

Shivaree

A Midwestern Welcome to Marriage

by Gordon Marshall

For many Iowans earlier in this century, the melodious echo of wedding bells was later drowned out by the irreverent cacophony of a shivaree

A shivaree is a discordant, noisy procession and serenade by which neighbors and friends greet a newly married couple, and which commonly continues until the husband pays the group to stop or offers refreshments. The custom, with many variations, was still practiced in the rural Midwest at least through the 1950s.

Historian Loretta Burns has studied the shivaree's European roots; the word comes from the French word *charivari*. In Europe in earlier centuries, the *charivari* was often punitive, its victims widows or widowers who remarried. The community expressed its unofficial disapproval of the upsetting of local tradition by raucously promenading the bride and groom on a donkey through the village to humiliate them. (In Britain, the *charivari* was called "rough music" or "mock serenades"; the donkey procession, a "skimmington.")

Charivaris did not focus only on those who remarried, but also on adulterers or "anyone who challenged the social order," Burns explains. European *charivaris*

served both as rites of passage and as public censorship, reflecting the community's belief "that it had the right and even the responsibility to reinforce custom, or at least to remind the community of custom."

As the *charivari* immigrated to America and became the shivaree, it gradually lost its punitive and sometimes violent overtones and focused only on newlyweds, but it could still be crude and rough. Banging on pots and pans or shooting a shotgun blast could be just the opening gambit for friends and neighbors. Making the groom wheelbarrow the bride down Main Street, or short-sheeting or salting the marriage bed (amidst the confusion of a surprise shivaree) were typical pranks.

Shivarees varied from community to community and changed over time. Yet the shivarees in Ida County, where I grew up, shared several common elements with shivarees recalled in 1978 by northwestern Iowans in oral history interviews (from which I quote excerpts). One of the main elements in most shivarees was to catch the couple off guard.

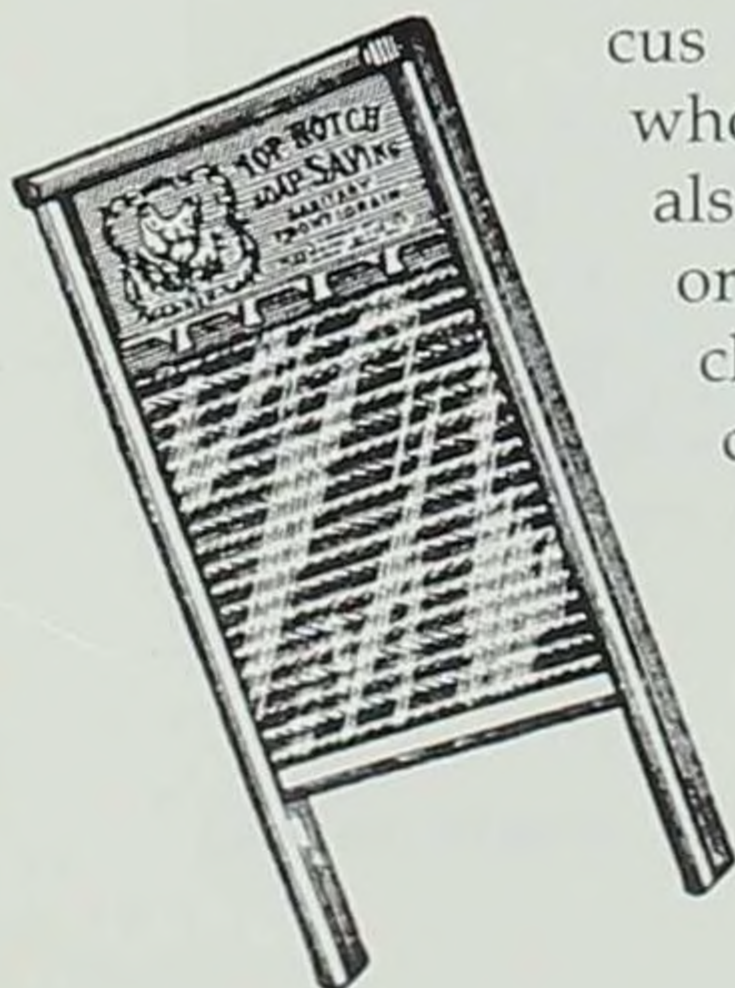
"It was a game, a surprise," explained Gerald Goodwin, who married Fay Utesch in 1933. "They'd even stop their cars or horse and buggy at a neighbor's place and walk in. Maybe you could guess, maybe you couldn't. Sometimes, if you got wind of it,

you'd trick them and leave home, and they'd have to hunt you up again."

"Usually it was within two weeks to a month [of the wedding] that they tried to shivaree you," Fay added. "Sometimes they liked to catch you in bed. Sometimes it was earlier. Probably never before eight."

Brownie L. MacVey agreed that a shivaree happened "whenever they could catch up with the couple." He and his wife, Florence, explained, "See, you weren't safe until after the shivaree was over. It could happen six months after you were married—even a year if they hadn't caught you yet." The MacVeys were married in Pocahontas in 1944.

When my parents, William and Mabel Marshall, married in 1922, they anticipated that high jinks were in order. After the wedding in the bride's home, Dad worried that a gang of friends would be waiting at the Battle Creek depot for them. He had his new brother-in-law drive them to a town farther down the rail line to catch the train to Chicago for their honeymoon. For the time being they had evaded any pranks, and by March 1 the newlyweds were back from their honeymoon and had moved to a farm in a new neighborhood. Still, from their first night, my folks kept their clothes very handy when they went to bed. Within a couple of nights, the expected shivaree came off. They were already in bed when their new neighbors arrived banging on pots and pans. Since Mom's hair was in disarray, she shoved it under a hat. Later in the evening her new neighbor, Hertha, who would become her great friend, suggested that she take off her hat and stay awhile. My par-





SHS (IOWA CITY)

Outsmarting the shivaree crowd in Wellman, Iowa, 1904, Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Ward announce in the Wards Drug Store window that “We got married on the sly. We did. Cigars on the house” and “We keep things to our self. We do. Will not promise to open today.” Cigars and candy were customary treats from the newlyweds.

ents provided the usual treats—cigars and candy bars. All in all, it was a very sedate shivaree.

My aunt and uncle’s shivaree, however, was not so sedate and perhaps reflected more of its European roots. In 1933 Ed Campbell made his second marriage, to my aunt, Mary Marshall, who was 25 years younger. When they returned to Battle Creek from their wedding trip, his cronies on Main Street tried to capture him. Campbell was a big fellow and he easily broke away and ran down the street. A newcomer to the area saw the town worthies in pursuit of Campbell and obliged by tackling him.

Now captured, Campbell was locked up in a railroad boxcar on a sidetrack for nearly a half-day (the bride was held in more

teel quarters). Despite this prank, there was no monkeying with their home or marriage bed, thanks to Ed Campbell’s elderly next-door neighbor. Furious about how these “hoodlums” were mistreating his pal and political hero (Campbell had been speaker of the Iowa House of Representatives and a U.S. congressman), the neighbor had guarded the house.

This urge to capture the groom had not died out by my own time. When I was in high school in the early 1940s and living in Battle Creek in Ida County, I joined a gang of young people organizing a shivaree of a young couple. Riding in a half-dozen cars, with headlights off, we rolled quietly into their farmstead one night, all hot to capture the newly married couple for some now-forgotten prank.

Not the passive type, the

couple started running away from their house. As one of the pursuers, I, a gangly youth, was sprinting along in the cattle yard when I tripped and fell. Not hurt, I brushed off the cow manure and resumed the chase. We soon had the couple back in their house for the usual treats. I was the butt of some coarse humor, however, and nobody would sit very close to me. Although I scarcely knew the groom or the bride, for years after, whenever she and I met on the street, I thought I detected a smirk.

What happened at the actual shivaree often depended on how many other couples the groom “had made life miserable for,” explained Brownie MacVey. “Generally nothing real serious,” he noted, “but they’d tear up the house a little bit,” hide the couple’s clothes, or rearrange furniture. “After they got through raising the dickens,” Florence MacVey added, “they all got together and had lunch or dinner or [would] play cards the rest of the night.”

Agnes Dunham, who married in Crawford County in 1933, recalled that her neighbors arrived armed with horns or “anything that’d make a racket.” They would “hammer ‘til you come out and then they usually have a captain and after about so much jazzing around and candy bars—you better have plenty of candy bars and cigars and what have you on hand because you know they’re going to come—and then they’ll sit and visit for awhile.”

“I tell you what they used to do,” she elaborated. “They come in your house, they just come in and say, ‘We’ll have a little party.’ They just pick up your furniture. . . . They roll the rug up, take your



dining room furniture, living room furniture, everything out and set it in the yard. Bring in the orchestra and have a dance. In your house."

Like many couples, Gerald and Fay Goodwin handed out candy and cigars, but only after the revelers had earned it. Gerald explained: "They surround the house and make noise and when you figure they've made enough to earn their treats, you open the door and let them in. You introduce your wife and you'd better have some treats or they made it rough for you."

Goodwin recalled a shivaree of an elderly couple in his neighborhood when he was a child: "It was the second marriage for both of them. I went along with my dad. That was back in the cob and wood stove days and they used to shoot black powder shells and it was very customary for lots of guns [to be] a-booming. There were cowbells and they carried one of these big saw blades that you could pound on. That was noisemaking."

"Well," Goodwin continued, "this old couple, it was very cold that night, and they decided they wouldn't even let them in. Back in those days they lots of times loaded their own shells and we didn't put shot in, to save money, but it made a lot of noise. I remember a great uncle, Mother's uncle, and he was a lightweight man—they shoved him up on the roof. And up he went and he shoved a double-barrel ten-gauge shotgun down the chimney as far as he could and pulled the trigger. The lids came off the cook stove and fired into the room," Goodwin recounted, "and they were glad to invite people in to help put the fire out."



In our town in 1941, a leading farmer named Calvin, married Elizabeth, a high school teacher. Aware of which night the shivaree would happen, the newlywed Goodenows locked the doors, turned out the lights, and went to bed. Their friends, including some schoolteachers, made a little racket around the farmstead but went away—temporarily defeated. In a couple of weeks the gang returned, and they painted a few slogans on Calvin's car. Although Calvin was very proud of his Ford V-8, he wasn't particularly distressed about the graffiti and didn't wash it off right away. Eventually he realized that the group had mixed lime in their paint, and the finish on the car was ruined. Although the insurance company paid for the repainting, the moral of the story was: Don't try to outfox the shivaree crowd.

Fitting the definition of a shivaree as a community celebration but lacking the raucous spirit or element of surprise was the daytime shivaree of my country schoolteacher, Gertrude Gottberg Knoke, who had married into a well-known area family who owned a grain elevator at Knoke. Her father-in-law set the date and paid the bills for their daytime shivaree. Perhaps a thousand people came from all over the area, and cars were parked all over the tiny town. Plank benches were set up around the newlyweds' house, and barrels of ice cream and beer were served to an orderly crowd. As kids ran all about, adults visited under the trees.

Sometimes other planned events substituted for a shivaree. "We got married at eight in the morning," Ethel Tiefenthaler recalled about her 1941 wedding in

Carroll County. "Big wedding, big dinner, and a dance at night. If you didn't have something like that, then you got shivareed."

On the other hand, Myrne and Elmer Bogh hadn't expected a shivaree "because we had given the dance," Myrne recalled, "and we thought they'd be satisfied, but they came just for fun." The neighbors brought cake and sandwiches. "I remember I got so scared—all these people coming in," Myrne recounted. "I didn't have that much lunch on hand. I didn't know then they were bringing their own."

Whatever happened to the shivaree custom? In our area, one of its informal rules was that you could only shivaree the married couple if you weren't invited to the wedding. As the mid-century economy improved and weddings got larger, shivarees died out. After World War II, wedding dances sponsored by the married couple became very popular. This social event replaced the shivaree, because the desire for a party was met.

"Nowadays, things have changed considerably," remarked Gerald Goodwin in a 1978 interview. "Very seldom you'll hear of any noisemaking."

"It's more or less of a kind of open house now," Fay Goodwin added. "Years ago, they came, finished the treats and visited and smoked their cigars and the house was full of smoke and [we all] just had a good neighborhood visit."

Historian Loretta Burns assures us the shivaree is not completely a custom of the past. She has learned of a few genuine shivarees since the 1970s and notes that some amateur and professional historians have been



known to celebrate a colleague's wedding in this traditional way. In rural areas a wedding anniversary is occasionally observed by reprising the shivaree with the original participants.

For as much mischief or damage as a shivaree did, it was nevertheless a community ritual not to be ignored. When asked what would happen if newlyweds didn't open their door to a shivaree, Alma Pauline Langer, who was married in Denison in 1913, replied, "Oh, that wouldn't look very nice, would it?"

"You really were insulted if you didn't get shivareed," Agnes Dunham confided, "because then

you knew nobody cared about you."

When rural and small-town Iowans were more physically isolated and financially limited in social activity, a sense of belonging was conferred by shivareeing a newly married couple. Certainly the gathering could be corny, crude, or even rough, but it was a memorable welcome to married life in the community. ❖

Gordon Marshall now lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and enjoys writing about Iowa's rural past.

NOTE ON SOURCES

Secondary sources are Loretta T. Johnson, "Charivari/Shivaree: A European Folk Ritual on the American Plains," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20:3 (Winter 1990); Loretta T. Burns, "Memories of the Past: Minnesota Shivarees," lecture, May 5, 1991, Mankato State University; and John T. Flanagan, "Note on 'Shivaree,'" *American Speech* 15 (1940), 110.

The author interviewed or corresponded with Esther Fowler Shotwell, Stanley P. Marshall, Calvin Goodenow, and Gertrude G. Knoke. The excerpts quoting Gerald and Fay Goodwin, Brownie and Florence MacVey, Agnes Dunham, Ethel Tiefenthaler, Myrne Bogh, and Alma Pauline Langer are from oral history interviews conducted with rural northwestern Iowans for the 1978 Earthwatch Project, coordinated by Rebecca Conard. Earthwatch interviews are archived at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City), as is the Barney diary (see below). Some excerpts were edited slightly for publication.

A Dubuque charivari in 1846 "The custom to make night hideous"

A century ago, attorney William Joshua Barney described a shivaree in Dubuque that echoed the more punitive overtones of earlier European *charivaris*. On May 20, 1846, Barney wrote in his diary: "Tonight hearing a tremendous noise going on up street which sounded like tin pans being beaten, bells ringing crackers being fired occasionally varied by the report [of] a cannon, I went to the place where the racket proceeded to ascertain its cause. I was told that it was a Charivari (pronounced Chivree) and that it was the custom thus to make night hideous under the windows of a newly married person when the match met with popular disapprobation. The Bridegroom can rid himself of this annoyance if he consents to treat the party who cause it. The present match was of a recently widowed woman to a man who stands in bad odour here. The marriage has been greatly disapproved by the family of the Bride and some members of it were among the performers of the Charivari. I staid near the house for a while listening to the noise which to say the truth was Infernal. The Bridegroom was obstinate, he would not treat, and his tormentors exercised every means of annoyance in the shape of noise that they could invent. Sleigh & Cowbells, tin pans, horns drums, fifes, firecrackers and even a cannon which they fired every few minutes. The concus-

sion of the frequent reports must have broken every window in the house. I heard one pane crack while I was [a] listener. Every now and then the mob raised their voices aloud in such a yell that it surpassed in hideousness all their instruments. This practice of Charivaring is common here though not peculiar to the West. Sanford & Crawford who were listeners with me told me that they had often heard them in some of the Atlantic States. In some cases the serenaders (if I may thus prostitute the term) have proceeded to unwarrantable lengths in their efforts to extort a treat. They have gone so far as to break open a house and drag the Bridegroom from his bed. Such provocation as this would, in my opinion justify a man in shooting some of the rioters. If I should marry here and be so unfortunate as to be Charivaried, no man shall enter my room without peril of his life. I should however, yield with as good a grace as possible to the compromise of a treat before the performance had commenced unless peculiar circumstances made me determined not to yield."

The next day Barney wrote in his diary: "I heard tonight that the man who was charivaried last night yielded to the necessity of the case and treated his [tormentors?]. He ought to have succumbed sooner or continued obstinate." ❖