**JIMMY WALLER**

Allen Nelson Peltier

Jimmy Waller,

old gray-haired man,

printing a six-page newspaper

in a small Virginia town,

you told them; you used to say

I played cornet with Bix Bierderbeck;”

and they said

“Who’s he”

and you said, with your eyes seeing

through the years,

“He was the best there ever was.”

They looked at you with the dream

still fresh in your eyes, and they thought

what a strange, funny, sad old man

you are.

You don’t bother telling

the young ones any more;

they don’t know about Bix

and they don’t understand.

But

As you absently watch page five

roll off your second-hand press,

You remember

the kid getting off the train in his

faded green overcoat and tan cap,

looking for all the world like the

dumbest hick ever to hit Chicago.

You remember the golden throated horn

that the world, your world, called

the greatest. And he was.

You remember the $50 bill that the

drunk businessman put in the

bell of Bix’ horn because his

skinny, peroxide-frizzed girlfriend

loved the way the horn curled

around “Ain’t Misbehavin.”

You remember

the hot nights playing out on the

pier with the good looking girls

and the gangly, awkward college boys.

You remember

the smoky, uncomfortable trains,

the musty depots, the 2:00 AM

hamburgers, naked bulbs hanging

in smelly hotel rooms, the warm beer

and the cold nights. You remember

that series of hellish one-nighters

through Indiana.

You played with the greatest

and nobody remembers.

Armstrong would have,

and Red Nichols. They

were there and they knew

he was the greatest.

One night, you, Bix and the boys walked into

an after-hours club where old Satchel Mouth

was playing. As you settled in at a table, his

gravel-grated growl cut through the

cigar and reefer fumes with “Folks, let’s make

a little noise for the great Bix Biederbeck

and his ban!” And the people clapped.

They knew.

(That was before Armstrong’s manager

made him change from cornet to trumpet

because the trumpet is longer; before

hard times forced Nichols into welding ships

out in Diego.)

You remember how the band “clicked”

like a well-oiled machine

or a printing press. It was

a lot of laughs;

the fame

the money,

even being stranded

in Cairo, Illinois.

You remember

the laughs.

You remember

Bix dying

in a drunken sleep

at age twenty-eight.

You played at the funeral

(“When the Saints Go Marching In”)

and you cried

like a baby.

A little of you, and a big chunk

of the decade folks now call

The Jazz Era

died with him.

Late at night,

while the grand kids dream about

the space creatures they saw on TV,

you take a battered old case

out of the closet, run your fingers

over the contours of a dented,

tarnished cornet, and imagine

the sound it used to make when

you pressed down the valves.

As you doze off in your recliner

with the horn in your hands,

you mind conjures the sound

of a distant trumpet

playing perfect thirds over

an old, old melody.