

BACK IN TIME

The love of dancing

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

I grew up in a family who loved to dance. That actually began in 1853 with my great-grandfather, John McKee. He was the blacksmith at the gold-mining town of Logtown on Forest Creek between Jacksonville and Ruch. Many Saturday night dances were in his family's home where he also taught dancing. Of course, his children and their children on down followed that tradition.

I remember when a fiddle player, maybe the only musician, would be at some home playing his heart out for a room full of dancers. I was about four years old when I first experienced such an event. It was in some neighbor's home in our upper Applegate area, maybe near the town of Copper (now under Applegate Lake). It was held in the home's large attic where one had to climb a ladder as there were no stairs.

For some reason, I was the only child there but enjoyed the music and watching the dancing that stopped when refreshments were served downstairs in the dining room. That was when I had fallen asleep and my folks left me on a bench covered with their coats. I was terrified when I awoke and no one was in the room. Of course, everyone heard my distress and mother came climbing up the ladder to comfort me.

There was a neighborhood dance almost every month in someone's home, even one in my grandfather's (Amos McKee) barn. I was told it was in late spring when the hay was gone. The barn had a good dance floor, probably on purpose, because it was rather common in those early days to have a barn for dancing.

We had just moved into our newly built home near the Palmer Creek and upper Applegate River around 1932, when mother decided to have a home dance. My dad moved most of the furniture into the bedrooms and, for some reason, my factious mother had the floor thoroughly scrubbed even though it would be later covered with dancing powder. Even the windows were cleaned, which I don't think anybody noticed.

Mother spent much time that



morning before the dance preparing refreshments for the midnight snack. In those days, the snack was more than just a little bite. She made large sandwiches of homemade bread filled with tasty ground-up baked chicken accompanied with potato salad, deviled eggs, and a choice of burnt sugar or cream cakes for dessert.

My grandma McKee had made phone calls on the "farmers only" phone line (formerly the Blue Ledge Mining line) to the neighborhood about the upcoming event. I remember there being a lot of high school kids coming, probably because my brother and sister were of that age. It was in the summer and those kids spent more time outside than inside for the dancing. The younger ones, my age, had a good time sliding up and down on the slick floor between dances. That was more fun than trying to dance.

We sometimes attended public dances at the Applegate Grange, and when the Upper Applegate Grange built their hall in 1936, well, that ended the home dances in our neighborhood. We were going to our grange dances once a month, sometimes so crowded it was difficult to dance, but enjoyable in seeing so many neighbors, friends and relatives.

It is strange that I was never a good



Top photo: Rolland (Sandy) and Clara Smith started holding square dances for locals.

Bottom photo: Dances were held at Little Applegate School on Little Applegate and Yale Creek Roads.

dancer—probably having been born with two left feet didn't help. My family tried to teach me the many dance steps but nothing happened. So, when I met my future husband, I found he couldn't dance either, which made me happy.

A few years later my Aunt Clara Smith (see photo), my mother's sister who was a very good dancer, started having square dances, which had become popular again. She and her husband Rolland (Sandy) had purchased the Crump ranch at Little Applegate and Yale Creek Roads. The abandoned Little Applegate School, still on the property at that time, was where

the dances would be held.

Our first time there was when our daughter, Janeen, was about two years old. Aunt Clara insisted we come even though there was not a place for little children, so we made a bed for her on the back seat of our car and parked close to the front door. She was accustomed to sleeping there on our camping trips and soon fell asleep, probably helped by the sound of music.

It took eight couples for two squares. If more couples came, turns would be taken so no one was left out. Sometimes there were not enough couples for a square, but that didn't keep them from improvising their own dancing routine, which sometimes caused a lot of laughter.

There was no electricity, but the kerosene lights filled the room with a nice warm glow. Aunt Clara's old wind-up Victrola phonograph would play the square-dance records and when the record began to run down, she would quickly run to rewind, then dash back to the square, rarely missing a beat. Everyone would laugh!

Toward the end of the evening, some would be getting a little fatigued, especially my uncle Sandy. He was a hardworking man with a work-clock setting brain; it was up at the break of dawn, a long day of work, then early to bed. So one night, when his dancing interfered with his bedtime, we actually witnessed him falling asleep, still standing, while his wife went to rewind the music.

I'm sorry that I can remember only a few who attended those dances. The ones I remember were Fred and Ethel West, Lance and Stella Offenbacher, Charles and Virginia Chittoch, and one time, Wayne and Jackie Reavis. There had to be more of the Little Applegate people and maybe some newcomers there. I just mostly remember what fun we all had.

My husband and I became expert square dancers, or so we thought. It was the only time we had the beat, the time, and the feet.

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