

## OVERLOOKED ORLEANS



COURTESY OF ORLEANS COUNTY HISTORIAN'S OFFICE

Leap days have brought a handful of interesting society events to Orleans County through the years.

## 'Weight Socials' provided fundraising opportunity

By MATT BALLARD  
Orleans County Historian

ALBION — With one extra day this year, I thought it would be interesting to dive into some early newspapers to extract a handful of interesting "Feb. 29" events.

Lo and behold, the leap year provided few notable deviations from everyday life. That is, of course, aside from the prevalence of "Leap Year Parties" scattered throughout the calendar.

However, one particular paragraph published in the Feb. 28, 1884, edition of the *Holley Standard* caught my eye.

Lyman Preston was scheduled to host a "Weight Social" at his home in Clarendon on Friday, the 29th of February. A rather foreign occasion to readers today, the *Standard* was kind enough to provide some brief insight into this unique gathering.

The social event paired men and women together based on luck, with the occasional dire consequence for the unsuspecting gentleman. Each guest received a card as they arrived and on that card was a number — lucky couples would identify themselves by matching numbers.

Then the real fun began. As in the case of Mr. Preston's party, each man paid one cent for every 10 pounds that the

lady "he may draw" will weigh. After confirming the lady's weight on a scale, the gentleman paid his debt.

The couple would then eat supper together, usually a meal that the woman prepared. The *Holley Standard* provided some additional, yet perhaps snarky, context to the story.

"Gentleman will please remember and carry sufficient of the 'needful' to meet any emergency that may arise. Clarendon has been noted for stout women..."

The "emergency" referenced here came by way of female attendants who tied rocks, horseshoes, or other objects to their hoop skirts in order to increase their weight on the scale. These socials served the purpose of raising funds for charitable and religious organizations in the community. Often organized and hosted by ladies' societies, it was in their best interest to tip the scales when possible to increase contributions.

Lyman Preston's weight social was not the only gathering of its kind held that year. On Dec. 11 of the same year, an ad in the *Holley Standard* read, "Pick out a good heavy girl and attend the Good Templars weight social at McCargo's Hall tomorrow night. A jolly time is anticipated."

In fact, it appears that the International Organization of

Good Templars in Holley frequently hosted these events in the 1880s.

Another social in December 1884 received considerable attention. The papers wrote, "Now let every young man who feels an interest in the organization display his generosity by taking to supper the heaviest young lady he can find ... he may equalize matters by taking two smaller ones."

Hoping to raise money to support the organization's temperance activities, women were weighed as they arrived, given a number, and the corresponding number placed in a bag. Men pulled numbers from the bag and paid the price per pound before sitting down to eat.

The *Standard* included a follow-up article noting, "one girl, with an eye to the shekels, hung some heavy clock weights from her waist under her dress and made herself weigh 209 pounds! Her partner had cold shivers when he saw the beam balance."

On March 1, 1888 (another leap year), Henry Brown held a weight social at his home to raise funds for the Good Templars.

"It was amusing in the extreme to notice the contrast in some of the couples who sat down to a sumptuous supper, the largest man present escorted a little dot weighing less

than 80 lbs."

Of course, the odd pairings of attendees became the most entertaining feature of these fund-raising events.

The weight social represented just one of many interesting social gatherings.

The Box Social placed additional emphasis on the prepared supper, where women wrote their name on a card and placed it inside of a box with a meal they prepared. Men bid on each box, paid the fee, and enjoyed supper with the woman who prepared it.

A local "Old Folks Social" encouraged attendees to bust open their old trunks and dress in pioneer attire for a party; what an antiquated sight! Conundrum Socials or Quiz Socials paired men and women together based on questions and answers.

The occasional Sock Social required guests to fill old socks with pennies, which were then deposited in a large sock hung at the party venue.

Then, of course, was the very rare and mysterious "Handsome Social," once hosted by Mrs. Minerva Pratt of Clarendon. Although it attracted considerable attention from local papers, they never provided a detailed explanation of the event.

It is surmised that the social included an activity similar to a "Bachelor Auction."