

DANCING THE SCHOTTISCHE

Decatur Island in the 1940s'

Oh Susannah,

Oh don't you cry for me

For I come from Alabama,

With my banjo on my knee,

By Stephen Foster

With an "allemande left" and a "do si do" we skipped to the music and directions by the square dance caller. Mother, wearing a new cotton dress, let go of dad's arm, and pirouetted to the next couple. Laughing, she called dad a "Bohemian." I thought she meant his ancestors came from an obscure European country, one not in my geography book. Dad was a wiry, muscular man whose skin was perpetually tanned to the shade of warm leather, and it made him appear to be another nationality, but that wasn't what she was referring to. It was because he knew how to dance the "schottische," a dance she didn't know, so when the square ended, it fell to me, age thirteen, to be his partner. As long as I went as fast as he did, I didn't need to know the steps.

I discovered this one winter. The dark chilly months had dragged by slowly with no breaks except for the Christmas program at the schoolhouse. Until a family with formidable Western musical talent overwintered their fishing boat at Decatur Island.

They berthed their seiner in a north-facing harbor, below a home built by a pioneer family.

Situated alone on a hillside, it was the only island house with an immense living room. With little hospitable farmland, the property had passed through numerous buyers as they tried to find

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ways to make a living there. Luckily for the islanders, the most recent owners invited the musicians/fishermen to spend the winter months at their dock. The musical group consisted of a family of four, who were proficient in playing their guitars and violins, and making monthly dances there a happy ritual.

The island residents could be put into two classifications. Those who inhabited their homes full-time, and the ones who were transient. We were not without our own resident talent. Roy Harmon, a sheep farmer, was the square dance caller. He looked the part of the former Texan we guessed him to be, with blue eyes that might have once squinted down the sight of a Colt pistol. We were guided by his voice to dance the Virginia Reel and the Cotton-eyed Joe. Our temperamental blacksmith, Charlie Bower, who spent most days in front of a forge, played the fiddle.

The musicians appeared to love their roles, and we danced until midnight, the hour when the women served supper. Food on long tables consisted of punch, covered dishes, salads and pies or cakes put together to show off each woman's cooking specialty. There wasn't a store or tavern on Decatur. If spirits were part of the entertainment, it was disguised in flasks, and tossed back during smoke breaks. Because we were a teetotaling family, we weren't informed about moonshine, or any other booze. However, my older brother, Bob, believed he could have more fun at a dance if he had something to drink.

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In the fall, our orchard was fragrant with ripening fruit. Apples from our trees were so plentiful they hung from heavily laden branches, or fell to the ground. It only took a moment's hesitation for him to realize that cider could be converted into the potent source of the fun he was searching for. He learned that the juice had to be kept warm, to properly ferment. Our house was out of the question. His friend, Pam's house was a favorable alternative, where fewer questions were asked.

When the islanders happily readied for another evening of dancing, I realized Pam and Bob were hiding something, and I was not part of the secret. Pam was a couple of years older than I and the only other girl living on the island. When I asked him what they were doing in Pam's kitchen, his rejoinder was "Get lost, Sis." (The "Sis" added on was the acknowledgement that although I was his sister, he still wasn't going to tell me anything.)

Pam was athletic, with thick reddish hair and a quick smile. When her family rented an old log cabin from us, I wanted to be her friend. She always accepted my invitations to go swimming on summer afternoons when the tide was high. Young men on the island were attracted to her, and when I was horseback riding I saw her walking with one of them, holding hands. She had already confided that she thought Bob was "cute", an adjective reserved for a boy that we liked more than others. But now I was jealous and felt excluded.

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All I could do was watch, in case my brother or Pam dropped a clue about their mysterious behavior.

The day of the dance, mother pressed her dress, and I ironed my starched cotton dirndl skirt and peasant blouse. Dad sharpened his razor on the strap hanging in the bathroom. Then he shaved and put on a new plaid shirt, with colors they discussed as maybe being "too loud." Mother sprinkled paprika on top of the potato salad and made a separate dish for dad without onions.

When we arrived, the music had already started. I helped mother carry her salads into the kitchen, but not before she whispered "where is your brother?" Then she began visiting with the other women, and I escaped with a sinking feeling in my stomach. It wasn't the first time I felt this way, and I, too, was wondering where Bob and Pam were. Maybe they had come ahead of us, and were outside.

I stepped outdoors, where Charlie and Roy were standing on the porch. Their cigarettes glowed in the dark, and they were chuckling at a private joke.

Charlie ground out a cigarette with his shoe and said, "I told them kids, I ain't going to help you. I'll just get in trouble with your folks. Forget it, you ain't going to turn apple juice into booze. You ever smelled vinegar fermenting? That's what you're going to end up with. And it will serve you right, you're too young to start the drinking habit."

They were still laughing when I closed the door gently and came inside.

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I was startled to see Bob and Pam in the hallway next to the punch bowl. He was emptying a mason jar of cider into the mixture, and I watched, horrified as the punch began to foam, emitting a powerful odor of fermenting apples.

"Don't tell anyone," he whispered, "the punch is spiked".

The musicians had finished one set and started another. This time they were playing a waltz.