

PROPER DANCING

Although to some degree Mormonism, at its inception, was cradled in New England Puritanism, it did not, as was the case with many other conservative denominations, regard dancing per se as sinful. On the contrary, dancing had been encouraged as an acceptable form of recreation and a proper expression of the arts. Nonetheless, there were those in high places in the church who worried about the "ever-present threat of abuse and degradation. " Some of the sisters in Brigham City regarded themselves also as self-appointed vigilantes, carefully observing with providential sanction and watchful suspicion the goings on among the young people of the community.

Because of this and the imposed custom of two generations, the public dances, whenever held under the control and sponsorship of church agencies, were conducted with the utmost order and strictest decorum prevailing. This could not be guaranteed whenever occasional private dances were held.

The Prophet Brigham, who according to Stansbury. could "acquit himself very well on the 'light fantastic toe. ' " had insisted in earlier years on certain restraints in the interest of moderation and propriety. Quadrilles cotillions and the usual country dances were very popular, and eventually the two-step was permitted, but polkas and waltzes were considered too intimate and daring for the time.

A natural curiosity had motivated some of the young-in-heart to try the new steps in the privacy of their own homes, which venture eventually led to the practice of holding private dancing parties for invited guests only.

While the public dances, often held in the opera house or the east basement room of the court house, usually ended about an hour after midnight, with a short intermission at eleven or twelve o'clock. the private balls sometimes lasted all night. After a midnight picnic the older folks, except the chaperones, would go home, leaving the young people to dance through the night until it was time to eat the left-overs from the late picnic for an early breakfast.

Those who didn't attend the private parties were suspicious, having heard frequent rumors of the sort often transmitted by busybodies whose imaginations are exceeded only by their ignorance of facts. Some High Priests had been urged by their wives to bring the matter up for discussion in the regular meeting. Notes from family journals and diaries show that the brethren had indeed made it a matter of great concern. Clem's mother, Elizabeth, was present in her father's home when he returned from the meeting to report that the quorum president had "denounced. private dances and fully endorsed the recommendation that the High Priests do whatever they could to abolish the same.

It was not surprising, then, that Elizabeth viewed with considerable alarm the announcement by her eldest son that he had been invited to a private dance. Her first impulse was to categorically forbid him to accept the invitation, but she decided to express strong disapproval and let it go at that. She reminded him that folks who take a fancy to things disapproved by the brethren probably are lax in living the gospel other ways too.

Clem argued that sons and daughters of respected citizens would be there. He saw no reason to assume that a fellow couldn't be a high stepper and firm in the faith as well. His mother finally let the matter rest after suggesting that if he observed anything that appeared "carnal, sensual, and devilish" he was to leave the premises immediately.

The sponsors of the party had obtained the use of the school house and hired the Christensen brothers to furnish the music, the orchestra being comprised of a violin and the school organ. Clem took a box picnic with him to share with the young lady at midnight intermission. When he opened the lunch box he found on top a slip of paper which he quickly crumpled and put into his pocket before his partner saw it. There were only three words on the note, carnal, sensual, and devilish.

As it turned out they both went home after the intermission, since the conditions of attendance for the young Cinderella included that promise together with an admonition to her escort to "watch for anything unseemly and fetch her home at first sign of' such."

"It was the first time in my life I'd ever stood face to face with my arm round a girl. I remember thinking to myself, I hope this isn't the carnal and sensual part, 'cause a fellow could get to like it without being very wicked. Pshaw, a little devilish, maybe, but not really wicked."