

FRANCO-AMERICAN DANCE TRADITIONS IN THE NORTHERN STATES

by Jennifer C. Post

Social dance practices among Franco-American families in northern New York and New England present an unusual range of traditions to those interested in folk dance in the United States and Canada. Existing in a unique historical and cultural framework, social dance customs have travelled, grown, and changed for several generations in both small and large communities throughout the region.

French-speaking Canadians were drawn to northern New York and New England communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for work in the mills, the factories, and the lumber industry. Holding onto their music and dance traditions contributed to their identity and sense of community as they established residential pockets in towns and cities. Music and dances were performed at events which took place regularly in small and extended family groups as well as in neighborhoods and in the lumbercamps. These traditions continued until the mid-1940s when they began to change or disappear because of major social and economic changes resulting particularly from the adoption of television and recordings in homes, and from the major shifts in industrial practices.

A close interrelationship between old-time New England (Anglo) and Franco-American dances and dance music can be found in the social context for dancing, the dances most popularly performed, the musical characteristics, and the instruments used.

Dance Events

Social dances among Franco-Americans have seldom existed in isolation, as events to which people come only to dance, but rather have been an integral part of occasions during which people gather to visit, sing songs, play card games, and dance.

House parties, or *veillées*, were important in many Franco-American families, as were the kitchen dances popular throughout the Northeast among people of English, Irish, and Scottish heritage. Julie Beaudoin and her daughter Carmen remember parties in central Vermont from earlier in the twentieth century:

Carmen: "Whenever company would come from anywhere—Canada, Massachusetts—as soon as we knew they were here, my father would say, we'll have everybody over. And before you know it, there was a house full."

Julie: "We'd invite both sides—my side of the family, and of course his side of the family. We had people from Canada, and people from Massachusetts and we'd make music."

Carmen: "We must have had twenty parties a year, easy."

Julie: "Mostly in the summer because people don't travel that much in the winter. So we had a lot of parties." ¹

These occurred on weekends, on a Sunday or holiday, or during a celebration, such as a wedding.

"We had family reunions, mostly on Sunday, to amuse ourselves. They were real *veillées canadiennes* and we certainly enjoyed ourselves. We sang without piano accompaniment, songs of Old Quebec, danced square and round dances and jigs, played games like *L'assiette tournante* (Spin the Platter) for forfeits, and played cards for the fun of it, mostly euchre, a game we learned here." ²

Brigitte Lane, in a study of Franco-American traditions in Lowell, Massachusetts, observed:

In Lowell, the *veillées* remained a major form of socializing for the French Canadian immigrants and their descendants, especially for those who worked in the mills where even talking was not possible. These periodic evening gatherings usually took place in private homes. Due to the length of the work week (five and a half days) and the restrictions put by the church on Sunday, the Lowell *veillées* ritually took place on Saturday night, after supper.

Since kitchens were spacious, they were usually considered as the best possible place to hold the party...The furniture would be pushed to the side or taken out to allow enough space for dancing and - in extreme cases - the kitchen table and kitchen stove would be taken out or even taken apart. ³

For the Beaudoin family, the New Year's Day gatherings were of particular importance. Family, food, music, and celebration, were all intertwined.

People of all ages, both women and men, were caught up in dance events. Willie Beaudoin remembers:

"We would get geared up for New Year's Eve and New Year's Day because the family got together and Louis (Beaudoin) always brought his fiddle or I had my guitar and my family had a piano and we'd break out the instruments and the first thing you'd know...they'd all come, wish us happy New Years, and we'd offer a little glass of cheers. And with the music, they really used to pack it in and now the house was chuck full of people and they used to sing and it was a real joyful time of the year. It was a special day, really." ⁴

And Julie Beaudoin added later:

"There'd be dancing, or dancing the broom. The little kids even do it. They stand a broom between their legs and jump over it right in keeping time with the music. Some of the men were good step dancers, and some of them were good singers, and so they would join the party and we'd make music." ⁵

Dances

Dance forms popular throughout the period include square, round and longways forms as well as step dances. Collectively, these dance styles result from the influence of European immigrants in Canada as well as New England and New York.

The square dances, usually *quadrilles*, have consistently been popular dance forms at Franco-American gatherings. Executed in groups of four couples, they are related to, but different from the Western square dance style of the United States. While callers were not considered necessary in the early years of dancing, the tradition of calling in French and/or English became popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Round dances (*la ronde*), have been popular among children, young adults, as well as adults. In earlier years these were often connected to games which were played at the *veillées*.

It is stepdancing, though, that Franco-Americans enjoy today and remember with a great deal of fondness. The stepdance, *gigue*, or clog has been popular among both women and men. Performed as a solo or group dance, it tends to be preferred as a solo form. Passed in families from parent or grandparent to child, it is seen today in family gatherings as well as at public dances and performances. Julie Beudoin recalls family gatherings in her home:

"There were people that would step dance and do the soft shoe. My sister's father-in-law danced. He was a stocky man—but that was a long, long time ago, I was just a little girl—and he would put a full glass of beer on his head and dance and he wouldn't even drop a drop of it, it was really something to see." ⁶

Instruments

Throughout northern New York and New England, among peoples of French, Irish and British heritage, the fiddle has been the primary instrument that provided the melody for dance ensembles. While it has been important in Franco-American dance culture, the button accordion has also played an important role as a melodic instrument for accompanying dances. Two other instruments that are especially popular are the harmonica and the Jew's harp. In some communities, the ensemble is supported by piano or other keyboard instrument. Other instruments

which have been popular (primarily to back-up the fiddle and/or accordion) are the guitar or banjo, and the spoons or bones. Clogging or foot tapping while seated, playing the fiddle, is also a popular form of rhythmic accompaniment for music and dance.

Not all musical instruments have been available at every community gathering. Music was provided by whatever instruments were locally available. Mike Pelletier of Old Town, Maine remembers the kitchen breakdowns:

"We used to have whatever kind of music was available. Somebody might have a fiddle, or maybe it would be an accordion or a Jew's harp. Sometimes we sang songs. If there wasn't room for square dancing, we'd dance clogs."⁷

Philippe LeMay of Manchester, New Hampshire:

"For our round and square dances as well as jigs, the music was furnished by a fiddler who always played the same tune as long as you wanted him to — he knew no other — and by a fellow who played the accordion, but they never played together because their tunes were different. We didn't care about that and we danced and had great fun."⁸

Musical Characteristics

Franco-American dance music is often characterized by its lively, fast-paced, foot-tapping character. The tunes and musical characteristics, like the dance traditions, were often passed orally in families and small communities, although, since the early years of the twentieth century, many tunes have also been learned from sheet music and from commercial recordings.

In Franco-American music, rhythm plays an important role, supported by strong accents, foot-tapping or clogging, and the use of spoons or bones to accompany the melody. A greater variety of musical instruments (accordion, spoons, harmonica, jew's harp, etc.) is more generally in use in Franco-American dance music than found in the old-time Anglo-American tradition. This produces a unique and rich overall musical texture.

Over the years, and particularly during the last forty years, Franco-American traditions have intermingled with those of other groups that settled in the same region. Today, in northern New York and New England, the dance and dance music traditions, while still retaining many of their historic characteristics, exist as a unique mix of traditional and other regional customs.

Jennifer C. Post (PhD in Ethnomusicology, University of Minnesota) is Curator of the Flanders Ballad Collection at Middlebury College where she also teaches in the Departments of English and Anthropology.

Notes

1. Vermont ETV interview with the Beaudoin family by Fletcher Fischer in Burlington, Vermont, 1984.
2. Philippe Lemay of Manchester, NH as cited in Doty, *The First Franco-Americans*, p. 28.
3. Lane, Brigitte. *Franco-American Folk Traditions and Popular Culture in a Former Milltown*, p. 158-59.
4. Vermont ETV interview with Willie Beaudoin in Burlington, Vermont, c.1979.
5. Interview with Julie Beaudoin by Jane Beck, 1988.
6. Vermont ETV interview with Julie Beaudoin by Fletcher Fischer, 1984.
7. Mike Pelletier of Old Town, Maine as cited in Doty, *The First Franco-Americans*, p. 85.
8. Philippe Lemay of Manchester, New Hampshire as cited in Doty, *The First Franco-Americans*, p. 30.

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- Brault, Gerard J. *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*. Hanover; New London, The University Press of New England, 1986.
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