BIG BAND Alliance

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Biographical Sketches:

TINY HILL



"TINY HILL"
America's Biggest Band Leader

Just a Little Gay with 350
lbs. of "Good Humor"

MCA
MUSIC CORPORATION OF AMERICA

“His Sense of Humor Was As Big As He Was”

by JAY and CHRISTOPHER POPA

It was a good promotional idea to call him “America’s biggest bandleader.” The phrase didn’t refer to his music, but, rather, his weight.

His nickname was “Tiny,” but he tipped the scale most of his life around 350 to 365 pounds and, therefore, was definitely one of the biggest of the bandleaders - so to speak! Note that the publicity photo on the previous page was captioned “Just a Likeable Guy with 350 lbs. of ‘Good Humor.’”



When Christopher interviewed Dan Windolph, a member of Tiny’s band starting in mid-1965, Windolph theorized, “Tiny would get the biggest kick in the world out of this. He had the world’s greatest sense of humor. His sense of humor was as big as he was. He thought everything was funny.”

That sense of humor was evident both while on the bandstand and off.

“Yeah, he had a wonderful sense of humor,” Windolph said. “I’ve gotten some of the old… they call them ‘airchecks’… from some of the broadcasts that we did. And you can hear his kind of line of patter. He kind of had this… almost a hillbilly-type accent. He was from southern Illinois. And he would exaggerate, I think, at times, because in private he didn’t always sound like that.”

“He saw the humor in things and he tended to surround himself with musicians that were as nuts as he was,” Windolph observed. “I often told people that I worked with better bands, musically, since then. But I don’t think I ever worked on a band that I had as much fun on as I did the Hill band.”

VITAL STATS



given name Harry Lawrence Hill

birthdate Jul. 19, 1906

birthplace Sullivan, Illinois

physical description 6', 350 to 365 lbs., light complexion, brown hair, hazel eyes

father William Fred Hill, a farmer, b.Oct. 17, 1880, d.Mar. 22, 1915

mother Osa Crowdson Hill Ault, b.Mar. 23, 1890, d.Jul. 8, 1982

first wife Alta E. Fredrick Sory, b.Mar. 23, 1907, m.Mar. 22, 1928, d.Nov. 12, 1984

second wife Virginia Lucille Overstake / aka "Jenny Lou Carson," a singer-songwriter, b.Jan. 13, 1915, m.May 31, 1946, div.Jul. 5, 1949, d.Dec. 16, 1978

third wife Catherine Marie Pearson Hill, b.May 8, 1922, m.Mar. 7, 1957, d.Nov. 24, 1958

fourth wife Barbara

education graduate, Sullivan High School, Sullivan, Illinois, 1924; two years at Illinois State Normal University [which in 1967 became Illinois State University], Normal, Illinois

residences East Nelson, Illinois (1910); Sullivan, Illinois (1920); Lake City, Illinois (1940); Fort Wayne, Indiana (1947); log cabin at Naches Pass, Washington (1948); 140-acre dairy farm, "Mountain View," Ft. Lupton, Colorado (1950); Rolling Meadows, Illinois (1960s)

date of death Dec. 13, 1971

cause of death severe heart attack, then lapsed into a coma

place of death Denver, Colorado

A biography of Tiny Hill on Wikipedia reports that "His parents separated when he was seven years old and he went to live with an aunt. He was active in high school sports and was president of his senior class . . . Financial difficulties forced him to leave college to go to work. He went to Detroit where he worked in a produce warehouse. After a series of short term jobs he ended up driving a team of mules for the Midwest Canning Company in Rochelle, Illinois."

His 1924 Sullivan High School Yearbook calls him "Strongly built and athletic. Broad in the shoulders, deep chested with muscles and sinews of iron." In school, Hill was Business Manager Retrospect; Sec'y Junior class; Representative to Student Council '23, '24; President, Student Council '24; participated in the Junior Play; Football '23, '24; Basketball '23, '24; Aeolian Society; was a Delegate to Illinois Press Association; and a member of the Glee Club.

In 1943, when questionnaires for The Billboard Music Year Book were sent out to various bandleaders, including Hill, he answered their inquiries as follows:

Born? "Why, of course."

Where? "Too young to remember."

Education? "A little—was supposed to be a school teacher."

Musical education? "Played and sang so bad, had to get my own band."

How did you become an ork leader? "Picked up the baton
and I was too big for 'em to take it away from me."

Are you happy in the music business? "I'm always happy—even in the music business."

Do you eat much? "No, it's glandular."

Do you drink? "Anything that pours—except hot iron."



"He was probably one of the greatest… I've worked with a lot of bands since Tiny, but he was probably one of the absolute best at being a front man," Windolph continued. "A true leader. He could read the crowd and he could tell what they were in the mood for."

Where did Hill get that ability?

"You know, that's an interesting question," Windolph stated. "I don't really know. And I don't know that he said anything about it . . . I don't remember him saying… He grew up as a… you know, on a farm in southern Illinois . . . But, I don't know. He just had that knack."

"

Hill started out as a drummer and in 1931 put together his first band, working in and around Decatur, Illinois for a few years. At first it was called “Harry Hill and The Five Jacks,” then in 1933 it became known as “The Fat Man’s Band.”

In 1934, he joined the Byron Dunbar band as their drummer and vocalist. He stayed with Dunbar for about a year, then again formed his own group, this time a bigger band which featured Dixieland jazz and hillbilly music. Hill and his new Orchestra had their first date at the Ingleterra Ballroom in Peoria, Illinois on October 31, 1935.

He played other late 1930s dates over WGN, the Mutual network outlet in Chicago, and at the Melody Mill Ballroom in North Riverside, Illinois, a Chicago suburb.

Personnel of the band in the ‘30s and ‘40s included, collectively, Dick Coffeen, Harold King, Bob Richards, Wally Fobart (tpt), John Norrell, Russ Phillips, Russ Smith, Harry Heffellinger (tb), Bobby Walters, Bob Kramer, Rodell “Nook” Schreier, Norman Maxwell, John Pettigrew, Ted Kalb, Paul Paddock, John Luthard (sax), Jim Shields, Lloyd McCann, Don Fairchild (p), Isa Foster (vibes/tp/voc—a female), Harold Osborne (vibes), Reightmo Carrington, Pat Patterson, Bill Coob (b), and Harold “Blackie” Blackwell, Monte Mountjoy (d). Some of them had been with Hill in the Byron Dunbar outfit.



Schreier (1913-2008), shown above, also wrote arrangements for the band, and later became known as “David Carroll” with his work as a studio arranger, conductor, and A&R chief at Mercury Records.

“I joined the band in June of 1965,” Windolph reported. “I’m not good at dates or anything like that, but *that* I know for sure. Because I came from Nebraska - this is my chance at the big time! And I went from Grand Island, Nebraska to Chicago, and Tiny was living in Rolling Meadows at the time. And that’s where I joined the band.”

“Actually, on Wilson Avenue, there was an old musician’s hotel that some of the guys stayed in,” Windolph recalled. “And that’s where I met the band . . . We stayed in a lot of hotels, rather than motels. There were still a lot of old hotels left in Illinois, Iowa… You know, we went all through the Midwest. And if you checked into the hotel, I believe it was after seven o’clock in the morning, you got on what was called ‘the day sheet.’ You could sleep all day, play the job, and then come back that night, all for the price of one night.”

“I was a regular on the band for probably the next three or four years. And then I got tired of doing the traveling,” he explained.

Hill's music was a bit on the hillbilly side, but with saxes and brass instead of fiddles and guitars.

In 1939, he made his very first commercial recordings, done in Chicago on June 1st of that year for the Vocalion label, a subsidiary of Columbia. Included at that session was his all-time biggest hit, *Angry*, which stayed on the popularity charts for three weeks that October. *Angry* featured Hill's vocal and him playing a guiro (a hollow gourd with notches cut on one side), known informally as his "scratcher," which gave his band a distinctive shuffle or rachet sound.

Around mid-1940, he was switched to another Columbia affiliate, OKeh, until his contract ended in early 1942. Hill then cut six sides for Decca in 1944, before finally landing on the Mercury label starting in late 1945 and continuing with them to around mid-1954.



We like how the above ad calls "Tiny" Hill "The Biggest Name On Records!"

Hill returned to Mercury in 1962 for "Tiny Hill Sings And Plays The Hits Of World War I" (catalog no. SR 60723), his only stereo album.

He also made non-commercial radio transcriptions for the World Broadcasting System from 1943 to 1945 and again in 1950.

“He was exceptional with people,” Windolph observed. “Even just going out to eat. We’d eat, you know, at three or four in the morning at truck stops after the job. And he’d just have the waitresses in the palm of his hand. He was just that kind of guy… very outgoing.

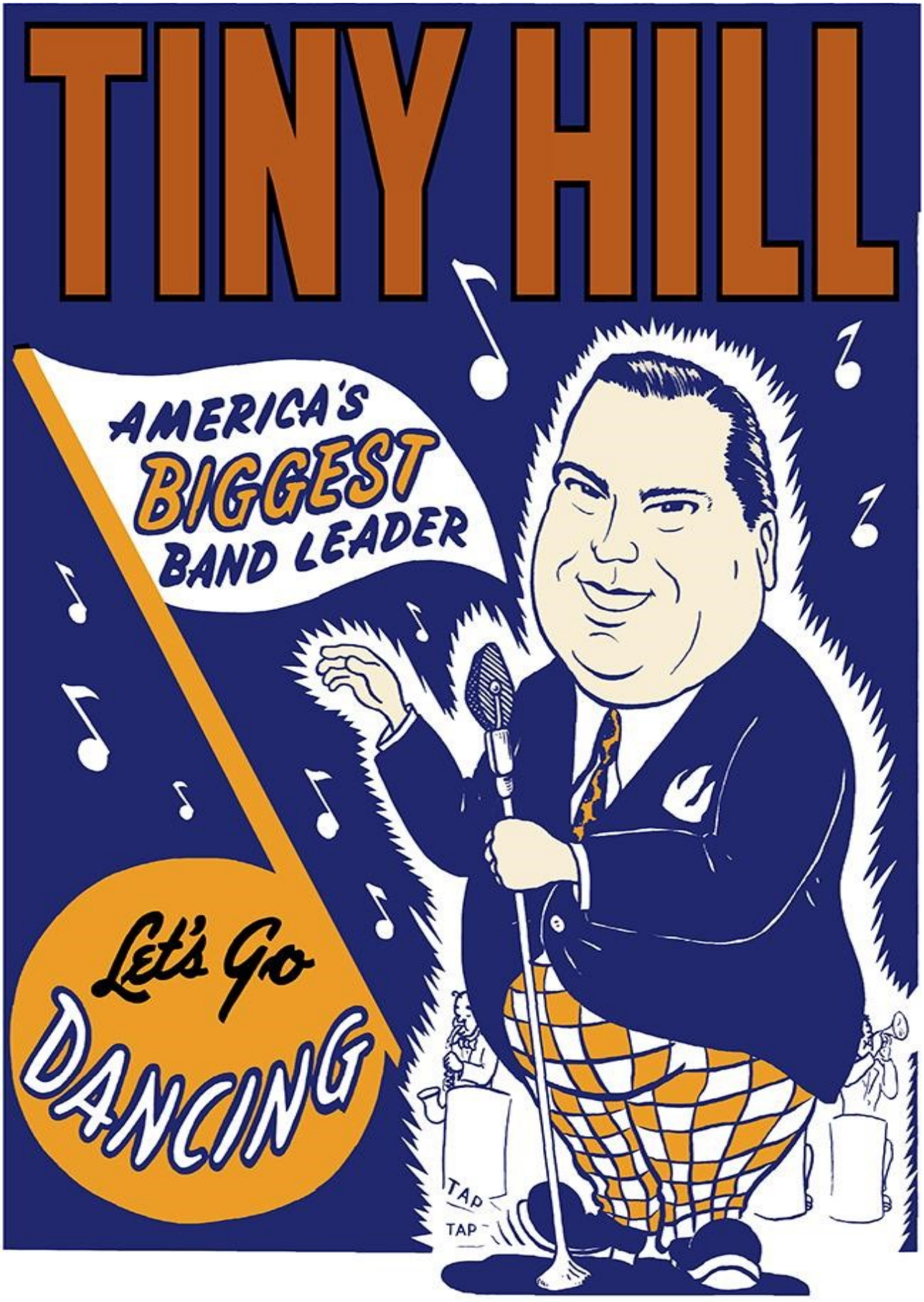


“I mean, obviously when you’re… he was probably 6’2” or 6’3”… and weighed anywhere between 350 and 400 pounds, he was fairly noticeable,” Windolph explained.

So the nickname “Tiny” was an obvious joke.

“Yeah, it was like a reverse kind of thing,” he confirmed. “That was fairly common in those days to give people nicknames . He was a *big* guy. I mean, physically you knew he was there. And he was a very good-looking guy… strikingly good-looking, considering how big he was.”

“And the other thing that was really interesting is he was *extremely* light on his feet, for someone that size,” Windolph noted. “It was just amazing to me, to watch the guy. You’d think of somebody that big just kind of lumbering around, like an elephant. But he was extremely graceful, extremely light on his feet.”


TINY HILL
AMERICA'S
BIGGEST
BAND LEADER
Let's Go
DANCING
TAP
TAP

“His real name, as I’m sure you know, was Harry,” Windolph said. “In fact, a lot of the old-timers on the band would call him ‘Harry.’ I didn’t know what to call him at first. You know, as I say, I was this green kid out of Nebraska. I think the first time I called him ‘Mr. Hill’ he laughed at me. I think after I was on the band for awhile, I started calling him Harry also, because the guys who had been with him so long, as I say, that’s what they called him. You called him anything. One of the trumpet players called him ‘Hill’ all the time. It was, ‘Hey Hill, where we going next?’ Nothing bothered him.”

Tiny Hill and his Orchestra, as they were known to the public, were an in-person favorite in the Chicago area and on the Midwest dance circuit for nearly 30 years, including Tom Archer’s string of ballrooms throughout Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri.

At the beginning, they toured the country and played such venues as Euclid Beach Park in Cleveland, Ohio (for three weeks in the summers of 1939, 1940, and 1941); the Starlight Ballroom, Chippewa Lake Park, Ohio (July 1940); even as far east as Donahue’s, Mountain View, New Jersey (January 1941). Shortly afterwards, he returned to Chicago for engagements at the Aragon and Trianon Ballrooms and the Oriental Theatre. During 1943, Hill and his musicians were the summer replacement band on the Lucky Strike “Your All-Time Hit Parade” radio show from New York City and played at the Hotel Edison in midtown Manhattan for three-and-a-half months. Out west, they had an engagement at the Trianon Ballroom in South Gate, California during June 1946, and were broadcast by CBS Radio from there. Then back in the Midwest, where locations included the Riverside Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1944); the National Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky (1948); and the Lake Club in Springfield, Illinois (December 1949).



Besides Hill’s own vocals, he had featured Allan DeWitt on ballads in the late 1930s, then in the ‘40s it was Todd Howard, one of the saxophonists, who sang the romantic songs.

Other stars with the band were Bobby Anderson on trumpet and short cornet, as well as the Double Shuffle Beaters, created by drummer Lyle Todd, one of the older men in the band. Mr. Todd would turn out to have an unexpected role in Dan Windolph’s life.

During the 1950s, Hill appeared at venues such as Grandinetti's Supper Club in East Burlington, Iowa and the Inwood Ballroom in Spillville, Iowa (three times in 1954 and 1955).



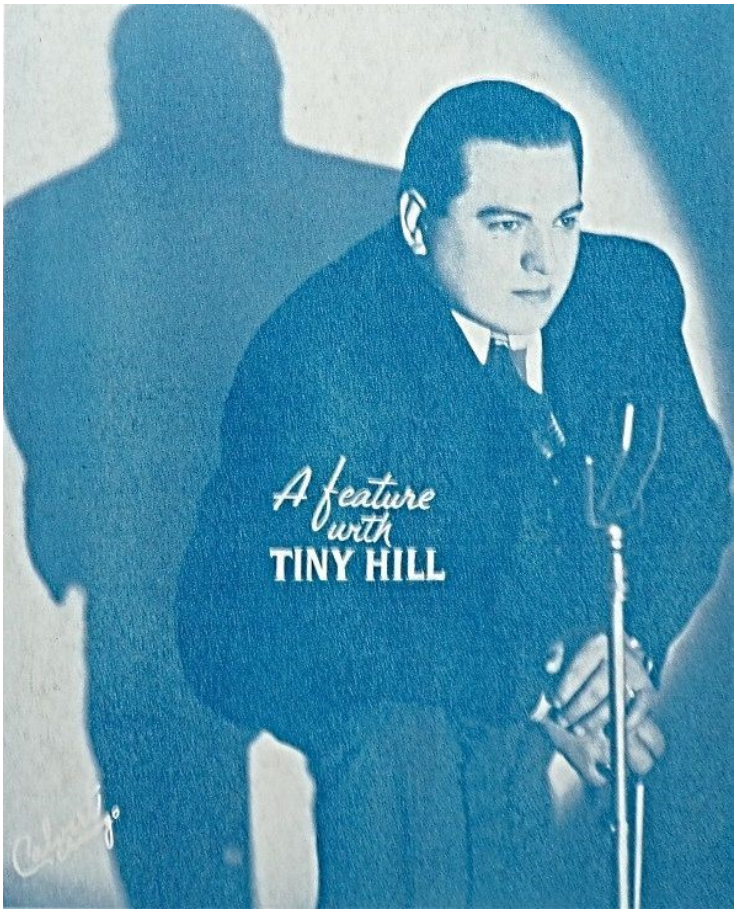
By the time Windolph joined them, the venues included Danceland in downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa (as shown above, in April and August 1965), the Hub Ballroom in Edelstein, Illinois October and December of 1965 and November 1966); and the Willowbrook Ballroom in Willow Springs, Illinois (1969).

"When I first joined the band, Tiny put me in [sharing a hotel room] with a trombone player who was just a galloping alcoholic, just practically a raving lunatic. And I thought, 'Uh oh! I'm going back to Nebraska, I don't like this.' Well, it turned out, the guy drank himself off the band in two days. And so Tiny put me in with another roommate," Windolph related. "And it was the drummer on the band. His name was Lyle Todd. He was on a lot of the recordings, and we just hit it off instantly."

"He kept calling back to Chicago and I said, 'Who you calling back there?' He said, 'Oh, I got this kid back there. She just graduated from high school.' He said, 'When we get back there, I'll introduce you to her.'"

As it turned out, Windolph and Todd's daughter, Patricia, wound up getting married.

"In those days, they graduated in mid-year, and she graduated in January," Windolph noted. "She had a scholarship to Northwestern. We laughed about it… she did not want to meet some jerkwater guy from Grand Island, Nebraska. But she finally was persuaded to come and meet me, and the rest is history. I owe a lot to Tiny Hill. That's how I met my wife."



Besides *Angry*, Hill's best-known recordings included *Doodle Doo Doo, Skirts, I Get a Kick Outa Corn, The Guy At the End of the Bar, How Many Hearts Have You Broken, Hot Rod Race, Slow Poke, Two Ton Tessie,* and *Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue* (the latter was recorded for OKeh in 1940, but a 1948 reissue on Columbia is shown below).







Hill's theme song was titled *Dream Girl*.

"The sax players always hated it, because it was in a terrible key for saxophones," Windolph claimed. "It was a very pretty song."

One of Hill's hobbies was fast cars, and for at least two years in the early '50s, he and his band were guests at the Indianapolis Memorial Day Races.

It was said that in 1951 Tiny Hill and his Orchestra traveled 46,000 miles in 10 months in their Packard automobiles, then 61,000 miles over 11 months the following year.

The following decade, the band had even more luxurious transportation.



"We traveled in two Cadillac limousines," Windolph remembered. "I used to ride with him, in *his* car, 'cause I was a good audience. You know, I was 21 and I loved to hear all these old stories."

"The Cadillacs we were driving were '59 and '60. What they were, they were pallbearers' cars," he said. "They were not stretch limos, but they were longer than normal, and they had what they call jump seats in the back. So that they could get nine people in the car. Well, we would travel with just, like, four or five in the car and then you could stretch out across these jump seats and sleep in the cars."

"Tiny kept them up real well, he had them serviced all the time," Windolph added. "I can remember one time when one of the Cadillacs just plain quit, and we all had to cram into the other one. And it was hysterically funny. Tiny loved it! We were playing at a golf club, a very fancy one, down somewhere around Springfield in southern Illinois. Very, very posh country club and here's this big-name band … We come driving up and it looked like the clown car at the circus 'cause people just kept getting out of this car. We were just crammed in one Cadillac. And we laughed about that."

"Again, Tiny was… he was the greatest guy to work for because you didn't have to worry about offending him or doing anything. If he thought it was funny, he would laugh!," Windolph stated. "His laugh was as big as he was."

"Generally speaking, with road bands like that, you wind up either with old-timers or young kids," he said. "I fit the young kid part. You know, the guys just starting out. Road bands, you know, it's a tough life… you have to put up with a lot. For whatever reason, I loved it. I liked living out of a suitcase."

Hill eventually spent less time on the road and more time with other interests, such as cooking and the 500-watt radio station he started in 1956 in Brighton, Colorado, KHIL (note the call letters "HIL" for his last name). But after a short time, he sold his interest in the station and concentrated on running his dairy farm in Fort Lupton, Colorado.

Then, by the late 1960s, Hill reportedly was suffering from diabetes and lost a lot of weight.

"He was starting to slow down in the late '60s," Windolph stated. "His health was starting to go. He just had weekends, Fridays and Saturdays, but there were a lot of them out in Iowa and down in southern Illinois. And by that time I was working at a music store in downtown Chicago… Lyon & Healy, an old name in music, and it was getting to be a pain for me to, you know, run out after work and jump in my car and drive him to Iowa. And I had also gotten married by that time."

"Then, I could see the handwriting on the wall, that Tiny was, as I say, slowing down. And by that time I had started to make friends in Chicago and started playing with other bands," Windolph reminisced. "In the final few years of his life, I would go out only occasionally with the band."

Hill's last performance was at Emden, Illinois, a small village in Logan County, on July 17, 1971. He passed away about five months later, and his gravestone at Elmwood Cemetery in Brighton, Colorado reads "Forgotten Quickly By Many, Remembered Forever By a Few."

As Christopher joked with Windolph, for someone whose biggest hit was a song called *Angry*, Tiny Hill didn't sound angry at all.

"No, he wasn't," Windolph agreed. "As his health was failing, he still retained a lot of his sense of humor. He used to joke on the job, he'd lost so much weight, he'd say, 'Well, you know, you may not recognize me, but it's still Tiny Hill up here. So he still had that sense of humor."

Christopher wondered, when Hill was in poor health, what his weight might have been down to.

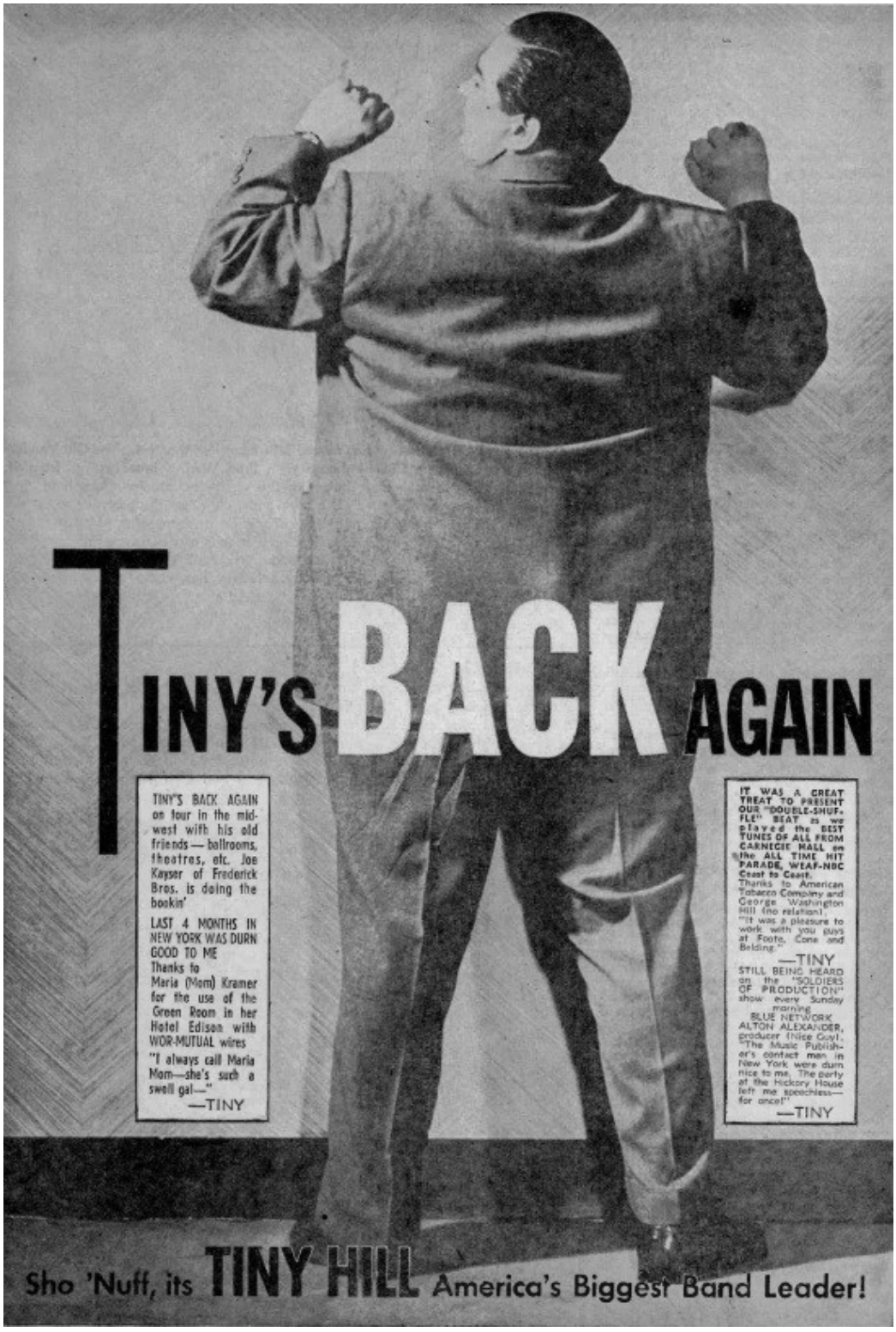
"He wasn't exactly skin and bones, he never was skinny," Windolph cautioned. "Boy, I remember I hadn't worked with the band in a little while and then he called me to do a few jobs with him. I had to do a double take when I saw him because he had lost enough weight so that it was very noticeable. I never knew exactly what it was that he had."

"From the day I joined the band, he was always doctoring," Windolph reported. "As he put it, his years of hard living finally caught up with him. He was a very heavy drinker in the old days. He just kind of shrugged, 'Well, you know,' he said, 'That's what happens when you abuse yourself that much.'"

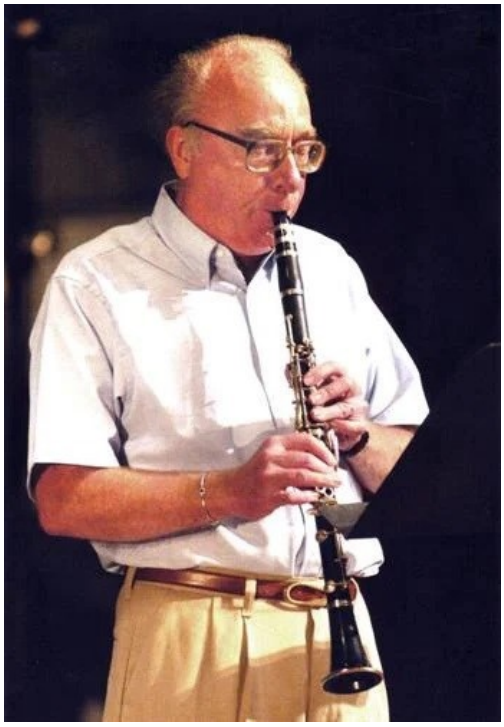
In 1982, former schoolteacher Paul Dean organized what he called "The Original Tiny Hill Orchestra," a 10-piece group, for an appearance in Sherman, Illinois on October 16th and some dances at the Knights of Columbus hall in Peoria, Illinois on October 24th and 31st that year.

The band's instrumentation was four saxophones (including Illinois State University faculty member Jim Boitos on alto, plus two tenors and a baritone), two trumpets, one trombone, piano, bass, and drums.

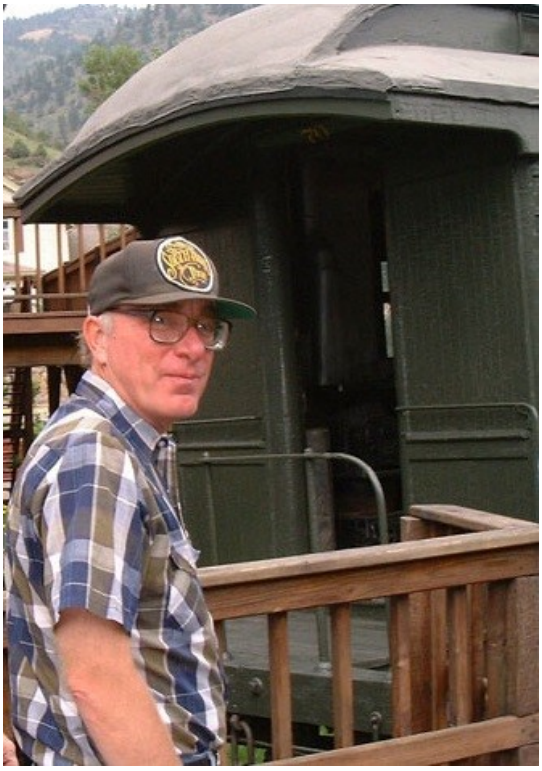
Despite the band's name, none of the players ever worked with Hill and Dean evidently abandoned the idea within a year or two.



In December 2018, a new “Tiny Hill Orchestra” was christened in south Texas by arranger and multi-instrumentalist Dan Stevens, after he secured the vintage Hill music library from a former band member.



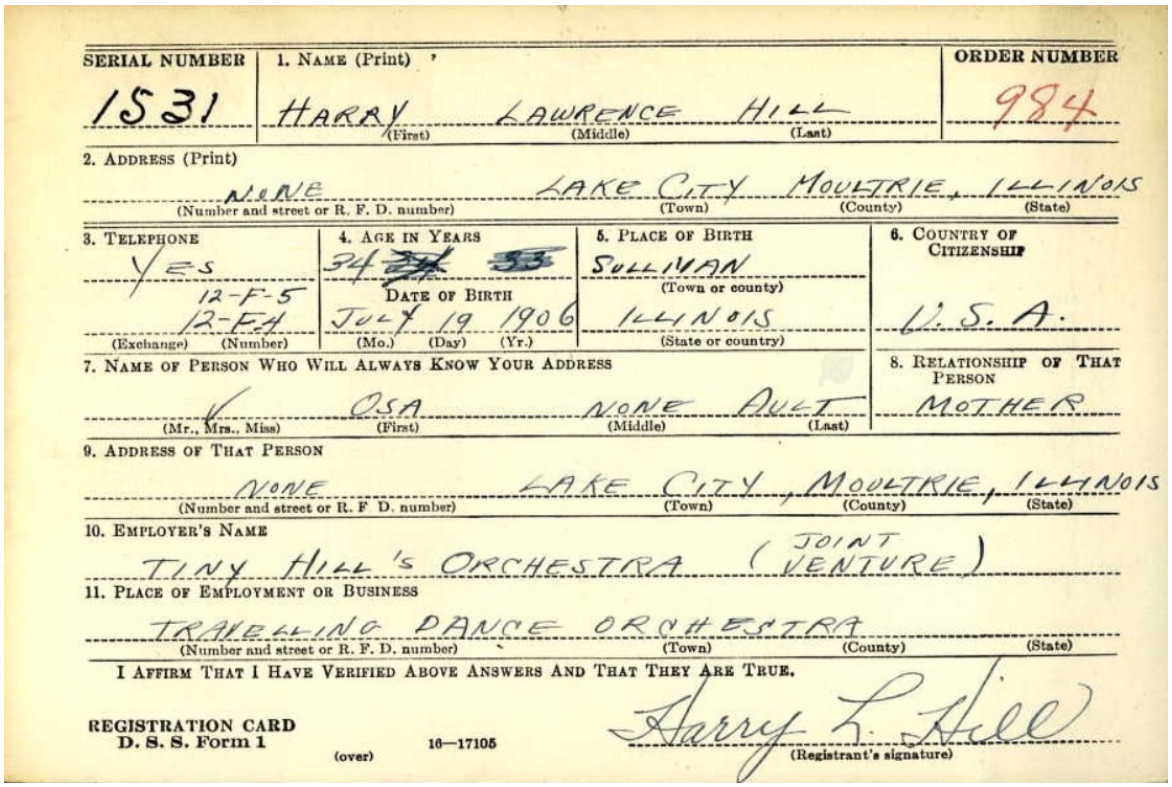
As for Windolph, he still plays the saxophone and clarinet for his own enjoyment, but is now retired and he and his wife, Pat, split their time between residences in Chicago and Nathrop, Colorado, an unincorporated town in Chaffee County.



As a hobby, Windolph has spent some of his free time sharing an interest in trains with fellow railroad buffs and working on his model train layout at home.

SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1924 Sullivan High School [Sullivan, Illinois] Yearbook.



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3. TELEPHONE Yes (Exchange) 12-F-5 (Number) 12-F4 | 4. AGE IN YEARS 34 ~~33~~ DATE OF BIRTH July (Mo.) 19 (Day) 1906 (Yr.) | 5. PLACE OF BIRTH SULLIVAN (Town or county) ILLINOIS (State or country) | 6. COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP U. S. A.

7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS ✓ (Mr., Mrs., Miss) OSA (First) NONE (Middle) AULT (Last) | 8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON MOTHER

9. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON NONE (Number and street or R. F. D. number) LAKE CITY (Town) MOULTRIE (County) ILLINOIS (State)

10. EMPLOYER'S NAME TINY HILL'S ORCHESTRA (JOINT VENTURE)

11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS TRAVELLING DANCE ORCHESTRA (Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.

Harry L. Hill (Registrant's signature)

REGISTRATION CARD D. S. S. Form 1 (over) 16—17105

Ancestry (ancestry.com)

"For Sale: Stations [advertisement], Broadcasting, Apr. 21, 1958, p.127.



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Popa Family Collection.

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Dan Windolph. Interview with Christopher Popa, May 1, 2006.

IMAGE ATTRIBUTION

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