

# RIP Jerry Dwyer, a man haunted by the Buddy Holly crash



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(Photo: Special to the Register)

Hubert Jerry Dwyer wasn't exactly J.K. Rowling or George R.R. Martin. But for years he tantalized fellow Iowans, not to mention rock 'n' roll fans worldwide, with a long-rumored book that he intended to publish.

Dwyer, 85, died Jan. 16 in hospice care in Mason City after a long struggle with Alzheimer's — a quiet, peaceful death mostly overlooked among the clamor of our Iowa caucuses.

He never did publish that book, in which he promised finally to reveal his side of the story, armed with crucial facts known only to him. But his widow, Barb, says she will finish it on his behalf. She's working with an author in California.

"It's going to take a while," she said.

You might have heard of Dwyer because of his role in the fabled "day the music died." A Feb. 3, 1959, plane crash north of Clear Lake killed influential early rockers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. "the Big Bopper" Richardson. The musicians had just played a gig at [the Surf Ballroom](https://www.surfballroom.com/) (<https://www.surfballroom.com/>).

And don't forget Roger Peterson, the 21-year-old pilot who also died but often is relegated to a footnote.



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[Buddy Holly: 50 years after the crash that changed rock 'n' roll | DesMoinesRegister.com](http://www.desmoinesregister.com)

(<http://data.desmoinesregister.com/holly/>)

Dwyer managed the Mason City airport and owned the plane, the 1947 Beechcraft Bonanza that in the wee hours of Feb. 3 ended up mangled along a fence line in the frozen field.

He watched the crash grow in significance throughout his lifetime and end up in Don McLean's 1971 elegy, "American Pie." The tragedy still resonates as the post-war template of unfulfilled artistic promise.

Consider that the combined age of all four young men in the plane added up to 88, only a few years more than Dwyer at his death. How might Holly and his peers have accelerated the evolution of American music given more time? (As it was, the Beatles named themselves with a nod to Holly's band, the Crickets.)

At first the crash was a scourge on the Dwyers. They prevailed against a \$1.5 million lawsuit, but the aftermath lingered.

"It was the worst thing that ever happened in my life," was how Dwyer put it in 2009, "until I lost my oldest son."

The couple put up with countless phone calls, including from gamblers in Vegas who had made a wager on what Dwyer had named his ill-fated airplane. (He didn't name it.)



Elwin Musser's photo of the Buddy Holly plane crash site taken Feb. 3, 1959. (Photo: Elwin Musser/Mason City Globe Gazette)

Yet ever so gradually, the Dwyers were befriended by the relatives of the late rockers, and others in the broader Holly universe for whom the annual Winter Dance Party at the Surf (begun in 1979) is a cherished family reunion.

Holly lore "was a big part of his life," Jeff Nicholas, president of the nonprofit North Iowa Cultural Center and Museum that operates the ballroom and crash site, said of Dwyer. "But I don't think it really defined his life."

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The Dwyers were serious about preserving the music. To leverage the attention to the tragedy for good they helped establish college scholarships for music students.

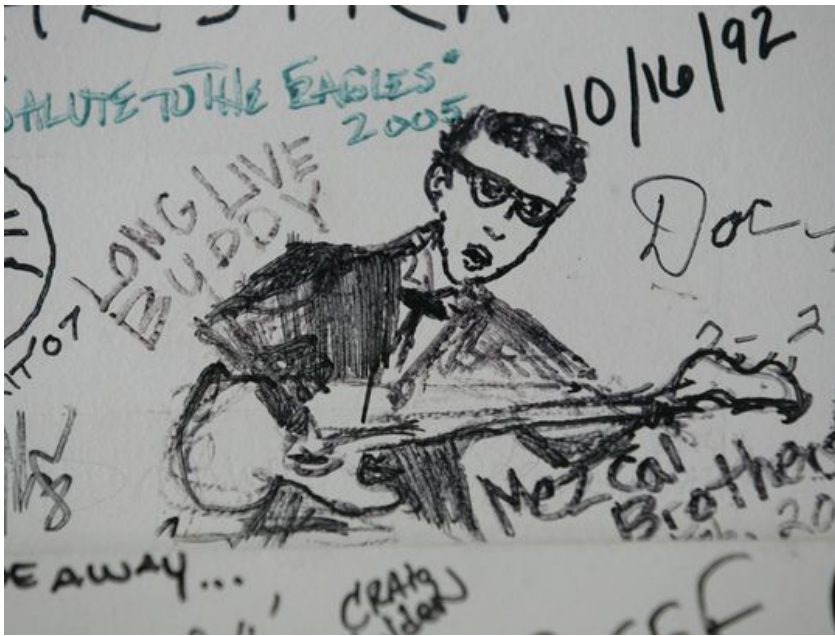
"I've told so many people that if you're going to have a problem," Dwyer once said, nearly in tears, "the best place to have a problem is in Iowa, because the people in Iowa give a damn."

## 'An ever-dwindling group'

Tribute will be paid to Dwyer on Friday night on stage at the Surf. His official funeral isn't until March 5 at Zion Lutheran Church in Clear Lake.

The family needed that long, Barb said, to reconvene in Iowa while also allowing mourners from around the globe to make travel plans.

Dwyer was the latest casualty among the extended cast of Holly characters. [Joe B. Mauldin \(/story/life/music/2015/02/07/joe-mauldin-buddy-holly-bassist-dies/23038149/\)](#), bassist in Holly's band, the Crickets, died almost exactly a year ago.



The green room behind the stage at the Surf Ballroom is scrawled with signatures and drawings left behind by performers and famous fans. (Photo: Register file photo)

[Elwin Musser](http://story/news/2015/03/30/elwin-musser-photographer-obit/70676120/) (/story/news/2015/03/30/elwin-musser-photographer-obit/70676120/), the humble, lively newspaper photographer who snapped the iconic black-and-white pictures of the plane wreck, also died last year, at 95.

[J.P. Richardson Jr.](http://globegazette.com/news/local/jay-richardson-son-of-the-big-bopper-dies/article_27c84916-0a80-11e3-9633-0019bb2963f4.html) ([http://globegazette.com/news/local/jay-richardson-son-of-the-big-bopper-dies/article\\_27c84916-0a80-11e3-9633-0019bb2963f4.html](http://globegazette.com/news/local/jay-richardson-son-of-the-big-bopper-dies/article_27c84916-0a80-11e3-9633-0019bb2963f4.html)), the Bopper's son who went so far as to exhume his father's body in 2007 to try to dispel myths around the cause of the crash, was just 54 when he died a few years ago from heart problems.

"It's an ever-dwindling group of folks," Nicholas said. "But, you know, the music is so good, and it's so pure, and it is so timeless."

## Dwyer saw Holly's plane go down

The music continues to draw pilgrims who flock to what is one of Iowa's most morbid, remote tourist spots.

I've never shivered more than during the 50th anniversary of the crash in 2009 when I stood among a gaggle of fellow journalists and fans around a bonfire near the crash site that kept all of us from dying of hypothermia in the 27-degree-below-zero wind chill. We sang "American Pie" through chattering teeth. A sightseeing plane circled above and a bottle of rum was passed around below.

The weather should be warmer Saturday when the Surf staff will lead tourists on an organized visit to the crash site at 10 a.m.

Dwyer stood at the Mason City airport that fateful night in 1959 and "actually saw the aircraft going down," he said in 2009. "I could see my little taillight — which is about the size of the tip of your little finger — I saw that little white taillight going down."



**A giant pair of Buddy Holly eyeglasses marks the roadside spot that leads to the crash site north of Clear Lake. (Photo: Register file photo)**

He also was the first to find the plane the next morning when he traced Peterson's flight path. He even saved and stored the wreckage.

"Jerry never wanted to get rid of anything," Barb said, "so I have my hands full."

The Civil Aeronautics Board in 1959 ruled (<http://data.desmoinesregister.com/holly/documents.php>) that pilot error and incomplete weather information caused the crash. But then there was a belated flurry a year ago as the National Transportation Safety Board considered reopening (</story/news/2015/03/03/transportation-board-considers-reopening-buddy-holly-crash/24315777/>) the investigation.

Ultimately the board declined (</story/news/2015/04/28/buddy-holly-plane-crash-investigation/26498071/>), citing insufficient evidence.

Dwyer logged more than 44,000 flying hours and was inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame (<http://www.flyingmuseum.com/h.-jerry-dwyer.htm>). He began flying at 13 and bought his first airplane two years later.

Near the end, Barb said, and despite the fog of Alzheimer's, her husband when prodded about flying suddenly blurted out from bed, "I don't think there's anybody around here that would know more about aviation than I would."

There's certainly nobody who had more firsthand knowledge about those final moments on the day the music died.

"It wasn't weather like everybody claims," Dwyer said in 2009, but wouldn't reveal more.

"You're going to have to read my book one of these days," he smiled, "and you'll find out."

That'll be the day.

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**Buddy Holly** (Photo: *Special to the Register*)

## **2016 Winter Dance Party**

Winter Dance Party (<https://www.surfballroom.com/wdp-schedule.html>) events at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake continue through Saturday.

Doors open at 6:30 p.m. for Friday night's concert with Flash Cadillac, Johnny Rogers Band and the Holy Rocka Rollaz.

Saturday night's concert features the Crickets and Friends, with a tribute to Joe B. Mauldin. Current band members Sonny Curtis and J.I. Allison will be joined by Glenn D. Hardin, Tommy Allsup, Tonio K., Gordon Payne, Albert Lee, Keith Allison and special guests the Killer Vees. Also performing: Wanda Jackson, Jason D. Williams and "Ricky Nelson Remembered" featuring Matthew and Gunnar Nelson.

For tickets and other information go to [surfballroom.com](https://www.surfballroom.com/) (<https://www.surfballroom.com/>).

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