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Play Parties

Play parties are folk song, folk dance, and folk game all in one. They were popular from the middle 1800s to around 1930. Although they have roots in early British singing games, they are truly an American phenomenon. They came about primarily because of the prohibition against dancing by fundamentalist Christian churches and, though they existed in most states, they were most popular and lasted longest in the South and Midwest, where fundamentalist religion was (and is) most prevalent. Play parties were active only in rural areas, not in cities. Though they were open to people of all ages, they were most popular with young people of dating age. They were nearly always held in private homes, though once in a while they were held in a school. Never in a church, even though approved by religious parents who had probably played them as young people. The last documented “authentic” play party appears to have been held in Stone County, Arkansas (central Ozarks) in 1956. There is a film of a play party in the rural Arkansas delta region from 1952.

Play party goers sang the songs without instrumental accompaniment. Words in the songs indicated the movements, which were simplified square dance movements. Play parties involved changing partners and games so they were not associated with dancing- though that’s exactly what they were.

Thanks to grants from Southwestern Oklahoma State University, where I used to teach and the University of Mississippi, where I currently teach, I was able to interview over 90 people who had participated in play parties as youngsters. Most of my interviews were in Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. Additionally, I studied all the published information on play parties, especially journal articles from the first third of the 20th century written by people who had performed play parties. The first article published on play parties was entitled “The Missouri Play Party” by Mrs. L.D. Ames, and published in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* in 1911. I have published two books on play parties, *Pig in the Parlor*, published by Heritage Music in 2002 and *Waltz the Hall*, published by the Mississippi Universities Press in 2005. Another excellent source of play parties is *The Handy Play Party Book*, edited by Cecilia Riddell.

British Ballads

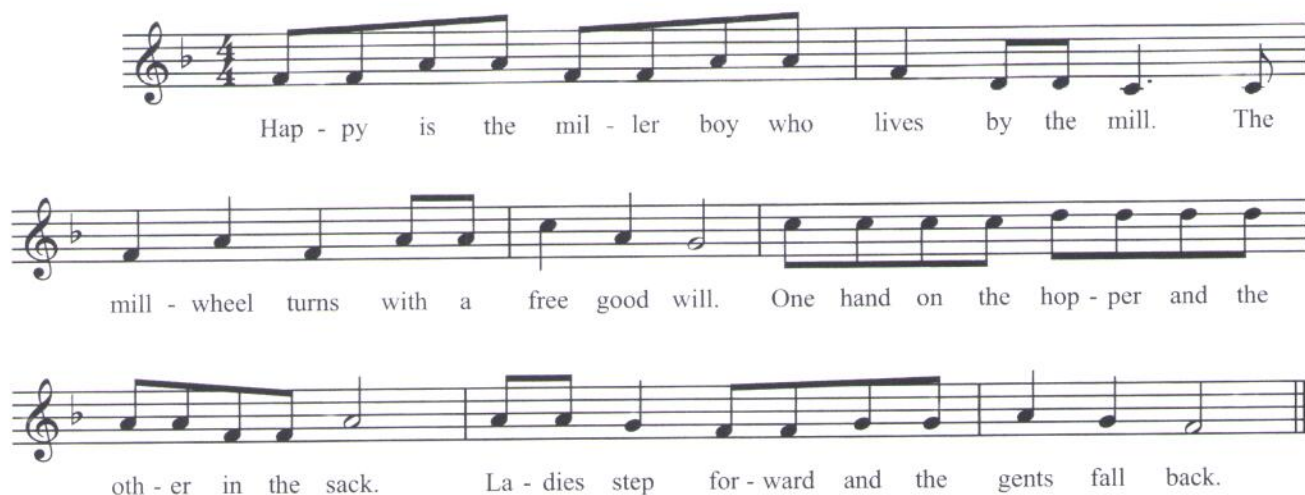
British ballads are songs from the 1500s through the 1700s that tell a story. Many are lengthy and have come down to us because of the uniqueness of their story lines. Most are not appropriate for younger children since they deal with the supernatural and often include extreme violence. Many are just downright scary. Their heyday was in the 1600s at the time the first British settlers came to America and they were widely dispersed. They were a part of rural culture until the 1950s and are still performed in isolated parts of the world including the central Ozarks. Ballad singers see themselves first as story tellers and second as musicians.

Research in British ballads is extensive and, even today, is done almost exclusively by literary scholars who are interested in the text. Francis Child, a Harvard researcher classified all published ballad texts in the late 19th century into around 300 ballad types. We still use his classification system. Bertrand Bronson, also from Harvard, classified the published ballad tunes in the 1940s, so we combine the Child number and Bronson number to identify the text and tune.

I have collected many ballad variants from singers in Missouri and Arkansas and there are several archives in universities in the region that include British ballads.

Miller Boy

17



Hap - py is the mil - ler boy who lives by the mill. The
mill - wheel turns with a free good will. One hand on the hop - per and the
oth - er in the sack. La - dies step for - ward and the gents fall back.

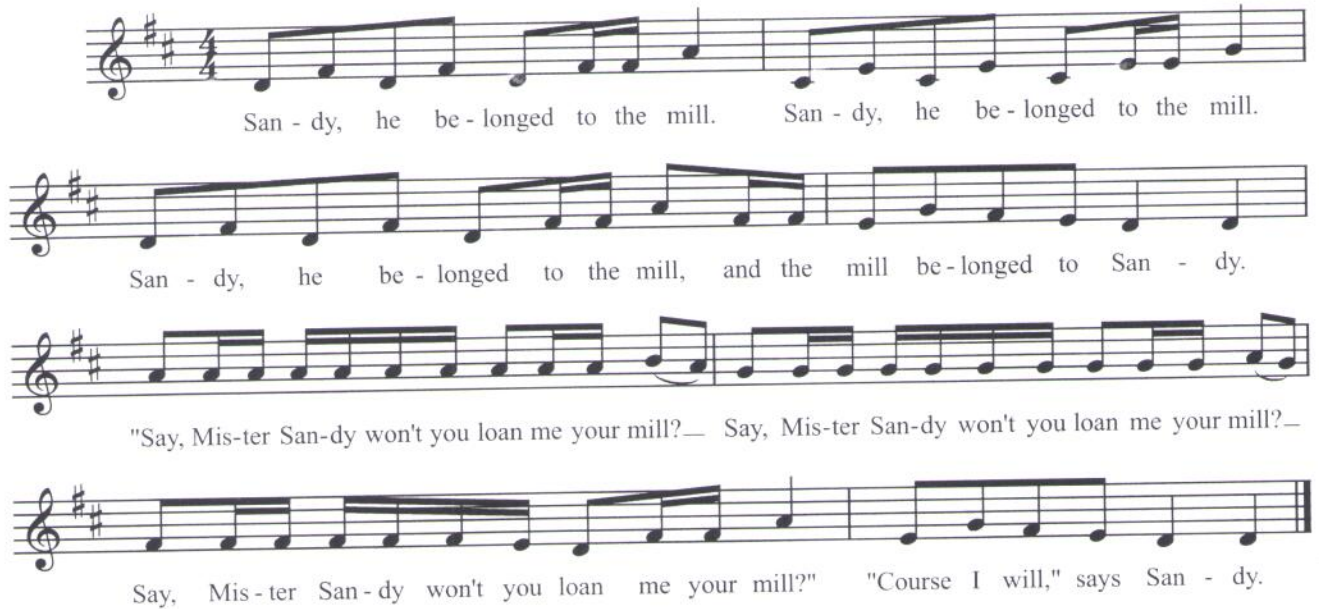
Mrs. Helen Morris, Mayfield, Arkansas, February 21, 1998.

Movement: The formation is two circles with girls on the outside and boys on the inside. There is an extra boy in the middle.

- The couples promenade counterclockwise until "ladies step forward."
- At that point, the girls move up one partner and the boys move back one partner (actually a change of two partners).
- At the change, the extra boy in the middle tries to steal a partner, and if he is successful, the boy whose partner he stole goes into the middle.

Sandy, He Belonged to the Mill

5



San - dy, he be - longed to the mill. San - dy, he be - longed to the mill.

San - dy, he be - longed to the mill, and the mill be - longed to San - dy.

"Say, Mis-ter San-dy won't you loan me your mill?— Say, Mis-ter San-dy won't you loan me your mill?—

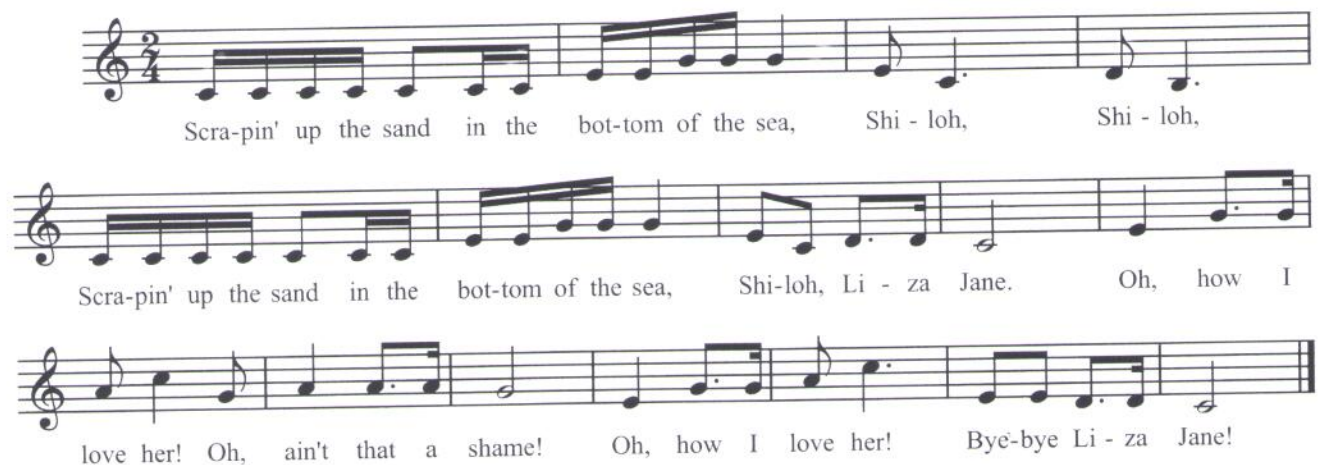
Say, Mis - ter San - dy won't you loan me your mill?" "Course I will," says San - dy.

Mrs. L.D. Ames, "The Missouri Play Party," *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. 4, 1911, p. 303.

Movement: The formation is couples in two circles with the boys on the inside, and the girls on the outside.
There is an extra boy in the middle.

- The couples promenade until, "Say, Mister Sandy..." when they swing first right, then left, then right and left again.
- During the swinging, the extra boy tries to steal a partner and, if successful, the boy whose partner he stole goes into the middle as the song is repeated.

Shiloh



Scra-pin' up the sand in the bot-tom of the sea, Shi - loh, Shi - loh,

Scra-pin' up the sand in the bot-tom of the sea, Shi-loh, Li - za Jane. Oh, how I

love her! Oh, ain't that a shame! Oh, how I love her! Bye-bye Li - za Jane!

Mrs. L.D. Ames, "The Missouri Play Party," *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. 4, 1911, p. 317.

Movement: The formation is two circles with boys on the inside and girls on the outside.

- Couples promenade around the circle on the first two phrases.
- On "Oh, how I love her," swing to the right.
- The second time they sing "Oh, how I love her," swing to the left.
- On "Bye-bye Liza Jane," the boys move up to the next girl and get a new partner.

The Girl I Left Behind

Spoken

First old gent a - cross the hall, Swing your op-po-site la - dy,
Swing your part - ner by the right and prom - e - nade the girl be - hind you.
Oh that girl, that pret - ty lit - tle girl, that girl I left be - hind me,
Ros - y cheeks and curl - y hair, the girl I left be - hind me.

From a play party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Weare, DeValls Bluff, Arkansas, November 14, 1953. Recorded by Mary Celeste Parler. Text located in the Ozark Folklore Collection in the Special Collections Room and tune located in the Audio Visual Room of the University Library at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

Additional refrain:

(To be sung the last time through)

Oh that girl, that pretty little girl,
The girl I left behind me.
She laughed 'till she cried the day I died,
The girl I left behind me.

Movement: The formation is two parallel lines with boys in one line and girls in the other, facing each other.

- After "First old gent across the hall," all couples swing first by the left and then by the right arms.
- The head couple skips together holding hands to the bottom of the lines and there is a new head couple who start the game again at "Second old gent across the hall."
- At each new verse, the leader calls "Third old gent across the hall", etc.

Dusty Miller

13

Oh, there was a dust - y mil - ler and he lived by the mill, And the

mill turned a - round with a free good will. One hand on the hop - per and the

o - ther on the sack, Hold your hold and turn right back.

Mrs. Lucy Clinton, Steeleville, Missouri, February 26, 1999.

Additional verse:

2. Oh, there was a dusty miller and he lived by the mill,
And the mill turned around with a free good will,
One hand on the hopper and the other on the sack,
Ladies step forward and gents fall back.

Movement: The formation is two circles with boys on the inside and girls on the outside. There is an extra boy in the middle.

- Couples form a circle and walk to the beat in promenade position.
- On "Hold your hold," the couples turn and walk in the opposite direction but do not drop hands.
- On the second verse at "Ladies step forward," the girls step forward to the next boy and the boys step back in a change of partners.
- At this point, the person in the middle tries to steal a partner.

Consolation Flowing Free



Mrs. L.D. Ames, "The Missouri Play Party," *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. 24, 1911, p. 301-302.

Additional verses:

2. I'm too young, I cannot go,
 I'm too young, I cannot go,
 I'm too young, I cannot go,
 For my mother told me so.
3. You're old enough, you are just right,
 You're old enough, you are just right,
 You're old enough, you are just right,
 I asked your mother last Saturday night.
4. Cream and peaches twice a week,
 Cream and peaches twice a week,
 Cream and peaches twice a week,
 Kiss her on the rosy cheek.

Movement: The formation is two circles with boys on the inside and girls on the outside.

- The circles move in opposite directions on the first verse.
- At the beginning of the second verse, the boys' circle reverses and moves in the direction of the girls' circle, holding hands in promenade position with the person opposite them.
- On verse three, the players turn and move in the opposite direction but remain with the same partner.
- On verse four, the couples swing first right and then left. (4 swings)
- On the repeat of the song, the circles again move in opposite directions.

Black Jack Davy

(found in Rainy, etc. al.) Child 200

A far - mer came in from his work in -
qui - ring for his la - dy the cook ans - wered him with a
quick re - ply she's gone with the black - eyed Dave - y.
Rat - tle dip - py dum dip - py dum dip - py dum, rat - tle dip - py dum Di -
av - y Rat - tle dip - py dum Di av - y
Da - vey dip - py dum, rat - tle dip - py dum Di av - ey

I'll go catch out my road gray horse
My gray is not so speedy
And I'll ride all day
And I'll ride all night
'Til I overtake my lady.

(Repeat Rattle Dippo Dum, etc.)

Come go back my pretty little miss
Come go back my honey
I'll swear to the sword that hangs by my
side

That you never shall lack for money.

(Repeat Rattle Dippo Dum, etc.)

I'll not go back and live with you
And I don't want to be your lady
I'd rather stay down here by the sea
And be with my Blackeyed Davy.

(Repeat Rattle Dippo Dum, etc.)

Pull off, pull off them high heeled shoes
That's made of Spanish leather
And give them to me with your little
white hands
And we'll bid farewell forever.

(Repeat Rattle Dippo Dum, etc.)

Froggie Went A Courtin'



Frog - gie went a court - in' and he did ride - rop top bot - tom Mist - er
Kim - bo. Frog - gie went a court - in' and he did ride,
sword and pist - ol by his side - rop top bot - tom Mist - er
Kim - bo. Fla - ro, fla - ro fla - ro
rop top bot - tom Mist - er flan - nel dood - le yel - low bug
rop top bot - tom Mis - ter Kim - bo.

He rode right up to Miss Mousie's door,
Rop top bottom, Mr. Kimbo,
He rode right up to Miss Mousie's door,
Where he'd never been before,
Rop top bottom, Mr. Kimbo.

Refrain:

He said, "Miss Mousie, are you within,"
Rop top bottom, Mr. Kimbo,
He said, "Miss Mousie, are you within,"
"Yes, kind sir, I sit ta spin,"
Rop top bottom, Mr. Kimbo.

Refrain:

He took Miss Mousie on his knee,
Rop top bottom Mr. Kimbo,
He took Miss Mousie on his knee,
He said, "Miss Mousie, will you marry me,"
Rop top bottom, Mr. Kimbo.

Refrain: