

Hollywood Inn

By

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If you are a Crooked Lake old-timer, you may be a bit confused by the title of this article. You might suspect that this piece will be about Hollywood Landing, the familiar landmark that existed on the northeast shore of the lake's first basin until 2009. That is understandable since most people have never heard of Hollywood Inn. To be honest, I had never heard of it either. My original intent was to prepare a piece about Hollywood Landing. When I began exploring the topic, I was surprised to learn about its intriguing, yet short-lived predecessor, Hollywood Inn. Because of this, I felt as if a mid-flight correction was needed. Hollywood Landing will have to wait its turn.

Steuben County's resort and recreation industry was booming during the Roaring Twenties. During the summer outing season, tourists and locals were flocking to the area lakes like never before. Automobile ownership was soaring, and economic prosperity made it easier for people to pursue leisure time activities.

In 1928, 33-year-old William H. Kessler of Auburn, IN decided to get in on the action by building a resort on Crooked Lake. He and his wife Esther had owned a cottage along the northeast shore since 1923. In April of 1928, Kessler purchased property from three of his lake neighbors, and later acquired a section of the old St. Joseph Valley Railroad right of way across the road. With nearly 200 feet of lake frontage, he was able to begin his foray into the resort business.

Kessler was no novice when it came to running a business. He had owned and operated the City Garage, in downtown Auburn. This company offered automobile repair and maintenance services. It also served as an auto parts store and gas station. It was during this time that he married Esther

Mae Hook. She was hired as the company bookkeeper after graduating from high school in 1921. After selling the business he formed a partnership with his father-in-law, Guy Hook. Together they operated DeKalb County's only Chevrolet dealership. This business was sold in early 1928 when the Kesslers moved to Crooked Lake.

In May, he announced plans to open Steuben County's newest and finest lake resort, Hollywood Inn. The venue was well thought out and sought to satisfy the needs of fun-seeking lake goers. The main building would be a three-story, 11,400 sq. ft. structure. Guests would be able to dine in the formal dining room or enjoy a quick meal at the lunch counter. Ice cream and sodas would be available in the parlor. A well-stocked grocery/meat market would be available for area cottagers, with gas pumps located along the roadside. A large dance hall would be located on the top floor of the building with dances set to take place every evening and Sunday afternoon. Bathers would be treated to one of Steuben County's finest beaches. Shower and locker room facilities would be housed in the building's lower level. At the beach, thrill-seekers could enjoy a water toboggan slide, a high dive platform, and a springboard. Kessler even planned to use electric floodlamps so the fun could continue after dark. Boats would be available to rent for fishing or exploring around the lake. Apart from the main building, five summer cottages would be available for rent by vacationers.

Hollywood Inn, while new and impressive, would offer few amenities that were not already available in abundance on the area lakes. Crooked Lake, for example, already had two well-established lake resorts. The Oak Bluff resort had been in business since 1900, and its large lakeside dance hall had been in operation since 1914. Sheet's Hotel had been in operation since at least 1910. Both resorts were located along the same part of Crooked Lake and were little more than a stone's throw away from Kessler's Hollywood Inn. These businesses had enjoyed tremendous success through the years and were popular destinations for lake goers.

Over the next several months the anticipated opening of Kessler's new resort received a lot of attention and high praise from northeast Indiana's local newspapers. The summer outing season was well underway when Hollywood Inn opened on Sunday, July 15, 1928. A throng of curious fun-seekers was on hand to participate in the day's activities. Afternoon attractions included a fancy-diving contest, swimming races, and rowboat races. In the evening the house orchestra, "Doc" Leach and his Red Hots, provided music for dancing. The entertainment continued into the wee hours of Monday morning. Response to the opening was so great that the designated parking area was overwhelmed. Parking spaces near the resort were scarce, and motorists were parking anywhere they could along the roadway and adjacent properties. Mr. Kessler pledged that the problem would be resolved and that ample parking would be provided in the future. Hollywood Inn's grand opening had been a huge success, and Kessler had ambitious plans to keep the crowds returning week after week.

On Sunday, July 22, the Hollywood Inn provided more excitement as it hosted the "Greatest Bathing Beauty Contest Ever Held in Steuben County." Cash prizes, totaling \$25.00, were offered to encourage participation. Special chicken lunches were sold for \$.75, and chicken dinners could be bought for \$1.00. Swimming competitions were also held, along with dancing.

On Saturday, July 28, the public was invited to Steuben County's first-ever cabaret on the lakes. Cabarets had become popular during the twenties. An audience would typically be seated at tables in a nightclub or restaurant where they would be treated to an evening of dining and entertainment. The Hollywood Inn cabaret featured the house band appearing under the name of "Doc" Leach and the Palm Garden Orchestra. The featured performer was Miss Harriot Crabill, known as the "Personality Plus" entertainer. Miss Crabill delighted the audience with her specialty songs and dances throughout the evening.

On Sunday, August 5, Hollywood Inn was the host for outboard motorboat racing. Races like these had become quite popular on the larger lakes in

the area and drew large crowds of spectators. These events were conducted under the rules of the Mississippi Valley Power Boat Association. One of the boats competing that day was "Ketchup," a Hooton model R speed boat, powered by a Johnson Standard Twin motor. This boat was a local favorite and hailed from Meyer's Boat Livery on nearby Lake James. Owned by George Meyer and driven by Cleon Jackson, she averaged just over 30 mph en route to becoming the winner in class B. The day's activities also included swimming and diving contests along with dancing. The Inn continued to appeal to lake goers as a popular place to dip, dine, and dance.

In those days, the arrival of Labor Day signaled the end of the summertime lake season. Resorts tended to cut back on their activities. Some even closed for the season. Kessler however, had no intention of shutting down. In September, he announced that Hollywood Inn would have a heating system installed. He planned to make the Inn available for banquets during the fall and winter months. The dances continued every Saturday and Sunday.

Labor Day had come and gone and patrons continued to flock to William Kessler's new venue on Crooked Lake. Saturday night dances proved to be quite popular and attendance regularly exceeded 1,000 people. On September 29, over 1,500 people attended a "Carnival" dance.

Local dance halls frequently offered special dance events that centered around a special theme as a way to build excitement and attract more customers. A "Carnival" dance would typically provide participants with horns, hats, and other noise-making accessories as a way to add to the fun and enthusiasm. The hall itself would be decorated, and colorful crepe paper might be suspended from the ceiling above the dance floor. "Watermelon" dances and "Hobo" dances were also popular. Kessler announced that the following Sunday, October 7, would be "Mystery Night."

As a way to broaden participation across the various age groups, dance halls scheduled special evenings in an attempt to appeal to a variety of

interests, and tastes. Fast-paced and energetic dances such as the Foxtrot and Charleston were popular among young people. The older generation favored more familiar dances. Because of this, special nights were scheduled that would feature waltzing, square dancing, and round dancing.

William Kessler's Hollywood Inn appeared to be off to a good start, but of course, not everything went as planned. On the evening of Saturday, October 13, a student from Tri-State College was run over by an automobile near Hollywood Inn. His head was severely cut, and he was taken to a local doctor for stitches.

On Saturday night, January 19, 1929, arrests were made at Hollywood Inn. Two students from Tri-State College were arrested for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. As a result, they were fined \$10.00 each and sentenced to six months at the penal farm. The mayor of Angola, who was also the judge for the case, offered to suspend the sentences if the young men agreed to leave the county.

Prohibition in the United States was in full swing, but so too was the Roaring Twenties. Prohibition in Indiana did not end until late 1933, but alcohol was not hard to come by in Steuben County. People were frequently arrested for manufacturing illegal alcohol or operating speakeasies. Bootleggers and rum runners out of Detroit regularly passed through the county en route to larger cities to the south such as Fort Wayne or Indianapolis. The local dance halls were not permitted to serve alcohol, but there was plenty of covert drinking taking place at these venues. The county, like the nation, had separated itself into groups that leaned "wet" or leaned "dry." The dance halls in the Angola lakes region, Hollywood Inn included, appealed to many citizens that wanted to socialize, dance, and have a good time. It would not be a stretch to think that some drinking was taking place in the parking lot, or booze was being discretely consumed inside.

In early March 1929, Bill and Esther decided to temporarily relocate to their hometown of Auburn. They were expecting the birth of their first child.

They went to stay with Esther's parents, Guy and Daisy Hook. The move would allow the Kesslers to enjoy the help and support of the soon-to-be maternal grandparents. On Monday, March 11, at 6:15 a.m., the Kesslers were blessed by the birth of a daughter, Bonnie Lou Kessler. Bill motored back and forth as necessary to oversee the operations at the Hollywood Inn. The couple planned to return to their Crooked Lake home on Sunday, April 14. This was to be the opening day for what they hoped would be another successful summer season.

Kessler had good reasons for being optimistic. The nation had been experiencing a wave of economic prosperity during the 1920s and showed no signs of stopping. There was reason to believe that business would continue to be good for the local resort industry. Additionally, one of the two dance halls on nearby Lake James would not reopen in 1929. A group of men from the Christian Church of Angola had purchased the 15-acre resort at Palmytown known as Lake James Beach. The purchase included the hotel, dance pavilion, store, and refreshment parlor. Plans were underway to transform the grounds into a religious haven to be known as the Lake James Christian Assembly.

On Thursday, April 11, a local group, the A. T. C. club, reserved the Hollywood Inn for the evening. I wish I could tell the reader what the club's initials stood for, but I was not able to find that out. It appears that the club consisted of married couples in their late thirties or early forties. The group gathered about once each month and had been in existence for about five years. These meetings took place at various locations around the Angola area with as many as 36 couples attending. An evening would include a pot-luck dinner followed by dancing. The group usually met at the Odd Fellows Hall in Angola. They also frequented the numerous lake-area dance halls, including the Oak Bluff dance pavilion at Crooked Lake. This would be the group's second visit to Hollywood Inn.

Kessler had been making frequent trips from Auburn as he prepared for opening day and the return of his family to Crooked Lake. However, on this day, he did not make the trip and had not visited the Inn. The A. T. C. club

had their dance that evening, and it was nearly 1:00 a. m. on Friday before everyone had gone home. At about 2:00 a.m., two residents on nearby Old Point Comfort saw that the Inn was on fire. The Angola fire department was dispatched. By the time firefighters arrived with their truck, the building could not be saved. Efforts shifted to saving Kessler's cottages adjacent to the Inn. All but one survived the fire. At 3:30 a.m., a call was made to Kessler in Auburn. When he and his father-in-law arrived, the building and cottage were burned to the foundation. Everything in the resort building was destroyed, along with a Ford truck and a speed boat.

Kessler estimated his losses to be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$20,000, and insurance would cover about half of that. The origins of the fire remained a mystery, and for that reason, he announced plans to submit the case to the state fire marshal. He made no immediate announcement concerning his intentions for the site moving forward.

The timing of this event could not have been much worse. The busy summer season was not far in the offing, and Kessler had nothing to offer but four rental cottages, a swimming beach, and a modest boat livery. Exactly two weeks after the fire, it was announced that "Doc" Leach and his Red Hots had signed on with Oak Bluff leaving Kessler without a dance hall or musicians.

The Hollywood Inn, William Kessler's brainchild, had experienced tremendous success since its opening on July 22, 1928. Less than ten months later, it was nothing but a memory. Putting his resilience on full display, he quickly rebuilt on the same site using the existing foundation. The new facility was called Hollywood Apartments and had a more family-friendly focus. The new building had no dance hall and featured a series of small rental units similar to hotel rooms. The remaining cottages would be known as Kessler's Cottages. The swimming beach was called Hollywood Beach. Astonishingly, everything was up and running before the end of the summer. Just in time to welcome the Great Depression!



This photograph was taken about 1903 in front of the Croxton Cottage along the northeast shore of Crooked Lake's 1st basin. The boy in the bottom right corner is William Kessler. He would have been about eight years old. The Croxton Cottage was sold in 1915 and became part of the Oak Bluff resort.



Bill at work. 8/24/21



Esther Mae Hook office City Garage.

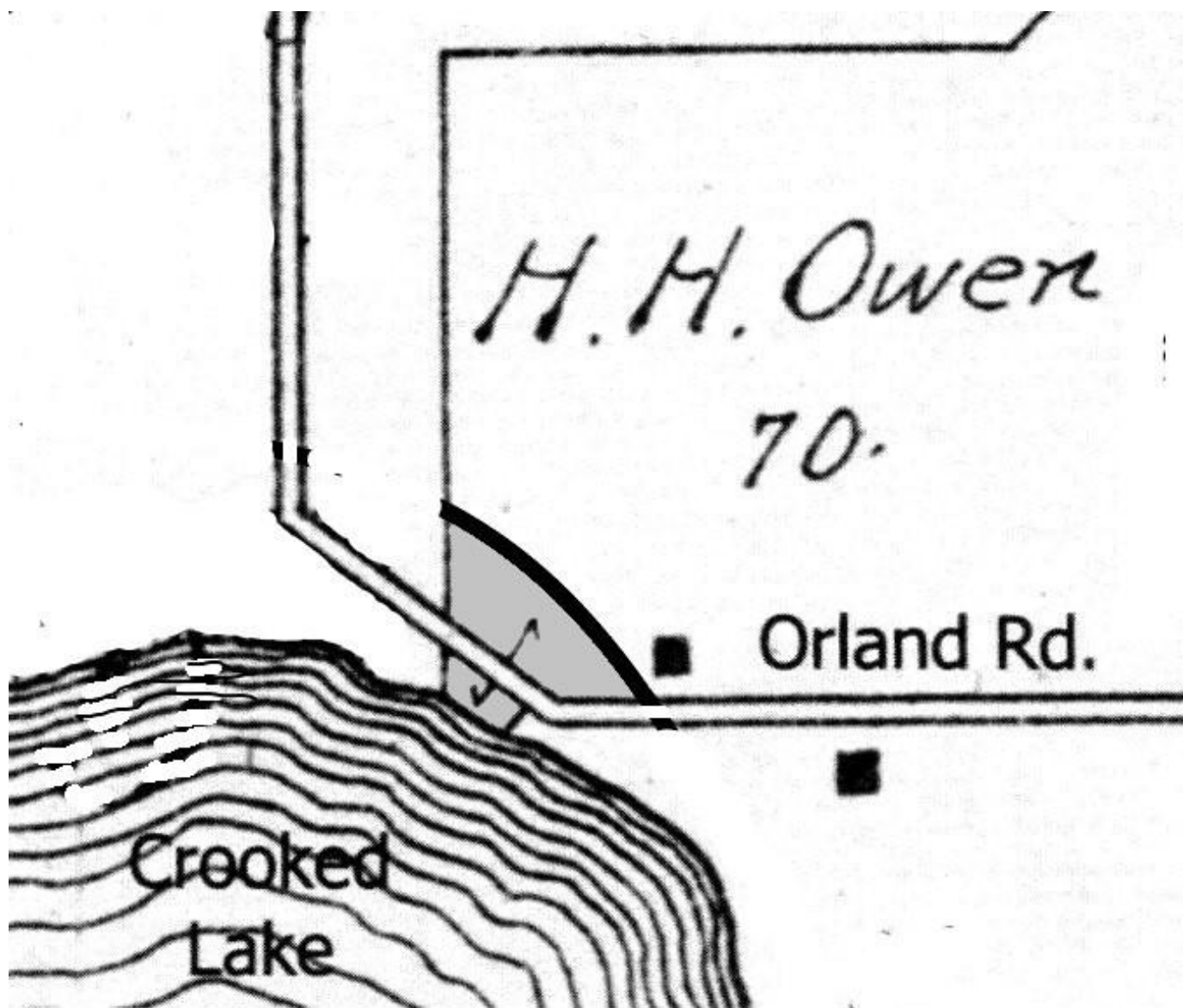
These photos show William Kessler and Esther Mae Hook in Auburn, IN at the City Garage. They were taken on August 24, 1921. The two were married on June 22, 1922, and honeymooned at the Crooked Lake cottage of a family friend, Frank Fanning. The Fanning cottage would later become one of the rental cottages at Hollywood Inn.



This postcard shows the cottage that William and Esther bought from Frank Owen in 1923. This became the Kessler home in 1928 when plans for Hollywood Inn started to come to fruition.



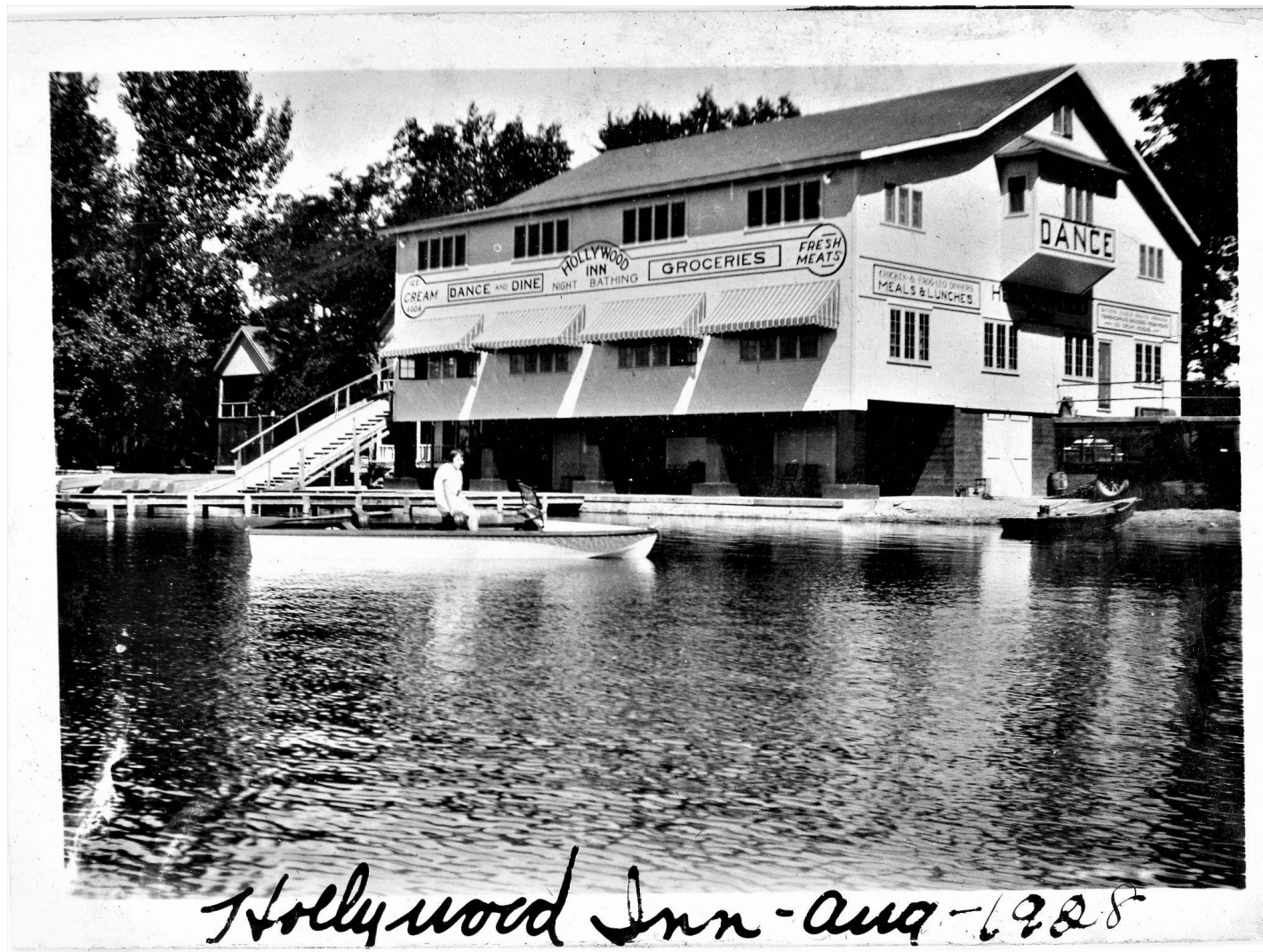
The Kesslers are pictured at the Wawona Tunnel Tree in Yosemite National Park alongside their 1922 or 1923 Auburn Beauty-Six touring car. On September 25, 1923, the Kesslers and two other couples from Auburn set out on an extended trip to California and the west coast. While there, they made several trips to Hollywood and even spotted actor William Desmond at Long Beach. Desmond was known as "The King of the Silent Serials" and appeared in over 200 movies during his career. Perhaps this trip influenced the Kesslers in 1928 when the name Hollywood Inn was chosen.



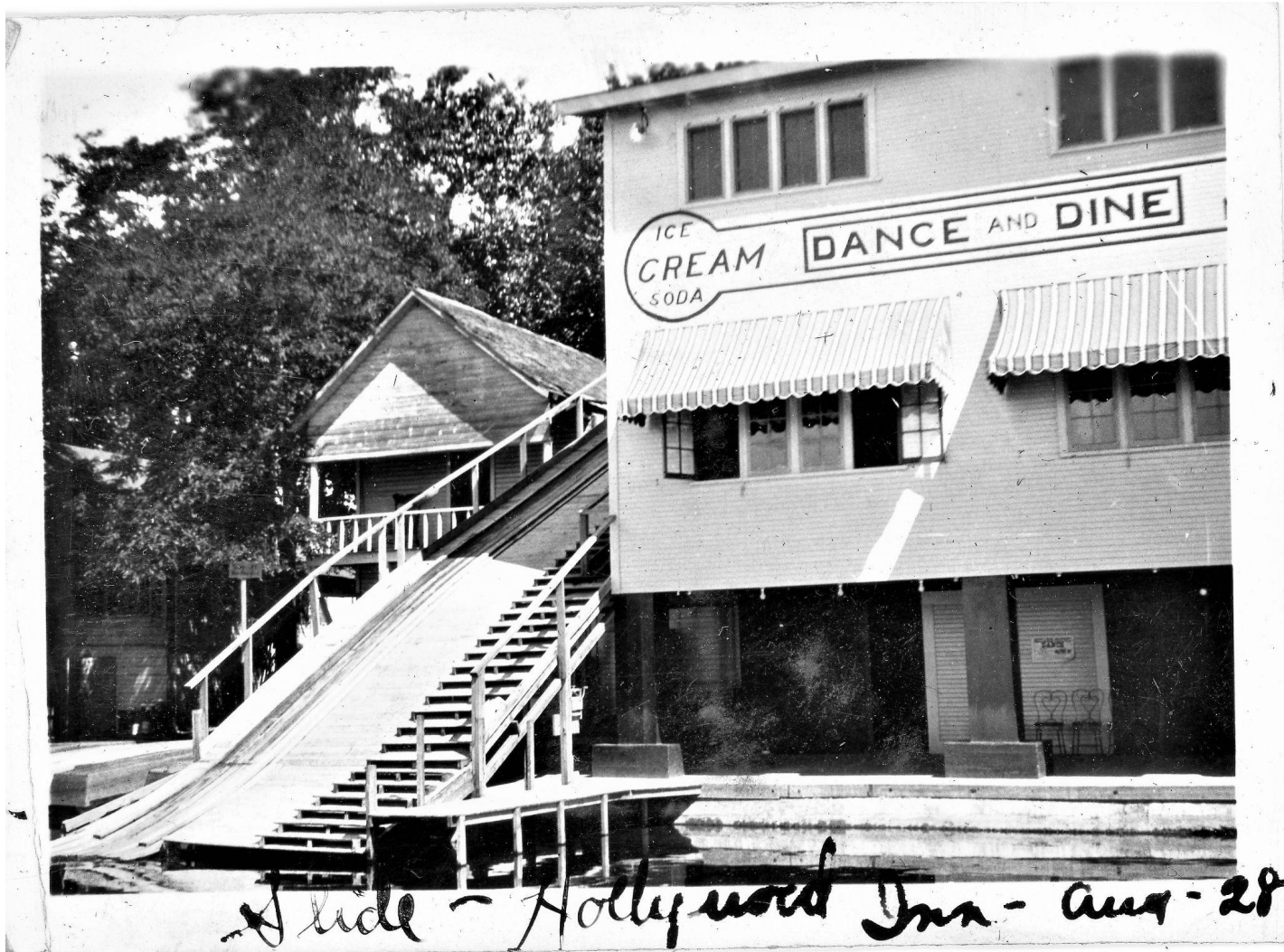
In early 1928, William Kessler was able to piece together a sizeable area for his resort. Much of this property had once been a part of the 70-acre Owen farm. The shaded portion of this map approximates the area Kessler was able to acquire.



This photograph shows workers preparing to put in a concrete seawall. The cottage in the picture is believed to be the rental cottage that was later destroyed by fire. The main building and beach would be located in the area where the truck is parked.



The main building at Hollywood Inn was described as being of English manor design. The top floor contained a 60x60-foot dance floor.



Hollywood Inn featured a large water toboggan slide, a diving tower, and a springboard. The beach area was lighted by flood lamps to make nighttime swimming possible. Locker rooms with showers were provided in the basement. Guests could also use the checkroom to safely store valuables.



Parts of Crooked Lake were not easily accessible via road in 1928. Hollywood Inn offered a launch service to help cottagers reach remote areas of the lake. I put a lot of effort into determining the relationship between Pauline, Tippie, and the Kesslers. I was not able to do so. They were featured in several other photographs and were certainly very photogenic.



This is a roadside view of Hollywood Inn. The main floor housed a soda parlor, lunch counter, pool tables, grocery/meat market, and dining room. The dining room featured chicken and frog leg dinners. Gas pumps are visible on the right.

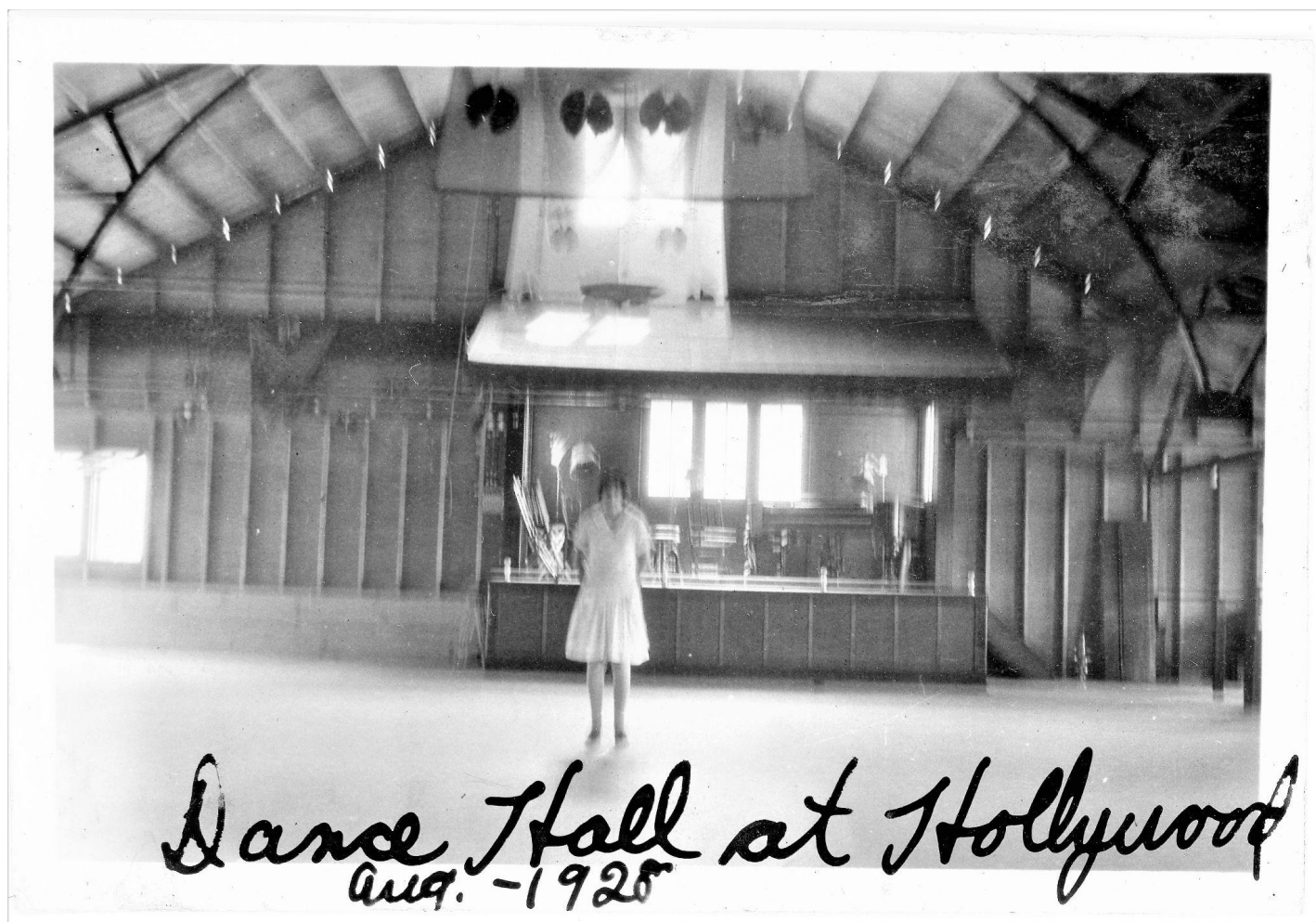
HOLLYWOOD INN	
On Northeast Shore of Crooked Lake, Four Miles Northeast of Angola—11,400 Square Feet of Floor Space	
"The Dreamland of Youth"	
Greatest Bathing Beauty Contest Ever Held In Steuben County	SUNDAY, JULY 22nd
\$25.00 IN CASH PRIZES—Girls, get in on this and send in your name at once by mail, or call us by phone. Free dressing room service to all entrants. CASH PRIZES FOR SWIMMING CONTESTS—OTHER AMUSEMENTS TOO NUMEROUS TO MENTION Dancing Every Night and Sunday Afternoon. Music by "Doc" Leach and His Red Hots from the Bermudas. Entirely New and High Class Tell your friends to meet you at Hollywood Inn, the newest and most modern amusement building in Northern Indiana. We have one of the finest Bathing Beaches in Northern Indiana. Toboggan Slide and a Diving Tower and Springboard that will thrill all comers. Try Night Bathing at the illuminated Beach. Let your Sunday vacation be at SPECIAL CHICKEN LUNCH, 75c; DINNER, \$1.00	
HOLLYWOOD INN	LUNCH COUNTER SERVICE AT REASONABLE PRICES

On Sunday, July 22, 1928, Kessler held what he dubbed the "Greatest Bathing Beauty Contest Ever Held in Steuben County".

**DIP, DINE, AND
DANCE**
from
Ten 'til Two
The Only Cabaret
on the Lakes
**HOLLYWOOD
INN**
Crooked Lake



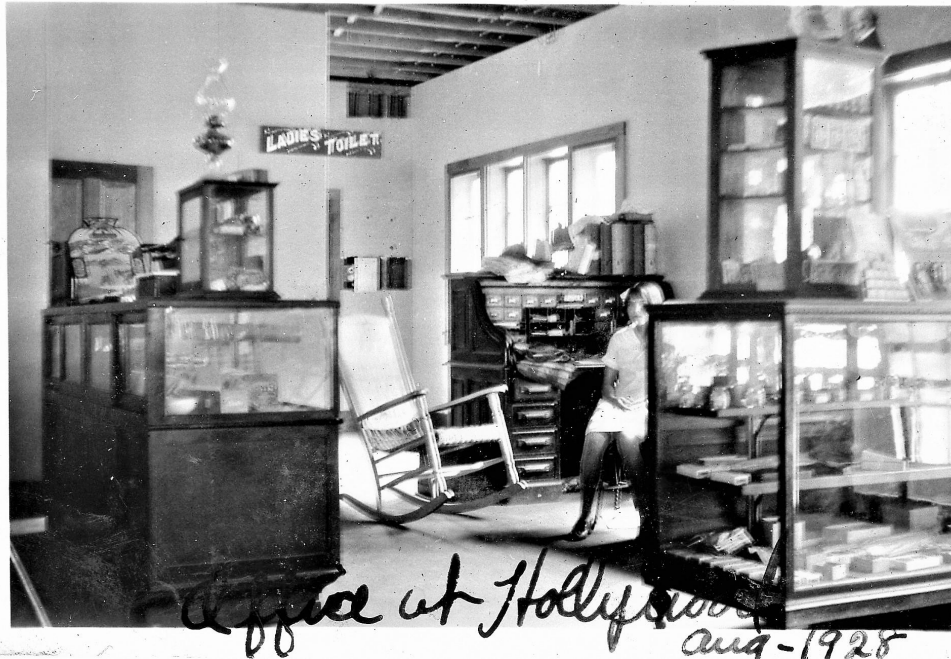
On Saturday, July 28, 1928, Hollywood Inn offered the lake area's first-ever cabaret. A small cover charge would reserve a table in the dining room for an entire evening of entertainment.



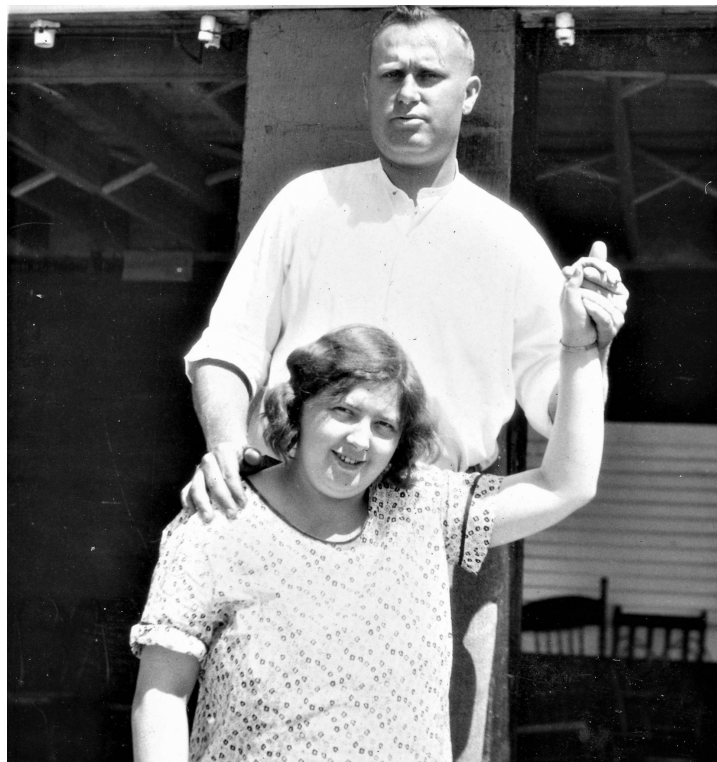
Dancing at Hollywood Inn proved to be very popular. "Doc" Leach and his Red Hots, a "high-class orchestra with good singers and entertainers", was booked for the summer of 1928 and continued performing into 1929. Crowds routinely exceed 1,000 on weekend nights.



The parlor at Hollywood Inn featured an 18-unit Italian marble soda fountain. Patrons could order ice cream, sundaes, ice cream sodas, and milkshakes. The lunch counter would have offered a limited menu that may have included hot and cold sandwiches, soups, pie, and coffee.



Here is a photograph of the office area. It is an area partitioned off by several display cases with a roll-top desk in the back. A sign identifying the way to the ladies' toilet is displayed on the wall.



Bill Kessler and his wife, Esther, on the lakeside of Hollywood Inn.



This is a photograph of Esther May Kessler and her daughter, Bonnie Lou Kessler. The photo was taken on March 29, 1929. Bonnie was 18 days old at the time. The Kesslers had temporarily left their Crooked Lake home and were staying in Auburn with Esther's parents when fire destroyed the Hollywood Inn.



Barely three months after the fire that destroyed Hollywood Inn, these photographs show that the new Hollywood Apartments were up and running. The name was later changed to Hollywood Landing.