

English Country Dance and It's American Cousin History and Comparison

By Alan Winston

Part I: History

There are written references to English Country Dance going as far back as the 1400s, but the first published dance descriptions and tunes we have are in publisher John Playford's collection, printed in 1651. Dances are written to folk tunes, popular ballads, and stage music, as well as music composed for the purpose.

English Country dancing went to North America with the colonists. In New England especially, country dance was extremely popular through the early 1800s. Americans eagerly awaited new dance books from England; they also wrote their own dances and published books.

Country dance, of essentially the English style, was popular throughout Europe. Beethoven and Mozart wrote country dance music. Our first hard information about footwork comes from a French book of 1710. The popularity of the quadrilles, spreading from France in the early 1800s eroded the appeal of country dancing in fashionable urban areas – both in the U.S. and England – but the death blow came with the couple-dancing/ballroom dance crazes. When the polka swept across Europe in 1844, it legitimized the waltz in polite society, and subsequent dance fashions changed social dance in the cities almost completely into couple dances.

By mid-century, country dancing had retreated to, well, the country. Americans kept on country dancing in Appalachia, and in small New England towns; quadrilles spawned square dances in the Midwest. In England, country dancing became the province of the villages exclusively, and most villages had only a few dances which they'd

do at all their celebrations. English and American Country dance were cut off; dancing masters rarely traveled between the countries, and there was no trade in country dance books. Not surprisingly, the two dance forms diverged considerably. (But some connections are still very evident. "Sir Roger de Coverly," which Dickens mentions in [A Christmas Carol](#), is essentially the same dance as the "Virginia Reel.")

English Country Dance was essentially dead by the beginning of this century, while contra dance and square dance was still alive, if in hiding. Ethnomusicologist Cecil Sharp and his followers collected extant country dances from villages, printed them and started a revival movement. That brought it into the cities, making it again a living tradition. He founded the English Folk Dance and Song Society. The style used today is basically Sharp's style.

Sharp came to the U.S. in the 'teens, and did research. He reported on what he called the "Kentucky Running Set" dances, Big Circle dances. At the demonstration he saw there were no musical instruments and rhythm was provided by body percussion, but this was quite atypical. He provided the impetus for the 1915 founding of the Country Dance and Song Society.

The big folk revival of the sixties and seventies brought traditional dance and music to the fore again, and contra dancing came back to the cities, starting in New England and spreading throughout the U.S.

Part II: Differences in English and Contra Dance

Music – Modern contra dances are usually done, on the West and East Coasts, to medleys of jigs and

Huntsville Calendar

- Huntsville dances are the 1st & 3rd Saturdays of each month in the gym at Faith Presbyterian Church, 5003 Whitesburg Dr., South, (corner of Whitesburg Dr. & Airport Rd.). Beginners Workshop is at 7:00 PM then the regular dance is from 7:30 – 10:30 PM.
- Admission is \$7 (\$6 for members), \$4 for teens, free for ages 12 & under. Remember to bring comfortable, non-scuffing shoes for dancing. Bring someone new to a dance this month – and bring them to the 5:30 Workshop so they can really learn and enjoy.
- Contact Bryan Walls (256) 837-0656 or email: bwalls@pobox.com or visit <http://secontra.com.NACDS.html> for more info.

| Date | Caller | Band |
|----------|---|---|
| Mar 4 | Adina Gordon (Workshop 5:30 – Jane Ewing) | Crosstown Traffic |
| Mar 18 | George Snyder (Workshop 5:30 – Jane Ewing) | Kaleidoscope – Chuck & Katrina Weber, Mike Bush |
| April 1 | Harry Delugach | Edwin Wilson, Karen Falkowski, Michael DeFosche, Brooke Allen |
| April 15 | Beth Molaro★★ SPECIAL DANCE | Avant Gardeners – Laura Light, George Paul & Roger Gold |



Area Dance Gypsy Calendar

| Date | Location | Caller | Band |
|-----------|--|--------------------|---|
| Mar 14/28 | Flat Creek | Chrissy Davis-Camp | Inge Wood & anyone who wants to play |
| Mar 24 | Sewanee | Vicki Herndon | Maple Hill |
| Mar 3 | Nashville | John Sharlet | Nashville Ceili |
| Mar 4 | Nashville (Special– Lebanon State Park) | Chrissy Davis-Camp | Old Time Bands |
| Mar 10 | Nashville | Susan Kevra | Russ Barenberg & Friends |
| Mar 17 | Nashville | Eddie Doss | Small Time String Band |
| Mar 19 | Nashville English Dance – Friends Meeting House | Kendal Broadie | Calliope |
| Mar 26-27 | Nashville Playford Ball Weekend | Gene Murrow | Bare Necessities – Mary Lea, Earl Gaddis, Peter Barnes, Barley Moon – Karen Axelrod |
| Mar 31 | Nashville | Doug Singleton | Whistlin Rufus, Atlanta |
| Mar 11 | Chattanooga | Reuven Anaf-Shalom | Danny Gammon & Love Muffins |
| Mar 25 | Chattanooga | Jane Ewing | Ed Baggott & Elsie Peterson |

FoOTMaD (Birmingham) dances 2nd Saturdays at the YMCA, 3rd Ave & 23rd St, 7:30 PM. <http://www.bamalong.com/bed.htm>.

CTDS (Chattanooga) dances 2nd & 4th Saturdays at All Saints Academy, 310 E. 8th St., downtown, 8:00 PM.

Contact Steve at (706) 937-4991, Claire & Bryant at (423)876-7359 or <http://contranooga.org>

Misty Mountain Dancers (Sewanee, TN) dances at the Legion Hall in Sewanee, TN. For details, call (931) 598-0814 or check <http://www.mistycontra.zoomshare.com/0.html>

NCD (Nashville) dances almost every Friday at 8:00 PM at University School.

For directions, contact Chrissy at (615) 210-6808 John, email: DanceFools@aol.com or <http://dancenashville.org/>

Flat Creek dances – 2 & 4th Tues, Flat Creek Community Center <http://www.nashvilleoldtime.org/Dances/flatcreekcontradances.htm>

A Bit Farther Away, But Well Worth The Travel

CCD (Atlanta) dances on Fridays & alternate Tuesdays. <http://contradance.org>

KCD (Knoxville) dances every Monday. <http://www.kornet.org/kcd/>

MCD (Memphis) dances on the 1st & 3rd Fridays. <http://hometown.aol.com/horselovers/index.html>

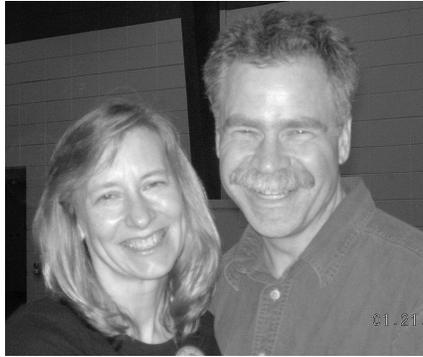
Sautee Community Dances (N. GA) once a month from Sept – May. <http://sauteecontra.home.mindspring.com/>

Getting To Know You

Kathy and Kevin Riggs

Kathy is an architect and Kevin manages writers at a local software company. They have two children – Taylor, a 14 year old son who has not yet discovered the joy of dancing, and Erika, an 11 year old daughter who loves to contra dance. The whole family appreciates art and creates in some way. The children are brass players in a local band and orchestra and Erika also plays the piano. The family enjoys their cats and hobbies which include hiking, camping, canoeing and traveling. Their families are from Pennsylvania, but Kevin and Kathy have lived in Huntsville for twenty years.

Kevin and Kathy officially began contra dancing in January, 2004 when Kevin's sister, Beth, talked them into going to their first dance. Previously relatives, Bryant and Claire Haynes, who dance in Chattanooga Blue Moon dance in 2001. "We intimidated by the flamboyant with flourishes. We couldn't imagine danced one dance but it took all our dance anymore." Fortunately, Beth's dance a few years later and they have then.



From that first introduction to they loved the music and the happy also noticed that all ages, all body be involved. We did not know what to make of the men in skirts and the women in bloomers, but on the other hand, we suspected that none of them knew what to think of us skulking on the sidelines for two days."

dance at the Blue Moon weekend, expressions on people's faces. "We types, and all social types seemed to

They have danced once in Pennsylvania and also went to the Chattaboogie dance with Wild Asparagus in September, 2005. Contra dancing is the first kind of dancing they have learned and they say they were exhilarated when they began dancing regularly, learned the dances and were able to float along with the music. Each time they dance with us, their grace and contagious smiles help to exhilarate all of us! We are glad that first Blue Moon experience did not scare you away permanently.

Dancing With The Stars

Okay, maybe we cannot make the dramatic improvements that the stars made practicing seven hours per day for the past eight weeks, but here is a chance to make big improvements. Expert teacher, caller and encourager, Jane Ewing, volunteered to teach a special, one-hour, in-depth workshop prior to our next two regular dances. The free workshop will begin at 5:30 PM with **Free Pizza** at 6:30 PM for all who participate. The workshop is for 1)beginners who want to learn more so dancing can be more fun, 2)anyone who has the basic idea of dance moves, but would like to "get" the finer points, and 3)experienced dancers who are willing to help the other two groups and learn some tips in the process.

So, go the step beyond and be present for the special workshops on March 4 and March 18. The workshops will be followed by the regular Beginner's Workshop and the regular Contra Dance at 7:00 PM and 7:30 PM respectively.

NACDS

North Alabama Country Dance Society

4304 Holmes Ave, NW, Huntsville, AL 35816

Address Correction Requested



Send just \$10 for one, or
\$15 per family, to the address above.

Make checks payable to NACDS.
(mailing label shows renewal date)

Members receive monthly newsletter,
2 guest passes, and a \$1 DISCOUNT to
each regular dance!

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reels, chosen by the band. The same dance might be done on different evenings to three different sets of three different tunes each, all of them in 2/4, 4/4 or 6/8 time; each tune played for thirty-two bars per time through the dance. Tempos are usually pretty consistent throughout the evening, generally pretty fast. In the Midwest and South, most contra is done to old time music, mostly sticking to one tune per dance; 99% of this repertoire is in 4/4 time. English dances are usually written to go with specific tunes, so you get the same tune each time and there's more variety in the meter – waltz, polka, minuet. In the U.S., most dances are still done with a simple dance walk. The English dancer is encouraged to “dance to the phrase of the music,” starting and finishing figures when the music says to do so. This is a good idea in contra dancing, too, but sometimes difficult – and impossible in Southern squares, which are danced unphrased.

Formations – Contras are usually done with partners across from each other in long lines. Many English dances use this formation, but there are also three, four, five couple set dances, some in circles, squares, or other formations.

Figures – English commonly uses a wider variety of figures than contra dance does. You see heys-for-three more often than heys-for-four. Two hand turns are more frequent than partner swings. There's a lot more emphasis on eye contact than physical contact, which makes flirting a bit subtler.

Footwork – As originally done, “historical” English dances used serious footwork. Some names of various steps might be familiar to ballet dancers. However, few modern reconstructions make use of this dance vocabulary, but rather use simple, vigorous stepping of several varieties.

In the U.S. the overwhelming majority of dances done today use the dance walk, with the addition only of skipping, skip-change, and slipping. You will see an occasional step-hop or rant dance. In Britain, the story is considerably different. At a ceilidh dance you will hardly see a walking step all evening. If an English caller says to “dance” a figure, that means to use some appropriate kind of stepping.

(There is an English Dance group in Huntsville and Nashville. Nashville hosts a Playford Ball each spring. See calendar.)

Alan Winston encourages those interested in English Country Dance to join the ECD listserv.

Send an email to: ECD-REQUEST@playford.slac.stanford.edu

Subject: anything, doesn't matter

SUBSCRIBE "your name here"

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