

# The Franklin House

## — More than just a hotel —

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Throughout most of this century until it burned in 1961, the Franklin House in Montague was the "in" place to go. This is where you met everyone and the parties were just waiting to begin.

The Franklin House was built in 1873 by George Franklin and Henry Dowling. It was part of the lumber boom era and from the beginning, a social center. Originally it reflected Victorian elegance and was considered the finest

establishment of its kind north of Chicago.

At the turn of the century William Peck purchased the business from Mrs. Anna Dowling. Peck and his family operated it until 1935. This marks its first peak period, for then it was practically abandoned until C. J. Sipple of Kentucky purchased it at a scavenger sale in 1940. After his renovation, he had a grand reopening. This would be the beginning of its second peak popular period, especially when it became a

social center during the World War II years.

Stella Pillinger recalls that the "Franklin House was the place to go during the war. Everyone met there, locals and visitors.

"I remember one New Year's Eve when it seemed there were only women at the party. One man friend who was in the area at the time had to



— Contributed photo from Dorothy Gibbs  
Many people gathered around the bar at the Franklin House.



— Contributed photo from Leonard Hunt  
The Franklin Hotel was the place to be whether if you were from out of town or from the White Lake Community.

take six of us. It was a favorite place for dinner, and Saturday nights you went there and stayed for all the fun. When the men came home on leave during the war, they would never miss going to the Franklin House."

Dorothy Gibbs worked at the Franklin House from 1943 until 1952. "It was wonderful. Everyone wanted to go there, and they seemed happy and friendly. The dance floor was so crowded you could hear it crack. That atmosphere has never been recreated."

Evie and Leonard Hunt recall the dance floor was always filled. The band that had everyone dancing during the 40s was the Junior King Band. His regular players were Lee and Dexter King.

Norm Johnson and Paul Jensen. "Everyone knew this was where you could see all your friends. The atmosphere was just great: so much fun, such good music, a unique place."

Glen Lipka whose drug store was directly across the street recalls that "there was always action. There were rooms on the top two floors which seemed to have more permanent residents in the single rooms than a large transient trade."

The Franklin House made an effort to be a complete entertainment center. In addition to the dance area and bar, there was also a dining room and bowling alley in the basement. Glen Lipka

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remembers service clubs meeting there, including Rotary and the White Lake Jaycees. Ike Hill, who had band which played at the Franklin House in the 1950s, says that one of his early jobs was to set pins in the bowling alley. Stella Pillinger learned how to bowl there. "Every gal whose husband was gone bowled there once a week."

The Franklin House did its part for the war effort: volunteers were on the roof every night to watch for enemy planes. The consensus of those who volunteered is that they never saw any enemy planes, but they did play a lot of cards, cribbage, and caught up on reading.

Hill and his band, The Tempos, played at the Franklin House in the late 1950s. Hill has only fond memories of

his involvement there. "It was still the place to go. The owners were popular. Bob Westbrook bought the Franklin House in 1960 and had begun a renovation project. It was a nice place to dance. The room was pretty dark so there was a feeling of intimacy. The crowd was nice and enjoyed the music which was generally the big band sound. I loved providing the music, consider myself fortunate

to have been part of that whole great scene."

All of this fun and excitement came to a burning end February 27, 1961 when refrigeration compressors became overheated and started the fire that would ultimately consume the entire structure. Although firefighters thought initially they had put the blaze out, it had already gone into the first floor false ceilings, running the entire length of the building, igniting the rest of the structure. With an insufficient water supply, firefighters decided to save the rest of the downtown district. This was accomplished due to business owners and firefighters keeping other roofs as wet as they could, and two, Leonard Hunt says the front brick wall was so thick that it kept the fire contained within the structure.

The empty hole in downtown Montague was more than just the loss of a building. For many, the Franklin House was more than a memory, the ashes took on additional sad meaning. These many decades later, people can still recall events, people, even hear the music that was so much a part of their life. Glen Lipka summarizes the feelings of many when he says that "it was a real loss to the town. The Franklin House was a focal point. Events held there were in many ways a civic glue. The burning was a shock to the community. And we still remember it, and nothing has replaced that special world."



As the Franklin Hotel burned, so did many area people's place of enjoyment.

— Contributed photo from Leonard Hunt