear what they're playing up there.

Q. Have you ever had any destructive-type bands that came in here?

A. Well, you'll have to talk to him about that [Ben, the janitor]. Well, no, most of them are pretty nice. Well, those rock bands--we had a problem with them showing up on time. Lots of time we had to refund the money. They'd call me up and be in Indiana some place. They'd call me up at quarter-to-nine that night and I'm sitting there with a packed house.

Q. What can you do about that except give the money back?

A. I would send somebody out and pick up a local band and anybody want to leave, we'd refund their money, and if they wanted to stay we just charged them a dollar or two. Then I would take the matter up with the musicians' union.

Q. Are they held responsible for something like that?

A. Well, it all depends on what the excuse is. A contract can be broken through an act of God. If they had an accident or--the same way would hold binding for me--if something would happen here, say a fire or maybe the furnace broke down and I couldn't get it fixed, I could get out of a contract. They claim it's got to be an act of God, but a lot of these rock bands, they just goof off. They get in a town and they play there one night, and I guess maybe they found a few gals or something. They just say, "Heck with the next job; we got a few bucks for the night, so . . . ." (laughter)

Q. Is this the original structure?

A. Yes.

Q. This is exactly as it was?

A. Well, no, this ceiling was lowered. It was more dome-shaped up here. It was all steel up there and then they lowered [it].

Q. Other than that it's basically the same structure. The floor has obviously withstood a lot of pounding. Is this the original wood floor?

A. The original floor.

Q. What's it made out of? What kind of wood is it?

A. Oak, I think.

Q. What was the original idea for the upper balcony?

A. Well, just to seat more people. Just like I was trying to explain to you, we didn't always have all these tables and chairs down here. The bar wasn't there. All we had were--they looked something like theatre seats sitting up against the wall, and the girls would sit there, and the guys would come up and say, "Well, can I have number five dance with you?" All these tables and chairs have been added since then.

Q. That's quite interesting how they used to ask a girl to dance.

A. They had their tally there and you had numbers. You might have number seven dance with so-and-so and number eight with someone else.

Q. That was back in the 1950's, wasn't it?

A. Well, I was just looking at Tommy Dorsey. June 10th, 1948.

Q. Did the war have any sort of effect on this place as far as the number of males coming to the dance?

A. No, not really. You see, Scott Field was right down here not too far, and we had quite a few service men.

Q. I was wondering, because this area was hit hard for recruitments.

A. Well, you see at that time Benld, too, never had no closing hours, far as taverns being open. That drew a lot of people into Benld.

Q. Especially early in the morning.

A. Well, you take from close around here or even from St. Louis a lot of times, they'd drive up. They'd close at midnight or one o'clock and then they'd drive up to Benld.

Q. What did you think when you heard Pearl Harbor was bombed? You were fairly young then, weren't you?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you remember where you were?

A. I was at home.

Q. Did you hear it on the radio or where did you hear it?

A. No, a friend was living with me. In fact, her and I had a nightclub uptown. She was an entertainer. I owned the building; well, I hired her from my father, so we decided to go into business then. I think it was her boyfried that came down and told us.

Q. Were you scared?

A. No, not really; it was just kind of a shock. It was just like anybody else.

Q. Had any boys around here been involved in Pearl Harbor?

A. You mean actually in Pearl Harbor? I believe there was one family here that had a boy who was over there, but I don't think he was killed.

Q. It's quite interesting how a war that happens way over there can affect people locally, eight thousand miles to Hawaii.

A. Yes.

Q. The impact hits half-way around the world.

A. It was such a shock that nobody even realized what was going on for a few days. You just couldn't imagine sitting there and somebody comes in and says, "Well, we're at war." It seems like there should be shooting or something.

Q. Did anything happen around here after the initial shock, such as the Army moving in or anything at all? Training grounds?

A. No, not right here.

Q. Do you remember the boys leaving enmasse to enlist?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Where did they sign up?

A. I don't know if they signed up right here in Benld but we used to have the--we called it a streetcar--it was the I.T.S. It was a terminal; it looked like a streetcar really. When the boys would leave, why, everybody would go down to the station and bid them farewell.

Q. It must have been a touching scene really.

A. Yes, it was, because in a small town you know most everybody, most everybody is your friend--and in the same way, when a lot of them would come back, you'd find out when they were coming back and we'd be up there to meet them.

Q. Ever have any bands or anything?

A. No.

Q. When the war ended, was there any sort of celebration here?

A. In the ballroom? No.

Q. Most of the boys were still involved in Europe I guess.

A. Of course, there was a big celebration in town. I mean, they got the fire engine out and different things like that. It did take quite a while before the boys got back.

Q. Do you remember the awesome effect of a bomb that you had really not heard about dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima? When you heard about the A-bomb, did you have any sort of reaction?

A. Whether I approve of it? I don't know--if they had done it a long time ago . . . .

Q. Were you surprised they had such a bomb? It was quite a secret.

A. I don't think it was a secret, was it?

Q. It was supposed to have been right up to the last minute.

A. Well, I had always heard about it. I don't know where I heard it, but I remember them talking about the atomic bomb and that. They could end the war any time they wanted to. All they had to do was go over there and drop that.

Q. Has social behavior changed as far as the dance scene? I noticed you mentioned about asking your girl on her number for a dance. Have any other major changes arisen?

A. Oh yes, it's all together different now. It's completely different.

Q. How about the 1950's? What were they like?

A. Well, they were in-between now and what they were before. Now a girl will go up and ask a guy to dance, where in them days there was no way, you wouldn't even dream of that happening. But now they get out there and dance by themselves. They don't even have to have a partner.

Q. Did a rough crowd ever emerge on this floor? Did you have a rough era?

A. Oh, there's lots a times there's disagreements. Most of it's petty stuff, you know, this guy wants to dance with that guy's gal, and then he gets smart and he wants to punch him in the nose.

Q. They say that in the early days there was a lot of bootlegging around here. Did it have any influence on the Coliseum at all? Did a different type of crowd move into this area?

A. Well, at one time there was quite a few stills around here.

Q. Did Wilsonville have some? I understand there was one in Wilsonville.

A. Well, there probably was. They claim there're still a few around here somewhere.

Q. Just old and abandoned now.

A. Yes.

Q. I know you said that the Coliseum was built after Prohibition, but did the tempo of the town change at all after Prohibition?

A. I was a little young at the time. I think everybody was glad that Prohibition was over.

Q. That's pretty much the general opinion of the area.

A. Yes.

Q. Thank you for your time, and I appreciate your help.

END OF TAPE