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ALWAYS MAGIC IN THE AIR:
 THE BOMP AND BRILLIANCE OF
 THE BRILL BUILDING ERA

By Ken Emerson

Viking

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In the late 1950's, the Brill Building retained a certain raffishness. A bookie would interrupt songwriting sessions to retrieve the betting slips he stashed in a piano. Enterprising writers continued to start on the top floor and work their way down.

"If they had a song that was so-so but they could sell it," recalled Ed Cramer, an attorney who became head of BMI, "they'd get \$25 for an advance, and they'd sell it five times before they hit the first floor. It was like 'The Producers.' The song wasn't going to make it, so no one would ever know the difference."

Still, by now the Brill Building had settled into stodgy semi-respectability. One major publisher nearly fired a young secretary for wearing a sweater to work.

"It could just as well have been an insurance company," she recalled.

The two restaurants at the base of the Brill Building illustrated its divided nature. To the left was the Turf Restaurant, where writers congregated because the food was cheap and traded tips about who was looking for new material.

"The Turf was for people with less money," one habitue recalled, "though it had two sections. For cats that did have money, it was seafood, surf and turf, and you could

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sit at a table. The guys who could get roast beef on a bun for 50 cents were standing at the counter."

"There were about 20 phone booths," Kenny Vance remembered. "So everybody who didn't have an office in the Brill Building had their own office, because they'd be working out of the phone booth."

The Turf made life easier for impecunious patrons by listing a public telephone number in the Yellow Pages.

To the right you entered Jack Dempsey's Restaurant and Bar, where the champ held court in a corner booth and only big shots and tourists could afford the fare.

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