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Rubble, where once stood Milan's premiere lounge

By Bill Wundram

SPIN the roulette wheel, all chips down; roll those dice, and — if you're in the dining salon — listen to Clyde McCoy, the "Sugar Blues" man, and his singing poodle.

As you may have observed, if you travel those parts, there's nothing but a blank space on 4th Street in Milan where once stood one of MidAmerica's best-known dining/entertainment spas.

Marando's is gone.

The place has been flattened by the headache ball. That fits, for all the headaches and hangovers that were stepchildren of a night at Marando's.

Jimmy and Jeff Marando rode high and mighty over their funland in the 1950s, '60s and the early 1970s. They ran a spiffy joint, which is understated vernacular for a night spot whose closest rival was the Plantation in Moline. Marando's led a charmed life, usually escaping at the last minute the hard eye of the law looking for gambling that unquestionably did well in the big place.

Times change. People change. Fun changes. The Marando brothers — Jimmy, Jeff and Ernie — are dead. So is Marando's, leveled a week ago to make room for a humongous-size Hy-Vee Foods that likely will be accompanied by a strip mall. About the only token left is a concrete piece that says "Marando Building." It was placed there in 1964 by Jimmy Marando, and has been rescued by his son, James, who lives near Orion, Ill.

Marando's was the hot spot for good food and even better entertainment. We don't get big names like that anymore in Quad-City restaurants. We're lucky to have a piano player plinking out "Satin Doll," but in the palmy days of the Marando's, name bands like Guy Lombardo would have three-day runs. Eddy Howard, propped up because of too many scotches, could still croon "To Each His Own" to the dreamy eyes of women of all ages. Liberace, grinning in gown-like sequined coat, would pretend to play Chopin. Louie Prima was a regular; so was Clyde McCoy, the trumpet man playing a waw-waw muted "Sugar Blues" at least three times a night, while his tiny white poodle whined a singing accompaniment. Sophie Tucker, last of the red hot mamas, played Marando's a half-dozen times.

"Pops — that's what I always called my dad, Jimmy — brought in the biggest names that he could book," his son says. "Bob Cummings did some performances at the place. He was a good friend and stayed at our house when he played Marando's."

In the beginning, Marando's was little more than a chicken and ribs joint called Fairview Inn. The Marando brothers took over Fairview in 1951. It was a high-flying postwar time. The brothers stretched their elbows, added a dance floor, and in due time a casino room off to the side. Eyes blinked at illicit games. When the law answered complaints, Jimmy would smile and invite the officers to have a drink and to check the place. No equipment was ever found.

"They were caught only once with their pants down," says Jim Jr. "It was a state raid, and the place was closed for two weeks."

Jimmy Marando was a smooth fellow, with slicked-back hair and dark blue double-breasted suits. He glided around his place in spit-shined shoes, often with a martini in hand. His ode to the martini, stirred and never shaken, was always on the back of the Marando menus.

"That place will forever be in my mind," says Jimmy Jr. "I was just a kid then, and Pops had a speaker wired into a room so I could listen to what was playing at the nearby Memri Drive-in theater while I sat and watched the screen out the window."

Nothing can last forever. The Marandos sold the place in 1972 and a new owner turned it into the Country Manor, a ranch-type supper club. That worked for awhile, but as entertainment moods shifted, the old place became the Impulse Lounge. Never, again, would that old Marando's magic rise again.

It's gone the way of the Tamboo, which caught the late-late night crowd a few blocks away. When Marando's locked up for the night about 3 a.m., the hangers-on adjourned to the Tamboo. That place stayed open until 6 a.m.

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