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Let's Dance

With apologies to Kay Kyser who began his music with these words: Let's (pronounced yet's) Dance. Actually, the time in this story is a bit before his time of popularity.

When I was in the seventh grade, two of my friends had older brothers and sisters who dated. Evelyn Fair relayed to our eager ears things she learned from listening to the telephone conversations that her older brothers, Jim and Ed, had with girls about their dates for movies and school dances - that is, what she overheard when they didn't know she was listening. Mary Alice Thurmond, on the other hand, could share with us the exciting facts her older sister Maureen told her about the boys she dated, especially the dances they attended and what we could one day expect when we went to dances. We heard about evening dresses and corsages and some of the actual events at the dances.

So far as I knew no girl or boy, either, in our small class at Robert E. Lee Elementary School had ever had a date. But we all eagerly awaited the time when we could enter the magic days of high schools and dates. (I guess that, by contemporary standards, we were retarded in our social development.)

High school began, but, alas, no dates materialized immediately and automatically in my life. There was a group of boys and girls from our neighborhood who, on pretty fall days, occasionally walked the five miles home from school, discussing school as well as personal matters. One day someone brought up the subject of dancing and the problem of not knowing how to dance. None of us, who all happened to be oldest children in our families, knew the first thing about how to dance. Billy McGehee had a college-aged neighbor friend, Mildred Atkinson, who offered to teach a group to dance for a small fee if we could find a place to have the lessons. Several parents offered living or dining rooms if we would help clear the furniture and rugs before the lessons and clean up afterward.

We gathered eight eager couples and learned together to waltz, to fox trot, and to just plain dance. This was the beginning of an exciting eight weeks during which we learned to dance to records played on the Victrola, got better acquainted, and had a really good time. (Years later my children participated in a similar but more formally organized group, called Cotillion.) We enjoyed learning together. It was a good transition to the dating games which were to follow. One or two of the boys began asking girls to attend Saturday afternoon movies with them, riding the streetcar, and Edgar Elmore and I went to the Arcadia Theater for our first date. We walked both ways.

Finally, in the spring of our freshman year, there was a school dance for which we sorted ourselves out by couples to attend, ferried in double pairs by parents. All the girls agonized for weeks over our choices of evening dresses. Mine was pink taffeta with a discreet ruffled neckline and puffed sleeves. It swished delightfully and satisfactorily even though it wasn't the sleek, sleeveless, low-backed green satin dress that Marie

Dishman boasted about having. On the long-anticipated dance night, Jimmy Cain thrilled me with a sweet-pea corsage that exactly matched my dress. I thought it was far prettier than Dorothy Patton's pink rosebud corsage. (It was some time before any of us received what we considered the pinnacle of floral success, a gardenia corsage.) Even though we were with the cohorts we had learned to dance with, we were all apprehensive about mixing with a far larger and older crowd at the dance. Dorothy and I were pleased to recognize several of the stags lined up nervously on the perimeter of the school gymnasium dance floor, gazing intently at the twisted crepe paper streamers decorating the ceiling. Surely that meant that we wouldn't be "stuck" ignominiously with our dates all evening.

The band, composed of a group of enterprising senior boys, began playing. It was wonderful music - every bit as good as Ben Bernie and Horace Heidt whose music we listened to on the radio. We self-consciously stepped onto the dance floor with our dates, hoping that some gallant friend would "cut in" soon. It wasn't that we didn't like our dates, but we'd been thoroughly conditioned by the gossip of our friends to believe that frequent changes in partners was the index of a successful evening. We prayed that our dates were knowledgeable enough not to return to dance with us until at least one more boy had chosen to cut in. The evening was a successful one for all of us, although not many of us could have been considered "belles of the ball." On that evening, at least, none of the girls had to dance a whole number with one partner until the final dance, which was reserved for the boy each had come with.

Later that spring we had the thrill of other dances, even a "program" dance, where we were able to reserve each number for a separate boy, but even those dances, according to the local custom, could be shared with other boys, giving the stags a chance to dance, too. Sometimes I think the best part of that first season of dancing was the talking about the evening during the next week, not to mention the self-assurance we gained through the experience of doing instead of anticipating. We had other kinds of dates during the years of high school, seldom with the same boy two times in a row (meaning we were a recognized "social" success); and, of course, before long we became independent of parental transportation. But the dances, with the evening dresses, corsages, dates, and changing partners, were the highlights of the year.

I think about the contrast of our evenings with the current custom of going steady with one boy at a time, and I remember our ways as satisfactory, even though girls were constrained from asking for dates or going solo to dances. I do think the present custom of dancing all evening with the same partner must be boring. Our clothes were much more special, too; there was a difference in what we wore every day and what we wore to dances and other parties. There's certainly more freedom in other ways among young people today, but I really believe that we had more fun.