

## SHAKIN' A LEG IN THE MILLS

### *Memories of Dancing at the Crary Mills Grange*

By Susan J. Grimm

Dancing has been a vital tradition in this hall since its completion in 1905. Thanks to the willingness of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Judd and Mr. and Mrs. Everett Waite to share their memories, a vivid picture of the past can be recreated.

Rev. and Mrs. Waite, of Colton, played an important part in the dance traditions of both Crary Mills and St. Lawrence County. Everett Waite is an accomplished singing caller who also plays dance tunes on the harmonica. Clara Waite is a talented pianist, chording dance tunes by ear; she, too can sing many traditional square dance calls. "Calling and playing for dances pretty much paid for our farm," recalls Rev. Waite.

When Everett Waite started going to dances in 1936, line or long dances (known today as contradances) were "fading away." He remembers an occasional Portland Fancy, and the Virginia Reel; Clara recalls that they were most likely to be danced at an anniversary party. Otherwise squares, circle two-steps, and waltzes were the order of the evening. There were grange dances nearly every two weeks throughout the winter, and Everett's parents and brother would also attend.

The first caller he remembers is John Kennedy — "one of the greats." The caller would announce the dance — "the next dance will be a waltz," for instance — and then three different tunes would be played for the waltzing, with only a brief pause in between tunes. Dancers remained with the same partner for the duration of the music. If the dance was a square, three different squares or "changes," would be called. That way there would be time to go downstairs and have some food, if you couldn't dance the particular dance about to take place.

Rev. Waite began calling at about the time he graduated from high school in 1938. When people gathered for house parties, they wanted a fiddler, someone to play the parlor pump organ and someone to call — "so I decided to try." He learned new calls by attending other dances, during which he would "squirrel the calls away in my memory." The Spanish Cavalier, a very popular dance locally, was brought to Crary Mills by Rev. Waite after his attendance at a 4-H Congress. A night of calling without amplification was hard on the voice, so he and Claude Aldrich would "split the night," sharing the calling duties at grange dances. The Waites remembered that "people were good about quieting down and listening to the calls, once the music started." By the mid-1940's, bands were amplified and provided the caller with a microphone. This seemed to result in noisier gatherings! Also, the tradition of a two-caller dance subsided, except when another caller was present, and wanted to call a particular dance. Everett called in many localities throughout St. Lawrence County.



However, he stopped calling as often at the grange hall when his children came along and when bands such as Joey Williams' band came onto the scene. These "western" bands usually had their own caller, and were part of a new musical and social tradition.

Before and shortly after the war, dance bands could be as simple as a violin or piano, or as complex as one of the bands that Walter Van Ornum put together; this might include violin, piano, clarinet, trumpet, saxophones, and drums. (Band personnel changed often, and thus the instrumentation!). Mr. Van Ornum lived on Judson Street in Canton, and taught at the high school. Both he and his wife Beverly played the saxophone, but usually Walter played violin for squares and saxophone for rounds. Mrs. Waite often chordeed on the piano while Walter fiddled, as this was not a strong point of the regular pianist. Rev. Waite remembers Mr. Van Ornum as being very easy to work with. Another accomplished local band leader was Joe Calipari from Potsdam, whose band played sets of foxtrots as well as rounds and waltzes; a violin was always added for squares.

"We never had any problems at the dances," remarked Clara. Drinking alcohol and smoking were not allowed in the Hall, and people who tried to do so were asked to leave. Everett remembered that Walter Boyden, a big man who was "strong as a bull," would put his arm around someone who was about to smoke and say "I think you'll want to smoke outside," as he walked the person out the door. This same man and his wife are described by Rev. Waite as "beautiful dancers — both big people but so light and graceful on their feet."

The first band that Mr. Herbert Judd of Crary Mills personally remembered was from the late 1920's — the Guy Crump Orchestra. This orchestra, whose personnel also was changeable, might include violin, piano, sax, clarinet, drums, and sometimes trombone. Most remarkable is that on occasion Mr. Crump would lay down his violin in favor of a xylophone, on which he played melodies.

Mr. Judd is familiar with many other, earlier orchestras, as well as the early hotel dances, kitchen hops, and various types of grange dances, through reminiscences passed down by his parents and grandmother. His earliest memory of a grange dance (which has also been related to him by his parents) is that of, as a toddler, being put down to sleep in a coat on two chairs in a coat room. Waking up and wanting his mother, he apparently wandered out into the hall in search of her, and was intercepted by a man unknown to him. This man lifted him up and carried him among the crowd until Mrs. Judd saw and claimed him. Dances were family affairs and hiring baby sitters wasn't thought of then; unless grandparents at home offered to stay with the children, they went dancing when their parents did.

When Mr. Judd began attending dances as a young man, couples who were married or going steady would often dance the first dance and the last



waltz together — and have different partners all the time in between. However, by the time he had stopped attending dances, some couples were apt to dance together the entire evening. "It was just a completely different social life, and older people thought that those young couples were missing half the fun." His father's cousin had her "favorites," and really looked forward to dancing with each these men. "If the evening had passed, and she hadn't danced with them, she'd have wanted to know why!"

Grange dinners, such as the fall Harvest Dinner, and oyster dinners for Grange Installations, were legendary. But good food seems to have been an integral part of Grange dances also. Herb Judd described an all-night dance at the Mills which began at 8 p.m., and temporarily shut down at 12 a.m. (orchestra included) for a midnight supper. This featured quantities of scalloped potatoes, baked beans, rolls, salads, cakes, jello and coffee. "People didn't just bring small dishes of food — they brought 10-quart casseroles and large platters. Of course, we had our own potatoes, and beans, and pork for the beans."

During the war and the pleasure driving ban, grange dances took on a different format; however, food was still an important aspect of gatherings. Through this period of twice monthly grange meetings (usually first and third Thursdays), the evening schedule might include an 8 p.m. meeting, refreshments at 9:30, and dancing from 10-12. In this way, the ban on pleasure driving had not been broken, as the primary order of business for the evening had ostensibly been the grange meeting! Herb recalls that these dances were quite popular, and drew a great many young people. Another kind of evening at the grange included a Pedro (card) party before dancing. Again, this was a very "sociable" activity in which couples expected to separate from each other and mingle. Four people played at each table; the two with the higher score moved to the head table; the couple with the lower moved to the foot. This would continue for 810 hands.

Many local people are familiar with the music and dancing which has taken place over the past two decades in Crary Mills. Dances are still every two weeks, and people of a wide range of ages are involved. Current musical tastes are reflected in the playing of rock-'n'-roll and country selections, just as previous band leaders were sure to include foxtrot, polka, and even jitterbug changes. And singing squares are still called in groups of three changes each. Thanks to Al Barney and in recent years to Steve Reed and the Generation Gap, traditional dancing is alive and well in Crary Mills.

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