**Notes from *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life ,* Paul G. Cressey**

**Introduction**

Promiscuity naturally arises under conditions making for casual acquaintanceship in city life. Conventional avenues for forming friendships are notoriously deficient in the city. The drive toward casual association, with the added piquancy of adventure and irresponsibility, is corresponding strong. And social relations of the sexes certain patterns of behavior come to be expected. These forms of behavior range in informality from the "pickup" and the *gigolo* to the establishment of business bureaus to supply girl companions to visiting businessmen (Cressey 1932: introduction).

**A Night in a Taxi Dance Hall**

Girls employed in these halls are expected to dance with any man who may choose her and to remain with him on the dance floor for as long a time as he is willing to pay the charges. Hence the significance of the aptly named "taxi dancer" which has recently been given her. **Like a taxi driver with his cab, she is for public hire and is paid in proportion to the time spent in the services rendered** (Cressey 1932:3). The patrons are a motley crowd. Some are uncouth, noisy youths, busy chiefly with their cigarettes. Others are sleekly groomed and suave young men, who come alone and remain aloof. Others are middle-aged men who stooped shoulders and shambling gates speak eloquently of the life of manual toil. Sometimes they speak English fluently. More often their broken English reveals them as European immigrants, on the way toward being Americanized. Still others are dapperly dressed little Filipinos who come together, sometimes even in squads of six or eight, and slipped quietly into the entrance. The patrons of the taxi dance hall constitute a variegated assortment. The brown skinned Filipino rubs elbows with the smaller the European slav. The Chinese chops and we wager comes into his own alongside the Greek from the Mediterranean. The newly industrialized Mexican peon finds its place in the same crowd with the "bad boys" of some of Chicago's first families. The rural visitors seeking a thrill achieves his purpose in company with the globetrotter from Australia. **American Negro remains the only racial type excluded from the taxi dance hall** (Cressey 1932:9).

The dance hall girl seems to represent a type in more than appearance. She may be either blonde or brunette, but apparently she is required to be slender, lithe, beautiful, and vivacious. She need not be thought virtuous, in the conventional sense; she must at least be considered "peppy." For the most part the dancers appeared to be giddy young girls in the first flush of enthusiasm over the thrills, satisfactions, and money which is transient world of the dance hall provides. Their stock in trade seems to be an ability to dance with some skill a great variety of dance steps, and, most important, sufficient attractiveness to draw many patrons to the hall (Cressey 1932:7). **It is a mercenary and silent world -- this world of the taxi dance hall. Feminine society is for sale, and adding the price. Dances are very short; seldom do they last more than 90 seconds. At $.10 for each 90 seconds of dancing, a full evening would total the man a tidy sum.** These young girls by a few hours of dancing each evening may secure a weekly income of at least 35 or $40. **By the sale nothing more than their personal society for a few hours each evening, they may earn twice or three times as much as they could by a long disagreeable day in a factory or store** (Cressey 1932:12). Some of these men are obviously dancing for sure enjoyment. But they are the minority. More often they seem to be seeking a certain girl for a "date" after closing our (Cressey 1932:13).

**The Taxi Dance Hall as a Type**

The term, "closed dance hall," seems to have arisen quite naturally among social workers. For them it serve to indicate what they apparently considered the most significant characteristic of the institution -- that it was close to women patrons. A former social worker San Francisco writes as follows of her first knowledge of the term: "I never had any uncertainty as to what it meant. It has always meant to be a dance hall where women are employed to dance with male patrons and where other women -- for all practical purposes -- are excluded." (Cressey 1932:18).

There are at least seven such factors must be considered to differentiate one type of dance hall from another. First, the type of ownership or management, whether publicly or privately owned and operated; second, the dominant motive actuating the management, whether the chief interest is in business profits, professional standards and service, or in social welfare; third, the methods of payment and the relative cost of attendance; fourth, the type of patronage, how homogenous, whether younger older people, whether exclusively masculine or both masculine and feminine; fifth, the association of the dancing with other services and activities in the establishment, whether dancing is incidental to other activities or is the center of attention; six, the type of physical equipment provided, whether expensive or inexpensive whether making possible dancing throughout the year only during certain seasons; and, the location of the dance establishment in the urban structure, whether typically in the central business district, in the "bright light areas" outside, or perhaps beyond the city limits (Cressey 1932:19). There are several "49 Camps" made up each year in Chicago to visit the mining towns of northern Michigan, Minnesota, Idaho. **These "49 dance halls" are not to be confused with the taxi dance hall. While serving very much the same function, the structural organization is entirely different. The girl received her pay as a commission upon the drink she can induce the men to buy and dancing is only incidental to the consumption of liquor** (Cressey 1932:26). When the patrons dance partner is arbitrary selected for him, it is probable that his interest in the dancing will be instructional and artistic. When he is permitted to choose his dance partners, it seems inevitable that the recreational interests will become dominant. If to this is added the ticket- a- dance plan, with very short dance. Any chance for frequent selection of dance partners by the patrons, interest other than recreation and romance seem virtually to disappear. It is apparent that a taxi dance hall is an establishment which only the masculine "public" is admitted, in which the income of the establishment and the taxi dancers is derived from dancing. Further, the ticket a dance plan and the opportunity for frequent reselection dance partners are inextricably bound up with the taxi dance hall.

**A taxi dance hall is a commercial public dance institution attracting only male patrons, which seeks to provide them an opportunity for social dancing by employing women dance partners, were paid on a commission basis for the ticket –a - dance plan, and who are expected to dance with any patron who may select them for as few or as many dances as he is willing to purchase ( Cressey 1932:27).**

**Life Cycle of the Taxi Dancer**

There are four cycles of the taxi dancer goes through. First cycle involves girls dissatisfaction with the type of life associated with the home and neighborhood. This may come about largely through a growing consciousness of economic slack in the family, reporting of the desire for a type of masculine contacts which the home where the neighborhood fails to offer, to a sense of insufficient prestige in the home and the community, or to loss of status due to the girl's supposed transgression of the established moral code. At all events the girl, finding her way sooner or later to the taxi dance hall, secures the satisfaction of certain wishes previously unfilled (Cressey 1932:90). She at first finds an enhanced prestige accorded her -- even though by world which her family in her neighborhood would a judge as lower than their own. Thus begins a second cycle for the girl. As a novice in the taxi dance hall she is the first "rushed," and enjoys the thrill of being very popular. But after a time she ceases to be a novitiate and must make a deliberate effort to maintain her status. If she fails and is no longer able to secure sufficient patronage exclusively from the white group, she comes eventually to accept the romantic attentions of Filipinos and other Orientals.

Thus begins a third cycle for the girl, at the beginning of which experiences a new prestige accorded her by the Oriental group. Here, again, girl they continue to "get by" with the group with which she has become associated, being consistently courted a degree of status which differ satisfying. But such are the hazards of maintaining standing in the social world that if she accepts the attentions of too many Orientals she is adjudged "common" by them, and again loses caste. A failure to make satisfactory adjustment in the world of Orientals may bring the girl to a fourth cycle, which is begun when she centers her interests upon the social world which in Chicago has been associated with the "Black and Tan" cabarets. She usually comes into contact with these groups to her association with Orientals. With the Negroes should get a cheese temporarily the prestige accorded the novitiate. But here, too, she is doomed to a decline in status, and this seems very frequently to lead to prostitution in the Black Belt (Cressey 1932:90). [[1]](#footnote-1)

**Learning the Taxi Dancers Techniques**

One of the first considerations is the question of the type of dressing and "makeup" most advantageous in the dance hall. Another device for interesting patrons is "dancing fast and peppy," and "acting peppy" when waiting for dances:

It pays to dance close and fast. Act like you're just full of. What I'm waiting for dances I walk along the side acting like I'm full of the Old Nick. Sometimes I feel just the opposite, but I couldn't afford to show my real feelings are I wouldn't get the dances ( Cressey 1932:99).

There is also the ruse by which the girl, who believes that a patron does not recognize her, represents herself to him as a novice with the hope that she will thereby secure more dances with him. The pretended promise of a late-night engagement is also used to induce patrons to continue dancing. In this way the patron is kept in the mood for spending money until the end of the evening when a girl informs him that she has made "other arrangements." ( Cressey 1932:99). Cressey describes a girl called the "never miss girl." She is the type was known by the more initiated patrons to be quite affectionate. Sometimes two other taxi dancers she may represent herself as successfully "fishing" her men friends. But her masculine acquaintances she presented an entirely different picture. The girl this type may occasionally have a little rats and you have men who have special "roles" or functions in her life. Toward each she has a certain romantic interest, though even with her it is sometimes coupled with a unique sense of objectivity and detachment. Always fearful that she becomes notorious and thus no longer able to secure dance patronage, yet desirous of having what she chooses to consider a "good time," the taxi dancer this type is torn between the double dilemma of respectability with decreasing income and a greater hazard of becoming notorious and thus unemployable at legitimate dancing in the taxi dance halls (Cressey 1932:103).

**The Origins of the Taxi Dance Hall**

**Adoption of the Taxi Dance Hall by Dancing Schools**

The taxi dance hall had its local development from two dance institutions -- the dancing school and the public ballroom. In the first instance the organization of the taxi dance hall was introduced as a byproduct incidental to the intense struggle for survival among dancing schools themselves. In the second case the competitive struggle between the public ballroom's forced those less favorably located and equipped to turn to the taxi dance hall plan as a means of forestalling business failure ( ie. competition) the proprietors of the dance halls recognize the changing clientele after the introduction of the $.10 a lesson ticket system, they were still a resistance to be broken down. Themselves dancing masters with status in the profession, and with years of experience behind them, they either do not perceive only the economic possibilities of the new clientele or unwilling to undertake the new venture

When I took over the $.10 a lesson idea I just thought of it as a new way of running a dancing school which would make it possible for students to dance with different instructors. I figured that the men would probably pay out more in an evening at $.10 a dance than they would if they had to lay down a dollar or a dollar and a half at one time, as they had to do before. I always made the girls line up at the beginning of each dance and made the men take the girl at the head of the line just as Johnson had managed it. Before long I began noticing the many men who came were good dancers. When I first realized that these fellows were coming back all the time just to get somebody dance with, I laughed out loud. Up to that time I wouldn't have believed that they were fellows who would be willing to pay as much as they did -- just to get a chance to dance... sometimes I noticed that certain fellows always wanted to dance with certain girls, but I would not allow that, except as they took an instructor at the hourly rate... I only ran the hall a year, but all the time I thought of it as a dancing school- not a place to rent a dance partner (Cressey 1932:185):

to remain for an "outsider," a "stranger," with little professional status in the city, to perceive the full economic opportunities of the new system and to undertake to put into operation. A Greek immigrant, himself a detached person in the city, and unhampered by some of the customs and by the restricted perspective of the established dancing school proprietors, was the first to undertake the venture. The earliest record of this enterprise, in the files of the Juvenile Protective Association is as follows:

Officer visited this dance Hall and school of instruction at 10:00 PM. Five young men, Greek and Italians, were hanging around the door, the hall itself is about as large as the interior of a streetcar, located on the third floor of the Haymarket burlesque building on W. Madison St. This place is run by a Greek. Patrons paid $.10 a dance, being issued, and the girl gets five cents on each ticket. A player -- piano furnished the music, and seven girls were present, so-called instructors (Cressey 1932:186).

Greek Americans had become acquainted with the taxi dance hall in other cities and could easily conceive of its application to Chicago. All of them were new in the dance hall business and had achieved no professional status. They had everything to gain and little to lose in a venture with a dubious form of public dance hall. These enterprises had few personal, professional, or cultural ties binding them to Chicago and to the traditional American standards of propriety they could see certain human relationships with greater clarity and objectivity and could push more vigorously any type of enterprise in which there was an opportunity for profit. Even though some of these first Greek-American proprietors were interested in developing a legitimate dancing school by the lesson -- ticket plan, **the system itself, making possible frequent change of couples, inevitably attracted those seeking dance partners rather than those desiring bona fide dancing instruction.** In this way the new enterprise, designed originally as a "dancing school," by gradual and almost imperceptible degrees adjusted itself to the patronage offering immediate support. Features such as practice rooms for private lessons, and graded classes, both of which had been thought of in the original plans, were dispensed with as unprofitable, and the business persisted in its attenuated form, still calling itself a "dancing academy." (Cressey 1932:189).

**Transformation of the Public Ballroom into the Taxi Dance Hall**

In Chicago there has been a striking tend toward the large and are neatly equipped public ballroom patronized by both men and women in located at "bright light" center is several miles in each direction from the loop. Between 1910 and 1927 the number of small dance halls has been greatly reduced but that new and much larger ballrooms have sprung up at new "bright light" centers at considerable distance from the center of the city. It is with these new "million Dollar" or "wonder" ballrooms at the small, poorly located holes are now forced to compete with the rapid expansion of the city at the center and the pushing outward still farther of the adjoining areas of deterioration these older halls, more essentially located, or force frequently to adapt themselves to entirely new clientele if they are to survive. These changes take the form either of lowered standards of supervision and conduct in the establishment or of a change in institutional organization attracted different patronage (Cressey 1932:190). The cycle of the generation of a dance hall occurs when under adverse competition the management makes various adaptations in an effort to preserve the establishment. In the end, the dance hall capitulates to these unseen ecological forces, and goes the way of all other enterprises not suitably located to serve their clientele. A change in organization to attract a different clientele is another means by which a dance hall they preserve itself in spite of increasingly unfavorable location.

**Competition, Conflict, and Specialization Among Taxi Dance Halls**

This period of ruthless competition seems to have been brought about by the increasing movement of patrons and taxi dancers from dance hall to dance hall and by the general recognition on the part of proprietors that all the taxi dance halls could not survive. The spring of 1923 witness the first conscious competition among Chicago's dance hall proprietors. Prior to this time the struggle for existence had been against other elements of the local environment. Each of these early taxi dance halls had secured its patronage exclusively from the neighborhood in which it happened to be located. But by the spring of 1923, the area from which patronage might be expected as officially recognized to invite the establishment of several halls within a computing zone -- and the resulting competition was soon felt by the proprietors (Cressey 1932:210-213). The barriers to competition included factors like poor location or equipment; lack of a personal following; insufficient capital to maintain the business until a patronage could be established; local opposition to the establishment; inability to pass the requirements for a city license permits; or lack of sufficient means her influence to be enabled to operate without a license. Proprietors were frequently accused of deliberately cultivating gossip damaging to a competitor's hall. Some tried, by fair means or foul, to bring their competitors into difficulty with the law and force them out of business. During this time special efforts were made by each proprietor to outdo his competitors in supplying his patrons with unusual variations in excitement. "Double dances" for the price of one, lottery devices, and special features on the different evenings of the week were all introduced (ie. specialization). These innovations were immediately copied by competitors and in turn became standardized. Girls found in one establishment one week could frequently be discovered into other halls the next week. Men changed about almost as frequently as the taxi dancers. Among the patrons, the Filipinos proved the most mobile. At this time Filipinos and other Orientals were admitted to almost any of the taxi dance halls and special efforts were made by proprietors to track their patronage and to hold their goodwill (Cressey 1932:210-217). In other cities the natural history of the taxi dance hall appears to have been rather similar to that in Chicago. In every instance there has been the initial uncertainty, the discovery of techniques of control, the development of an informal code, and when possible, the trend toward expansion and specialization among establishments. In New York City there is much more specialization among the halls, some being exclusively for Orientals and others concentrated upon sensual dancing for white men only. New York's taxi dance halls have advanced farther along the cycle toward expansion and consolidation that is true in most cities. In July 1931, there were reported to be nearly 100 taxi dance halls operating nightly in Manhattan and Brooklyn alone and it's estimated that from 35,000 to 50,000 boys and men frequent these halls each week. These were reported to be operated as one or more "chains" of taxi dance halls and protected by influential political figures (Cressey 1932:221-223).

**The Location of the Taxi Dance Hall**

It finds its roots in the central business district and the rooming house area, near the residence of a majority of its regular patrons. Just as the "wonder ballrooms" in Chicago prosper only in the "bright light centers" at considerable distance from the central business district, though the taxi dance hall seems to flourish exclusively in the zone of furnished rooms and in the central business district(Cressey 1932:224). In Chicago in expensive and frequent transportation during the late-night hours as provided by the surface lines which radiate from many sub centers outside the loop. Thus the location of a hall near several different streetcar lines is an important factor in success. The taxi dance Hall thrives best when it's location affords ready access to cheap and frequent late-night transportation service to the residential sections from which patrons come (Cressey 1932:226). The taxi dance hall must be located in an area of high mobility in which rental values are nevertheless relatively low. The taxi-dance hall cannot afford to pay extremely high rentals. It must be easily accessible to as large a number of potential patrons as possible. As a result it seeks out a second-floor location in a second rate business district near the loop, or lodges on an upper floor of a skyscraper. In either case the dance hall is made accessible to a great number of possible patrons, yet at a fairly low rents. This rental varies within a narrow range, below or above which profits tend to diminish (Cressey 1932:226). This type of dance halls seek out those sections of the city which will tolerate it. As a form of commercialized recreation held ingrained suspicion by the general public the taxi dance hall finds it desirable to locate in those "interstitial areas" of the city were community consciousness is weak. Since the rooming house district is an area of great mobility in which there is usually an almost complete absence of community interests, that provides the safest location for the taxi dance hall. Thus, protection against opposition, as well as nearness to possible patrons, induces proprietors to locate in the zone of furnished rooms (Cressey 1932:232).

The End!! If you read this far, you are quite the scholar:)

1. A young taxi dancer without training of any kind frequently earns as much as 35 or $40 a week. But the economic interests is paralleled by an interest in the "thrill" and excitement of the dance hall. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)