

Bush Dance as it was in the Bush!

Part 2 – 1850s – 1950s

By Peter Ellis



Thanks again to the National Library of Australia for setting up the Digitised Newspaper resource that has been invaluable to me in preparing the recent series of articles for Trad & Now.

During the course of perusing the papers for information on dance, and in particular 'bush dance' I've come across several excellent 'stories' by Will Carter. I also observed Warren Fahey in his research on the song 'Tumba-bloody-Rumba' uncovered Will (Wilf) Carter and has provided

details about this accomplished writer of bush traditions:-

"Will Carter was born in 1867. With a life of 88 years he spanned significant changes in Australia. The gold rushes tripled the population; gold was replaced by the new fortunes of wool, wheat, beef and coal; our colonies had federated to become a nation; the population had shifted to living primarily in the cities, and we had seen ourselves fighting in WW1. Carter, like many of his time, was interested in the development of the Australian identity. Carter was a prolific writer and Ron and Catherine Frew have used his words to provide us with a unique insight into one man's vision of Australia. Carter was a schoolteacher and, in his way, a documenter of life. He contributed to local newspapers and The Bulletin. He was also an accordion player, bush dance MC and a dab sketcher in the style of Hop and Lindsay."

You can purchase the book by mail order directly from Ron and Catherine Frew at PO Box 15 Tumbarumba NSW 2653. Will Carter's manuscript collection is housed at the Mitchell Library, Sydney, MLMSS3372



Left. Will Carter. Photograph resourced courtesy Warren Fahey. Also Warren has further information on his web "Australian Folklore Unit" www.warrenfahey.com
Camperdown Chronicle 4th January 1934 p 8
AUSTRALIANITIES. No.261.BINGLE ON THE WEATHER. By Will Carter, Hurstville.

THE REAL OUTBACK. I was enjoying myself in a **bush dance-room** one night in the Christmas holidays over forty years ago. It was just a



bush gathering where everybody had done his or her bit towards making a bit of jollity. It was the real bush spirit that prevailed, and the whole circumstances characterised the bush festival proper. Wattle trees were exuding their warts of yellow, sticky gum not ten rods from the front door of the innocent-looking assembly-room which the locals proudly alluded to as "The Hall". Numerous jaws were busily engaged in chewing lumps of the gum, and some became tightly stuck in the process, necessitating, the insertion of a pocket-knife blade between their teeth to coax them apart when refreshments were handed round by the girls in their muslin dresses, relieved with blue ribbon waistbands. The fiddling and concertina-playing, the tree-fern wall and beam decorations, the pine box seats borrowed from a local grocer, and draped with pink and blue art muslin, in fact everything savoured of the real and remote, bush, and while one mother "was waltzing with' her husband, she had her arms encircling his body, while, in her hands ' she held a cheap accordeon which she played as she danced. "By George," I observed to a local male resident, "that beats the band in more senses than one; I never saw that done before; not even out at, Nockatankatoo where the men used to dance in their socks on hot nights." My rustic acquaintance was tickled to death at such an extreme in bush convention, and sidling up a bit closer, till he actually occupied a third of the "Whybrow Pickles" case I was seated on, he said very soberly: "Yares, I s'pose you do see some rum doin's out in the bush."

I glanced round the room till my eyes rested on the lady with the waltzing accordeon, and I said thoughtfully: "Yes, you do."

Camperdown Times Thursday October 10th 1935

AUSTRALIANITIES No. 346 **THE CROSS-EYED FLAPPER** by Will Carter, Hurstville.

It was a bush dance room that one of the local Romeos was favourably impressed by a certain Juliet, who had come out from town, ten miles away, with a party of friends to enjoy a wild hop among the gum leaves. He had not received the usual "knock down" nor had he even enjoyed the thrill of "swinging corners" with Jennifer in time second -sure of the lancers, but he seemed to sense the fact that she was more than a little impressed with him, as her eye was on him whenever he looked in her direction. When the perspiring dancers had escorted their fair partners to a seat which had been borrowed, or commandeered, from the nearby provisional school, and arranged round the room, she was sitting six couples up towards the door, and, bless me, if that lustrous eye of hers wasn't beaming in his direction again. The youth felt a surge of manly pride in his blood, and he said to Jimmy Stockwhip, his pal standing near. "See that new 'tart' along under the winder, in the blue with white?" "Well, I'm takin' her on after supper: she's struck on me real proper; she's never had her eye off me since she came into the room." "Go on you silly cow," said his mate, "can't you see she's cross-eyed?"

SQUARING HIS ACCOUNT. This is the story of the "Dance that Didn't." The incident is associated with Glenthompson, on the old coach track between Ballarat and Hamilton (Vic), and occurred over thirty years ago. The advance guard of the rail survey, across from Ararat to Hamilton, camped near a small township, where dances were very frequent. The members of the survey party carried all before them with their bit of dash and superfine robing in tailor-made suits and patent leather dancing shoes, where the local lads had to be content with "hand-me-down" suits and white canvas shoes. Naturally a little local jealously

was aroused, and one of the first to air his grievance was Barney Mooney, a local saddler, who was reputedly the best waltzer, and beer-sinker for twenty miles round. He had won so many waltzing contests that he was barred, at length, from all local competitions, and had to content himself with accepting the responsible office of judge on all occasions, a job he was well qualified to perform satisfactorily. He used to chalk the bottoms of the competitors' heels, in order to learn if they had momentarily touched the floor during the contest. But, getting back to that survey gang, they got up that there was going to be something absolutely "out of the box," in the nature of a reception ball to the townies. The local schoolmaster, whom we shall call Mac, supplied the band with his fiddle. He was the only available musician for many miles round. The great night came, and Barney Mooney had not been invited. Mac called in at the pub on his way to the hall, and was treated by some of the local boys, while Barney Mooney slipped away with Mac's fiddle-case to a quiet room, and presently returned, placing the case back unnoticed. A little later the great ball was about to open. Barney was guying in through a hole in one of the windows. Mac took out his fiddle, placed his handkerchief pad under his chin, and the MC one of the survey party, in a flowery speech, having welcomed the local townsfolk, and wished them a good night's fun, called: "Now, gentlemen, select your partners for the first set of quadrilles; right-o, musician!" Mac drew his bow across the strings he had previously tuned at home. There was no sound. He drew again, and still no notes responded. Barney had thoroughly greased the bow with dripping, pinched from the cupboard in the kitchen, down at the pub. There was no dance. Barney slipped away from the window, and though strongly suspected, the crime was never sheeted home to him.

OLD TIME DANCE & MC Camperdown Chronicle (Vic.) Thurs. 4th Oct. 1928
AUSTRALIANITIES by WILL CARTER. **The Old Time Dances.**

The glamour and the importance to say nothing of the imposing dignity of the old-time bush M.C. that indispensable functionary a quarter of a century ago at all country dance assemblies, have departed since the advent, of the nondescript parades we now indulge in either in country or in city. Despite the move to bring back the (MERE MONOTONY) Quadrille, the Lancers, the mazurka and other graceful and exhilarating dances of the ancient order, there is little other than the monotonous repetition of "One step, Fox-trot, One step," with a very occasional waltz or something nearing that name, and so, the skilful guide is no longer needed. One may dance what he likes, and how he likes to them all, in fact most of it amounts to merely a shigger-shagger walk-round with appropriate head and shoulder swaggering. It's easy, that's one thing, and it is accommodating: so much so, that the new chum never feels ill at ease. But times were when dancers had to know their business, when the figure or "squarie" dances made exacting demands upon the trippers by reason of their intricate movements, and, it was upon the shoulders of the Master of Ceremonies that the full responsibility rested. He had to know his business and be qualified to settle an argument about what was next in the Caledonians or adjust a squabble about "tops" in the Lancers, when no less than three couples claimed "to have been there first." Hither and thither sped the M.C. arrayed in black bell-bottoms, white or floral vest, (THE RESOURCEFULL M.C.) sparkling tie, patent leather pumps or light kid boots, with perfumed silk handkerchief of brilliant hue, often rakishly adorning his neck as a sweat-absorber. Here and there he slipped and slid and tripped, pushing this one into place in the "fall-in" or the "grand chain;" signalling a dubious couple to "swing corner's" or "visit to the

right," in the Lancers. His voice continually rang out beneath the **old stringy-bark roof** (*see photograph below) the night through, sharp, clear, and decisive. "Gentlemen, you'll take your partners for the shortease, and see you don't get wortzin of it." Each dance was announced, despite the fact that the programme was hung conspicuously on at least two of the walls. There was no tampering with that programme, either; no readjustments or monkeying with extras, the M.C. saw to that. Should things drag slightly, after his announcements of the Alberts, his vigilant eye rapidly ranged the lines of sitters and slightly protruding his chin, and

with his thumbs and fingers pronged on his hips, he called with the very urge of doom in his voice. "I'm askin' yous for another couple here on the sides!" where-upon Art, Somebody would speedily be forth coming with his bit o' blue muslin. Then, a final (MUSSOLINI TAKES THE FLOOR) glance of survey of the sets, a thumb-and-finger click to the "mushiner," some local fiddler or accordeonist and, "Let her go Bill!" and, away they



went. Should there be a rush for "tops" or should any contention arise at the formation of a set, the company of trippers was ordered to, "Prommynaid-" There was exultation, nay there was absolute triumph in the M.C.'s eyes as they trooped round in pairs before he shouted. "Places," at which they fell into their stations. Sometimes he essayed to dance himself if things were going smoothly, but it was mostly in the circulars that he graced the boards, especially when he could secure a good partner, and show the company how to dance the German waltz on the toes throughout, with a glass of water on his head without spilling a drop. The Bush M.C. You would meet him at a party in a station shearing-shed, Or at Riley's when they celebrate The day when they were wed; Or when Hogan built his humpy, And his neighbours, for a lark, dropped in to warm the tenement Of slab and stringy bark. He did it all so grandly, And his waltzing was a treat, Whilst the odors of a spice shop Smelt nothing half so sweet. He'd have no "coppin" partners A dance or two ahead, No "worlzin' sooreanners", Or "shorteasin' " them instead. And he wore a fancy waistcoat, A howling toff, you bet! With red and green silk handkerchief That formed his collarette. "Hi snat yere trippin' fancies For the Fus' set of Kerdrilles- Why don't you get a partner, Jim? No rushin' things there Bell! He kept them in their places. I tell you he was prime; He whistled through his finger-tips To stop them all to time. And all night long he roared it out, And tootled undismayed, "Arf-right and left, swing partners," or, "Advance, and prommynaid!"

Slab and Bark Hut Buckrabanyule circa 1923. Family and neighbourhood dances were held in these and sometimes there was a piano at the top of the list of essential furniture. Photo from Peter Ellis collection -grandmother's Aunt Emma's farm at Buckrabanyule between Charlton and Wedderburn. Dances also held at grandmother's grandparents' farm

at Yeungroon.

The Southern Mail (Bowral, NSW: 1889 – 1954 Tuesday 26 May 1936 p4.

TALES OF THE OLD DAYS AND OTHER AUSTRALIANITIES by Will Carter **AN OLD CONCERTINA**. I came across a link with the hoary past the other day. It was one of those instruments of torture, the like of which you would find in almost every bush home in the days when chock-and-log and dog-leg fences were in fashion, and stringybark roofs quite the vogue; it was a German concertina. My old friend, Bill Bingle, had preserved the thing which had often been manipulated by himself when a budding youth, staring up at the old smoked rafters at night in the kitchen, while his food, old, hard working mother kneaded the family batch on the rickety legged table. Bill said that it cost twelve and sixpence when he bought it at Blayney, adding, ' And I had the worth out of it, take it from me. The bellows had been patched all round, while the wood work, near the strap attachment on either side, had been punctured to bits in vain efforts and frequent, in order to try and keep the leather hand-strap from flying off in the midst of a crescendo-swell in ' ladies in the centre ' of the lancers, or perhaps in the bustle of the stockyards finale of the first set, causing no end of bother. It couldn't be expected that a bush dance-room could supply sprigs or tacks at a moment's notice, of course. At last, profiting by ill experience, Bill used to take a few sprigs in his waistcoat pocket, and the dancers would patiently keep the floor, talking about the melons over at Daly's, or the coming picnic at the school, while Bill drove home his forty-seventh sprig with a grey stone that he had found outside somewhere. One of Bill's trials at dance parties was a "yaller cattle dog belonging to Peter Swills", which never seemed to miss a local dance, and would insist on accompanying the concertina with a pathetic wailing from under the stool near the instrumentalist The brute wouldn't, or couldn't, leave the music, and go outside like a decent dog. It seemed to have him gripped like a mouse wilting under the baleful glint of a snake's hypnotic eye, and there the animal stuck and yelped like forty belly-aches, until someone landed him a cow kick with his heel in response to an impelling command from the exasperated "musicianer."

There are possibly a number of explanations required for the modern reader:-

1 the *Old Time Waltz* or '**Circular Waltz**' as it was known was very small stepping, smooth with no rise and fall unlike the older Viennese form, and only just progressing round the line of dance like a 'spinning top'. Waltzing competitions were just as popular in the bush as in the city and towns and you would seldom put a heel to the floor, always on the toes and turned out in the five positions of the stage or ballet. Thus marking the heels with chalk marks, or taping egg shell pieces to the heels ensured no winning couple could have faulted by dropping a heel or flat of the foot to the floor. No "worlzin' sooreanners", Or "shorteasin'. I'm finding this a little hard for the exact meaning (sooreaners perhaps 'soaring around?'), but the shorteasin might mean 'Schottischung', using a bouncy step hop style which did come in with the 'hop waltz' or redowa, but this would be a definite 'no no' in a competition, or it might have meant cutting corners or overtaking. Waltzers had to progress just a little around the line of dance as a good waltzer could waltz on the spot and cut the competitors out as they would either bump into them, or have to overtake and that was not allowed. Nor could you cut corners, the judges would often place a chair a distance in from the corner and all competitors had to waltz into the corner around the chair. The best of the 'smooth'

waltzers could waltz with a wine glass of water on their heads without spilling a drop, or 'spin a saucer'. Playing an accordion or concertina behind your partner's back while waltzing was another party trick or floor show requiring the '**threepenny waltz**' style as the Circular Waltz was frequently dubbed.

2 The term '**tart**' in this context is from the old English shortened version of 'sweetheart', a term of endearment for an attractive woman, a different connotation to the more general meaning of 'low character'. But the meaning can sometimes be two way for example in the words of 'Bourke Street on Saturday Night', *Gimme old Melbourne, an gimme me tart*: and '*that's Billo they say, walking out with his fair dinkum tart*'. Of course that song is set in Melbourne in the mid-19th century and some of the 'escorts' were tarts.

3 Notice also, they **dressed well** even at bush dances and wore the best patent leather dancing pumps or light kid boots.

4 **Pronunciation**, Will Carter uses much phonetical and colloquial spelling to emphasise the accent and some of the words. For example today in the folk scene everybody pronounces 'quadrille' with the emphasis on 'quad' as in quadrangle, but in fact it was never pronounced that way, the emphasis on the 'drille', and thus Will's spelling 'Kerdrille'. That is how MCs pronounced it, my grandparents and all dancers of the day. Also you'll find John Meredith in collected tunes in his books quotes the musicians saying 'Cadrille'. Shortease for Schottische is another, sometimes tongue in cheek as the 'Short-squeeze'.

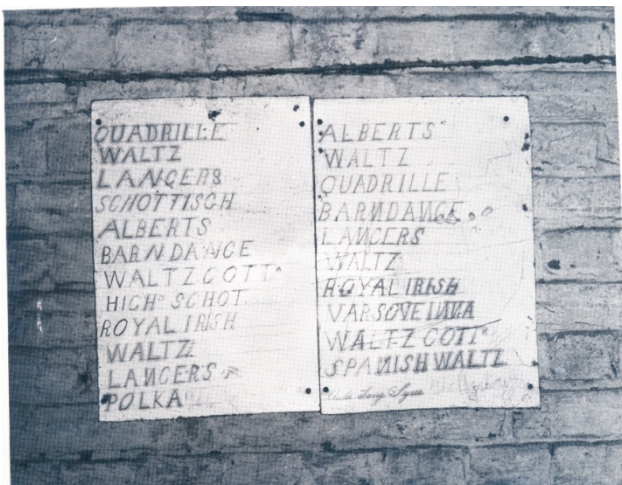
5 The MC was '**Boss Cocky**' according to Harry McQueen and had total control over the dancers and musician(s). You didn't 'do your own thing' or a different version or you would be tapped on the shoulder and told to do the dance properly or sit down or even leave the hall. Hence the expression by Will 'Mussolini takes the floor'. '*Take your partners for the shortease, and see you don't get wortzin of it*'. Here he's insisting you dance the Schottische in the old style with the step hop turns, round the turn of the century dancers were starting to replace this with a barn dance waltz type turn.

6 No **tampering with the programmes**, conspicuously hung on at least two of the walls. At 'society dos' special printed programmes on small folded cards with a pencil attached via a silk ribbon to write a partner's name for each dance were popular, but dancers often found themselves booked up in advance and then not able to oblige a partner of choice.

However as exemplified in the Bush Dance style 'Old Time Dance & MC' by Will Carter, the programme is suspended on at least two opposite walls, simply to view so you knew what was coming up. No interfering with the '**extras**'. There could be 2 or 3 sittings of supper,

the band or regular musician would go to one sitting while volunteer musicians would take over for several 'un-programmed' dances of their choice that was in their repertoire. The volunteers and the selection of several supertime dances were known as the '**extras**'.

Will also makes the point about not booking partners in advance: - "*He'd have no "coppin" partners A dance or two ahead*". See the illustration of such a programme board of Day's



Mill Murchison exactly that era. Also as far back as the Port Phillip Herald of August 1848 is mention of the “programmes around the hall” and their “*excellent and great variety*”.

But to jump a century forward, I can recall dances at Spring Gully Bendigo in the late 1960s when the band didn’t want to play certain dances, they’d push that particular card off the stand and with luck, the MC didn’t notice. So the early reference to ‘no tampering’ with programmes is making it clear it didn’t happen then.

An excellent example of the old bush dance programmes of the era in question. This is nailed to the wall of **Day’s Mill at Murchison Vic.** Dancers on the other side of the Goulburn River had to cross paddocks and then the river by flying fox. The little daughters often had the job of removing grass seeds from their mothers’ trains the following day (personal communication from the late Agnes Corry). Compare this 1890s programme with the revival city bush dance repertoire of the 1970s to understand what a ‘real bush dance’ was about.
