

OLD TIME SQUARE DANCING IN NEW YORK STATE

James Kimball

"Right hand to your partner. Ge-rand right and left!" This was how Floyd Woodhull got them going all through central New York from the 1930's into the 60's. Woodhull's Old Tyme Masters were from Elmira, but played dances as far away as Binghamton, Utica, Syracuse and Rochester; and wherever they went, there were local callers ready to add one or the other of Woodhull's figures to their own repertoire. Woodhull himself avidly sought out new dances from other callers, old and young, as well as creating several original figures which in time became standards throughout the region (for details on Floyd Woodhull's career and on his successful recordings for RCA, see Bronner 1987). Woodhull was not alone, however. The 30's and 40's saw a significant revival of interest in square dancing all across New York, and the country as a whole, led in part by Henry Ford's outspoken efforts to bring back traditions he had grown up with in rural Michigan years before (see Lovett 1925). The old quadrilles, which had dominated social dancing through most of 19th century America, had begun to slip out of high fashion already in the 1870's. Saratoga balls and college proms alike turned toward Europe for dance inspiration; Strauss waltzes and other round dances reigned supreme. By the early 20th century, American ragtime and then jazz took over and even rural communities started dancing one steps, two steps and foxtrots. Many a teenager of that era saw him or herself as a "jazz baby" and square dancing as something particularly old fashioned or backwoods.

Backwoods or not, some of the old dances did survive to the 1930's, thanks to those local granges, fire companies and other dance sponsors which strove to please both young and old, and to the continued popularity of rural house dances, where the fiddle still led the music and all ages participated. By the late 1930's, the efforts of people like Ford and Woodhull had paid off; PA systems and singing calls were bringing square dancing back into popular culture; new square dance records and books were published; country bands and barn dance programs could be heard every week on the radio; and there was a rising sense of nationalism which saw square dancing as something especially American. Community recreation programs, USO's, 4-H clubs, camps, and similar organizations geared toward younger people started including square dancing in their programming. Especially significant across New York state was the number of rural and small city high schools which in the 1940's and 50's started emphasizing square dances along with the jitterbugs and foxtrots coming out of the big band era. Cowboy-styled country bands were kept busy and eager fans could find a round and square dance somewhere almost any night of the week. The dances themselves preserved many of the old calls (e.g. do-si-do, allemand, grand right and left, etc.); but the

new generation of dancers and musicians tended to speed things up with extra twirls and a general boisterousness which Henry Ford and his dancing masters would not have approved of. Where alcoholic beverages were available, rowdiness often prevailed, leading some square dance fans to flee the older local styles for the newly forming and carefully regulated and standardized western square dance clubs. By the 60's, Rock and Roll was starting to dominate school dances across rural New York and once again traditional square dancing was relegated to a few grange halls, fire halls, local taverns and old folks' or "silver grey" dances.

Traditional round and square dances do still exist in New York, however, and though clearly they are less frequent and further apart than they were thirty or forty years ago, there are still plenty of interested dancers. The general folk revival of recent years, a resurgence of interest in old time fiddling and in old fashioned culture in general, and the energies of enough enthusiastic dance managers and musicians, young and old, will hopefully keep New York old time dancing alive for generations to come.

Contra Dances in New York State

Country dancing in three forms, in squares, longways sets or big circles, has been part of English and by extension American social entertainment since the 17th century (see Playford 1651). To 18th and early 19th century Americans, however, the clear favorites were the longways contra dances ("long" or "string" dances as older New Yorkers may still call them). An 1808 collection of popular dance figures, published in Otsego, New York (A Select Collection...), includes more than three hundred longways dances and only a handful of squares. The square format was seen as something particularly popular in France and such dances were called "cotillons" (or "cotillions" as Americans spelled it). With an influx of new French culture into America in the years following both our revolution and that in France, society dancers started seeing more and more square dances, along with a lexicon of French dance instructions (e.g. dos-ado, promenade, chassez, etc.). By the 1850's New Yorkers were dancing mostly square dances (called "quadrilles" by then), the new round dances (e.g. waltzes, polkas, schottisches, etc.), one or two big circle dances (e.g. the Spanish dance and the Sicilian circle) and just a few of the old contras. Local dancers took to preferring only certain of the longways figures and others were quickly forgotten. The Opera reel, Virginia reel, money musk, Portland fancy, fireman's dance crooked S, and a later arrival, the Irish trot, were all contra dances which lasted into the 20th century somewhere in rural New York. They were the most old fashioned of our set dances, however, and they generally did not survive the shift to singing calls and the new younger crowd of the 1930's and 40's. The Virginia reel might still be seen here and there, partly through its longer survival in recreation programs and gym classes; but the others are mostly memories or just

tunes played by older fiddlers. A revival of interest in contra dancing hit a few New York cities and college communities along with the bicentennial hoopla in the 1970's, but with its emphasis on newly made or older New England dances, this has had no particular connection with, or influence on traditional dancing in rural New York.

Square Dance Orchestras in New York State

The instrumentation of square dance orchestras has changed considerably through the years, as new instruments have come into vogue and older ones are set aside. From the pioneer days right down to the present, however, an ideal accompaniment, in fact often the only accompaniment for square dancing has been the fiddle. Regardless of whether his or her instrument was homemade or store-bought, American or European, a good fiddler could always make folks shake their feet. If you didn't have a fiddler, however, in the old days a jew's harp or, by the 1870's, a mouth organ might have worked almost as well. The most common two man ensemble (and in this case it was usually men or boys) in 19th century rural New York has two fiddles, first and second. The second fiddler played backup chords and often did double duty as dance caller. Several other instruments might also have served as backup in the last century, depending on what was locally available: bowed cello or double bass, trombone, harp, hammered dulcimer or piano; later in the century we find pump organs (melodeon or harmonium), button accordions and 5-string banjos joining the dance bands. Guitars were occasionally used, but in the 19th century were generally too weak to be very effective in a dance hall. Wind instruments which might join the fiddle on either melody or harmony included flute, piccolo, clarinets (in A, C or Bb) or cornet.

The 20th century saw first of all a much wider availability of pianos (often played by women), which generally replaced the second fiddle as the favorite chording instrument across New York state. Other instruments which started to be seen in square dance bands in the 20's and 30's were the tenor banjo, mandolin, steel guitar, drums, saxophone, piano accordion, plucked (or slapped) bass, and the newer larger rhythm guitars. Recent decades have seen the arrival of electric guitars and keyboards along with a trend, at least among younger musicians, toward a more contemporary country and rock and roll sound. In general these significant changes in instrumentation have simply reflected the changes in round dancing: from fox trots and jitterbugs (which are still danced) to the twist and free style rock and roll. The square dances, however, have changed little over the last fifty years, regardless of modernization in the bands.

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