

village view

by Andrea Leonard

What in the world did folks do for entertainment before radio and television was available at the flick of a finger, before stereo and tapes, before movies?

They played games. No, not the psychological warfare games the mental health experts tell about, nor the sporting games of fields and courts, complete with uniforms, bats, balls, hoops, or shoulder pads. They played social games.

Children have always played games, of course, just as they do today. And teenagers played games. And adults played games.

Magazines and newspaper articles commonly suggested new games, and whenever a group gathered, games were expected as a way to pass time and enjoy one another's company.

Suppose you were invited to a White Elephant Party, for instance; your hostess would ask you to bring along a trinket in a brown paper bag, fastened with a rubber band.

When you arrived at the party, each person would have brought a similar parcel, and deposited it, unopened, in a pile on the floor. Once all the guests arrived, your hostess asked everyone to march around the room while she played a sprightly tune on the piano.

When the music stopped, everyone dashed for a paper bag. Guests opened the bags and privately inspected their prizes. If satisfied with their booty, they took seats. All others put their bags back in the pile and waited for another draw. The last four kept their prizes whether they liked them or not.

When the game was over, of course, the guests might "swap" prizes among themselves, if they could find a willing swapper.

A variation on this game might include inexpensive tokens of good luck wrapped as gifts. Attached cards had a rhyme or verse appropriate to the contents. As the gifts were opened, each recipient read his card and displayed his good luck symbol.

Contests were popular, and might be active or quiet. Passive games such as "Name the Birds" would be pre-arranged with pictures displayed about the room hinting at different birds.

A blackbird might be a bird cut from black paper; a redwing, a house with a red wing; flicker, a candle-flame blowing in the wind; cuckoo, a cook with two o's; woodpecker, a toothpick and a peck measure; cardinal, a church dignitary; a crow, a cock crowing; hawk, a peddler; a crossbill, a bill marked "PAST DUE!"; blue jay, a blue J; bluebird, blue with drooping head and wings; wagtail, a happy dog; flycatcher, a fly-swatter; humming bird, a spinning top; pewee, a small p; you can think of others.

Appropriate prizes would be a bird book, bird feeder, or even a bag of bird food. Suitable refreshments would be turkey, chicken, and egg sandwiches.

A more active game would divide the players into two teams which stand facing each other. Team A is told to study the members of the other team. Then team A turn their backs while one player on Team B alters his appearance slightly--removes a shoe, twists a belt or scarf, slips off a ring or adds eye glasses. All the others remain as before.

Team A turns back and has three guesses as to who moved. If they guess, the mover goes over to Team A. Anyone who thinks he knows may guess. After three chances, if they haven't guessed, they lose a player to the other team.

Teams alternate chances. At the end of 15 minutes, the team with the most players wins.

Playing games often involved some pre-planning. There were picnics in January, where the room was stripped of furniture and decorated with green boughs and pine needles scattered on the floor. There were "Come in Casual Dress" parties, where each guest was given a different chore to do--serve the sandwiches, pour the coffee, answer the phone, clear the tables, pass the dessert trays, distribute paper napkins, wipe up spills, etc.

There were scavenger hunts to see who could find the greatest number of objects that had come from foreign lands. The objects would be placed in unobtrusive places in the room, such as in corners, under the edge of a rug, behind a lamp, under a cushion.

To give you an idea of what sorts of things to look for, coffee comes from Brazil, silk from China, gloves might come from France, stamps or letters from anywhere. A half-hour scavenger hunt could be limited to a large room, or two or three rooms in a house.

Make necessary rules about the objects being in plain sight, or at least partly visible, to prevent pictures being torn from walls or privacy invaded.

There were games of wit in which the players used words or letters in novel spelling or poetry contests. With the players in a semi-circle, one person began by giving the first letter of a word, say D, thinking of doll, the next said A thinking dance, the third said U for daughter, and so one, until a player was unable to continue.

The first to complete a word or be unable to provide a letter without spelling a word would move to the end of the line. If a person completed a word inadvertently, thinking of a longer word instead, someone called out "foot" and the word-completer moved. In rhyming, complete words instead of letters we've used, and the person who completed a good rhyme moved to the head of the line, and began the next couplet.

There were parties for every season of the year, of course. New Year's Watch Night, Twelfth Night, St. Valentine's Day, April Fool's Day, May Day, and Memorial Day. The parties on July 4th commemorated our Independence, and Labor Day (in some places) celebrated tourists leaving resort areas for home.

Columbus Day and Halloween parties kept people frolicking, and while Thanksgiving was a family day, there was no reason not to play games after the turkey and fixings had been consumed.

Christmas parties were as popular half-a-century ago as they are now, but they were different, for people played group games to celebrate the joyous season.

If people ever tire of television and desire once more to learn how those with whom they live and work think and feel, they may turn again to games for entertainment.

Games can be revealing, show traits of sportsmanship, reveal character, intelligence, humor and wit. Games can stimulate the imagination and provide exercise for intellectual acrobatics as well as dispelling gloom and boredom.

Old-fashioned? Yes, indeed; but games have a history far longer than radio and TV and may prove far more stimulating than most programs available to the audiences of these new-fangled spectator diversions.