AS WE WERE
(By Bert Weston)

A question put quite often by young people of to-day to their elders is: “How on earth did you amuse yourselves when you were children and up into your twenties?”

This is understandable seeing that we had no radio or TV, no clubs or discos, amusement parlors or colour movies; drugs were only used, we were told, by a few depraved doctors; there were no hotel lounges—in fact teenage drinking was a rarity. In any case hotel bars closed at 6 p.m. under strict police surveillance—and woe betide the publican caught with an under-eighteen-aged youth on his premises.

Ownership of the comparatively few cars was usually limited to heads of well-to-do families, and a junior was extremely lucky to be allowed use of the parental car for a special outing.

Around 1920 the population of the Illawarra coast from Stanwell Park down to Nowra was pretty evenly divided between town and country dwellers, the latter comprising people engaged in farming, quarrying and the timber and fishing industries. The towns were peopled by the business, professional, mining, transport, industrial and retired sections of the community.

As school children our playground diversions lay in activities not much indulged in these days, and included marbles, top spinning, running games such as “Fox and Geese” and “Egg in the Hat” and ball games, while for the girls there was hop scotch, skipping, jacks, rounders and croquet.

In the rural areas most children on arriving home from school had allotted tasks to perform such as milking, feeding calves, gathering eggs, watering vegetable plots, chopping firewood, and making sure that in wet weather there was plenty of dry kindling wood for the fuel stove next morning.

Once home, it was not usual to go out again except in a family group to some definite fixture in a nearby town or village such as a concert, bazaar, circus, or to see one of the numerous travelling shows which toured country areas; these included the Lynch Family of Bellringers, Fisk Jubilee Singers, vaudeville shows and dramatic theatres (how we all sobbed over “East Lynne”!) and “Magic Lantern Shows.”
Most homes had a piano and someone who could play the tunes and songs of that era, so evenings were often spent in singing, card games such as euchre and cribbage, Ludo, Snakes and Ladders, and "Bobs" played on the dining-room table with billiard ball and cue.

Going to the pictures to view black and white silent movies was a feature of family life about twice a week in Wollongong, with the Crown Theatre packed with children and teenagers on Saturday afternoons.

Milk bars had not evolved, the meeting places for the youth being the "soda fountains," two of which, Howarth's and Cook and Cornforth's in Crown Street sold luscious and variegated ice cream sundaes together with a popular drink known as a "spider," a mixture of ice cream and ginger beer.

However, ballroom dancing was certainly the most popular social activity in the 1920s. The end of World War I saw the phasing out of the dances of earlier times such as the schottische, mazurka, valetta and polka, and their replacement from U.S.A. by the foxtrot, quickstep, gypsy tap, barn dance, Canadian three step, Pride of Erin and later arrivals such as the Lambeth Walk and Boomp's-a-Daisy, all performed in cheek to cheek style to strict dance-time music; the sheet music for popular songs was usually labelled as being in waltz, foxtrot or quickstep time.

These days dancing in the modern style seems to be learned in discos without formal tuition but sixty years ago the youth of the community attended dancing classes to learn at least the rudiments and basic steps of ballroom dancing.

In Wollongong the best known were the weekly classes conducted in the small Alliance Hall in Market Street by Miss Wilson, sister of Vorn Wilson, one of the town's five dentists. It could not be said that there was no class distinction, as admission to her "academy" was limited to sons and daughters of the professions, business executives, heads of industry, country landholders, and from banking and Government circles.

The niceties of dress and deportment were dealt with, together with the various dance steps to music supplied by Mrs. Osborne at the piano and with her daughters Molly and Nancy initiating perspiring and three-footed young men into the mysteries of the art.

At winter's end a formal graduation dance was held in the ballroom of the former Queen's Hotel, next door to to-day's Wollongong Museum. This signalised Miss Wilson's opinion that her pupils could henceforth attend public dances and balls with confidence in their ability to perform creditably. (To be continued)
During the winter the newspapers in the country towns were full of notices of forthcoming balls organised by many local institutions. These assured patrons of a competent Master of Ceremonies, good orchestra, lavish supper and, most importantly, a fast floor. This latter would be prepared by the treatment of shredded candles, sawdust and kerosene and brought to a high polish by dragging over it a cornsack on which was seated a small boy; one of our after-school diversions.

The result was a surface comparable to greased lightning, on which many a gliding couple came down with a thud. Men usually carried and changed into a pair of feather-light dancing pumps before taking the floor. I still own a pair of these patent-leather pumps made at Baxter’s factory at Goulburn and bought from Lance’s store in Wollongong for ten shillings. These have trodden on some of the daintiest feet of that period on the South Coast and are still full of fox-trotting mileage.

By far the most popular event was the weekly “Saturday Night Diggers’ Dance” held in the Wollongong Town Hall. This was organised and continued for a number of years by a committee of returned soldiers, of which the late Herbie Herd was an active member.

Attendance was by invitation, Graduates of Miss Wilson’s classes were especially welcome, and a card was issued to each invitee, which had to be shown at the pay window each night before a ticket was passed out at ten shillings per couple.

Strict tempo dance music was supplied by Beaumont’s Sylvan Orchestra, consisting of piano, drums, saxaphone, cornet and violin.

Strong drink was not allowed nor even thought of, but a so-called claret cup was dispensed from a table in a corner of the hall where stood a large china wash basin in which was mixed a bottle of red wine diluted with about twenty bottles of lemonade in which floated slices of orange and cucumber.

Strict observance of the Sabbath was a feature of the social scene and all forms of entertainment in public halls were compelled to close at midnight on Saturday nights; for this reason balls were always held on week nights so that revelry could continue on until early hours.

In this regard I remember that the Albion Park football club applied to the local Show committee for permission to rent the showground for matches on Sunday afternoons.

The letter was received in stunned silence followed by a unanimous rejection of such a sacrilegious proposal; the president, William Norris, adding that he could think of “nothing more wicked than playing sport on Sunday”.

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(Continued from August Bulletin)
Towards the end of winter the Digger’s Ball Committee always staged a formal ball which was the occasion - in the absence of dry-cleaning facilities - of much sponging and pressing of blue serge “best” suits and purchase or making-up of pretty evening frocks. They were always programme dances in which it was de rigueur to book one’s partner for at least the first, last and supper dance.

The season always closed with a fancy dress masked ball when scores of revellers in cleverly designed outfits paraded Wollongong’s streets en route for the Town Hall. The scene on the dance floor was really spectacular as scores of colourful couples advanced and retreated, dipped and swayed, side-stepped and slid in unison to the tune of “Lily of Laguna”, “Somebody Stole My Gal”, or “Moonlight and Roses”.

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