

Our most popular recreation controlled by the liquor interests; a study of public dance halls by the Juvenile Protective Association of Chicago. Text by Louis de Koven Bowen

Bowen Center.
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Our Most Popular Recreation Controlled by the Liquor Interests

A Study of Public Dance Halls

BY THE
**Juvenile Protective Association
of Chicago**

TEXT BY
LOUISE de KOVEN BOWEN
1911

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THE PUBLIC DANCE HALLS OF CHICAGO

Recreation a Necessity for Normal Development

Young girls all over the world require and want recreation. It is necessary for them when they are of school age, but doubly necessary after they have left behind the relaxation of music, gymnastic drill and physical exercise which the school provides. The industrial life in which the majority of our young girls are engaged offers but little variety. The monotony of factory work is not only wearisome to the body, but to the mind. Pasting labels, dipping candy, wrapping soap, making eyelets in shoes is deadly monotonous and starves the imagination. Then comes the inevitable revolt, and consequent trouble.

The Theatre and the Dance Hall the Two Most Popular Places of Amusement

In all of our large cities the two agencies run for commercial reasons which draw the largest number of young people are the theatre and the dance hall. It is estimated that about 32,000 children attend the moving picture shows in Chicago, but the dance hall is even more popular and attracts some evenings as many as 86,000 young people. Young girls go to these dances because they crave the excitement of the dance. It is an

outlet for their emotions, it affords a forgetfulness of fatigue and it is a safety valve for their surplus energy.

**The Investi-
gation—Why
It Was
Undertaken**

The JUVENILE PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION received so many complaints regarding dance halls from mothers whose children were attending these halls or from neighbors who knew about the conditions existing there that they determined upon an exhaustive investigation. The burden of the work was borne by two women and their husbands, who visited practically all the public dance halls in Chicago. They mingled with the men and girls, sat in the saloons, danced in the halls, talked with managers, employes and patrons, and openly flirted with each other. Their observations were carefully noted on cards prepared for the purpose and filed daily at the office of the Association. The work was done between November 13, 1910 and March 9, 1911. Within that period the halls were visited from one to seven times. A total of 278 dances were attended, while 328 halls were visited.

**Dance Halls
Controlled by
Saloons—
Recreation
Commercial-
ized**

The results of this investigation show that the public dance halls of Chicago are largely controlled by the saloon and vice interests. The recreation of thousands of young people has been commercialized, and as a result hundreds of young girls are annually started on the road to ruin, for the saloonkeepers and dance hall owners have only one end in view, and that is profit.

**Conditions
Transform
Innocent
Social Pleas-
ure Into
Vice and
Debauchery**

The conditions existing in the dance halls and in the adjoining saloons transform naturally the innocent desire for dancing and for social enjoyment into drunkenness, vice and debauchery. Saloonkeepers and prostitutes are in many cases the only chaperones, and in a majority of the places even the young girls and boys fresh from school are plied with alcohol and with the suggestion of vice until dances cease to be recreation and become flagrant immorality.

**Policemen,
But No
Protection**

At 158 dances there were police present, but out of the 202 policemen found on duty at only 17 dances did they render good service. At the remaining dances they idly witnessed all gradations of vice, from the incipient liberties of the young and immature to the grossest sensuality of the vice-ridden "rounder." They stood inertly by while minors drank in more than half of the halls, and in six instances the policemen themselves were found drinking. In 134 halls they failed to interfere when the grossest and most dangerous forms of "tough" dancing were being practiced.

**City License
No Guarantee
of Quality**

If one of our newly arrived immigrant mothers wanted recreation and amusement for her children, might she not consider that our licensed dance halls—allowed to be open under city regulations and protected by the presence of city police—would be a safe place for her children? Unfortunately the majority of the dance halls of Chi-

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cago do not offer safe or wholesome recreation for young people. They are, in fact, a disgrace to our city, and too often feeders for the under-world. In the majority of these halls the state laws and the city ordinances are broken; minors are not only admitted unaccompanied by their parents, but in 146 of these places investigation showed that liquor is sold openly to them, all the laws of common decency are violated and they are resorted to by evil-minded men and women seeking victims. The proprietors of these places either connive at or participate in this use of their halls, and no effort whatever is made to protect the young people.

Outside the Dance Halls It is not difficult to know when one is in the neighborhood of a dance hall, as the doorways, alleys and dark passageways in the vicinity are filled with young men and girls, in couples, and outside the halls there are always girls waiting to ask men who are leaving for their return checks.

"Pluggers" Dances are advertised by posters on telegraph poles or in saloon windows, and by "pluggers"—bright colored cards, with the dance announcement on one side and a popular song, often indecent, on the other—which are distributed in the halls and carefully preserved by the boys and girls. In one district the "pluggers" announcing the Sunday dances are given to people leaving the churches.

Two Classes of Dances The dances may be divided into two classes: Those given by the management, or proprietors of the halls, and those given by

clubs and societies. At the former the dangers are more subtle. The halls are cleaner and better order is preserved; drinks are higher priced, but more intoxicating; the patrons are better dressed, and there is an assumption of decency. But these halls serve as a rendezvous for immoral men and women, and crowds of young men attend with the sole idea of meeting girls for immoral purposes. While many of the club dances are well conducted, the majority of them are more openly dangerous, and they are nearly all marked by extreme disorder and open indecency. The men outnumber the women at all dances.

Boys 16 to 18 Out of the 86,000 people found by the
Years of Age; investigators in 278 dances, in the ma-
Girls 14 to 16 jority of the halls the boys were between
the ages of 16 and 18 and the girls between 14 and
16—the very age at which pleasure is most eagerly
demanded as one of the prerogatives of youth.

One condition is general. Most of the
Majority of dance halls exist for the sale of liquor,
Halls Exist not for the purpose of dancing, which is
for the Sale of of only secondary importance. 190
Liquor— halls had a saloon opening into them,
Dancing and liquor was sold in 240 out of the 328
Secondary halls and in the others—except in rare instances—re-
turn checks were given to facilitate the use of the
neighboring saloons. At the halls where liquor was
sold practically all of the boys showed signs of intoxi-
cation by 12 o'clock, possibly because it is almost im-
possible to get a drink of water in these halls.

**Proximity to
Disreputable
Lodging
Houses**

The waiters and employes of the dance hall are only too ready to give information regarding the location of disreputable lodging houses, which in 77 cases are in close proximity to the hall, and in many cases the use of the dance hall premises for immoral purposes is connived at by the management. In these halls newcomers are treated with great attention; old men are polite to young girls. Their first effort is to get the girl intoxicated. In one case the investigator saw a young girl held while four boys poured whiskey from a flask down her throat, she protesting half-laughingly all the time that she had never had anything to drink before. A half hour later, her resistance gone, she was seen sitting on a boy's lap. Older women—sometimes prostitutes—treat young country boys in the same manner. In one hall a young boy, evidently new to the city, was seen looking for a partner. He found one, a prostitute, who, after drinking with him all the evening, persuaded him to give up his job. At the end of a week she induced him to go with her to St. Louis to act as cadet for a disorderly house.

**Immoral
Dancing**

In 187 of the halls immoral dancing and open embracing was indulged in.

**Prizes for
Selling
Liquor**

At one hall it was found that a cash prize of one hundred dollars had been offered to the girl who at the end of the month had the largest number of drinks placed to her credit.

Dangers in Masquerade The greatest dangers are to be found in connection with masquerade and fancy dress balls, where the costumes often permit the most indecent dressing and where prizes are awarded for the best costumes. These prizes consist of cheap jewelry, perfume, cigars and liquor, donated by the neighboring tradesmen. A barrel of beer is usually awarded to the best group of men and a dozen bottles of wine to the best group of girls. A quart of whiskey is the usual prize for a single character.

**Five Minutes for Dancing—
Twenty Minutes for Drinking** The saloonkeeper lives and thrives by the sale of liquor, consequently the dances are short—four to five minutes; the intermissions are long—fifteen to twenty minutes, thus giving ample opportunity for drinking. In the halls where liquor is not sold the intermissions are short and the dances long. Is not this an argument for divorcing the sale of liquor from the dance hall?

Obscene Language In these same halls obscene language is permitted, and even the girls among the habitues carry on indecent conversation, using much profanity, while the less sophisticated girls stand around listening, scandalized but fascinated. There is an almost universal custom among the girls of keeping their powder puff in the top of their stockings, from which it is ostentatiously taken and used whenever a girl wishes to attract the attention of a young man.

Poor Lighting and Fire Protection Many of the halls are poorly lighted—172 belong to this class. There is very little protection in case of fire—97 halls are deficient in this respect, and the overcrowding renders unsafe even those which meet the requirements of the building department.

Men's Toilet Reached Only Through Bar In 139 halls the toilet rooms for men are reached only by going through the bar, and there is an unwritten code that the man who avails himself of this privilege must spend money for a drink. In 233 halls the floors were covered with expectoration and littered with cards and handbills.

Ventilation Bad There is but little ventilation—170 halls being deficient in this way. In some cases the windows were boarded up, apparently on the theory that the hotter it was the more thirst would be superinduced and the more liquor would be sold. Even in the halls where the windows were open the odor of the overheated people mingled with the tobacco smoke and the fumes from the spilled liquor on the floor, tables and chairs made the air unbearable. The dust arising from the floor, caused by the moving feet and swirling skirts of the dancers, is so thick that it makes breathing both difficult and dangerous. Girls frequently faint and are carried out or laid upon the floor, their clothing torn open and cold water thrown upon their chests.

Indecent Liberties Men frequently subject girls to the most indecent liberties without interference either from the police or patrons in the hall. In one case where the girl screamed the man choked her, and although her screams rang through the hall, those surrounding the couple only laughed and made no attempt at interference.

A Narrow Escape The case of a decent young girl who recently went to the Dearborn Hall is typical. At the end of the evening, finding herself worn out from dancing and her head heavy from the liquor to which she was unaccustomed, she said to her partner: "Let us go somewhere and rest." Fortunately the young man was a decent fellow and took her home to her mother, who, frightened by the danger which the girl had so miraculously escaped, came the next day to the Juvenile Protective Association to complain of the hall, which she had assumed to be respectable.

No Limit to Number of Bar Permits Our city ordinances require that no organization or individual shall be granted a special bar permit more than six times during the year, and yet the Juvenile Protective Association has evidence showing that organizations frequently secure from 12 to 22 bar permits in one year. Does not this investigation make clear that we should have more stringent regulations regarding dance halls?

**A Department
of Recreation
Needed by
Chicago**

Kansas City recently established a department of Public Welfare, and part of the business of this department is to supervise the dance halls of the city and see that they comply with the regulations established for their conduct. Cleveland recently has passed a revised dance hall ordinance which, if properly enforced, will eliminate from the dance halls all objectionable features and provide decent amusement for its patrons. A Department of Recreation is now being planned in Milwaukee. We should have some such department in Chicago. A city ordinance should be enacted covering the following points:

1st. A license should be required for premises used for dance halls, not for the man who operates the hall. This would make it impossible to have a license taken out by a relative after it had been once revoked.

2nd. All dance halls should be made to comply with the regulations of the Building and Fire Departments so as to insure proper sanitation and adequate fire protection. By this means many small and poorly built halls would be forced out of business because they could not pass inspection.

3rd. The sale of liquor in dance halls or in buildings connected with them should be prohibited. This has been accomplished already in New York.

4th. The giving of return checks to dancers should be prohibited so that the saloons in the neighborhood may not be so constantly utilized.

5th. The connection of dance halls with rooming houses or hotels should be prohibited.

6th. All halls should be brilliantly lighted, and all stairways and other passages and all rooms connected with dance halls should be kept open and well lighted.

7th. No immoral dancing or familiarity should be tolerated.

8th. People under the influence of liquor or known prostitutes should not be permitted in dance halls.

9th. A policeman provided by the city should be on duty at every dance, and should remain at his post from the time the hall is opened until it is closed. He should be instructed to enforce the above regulations.

10th. A license should be forfeited upon presentation of reliable evidence that the rules and regulations covering the dance halls have been violated.

11th. There should be an inspector of dance halls, who should have in his department a corps of inspectors who would regularly inspect the dance halls and make reports concerning them to the chief inspector.

In the above regulations it will be noticed that no mention has been made of the hour for closing the dance halls. In Cleveland they are required to close at 12:30, but it does not seem best to limit the hours of pleasure for the working people any more than for those who can afford to entertain in and patronize the best hotels. Neither does it seem wise to bar the girl of sixteen from attendance at dances unaccompanied by parent or guardian, because the two years after

leaving school, i. e., between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, are often the years when the monotony of the factory or the store makes her crave the excitement which is furnished by the dance.

If there could be established in Chicago a Department of Recreation and if we could secure the passage of a city ordinance regulating the dance halls as above suggested, then the dance halls will cease to be places where decent young people are too often decoyed into evil and where mere search for pleasure so easily leads into disgrace, disease and crime.



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