

Intel Feb. 1/03 p. D2
Gwen Hall attends every Club 39 singles dance.

She's not there to meet someone but to ensure everything is running smoothly in her capacity as club president — and to also dance up a storm and have lots of fun.

"I sure do," said Hall. "And at my age I feel very lucky that I can, that I have good enough health to do all these things."

The Sidney Street apartment resident is in her mid-70s.

"I love to dance to all the music. I can cha cha, jive, waltz, polka, you name it and I'm there," said Hall.

The retired Ontario Milk Marketing Board employee figures she attends about 12 different dances a month in different halls in this region, including the Club 39 dances held every second Friday night at the Oddfellows Hall and featuring the music of the Starliters Orchestra.

"Sometimes I get tired, but I can always rest the next day," she laughed.

Hall is in her 11th year as president of Belleville Club 39.

It started out as a singles club 40 years ago for people over the age of 39 "and the name has stuck." Kingston and Brockville also have a Club 39.

Shortly after Hall became club president, the executive decided to open the dances to couples as well "because attendance at the dances was going down and we had people who wanted to attend the dances because of the band."

Nowadays, each dance attracts upwards of 150 people, even some from as far away as Peterborough. Most are 50 and over and singles still account for 75 per cent of the dancers. (But only singles can become club members).

"These dances are very popular because we make people feel welcome to our dances and we go out of our way to make them want to join in the fun. We have 'mixers' five times a night where people get to dance with others," said Hall.

She said the club was her "saviour" after the death of her husband, Garfield Hall, in 1985.

"I was alone for a year and a girlfriend suggested I go with her to a Club 39 dance. I was nervous and asked myself what was I doing here....but I have rarely missed a dance since."

She and her late husband were married 42 years and raised five children.

Born in Thurlow Township, Hall attended a small school on the 8th of Thurlow and also completed two years of high school there.

She enrolled at Ontario Business College, graduated seven months later with a diploma in shorthand and typing and, in 1942, went to work for a Belleville law firm, Porter Payne and Arnott. Less than two years later, she got married and moved to Hall Settlement near Latta.

The couple operated a small dairy farm and started a family.

Hall returned to the workforce in August of 1954, joining the Ontario Milk Marketing Board. She spent 37 years with the provincial agency in the cheese division building on the Keegan Parkway in Belleville, now a warehouse. She retired

in 1991.

"I had the most versatile job there ever was," Hall said.

She was bookkeeper and then office manager. For many years, she ran the Dutch clock for the selling of cheese for Ontario cheese factories and was responsible for shipping products advertised on the back of milk calendars.

Hall loved her job.

"So many people complain about their jobs. I didn't. I enjoyed the work and I needed the money," she laughed.

Hall said the marketing board was the "best thing" that ever happened to both cheese factories and milk producers "because it stabilized their prices for cheese and milk."

She saw a lot of changes during her career.

"When I went to work for the milk marketing board, there were 387 cheese factories in Ontario and when I finished, there was 15. The rest either amalgamated or closed."

Hall and her husband had moved to Belleville in the fall of 1985 because of his ill health. He died not long afterwards.

That's when Club 39 helped her deal with her loss.

"I made up my mind I was going to go out and do things and make a new life for myself...I have rarely missed a dance since that first night in late 1987."

She was elected president in 1992.

"I enjoy being president. I just like to see it run for the enjoyment of others."

Dancing is now one of her favourite activities. She belongs to the Ole Tyme Fiddlers

Association and attends its monthly dances.

"My friend and I usually go to a dance every Saturday night, wherever this is a dance at the Oddfellows, Fish and Game Club or the Mohawk Orange Lodge. I love to dance and it keeps my joints oiled."

Besides dancing, she also volunteers at Eastminster United Church "doing office work or whatever they need me to do."

In addition to her five children, Hall has 14 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

She joked that they are lucky to catch her at home most days.

"I'm always on the go or the dance floor and I like it that way."

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