

The Plod Essay: Dance Halls, Dancers and Mrs Connelly & the Cairo Orchestra

For this month's PLOD Essay, I have combined two of my favourite essays out of all the 130+ essays that have been written over the last 15 years. These two stories turn their focus on two wonderful Wonthaggi women, Doll Keily, who loved to dance the Charleston, and Ruby Connelly, orchestra leader extraordinaire.

DOLL

Before the “talkies” made their impact on social traditions at the several cinemas in Wonthaggi, young people got together at dances. Peruse the *Powlett Express* or the *Sentinel* – and even the *Criterion* – from 1909 until the mid-1930s and the columns will be littered with advertising for dances at halls scattered round the district. Among the halls, there seemed to be a roster so there was at least one dance being held somewhere every week and, more importantly, so that the different bands – or orchestras, if you were lucky – were available to play.



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 where only eight months earlier, in November 1909, all that existed where the new town now stood was tea tree, sand and ‘clouds of plovers.’ Amazing that they were having a ball at all in a newly erected building 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 continually in town. 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 & Birth-day Cakes a Specialty’) did the catering and the Ladies’ Committee supplied “large quantities of eatables”.

New halls were being erected in the Wonthaggi area at a fast pace. The Ryanston Ball was held in Archies Creek Hall, and ‘Euchre and Dance Parties’ abounded. The first Annual

M.U.I.O.O.F.¹ 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.

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.



Doll Keily, who had just had her 100th birthday up at Rose Lodge when she talked to us about her life, remembered her dancing days in great detail. The preparations were elaborate: "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, the boys could go to the Chicago Hairdressing Saloon, smoke cigars and play pool while they waited for their hair to get cut. Also, the Miners' Hairdressing Saloon boasted that it had three chairs and first-class tradesmen.

"Men would 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.

"We girls could go The Corner where we could buy 'Frocks', blouses & skirts or ladies neckwear plus ribbons, laces and trimming. Or we could go to Bird's Draperies and buy fabric to make our frocks either by hand or with a new sewing machine (£6/10s) available at the Austral Store McBride Avenue."

The women usually made their own dresses, which may be why so much fuss was made over them in the paper. Doll remembers, "We had nice dresses. 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 corner is where everybody met."

One wonders how people – some still living in tents – or – more often – living in newly erected houses – walking from building site over ash and stone roads, dodging the mud near open drains, ever got themselves to the dances in such finery. But the young people knew what to do: when they were making their way to the dances, they all wore boots, the boys with their

¹ M.U.I.O.O.F stands for Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows, a Friendly Society that had its origins in England and was established in Melbourne in 1840.

trousers rolled up and the girls carrying their dainty shoes with their dresses tucked into farm trousers. Nothing could stop them.

Doll remembers, “We used to go to the Hicksborough Dance. Too right we did. We’d go out there on the buses once they started. 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 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. 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.”

This must have been after the soldiers returned from the war in 1919 and after the world managed to beat the Spanish Flu. There must have been a sense of devil-may-care everywhere. Doll never said whether or not she knew the shire wanted to disallow the Charleston at the dances because it was unseemly and decadent, but it clearly didn’t stop her or anyone else from becoming a ‘flapper.’

“I was lively,” she remembered.

RUBY

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



Mrs Ruby Connelly was the leader of the Cairo Orchestra that played at all the dances. Ask anyone now who remembers those days, and they won't be able to tell you that Mrs Connelly's Christian name was Ruby, but they can tell you the dances they did and exactly what song the orchestra was playing when they met their life-long partners.

It's not exactly clear when little Ruby was born. In the July 1972 *Sentinel*, a feature article celebrating her 80th birthday at Taberners says she was born in Tasmania in 1893, three years before she came with her large family – she was one of 19 children – to the coal mines in Korumburra. When she was 16, she said she became the solo artist improvising at the piano for the silent movies in the local cinemas. Hmm... they didn't start until 1910 so she might have been older than 16. Back then, she was still Ruby, had waist-length auburn hair in two plaits and was five feet tall.

It was after she married Jack Connelly of Jumbunna in the new St Joseph's Church, that she became known as Mrs Connelly, the lady who played at the St Joseph's dances held to raise money to pay the church debt. She was a tiny, fine-boned, young woman by then, and still had her thick auburn hair, which, interestingly, never changed colour throughout her performing life. To help out the church, she had formed a trio by adding cornet player, Mr Jim Cameron, the leader of the Union Band, to the duo she already had going with Mr George Lees, who played the violin. Soon the band was in demand, travelling by jinker over unmade roads as far as Foster, Woodleigh, Glen Forbes, Glen Alvie, Almurta, even to Cowes, taking the punt over to the island.

Sometimes it took them all day to get to the dance where, for a few shillings each, they played all night, from 8:30 to 4:00 am and then drove home. If they got stuck in the mud and it was still dark, they'd just go to sleep where they were until someone came along to help.

No one ever said anything about Mrs Connelly staying out all night with a couple of fellows while her husband slept on, oblivious, tucked in his warm bed at home. They knew Mrs Connelly was the boss of the operation and her fellow musicians did what they were told. They'd seen her get them back to their instruments after a break, when they surreptitiously took advantage of the side door that was always at the back of a hall to share around a flask. "You slave driving old devil," they used to say to her as she pulled them inside to continue playing for the waiting dancers.

The music in the 1920s was 'jazz' – as Doll well knew – and Mrs Connelly gathered together a group of musicians to play it.

"It was a good orchestra. Oh, yes, they were good!" Doll exclaimed.

It was a six-piece band called the Cairo Orchestra because that's where they mostly played after the war until the Union Theatre was built in 1925. Howard Tinkler was on the drums, Reg Baker on the sax and trombone, George Mann on the banjo, Horrie Philpot on the cornet and Snowy Peters on the sax. Although the band members changed over the years, the fellows were all loyal to Mrs Connelly because they knew they couldn't do without her.

"We bought music as a group and I kept it," she said during a long interview with Joe and Lyn Chambers in the mid-1980s. "If we were going to play for a ball, I would have it all out on the kitchen table sorting out the parts for each man. It was a big job, but once it was sorted, it was right. You see, we bought music from Allen's Music store. We had a subscription with them and they sent us all the latest tunes each month. There were lots of new dances: the Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Royal Alberts, the Maxine, the Joy-Stick.

"We'd play thirty dances in a night: sets, waltzes, foxtrots, one-steps, the three-hop polka, the Yale blues, which was a slow one. They liked the slow ones. They also loved the Quadrilles. The girls would form a circle and they'd swing around with such energy that some of the girls ended up under the seats!

"The dancing was almost continuous through the night. They used to do what they called the Johnny Miller Dance. They'd all be on the floor swinging around and then suddenly I'd stop the music. Then they'd march around, the boys one-way, the girls the other and when I began to play again, they'd grab the nearest partner. That mixed them all up. It was fun."

All the musicians carried their own instruments with them; all except for Mrs Connelly, of course. She'd have to rely on whatever she found in the hall. "Oh, I played on some dreadful pianos, some, where half the notes wouldn't play. Dreadful! But there were some good ones, too.

"And I remember the halls: The Excelsior, Sheehan's Hall, the Soldiers' Theatre, the Plaza, the Crystal Palace, which became the Cairo. At the Cairo, the silent pictures were on above the

dances. When my children were babies, they always came with me to the dances and I tucked them away in their basket behind the piano, but as they got older, I let them go upstairs to see the films. I remember on a nice night they could open up the roof to show the stars and moon while people watched the films. I used to let my daughter come down to the Dance Hall after the film and she was allowed to dance the last dance.”

In the 30s at the Cairo, they had non-stop dances. Another pianist, Bert Nichols, played for those because they went on for more than a day. “They had a piano and an accordion. I saw Johnny Wells, the postman who was a good dancer, collapse after 24 hours, but Bert, he just kept on playing. How they stood it, I don’t know.”

There were other bands in the area, but Mrs Connelly’s Cairo Orchestra was the most sought after. “We played at the Union once a month. The Rex Revellers started up when I took a rest from playing for a while. It was Matt Cameron’s band. Bob O’Halloran was the pianist. He was a great pianist, but a poor dance player. There is a certain knack, you see. I would sit and play and I would watch the dancers. I couldn’t bear to see anyone out of step. I would have to start again with the set dances. There were plenty of people who just didn’t have the sense of it, but they always had a good time.”

Some weeks, Mrs Connelly didn’t get a night off. “One night, we played at Kongwak until 3am and then that evening I had to play on my own at Almurta. Nobody was with me. I was playing away and I fell sound asleep while I was playing. Everybody roared laughing. I usually got 15 shillings a night when I played on my own. If we all played at a large hall, we each got 30 shillings for the night. It was very handy to get the income when the strikes were on.”

Mrs Connelly and her orchestra played for the first ball at the Union Theatre. “Annie (Legg) Gilmour was the Queen of the Ball. I remember that,” said Mrs Connelly. Her band was also playing when ‘A Part of My Heart’ was first sung at the Union. In fact, it was her husband, Jack, who sang it. “It turned into a duet because Jack forgot the words half-way through. Our daughter, Thelma, was standing off-stage and she started to sing the song to get her dad going again. Mr Philpot heard her and brought her out on stage. She held her dad’s hand and the two of them finished the song together. It was wonderful.”

Mrs Connelly said she lived a good life. “I loved playing. The last dance was always ‘No Place Like Home.’”

-- C.R. Landon
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