

# Bob Remembers Bix In Wolverine Days

By LIZ EASTMAN

One of the few show biz personalities who still look like their publicity shots of more than 30 years ago is Bob Gillette, an agile youngster whose age we didn't ask—but he remembers Bix Beiderbecke, the legendary jazz trumpet and cornet player of the 20's and early 30's.

And he remembers him well.

For Bob and Bix played together in the old Wolverine band (see photo) and, when on the road, Bix and Bob buddied up as room mates.

Bob, who played banjo with the Wolverines and with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings before that, is here from Dallas, visiting his parents, Mr. and Mrs. George Gillette, and his sister, Mrs. Peter Ciri, at 950 N. Wild Olive. (Another sister, Mrs. Alma Walker, is here from Little Rock for the reunion.)

Bix, he recalls, was far ahead of his time when he first started playing. As a matter of fact some pewter eared dance hall proprietors used to say they liked the band fine except that the trumpeter had to go. But not for long. He soon became known on bandstands and in front of them for his clean-cut playing.

Hoagy Carmichael, who later became quite a musician himself, neglected his law studies to follow the Wolverines around from job to job listening to Bix. The three of them used to go to a place called the Paradise in Chicago to hear Joe Oliver and a trumpet player he had named Louis Armstrong.

Gillette, like other jazz historians, remembers Bix as an overgrown, good natured kid who lived for his music—but never lived long enough to grow up.

He could never stop playing. When the band finished a five hour stint on the stand and the other fellows wanted to fold into bed or go out with the girls, all Bix wanted was to take his horn and find a band to play with. He would, too, until 6 to 8 a.m.

Bob started playing banjo with a band in 1924 and the Wolverines were born in 1926. It was while Bob was a student at Evanston High and he took a four piece band to play at Lake Forest (Ill.) Academy where Bix was a student. Bix sat in with the group. And after that he put down his books and picked up his horn and went with the band. Others with the group in those days were Dick Voynow, piano, (he later headed Decca Records), Vic Moore, drums; Jimmy Hartwell, clarinet and sax; Min Leibbrook, bass and tuba (he later went with Paul Whiteman) and George Johnson, tenor sax. A trombonist, Al Gandy, was with them on some recording dates.

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Before his days with the Wolverines, while still a schoolboy, Bob played banjo with the then famed New Orleans Rhythm Kings which included Leon Rappolo, clarinet; George

Brunis, trombone; Paul Mares, trumpet; Jack Pettis, sax; Mel Stitzel, piano; Jack Snyder or Ben Pollock, drums.

When Bix quit the Wolverines to go with Gene Goldblatt's band, Bob lost interest in the music and eventually put down the banjo to go on the stage in vaudeville type acts. But he does recall the band's difficulty in replacing Beiderbecke. And with due embarrassment the fact that they brushed off an eager young trumpeter in derby and yellow shoes after a brief audition and sent him home to New Orleans. His name was Sharkey Banano. (Jimmy McPartland eventually took over trumpet in the band).

For the past 26 years he has played a duo with Shirley Richardson, who became his wife 25 years ago in Rio de Janeiro. Gillette and Richardson, a sort of song, dances and witty saying act, has played all over the World—including the Lido in France and a command performance in London. Bob, who hadn't played a banjo for 12 years, took it up again when the modes of the 20's came back into the spotlight.

Now he opens with "Tiger Rag," one of the fastest tunes ever to be plunked, and Shirley sings songs of the 20's ("I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate," "Five Foot Two" and such). Shirley claims her ever lovin', can kick higher than any gal in show business—and even Charlotte Greenwood admitted it. A five foot six

inch lassie she can kick over the head of a six foot eight inch man with space to spare.

The Gillettes recently played four weeks in Dallas with Red Nichols and his five Pennies, another nostalgic name from that slaphappy era.

Strangely enough, the Gillettes don't own any of the old Wolverine recordings—they're all collectors' items now and out of sight pricewise. However, our old friend Dr. Edmond Souchon of the New Orleans Jazz Club has promised Bob he'd tape him a batch of them and send them to him in Dallas.

In fact, if it weren't for that old jazz network we'd never have met Bob. When he talked to Doc Souchon in New Orleans the Doc told him to give us a ring. We're glad, too.



News-Journal Photo  
**THEN AND NOW**—Bob Gillette, above, looks at the scrapbook with photos from the late 30's of the old Wolverine Band in which he played banjo and which featured the famed Bix Beiderbecke on trumpet. The scrapbook belongs to his sister, Mrs. Peter Carl, who lives here with their parents, Mr. and Mrs. George Gillette. Bob is visiting from Dallas.

**AT LEFT** are the Wolverines happily gazing at one of their recordings — could be "Fidgety Feet," "Copenhagen," "Sensation Rag," "Riverboat Shuffle," to name a few of the Wolverine hits of the 20's. Front row: George Johnson, sax; Bob Gillette, banjo; Vic Burton, drums the spelled Vic Moore on drums at times; Back row: Jimmy Hartwell, clarinet and sax; Min Leibrook, bass and tuba; Dick Voynow, piano.

