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Inez Schneider Whitney

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The Last Dance

By Inez Schneider Whitney

One of my fondest childhood memories is thinking about the fun I had going to the country dances with Mama and Papa. Oklahoma hadn't been a state very long, and these dances were the main recreation in the Custer City community. Some farmers wouldn't go because they thought dancing was wicked, but they were in the minority.

The dances were held in homes and were friendly neighborhood gatherings. Entire families attended. First there was a potluck supper with every housewife bringing the thing she cooked best. When the delicious meal was over, the children were deposited on quilts spread on the bedroom floors. Most were soon in slumberland, but I was one who feigned sleep; then after the music started, I tiptoed to the door to peek out at the festivities.

The musicians were all local famers. Although Papa had never had a music lesson, he had an ear for music and was quite accomplished on the accordion, violin, and bass violin. At the dances, he played the bass violin, which he called the bass fiddle. Tod Storm played first fiddle, and his wife, Peggy, chorded on the organ. Jack and George Allen, brothers, played second fiddle. Jack also did the calling for the square dances. I can still hear him yelling "Do-si-do and

around you go." The musicians donated their services; it was an honor to be asked.

Although Papa played instruments the whole evening, Mama never lacked for partners. When I peeked out, she was always dancing. Most of the time, her partner was Sam White, a nearby neighbor. He was tall and thin and always wore a jacket and high-topped laced boots. A fringe of hair, hanging almost to his shoulders, encircled his bald head. One time, Mama said to Papa, "Can't I say no when Sam White asks me to dance? You know how much trapping he does, and he smells just like a skunk."

"Oh no," Papa answered. "That would hurt his feelings."

All at once, we didn't go to the dances anymore. I kept asking Mama, "Why can't we go? It's so much fun. Edna and Lorene still go."

Her reply was always the same. "Your papa and I have a lot of work to do. We're just too tired."

One time after I was grown and back home for a visit, I said, "Mama, it was a shame you and Papa had to work so hard that we had to stop going to dances. They were really wonderful entertainment for whole families."

"That wasn't the real reason," Mama replied, and then she told me the story.

Mama's Story

The Hilds were nearby neighbors. It was their turn to have the dance. We ate supper early. Then Bill Daley, the hired hand, hitched up the horses to the wagon. Mama and Papa sat on the front seat, and I sat between them. Rudolph Schneider, my grandfather, had come to live with us after Grandma died. He and Bill Daley climbed onto the seat behind us, and away we went.

When we reached the Hilds', quite a crowd had already gathered.

"Folks," Mr. Hild said when it was time to eat, "my wife and I have a good batch of wine we made this summer. We're going to give everyone a little sample." An abundance of wild grapes grew down near the Washita River, and they made excellent wine. Mama never would allow Papa to make any.

"I won't have it around," she said. "It can cause nothing but trouble. There's always someone who likes it too well."

The meal was finished, and it was time to start the dance.

"Folks," Mr. Hild announced, "I have a table set up in the backyard and a lantern hanging on a tree for light. I thought the men who usually play Pitch would enjoy being out in the cool air."

Several of the older men, widowers like my grandfather, and a few others who didn't want to dance, usually played Pitch instead of dancing; so out they went.

After playing a few games, my grandfather said, "Why don't we play Drink or Smell? The Hilds have lots of wine right here in their cellar, and they'd be glad for us to have a little."

A shout of approval went up and they started to play.

After each game, the winner would go down and bring up a jar of wine. After opening it, he would pass it around for each one to have a smell. When it got back to him, he would gulp down the whole thing. As the evening wore on, the Pitch players became quite hilarious, especially the winners. Mrs. Hild's canned fruit was on the same shelves with the wine. If a jar of fruit was brought up by mistake, it was just tossed into the yard. Soon there were fruit and broken glass everywhere.

Grandpa was an excellent player and was really tipsy when the time came to leave. Everyone came out and when Mrs. Hild saw the fruit and broken glass strewn all over the yard, she was furious. She screamed, "Hours and hours of my work for nothing! What are we going to eat this winter?"

"I was never so embarrassed in my life," Mama said. "I told Papa that if he didn't go right then, I would take you and start walking home."

"Pa, come on. We're going home," Papa said.

"No, no, Eddie. How can I leave? I'm the winner, and I can win some more."



Papa told the hired hand to watch Grandpa and said, "I'll be right back to get you."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"I told your papa no more dances for me. They were getting too rough. It was no place to take a child. If he wanted to go and play his bass fiddle, it was all right with me, but I was staying home with you. He wouldn't go without us, so we never went again. That was the last dance." ●

INEZ SCHNEIDER WHITNEY of ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA, grew to womanhood in the Custer City area. She has excellent credentials as a WESTVIEW writer as a result of the beautiful memories she has of the eighty-three years she has lived on Planet Earth.

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