

GOLDKETTE MEMORIES

Spiegle Willcox talking to Sinclair Traill

"Jean Goldkette wasn't his proper name, I'm sure — he was French but I think, educated in Russia — I always understood that, anyway. I got the job with the Goldkette band through Fuzzy Farrar. He had been playing first trumpet with the California Ramblers, but by this time he was playing lead trumpet in the Goldkette band. Roy Johnson took his place with the Ramblers. I had played with Roy in Paul Whiteman's Collegians at a night club called the Rendezvous. That was my first professional job. This band was a unit of Whiteman's and it was all made up of Cornell fellows. I don't know if you know of Bob Cauza, he was manager of the band and didn't go to Cornell but he was a promoter and his mother ran the Ithica Hotel at Cornell. So Bob had good politics with the Whiteman Office. A fellow by the name of Ernzt was the big power in the Whiteman Office. Anyway, we started out at Castles by the Sea on Long Island in the summer of 1923, then, in the fall, we went into this Rendezvous Club. The next summer, we went up to Saratoga where they have races in August with all the top horses. We played at a place called the United States Hotel and were very popular. The Collegians only consisted of eight or nine musicians, but it was a good band.

"Fred Farrar, they always called him Fuzzy, came to Auburn, New York one day, — it was in the late summer of 1925. I was playing at a park there in Auburn, one of those dime-a-dance places. You come out and you get on the floor for maybe ten or twelve minutes — go through a turnstile with your girl. You pay a dime. We, the musicians, played ten or twelve minutes, then off — everybody would have to go! I had played with the California Ramblers just prior to this and I told Fuzzy all I'd done, prior to meeting him. I asked him

where he was from and he told me, Detroit. He told me he played with the Jean Goldkette Orchestra and of course my ears pricked up right away. Yes, I'd heard of that band before, I'd heard of the Jean Goldkette band! Anyway, I said, 'Why don't you come over and sit in with us tonight?' And he did — and he played just great. During the evening, he suddenly said to me, 'How would you like to join the Goldkette band?' Well, I just about flipped. But I had to tell him that I had a commitment to rejoin the California Ramblers. So I went back to New York, to see how I'd kind of like it, with the California Ramblers. But I didn't like New York City, too big for me, I was too much of a cornball, a country boy.

"Anyway, Farrar sent me three or four wires during that two weeks, asking if I would still be interested in coming to join him, so I finally decided I was going to leave New York, and join the band he was with, and of course it turned out he was still with Goldkette.

"Oh, I remember that first night very well! I asked them up in the office, where I had to report, what band? I thought maybe I'd be playing with the Cadillac Band, but someone, I think it was Don Murray, said, 'No, I think you're going to be in the Victor band, down at the Greystones'. Anyway I showed up, and there was Fuzzy in the back row, and fronting the band was Russ Morgan. And that was the first time I met Bill Rank. He was in the trombone section doing what I was doing, taking Tommy Dorsey's place! In the sax section we had Don Murray, Doc Ryker, and Fud Livingston. Fuzzy Farrar and Ray Ludwig were on trumpets, Chauncy Morehouse on drums, Steve Brown on bass, Howdy Quicksell on banjo, and Itzy Riskin on piano — this was October 1925.



"We played at the Greystones Ballroom straight through the winter and it was about two weeks after I'd joined the band that Fud Livingston left. In came Jimmy Dorsey — my first introduction to Jimmy — and he must have stayed about six months, as I recollect. Then, in came Frankie Trumbauer who brought in this guy Bix — I think they came from St. Louis. I heard from others in the band that Bix, without Frankie, was in the band for a short while in 1924. The band recorded during that time, but Bix for some reason didn't stay long, he couldn't cut it or something — didn't read the dots so good. We played through to June, at the Greystone and then the band split for the summer.

"There was a band just down the street from the Greystone led by Henry Theis; did you ever hear that name? He played fiddle and was quite a social bandleader. He was getting along pretty good though it wasn't a big band. Many times I'd gone down there and sat in with them. They had a good hot trumpet player, Chuck Goznell — he's still living, in Pittsburgh. So, Henry wanted me to come and join his band at a place down in Cincinnatti, called Castle Farms, a big open-air place, with trees and lawns — great place for the horse fans. They gave me a hundred-and-a-quarter a week and I wanted the money, for my wife was pregnant. I wanted the cash and so I broke away from the Goldkette band that summer and went down there and played until Labour Day. My wife Helen went to her home to have the baby — that was our first, Newall.

"It so happened there was a big race up at Chicago and, I think it was Don Murray who saw that one of the horses running that day was called 'Helen's Baby'. Well, all the band knew that Helen had gone



home to have her firstborn, so they backed 'Helen's Baby', pretty good, true, no fake. Even Bix said it was a good idea. So they bet on it, and it came home!

"Well about this time I began to get some wires from Charlie Horath, a nice guy who was manager of the Goldkette band. He wanted to know when I was coming back to them. He offered me a hundred-and-a-quarter this time which I thought pretty good. So, I said O.K. and joined the band up in New England; they were on tour. From there, we went back to Detroit, where we played all winter. Bix was with the band, and Frank Trumbauer. I don't know what I can say that hasn't been said about Bix's playing, except to say Amen. Oh, that guy just brought that band right-up, he brought us all right up! Musicians came to hear him everywhere we went. We'd always have a big crowd of musicians round the bandstand. Bix was a kind man, a real gentleman — very mild in his ways. His tone, attack, ideas and the way he improvised were just unique. He just delighted us all every night. Of course, Trumbauer was no slouch, either, he was something else, with the band too. He fronted the band and also played C Melody sax.

"I sat right on the end of the back row. Bix didn't read too well, but he didn't have to, it was just great to have him there. In the front row, ahead of me there was Don Murray, a great tenor player, not enough has ever been said about Don. No, sir, he was a precious little guy, and a beautiful clarinetist with a style very much all his own. Doc Ryker (he's still alive) played lead alto, a great leader, and then, there was Frank and that was our sax section. Then, of course, Howdy Quicksell, a great guy, and Steve Brown who was terrific on bass. He had that old triple-beat and he

was very secretive about it because there were other musicians who would come in to listen, and the guys that dug bass would try and watch what he did, but he always guarded his secret. He used to turn away if they got too close. I roomed with Steve on the road and he was a good guy.

"Jean Goldkette himself didn't front the band ever. We very seldom saw him, but he was a very fine gentleman. He never was around the band, he was the business man. The Orange Blossoms was one band, the Cadillac another, because the Greystones had continuous music, you know. We'd play for about half an hour then the other band would start up. The Greystones was big, with a large balcony around it. Jean, I remember, would walk around on tiptoes, that habit stands out in my memory. I remember once we were playing the Capital Theatre in Detroit and one night in among the pieces we played was *Rhapsody in Blue*. We had a pretty good arrangement of it. A lot of people think *Rhapsody in Blue* was only played by Paul Whiteman but we did it pretty good. The piano part was played by Jean — finely. A guy by the name of George Crozier, an excellent arranger, who wrote some beautiful stuff, fronted the band. I remember it as if it were today. Jean got through his piano part playing it beautifully and we played the finale. But although Jean was the star of the piece, it was George who took all the bows. Goldkette played really fine piano but I never was around him much — it was Charlie Horath who was our real connection. Any problems and Charlie would attend to them. He was with the band a long time. The Greystone was so big, you know, two bands, three bands, four bands. Every time we went to New York, McKinney's Cotton Pickers came in and took our place, they were part of the Jean Goldkette organization and most times when we'd go to New York to record, that would be the band to take over, and we'd generally be gone two weeks.

"It wouldn't always be New York, sometimes we'd go to some senior proms., I remember playing twice at Notre Dame at two senior balls there, and the University of Indiana, where Hoagy went, and I won't forget that! He was there in the crowd that night with his girl, and, after everyone had gone, we just got up there on the bandstand and just kind of changed the Goldkette band a bit. Hoagy Carmichael was on piano of course, and Frank and Bix, and some others of us — it was just a jam night.

"Although there were others such as Eddie Sheasby and Russ Morgan, I'm sure the guy that fronted the band most was Frankie Trumbauer — he looked good and he played good. Oh, we'd rehearse, especially when we knew we were going to New York for a recording. We'd get the tunes together, go down to the Greystone in the afternoons and have what it known as sectional rehearsals. The brass would go downstairs and the saxes would go somewhere else. Maybe we'd have parts of a stock arrangement, then somebody in the band, maybe Bill Challis would add to it. Challis brought us right up. The band was pretty good before Bix and Trumbauer got in but Bill Challis really got us going. He

joined to play tenor sax but Charlie Horath told him we needed him as an arranger.

"In June that year I decided not to follow music any longer. I had family ties and my Dad had a coal business. So I went home and I was in the coal business for many years. I also started up my own band before I had been back very long. I had what is known as a Friday and Saturday band — played everywhere around Cornell, Syracuse, Cole Bay and Central New York. We played for dances, but there again the band showed that Goldkette influence. It was a big band — I'd use twelve guys, I was a big cheese in a small puddle, but we got plenty of work. I have my own band again now, thanks to Joe Venuti. He pulled me out from under the rug about four years ago, in 1975. I had played with Joe on the Carnegie Hall 'Memory of Bix' concert. Then, about three months later, we played another concert at Carnegie, for the opening of Newport Jazz Festival. It was at the end of that second concert, when we had played all those old Goldkette tunes, and Joe said, 'Why don't you come with me, bring your horn and come on and play and we'll have some fun — won't cost you a dime. Stay with me and visit places like Blues Alley, Disneyland and Michael's Pub and so forth'. I know that's the only reason I'm here, because Joe exposed me to so many people.

"At Joe's funeral, the only surviving Venuti was his sister, Florence, and I should tell you that his birth certificate reads September 16th, 1903, born Philadelphia so all those stories of his birth on a boat, between Italy and America are wrong. He is buried in the same cemetery as Eddie Lang, very close to Eddie. I've heard so many stories about Joe. To give an example. We were playing at Blues Alley and for some reason I was about three days late in getting down there. So Joe told everybody that I'd had a fire at home and that I was trying to settle things up. So, when I do get down, to Blues Alley, people would ask, 'How's your fire?, Were you covered?', and other questions. I said to Joe, what the hell did you tell those people about a fire?. 'Well', he said, 'I had to tell them something didn't I?'. He said that he'd tell everybody that he'd rather buy me a suit than feed me! Simple thing but he did help me a lot. I got confidence again in playing and he was very kind, introducing me to every musician he contacted.

"Did I tell you that Bill Rank and I played together the night he died? Wasn't that a kind of weird thing? It was the last time he played his trombone in his life and it was with me. He died of heart failure — he'd had several heart attacks. We were at Honiton, West Virginia, playing, and he mentioned that he had a pacemaker, and he looked kind of thin, but he was doing pretty good. He didn't play all the time we were there, but each night we stood up and played that old tune *On the Alamo* that Bill Challis arranged for us. So it was quite an historic thing, the two of us standing up and playing again, after over half a century. He died just after that, right after that.