

MINING CAMP CAMPUS

By Gladys Whitlock

Western mining towns are not particularly noted for intellectual stimulation. They are generally isolated and rough, and often male oriented. If it is a mining *camp* it is all of the above doubled. A camp is a mine location on the back side of nowhere and at least a hundred miles from the nearest real town. They can be in the United States or a foreign country.

A company that sets up such a camp brings in the bare necessities to be able to attract workers. The company will create housing for men and their families, a general store for food and other essentials, a club of some sort for dining and drinking and a school for the kids at least through eighth grade.

These camps are frequently hated by the women, who are often lonely and bored. There in, however, lies the stimulus that results in some of the more interesting social entertainments I have ever experienced. The need for entertainment in such places brings out a creative and cooperative effort you simply don't find in a "real town."

You never know what will trigger one of these events. In one camp we lived in it was availability of evening extension courses from a distant college which provided a welcome

connection with the outside world.

The education program was designed to help upgrade job skills, or prepare the young for higher education, or introduce music and drama otherwise out of reach.

However, as I looked over the latest extension brochure, I was disappointed to find my foreign language choice was not offered and at my age there seemed little point in improving my job skills or preparing for college. I came to the conclusion that there was really nothing in it for me, but my eyes kept returning to the final listing, “Beginning Belly Dancing.”

The idea was completely ridiculous! A sixty year old overweight grandmother taking Belly Dancing. It was too absurd to even consider. But when I considered what the winter season of camp life would bring, I decided to sign up anyway. I had no idea what series of events that decision would bring.

My very conservative husband escorted me to enrol, obviously a bit embarrassed, but surprisingly supportive.

As the few of us who had enrolled talked about the course, we recruited several others and eventually got our class minimum of fifteen students.

We were of varying sizes, shapes and age, but we all had the same thing in mind: exercise, fun and something different to do in camp. We found plenty of exercise and in the process found muscles a lot of us didn't even know existed. Most of us lost a little weight as our slim graceful teacher advised no evening meal on class night. The twisting and stretching sometimes brought about a slight feeling of nausea to a full stomach.

The awkwardness of a bunch of overweight neophyte belly dancers must be seen to be believed. Groans sometimes punctuated the Arabian music as little used muscles were called on

but more often, uproarious laughter would disrupt the lesson until our instructor could regain control. Each newly learned undulation, step or wriggle was choreographed into an ongoing dance that was to be our final performance.

We wore leotards to class but part of the curriculum was to design and make our own Arabian costumes to be worn at our graduation ceremony. Everyone studied the filmy costumes of the voluptuous dancers pictured on the covers of the belly dancing records and began planning. Of course these were more Hollywood than Arabian.

The camp's general store offered a narrow selection of dressmaking materials and the nearest town was almost 200 miles away. Materials available in the store were strictly practical in nature, so exotic costumes required a lot of imagination and some scrounging of resources. Some of us began "borrowing" things from women not in the class. A scarf here and a bangle there, and soon all the camp women were intrigued. As gossip spread, excitement grew. Women were offering us various materials and jewelry they had squirreled away and also volunteering to "help" with costumes.

Without exception, we had all been the target of jokes and sly innuendo from the men in our lives. Wives as belly dancers seemed to strike the male funny bone. We laughed with them but were secretly determined to make them eat their words. As we grew more nimble, their teasing began to betray a rather sheepish pride in possessing their own private belly dancers. Not the reaction we had expected.

It became well known that our final exam was to put on a complete performance for our spouses, and the entire camp was beginning to ask for invitations to the party. That party took on the glow of a bright spot in the slow dreary winter schedule, and everyone was excited about it.

However, with only three weeks left of class, two of our members had to drop out putting us below the minimum required to hold our place in the school building. We were ousted by a college prep class with greater numbers. The disappointment went beyond our class members and half the mine's adult population met that night in the bar.

As we all drank sadly to the lost class, something took hold. There was a determination in the great show business tradition, that *the show must go on*. A company exec volunteered an empty warehouse for our dance studio, and a collection was taken then and there for the instructors salary for the last three weeks of the course. And *Ali kazam*, just like Andy Hardy and the gang, we were set to put the show on right there in the "barn."

We set up in our new "dance hall," but found the weather was cold and the warehouse inadequately heated. Our warm-up exercises began with a noticeable promptness. There seemed to be an added zest in the dancing, probably because we had to move fast or freeze, but also the excitement our class was generating around camp defiantly gave us greater purpose.

By graduation night full camp participation in all aspects of the event was a forgone conclusion and no one waited on a formal invitation to join in and contribute to the fun.

The warehouse was rigged with heaters, tables, chairs, lights, and place settings. The big night of the party tons of food and drink was carried in pot luck style. While we were still the featured act, we were joined by guitarists, singers, and story tellers in the style of cowboy poets.

We exotic dancers performed in full costume before a battery of cameras in the hands of our spouses. As dancers we were still inept and only a little less awkward, but our muscles were a lot firmer and we were all a little slimmer. There was a new spring in our step and a new gleam in the eye of our spouses. It was a highly gratifying end to weeks of really hard work. Most

importantly, the entire camp had made it through one more dreary winter with the largest party of the year and a self styled entertainment you can only create in the remote environment of an isolated mining camp.