

## Johnson Revisits Dance Hall Era

The Scenic Regional Library New Haven branch hosted the "Looking Back On Missouri Dance Halls" program on Tuesday, September 19. Author and educator Kenneth Johnson was in New Haven to share stories and photos of the bands and orchestras from the dance hall era of the 1940s and 1950s.

Johnson is author of the book *Moonlight Serenade to City Lights: Rare Images of Bands and Orchestras from the Dance Hall Era in Missouri*. Research for the book started with one photo and then evolved into a ten-year project. About 200 interviews and 150 photos later, his book was written.

All photos in the book are of musicians from the east central Missouri area ranging between St Louis west to Jefferson City and Columbia and from Hannibal south to Rolla. The book preserves a time when local dance halls provided the main social outlet for many rural families.

Kenneth Johnson grew up in rural Missouri in the 1940s. Between the ages of 9 and 11 he lived in Morrison with his grandparents at their grocery store/gas station/restaurant, which also had a little dance hall out back. His father and grandfather played

drums. His mother played banjo and sang in local venues in the area. Johnson himself never took up an instrument; however, he never forgot the music of his childhood. His experiences inspired his lifelong interest in music and a desire to preserve a record of an era important to American lives during the mid-20th century.

On a local note, Johnson shared photos of the band Eddie Randle and His Blue Devils, who played at the former Roadside Barn in New Haven in 1941. Also, the Starke Orchestra played at the New Haven High School prom in 1964, where local Marian Kelley sang on stage with the orchestra.

Marian was at the September program and said, "This program was very enjoyable for me. Ken Johnson was very dedicated to this project. His research was time consuming and intense. He did a wonderful job bringing back some good memories from years ago."

*Moonlight Serenade to City Lights: Rare Images of Bands and Orchestras from the Dance Hall Era in Missouri* is available for check out through the Scenic Regional Library. For more information visit [www.scenicregional.org](http://www.scenicregional.org) or call the library at 573-237-2189