

The Plod Essay: "Doll Does the Charleston"

The first "Plain and Fancy Dress" Ball in Wonthaggi's history took place on Friday night, 1st of July 1910. *The Sentinel* reports in the 9 July issue that, "Although little or no publicity was given to the event the attendance was highly satisfactory and everything went as smoothly as could be desired. The floor was in excellent order, the [piano] music good, the right man in the right place as Master of Ceremonies and the company congenial. What more could be desired by those who delight in tripping the light fantastic? Dancing was indulged in from 8 pm til the wee small hours of the morning."

It must have been an adventure to have a ball so soon in what was still a frontier town with many people still living in tents, the streets unpaved and the footpaths, if there were any, made of boards! How would the ladies have kept their skirts clean when they must have had mud up to their ankles? No matter. Where only eight months earlier, in November 1909, nothing had been where the new town now stood except tea tree, sand and 'clouds of plovers', they were having a ball with an excellent floor, an MC and Mrs May at the piano. (Unfortunately, the *Sentinel*, only a month old in July 1910 and clearly with journalists wet behind the ears, neglects to tell us exactly where the ball was held.)

There must have been a need for dancing because as soon as the first ball proved to be a success, balls and dances started happening everywhere. The 'Roman Catholic Church' announced they were holding a 'Grand Concert and Plain and Fancy Dress Ball' in aid of their

building fund to be held "on Wednesday, Next, 27th July at Messrs Guilfoyle and McRae's building, McBride Avenue."

Hang on! Guilfoyle and McBride were the 'promoters' of the first ball. So, that's where it was, in their building. These fellows were entrepreneurs. They were charging two shillings for the concert and one more if you stayed on for the ball; or, if you wanted to miss the concert, you paid three shillings for the ball.

According to *The Sentinel* this ball was even better than the first, partly because Mr Fitzgerald of the Vienna Bakery & Café ('Weddings & Birthday Cakes a Specialty') did the catering and the Ladies' Committee supplied "large quantities of eatables".

A number of balls took place after that. The Ryanston Ball

was held in Archies Creek Hall, and 'Euchre and Dance Parties' abounded. The first Annual M.U.I.O.O.F. Plain & Fancy Dress Ball - there were several men who always came to these as either clowns or cowboys or soldiers - was held in the new Smith's Hall in McBride Avenue. A 'Social Dance' - another fundraiser for the 'R.C. Church' Building Fund - was held at yet another new hall, The Lyceum. The Caledonia Club held their First Annual Games Day on New Year's Day 1911 and capped it off with a Grand Ball and Hog-Ma-Nay. Even though the Dalyston Boxing Day Races was postponed until 12 January, it also finished with a Grand Ball.

Perhaps the reason for the postponement was that the Brass Band 'Monster Picnic' was held on Boxing Day at Kilcunda. Maybe a picnic in summer outclassed a Ball. After all there were "special arrangements on the ground for the comfort of the ladies and children", plus refreshment and children's games and races. Return fare on the special trains to Kilcunda that day was 1s4d. Dalyston had no choice but to postpone their own event.

Smith's Hall continued to have "Social Dances" just about any day of the week, but they also began to compete with their own dances by putting in the first cinema in Wonthaggi. On 3 February 1911, they announced that, "An up-to-



date Electric Lighting Plant has been installed by the management. No expense has been spared and everything necessary for screening the Latest Up-to-Date Pictures has been provided". Smith's also offered Skating morning, afternoon and evening with a Ladies' Day on Wednesdays, admission 6d, skates 6d.

So, dancing had to compete with all this plus football, cricket, tennis, netball, cycling, music clubs, churches, men's clubs. But it didn't matter; the dance venues thrived all along the coast, not just Wonthaggi. People would travel miles for a good dance. They'd go on horseback, on bicycles, but most got to the dances on 'shanks ponies' until a bus service began. Once they got to the dance they wouldn't leave. In September 1912, the San Remo Hall Committee applied to the Woolamai Shire Council to change the closing hour of its dances from 4am to 3am! Disgusted dancers argued that, "It would have the effect of turning dancers into the un-sheltered road at times of darkness and heavy rains." The journalist from the *Criterion* wrote that it would be up to the Shire Council to "exercise the wisdom of Solomon, but no chance of pleasing everyone."

The newspapers always reported on the dances, especially the balls. The thing they were meticulous about describing was the way everyone looked, most importantly, the way the ladies looked. They listed names and dresses: "Miss Hodge, crystalline silk; Miss Macleod, white silk; Miss Munro, white muslin; Miss Beckley, cream voile; Miss Radcliff. Brown cecillian [sic]; Mrs McRae, cream nun's veiling... and so it went.

One wonders how people living in tents, working in a coal mine and walking through mud ever got themselves up in such finery. Well, I suppose you'd start with "Butterfly Soap" which "lathers like winkey, turns out dirt, does not damage and wears like a board." Then you could go to the Chicago Hairdressing Saloon, smoke cigars and play pool while you waited for your hair to get cut. The Miners' Hairdressing Saloon boasted that it had three chairs and first class tradesmen.

Men could go to a tailor to get suits made or fitted. The J. Visbord's Tailor on Graham Street advertised in the *Sentinel* throughout 1910. He cleaned and pressed suits for 3s6d.

The women usually made their own dresses, which may be why so much fuss was made over them in the paper. They could go The Corner where they could buy 'Frocks', blouses & skirts or ladies neckwear plus ribbons, laces and trimming. Or they could go to Bird's Draperies and buy material to make their frocks either by

hand or with a new sewing machine (£6/10s) available at the Austral Store McBride Avenue.

Doll Keilly, who just had her 100th birthday up at Rose Lodge and has a mind like a trap, remembers her dancing days in the 1920s:

"I started going with my friends to the dances. People said of me, 'She'll be off at one of the dances.' We used to go to the Hicksborough Dance. Too right we did. We'd go out there on the buses. Too right. We danced a lot. We did old time dances, waltzes. We went to the Scottish dances. We used to go everywhere to the good dances. Buffalo Hall. Too Right! We danced. Different dance halls everywhere. I was a good dancer. I still dance. I needed good partners. I met my first husband at the dances. The Crystal Palace. They had moving pictures downstairs and dancing upstairs.

"Oh, that was great. We'd dance with the boys and go up to the top and have a kiss and a cuddle and then back in and dance again. The band had a fiddle and an accordion and a piano and drums. Mrs Connelly used to play. She played for years. Every night. Chet Atkinson used to play. They had a fellow call out the dances. I got to more dances than the other kids because when we lived in Watt Street, I could just go around the corner and be there. That was the Charleston era. I Charleston-ed more than anybody else in the whole place.

"Mum used say, 'Where are you going?' And I'd say I was going to the dance to teach my friend how to Charleston. I'd say, 'She doesn't know how to do it properly. I have to go to teach her more.'

"I would teach others to do the Charleston. We would go anywhere as long as we could do the Charleston. We had nice dresses. Flapper dresses, you'd call them. I was no sewer so I didn't make my own clothes. Mum used to get them for me. I was the spoiled one. Bond's was the best place to buy a dress. Mrs Bond on the corner. Bond's corner is where everybody met.



Mrs Connelly's Band: (back) George Mann, Will Philpot, (l-r) Harold Tinkler, Reg Baker, Ruby Connelly, Albert (Snow Peters)

