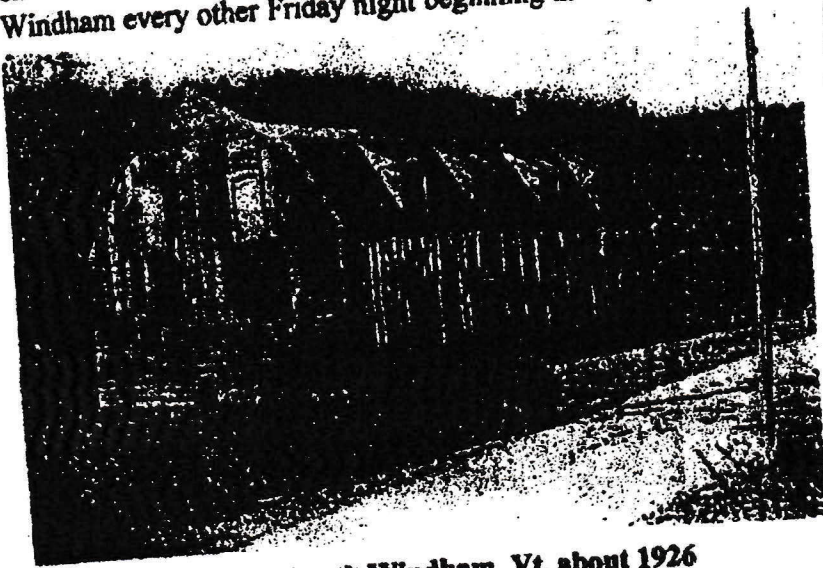


Friday Night Supper Dances

In 1926, Elias and Minnie Stowell began running supper dances to help make ends meet and provide entertainment for their rural community in southern Vermont. They were held at the large dance hall in South Windham every other Friday night beginning in the Spring and running through the Fall.¹ Elias bought the two



Dance Hall, South Windham, Vt. about 1926

story dance hall on May 26, 1926. It was located just off the main road, on the west side, a short distance north of the Baptist Church. The dances were held upstairs, and downstairs Elias had sodas, candy, ice cream, homemade snacks like peanut butter and crackers, and other goodies and tobacco items for people to buy. The cost to dance was 25 cents and folks came from all around, including some from as far away as Massachusetts and New York State. The average attendance was about 100 couples, but occasionally they'd draw 150 couples.² This is how most of the Stowell children learned to dance.³

A variety of music was played at the dances, including both square dances and round dances such as waltzes, fox trots and polkas. Daughter Alice remembers that music was provided by the Jolly Six Orchestra from nearby Londonderry, Vermont. Jule Johnson led the group and called the square dances and his wife played the piano. The other musicians were Harry Sparks on the clarinet, Jimmy Bradshaw on the guitar, Clifford Moffit on the bass, and Ralph Moffit on the fiddle. Popular square dances included *Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet*,

Wabash Cannonball and *Darling Nelly Gray*. Dancers often waltzed to *The Waltz You Saved for Me*, *Till We Meet Again*, *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, *Let the Rest of the World Go By* and *My Wild Irish Rose*. A favorite fox trot was *Red River Valley* and the more spirited dancers would kick up their heels to the *Beer Barrel Polka*. Alice remembers how the Finnish people could really polka and how her husband-to-be, Bill Bliss, would dance with her youngest sister Evelyn when she was only about 11 to 12 years old.



South Windham, Vt. about 1925 (Looking South)

Even though they were getting married and starting families during these years, sons Leonard, Edwin and George, all very good dancers who loved to dance, served as floor managers. If people needed encouragement

¹ On May 24, 1928, the Bellevue Falls Times reported that "E. L. Stowell held his first dance of the season at his hall in South Windham, Friday night."

² Schrifgiesser, Karl, *The "Success Story" of a Man Without a Million*, Boston Evening Transcript, July 7, 1928.

³ Bliss, Alice Stowell, December 1995 audio tape.

or got turned around, they were there to help and get folks going right. Leonard's wife, Ruth, did not have a washing machine at the time. Very cleverly, she agreed that Leonard could attend the dances if she got one. Soon after, her first Maytag washer arrived and Leonard got to help supervise the dances.⁴ If the dance floor got rough, the boys would spread cornmeal on it and work it around to help smooth it out. And, every now and then, the boys would have to help keep order, too. John Newton of Londonderry remembers attending one supper dance in the late 1930s when he was eight or ten years old. "Someone was really causing trouble and the Stowell boys went to work. One grabbed him and threw him down the stairs, another picked him up and threw him out the door, and a third made sure he left and didn't come back." Alice remembers that while no alcohol was allowed in the dance hall, some men would bring hard cider and drink it in the gravel pit across the street – they thought it would help them dance better when they came back in.



Elias with Dort Truck about 1926

Just as important as the music and dancing at these events was having good country food. Daughter Margaret recalls that "Mother would get up early on Thursday and bake all day Thursday and Friday. On Friday afternoon, Dad would take his Dort truck⁵ with benches that he built on both sides in the back and us girls would carry all the food to the dance hall where Mother served a family style supper at around 10:30 p.m. – eat all you want for 50 cents. The girls set the tables and waited on everyone. Mother changed the menus each time, serving such items as meat loaf, potato salad, hot dogs, baked beans, steamed brown bread, cold meats, scalloped potatoes, stews, Parker House rolls and corn bread. In the Fall, she would serve oyster stew and crackers and everyone loved it. For dessert, she made a variety of home-baked cakes and pies, including lemon meringue, apple, raisin, pumpkin, mincemeat, custard, chocolate cream with whipped cream on top, and a two-crust lemon cream pie (Margaret's favorite)."⁶

Alice remembers how "Mother would boil eggs for the potato salad in a large galvanized steel pail and I would sometimes have to peel and slice them – it got tiresome peeling and slicing all those eggs!" She also remembers how "three or four of the kids would pile back into the truck and go back down to the dance hall from their home in Windham Center on Saturday morning to clean-up. They would trade-off, but everyone had to help." She and her brother Floyd would often make the trip bareback on the family horse so they could leave as quickly as they were done. "Oh, what a lot of work, but those were the good old days, that's for sure!"⁷

Somewhere around 1940, Elias and Minnie quit the supper dance business. The dance hall sat vacant for a few years until Herb Hall's son purchased it, took the top floor off and made a house out of it. The house is still there today. There hasn't been an old-time supper dance in Windham since. Several of the family recently thought it would be a lot of fun to recreate one of these events. So, we're planning to have it in Windham on Saturday evening, May 27, 2006, the night before our annual family reunion and picnic, which is to be at Kim and Brian Benson's home in Chester. Details are enclosed and we hope everyone can make it.



Minnie and Elias about 1935

⁴ Malone, John Stowell, The Stowell Family Windham Cookbook, Leonard G. Stowell article, Cookbook Publishers, Inc., Lenexa, KS, 1998, p. xxiii.

⁵ On June 2, 1921, the Bellows Falls Times reported that "E. L. Stowell is driving a new Dort car."

⁶ Malone, John Stowell, The Stowell Family Windham Cookbook, Margaret S. Trusty article, Cookbook Publishers, Inc., Lenexa, KS, 1998, p. lix.

⁷ Bliss, Alice Stowell, December 1995 audio tape.