

AND ALL PROMENADE

By Katherine Buxbaum

The term folk song and folk singing, popularized through radio and television, should be broad enough to cover the subject of this essay. And, yet, the songs that were the life blood of the party games of the late 19th century seem, to me, to have been of a different breed.

Some studies have been made of these songs, but they are scattered through publications such as *The Journal of American Folk Lore*. The best single work I know is by B. A. Botkin, who began his research at the University of Nebraska and, as his findings grew, wrote the book *The American Play Party Song*, New York, Ungar, 1963. Mr. Botkin has an exhaustive collection of songs, gathered first-hand; much of it from Oklahoma where frontier conditions prevailed well into the 20th century. He interviewed scores of people who gave him fragments, whole songs and variants of songs.

Iowans who may remember having played or even watched the games will find them all in Mr. Botkin's book. But, you may lay the book down, as I did, with the vain regret that it could not possibly recreate the experience as a whole. One needs to see it and hear it — see the players weaving in and out, two lines going in opposite directions, clasping hands as they meet in a grand right and left; hear those rollicking tunes which told the feet what to do; hear the laughter that accompanied a mistake in the pattern, all the good natured "joshing" in which young folks indulge.

Invitations to parties were given out personally or by written message, for the telephone was not yet. The guests were all young adults, teens being pointedly excluded. They had their own gatherings, — "kid parties," their elders called them with a shrug. As a sub-teen myself, I would have had no intimate knowledge of this pleasurable excitement if I had not sat with my parents on the side lines. I drank it all in, of course, enjoying it vicariously, biding my time. My father enjoyed it all, too; his face would crinkle with pleasure

as the players whisked by, and his foot would tap to:

**Old Dan Tucker's a fine old man
He washed his face in a frying pan,
He combed his hair with a wagon wheel
And died with a toothache in his heel.
Get out of the way for Old Dan Tucker . . .**

If the farm house had a large kitchen, it was ideal for the games. At our house, the games had to be in the living room, which was spacious enough, but the wall-to-wall rag carpet was a hindrance so we took it up for the occasion. Early comers tended to linger in the parlor, looking at albums or at stereoptican views. Then when the others had arrived, singly or in couples, someone would call out, "Why don't we play Miller Boy?" And the party would be on. An especially gallant youth might slide across the floor to the lady of his choice with "Will you assist me in this game?" while the shyer ones would link arms with some girl, any girl, and draw her into the circle.

**Happy is the miller boy that lives by the mill,
The wheel turns 'round with a right good will,
Hand in the hopper and the other in the sack.
The ladies step forward and the gents fall back.**

The last line here is typical of the lines in others that were self directed. There was nothing complicated about it if you were on the alert. Now I love to watch the Virginia Reel, where the graceful movements of the dance flow smoothly to the sing-song call of a director; but the players of our party games had an expertise of their own. Such commands as the caller in the square dance gives were indigenous to the song itself:

**Your right hand to your pardner,
Your left hand to your neighbor;
Your right hand to your pardner,
And all promenade.**

Or:

**Half way back and honor your opposite,
Half way back and honor your pard.
O, swing that girl, that pretty little girl,
the girl I left behind me,
And every time I think of her
the tears they fall and blind me.**

Of course, this was not dancing! Make no mistake about that. The square dance just mentioned was not known among us, and it might not have been acceptable, since the word

"dance" was studiously avoided. The ball-room kind we knew by reputation, at least; knew that its favorite form was the waltz, performed by couples linked in what appeared to be an embrace. One of the popular boys in our set played the fiddle himself, and was often sought out by the other element. If he was absent from a neighborhood party, someone might sigh and say, "I suppose he's off somewhere, playing for a dance!"

Looking back on all this now, I ponder the fine distinctions made in accordance with a code, a code whose reasonableness we did not stop to question. Our young people, mostly church-oriented, had persuaded themselves that it was all right to step to music you made yourself (accompanied, perhaps, by someone's mouth harp), but not to the violin. Hadn't they heard the fiddle called "the devil's own instrument?" Likewise, it was permissible for a boy to swing his girl by one hand, or both, or even by the waist as a few of the bolder ones did, but never to take her in his arms. I do not say that a girl did not, now and then, cast a wishful eye in that direction; but, she kept the letter of the law.

Scraps of the play party songs linger in the memory, and as I quote them I find myself humming their brisk, bold tunes. "Wash and scour the old brass wagon." "Oh, let's go down to Rowser's to get some lager beer." "We've got a new pig in the parlor." "We're sailing east; we're sailing west; we're sailing over the ocean. Says I, 'Young man, you'll lose your wife, if you ain't pretty quick in the motion.'" "Chicken on a haystack, can't fly down." "Buffalo girls all around the outside."

**I'm Captain Jinks of the horse marines
I feed my horse good corn and beans,
And court young ladies in their teens
For that's the style of the army.**

And:

**Four hands round the Youger (euchre?) house,
Four hands round I'm gone.
Four hands round the Youger house
With the golden slippers on.**

It would be tedious to attempt to describe the action

accompanying the songs, but we may mention briefly how the ever-popular "Skip to my Lou" was played. Imagine a single large circle of partners, all facing in. But there is an extra — a young man inside the circle, who skips around and steals a girl whose partner is not watching. While the deserted one pursues the couple, all sing, "Lost my partner, and what'll I do?" But, he probably brings her back, to the refrain, "Skip to my Lou, my darling," after which the extra tries it again and the game proceeds with gusto.

Probing for origins of these songs is almost a fruitless task, as little can be stated with certainty. Does "Captain Jinks" suggest a sailor recruited unwillingly in some Civil War regiment? The dictionary gives a symbolic meaning for "Horse Marine" — one who seems to be "a man out of his element."

**I don't want any of your weevily wheat
I don't want any of your barley.
I want the very best you've got
To make a cake for Charlie.**

The familiar "Weevily Wheat" song may be of Scottish origin. Many songs were made by loyal supporters of "Bonnie Prince Charlie," the Pretender to the British crown. One would really expect to find remnants of songs imported from England, but these are very rare. I have my own guess about "Molly Brooks," but can find no supporters for my idea. To me, it seems probable that Molly, for some slight misdemeanor, might have been destined for the penal colony in Australia. Doesn't this sound like it?

**O Molly Brooks has gone to the isle,
And they say she'll never return.**

Even so, she might have had admirers among the English lads who mourned her loss.

On the whole it seems likely that rural America furnished the content of the songs. And, if it is unprofitable to look for sources it is equally futile to search for "meaning" in the verses. Nobody who sang them worried about meaning. The very absurdity of these fragments is part of their charm. Nonsense, sheer nonsense, rates high in the best of children's poetry. Indeed, there is a kinship between the inspired absurdity of Mother Goose and the Play-party song. Invention

is part of it. Given one stanza with the germ of an idea, the free-wheeling imagination of the singers might lead them to add verse after verse. Such spontaneity gives these rustic rhymes a claim to a literary contribution of sorts.

As the 20th century got under way interest in the play-parties waned. The young adults married and settled down, or drifted off to the towns where jobs looked tempting. The Cherokee Strip, just opening up, lured some to try their luck at farming on one of the last frontiers. The younger set, the kid party group, somehow got the notion that the old games were "countrified." They got up "socials," or "sociables." Guessing games and contests calling for a little brain work seemed more genteel. "Molly Brooks" and "Old Dan Tucker" were forgotten.

Tapes, I suppose, will preserve the music of the Rock and Roll generation for a later day, when someone may wish to study the subject. By that time "Do-wah, diddy diddy," or "Get Off of My Cloud" may sound as quaint as "Pig in the Parlor" sounds to one who never attended a play-party.

Union Sword Added To Historical Museum

A Union sword taken as a souvenir by Major William G. Thompson during a surprise raid the Major led against Corpus Christi, Feb. 21, 1864, has been added to the collection of Civil War swords on exhibit at the State Historical Museum, Des Moines. The sword was originally from the Federal gunboat "Sachem," having been taken by Confederate Captain Nolan when he captured the gunboat at Sabine Pass.

Captain Nolan was at Corpus Christie at the time of Major Thompson's raid. The Captain escaped the raiders but Union supplies, including the aforementioned sword, were found in his house.

The sword was donated to the Museum by William G. Thompson, Tenafly, N. J., grandson of Major Thompson.

(Selected Civil War Letters of Major Thompson were published in the *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. 38, No. 6.)

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