

Exposing History . . . Back to The '70s in Martin County

Remember the '70s? For those who grew up in this era of change, the '70s were unforgettable. It was a time of innocence, kids could roam the streets with their friends without fear and families gathered together each night to enjoy a meal and talk about their day. It was a decade of simpler times, but it was also a decade of change.

History is defined by Dictionary.Com as the branch of knowledge dealing with past events. That same source defines an exotic dancer as a striptease dancer or a belly dancer. That is hardly what one would consider a common occupation in rural southern Minnesota. However, for a brief period of time during the 1970s it appears to have flourished while at the same time causing a considerable amount of discomfort and anxiety for many citizens in Martin County.

“Exotic dancing” as well as somewhat questionable printed material placed Fairmont at the center of a fight regarding the freedoms set forth in the First Amendment of the Constitution. This involved the owner of the Safari Lounge and the owner of a book store in Fairmont.

The Safari Lounge was a 3.2 beer bar adjoining a bowling alley. The controversy involved the employment of female performers that would dance topless or completely nude and male performers that occasionally danced completely nude as well.

Contentious and controversial as it was, there were mixed opinions and considerable disagreement involving the issue. In February of 1974 the city council brought the topic of morality, deemed “round one,” to the forefront with discussions lasting but fourteen minutes. There was some disagreement among council members and the council chambers were said to be “crammed” with 35-40 spectators, of which only three expressed their opinions on the matter. One individual in attendance suggested that the council attend at least one session of “go-go dancing” at the Safari so that they could make an educated decision as to the merits of the proposed morality ordinance.

The owner of the “Browse-a-Bit” book store that displayed and sold what some considered objectionable material was denied a 3.2 beer license by the city council. This prompted him to file a \$200,000.00 lawsuit against city officials, also in February of 1974, stating that he was deprived of his livelihood and was caused much distress, anxiety, discomfort and embarrassment. The case was later heard in federal court in St. Paul, but apparently did not prevail.

In April of 1974 the Fairmont City Council passed the proposed morality ordinances by a vote of 6-2. The ordinances would (1) outlaw topless or nude go-go dancing and (2) ban the sale of material alleged to be obscene or pornographic. In the April 4, 1974, edition of the *Sentinel*, in arguing against the ordinance, the owner of the Safari Lounge

suggested that members of the city council visit his establishment in stating “Why not come out to my place and see if you haven’t seen the same thing at the beach.” The council members did not respond to his request.

Petitions against the ordinances were circulated and validated in May of 1974 signed by 232 registered voters. The petition was initiated and circulated by the owner of the Safari Lounge. That set the stage for a public referendum.

A June 26, 1974, *Sentinel* headline stated the following: “Morality ordinances pass by one-half per cent.” The divergent views stated were either “It was a gratifying turnout of law abiding citizens who want to live under the law and support morality,” or, “It was a disappointment that so many people would sacrifice their freedom of choice.” The ordinance passed, but by a very close vote with 50.53% in favor and 49.47% in opposition. According to that *Sentinel* article the voter turnout was more than twice the turnout for the last municipal election. Obviously, there were strong feelings on both sides of the issue.

Interestingly, a June 13, 1975, *Sentinel* story stated the following: “No nude dancing reported at Safari.” On the first day the morality ordinance was in effect, Fairmont police officers were dispatched to the Safari to assure compliance with the new law. Their findings were that there was, in fact, no nude dancing at the club. Regarding that investigation, perhaps the old adage “It was a dirty job, but somebody had to do it” might be somewhat facetiously applied to this investigation.

Finally, the ordinance was appealed to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1976. “The Minnesota Supreme Court in Koppinger v. City of Fairmont, 248 NW2d 708 (1976) held that the Fairmont city nudity ordinance which applied to all public dancing places and all places where tobacco was sold suffered from overbreadth and had to be redrafted because it was unconstitutional. As might be expected, the Fairmont City Council did redraft the ordinance and while you can get 3.2 beer in Fairmont, you won’t get the beer in conjunction with nude dancing.”¹

The fact that the preceding events actually took place in a small, conservative, rural Minnesota community is in and of itself surprising. However, what might be even more surprising is that there was fairly strong opposition to the proposed ordinances. On the other hand, this was the 1970s, and change was definitely in the air.

The ‘70s was a tumultuous time defined by changes, events, and attitudes. The advancement of women’s rights, technology, and music were significant to that era. People were more likely to become free thinkers while questioning the government and the status quo, thus leading it to be eventually hailed by some as the “Me Decade.”

¹ Martin County Judges, Law & Lawyers by Elton A. Kuderer, June 10, 2007.

In conclusion, the “naked truth” regarding this “overexposed” chapter of local history was argued and finally settled in the courts. Democracy prevailed, nude dancers and objectionable printed material became history, and life in Martin County returned to what most would consider being normal.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum.

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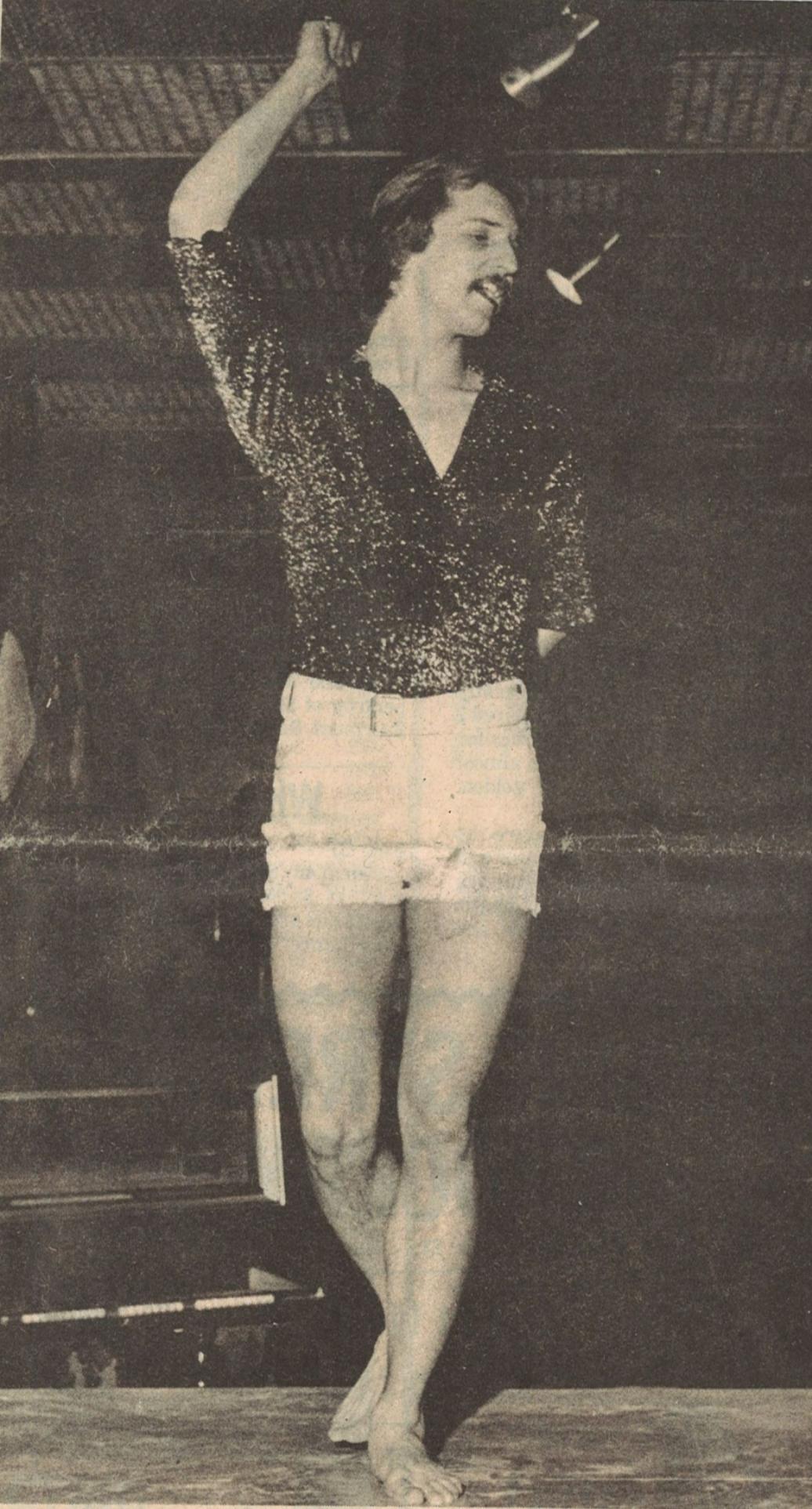
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