

Bush Dance As It Was In the Bush!

Part 5 - Special occasions

Peter Ellis



**Northern Star (Lismore, NSW: 1876 - 1954)
Wednesday 7th May 1952 p6 Celebrates 85th
Birthday**

“Reminiscences of the early days on the Mid-Richmond were discussed at length when Mr. Richard Dwyer, senr., of Riley's Hill, celebrated his 85th birthday anniversary at a party held at the residence of his daughter, Mrs. R. Dann. Many friends from Ballina, Broadwater and Riley's Hill were present and an enjoyable afternoon was spent. Step-dancing and musical items were rendered. Mr. Dwyer played several items on the accordion, an instrument with which his ability has not declined in spite of his years. Half a century ago Mr. Dwyer was in demand with accordion or concertina at bush dances, and he spoke entertainingly of these functions often held in houses or barns when a hall was not obtainable. Transport was by horse through the dense bush, or by row boat along the river, and sometimes one was lucky to arrive at the dance without a plentiful spattering of mud. The women usually made their own dresses and their "finery" was none the less elaborate or striking for that. Some of the parties were most formal, white gloves for the men being de rigueur. On one occasion, recalled Mr. Dwyer, he invested a half-share in a pair of gloves with one of his friends, the understanding being that they were each to wear them for alternate dances. However, Mr. Dwyer, who had first "wear," absentmindedly rolled a pipeful of tobacco without first removing the gloves, much to their detriment and the chagrin of their co-owner.

Toasts were drunk during the course of the proceedings, Mr. Dwyer himself proposing the toast of "absent friends." Telegrams of congratulation were received, one being from as far afield as Malaya, where a grandson of Mr. Dwyer is serving with the R.A.A.F.”

**The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1842-1954) Tuesday 11 December 1945
p8**

“Real Old time Bush Dancing in the Barn’ tonight and tomorrow Christ Church Hall opposite Central Railway”

Illustrated Sydney News 8 August 1889 - THE BARN DANCE.

GOING to the spree in Lukyn's barn to-night, Job?" Rather,' drawls Job; yet with an emphasis that admits of no doubt as to his determination to 'tread the light fantastic ' o'er the flooring boards of Lukyn's barn.

It is Boxing Day in a small township down South; so small, that though provided with a school, it has not even a public house! Ergo, the crowd round the race-course is delightfully sober; private flasks there are, of course, but their owners have divided their contents with true bush bon- homie amongst their neighbours, with the result that none save the most hopeless old soakers are the worse for their libations.

The scene is one to inspire enjoyment in the veriest misanthrope. Imagine a well grassed paddock of moderate extent, fringed on three sides by the feathery wattles and spiny oaks that mark the course of the river and its tributary creeks. The racing for the day is over. Owners of winning horses strut around, with the bridle that the bay mare won, hung ostentatiously over the right shoulder; or flip at the grass with the whip of rare and notable design awarded to the local prodigy which came in such a rattling good second in the three-mile handicap.

Everyone is going to the spree. Ezekiel Mullens, the patriarch of all the country round, is an invariable feature of the Barn Dances. Ezekiel, to whom old Andrew Haley is but a stripling ; and who regards young Andrew, the father of Andy number three, as a child of tender age. For, be it known unto the ignorant, the barn dances are enlivened by song; and the gem of the evening is universally admitted to be a little ballad of some thirty odd verses, relating to the adventures of one Timothy Tossier, who sought the affections of a Hebrew widow, possessed of plethoric money bags, and of the final discomfiture of the swain when the lady eloped with his brother. And doesn't Ezekiel sing this gem with side - splitting emphasis, and portentous winks, the cuteness of which is beyond description; and hasn't he sung this same song every Boxing-night for nigh on thirty years, so that his hearers know exactly where the jokes come in, and laugh immoderately, never missing a point, while the women gasp: ' Lor', Mr. Mullings, you'll be the death on us yet!' But we anticipate. It is barely a quarter to eight when little coteries may be seen, streaming from all directions towards Lukyn's barn. Lukyn is most favourably regarded by the whole countryside. He vends groceries, i.e. tea, sugar,

peppermint lollies, gunpowder, and sardines; his best parlor is the local post office; his farm is productive, and well attended to; and, important and. delightful fact! he always has his barn-floor cleared for Boxing Day.

The ball-room is already brilliantly illuminated by the festive candle. Candles are all over the place, stuck in niches in the wall, with two or three on the corn-sheller, and a few on the harrow up at the end; the majority, secured to patent arrangements of wood, nails, and string, which are suspended from the beams which cross from wall to wall. Around the room, corpulent bags of maize, laid sideways, form the most comfortable of seats. N.B.-One bag seats two persons, that is if they do not sit far apart; as a general thing they don't. The ball opens without delay with 'a waltz ' you say? No, my friend, with a set of quadrilles of the good old-fashioned sort. No sleepy stroll this, no languid flirtation while setting to partners: their motto is ' Galop,' and galop it is, in every figure of this much neglected terpsichorean exercise, Ladies are decidedly at a premium, as, in addition to the local male population who have turned out to a man-and a boy,



there are the jeunesse dorée of the whole of a numerous though scattered population who have brought their horses to the races: and, last but not least, a contingent of miners from the adjacent goldfields. Girls are snapped up at once; next come the young married women who place their sleepy babies in the hay stacked up behind the hurdles at the end of the room, while Ezekiel mounts guard over this impromptu creche and calls the mother of any infant who lifts up his voice in lamentation. Most of them, however, sleep soundly enough through all the racket-all praise to the bush baby! Portly matrons of extensive build, foot it as energetically as anyone, while little old Mistress Haley, is amongst the briskest of the gay assembly. As a rule wives dance with their husbands, and though during the evening they may bestow a few round dances on their old beaux, their husbands, in such a case, congregate

round the door and smoke, not seeming to care about joining the company of dancers.

The music is provided by various members of the company who perform on the tuneful concertina; and the extras are given **by a miner who has brought his beloved fiddle along with him**. The concertina is par excellence the music of the provinces, as it is of the forcastle. It is not patronised to any appreciable extent by the lasses, who prefer the piano that Daddy buys them after a 'good year;' but every gay young spark in the district has his concertina. Not unfrequently the performers on these instruments exhibit a rare talent for drawing music from what, to most ears, sounds almost as wild a source as the bagpipes, and many a country dance would be a thing unknown but for the unassuming 'screamer.' In fact too much can hardly be said in praise of this little instrument; it is delightfully portable, and, in a district where all the travelling is done on horseback, that is the chief consideration. Then it is easy to learn, and repays in a short time all the trouble expended on it: the aspiring musician has not time to tire of his art before he is able to launch forth into the intricacies of 'Belle Mahone' and 'Jack Sheppard.' Cases are very numerous, where a young farmer, after a trip to Sydney and a visit to the Opera, returns with his brain stocked with every aria in the piece; and he forthwith produces them one and all on his concertina, adapting them to waltz, march or polka time as the occasion requires. Such a young man is regarded as a public benefactor by the surrounding population. In a wonderfully short space of time the whole country round rings with the more or less mutilated melodies that he has introduced, and it strikes a town visitor curiously to hear the almost untrodden hills echoing the announcement that into Parliament he must go,' or confessing to ' Being as bad as they make 'em.'

Let us return to the ball. The quadrilles being accomplished to the satisfaction of everybody, the partners separate and go each his and her way. If they strolled off together until the next dance, they would be looked at askance as being heartless flirts and altogether naughty, unless, indeed, they are engaged, when they are expected to devote the whole of their time to each other. Everyone who can, gets a seat on the corn-hags; those who are not so lucky, stand - really about the wisest thing they could do. A good deal of chaffing goes on amongst the young folks; the girls giggle and blush distractingly, and their beaux grin a good deal and stand on one foot with the other twisted round a hoe handle or the leg of the corn-thrasher, or anything else that comes handy. These proceedings are presently enlivened by the ancient announcement about the next dance on the programme being a song, and Ezekiel takes his place in the middle of the room.

He has the remains of a rich, expressive voice, and the words of his song are at any rate more amusing than the majority of latter-day effusions; moreover, his audience is entirely in touch with the singer, so so that he acquits himself marvellously well, and takes his seat amid terrific applause, resembling the reports of a hundred or so of many-barrelled revolvers. After this, the affair is considered to be fairly opened, and polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, waltzes, varsovianas, and galops, follow each other in a breathless, enchanting haste, that has no parallel in the languid pursuit of pleasure of the weary dweller in towns. And these are regarded merely as light relaxations from the grand business of the evening. Highland Schottisches are given a place of honour, but who shall do justice to the intricacies of the Alberts (a square dance), to the curtseying, the little pirouette introduced at all stages, to the grand promenade, the mazy waltz-cotillion, and later to the wild Swedish dance, with its up the middle and down again, and its perilous tour round the kneeling forms of the dancers, who clap, clap, clap to the time of the music.

Such a rattling pace it is from beginning to end. And when panting dancers with glowing cheeks take their seats on the corn bags, out steps a young dealer in pork, who sings a hunting song, the chorus being given by the whole strength of the company, so that the wallabies on the adjacent mountains are startled from their meal of gum leaves, and flying foxes prick their ears in the orchard half a mile away.

After another dance two ex-sailors foot a hornpipe so deftly that they bring down the house; other intervals are filled by a Highland fling, a reel, a sand shuffle, and various songs, until the shy digger with the fiddle is prevailed upon 'to favour the company with a song.' He won't be beguiled into taking the floor, but keeps his stand by the open door. There he stands silently for a moment, then dashes straight into a jolly, rollicking little nigger ditty, so spry and lighthearted that the fiddle with which he accompanies himself seems to laugh in a very abandonment of glee. The audience is intoxicated with pleasure, and the singer is compelled to respond to the vociferous encore which he seems scarcely to hear. He draws his bow meditatively across the strings, then glides into 'Way Down Upon the Swanee River.' As the last word dies away the violin takes up the theme. 'Oh, de way am sad and weary,' it surely speaks, right on to the end of the sad little chorus, till the music ends in a deep-drawn, quivering sigh. Eyes are dim and voices are hushed, till one of the cherubs in the hay, happening to wake, uplifts such a dolorous wail as sets the whole crowd a-laughing.

* Now, gells, one more hop and we must be off home,' announces Andrew Hales! The fiddle bow seems fairly alive as the strains of 'Sir Roger de Coverley' ring out on the cold morning air. Faster and faster moves the bow, faster also the dancers as



they skim from the top of each long line to meet in the centre, then back to their places while their vis-a-vis take up the thread. The babies wake, and wonder what it's all about, and sleepy cattle bestir themselves, and reckon that it will soon be time for the boys to come and drive them in for the morning's milking. One last flourish of the bow, the music ceases, and the barn dance is a thing of the

past. The barn dance, with its quaint rules of etiquette, its old world figurings, its flirtations behind the corn bags, its songs, its unaffected good humour, all combining in one delectable whole for the enjoyment of the lads and lasses, old men and eke old women of this southern Arcadia.

This is a tremendous description of a dance in the bush and certainly highlights the 'life' of the dance and in which the 1970s revival of bush dance certainly duplicates even if the actual dances and music is different.

Also notice the reference to the Swedish Country Dance of that period.

There are many Australian references in the papers of this period from the 1890s to the 1910s as exemplified in the next reference: -

Australian Town and Country Journal (NSW: 1870 – 1907) Saturday 19 April 1890 p15

A private dance at Moss Vale makes mention of the Swedish Country Dance: -
“The programme of the usual waltzes and lancers was varied this evening by the introduction of a Swedish dance, a kind of Sir Roger de Coverley country dance, but with more animation and fun in it than the stately old Sir Roger.”

And also a programme from the South Australian Chronicle (Adelaide, SA: 1889-1895 Saturday 10 1891 p12

“The following was the programme: — Waltz, lancers, waltz, polka, waltz, Dancing in the Barn, waltz, Alberts, Highland schottische, supper dances (waltz and polka), waltz, lancers, polka, Swedish dance, Highland schottische, lancers, waltz. Sir Roger de Coverley, waltz, polka, and gallop”

SWEDISH COUNTRY DANCE 4 x 48 bar set tunes in 2-4 at 58-60 bars per minute. (For tunes see page 9 below.)

Longways set for 4 couples

Bars

- 16 **Top couple gallop down the centre, round behind the men, down the centre again, up behind the ladies and down the centre again to finish at the bottom.** (Take the gallop hold, 1st man performs a half turn weight on right foot as he takes the hold with his partner, the couple gallop sideways down the set and without turning, change direction to gallop back up the outside of the gents’ line, repeat same way (each time, no turning) down the centre again, up to place on outside of ladies’ line and back down the bottom of the set. On the repeats of the dance it is easier to take the gallop hold as the top couple come of the swing in correct position).
- 16 **Top couple Strip the Willow from the bottom** of the set commencing with a half right arm turn with partner, the man turning by left arm on the ladies line as his partner turns by left on the men’s line (with respective 4th persons) and turn by right arm with each other in the centre, the left on the opposite line with 3rd persons etc. back to the top.
- 24 **Top man & lady arch over the ladies line** (he takes his partner’s left hand in his right and he goes down the outside of the of the ladies’ line while she goes down the inside i.e. they arch down the set over the ladies) and **return along the men’s line** in the same manner. The other dancers kneel or crouch down as this is in progress (facing top or bottom of set) and with hands ‘clap, clap, clap’ in polka time to the music. Suggested ladies face the top of the set when kneeling and crouching, and men the bottom.
- 8 All the other couples **form arches** holding raised hands and the **top couple gallop to the bottom** and **all swing** during the last 4 bars of the phrase Repeat 2nd, 3rd, 4th leading.

**Also a similar dance from The Australian MC – R. Lovenberry, Ithaca School of Dancing 1884 Brisbane
“NORWEGIAN COUNTRY DANCE”**

Form like Sir Roger de Coverley. The top gentlemen gives his left hand to partner

(who gives her right hand), galop down the middle, swing, separate, and turn bottom lady and gentleman; back and turn partners, separate, and turn next lady and gentleman, and so on to places. The gentleman then gives his left hand and the lady her right to each other, the two lines kneel and clap one, two, three, whilst the leading couple (the gentleman outside the lady inside) dance down one line and up the other, holding their hands over the heads of those kneeling, who rise and form an arch, the top couples pass under to bottom.

I have made up the following arrangement of music to suit the dance; the opening tune is actually an Australian collected form of the Swedish Gärdebylåten collected by Rob Willis from Sid Brigg who came from Young in NSW. Perhaps this set tune has been handed on from the days when the Swedish Country Dance was known in the bush, or it may have come directly from Swedish immigrants who were prevalent on the goldfields amongst many nationalities. I've added a 16 bar tag in polka time to enhance the hand clapping in that section and likewise the Redowa Polka in the second arrangement. I usually play from the first to the second and then repeat which is once through the dance for four couples.

Swedish Country Dance

4 x 48 bars arranged by Peter Ellis

Syd Brigg's Tune (from Young NSW) collected by Rob Willis
(a derivative of the Swedish Gardebylaten)

1st arrangement

D G A⁷ D

9 D G A⁷ D

17 D G D A⁷

25 D G D A⁷ D

Swedish Dance

(adapted from a Felix Burns' Swedish Dance tune in 3-4)

1 D A⁷ D

2nd arrangement

Swedish Rhapsody

(a popular radio tune of the 1950s)

1 G D⁷ G D⁷ G

9 G D⁷ G D⁷ G

Redowa Polka

(from Dance Music for the Concertina)

1 G D⁷ G

9 D⁷ G D⁷ G