

Worksheet 1 – WPA Interview

Student Name _____ Date _____

Directions: Read the excerpt of the interview with George Duffy and answer the following questions in short sentences.

Questions:

- Why was the community dance socially important?
- How did the automobile affect community dancing?
- List four (4) popular 19th century dances.
- Where did the community dance take place and how is it different from modern dance?
- What does George Duffy think of professional musicians?
- How would you compare today's dancing style to the quadrille?

Excerpt of Interview with George Duffy

"I guess dancing is as old to civilization — maybe older. Every country on the face of the earth has its dance forms. Even the savage tribes perform dances that are more or less intricate — and usually symbolic or ritualistic. Dancing is mentioned in the Bible and I have read of dancing being indulged in long before the Christian era. I may be wrong, but I do not believe the dance of today is of any great social importance. Automobiles and moving pictures have supplanted the community dance as a means of bringing young folks together, in my opinion. In other words, I truly think all dancing could today be abolished and the social world would move along quite as well without it. Such may not be said of the old time dance. The dance —especially the country dance — was an almost indispensable institution in those days.
[...]

The shrill tones of a rapidly bowed fiddle and the lusty commands of the "caller" break the soft silence of the surrounding countryside. Thin fingers of mellow lantern-light filter through chinks and knot-holes of the new barn in which the dance is being held. Our farm boy and his Sally enter the barn and are greeted by cheery nods of welcome and recognition all around. A quadrille is in progress. The music is not furnished by a smooth, sleek group of tuxedo-clad professionals with two, three, and four-hundred-dollar instruments. The music here consists of the best available neighborhood fiddler assisted by another neighbor who can "chord" on the [melodson?] — without benefit of notes. Correct time is maintained by the thumping of the fiddler's boot on the hard floor, by the gyrations of his shoulders as he scrapes his fiddle, and by the vigorous nodding of his head in proper tempo. The fiddler's boot thumping is augmented in volume by the [concerted?] foot tapping of small boys who sit on the benches that line the dance floor.

The fiddler and dance caller were colorful and picturesque individuals who, if they excelled in their abilities, were not without considerable repute and importance in their respective neighborhoods. A colorful fiddler knew how to draw attention to himself and to liven the proceedings by clowning a bit as he fiddled. Some fiddlers could toss their fiddles into the air or flip them upside down without losing a beat. Others made a specialty of waving their fiddles backward over their heads while playing just to prove their complete mastery of the instrument. The callers more usually glib fellows of likeable personality and strong of lung. The best callers were ones who could improvise [new?] figures or movements for the dancers, though in a pinch almost any young dance [follower?] of the neighborhood could be drafted into service and do a very creditable job of calling. There were a number of standard dance popular in the '80s and '90s — the schottische, the

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minuet, the polka, the Virginia reel and others, but the most popular by far was the quadrille. The quadrille had almost as many variations as there were callers to call them and couples to dance them, and new calls constantly filtered in from other localities. They all followed, however, a fairly regular pattern. The quadrille usually consisted of five figures, movements, or changes, executed by four couples, each couple occupying one side of a square, giving rise to the name by which this dance was commonly called, "the square dance". Four couples comprised a set. There were as many sets on the floor simultaneously as the size of the floor would accommodate and each set followed the commands of the caller in unison. Here, I believe, is where the expressions, "our set," "he doesn't belong to our set," and similar folk terms originated.
[...]

Quite different today in any modern dance hall. The modern dance requires no concentration as in listening to a caller's commands. The modern dance seems to consist chiefly of walking around to music, and if you choose not to walk you may stand virtually in one spot, shifting the body's weight from one foot to the other in time to music. The modern miss steps out onto the dance floor clad in a few ounces of wispy material under which she wears a thin, elastic garment so constructed as to reveal every curve and contour of her body. Her partner grasps her in as close an embrace as the none-too-vigilant eyes of the dance-hall management will permit. In the average dance-hall, decorum is maintained by supervision rather than by the individual's desire to behave decorously. Young persons attend present-day dances and frequently dance the entire evening with one partner, leaving the dance at its conclusion without having widened the number of their acquaintances by a single person. In the days of the square dance, a newcomer to the community mingled and danced with all, and when the evening's dancing ended he found himself no longer a stranger. That is why I say ball-room dancing today seems to me to be of slight social significance."