

Historical Ramblings

“The Living is Swell”

It was 1960. Boys wore peg leg pants, white t-shirts and Italian style pointed toe shoes that laced on the side. Girls' skirt lengths were below the knee and rapidly rising upward. Flat top D.A.s would soon grow out to surfer cuts and the “bobs” of the 50's would inflate into beehive hair dos. It was a time of transition. Lompoc itself experienced a major transition when suddenly; the town had its own radio station. KNEZ, the “Breezy 960” was a welcome relief to local listeners whose radios had very limited reception. AM stations came in by the dozens at night, but in the daytime, only a few made their way through the ever-present static. Those with an FM receiver were just out of luck, unless they erected an outdoor antenna. All ages listened to KNEZ. The station played all the current popular tunes, ranging from Lawrence Welk to Nat King Cole. Local talk show personalities presented controversial subject matter, prompting local citizens to call in and offer their viewpoints. Early morning host Ed Libby opened his show with a rousing march, urging his audience to “March around the breakfast table.”

By 1962, the station had forged its niche in local entertainment. To further prove that the station was Lompoc's own, a professional “jingle” company produced a promotional record for KNEZ. *“I Had a Ball in Big L”* hit the airwaves and became an instant hit with local listeners. The catchy tune was played repeatedly every day. Soon the public clamored for copies of the recording, so the station made 45 rpm copies available for \$1 each. The lyrics were on the tongues and minds of kids of all ages – so much so, that local Jr. High School students made up their own lyrics in a parody of the original tune.

Time progressed and eventually Lompoc boasted three radio stations, one of which provided the community's first FM broadcast. With listening tastes changing, formats also changed. There was more canned music and automated programming. The local nature of radio was gone. *“I Had a Ball in Big L”* also disappeared into oblivion – or did it?

Occasionally I get a phone call asking if I remember the song and if copies are still available. The answer is, “Of course, I remember it” followed with, “Somewhere I have copy.” Several years of finding the record and then losing it again have passed since the first inquiry. A couple of months ago it was found again, still in its original record sleeve, in pristine condition. I still had my turntable from years past, so I gingerly placed the record on it and turned up the volume. The harpsichord introduction began and I was transported 40 years into the past . . . *“I landed in Lompoc not long ago; the central coast of California is quite a show . . .”* The lyrics came back to me as though I had just heard them yesterday. Sure, the song was a bit corny, but it was sung capably by a very pleasant, unidentified female voice. *“This is the area called the valley of flowers, it's all so beautiful, I could go on for hours.”* The song had catchy lyrics, to be sure, and it was a great little promotional item for 1960's Lompoc. *“I had a ball in big L, I had a ball in big L; The livin' is swell and oh how I fell, 'cause I had a ball in big L.”* Most of the lyrics ring true even today, but I'm certain today's Middle School crowd wouldn't give them the time of day: *“Across the valley nearby is Vandenberg Air Force Base - and Pt. Arguello is making another probe into space. For recreation the Vandenberg Village Inn's a lark, or you can see the old mission at La Purisima Park.”*

I contacted Randall Sena of Certain Sparks recording studio, who converted the 45 to a digital audio file. The song now lives on a computer, with the original 45 tucked away in a safe place (I'll soon forget where that place is!). The digital version can be heard on the Historical Society's website, www.lompochistory.org.