

Fakelore to Folklore, Part 3, 'Poster Sets' in the early 1900s

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In this section I'm going to deviate a little from the music and the actual dances to the 'Folklife' side, but it is still connected with quadrilles such as the Lancers which was one dance and music example singled out in the previous chapters.

Around the turn of the previous century and through into the 1920s it became popular to have 'Poster Sets'. At fashionable balls in Australia sets of four or even eight couples would be supplied with costumes and themes as a marketing promotion, I guess, for various forms of produce, business and so on. I imagine such society 'do's' with commercial promotion may not be regarded today as truly folklife. However they certainly did catalyse copying the theme into folklife as will be evident in several of the Figures below on fancy dress sets in the bush.

The sets wearing these costumes would be judged on their dancing ability in the Lancers or First Set, Alberts, Waltz Cotillion etc. as well as the costume concept and the winning set would be awarded trophies or prizes. The latest flashlight photography provided opportunity for many of the couples to have snaps taken for their personal memorabilia and perhaps even publication in the local paper or magazine. Here are a number of such 'Poster Sets' Fig.s 1 - 3 from the Leader taken the late Frank Cusack.



Fig. 1. The Co-operative Coupon Co. poster set. This depicts a double set of eight couples so that the Quadrille or First Set (or in the Royal Irish form) would lend itself for dancing tops and sides as couples in doubles with their opposites.

Bendigo Leader 1900



Fig 2. Geisha Tea House poster set. Four couples with a theme of Madame Butterfly perhaps.

(The picture is damaged by omission of most of the second naval officer, but is included as the best available record of an important social occasion.)

Bendigo Leader 1900

Fig. 3. Allan's Piano & Music Set, The Leader 1900. In the latter set the blokes don't get a go in the photo, but of course these ladies would have had partners and danced a quadrille to be judged.





Fig.s 4 and 5, to the left and below, respectively. Monkey Brand soap inspired even the macho males to dance in masks and pretend to know about kitchen work.

(Monkey Brand soap was a scouring soap and advertised as, "It won't wash clothes.")

Photographs courtesy of the Bendigo Historical Society



Mary Bourke of Bendigo, a teacher of Old Time and Irish and Scottish Dancing gave me much information on the tradition of dances and balls, as well as a demonstration of 'clogging' and some tunes, plus a celluloid penny whistle, piccolo and her father's Kalbe accordion. Her sister Kathleen gave me the two photographs above of the Monkey Brand Soap poster set in which she was a participant in a ball in the Bendigo Town Hall in the 1920s.

Whilst this part of the folklife within a community it might not be accepted as spontaneous folk the more formal music and dances of the ballrooms percolated out into the aural tradition in the country and bush. So did many of the society concepts, and thus innovative home-made fancy dress sets soon became extremely popular and not linked to advertising or business. Beat Klippel of Nariel told me she was in a fancy dress set in which they were decked out as lampshades.

The late Nell Challingsworth told Shirley Andrews that mock deb balls were actually the original debutante balls in Australia and were a send-up of English society, i.e. aping the upper crust.



Fig. 6. Cross-dressing in an all male mock debutante set, including the matron, in 1930 before such cross-dressing became a sign of the times.

Photograph courtesy the Melbourne Museum, 'Ironbark Tennis Club Mock Deb Ball' Bendigo.

It was quite common to have childrens' dances and special balls, and in this one below an obvious arrangement of four couples to be judged in dancing and a quadrille and in the 'theme'. The photo is taken at a Church of England fancy dress ball at Narrogin W.A. in 1932. Moya Morris, who provided the picture, said that among the "Bakers Boys and Girls" were Billy Stone, George Morris, the Thomas children, Sybil Miers, the Sharps and the Wards.

Fig. 7. The children could simulate pastry cook prowess.



The following pictures show revivals of the mocking tradition within Club settings.

Fig. 8. Mock debutantes in the Spring Gully Hall, Bendigo, June 1989.

The local MC, Colin Silk, is the 'woman' on the far left and I'll leave you to find yours truly (Penelope Peasbottom).





Fig.s 9 and 10, respectively.

Left: Rae and Jens Lewis.

Right: Putting on the face with Miss Higman.



Fig. 11.: The official party at the Spring Gully Hall Bendigo, 1989.





Fig.s 12 -13, respectively. More aping of convention on the Spring Gully occasion, 1989.

Left: Keithleen and Joseph White.

Right: Raelene and Johnny Mundy.



Fig. 14 The Tarts of Fitzroy at the Central Hall, Fitzroy, 1989.

