Music-minded residents of Pittsburgh right before, during, and after World War II will recall Art Farrar as a top (if not the top) local Big Band dazzler of the day. Widely revered in his home town, Farrar toured for more than a dozen years for a major music company, becoming well-known nationally. The photographs here — just a few in the large collection that he recently donated to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania — reflect his impressive musical career and offer insight into the historically important war-era entertainment industry.

*Suited to the Sax*

Art Farrar, at age 60, with his alto sax in 1980, the year he decided to begin performing again regularly. “There was a strong premonition about then that the Big Bands were coming back.” Today, he plays several engagements a month in the Pittsburgh area. “What I’ve been doing now reminds me of how busy I was in the ’30s and ’40s.”
Pittburghers of the generation before Farrar was a popular bandman may remember him for another accomplishment, one which makes his personal story truly astonishing.

Born August 8, 1915, son of Italian immigrants, Arthur Farraro grew up in the thriving, ethnically mixed East Liberty section of Pittsburgh. At age 4, he developed polio. Nearly every day, his mother took him to the nearby Highland Park Reservoir, where she pushed Art to exercise, despite a brace on one leg and crutches. “As you can imagine,” Farrar says today, “I was a very sad little boy.”

Home by himself one blustery day in 1927, Farrar simply decided, he says, that he would walk without crutches. He first watched his brace and crutches ignite in the coal stove of the family’s small house on Omega Street, then he closed the stove door and walked. He was 12 years old. The steps were neither painless nor perfect (he still has a slight limp), but the flames liberated his spirit.

The next year his father passed away, leaving a family of four unable to manage on their mother’s income as a buyer for the former Frank & Seder Department Store downtown. Again Art Farraro contemplated his lot, and when he saw a newspaper ad for a dance marathon contest with a hefty purse, he took his idea to his mother, Esterina Farraro. She was a young-looking 34.

“They’ll find out, Art. They’ll never allow it. You’re not old enough.”

“Mom, we gotta try something,” he told her. Fibbing that he was over 18 and that his partner was his sister, the duo entered the contest at the old Duquesne Gardens in Oakland, and 23 days, some 533 hours later — imagine it, one year before Art Farraro had been a crippled child — they emerged as the new marathon dance champions of the world. According to the compilers of the Guinness Book of World Records, they still are. The mother-son team (let’s hit the highlights before re-living the contest) took home $23,000. In 1928.

The previous record was 125 hours, and its holders competed again, but they dropped out after about 250 hours, Farrar says.

He continues:

Marathon dancing was a big thing, and the rules were very strict. The rules allowed a 15 minute rest every hour. In that 15 minutes you had to be examined by one of the doctors or nurses there, change clothes and do whatever else you had to. We did eat on the floor, while dancing — people brought us food.

Now we had to leave the Gardens every weekend because of the Sunday Blue Laws [which, among other things, prohibited dancing in most public places]. So, at 12:30 on Saturday night, they allowed 15 minutes to take

In Person Right Here
Farrar behind the counter in 1952 at Murphy’s 5c & 10c in East Liberty, offering autograph copies of his two 78 r.p.m. records on the Ruby label. (“Poinciana,” “Red Red Robin,” “How About you?” and “The Man I Love.”) On November 13 of that year, he played the last stage show ever done at the Enright Theatre, Beaver Street and Penn Avenue — one of seven music halls to operate in East Liberty.
Loaﬁng Like in the Old Days
With three former members of his band, all from Pittsburgh, in 1947 at Sherman’s in San Diego. From left: Bob Newman (sax), Farrar, Harry Steen (drums) and George Aiken (sax). Farrar says he was the ﬁrst to break the “color line” in Pittsburgh, hiring black musicians as early as 1933. “I grew up in East Liberty,” he says. “We all got along.” He also recalls touring for two years with Pittsburgher Erroll Garner, a gifted piano player who went on to major fame in the 1950s. “We were going into a club in Shreveport, La., and the owner tapped Erroll on the shoulder as he walked by: ‘Where you going, nigger, acting like you in the band.’ I said, ‘He is in the band. He’s my piano player.’ The owner said, ‘Not in my club, he ain’t.’ There was nearly a ﬁght, but Erroll said he understood and he took off on his own. I made some calls and a friend in New York helped him get going. Erroll was so talented, though, he would have done ﬁne without my help.”

His Heart Was at the Savoy
New Year’s Eve, Pittsburgh’s Duquesne Gardens, c. 1939. Farrar’s more regular haunt before the war, for about three years, was the Savoy Ballroom, on Centre Avenue in a predominantly black Hill District neighborhood. “The Savoy manager was worried at ﬁrst,” Farrar recalls, “cause I was white, you know.” Farrar says that growing up in East Liberty, in a vibrant ethnic culture, gave him a deep appreciation for jazz and African-American musicians. “After the ﬁrst song,” says Farrar, “the manager gave me the signal that I would do ﬁne.”

Art Farrar Orchestra
Farrar recently donated to the Historical Society’s Museum Programs Department a band stand like the ones shown here. It is likely to end up in an exhibit at the Historical Society’s Pittsburgh Regional History Center (to open in 1995).
us by taxi — there was a police escort, lights flashing — to a boat on the Allegheny, the Julia Belle. That’s where we had to dance on Sunday, three times, three weeks — 23 days, you know. The boat went as far as East Liverpool, Ohio [on the Ohio River], then it would turn around and come back. Practically everyone who dropped out did something to disqualify themselves. I mean you didn’t know what you were doing or where you were, you were so tired. Some people were hypnotized by the mirror ball spinning ... its reflections on the floor; they’d be down there trying to grab those sparkles. If you stopped dancing for even a second, they would come around and tap you on the shoulder and you were out.

Right before the event ended someone notified the contest authorities — I don’t know why people do such things — that we were mother and son, and I was under age. You have to understand it was a health thing. They thought it would be too hard on a young person; the doctors told us we might not live a year after we finished. Anyway, they announced that Couple No. 1 would be disqualified. Well, people started stamping their feet and hollering and booing. They were afraid there was going to be a riot; there were 7,000 people in the Gardens there. The announcer paused and there was a commotion up on the stage, and then they come back and said they’d decided we should win, that we deserved it.

And then, I guess, there was the condition of our home: we had no heat or running water.

Esterina Farraro took the $23,000 prize and in 1933, she opened a nightclub, the Cocoanut Grove (pictured on front cover of magazine), at Aspin and Liberty Avenue in Bloomfield. Already a promising musician, Farrar played regularly there in the mid-1930s.

Like so many musicians of his day, radio gave him his break. A KDKA executive saw his act and between sets called Farrar over to his table to say: “Kid, can you be ready in a week?” Farrar wound up doing 250 live broadcasts from the Cocoanut Grove on Pittsburgh’s dominant station, until a national recording company executive heard his show.

“Then,” says Art Farrar, now 72 and still playing a dozen or so engagements a month, “I was off.”

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**Post-War, Pre-Patricia**

With actress Virginia Mayo, 1947, at Sherman’s in San Diego, where Farrar was the featured band that evening. In a 17-year road career, Farrar and his orchestra played every famous music club and theatre in every major U.S. city. He and his wife, Patricia Norman Farraro, have lived in Pittsburgh permanently since 1953.