

The play party games were an outgrowth of square dancing, the Appalachia running set, and the New England contra dances. They arose in the 1830's as a result of the "unending conflict between the natural desire to dance and be merry, and the stern religious prohibitions of all worldly pleasure".¹ They stem from those times and places in America when both dance and the musical instruments used for its accompaniment were decried as evil inventions of the devil".² Dances were modified to evade the word "dance". One of the attributes of the play party (depending on one's point of view) was that it facilitated courtship for the young people. In place of instruments, the participants sang, using words and syllables. The difference between play parties and singing games is largely a matter of semantics. However, in a play party, participants must use primarily walking steps, even though there is some difference of opinion over whether or not skipping was allowed. In the Lomax instructions for Skip To My Lou, skipping is included.

In order to place this type of music in a social/historical setting, the following anecdotes and stories are offered.

The work on the frontier was very hard. After months of logging, plowing, cooking,^{and} washing, frontier people welcomed any kind of get-together, especially a dance. The occasions for a party were usually to help neighbors with work that one family could not do alone - barn-raising, hog-killing, corn-husking bees, and quilting parties. "Any kind of get-together, of course, created possibilities for drinking, card playing and illicit lovemaking."³ "Nearly every preacher, from early colonial days on, had at least one sermon which "proved" that people who indulged in any of these activities would come to a horrible end. "In frontier communities, they got around the churches' opposition...by holding play parties...with their skipping, dancing, and marching movements. In these, boys and girls swung one another by the hand and not by the waist..."⁴

Most of the play parties had to do with choosing, chasing or stealing a partner - a concealed form of courtship in the innocent guise of a child's game.

The following anecdote was given by Mr. and Mrs. Crockett Ward, of Galax, Va. in 1937, and is included in a Lomax book as an introduction to a playparty, King William was King George's Son.

"It was mostly skippin' and swingin' each other around in those days, not this huggin'-up bussiness like today. Of course the play parties was used a lot for courtin', you might say; but so was the Sunday singin's and camp meetin's too, for that matter. When you get young people together they's goin' to be courtin'. Now I think a play party's a pretty good place for young folks to find out about each other, how they can get along with people and if a girl's got any life about her, anything about her to like besides her looks. And a slicked-up boy now - many a girl's found out how little sense such a boy has got when she sees him alongside a bunch o' right clever fellers; or maybe she's been a'holdin' his good looks against him, and she finds out he's got more sense than she thought he had and can hold with the smartest of 'em. There ain't no harm in a decent-conducted play party or singin' party, as I can see." ⁵

And from another book:

"The least children are put to bed on pallets in the bedroom. The furniture is all moved into the back. The girls in their stiff calicoes sit giggling against the walls. The boys begin to drift in, not dressed up specially, but in white shirts, blue trousers, and with their broad hats pulled down over their eyes. The "life of the party" starts the dance off with some simple choosing-the-partners games, getting folks acquainted, poking mild fun at some of the tough boys - but very mild because he knows how easy a fight can start. The older men join in from time to time to have the pleasure of jollyng some young gal. The eight-and ten-year-olds can dance too, if they've a mind to. The leader goes on with more intricate games like "Old Dan Tucker" or "Coffee Grows on White Oak Trees" or "Jingle at the Windows". Maybe a couple steps out to the well for a cool drink; he hands her the dipper, then drinks, himself, from the same side. Lots of country romances have started that way.

Toward the end the leader may call for "Weevily Wheat"

or one of the games that involves a "waist swing". Some dancers drop out then and just look on, wishing, probably, that their folks weren't so strict...At eleven o'clock there'll be watermelon or ice cream and cake...Then around twelve o'clock it's time to go home. The young folks walk home across the fields or down the dusty roads, some couple holding hands, the married ones walking Indian file, with the man in the lead. Next week all the young folks will talk about what went on at Maybelle's party."