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THE SPANISH DANCE

by LOUIS CAPRON

ALL THROUGH THE EARLY social history of Florida runs mention of "the Spanish Dance." Authorities agree that, until after the war between the States, it and the waltz were far and away the favorite dances. But today, a hundred years later, it has disappeared as completely as though it never existed. It is never danced. Nothing answering its description is to be found in books on the dance, encyclopedias or histories of the dance. Two years of search and inquiry brought out not a single person who had even heard of it. "The Spanish Dance is peculiar to Florida," Ellen Call Long wrote in *Florida Breezes*.¹ Here, then, was an authentic facet of Florida's history that had passed into oblivion.

What was the Spanish Dance? It wasn't any of the well-known Spanish dances with their heel taps and castanets. It wasn't the Fandango or the Sevillanas. "This dance," Lieutenant George A. McCall, fresh out of West Point, wrote home in 1822, "uniting the beauties of the minuet with those of the waltz, is unrivalled in the fine attitudes and chaste movements its peculiar figures are calculated to exhibit."

Ellen Call Long described it as "a gliding, swinging movement, particularly adapted to display of graceful action, but as intricate to me in its evolutions as the labyrinth of Ariadne, to her pursuers: but they dance it well here, and it is beautiful."

Fairbanks, in his *History and Antiquities of St. Augustine* (1858) writes:

The graceful Spanish dance, so well suited in its slow and regular movements to the inhabitants of a warm climate, has always retained the preference with the natives of the place, who dance it with that native grace and elegance of movement which seems easy and natural for everyone, but is seldom equalled by the Anglo-Saxon.²

Williams, in 1837, says:

Dancing is the favorite amusement of all our southern

1. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes* (Jacksonville, 1882), p. 108.

2. George R. Fairbanks, *The History and Antiquities of the City of St. Augustine, Florida* (New York, 1858), p. 183.

inhabitants. The Spanish dances are still preferred by the natives, while the Americans consider cotillions as more genteel, and object to the waltzing that is practiced, and indeed mingled in all Spanish parties of pleasure. They are easy and graceful and will probably preserve their present standing in Florida.

But it is McCall, with the enthusiasm of a young lieutenant transported to an exotic, tropical wonderland of dark-haired beauties with flashing eyes, who gives us our best picture. It was Pensacola in 1822 - "A Boquet Ball in the spacious ballroom of the 'Hotel d'Espagne,' which was brilliantly lighted and gayly decorated." The King was a Mr. Norton, and he "had boldly challenged the fairest and gayest young widow of Pensacola to share his honors on the inevitable occasion."

The *King* and *Queen*, of course, occupied the most conspicuous position in the dance, on the right of the Spanish contra-dance. The music, measured and slow, commenced; the queen began the figure. She glided through the intricacies of the dance with a light step, to which the movements of her matchless figure (full but not over-grown) conformed with facility and grace. . . . This dance uniting the beauties of the minuet with those of the waltz, is unrivalled in the fine attitudes and chaste movements its peculiar figures are calculated to exhibit.

. . . la Fleur and her partner . . . slowly passed down the long alley of smiling damsels and gallant men, lingering in the exchange of partners and interchange of courtesies with each succeeding couple as they went.⁴

Jacob R. Mott, Assistant Surgeon in the army, also paid his tribute to our dance:

The dance went joyously on; and figures of the most lovely proportions, fit models for sculptors and painters, and arrayed in dazzling beauty, were gliding through the labyrinthine mazes of the graceful Spanish dance. Myriad dark and fawn-like eyes shed a pure radiance of glad light with their kindling beams; while the rich black tresses and olive complexion attested the claims to Spanish descent, in strong con-

3. John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), p. 117.

4. Major General George A. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers* (Philadelphia, 1868), p. 46-48.

trast to the lighter locks and whiter skins of America's daughters.

The Spanish dance seemed deservedly to prevail over all others except the waltz; but it was a very different thing from that which is called the Spanish dance in our northern cities; here all was grace and ease, like the floating of down upon the breath of morning.⁵

What was this dance, "peculiar to Florida," that could move staid northerners to such ecstatic raptures? With all the revival of interest in the old time dances, this one had obviously escaped notice. Perhaps the explanation lay in its stateliness and grace, for the dances that are being revived are the active, rowdy dances of the countryside.

After considerable research, one lead at last proved fruitful. It was an article from the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society that had been republished by the *Barre Gazette* and was reprinted again in 1957 - *The History of Square Dancing* by S. Foster Damon.⁶ Fortunately, Mr. Damon gave his authorities, and there was our final clue: "Wm. B. DeGarmo [DeGarmo] (*The Dance of Society*, New York, 1875, p. 50) is equally condescending. Under 'Contra Dances' he describes the Spanish Dance and the Sicilian Circle (two progressive circles)."

A copy of DeGarmo's book was located at the Library of Congress, and in it was described a dance answering to all the clues we had found. It was done to a slow waltz. It united "the beauties of the minuet with those of the waltz." There was a long alley of smiling damsels and gallant men," either a line or a circle. There was an "exchange of partners and interchange of courtesies with each succeeding couple as they went." There was a "gliding, swinging movement." It was "intricate." Above all, done with grace and the ease of constant practice by "smiling damsels and gallant men" in the rich Spanish costumes that still prevailed in St. Augustine and Pensacola, to the languorous strains of a slow, Spanish waltz, it must have been a thing of infinite beauty, "like the floating of down upon the breath of the morning."

5. Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey Into Wilderness*, edited by James F. Sunderman (Gainesville, 1953), p. 112.

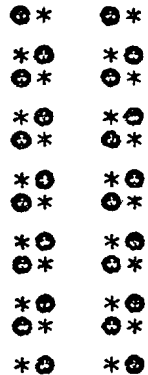
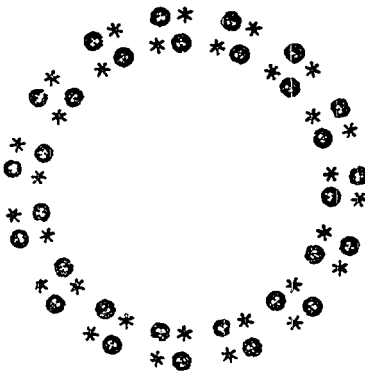
6. S. Foster Damon. *The History of Square Dancing* (Barre, Mass., 1957, p. 35.

7. William B. DeGarmo, *The Duncce of Society* (New York, 1875), p. 51.

SPANISH DANCE:

DANCED TO SLOW WALTZ MUSIC.

Form in Circle all around the room thus: or in lines, thus :



Form in circle all around the room (as above) or in lines, thus. N. B.-The couples nearest each other, in diagrams, have their backs to each other and dance in opposite directions; half the couples face one way and half the other.

If there are too many couples to form one circle, two circles may be formed, one within the other. The couples are not numbered in this dance.

At the commencement of the 2nd strain.-

ALL FORWARD. - (The gentleman takes lady's left hand in his right. They forward towards *vis-a-vis* - the gentleman advances one step, with left foot (counting *one*); then brings right foot to and behind left (counting *two*); and then rises slightly on the toes (counting *three*) - taking one measure of music; he then steps back with right foot (*one*) ; and draws left foot to and in front of right foot (*two*) ; rises (*three*) - taking another measure of music The lady does the same step at the same time, but advances with the right foot and steps back with left. After which exchange partners, etc.

As the couples advance towards each other, the hands which are joined should be slightly moved towards *vis-a-vis*; and, as they retire, the hands are brought back again. This movement of the hands and arms, when gently and gracefully executed, harmonizes prettily with the step, the movement of the body, and the measure of the music.)

-They all forward (as above) towards *vis-a-vis* (1 measure); back (1 measure); forward again and change partners (2 measures) which causes a quarter turn to the left, 4 measures

Repeat, to regain partners (which causes another quarter turn to the left) 4 measures

Repeat the whole (ending by facing as at first) 8 measures

CROSS RIGHT HANDS AND GO HALF ROUND (The two gentlemen give right hands to each other, and two ladies the same-crossing hands-the gentlemen's hands above the ladies'), 4 measures

CROSS LEFT HANDS AND RETURN, 4 measures

WALTZ OR PROMENADE, once and a half round, to next couple, 8 measures

(The next couple is the one facing the same as your late *vis-a-vis*.) Recommence the figure next couple and repeat it round the circle or down and up the line until the music ceases.