FAMILY

The Pre-wedding Parties Where Couples Charge Admission

At a "stag and doe," communities come together to celebrate the spouses-to-be—and give them a financial boost.

JULIE BOGEN 7:00 AM ET

JOHN MACDOUGALL / GETTY

Kyle Reid and Tessa Bailey heard from friends and family members that their party this summer was a blast. Some 400 people attended, and there was a spread of homemade and catered food—pulled pork, lasagna, meatballs, salad—as well as a DJ, games, and a raffle. The last guests didn't leave until 2 a.m.

Reid and Bailey, who are in their 20s and live in Binbrook, a town in Ontario, Canada, were celebrating their upcoming wedding, though they did so in a way that might be foreign to most couples and wedding-goers: They threw a party for their families, friends, and co-workers—and charged everyone admission. The ticket price was 10 Canadian dollars a person (about $7.60 in U.S. dollars), and that night, Reid and Bailey estimate, they raised more than 10,000 Canadian dollars for their ceremony and reception.

Parties like this are not the norm in North American wedding culture, but in some communities they have become a tradition. "[Where we're from] people ask when you get engaged, 'Okay, when's the wedding?'" Reid told me. "Pretty much the second question is, 'When is the stag and doe?'" That's one name for these parties, which are known elsewhere as "Jack and Jills" or—as was popular with some same-sex couples I spoke with—"stag and drags." They seem to be particularly common in the Northeast and parts of Canada, especially in small towns.

While the names vary, the festivities usually operate within a somewhat standard set of parameters: A couple gets engaged and then settles on an event space—church halls and community centers are popular because they can fit large groups of people at non-exorbitant rates. Then hundreds of people are invited to buy tickets that cover food and entertainment for the night, and donations are collected from local businesses, sometimes in the form of raffle items or catering.

There are of course variations on those elements, but the central aim of the stag and doe—beyond, of course, delivering a night of celebratory fun—is to help fund a couple's upcoming nuptials: The events turn a profit off of revenues from ticket sales and pay-to-play games. "I've heard of people making 15, 16, 20 thousand dollars," Reid told me while planning his own event.

[Read: Why is everybody getting married in a barn?]

Reid told me that his parents and his now-wife's both had one, but none of the various experts I consulted was able to say where or when the practice originated (or even how widespread it is now).

The event, though, does have historical antecedents. Beth Montemurro, a sociology professor at Penn State University, likens them to a wedding tradition called "dollar dances." In an email, she explained that wedding attendees line up "to take turns to dance with the bride and she (or someone nearby) would be holding a bag for dollar donations for each person to give before their turn." Trading a modest amount of cash for a dance with the newlyweds is a practice that seems to exist, in a multitude of forms, around the world.

When I asked Claire Stewart, the author of *As Long as We Both Shall Eat: A History of Wedding Food and Feasts*, about stag and does, she said they reminded her of something called a "penny wedding." Penny weddings, which date back to 16th-

century Scotland, were "an early form of contributory celebration," she writes in her book. "Wedding guests often paid a small fee (a penny), brought food, or paid admission as part of attending receptions, and often the entire town, and even strangers, attended."

The revelry, which included games and prizes, could last for days, and Stewart noted that penny weddings generally were less a financial necessity than an excuse to bring the community together and have a good time. (Alas, they were banned by royal decree in 1687—from then on, weddings were to be conducted with more solemnity.)

These days, the community aspect of the stag and doe is just as important as it was to penny weddings. "You can look at it like a barn raising that the Amish do," suggests Amy Alkon, an etiquette expert and the author of *Good Manners for Nice People Who Sometimes Say F*ck*. "This is a way—in these communities—that people show each other they're being generous."

The events, therefore, carry special meaning for couples who plan to remain in the place where they grew up, especially if it's not a big city. In towns where people expect to have a future with the married couple and think, "We're gonna know you, and know your future children, and go to church with you," says Juliet Horton, the CEO of the wedding-planning company Everly, it's only natural that neighbors would want to support them.

The stag and doe can be especially useful as a way of including in the wedding festivities people who might not have made the cut for an invite to the ceremony itself (or even members of the community whom the couple don't personally know). For stag-and-doe attendees, there's a "thought process of *I know these people, I know this couple, I care about them, I have a relationship with them, but I fully understand that I'm probably not going to be invited to the wedding and this is a way I can go and celebrate their wedding with them*," says Janna Blaine, a co-owner and the lead planner of the wedding-planning company Smitten & Co.

And then there is the second purpose of the stag and doe: to satisfy a couple's more practical, and often financial, needs. For example, Amy and Jason Shemms of Goshen, Connecticut, already had a baby and owned a home as their wedding approached, and had accumulated much of what people traditionally register for when they get married. So when it came to asking something of their wedding

guests, they opted to throw a Jack & Jill instead of putting together a registry. They then used proceeds from the party to cover the final installment on their venue and put the rest in savings.

The idea that a couple's friends and neighbors should help finance their wedding may offend some readers' sensitivities. The words *tacky* and *money-grabby* came up a lot during my interviews for this story, and several wedding professionals I spoke with considered the stag and doe a violation of accepted wedding etiquette.

Chris Skrzek of Hamilton, Ontario, told me that when he posted on Reddit excitedly explaining his plan to merge his wedding and his stag and doe into one big crowdfunded event, he was surprised by how many negative responses he received about how it was being financed. "We just wanted to get married and have a party and not pay through the roof for it—not sell out our kids' education fund," Skrzek said. While Skrzek said stag and does are commonplace where he lives, the concept was poorly received online by people unfamiliar with the practice.

It's hard to argue that a wedding one can't otherwise afford is a life necessity, but there might be something more to the commenters' disapproval. "Passing judgment on people who would ask others to help pay for their wedding and saying, 'They're rude and grasping,' is a way to reproduce class boundaries without explicitly engaging in overt classism," notes Andrea Voyer, a sociologist at Stockholm University who studies etiquette.

Maybe it's better to look at stag and does as yet one more way weddings have become more financially transparent. "We are very much in the era of GoFundMe and crowdsourcing," says Ariel Meadow Stallings, the author of *Offbeat Bride: Create a Wedding That's Authentically You*. She points out that it's now not uncommon for newlyweds to ask for financial contributions rather than things, perhaps in the form of a honeymoon fund or even just cash. "The idea of finding a cute way to ask people to contribute to the wedding is definitely gaining in popularity," Meadow Stallings says.

In one single event, stag and does address both couples' financial concerns and their vision for how they will celebrate their marriage and who will be involved. Juliet and Taylor Lackey of Canton, Connecticut, decided to forego traditional showers in favor of a Jack and Jill for two reasons. First, they were tired of the old way of doing things. "I've never been a fan of bridal showers or the same old games

women play" at them, Juliet wrote to me in an email. And second, she said, the couple had their heart set on a picturesque but costly venue. "Weddings do not come cheap. I did not want to settle on the happiest day of our lives."

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