

News & Reviews

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Old Time Dances

In the 1930's a major social recreation for my German-Russian people in Strasburg was dancing to old time accordion music in the famous Blue Room Dance Hall in Strasburg. Dances were a regular Friday night event. The only time dances were any other night of the week was on Easter Monday. People abstained from dancing during the four weeks of Lent, making the Easter Monday dance extra special.

Local accordion players John Schwab, Mike Dosch and the Mastel brothers, along with traveling musicians Charlie Richter, Tom Guthenburg, The Six Fat Dutchmen, The Royal Kings, Whoopee John and Sam and His City Fellers were some of the music providers for the Blue Room dancers. The music was played in sets. A set consisted of three or four waltzes, then three or four polkas and then a couple pieces in the modern vein, like Blue Hawaii and South of the Border.

An old time waltz came in three beats to a measure, like 1-2-3. The accordionist played the beats with his left hand, the base hand. The right hand played melody. Each waltz had three parts, a stanza, a trio and a bridge. The stanza was played and repeated, then the trio was played and repeated and then the bridge was played and repeated. This process was repeated about three times. Couples gliding around the dance floor, their left feet down on the first of the three beats, forming a gracefully moving talking

and smiling group.

Old time polkas had two beats to the measure, like 1-2, and a much swifter rhythm. Polkas, too, had two or three parts to them; stanzas, trios and bridges, and were repeated the same as the waltzes. Couple dancing to a polka appeared almost furious with their up and down, perspiring hops, keeping up with the beats of the music. A dance floor full of people doing an old time polka was an awesome, floor vibrating experience, and everyone was smiling.

The third portion of the set, the "modern vein" had four beats to a measure, like 1-2-3-4, and much slower and breath catching.

After a set was completed, the ladies retreated to the benches along the walls of the dance floor and the men stood in groups. All awaiting the next set. In a few minutes the music started again and the men chose partners. Every one danced. If there were any women left, they danced with each other.

A short break at midnight emptied the dance floor to the Blue Room Lounge, or to the Bowling Alley cafe, or to Ternes's Saloon, for refreshments. The dancing resumed for a while until the musicians played Home Sweet Home around 1 a.m.

Admission to these cheerful old time dances was 25¢. The entertainment presented a welcome relief to the prairie isolation of the 1930's and blossomed many a blooming romance and marriage.

Till next time.

