

# All About Montana

## The Last Chance Rhythm Mares

ZANY HELENA KITCHEN BAND OF THE 50s AND 60s

BY JOHN VOLLERTSEN AND  
DOUG AND LINDA PETERSON

What do you get when you combine a bunch of fun-loving community-minded woman whose desire was to brighten the lives of others in some simple way? Well, one such result came from a unique amalgam of talent, music, humor, daring, and imagination.

Those were the ingredients of a group of women of Helena's Josephine Heppner Chapter No. 89, Order of Eastern Star. When this fountain of dynamism erupted in 1955, the Last Chance Rhythm Mares kitchen band was born and quickly evolved to become a popular entertainment medium for Helena area gatherings of all sorts.

They provided entertainment for conventions, club meetings, nursing homes, veteran groups, and legislative bodies. The *Helena Independent Recorded* reported audiences from 100 to 1200. One article best



Floy Nicholson, last living member of the Last Chance Rhythm Mares.  
Photo by Nann Parrett.

describes the fledgling band in December 1955:

*"The Last Chance Rhythm Mares," a peppy kitchen band accompanied by Mrs. Lloyd Synness at the piano, was applauded through 14 selections. Utilizing washboards, strainers, plungers, funnels, a bathtub spray, bells, popcorn popper, and washtubs as "instruments,"*

*the band featured Esther Stewart in a solo, "In the Mood," and Bea Smith in a South American number. When the orchestra members became exhausted, Esther Stewart responded to the continued applause with a Scandinavian reading, "Paul Revere." The orchestra was dressed in men's hats, wigs, old shirts and trousers and men's shoes. After their appearance before the Trail Riders, they were "booked" at a meeting of the Past Matrons club.*

A visit down memory lane recently came together with the fine efforts of Doug and Linda Peterson of Helena. Doug's mother, Floy Nicholson, is the last living member of the Rhythm Mares band.

Nicholson, 94, provided an immense amount of detailed information on the band members, their instruments, and songs. The band flourished for 16 years running from 1955 to 1971.

The band generally consisted of seven to twelve members at any given performance (which generally lasted 30 minutes,



unless encored back). But over the years, a total of 18 total members performed. Nicholson performed in the band on occasion and was featured in a special sister act from the very beginning.

"The sister act was me and my little sister Sonja Synness," she said. "We had a dance and song routine to the song Sisters."

Several band members performed individual routines among the diverse chorus of kazoos, thimble-strummed washboards, and lively piano music.

Justine Breckenridge and Liz Vollertsen dressed as flappers and danced the Charleston.

Virginia Sorrels impressed the audience with her humorous rendition of the old under-the-bed pot while Edna Hinman, clad in baggy overalls, plaid shirt, and farmer's hat, blew bubbles from her coiled shower hose.

Jackie Helberg danced a number in her polka-dot dress and tennis shoes. Songs included "The Old Grey Mare" (Collins and Harlan, 1917), "You Are My Sunshine" (Davis and Mitchell, 1939), and a dozen others.

Bea Smith performed the "Indian Dance," the serious nature of which was moderated with a dose of humor, by her being attired in baggy long-handle men's

underwear. Terry Smith Bender, daughter of Bea Smith, recently added some family history to the Indian dance regalia. The authentic war bonnet and all-bone breast



The Last Chance Rhythm Mares performing on TV in Butte, Mont., late 1950s. Photo courtesy of the Charleen Spalding Collection.

plate belonged to Terry's grandmother, Lizzy Smith, an Assiniboiné tribal member from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation.

"Zany" is how Liz Vollertsen referred to her co-members and their antics. That was the recollection of her son, John Vollertsen.

His mother would tell of Frances Synness's vigorous piano playing as "her foot would just be stomping on those pedals." Synness and her robust piano-playing were the heart and soul of the band's musical composition; and that came from many years of practice.

She and her husband, Lloyd, entertained audiences and dances in the Helena community for 50 years.

The Synness Orchestra was a popular group that mostly played at The Shanty in the Helena valley according to grandson, Doug Peterson, Jr.

Other talented band members included Peg Spalding (the steadfast band director, equipped with a toilet plunger to maintain program tempo), Dora Barney, Dorothy Foster, Mildred Riley, Marge Thistlewaite, Margaret Garrett, Polly Ragen, Venore Henry, and Helen Dunlop.

An article in the *Helena Independent Record* stated the band logged over 100 performances from November, 1955 to December 1957.



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Throughout their 16 years they were either mentioned or featured in 62 newspaper articles.

Helena area audiences included Cooney Home residents, Helena Trail Riders, Elks Club, March of Dimes, Women of the Moose, Soroptimist International, Retail Merchants Association, Practical Nurses Association, Townsend Charity Ball, All-Montana banquet (for legislators), and many more. However, their broadest audience arose soon after their debut in the late 1950s when they performed on Butte television.

The band performed and traveled at their own expense. They never charged to entertain. In fact, the local newspaper reported after one performance "the group presented two baskets of fresh fruit to the county hospital patients."

What they did came from the heart. As Bender iterated, "These women worked too. Edna Hinman, for one, was Montana's state treasurer. But they always made time for the band."

Some women were part of family farm operations or helped run Helena businesses.

Revitalizing the history of the Rhythm Mares came from recent efforts by several of the children of band members who

currently reside in Helena and Conrad: John Vollertsen, Doug Peterson, Jr., Charleen Spalding, Terry Smith Bender, and Dick Garrett. They pored over newspaper clippings, plowed through old photographs,



Last Chance Rhythm Mares in full costume and entertainment mode. Left to right: Liz Vollertsen, unknown, Justine Breckenridge, Virginia Sorrels, Margaret Garrett, Bea Smith. Photo courtesy of the Charleen Spalding Collection.

and collected stories. They were youngsters when the band was flourishing. Now in their 70s and early 80s, they only remember small bits and pieces of stories their mothers told.

Better late than never.

Through mail, emails, phone calls, and conversations, a laugh and a sense of pride was always detected among the offspring when discussing the band, or as Spalding coined them, "The Mares."

Garrett summed up the band's legacy, "I do know they had a good time doing it."

With a lifetime of community involvement, Nicholson's contributions expand far beyond the entertainment world of the Rhythm Mares and the Synness Orchestra. Nicholson received the Montana Historic Preservation Commendation in 1983 from Montana Governor Ted Schwinden for her leadership in a project to restore the Little Red Schoolhouse in the Helena valley. Additionally, and with the help of her mother Frances Isham Synness, she helped compile the book *Valleys of the Prickly Pear* (1988). The popular volume is about the people, schools, and institutions in the Helena valley for which she assembled family history, research, and illustrations.

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Co-authors John Vollertsen, Doug Peterson, and Linda Peterson are retired and live in Helena, Mont. Additional pictures of the Last Chance Rhythm Mares can be viewed at [www.helenahistory.org](http://www.helenahistory.org)