

By Herb Egender

It is difficult to trace exactly the roots of our modern square and round dancing, for they are deep and varied. Certainly, the taproots go back to our English and French ancestors, but there are traces of Scottish, Scandinavian, Spanish, and other elements.... France may be said to be the Mother of the modern art. Many of our dance terms show this French connection, including the call dos-a-dos, which means back-to-back.

Unquestionably, the English ancestor of our modern square dance was the great Morris dance. It was an exhibition dance done by trained teams of Morris dancers - six men (women did not participate) in two rows of three. Later on, in the 17th century, country dances became all the rage in England. Many were longways or line dances, and some believe that the contra got its name either from a mispronunciation of "country" or from the fact that the dances were done in two, opposing lines. At the same time, people did "rounds for as many as will", some of which resembled the choral dances often danced in the naves of English churches.

The French adopted and modified the English country dance and called it the Contredanse Anglaise. They also produced the form of dance known as the Quadrille (a term which originally referred to a card game). It is the Quadrille that most people point to as the grand-daddy of our modern square dance. However, history shows that "Dull Sir John" and "Faine I Would" were square dances popular in England over 300 years ago. The French also developed the Contredanse Francaise or Cotillon (later changed to Cotillion), a dance done in a square formation with eight dancers.

The vital link to this past was the dancing masters that came to this country with our forefathers and brought with them the dances of their homeland. One of the earliest records (and there are not many) of these dances is contained in the works of John Playford, a musician and dancing master. His book, "The English Dancing Master - Plaine and Easy Rules for the Dancing of Country Dances, with Tunes to Each Dance" was published in seventeen editions between 1650 and 1728 and contained 918 dances. Meanwhile, couple dancing was keeping pace. The French had a round dance called the branle, and there was the gavotte and the minuet. It was that most daring of all dances, the waltz, that created quite a stir when it was introduced, for it permitted the gentleman to hold his partner in close embrace as they moved about the floor. That position, which we now call closed dance position, was known for many years as the waltz position.

As the pioneers moved westward, the dances went with them. Many of the dances were lost or forgotten, but many were preserved, particularly in the southern Appalachians. There the running set established itself as one of the deep taproots of our western square dance. The running set even had a caller -- America's only unique contribution to the square dance. In the first part of the 20th century, American dancing suffered a great decline. Quadrilles and contras died. People two-stepped the waltz and forgot the polka and the schottische. A rowdy form of dancing called the "barn dance" set a precedent that square dancers have fought to overcome. It took a great industrialist and a superintendent from a small school in Colorado to lift the great American folk activity out of the doldrums.