

**The Old Dance Hall**  
**Yankee Jims Memories of a Boyhood**  
**By Harold E. Henderson**

The old dance hall, once said to have had the finest spring floor in Placer County, served in various capacities. In addition to its primary purpose, it was occasionally used as a theater, a church, a lecture and debating hall, and in lieu of an undertaking parlor, services for the dead were sometimes performed here.

Dances were held at frequent intervals during the winter months, and always on a Saturday night, starting soon after eight o'clock, and ending just before dawn or sun-up. Sunday, then as now, was supposedly a day of rest.

This old dance hall had an interesting history, and served to symbolize community effort at its very best. During the middle 'nineties,' Yankee Jims could still boast of a group of young people who felt the need for better entertainment facilities, and decided to do something about it. They formed a Literary and Social Club, and as a first project, discussed the possibility of erecting a suitable dance hall, complete with stage, curtains, and a downstairs combination kitchen and dressing room. It was a daring and pretentious plan. These people had no money, nor any immediate prospects of raising any. There were no generous sponsors available to lend substance to this dream of youth, for the town was by this time well along on its decline. So they decided to 'lift themselves' by their proverbial bootstraps.

Enlisting the aid of every willing and able man in the town, and by gentle persuasion and perhaps tempting promises, they first secured a piece of land near the schoolhouse. Then the strong boys went to work, felling and shaping trees into suitable lumber, and then dragging them to the building site, where they proceeded according to a skillful carpenter's plan to install sound underpinning and sub-structure of an ingenious design, which provided a flexible foundation for the spring maple-floor, which was then laid. I've never learned how or where they obtained the money to pay for that expensive flooring; but I do know that a well-advertised dance was held to christen it, even before the walls or roof could be erected. This and other dances provided the funds for progressive construction. The building was finally finished, and with everything called for in the original plan.

The Literary and Social Club's enthusiasm must have proved contagious, for many of the young people in the neighboring towns and camps seemed to take personal pride and pleasure in the achievement of this project, and supported in unstintingly. The news of a proposed dance at Yankee Jims seemed to reverberate throughout the county. On the evening of such an affair, stage-load after stage-load of exuberant youth would arrive about the time that the fiddler and organist were prepared for action. There were many who came with no intention of dancing, but rather to stuff themselves on the 25 cent midnight supper at Duncan's Hotel, and to enjoy watching and listening to the general frivolity.

There was usually mild liquid refreshment provided for the ladies and their less masculine escorts, but the men or hardier physique had, previous to entering the dance hall, secreted their flasks of whiskey and brandy at darkened corners, within easy reach behind a picket fence, and which they were determined to relocate and sample between dances. They were not aware of the fact that they were being watched by two of our local boys (under teenage), who would generously permit each owner of a bottle to enjoy two or three swigs of his precious nectar before all of the bottles mysteriously disappeared. This act of thievery was really in the public interest. It reduced potential drunkenness to a controllable level; and at the

same time a couple of old men in town, who required medicinal alcohol were fortuitously kept well supplied, between dances. The little rascals who stole the stuff were incapable of partaking of more than a wee choking gulp, and so enjoyed the exalted thrill of being benefactors to their senior friends and relatives; who, by the way, refrained from asking any embarrassing questions.

Despite the social and financial importance of the many dances held here, the old hall had other uses as mentioned. There were lectures, an occasional play or one-man show, some songfests, and many highly provocative debates. For instance, the Placer Herald in one of its 1899 issues, saw fit to inform its readers that the "L. and S." society of Yankee Jims was a lively organization, and that "Daisy Harrison and Jessie McCoy had debated the subject: 'Resolved: that the editor has more power than the orator.'" Again, in the August 2, 1900 issue of that venerable paper, Bessie Harrison is quoted as saying, "We shall consider everyone who attends the church socials and conducts himself properly, as an invited guest, as we have always done in the past; and shall continue in the future to exert ourselves to entertain him as royally as circumstances will permit." That phrase, *conducts himself properly*, would seem to imply that there were some who didn't, and in this respect at least, times have not greatly changed.