America Is Dancing

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1. An Indian Ceremonial Dance, Dells City, Wisconsin.

Rushing down to the docks and trembling with excitement, we are afraid that we might be late. Dells City is certainly a busy little town during the first two weeks in July when Indians from all over the country unite to hold their time-honored annual ceremony. It takes time and strength to elbow through the idle crowd that throngs the docks just before the launches shove off toward the Upper Dells, and we reach our seats by the big open windows none too soon.

Tonight the Wisconsin River is beautiful and our excitement subsides a little as we lie back lazily enjoying the cooling breeze and the towering cliffs which frame the river. As we reach our destination, we must start the long climb from the dock around the side of the cliff and down to the ceremonial grounds. Coming very suddenly upon the huge natural amphitheatre, we stop to catch our breaths and to take in the natural splendor of our surroundings. Although the moderns have added benches to the hillsides which gently rise away from the flat central plain on three sides; and although the same enterprising businessmen have equipped the grounds with lights, the natural beauty of the place cannot be hidden. There is a tiny rippling lake over to one side at the base of a cliff which rises sharply on the north side of the dancing grounds. The cliff and the surrounding hills are densely wooded with huge pine trees which have grown extremely tall in their quest for life giving sunlight. Indians from almost every tribe in the country are silently moving about, quickly preparing for their dance. There are myriads of colorful costumes which seem even brighter against the dark evening shadows. As the darkness overcomes the fading daylight, and as the bright full moon slips above the tree tops, the insistent beat of tom toms announces the beginning of the dance.

The huge central fire sends grotesque shadows across the line of dancers as they silently move around the arena. This is the famous Snake Dance, and it is more beautiful than any we have ever imagined. Each figure, from the very old, bent, Indian woman to her five year old son, is moving with complete grace and confidence. Their softly chanted words seem to take us back to the years long before the white men invaded this part of the country. The cadence of the tom toms echos back from three or four hills in the distance; and now the Snake Dance is coming to an end, and the dancers find their places about the fire.

An old Indian love song is perhaps the most beautiful of the evening. A lovely Indian girl is standing on one point of the rocky cliff before us as her mate calls up to her from down below. He is climbing up to join her as all the Indians below dance around the fire and rejoice at their happiness.

The Rain Dance is almost the last of the evening. Each year the Indians pray to their rain god to bless their crops and make them grow. While the Indians are softly chanting their prayers and at the insistent beat of the tom toms, images of corn are being drawn on the ground with blue, red, yellow, and green maze. The dance progresses and suddenly we
see a girl clad in white slip silently from the nearby lake. Her arms are outstretched and she comes toward the dancers to sprinkle water on the pictures on the ground. The girl is now leaving as quietly as she came, and the dancers begin their chant of thanksgiving for the rain which they have been promised.

How reluctant we are to leave the dance and to return to the hot and hurried town. However, the return boat ride is even more pleasant than the first. The round moon is high in the sky and thousands of bright little stars twinkle above us.

II. A Modern Jitterbug Dance, Indianapolis, Indiana

As we make our way through the milling crowds, the heat seems to come up in waves from the pavement to smother us. The dry summer breeze offers no relief from the day’s sun even as the familiar buildings are graying and daylight is disappearing. Our spirits are high, however, as we make our way to the clubhouse which is famous for its jivesters. We are temporarily relieved by the damp coolness of the poorly regulated air conditioning system.

The check room is almost empty tonight because of the extreme heat, and an excessively made up girl is leaning over the counter ready to pounce on the first available male. Her huge earrings seem to mock her small eyes and narrow forehead; and the sophistication which she has donned for the evening is identical to her junk jewelry — it is wearing thin in spots.

Glancing around us we see dozens of teen age boys and girls leaning against posts loudly laughing and cracking jokes. With a few exceptions they are dressed for comfort and action. Bright colored stripes and checks rate high with the girls, and the boys have blossomed forth in multi-autographed white corduroy pants, vivid socks, and shirts.

The air no longer seems fresh or cool, and the noise of music and shouting drowns out any serious thoughts which might find their way past the door. Looking across the crowded floor we see arms and legs flying in every direction seemingly without control. Watching on the sidelines is almost as tiring to us as the actual dancing would be. A lone couple soon takes over the floor, and the others fall back clapping in time with the loud rasping piano. The two dancers are applauded loudly and are urged on and on. After turning in and out, whirling about, and jumping under, over, and around each other, they stop only long enough to get a new breath and take off again. The noise increases and even the pictures on the wall quiver in protest. For the first time we realize that we are hot and tired even though we have been inactive. The glare of the bright lights suddenly draws our attention to the cracks in the bright red enamel of the chairs, stains on the table cloths, and white spots on the varnished tables. The only real thing is the laughter and even it at times seems forced by a few couples standing to one side. Some are in uniform — young and gay, but just a little less noisy than their comrades. The fact that we aren’t enjoying their fun makes us ashamed to stay and anxious to leave.

As we open the door the hot breeze brushes by us. It is so welcome — this fresh pure air. The clear stars wink at us and the big yellow moon laughs as we escape from the bright lights, harsh music, and modern jive.
A Southern Ball, Atlanta, Georgia

The walk up the long avenue to the huge Lane mansion actually seems to transpose us to the eighteenth century. It is somehow easy to lose our sense of hurry which is the result of our mad scurry to prepare for the ball. Our friends, some newly made this morning while we were knee deep in the limp filmy dresses of Civil War days, have spent the entire day dashing from house to house in order to outfit themselves and us for the dance. Every attic was raided and forced to yield reluctantly its ancient relics prised even more now than they were a century ago. Being typical Northern Yankees, we feel just a little strange in our newly acquired Southern 'finery, and yet the Southern hospitality is so warm and so sincere that we are welcomed as honored guests rather than as invaders.

The dark green branches of the trees on each side of the lane touch overhead, making a perfect archway all the way up to the house. Many people have already gathered on the lawn under the cypress and magnolia trees. The blue green lawn which slopes down from the white colonial house is stopped only by the road almost half a mile away. The house is alive with yellow lights from every window, and outside the wide veranda and the lawn are lighted with brilliant antique lanterns. They cast a rainbow of colors across the lawn as the lights are reflected through the colored glass. From the cloudless sky above thousands of stars sparkle down on us, and a soft breeze wafts the lighthearted perfume of a nearby rose garden gently toward us. We rather reluctantly decide to go in as the orchestra is taking up the strain of some slow and deliberate music.

The ballroom which is on the second floor completely takes up one side of the house. Dozens of windows are flung open to allow some of the evening charm to steal in from outside. The dance seems truly to be an eighteenth century one. We evidently are not the only ones struggling with our unaccustomed flounces and stiff shirts. Even the most southern belle appears to argue now and then with her hoop skirt or extra frills. The men look strangely alike in their cut-away coats, narrow trousers, and very stiff shirts; however the girls' dresses are of every variety and color. The most lovely dress is a filmy chiffon, and perhaps the most exciting is a deep red taffeta with a huge hoop skirt and deeply ruffled sleeves. All the clothes are precious keepsakes of a day long past — a century long lost.

Many southern dances are revived and among them, of course, is the Minuet. The dances are more real, more beautiful tonight than they ever have been before because of their natural background. The slow easy-going southern manner is easy to understand tonight; and as we prepare to leave, our thanks for a lovely evening comes from the depths of our hearts. We feel somehow that a mutual respect and understanding has sprung up between us and our southern friends.

As we cross the lawn, the light from the lanterns fades, and the full bright moon spreads a golden path before us on the cool grass.