

The Come-back of the Old Time Fiddler



By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

SHORT time ago a Montreal newspaper printed an article under the title of "Our Canadian Folk-Dances" in which Kathleen Redman Strange, the author, said: "If you ever have watched a group of country people engaged in a 'square' dance, you will readily understand why I regret the passing of these old-time favorites from the floors of our present-day country dance halls.

"As recently as ten years ago these square or group dances were an integral part of our western country life. Today the modern tendency for jazz is crowding out the old-time fiddler and the old-time dances. The old-time fiddler cannot play the new dance music, though he can play the old irresistibly. The consequence is that not only the fiddlers, the 'callers,' and the old rhymes themselves, but also the people who know how to dance the figures are disappearing."

"If this Canadian woman had crossed the boundary line into this country and visited various places in a number of different states she might have discovered that mourning over the 'passing of the old-time fiddler' is still a bit premature. If, for instance, she had gone into the Catskills in New York she might have made an interesting discovery, as witness the following from the New York Sun:

Having explored the Catskills, Mary Elizabeth Osborn has recorded in American Speech some of the results of her observations on the square dance.

"The neighbors gather in the 'front parlor,' the barn or, corrupting touch for the true antiquarian, in the garage. The fiddler calls the figures; he is dictator of the dance; he has been known to stop fiddling and scold the dancers if the figure is not being performed quite swiftly enough or evenly enough to meet his approval."

Whatever the dance may be, says this historian, there are introductory and closing steps that are always the same. The opening figure is ordered thus:

- "Head couples,
 - Right and left,
 - Half promenade;
 - Ladies change,
 - Balance four,
 - Allemand left,
 - All promenade."
- The closing figure is directed in this fashion by the master of festivities:

- "Ladies to the right and swing,
 - Balance to the next;
 - Gents to the right and swing,
 - Balance to the next;
 - Allemand left,
 - All promenade."
- In "Captain Jinks," a favorite dance, the figures are performed with enthusiasm to these quatrains, the "flying lady" is frequently lifted bodily from the floor and swung in the air with right good will:

- "First lady swing with Captain Jinks;
- Now with the one that never drinks;
- Now with the one that carries the chinks,
- And now with the dude of the ballroom.

First gentleman dance with lady so fair;

Now with the one with curls in her hair;

Now with the one that flies in the air,

And now with belle of the ballroom."

A typical dance for four couples is expressed in these lines:

"First two give right hands across,

Back with the left;

Fall back between side couples,

And forward six,

Richmond, Va.—For the first time in Virginia's history the old lyrics of a forgotten day that came to America with the first colonists, are to be heard again, when the picturesque valleys and hollows of the Blue Ridge mountains surrender their mountain bards, April 14 to 17, of this year for the first Virginia music festival, to be held at Charlottesville. Above is shown a group of the old fiddlers getting in a bit of practice for the coming festival.

And back with the left;
Join your partner,
And balance four in a line;
Swing to places
And promenade all."

This is an aspect of life in the Catskills the summer boarder does not know. Our author says that in the villages the square dances are falling off somewhat in popularity, but on the farms they are as greatly enjoyed as they were a generation ago. Jazz leaves the guests apathetic.

It was only a year or so ago that the Kansas City Star chronicled the fact that "ten old-time fiddlers, five from north Missouri and an equal number from the southern section of the state, will saw it out December 30 at Jefferson City for the state championship. The winner will receive a large loving cup. The contest is expected to take all night." And the Rolla (Mo.) Herald reported that "the Ozarks have radio and free rural mail delivery; they have automobiles and roads but refuse to abandon the old square dance where the fiddler plays the 'Arkansas Traveller' and 'Turkey in the Straw' and at the same time calls the dance figures in verse.

A year or so ago a South Dakota editor, commenting upon the revival of the old-time dances in that state, was moved to the following reminiscence of an earlier day:

In the spring of 1870, I witnessed my first frontier dance. A new store building was to be dedicated with a dance. There was room for three "sets" of four couples each to dance at once and the musician and caller was Dume Evans. Just what Dume was a contraction of I never knew. His music didn't appeal even to my unpracticed ear, but his unique and poetic improvisation as he "called" to his own fiddling impressed me more than the movement of the dancers. When the sets were full, Dume's fiddle and also his voice came into action. He always sang in a droning monotone, keeping time also with his foot. The opening was always the same, "S'lute yer partners.

"Jine hands and circle to th' left,
"Right hand to yer partner an' grab right and left."

By this time his eyes were closed and his voice had risen to a sort of rhythmic wail:

"First couple lead to the couple on the right,

"Lady in the center an' three hands 'round; mind yer feet feller, don't tromp on her gown,

"First lady swing out and second lady in; three fine hands and circle again,

"On to the next couple, hoe it down; three fine hands and caper 'round,

"Third lady to the center; give your honey a whirl, lead to the next with your best girl,

"Grab your honies, don't let 'em fall, shake your hoofs and balance all,

"Ringtail coons in the trees at play; grab your partners and run away."

Or there might be a variation after the grand circle-to-the-left, something like this:

"Buffalo gals are a comin' out to-night; first couple lead to the couple on the right; jaybird scoldin' up in a tree; gents stand around and ladies do-se; if you catch a yeller jacket let 'er go; ladies stand back and gents do-se-do. On to the next and do it some more; make them cow hides hit the floor.

"Back to yer places that-away; grab them heifers and all chaw hay." Or it might be in a sort of reminiscent and sentimental vein that he would call:

"First gend lead to lady on yer right and watch yer step now, mind yer; back to yer place and swing that gal, the gal yer left behind yer."

Dume's physical endurance apparently was as inexhaustible as his power of improvisation. Hour after hour the old fiddle would screech, and hour after hour the voice of the fiddler would drone on while his foot kept time without intermission. Of course there were occasional periods of irrigation, though Dume never seemed to be affected by his potions, and when at last the dance broke up it was near the hour of blushing morn.

Similarly a writer in the Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal told of old-time dances and old-time fiddlers in that state as follows:

Some of the old-time Kentucky fiddlers had more of a variety of tuneful breakdown melodies in their repertoire than others, but there was one accomplishment in which fewer excelled. That was the calling of the dance figures, which some of them could do in an original and novel way.

The figures of the old-time square dances were called off in the quaint vernacular couched in loose rhyme, and the variations that took a wide range occasioned much merriment. Following is a sample of one of the characteristic dance calls of the period:

"S'lute yer pardner and let her go;
Balance all and do-se-do.
Swing yer gal and run away;
Right and left and gents sashay,
Gents to right and swing or cheat;
On to next gal and repeat.
Balance next and don't be shy;
Swing yer pard and swing her high.
Bunch the gals and circle round;
Whack yer feet until they bound.
Form a basket and break away;
Swing around and all get gay.
All gents left and balance all;
Lift yer hoofs and let 'em fall.
Swing yer opposite, swing again;
Ketch the sagehens if you kin.
Back to pardner, do-se-do;
All fine hands and off you go.
Gents salute yer little sweets;
Hitch and promenade to seats."

The time-honored square dance, or quadrille, included other figures, one of them being called "bird-in-the-cage." Others were made up and interpolated, such as "Swing Yer Long Cornstalk," which had its origin in Arkansas. Usually the dance "caller" of other days had a foghorn voice and he contributed much to the "shindigs" of the period that often lasted until daylight before the final strains of "Home, Sweet Home" broke up the party.

All of which offers rather conclusive evidence that it's not yet time to write "anis" to the old-time fiddler and his dance tunes. He will hold sway at the Virginia music festival at Charlottesville this month, according to the information accompany the picture shown above, and judging by reports of fiddlers' contests in other parts of the country which have appeared in the newspapers recently, it seems likely that he will pursue his "calling" for some time yet to come.

(By Western Newspaper Union.)

Community Building

Bad Sidewalks Reflect Discredit on Owners

Sidewalks, in a sense, are much like the "one-hoss" shay. We never think much about them until the darn things break down.

Many factors may cause a walk to fall into disrepair. A vagrant tree root, for instance, may press against the under side and eventually make the adjacent section of walk look like so much disturbed pie crust. Whatever the cause of failure, a bad walk can be a menace to safety and an eyesore. Hence, walks in disrepair should be repaired or replaced as soon as possible.

In most cases where the municipality calls the owner's attention to his walks, reconstruction with concrete is invariably recommended and, in most instances, required.

During recent years the vogue for color in walks has aroused considerable interest in many localities. New Orleans, as one example, has departed somewhat abruptly from the familiar gray concrete slab.

In several of the business sections tinted concrete has been used in various shades of green and red. For private walks, especially, the idea has good possibilities. The home walks could easily be tinted to harmonize with the surroundings or the color of the house itself. Some interesting colored flagstone effects could also be achieved under the guidance of an ardent sidewalk builder.

Cities of Future to Be Both Town and Country?

Never again are populations going to live as thickly in the cities as they formerly did. The motor car has settled that. Real estate men long ago saw the trend; and with their customary perspicacity have provided the homesites that the public seeks.

Cities of the future will be enormous in area, almost as large as a small state and will be granted practical autonomy in government. F. H. Collier writes, in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat. Under the same municipal control will be communities of varying types, the same public utilities serving all, and the citizens united for the same general purposes in public matters. Cities will control outlying parks and recreation areas, probably thousands of acres in extent.

The "city" as part of the civic development of the human race is beginning to approach its apex. When complete it will not much resemble the city of earlier and darker ages from which it sprung. It will be much more thoroughly mixed with "country"—rural in urban; and real estate will be dealt in by the square-mile where it now is considered in acres and less.

States Making Progress

Oregon, in developing the beauty of its highways, has locked natural springs in fountains made of native materials.

In North Carolina a program of beautification has been preceded by a survey of what is termed the "bill-board rash."

California has planted trees along 600 miles of highway. Oklahoma has planted 40 miles, and extensive programs are under way in Indiana, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Michigan.

In Pennsylvania, unauthorized signs lining the highways are removed in semi-annual cleanups which, on one occasion last year, netted more than 25,000 boards.

Proper Care of Lawn

A new lawn should be helped along in the beginning by weeding it until it becomes thick enough to crowd out the weeds.

If you find bare spots, throw on more seed and keep the grass coming, as it is the best insurance against weeds. Give the lawn liberal re-seeding at least the first season or two after establishing. Re-seed until you have established a good thick turf.

Conditions are not all equally favorable and some retard the growth. We might add that light re-seedings every year will keep a lawn in excellent condition, but if the lawn is neglected several years and weeds get in, it is hard to bring it back.

Factors in Highways

That accessibility by means of the highways should be an important factor in the selection of state parks goes without question. Most of the people who visit these areas will expect to reach them by motor car. Whatever may be the necessary considerations in setting aside the larger park areas, it seems plain enough that many smaller parks, if only of a few acres, can be established immediately adjacent to or conveniently near the roads that are most heavily traveled.—Kansas City Times.

Development Handicaps

Roadside attractiveness stimulates sound development and increases land values. I heard recently of a sale of a \$150,000 house which was stopped because there was a nearby gasoline station. Sand and gravel operations have stopped residential development within sight of them. More development is stopped through fear of what the neighboring property will do than for any other cause.—Exchange.

"Intention" in Bequest Held Sacred by Courts

A copy of Samuel Hoffenstein's "Poems in Praise of Practically Nothing" has been filed with Surrogate Hetherington of Queens. It contains the last will and testament, written in ink on a flyleaf, of Mrs. Elizabeth Nusbaum of Bayside. The will contains 36 words, is properly signed and witnessed by two fellow patients in the hospital where it was written and leaves all Mrs. Nusbaum's property to her husband. In accordance with the law rule that the intention of the testator must be observed, the will is presumably valid for probate. The law is more solicitous for the substance than for the form of wills. The scrawl of a soldier fatally hurt in battle, of a patient dying in hospital, with the mind clear, is sacred to the court.

Odd wills have ever been much in use with the writers of fiction—none more odd, surely, than that which Rider Haggard described 43 years ago in "Mr. Meeson's Will." This Meeson, cast away on a desert island without writing paper, tattooed his will on the back of a girl companion in shipwreck; and later it was good in an English court. Just what an actual court might do with an actual Meeson will we do not profess to know; this is one case where fiction is stranger than fact. But thousands of wills as informal as Mrs. Nusbaum's have been probated without question.—New York World.

Plenty of Thrills in This Airplane Runaway

Several years ago one heard of runaway horses. Today we have runaway airplanes—at least at the Ciampino airfield, near Rome. A huge Caproni machine was basking empty in the sun, all set for a trial flight, when its mechanic, who had set the motor going slowly, was surprised to see the plane moving forward.

A few more seconds of awed hesitancy and the machine began to slide along the ground more rapidly, covered about 100 yards, gently rose from the field and headed straight for the barracks. Bewildered spectators foresaw an inevitable collision, but the robot Caproni made the grade, rose a bit higher and began a series of acrobatics which the most daring stunt birdman might have envied.

After a few moments the wind caught it and it was seen to turn on one side and dive to the ground in flames. Aviators, in discussing the incident, conjectured that the mechanic accidentally opened the petrol lever as he was jumping out of the cockpit.

Dr. Pierce's Pellets are best for liver, bowels and stomach. One little Pellet for a laxative—three for a cathartic.—Adv.

Insanity Laid to Idleness

The dominant causes of many mental disorders are unhappy domestic relations and unemployment and its attendant financial worries, according to a survey presented to the Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Diseases at its meetings held recently in New York. The survey shows that of 100 cases studied, mental illness was caused in twenty-five instances by friction in family life and in fifteen cases by unemployment and loss of savings. Other causes included: death of relatives, nine; anxiety over health of family, sixteen, and emotional stress of an unnamed type, seven. Dr. A. C. Bonner, leader in the discussions, said that women were more susceptible than men.—New York Evening Post.

Among Women

"What are you lamenting now?" "The art of conversation is said to be dying out."
"Not among women. It has merely been transferred from the salon to the telephone."—Louisville Courier-Journal.

Window Shopping

Our idea of perfect happiness is to ramble around looking at things. It makes growing old difficult.—Collier's Weekly.

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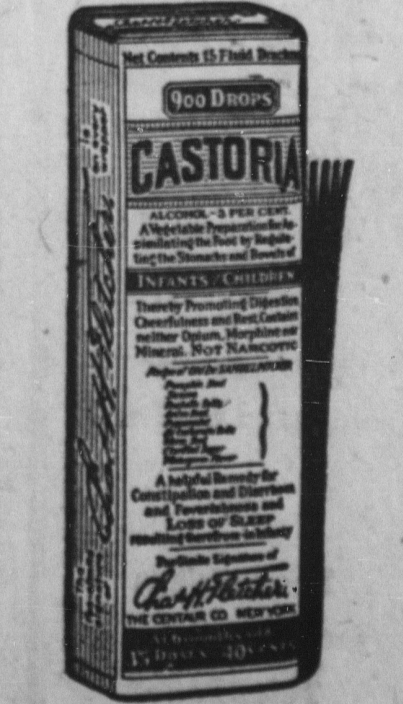
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Archery Target

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