

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

Let's Dance!

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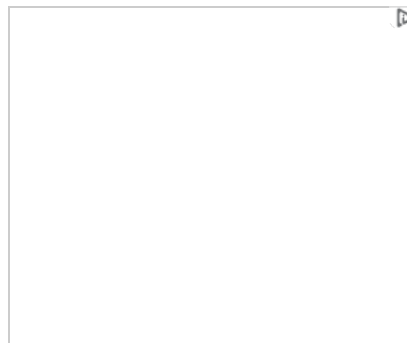
Dancing was historically a very significant form of community entertainment on Orcas Island, and dancing remains popular to this day. Dance halls were built in many island communities, including Doe Bay, Olga, Orcas, West Sound, and Deer Harbor. There was even a covered dance pavilion on top of Mt. Constitution, which could be reached by trail from Cascade Lake. The more intrepid dancers could travel to Cascade Lake, stay overnight at Mrs. Cox's boarding house, and climb the mountain the next day to dance all night.

Islanders would travel by boat, foot, horseback or wagon to congregate at the dance hall. It was often easier to go by boat due to the state of the roads, although changing weather and excessive consumption of liquid refreshments occasionally made the trip home more adventurous than desired. Dances were popular community events where news and gossip were traded along with recipes and new dance steps, islanders could visit with remote neighbors and friends, and newcomers were eagerly welcomed. Many an island family had its start with a first, hesitant whirl around the dance floor.

Dances included the Two Step, Three Step, Schottische, Foxtrot, Waltz, Polka, and various types of Square Dancing, as well as others. Music was provided by a wide range of instruments including the fiddle, guitar, drums, horns and piano. Occasionally an entire band would come over from Mount Vernon to play at Deer Harbor. More than one young girl had her first dance atop her father's boots, and dancing ability was widely admired by young and old alike.

Dances promoted community values, gave island neighbors an opportunity to visit friends and meet newcomers, and served as important venues for the strengthening of neighborhood and community ties, no doubt in much the same way that earlier dances, now lost in the mists of time, created and cemented relationships in native communities.

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