

# DANCING!

by Gordon Hastings

*Who would think that ballroom dancing would be a big part of growing up in Boylston in the 1950s? One couple, Ralph and Virginia Colebrook, not only thought it important but took charge to create an enlightening experience for all who participated. It was not just learning ballroom dancing but manners and etiquette were an essential and fundamental part of the program.*

Each spring and fall the Boylston Town House was transformed by the Colebrook's into a dancing school. About forty of us, aged 11-15, half boys and girls were delivered to the dancing school at 7 p.m. to be picked up at 8:30 p.m. Once inside the boys sat on the left-hand side of the dance floor and the girls on the right. Ralph Colebrook manned the record player and his wife Virginia (Ginny) was the instructor.

Upon instruction the boys were directed to cross over to the other side and say, "May I have this dance," to the girl directly opposite. Ralph Colebrook dropped the needle on a selection and the dancing would begin with Virginia Colebrook choosing one boy or in some cases her husband to demonstrate how it was done. There was no choosing of partners and it worked out that over the course of the evening most everyone danced with one another. When the music stopped each girl was escorted back to her seat with a formal thank you. Best manners from their young students were at a premium under the watchful Colebrook eyes.



**Virginia Colebrook with  
Sue Emery and Dave Hagstrom  
1954**

*Historical Society Photograph Collection*

The Waltz was the easy part but the Fox Trot was more difficult and the Cha-cha a challenge. Everyone was encouraged to try. We learned the Polka and yes even the Virginia Reel. The dancing classes were held on the cusp of the explosion of Rock and Roll and once an evening the Colebrook's would relent and a single "Rock and Roll" selection would pop up. Only a few could perform the twists and twirls, but it was an early nod to the "Record Hops" that would soon take over the dancing scene among teenagers.

Dancing class regulars were a large group and of course it is impossible to remember all of the names but everyone knew one another. Irene Condon, Billy Chase, Bruce Backholm, Russ Chaplis, Sally Wentzel, Barbara Fellows, Barbara Rosebury, George Olson, Susie Ware, June Christenson, The Colebrook's daughter Liz and son Charles, Terry Ryan and many others. The spring season ended with the Cotton Ball in June and similarly the Jingle Ball in December. The Town House was properly decorated and some brought a flower for their favorite dancing partner.

Ballroom dancing was not the only scene for young people in Boylston. Barbara and Chet Smith, even before opening the transformed Bay Path Barn into a square-dancing emporium, taught a group of young people to square dance at lessons held downstairs at the Congregational Church. When the barn opened, they welcomed young people and continued their instructions to many of us enthusiastic participants. At one point some become proficient enough to perform demonstrations. The Smiths were clearly delighted with our progress as they encouraged more complicated "calls."

Once you have learned to dance it is like skiing or riding a horse. It stays with you for life. All thanks to Ralph and Virginia Colebrook, Barbara and Chet Smith and the congenial culture that existed in Boylston. May I have this dance?"

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Editor, Nancy O'Loughlin Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts  
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