

Commentary

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Frank Bryan

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*(Host) As trees here and there begin to signal the end of this summer in Vermont, VPR commentators are recalling "Summer Times" of the past and reflecting on how those experiences continue to resonate today. Here's commentator Frank Bryan with that staple of Vermont summers not so long ago - the barn dance.*

(Bryan) When I was growing up in Vermont the sounds of summer flowed mostly from work. The bump and grind of the bailer across a field of rowan, the lonely "come bosses" cried out by small boys in the haze of late afternoon, creaking stanchions, the hissing of the milking machines.

But there were other sounds too, joyous sounds of country people at love and play.

Among Vermonters of my generation dance halls are legendary in the annals of memory. Robinson's Barn in Passumpsic, Circle C in Macandues, Fry's Barn in Danville, Jacques Barn in Huntington, Dreamland in Tunbridge, the Grange Hall in East Barnard, the Pavilion on Harvey's Lake.

Not to be romanticized as citadels of the "chosen people of God" - Jefferson's description of country people - such places are instead to be celebrated as reflections of culture. The mix of good and evil by which the human race struggles on, each generation (one hopes) making improvements on the human condition.

And certainly on balance these dance halls fall on the side of good.

When we square-danced, men locked hands with men, women with women; grandparents danced with grand children, fathers with daughters, mothers with sons. Sweat intermingled, pretensions died.

There dancing was a communion of music with the human spirit - not a grotesque approximation of the sex act. It was an affirmation of society's desperate longing that all of us indeed can live together in joy and in peace. And when we waltzed the rhythms were pristine - the strength of cadence - the sway of melody and the hope and the passion of the words.

"Let me call you sweetheart,  
I'm in love with you.  
Let me hear you whisper,  
That you love me too."

My favorite dance halls were near the water - ones like Coles's Pond Casino in Walden. On a dirt road north of Walden Four Corners soft summer melodies of long ago were carried by fiddle, piano and guitar across the still water and into the deep timber of our most precious memories.

I returned there this summer as a preparation (I told myself) for this commentary. Cole's pond casino is gone now, only a boulder or two from its foundation were left in the moon light on summer's swaying grasses. But there in the midnight mist over Cole's Pond my youthful days of calloused hands and perfumed nights returned to the rhythm of yesteryear's last dance.

Her name was Susan and for an instant we were together again as once we were and would never be again. But the music was clear and the lyrics whispered the truth of a bygone summer.

"Let me call you sweetheart.  
I'm in love with you.  
Let me hear you whisper  
That you love me too."

This is Frank Bryan from Starksboro.