

Social dancing the Texas way:
Live Music and a Wood Floor

Dance halls top list of Texas' endangered places

February 8, 2008

By JIM VERTUNO

Associated Press Writer


AUSTIN -- Town dance halls, where boot-scootin' Texans have two-stepped for generations, top a preservation group's latest list of the state's most endangered historic places.

Advocates warned Friday that the Texas dance hall tradition could be wiped out if there's no revival for the buildings, many of which still have wooden floors and walls or dilapidated wiring and plumbing.

"There are places where so many people had their first date, their first dance," said Sharon Kleinecke, who owns the Schroeder Dance Hall and has pumped about \$150,000 into renovations. "It's a part of who they are."

The annual list of Texas' Most Endangered Places is produced by Preservation Texas Inc., a nonprofit group that raises money and awareness for saving historic buildings. The 2008 list includes dance halls in general and 12 other specific sites in dire need of repair, ranging from an old school near Amarillo to a crumbling Spanish port near Bayside.

Old-time dance halls are cultural landmarks that are being neglected as the state becomes more urbanized and the early generations who frequented them are getting older, said Libby Buuck, president of Preservation Texas. Many halls had roots in Czech, German, Mexican or black cultures and communities, she said.

Another advocacy group, [Texas Dance Hall Preservation](http://www.texasdancehall.org) , was founded last year after fire destroyed DeWitt County's Gruenau Hall. Built in 1900, it was one of the state's rare round dance halls and had hardwood maple floors and hand-carved rafters.

Dance halls were often among the first public structures built in a town, said the group, which estimates as many as 1,200 were active in the early 20th century. Most have been lost, and many that still stand have been abandoned or converted for different use.

Yet some still hear the sound of shuffling feet and steel guitars.

Luckenbach Dance Hall near Fredericksberg and Gruene Hall - which bills itself as the oldest continually operated dance hall in Texas - both still attract big musical acts and big crowds.

Kleinecke bought the Schroeder Dance Hall near Goliad "out of a love for old buildings" and has managed to keep the place up and running, hosting concerts and dances. It recently booked a 50th wedding anniversary.

The preservation group raises money to identify historic property and find potential buyers and investors. The Texas Historical Commission also provides small grants and technical expertise to inspect property.

Terry Colley, deputy executive director of the commission, said that if the effort builds momentum, state lawmakers might pump state money into preservation efforts. The current state budget includes \$67 million for a program to preserve local courthouses, Colley said.

Advocates want young Texans to visit the places where their grandparents danced and learn about a slice of family history, said Patrick Sparks, president of the dance hall preservation group,

"The key to saving them is to get people dancing in them," Sparks said. "It's the most Texas thing there is."