Square Dance History in the U.S.

The following article was found in the archives of MACA (Mid Atlantic Challenge Association).

The square dance is an American institution. It began in New England when the first settlers and the immigrant groups that followed, brought with them their various national dances, which we now call folk dances, but which were the popular dances of the day in the countries of their origin - the schottische, the quadrille, the jigs and reels and the minuet, to name a few. After a week of toil in building new homes and carving homes out of virgin forest, the settlers would gather in the community center on Saturday evening and enjoy dancing their old-world favorites. As the communities grew and people of different backgrounds intermingled, so did their dances. As the repertoire increased, it became increasingly difficult for the average person to remember the various movements.

In almost any group, however, there would be at least one extrovert, the hail-fellow-well-met, the life-of-the-party type, with a knack for remembering the dance figures. With typical Yankee ingenuity, the settlers let this person cue or prompt them in case they happened to forget what came next. In due course, the prompter (or figure caller, as he became known) acquired a repertoire of various colorful sayings or patter that he could intersperse with the cues. Quite often he would learn the dances of other communities and he would teach them to the group. Some of these men were quite ingenious and developed dances and routines of their own, including dances for groups of four couples. This is the manner in which square dancing and its director (or caller) developed.

As the population spread southward and westward, so did the dances. Lacking the organized recreation of today, the hardworking pioneers felt a need for an activity that would provide recreation as well as social contact with neighbors. Square dancing filled this need. The only requirements were a wooden floor, music and a caller. A barn, somebody's living room, the town hall or, in later years, the grange hall provided the place. A caller was not always a basic requirement. If one was around, fine; if not, they did dances that they remembered or that someone in the group could prompt. As far as music was concerned, there was always someone on hand who could play a guitar, a fiddle or an accordion.

However, as the population became more urban it also became more cosmopolitan. Booming trade brought to our shores new fashions, new music, and new dances from other continents. The new dances became fashionable, and square dancing was displaced in our mushrooming cities. It survived only in isolated areas, in each of which an individual style peculiar to that region developed. In time, differences among these regional dances became so pronounced that a square dancer from one area often would not be able to dance in another. Square dancing seemed slated for oblivion.

In the early 1930's, Henry Ford became interested in the revival of square dancing as a part of his early New England restoration project. His efforts captured the interest of other individuals who then modernized the activity so that it would appeal to contemporary America while retaining its basic flavor. Square dancing groups began to form hither and yon. By 1948, square dancing had reached the level of a fad and there was some concern that interest would be short-lived. Such fears proved baseless. The people who had rediscovered this activity were determined to retain it, to perpetuate it and to share it with others. In the process of revival, the hillbilly band with its whiny fiddle was replaced by modern combos, which provided uniform performance through the medium, of high-fidelity recordings; the nasal-voiced, almost unintelligible caller was replaced with an articulate professional assisted by a public address system. The barn, the pitchfork, the bale of hay and the little brown jug disappeared from the scene and square dancing moved into the urban centers. Name tags, worn by all dancers, put everyone on a first-name basis and thereby created instant informality and good fellowship.

Square dancing had regained its old appeal in a modern setting and it spread over the nation. It is estimated that today this wholesome recreation is enjoyed by millions of Americans and by countless others around the world. Wherever Americans have gone overseas - England, Germany, Australia, Japan, etc, they have introduced square dancing and it has been received enthusiastically.

Any activity of this scope is an inviting target of commercialism, but square dancing is a cooperative activity involving the dancers themselves and their leaders have vigilantly guarded against the invasion of commercialism.

Far from being pale and static, modern western-style square dancing is vibrant and growing. New ideas and figures are introduced each year, insuring that square dancing will not become boring and get into the rut of sameness. As interesting and enjoyable as square dancing is, it is not difficult. This activity can be enjoyed alike by the young and old, the handicapped and the able-bodied. All that is necessary is a thorough familiarity with a number of basic figures or movements, which are called in various combinations on the dance floor. Knowledge of and practice in these basic movements are best obtained through instruction is given in a series of weekly sessions which, for lack of a more descriptive term, are called beginners classes.

Having learned to square dance, new hobbyists find themselves in a brand new, heretofore unknown world. They are now among the millions of dancers active in the United States and internationally and because of standardized figures, they can dance throughout the United States and other countries. However, the average dancer remains in the "Mainstream" levels of square dancing for only four to five years. In order to extend this period of activity, "Advanced" and "Challenge" levels of square dancing have been developed. These additional levels of square dancing have maintained the interest of many dancers and have extended their dancing years.