

## **ALLONS DANSER!**

### **Some Memories of North Country French Dance Parties**

*Peter C. van Lent*

Dancing was an important and festive part of the social activity of French Americans in Northern New York. Bursting with the *joie de vivre* of their habitant ancestors from Quebec, few of the "Canadiens" could keep their feet still when, at any get-together, someone broke out a fiddle and started a jig or a reel. Be it "Le Bois pourri" or "La Trembleuse," or any other well-known dance piece, players, dancers, and spectators immediately bonded together in true North American Gallic verve. "My early memories of dancing were houseparties held in relatives' homes," recounts Margaret LaPorte of Tupper Lake, a town famous for its 93% French population. "We all absolutely had a ball."

Besides being just fun, dancing in these French American communities reflects the fundamental values of a unique ethnic culture. Margaret LaPorte indicated one aspect of this above with her reference to "relatives." The importance of the family as the basic unit of socialization cannot be overemphasized. Most dancing was done in family reunions or *veillées* which were usually held in private homes. The rugs would be rolled up and removed, and the floor would be carefully waxed the day of the dance. The chairs would be arranged all along the walls of the room, and if there were to be a piano, it would be set up at one end. The other major instrument, the fiddles, would be played right next to the piano. "It was a tight bonding of family members," recalls Miss LaPorte. "There was never any question of arguing, fighting over a girl, or even excessive drinking because we were all 'famille.' If anyone ever did get a bit out of line, an older relative would simply walk up and tell the individual to 'sit down and shut up.'" And he did!

Dancing at these events had no great romantic or sexual aura to it. Often couples represented different generations. A family member would walk up and just grab up a partner and with a twinkling smile say "Allons danser!" Everyone paired off with many different dancing partners during the evening, and it was not uncommon for a married couple or older siblings to hold younger children up in their arms or to form a little threesome while they all danced together. Marie Marceau has vivid memories of dancing from her youth in Ogdensburg's French community: "Often when we all were dancing my parents would lift me up in the air by both arms and I would swing around and whirl about. I wasn't scared at all. I knew they were holding on to me tight." When a square dance was the pursuit of the evening, certain squares would be formed of just the younger relatives, however. This gave them a chance to get to know each other and to learn the dance patterns without being in the way of the older dancers.

Even though the guest list might include one or two close family friends, there was a definite exclusivity to these events. Margaret LaPorte recalls that one family veillée was held in a hotel owned and run by her aunt. Since relatives had come all the way from Syracuse for the occasion, it was "just family." Hearing the lively music and sensing a good time, a group of six or seven young men pulled up to the hotel, parked, and tried to join the party. A cousin kindly but firmly told them that it was not an event open to anyone but family. "But you're having so much fun, can't we come in just for a few minutes?" they pleaded. The answer remained "No."

There were dances that were community events, however. Sometimes neighboring villages would trade off from one weekend to the next having public dances. "I can just see it now," says one of the older French Americans from the Goldsmith-Vermontville area. "We would all pile into sleighs with a double team of horses and bundle up in bear rugs with heating bricks to warm our feet. We'd leave on Saturday afternoon and arrive for supper and then dance all evening. We stayed at houses of friends in the other village and got up Sunday morning for mass before we returned home. The next weekend the friends from that village would do the same thing and come to dance and visit with us. I felt so alive and surrounded by happiness then. Now so many people just sit alone at home and watch television. Modern technology has separated us."

Margaret LaPorte's father was one of the most frequently requested fiddlers in the Adirondacks. "My Dad couldn't read a note of music. He started out playing with his father and learned from him and went on from there." One time the father and son duo were invited to play at an Irish wake. They protested the invitation saying that their music was the joyous, spirited music of square dances and blissful good times. The Irish hosts said that this wouldn't be inappropriate and renewed the invitation even more insistently. Margaret recalls that her menfolk were still very uncomfortable with this situation and went to consult the priest. "Go ahead and play for them," he replied. "It's their custom. They come from another culture." As can be seen from this anecdote, one is never far from the Roman Catholic religion in French American life, and one of the most common occasions for public dances among these people were church socials. The priests always came and acted as hosts, but no one ever recalls that they actually danced. Religious sisters did not attend dances in former times, although it is supposed that they do now. The only time of the year during which there was never any dancing was Lent. "It wasn't so much that there was a strict ban on dancing at this time," recalls one French American. "It was just an unspoken rule that no one ever thought of not following."

The two cultural themes of family and religion are keenly present in what is perhaps the best known North American French folktale of all: the story of Rose LaTulippe at the dance. According to one version from the

Adirondacks, Rose, the most beautiful young woman around, attends a community dance party escorted by her grandparents. It's Mardi gras, the night before the beginning of Lent, and everyone wants to have one last good time. Just as the dance is beginning, an exceedingly handsome young man enters the hall. He is dark with a shock of wavy black hair and is dressed smartly in a black suit. The older men are playing the fiddles and dancing and don't take much notice of him, but the older women don't like him at all. He is not known in the community — a stranger. Nonetheless, he is so polite and suave that Rose's grandmother agrees to let her dance with him. After several dances, he invites Rose to take a walk outside with him. This is going too far! Rose's grandmother rounds up her husband and several other men and tells them to go right out there and bring that man back in. The stranger resists, but the men haul him back into the hall. "That man is Satan!" thunders the grandmother, and sure enough, when the men pull off his boots they find that he does not have human feet, but CLOVEN HOOVES!

It's not likely that Satan attended very many *veillées* in Northern New York. Our final vision of dancing in these French communities should be one of an intense commitment to living. Jubilant, vibrant, closely bonded to each other and to their faith, French Americans have added, sometimes without our even knowing it, a very vital dimension to the life we lead in a climate which often seems opposed to life itself. In this spirit one French American sums up the role of dancing: "It was more than just fun. It was our way of fighting the cold, the dark, the isolation of our lives during so much of the year. We forgot the ice and the wind, and for a few brief hours we were together, whirling, laughing, meeting our future husbands and wives. I was so happy. I'm so glad I lived those times. No one can ever take them away!"

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