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## A Brief History of Square and Round Dancing

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.

One might speculate that the dance itself began as an imitative art, i.e., early man imitating some of the ritualistic dances of the animals. Historically, dance seems to have reached its low point during the days of the classical Greek, when it was looked upon as an ignoble activity. Aristotle was supposed to have said, "No citizen should pursue these arts (music and dance) so far that he approaches professional status," and relegated such activities to slaves, freedmen and foreigners. The great Roman, Cicero, said, "Nobody dances unless he is drunk or unbalanced mentally." Italy saw the renaissance of the dance in the 15th century, but 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 in the Contredanse Anglais. 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 Francais 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.

Mr. 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. Mr. Ford tried to hire Mr. 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 Mr. Lovett's contract and took Mr. Lovett back to Detroit with him. In the Detroit area, Mr. 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 Mr. Ford and Mr. 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. Of course, in those days, one did not ask if there would be rounds. It was taken for granted that one would do the Varsouvianna, a schottische, the Black Hawk Waltz, and perhaps, Blue Pacific Waltz. There might be a cue word here and there for the new people, but no cuer. Dancers

knew the dances, just as they knew the figures of many of the square dance calls such as Birdie In The Cage, Lady 'Round The Lady and Dive For The Oyster.

Square dancing began its transition from the traditional, visiting couple type of dancing into all-four-couple-working kind of dancing 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 "invented" and introduced in 1955, and other movements followed quickly. Soon we had 16 basics, and then 20, and then 32, and then -- you know the rest of the story. Similarly, people began to write more couple dances, and the round dance picture changed. 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.

Meanwhile, the development of the electronic amplifier aided the transition, since it permitted the caller to manage large crowds. It was no longer necessary to shout, use a megaphone, or have a caller in each square. Square dance records, particularly, the small, easy to manage 45 RPM discs, eliminated the need for live music, with all its attendant problems and allowed much greater musical variety and flexibility.

In 1974, an organization named CALLERLAB, The International Association of Square Dance Callers, held its first convention. It has met every year since. 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.

Through many, many years, it has been the pleasure of dancing smoothly to good music and sharing a fun activity with wonderful people that have made square and round dancing attractive and long-lived. Many national surveys indicate that, perhaps, we are forgetting some of our history of fun and good fellowship and that complexity, competition, roughness and rudeness have replaced some of the values held dear by many. It would be a shame to lose that which has been passed down through so many caring generations.

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