

A Brief History of Square and Round Dancing By Herb Egender

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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 square dancers long 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. Henry Ford used to vacation at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts. There he became interested in the dance program conducted by a dancing master named Benjamin Lovett. The program included the gavotte, mazurkas, the schottische, the minuet, the Virginia

reel, and other squares and rounds. Ford tried to hire Lovett, who declined, pointing out that he had a firm contract with the Inn. This posed no problem for multi-millionaire Ford, who simply bought the Inn and Lovett's contract and took Lovett back to Detroit with him. In the Detroit area, Ford established a broad program for teaching squares and rounds, including radio broadcasts and programs for schools. He built a beautiful dance hall in Greenfield Village and named it Lovett Hall. It is still in use. In 1926 Ford and Lovett published a book which provided inspiration and material for many people who had wanted such a reference. That book was entitled "Good Morning". One of the people who pounced on and devoured the book was a young school superintendent in Colorado Springs, Colorado, named Lloyd Shaw. Lloyd "Pappy" Shaw realized that Ford's book supplied only a part of the information on the American dance, and that the rest of it was under his nose in the small towns and farming and mining communities of his own West. He went to work painstakingly interviewing old-timers, collecting dances and music, researching. In 1939 he published the first really definitive work on western square dancing - "Cowboy Dances". Later he published a round dance book. He trained teams of dancers in his Cheyenne Mountain School and took them around the country exhibiting and teaching. In the summer, he conducted classes for new leaders. And western square dancing began to grow like wildfire.

Square Dancing began its transition from "dancing as visiting couples" into "all-four-couples-dancing together" in the 1950's. Callers discovered that they could move everyone at the same time and create more interest. Then Square Thru (which had been danced in contras for hundreds of years) was "re-invented" in 1955, other movements followed quickly, and soon there were hundreds of calls! The use of electronic amplifiers aided the transition, as callers could manage large crowds without shouting. And the small, easy to manage, 45 RPM square dance records eliminated the need for live music and allowed greater musical variety.

The Round Dance picture also changed as people began to write more couple dances. At first, the dancers memorized the dances and only an occasional cue was necessary. Then dances became more numerous and complex, new rhythms and terms were added, and a cuer became a must for many dancers who had neither the time nor the interest to memorize large quantities of material.

In 1974, an organization named CALLERLAB, The International Association of Square Dance Callers, held its first convention, and has met every year since then. CALLERLAB unified square dancing by eliminating duplicate square dance calls and streamlining the calls' definitions, enabling square dancers to travel and dance with any club, anywhere in the world! CALLERLAB's aim is to promulgate the principles of fun and friendship established by early leaders like "Pappy" Shaw and to standardize square dance terms, timing, and styling. ROUNDALAB, The International Association of Round Dance Teachers, works toward the same goals for round dancing.

The 1980's and 1990's were the heydays of Square Dancing, then came a slow but steady decline. Nowadays, most Square Dancing clubs are struggling, especially in rural areas - aging dancers - slower dance pace decreasing dancers' fun - ill-fitting dance attire discouraging new dancers - fewer clubs causing longer drives to other clubs' dances... and reduced attendance at those dances. And now Robyn Pennacchia, disgruntled by her "forced" square dancing experience in school, recently published an article in Quartz blaming Henry Ford (who hated Jazz and Charleston) and those who tried to declare Square Dancing the official dance of the United States, giving her article the following title: "America's wholesome square dancing tradition is a tool of white supremacy." ...NO !

Let's STAND UP to defend our favorite past time! Go DANCING and ENJOY it!