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Seniors

The 'Barn Dance' brought the community together

Gilbert English was born at Torquay, Devon, England, in 1891. He lives at Speyside, Ontario, where he continues to write his historical articles and stories. The following is Part 2 of a two-part feature:

The Barn Dance
Swing out one, Swing out all,
English, Irish, Scotch, and
Aaaall.

The caller oft ended his singsing rigmarole with a long drawn out Scooootch and Aaaali. The young farmers with a hoot and holler and a pounding of hard heels on the plank floor, grabbed their partners and whirled them around. The flying skirts giving a fine display of the latest fashion in brightly coloured bloomers underneath. When some of the exuberance had died down somewhat, the caller announced "Partners for the supper waltz." Only a few couples stayed for this dance, mostly young people from the town.

The young men had come out in the hope of being introduced to the hard cider to be found in some dark corner.

Two one pound bags of coffee were dumped in. Milk and sugar stirred in and brought to the boil again, taken off the stove, and three our four raw eggs broken in to settle the grounds. While the coffee was being brought down. two other men had taken a clothes basket of cups, plates, forks, spoons around each person taking what they needed to eat with. The young ladies carried plates of sandwiches among the people seated around the yard, wherever they could find a place, on the piles of lumber, timbers not used in the construction of the barn.

Some were sitting on the edge of the barn floor with their legs swinging out over the foundation of the front side that had not yet been boarded up yet. Canned salmon was a favourite sandwich filling, then egg and lettuce, and home killed roast pork. Then followed the men with the gallon enamel jugs of coffee. When the sandwiches had been around several times, the girls took the remains back to the tables and brought out the cakes, pies and cookies. The two friends, Ethel Ivans and Zelda Greene, were going the rounds, one with cake, one with pie.

A strange friendship this, opposite in everything, it had been formed in infancy, when class distinction was unknown, and had lasted all through their teens. Ethel cared very little how she looked or dressed and Zelda, who had a flair for city fashion and sometimes carried it to extreme. For instance if skirts were short, hers were shorter, and if hats were big, hers were bigger. True, she had the looks and the figure to show them off to advantage, and she knew it. Surprisingly enough, she was dressed very moderately this evening. Skirt was proper length mid-cuff, and her blouse even had long sleeves. She had just returned from an extended visit to the West and she didn't even have a cow girl hat.

As the two girls were going around with their plates of cake,

Zelda said to her friend, "Who's that man over there, Willie is talking to?" Ethel said, "You won't know him, he has just come around while you were away. He is the new owner of the old Malcolm farm down at the 'Corners'. You won't get anywhere with him, he is a nice enough kind of guy that keeps to himself pretty much. My dad says he must have a girl or perhaps a wife, back where he comes from. Most weekends he hires ...id Sammy Williams from the Village to go out on Sunday to do his few chores and he drives away in his old Flivver and doesn't come back 'til Monday." Zelda said, "Let's go over there anyway, I know Willie will take a piece of cake."

Most of the local girls tried to avoid Willie McSweeney at these community events. At times he was not very presentable. He wore a heavy cloth peaked cap summer and winter with the peak always hanging over his left ear and his jaws worked continually. The dark stain seeping out at both corners of his mouth, testified to the fact it was not gum he was chewing. Willie was not particularly interested in dancing or women. His main reason for attending these community affairs was to get a good feed of some fancy baking.

Since his mother's death, Willie and his father had "batched" on their farm and their home cooking was of the plainest. Now here an acknowledged beauty and fashion plate was actually going to Willie. As the girls approached Willie called out, "Hi, Zel, heard you were back." She replied, "Hi Willie, I saved you a piece of Mrs. Fraser's cake." Mrs. Fraser was considered the best cake baker in the district. Taking his piece of cake, Willie said "Zel, meet our new neighbor, Cecil Illingworth, Cec, Zel Greene." She put down her cake plate and held out her hand. "Hi Cec, I didn't see you dancing much tonight." "I'm no dancer," he replied. "We'll see," she answered. "The first dance after supper is ladies choice and I am asking you now." "You'll regret it," he said. "We have to go now," said Zelda, "take another piece of cake, Willie."

In community events such as ' this it is 'Ladies please provide.' The men were expected to chip in with half a dollar or a dollar to help defray the expenses of the coffee and the orchestra and rent of the crockery from the church. Old Amos Avery went around with the hat, while they were still eating so as to catch the men before they began to wander away in the dark, seeking something to kill the nasty sweet taste left in the mouth of what they had eaten. It had been whispered around during the evening that Old Tom Katz was down off the mountain and that he had "something on both hips" and for a consideration a sample could be had.

When all had finished eating, two men went around with the clothes basket and gathered up the crockery and utensils and took them to the farm house. Some of the women would come

in in the morning and wash up and take them to the church to await the next occasion they would be needed, be it a wedding, funeral or school Christmas concert.

Dancing was resumed after supper and Zelda went to claim her dance with Cecil and it turned out satisfactory to both parties, but Willie had disappeared. When Ethel found him he was back at the tables where the ladies were fixing a plate of different goodies for Willie to take home a treat to his father Old Johnny. The ladies were sorting out and packing their own plates which they brought the provisions in, and Mrs. Taylor was looking very frustrated.

Mrs. Taylor had the reputation at these events where 'Ladies provide' of fussing around the table as the cakes were brought in, and picking out the best cake and contriving to hide it in a dark corner or under a pile of papers. Then when she was getting ready to go home "just by accident" find this cake uncut and take it home, so it wouldn't be wasted. Tonight with tables in the open yard, and the other ladies sitting around there were no dark corners so she went home emptyhanded.

It was now getting well past midnight and old Tom's hip was getting lighter and clashing with the hard cider. There were several little flare-ups between the town boys and the country boys, so old Amos who on occasion took on the role of peace maker told Bill Hills, the orchestra leader, to call the Home Waltz, and proceeded to extinguish some of the oil lanterns hanging from the rafters, making the dim light more dim. The orchestra launched into the Bubble song which was all the rage in the country at the time, and as the dancers swayed to the music of the popular song in the dim light, someone began to sing, another chipped in then everybody was singing:

retty bubbles in the air,
They fly so high, nearly reach
the sky, then like my

"I'm forever blowing bubbles,

Dreams they fade and die, fortunes always hiding I've looked everywhere, I've looked everywhere,

I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air."

The orchestra gave an extra long period to this popular song, finally drawing out the last line very slowly and very softly. The dancers with a last hug and kiss, reluctantly broke off, and began to seek out their cars or buggy or whatever they came in. Some still singing, others calling out, "Good night and when's the next barn dance?"

Your right hand to partner, all grand chain,

Grand chain all right around the hall,

Meet your partner and pass

her by,

And wink to the next one on the sly.

And roll 'em around when you come home.

Now, first couple, up the centre and cut off six,

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And see that you don't get missed,

Swing when you meet and do it up neat,

Now up the centre and cut off four,

And do the same as you did before.

Now up the centre and cut off two,

And do the same as you used to do.

Swing out one, Swing out all, English, Irish, Scooootch and Aaaaallll.

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