

May Day

by *Helen Gowan*

These days that phrase may invoke scenes of Red flags and battalions of armed forces parading through Red Square in honor of the glorious Russian Revolution, or, perhaps, the frantic calls of “m’aider, m’aider,” from downed airmen, but when I was young, decades ago, May Day was celebrated as the true beginning of spring when flowers bloomed and sleds were put away until the first snowfall.

In the late days of April, egged on by mothers who remembered the habits of their own childhoods, young girls would construct cornucopias from colored construction paper and ribbons. Early in the morning of the first of May, we would slip out early and pick whatever flowers we could find, pansies, jonquils, grape hyacinths, violets, dandelions, lilies of the valley, and snippets of blossoming trees and shrubs, crab apples, quince, bridal wreath. These we would divvy up among our paper constructions, and, still early, we would go from neighbor to neighbor, hanging May Baskets on chosen front doors.

Second, and rarer, celebrations of May Day were elementary school May Pole dances. Eighth graders fashioned May Poles with colorful ribbons, and classes were rehearsed in the simple weaving steps of the dance, while teachers explained what was even then an archaic custom. One notable May Day children from all the elementary schools in Queens County assembled on the lawn of the historic mansion of Rufus King, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Dozens of May Poles had been set up on the grassy expanse, and hundreds of teachers, class mothers, and possibly a thousand or more children dressed in their Sunday best, milled about looking for their own school’s May Poles. Thanks to flawless organization, and the help of strident whistles worn at the end of dozens of lanyards, hanging around the unaccustomed starched white collars of erstwhile gym teachers, the children lined up at the appropriate Pole, each holding the end of a long ribbon, and all started out on the right foot at the right time, when the lilting air, “Today’s the First of May,” rang forth from the Municipal Band. The ribbons wove in and out around each Pole to form intricate patterns. The accuracy of the weaving was one of the points to be judged by distinguished local dignitaries, who hurried from Pole to Pole with check-off sheets, and awarded prizes at the end to the best of the best.

In addition to cheers and applause from onlookers and dancers, every child received the best prize of all, a Dixie cup of vanilla and chocolate ice cream, with a small wooden paddle to eat it with. Then we all climbed back on the school bus that had brought us to Jamaica. Teachers and class mothers heaved great sighs of relief that no mishaps had occurred, aside from a few chocolate spills on white dresses.

Next day we searched in vain for our faces in the crowd photos of the May Pole festivities which appeared in the local paper.