A Tradition Since Forgotten

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a new form of celebration occurred which eventually evolved into a form of Saturday night extravaganza. After the completion of a new barn, workers and their families gathered in celebration of the completed structure. Many times the new barn was decorated and a dance held in appreciation of the workers, families, and friends.

The original name for this celebration was “pas de quatre,” a French word meaning a dance for four, but this was misleading as in America “pas de quatre” was known as a dance for two people. Later these will be called barn dances such as square, round, and circle hall.

The Northeast Missouri barn dances started in the early 1930s during the Great Depression. There was not much money then so people could not afford luxuries. Of course, many things that were considered luxuries in those days are often taken for granted today such as going to see a picture show or going out to eat.

During 1925, the porch of Mr. and Mrs. Ivie “Buckeye” Bergman was cleared of furniture many times and the Queen City, Missouri, barn dances originated here.

If you lived in Queen City, Missouri, in the early 1930s you might recall a group of teenagers that started a barn dance. This group of about 20 teenagers, referred to as the “gang,” began this idea in the home of Ivie “Buckeye” and Mae Bergman about five miles east of Queen City.

One night during the fall of 1932 their daughter, Kathleen (Bergman) Yates, and the “gang” decided to pull all the furniture off the front porch of the Bergman’s house so they could dance. Little did they know that this porch was going to become so full of friends that they would have to move into the house, and later the barn.

Preparing the barn took approximately half an hour according to Mrs. Yates. She said, “My parent’s barn was mainly used because it was the newest and probably the biggest barn belonging to a member of the ‘gang.’” Her father was a carpenter and had built a stairway up to the hay loft and then placed two wind propellers on each side of the loft to circulate the air. “The propellers were
attached to a gas engine which did not make much noise and did not interfere with the music at all," stated Mrs. Yates. The lights in the loft came from Coleman lanterns. She said, "There were three lanterns which hung from the ceiling, one sat on top of the piano and one hung downstairs, which at that time was considered to be a nice bright light."

Her family swept the hay and dirt out of the barn loft. Corn meal was applied over the wooden floor and was scattered by the dancers' feet as they danced. "The more that was applied the slicker it got!" replied Mrs. Yates.

The dances were held from around 7 p.m. until midnight every Saturday during the summer months. It was an invitation by word-of-mouth to friends and family. The charge was 25 to 50 cents each, which was enough to pay the band for five hours work. However, there was not enough money left over to pay for decorations or refreshments. The crowd learned to do without, but that never interfered with the fun.

Part of the "gang," Carl "Doc" Bernizer, Paul Vannmeter, Paul Yarns, Edgar Johnson, C. C. "Bun" and Nellie Figge provided most of the music at the dances. Mr. Bernizer played the mandolin, Mr. Vannmeter was on banjo, Mr. Yarns played the accordion, while Mr. Johnson and C. C. "Bun" Figge played violins, and Nellie Figge played the piano for a number of callers. Some of the most remembered songs were "Sweet Jenny Lee," "Wagon Wheels," "Silver Haired Daddy," "Springtime in the Rockies," and "Take me Back to my Saddle."

"A platform was built along the south wall to hold the band, while along the north wall bales of hay were placed so people could sit," remembered Doc Bernizer and Paul Vannmeter. They also said, "The barn could hold three squares of dancers at once." The members of the band dressed in their regular work clothes and looked like the dancers. Many men wore overalls and their black or brown Sunday shoes while the young girls wore plain cotton dresses or flowered prints. Instead of panty hose the girls wore white knee highs or bobby socks and loafers, others wore tie shoes.

Queen City, Missouri, was not the only city to provide this kind of entertainment. At the same time people in Kirksville, Missouri, were paying a quarter every Saturday night from April until November to attend barn dances held at Carter and Mary Patton's home just east of Kirksville on Highway 11. Their barn, built in 1925, held 8 to 12 squares of dancers at a time. "People came from Moberly, Missouri, Quincy, Illinois, Ottumwa, Iowa, and Centerville, Iowa," said Mrs. Patton.

The barn was decorated with balloons and streamers. For special occasions like Halloween or the Fourth of July the barn's decorations complimented the special occasion. To pay for these decorations, Mr. and Mrs. Patton charged the males but the females were let in free. They rented the barn to the public for private parties at the cost of $10. A refreshment stand was available with soda pop for 5 cents and candy bars for a quarter being sold at both the private parties and public dances. From the night's receipts, $3 to $4 went to the band. John Lawson played the piano, Willis Welt was on drums, while Loren West and Arthur Harbur played their violins.

The only way onto the dance floor was up a ladder from the outside of the giant white barn. Benches were built along the east and west walls for those not wanting to dance or waiting to be asked. "Parents would come and sit on the benches while their children danced all night," said Mrs. Patton. "Everyone could come as long as they
behaved themselves. There were no signs of misconduct, but everyone knew how to behave,” she added. But just to be sure a muscular man, named Bob McClanahan, was the overseer.

Mrs. Patton commented that people still come up to her today and say, “You’re the ones who had those ‘good’ barn dances!” So, if people enjoyed these barn dances so much, why did they stop? Was it money, growing families, or were times just changing? Mr. and Mrs. Patton stated that the reason they stopped having their barn dances was that their family was growing and they wanted to spend more time with their children. Mrs. Yates remarked that everyone in Queen City, Missouri, was growing up and moving away. It is a shame that this tradition which was such clean fun for our parents and grandparents faded away with the passing of time.

by Sharla A. Fox

Mr. and Mrs. Bergman didn’t realize that their daughter’s few friends would fill the new barn.