

# *History and Heritage*

by Tim Marriner

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Like the United States itself, Square Dancing is a melting pot of the dances that our ancestors brought with them when they settled this nation. At first immigrants to America settled in concentrated areas keeping their dances and other customs in a pure form. As they and their descendants began to spread and “melt” into society so did their dances. The eventual result was an American Folk Dance that includes many of the best features of all the other dances.

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 in two rows of three. Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century country-dances done in long opposing lines became the rage of England. Some believe the term Contra was a mispronunciation of country-dance. The French modified the English dance with eight in a circle called a Quadrille. Several dance terms used today show this French connection, including the call dos-a-dos, which means back-to-back.

A hybrid of the English Country-Dance and the French Quadrille surfaced in New England by the colonist. Of particular note were the Singing Quadrilles that consisted of an opening chorus, a figure repeated two to four times and a closing chorus. The most common chorus then, as now, was... Allemande Left and Right and Left Grand!

Paralleling the evolution of the New England Dance was the dance of the early settlers of the Virginia-Carolinas area known as the Appalachian Mountain dance. This dance involved great vigor and foot speed. Clogging undoubtedly came from the Appalachian Mountain Dance.

As America’s population moved westward, all of these dances began to mix. Gradually from the square formation of the quadrille, the visiting couple patters of the mountain dances, and the movements of the contras, a form of western dancing developed. This form of dance was referred to by several names including Cowboy dance, Miner’s dance, West Texas, and Clodhopper dance. Many dancers often from the floor shared the calling. Styles and terminology varied by region but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had blended into a square dance with definite characteristics.

In the 1920’s an American industrialist Henry Ford revived the current dance form. While vacationing at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts Mr. Ford became interested in the dance program conducted by a dance master named Benjamin Lovett. The program included the schottische, the minuet, the Virginia Reel, and other squares and rounds. Mr. Ford tried to hire Mr. Lovett whom declined, pointing out that he had a contract with the Inn. No problem, Mr. Ford bought the Inn and Mr. Lovett’s contract and took him back to Detroit to set up a dance program for his workers. They assembled a book of dances called “Good Morning” published in 1926. These dance programs were an inspiration to many including a young Colorado school superintendent Dr. Lloyd “Pappy” Shaw. He is often referred to as the father of modern western square dancing. Pappy called it western style to distinguish the American version of the dance form from its eastern or European cousin. He painstakingly interviewed old-timers, and collected dances and music from small towns and in 1939 published the really first definitive book of western square dances called “Cowboy Dances”. Later he published a round dance book. He trained teams of dancers known as The Cheyenne Mountain Dancers, and took them

around the country exhibiting and teaching. Callers and leaders were developed with the aid of Lloyd Shaw, who each summer taught callers at the Cheyenne School. Modern transportation and sound equipment enabled callers to bring square dancing to ever-larger numbers of dancers.

Square dancing began its transition from visiting couple type of dancing into all-four-couple-working kind of dancing in the late '40s and early '50s. Ed Gilmore who traveled widely was one of the first callers to use this type of dance pattern. He trained many callers who discovered they could move everyone at the same time and create more interest.

Meanwhile, the development of the electric 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. The improved equipment allowed the caller to be heard well enough so that the dance routine could be invented as it was called. No longer was the dancer expected to know the dance pattern that went with a particular tune as was common in traditional dancing. "Hash," as it was referred to, became more and more complex as new moves were invented. In the early '60s, Les Gotcher began to use a programming technique that became very wide spread teaching calls in several tips. The lack of standardization and cooperation began to be a growing problem.

Attempts were made to develop a standard list. The national magazine, Sets in Order, with the help of a Gold Ribbon Committee, developed a list of 50 calls that everyone should know. Soon it became clear that some new calls, not on the Basic 50 list were gaining wide acceptance and a supplemental list of 25 was developed. The creators of these list hoped to provide a stable, unchanging body of calls that could serve as an entry point for new dancers. Newer calls however kept winning favor of dancers and callers that could not be left off of any standard list. Several round robin meetings of leaders culminated in the historic gathering in the early '70s that laid the groundwork for the first CALLERLAB meeting in 1974.

CALLERLAB, the International Association of Square Dance Callers has met every year since its inception. Its first goals were to promote the principals of fun and friendship established by early leaders and to standardize square dance terms, timing, and styling and to look for ways to promote the activity to ensure its continued growth. The Programs of square dancing were developed and are now widely accepted by dancers. CALLERLAB has also established the CALLERLAB Foundation for the preservation and promotion of square dancing. It is a nonprofit foundation that has as a primary task the development of promotional teaching materials for recruiting new dancers.

You are a part of this on going history. Be proud of the heritage. Remember, just as it took much work and sacrifice to build this country, it also took much work and sacrifice to build the square dance movement that we enjoy today. Your help is needed to preserve this heritage and keep square dancing thriving.

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