

L.A. 'Red' Riddell Jr., Tantilla Garden bouncer, dies

He worked for 15 years at ballroom on Broad

BY ELLEN ROBERTSON

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Louis Andrew "Red" Riddell Jr., who died June 24, worked for about 15 years as the principal bouncer on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights at the former Tantilla Garden ballroom at 3817 W. Broad St. in Richmond.

Tantilla, which opened in 1933 over Tiny Town bowling alley during the Depression, was billed as "The South's Most Beautiful Ballroom." In the days before air conditioning, it had a ceiling that could be rolled back to permit couples to dance under the stars.

With its velvet swags, burrundy, brown and gold décor and polished dance floor that accommodated 750 couples, Tantilla drew dressed-up crowds who climbed to the second floor of the building to dance to the likes of Duke Ellington, Jimmy

Dorsey, Rudy Vallee and the Ozzie Nelson Band, whose lead singer, Harriet Hilliard, had to enter through the back door to circumvent male fans.

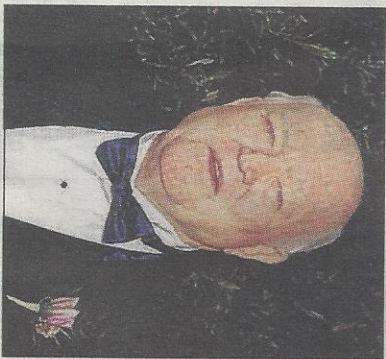
In the days when the sale of liquor-by-the-drink was illegal, couples brought their own in brown bags and got set-ups at the ballroom.

"Red, a big man — both literally and figuratively — was largely responsible for Tantilla's reputation for being a place where rowdy behavior wasn't tolerated," wrote a paternal cousin, Doug Riddell of Ashland, in an email.

"Those who opted to ignore Red's kindly warning and test the patience of the tall, balding barrel-chested guardian at the entrance were summarily escorted by him to the door."

When Doug Riddell went to pick up Sandy Trot, who later would become his wife, for their first date, her father, Tony Trot, asked Riddell if he were any kin to Tantilla's bouncer.

After Riddell said he was, he



Louis Andrew "Red" Riddell Jr.

recalls that Trot replied, "There are very few people in Richmond who went to Tantilla who *didn't* know Red Riddell. ... That includes a few members of City Council and the legislature, although I doubt any of them would want to admit to it. I don't guess he ever had the occasion to show you to the door, did he?"

"If you're anything like him, I guess my daughter is in good company."

Glenn Ross Riddell of Henrico, Mr. Riddell's son, recalled, "At

home, my dad was really, really gentle. At Tantilla, until people crossed him, he was, too. Most of the time when he asked people to leave, they would leave. He always treated people with respect. They had enough people to handle what came up."

Tantilla closed in 1969. Its building was razed in preparation for a building that was never constructed. The site became a parking lot.

Mr. Riddell saved many of the photos and posters that advertised Tantilla as a destination to hear big bands and later as a place for teens to dance to the music of local, regional and national rock 'n' roll groups.

When WCVE-TV wanted to produce a segment on Tantilla for its popular "Richmond Memories" series, Mr. Riddell was a valuable source for memorabilia.

A Richmond native, Mr. Riddell graduated from Glen Allen High School and was on a Navy ship in Tokyo Bay at the Japanese surrender ending World War II. He was a lifetime member of

American Legion Post 125.

He retired after 28 years from Railway Express Agency, which shipped parcels by rail. He also was a member of the Tuckahoe Moose Lodge.

While Mr. Riddell was unmitigatable in his ballroom role, he was less known as a co-partner in the original Pizza Oven restaurant on Mechanicsville Turnpike, across from Blair's Drug Store.

"Back in the early 1960s, pizza was just emerging as a novel new eating sensation," Doug Riddell wrote. His main competition was the late Gus Serafini's Celebrity Room.

Mr. Riddell's wife, Eleanor "Jeanne" Blankenship Riddell, died June 1.

Survivors, besides his son, include a stepson, Kenneth Thompson of Richmond; and a granddaughter.

A graveside service was held Saturday in Riverview Cemetery in Richmond.

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