

At the Schoolhouse Dance

Fun for the whole family!

If a farming community had a “social season” it would be winter. With harvest in, fall work done, hay for the stock secured in the barn loft, a farm family might just have a bit more of what we today call leisure time.

As so many seniors will tell us, in the old days, people had to make their own fun. Social life was vital to people who spent long days working on their farm, isolated from other human contact outside of family.

One might also say that these social events were essential to the process of match-making.

From the earliest pioneer days, music and dancing were one of the

things that would motivate people to bundle up, leave the warmth of home, and have some fun with their neighbours. It brought people together.

Perhaps it was also those long winter evenings that prompted so many people to take up an instrument. There seemed to be no shortage of people to provide music for the social gatherings.

The schoolhouse was the place to gather, and if someone could play a fiddle and someone could chord along on a piano or banjo, you had the makings of a dance.

Small schoolhouses at Lake Max, Horton, Wassewa, Mountain-side, Whitewater, and Strathallen were popular spots.

Sometimes the dance might be combined with a “box social”. The girls brought fancy boxes, with lunches for two, which were auctioned off. The proceeds could be used for church work. That way, if the dance wasn’t enough to spark a romance, the young people had a

second chance to make an impression at lunch. At other times they might start with a whist

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A Family Affair...

Phyllis McQuorquodale remembers:

“I remember chording at a fiddling contest for my dad Parker Patterson when I was about six years old. From there, I remember playing for functions at school.

“Of course dad played the violin at all country schoolhouse dances, and I found myself sharing the chording with Luta and Auntie Eileen.

“It was a real pleasure to play for those people. You know they were so keen to dance and there was no liquor or anything like to make them get up and dance. They just danced because they loved it.”

► Wassewa School was the site of many dances and social events.

drive, crokinole party, or a speaker, then follow that up with a dance.

Sometimes half the fun was getting there. Sid Ransom recalled the fun that they had when a whole bunch would get together and go to a dance in the sleigh-box. “We’d start out from our place and pick up various people along the road as we went and by the time we’d get to the dance, of course, we would have a pretty good sleigh load.”

There was no “cover charge”. The musicians generally played for free. There was no open bar. Food was of the potluck variety, meaning it would be plentiful, wholesome and fresh.

When asked, Bessie Smith insisted that there wasn’t too much moonshine at the dances unless they had a still hidden back in the bush somewhere.

If you had young children you brought them along. They could join in until it was time to bed them down in the cloakroom. In fact budding musicians often got their first “on-stage” experience at a tender age. Doug McKinney recalled attending a country dance at the age of five and was playing a violin for dances by the time he was twelve.

Sources:

Personal Reminiscence of the author.
Oral History Boissevain and Morton Regional Library and Archives & TM-SPHA Collection.

