

The Old Square Dances

Let us pause a moment, "ladies and gents", and welcome the past. Let us lay aside our coal bills (this was written with the thermometer hovering around zero) and greet some old familiar friends who are with us to-night. The neighborhood fiddler is here ready to furnish tunes that set our feet to keeping time, and the old-time caller has arrived eager to start the dancing. All the young men and women of the neighborhood are here, too, dressed in their Sunday best — gay calicoes and ribbons worn by the girls and store clothes by the boys.

But before we can go on with the dance it will be necessary to tell some of the younger generation just what the old square dances were, and explain the terms used. For, alas, although there are attempts here and there to revive the old square dances, such as the efforts of Henry Ford, boys and girls of to-day seem to prefer the modern form of dancing, and have little knowledge of the quadrilles so popular in the Iowa of yesterday. *Old Square Dances of America*, by Tressie M. Dunlavy and Neva L. Boyd, and *Good Morning with the sub-title, After a Sleep of Twenty-five Years, Old-fashioned Dancing is Being Revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford*, describe these dances clearly and would serve as excellent manuals of instruction.

The square dance or quadrille was performed in a square by four couples designated as head couple, foot couple, and side couples respectively. The head couple was the one nearest the music, and the gentleman always had his partner on his right. The whole square, or four couples, was called a set.

Music for the old fashioned dances was furnished by one or more fiddlers who had at their command a wide variety of tunes. Usually the fiddlers occupied chairs on a table at the end of the room, and from this vantage point above the heads of the dancers they teased lively music out of their fiddles (violins were fiddles in those days) while each musician tapped out the time with his heel. Many tunes were popular such as: "Turkey in the Straw", "Irish Washerwoman", "Irish Whisky", "Prairie Queen", "Seven Sisters", "Durang's Hornpipe", "Fisher's Hornpipe", "Douglas' Favorite" or "Mountain Hornpipe", "The Girl I Left Behind Me", "Old Zip Coon", "Old Dan Tucker", "Money Musk", "Buffalo Girls", "Midnight Serenade", "Paddy on the Turnpike", "Arkansas Traveller", "Grey Eagle", "Sally Goodin", "Cotton Eyed Joe", "Flowers of Edinburgh", "Billy in the Lowland", "Stony Country", "Rickett's Hornpipe", "Corner Waltz", and "The Dwarf". The foregoing list is more suggestive than complete. Inquiry among any group of old fiddlers would, doubtless, disclose other favorite tunes.

As soon as the dancers were ready, the fiddlers

played a few introductory bars, the caller shouted "Git yer partners", and the "stepping bee" began. The caller was an important and indispensable figure at a square dance. The old-time caller developed a rhythm and something of a sing-song swing to his calling. Often he filled in between the calls with nonsense jingles. More than any other individual, the caller set the tone for the party. A roistering fellow with a penchant for rhymed lingo stirred up laughter and added much to the gayety of the occasion.

The following jingles, quoted by Miss Dunlavy and Miss Boyd, are typical of the humor a clever caller injected into his directions to the dancers:

Right hand grand around the ring,
Hand over hand with the dear little thing.

Swing on the corners like a-swingin' on a gate,
Then your own if it ain't too late.

Left allemande, right hand grand,
Plant your 'taters in a sandy land.

Other interesting jingles are quoted by Edwin Ford Piper in an article, "Quadrille Calls", which appeared in *American Speech* for April, 1926. The following call to places was an imperative order:

Lead your lady out on the floor
I called you once, and I call no more;
Draw your furrow and draw it deep —
God help a feller if I catch him asleep.

In imagination, declares Professor Piper, one can hear the fiddles jogging and the feet keeping time as the caller sings out the following jingles:

First couple balance and swing,
Down the center and split the ring;
Lady go right and gent go wrong,
Come to the corner and hook a wing;
All eight swing.
Same man with a brand new girl,
Down the center and split the ring;
Lady go right and the gent go wrong,
Come to the corner and hook a wing;
Alum and left, grand right and left,
Come to your partner and promenade home.

And sashay out and bow
The best that you know how;
And right and left through to your partner,
Right and left through to your partner,
Right and left back to your partner,
And all promenade.
Indian style, single file,
Stop and swing her once in a while.

Waves on the ocean, waves on the sea,
Wave that pretty girl back to me.

Round that couple and swing by the wall,
And through that couple and swing in the hall.

Lady round lady, and gent so-low,
Gent around gent, and the lady don't go;

Four hands half and a half way round,
Dosey-doe and little more doe,
On to the next and around you go,
Balance out with a whoop-de-doodle-do,
Right and left through.

Dosie out as you come in,
Back to the center and swing her again;
Hurry up, boys, and don't be slow,
You'll never get to heaven if you don't do so.

Ladies dosey side by side,
And the gents come down with the old cowhide.

The calls ran at least four times through for every tune, shifting the lead in turn from the head couple to each of the couples in the square. The entire call for one dance was referred to as a "change". Two changes were usually called, sometimes more, while the same couples were on the floor. At the end of the dance, after the last couple had had its turn, the caller indicated that the dance was finished by some such couplet as the following:

Meet your partner and promenade there,
Lead your honey to a big soft chair.

Salute the opposite lady, salute your own:
Balance with your lady and dance all the way home.

To dance the quadrille or square dance the members of a set had to understand the movement or

evolution which a certain call demanded. "Of these terms", says Professor Piper, "half a dozen are French — hangers-on accompanying the quadrille into England in the early nineteenth century." These terms were spelled in various ways and their pronunciation likewise differed somewhat in different localities. All of these terms are explained in the two books mentioned earlier in the article — *Old Square Dances of America* and *Good Morning*. For the younger generation some of them are included here.

All Promenade. This movement is performed by the gentleman taking his partner on his right and either with both hands crossed or with the lady holding the "gent's" arm, walking around the outside of the set. The rhythm is expressed by the dancer's taking a light gliding step with perhaps an occasional little catch step.

Right and Left Through. In this figure two couples cross to each other's places, the two ladies passing each other on their right and the gentlemen on the outside. When the two couples have changed places, partners join their left hands and turn, or the gentleman turns his partner around so that she is on his right as they face the center. Both couples then pass back to their places in the same way and turn.

Dos à Dos, or Do si Do. In this figure the lady and gentleman walk forward, pass to the left of each other, right shoulder to right shoulder; and having

gone one step past each other, take one step to the right, which brings the couple back to back. Without turning, they back around each other, and walk backward to place.

Allemande Left, Allemand Left, Alum and Left, or Elem and Left. In this figure couples turn back to back and walk four steps to a corner, each thereby meeting a new partner. They give their right hand to each other and turn. Partners return to place, giving left hand to each other, and turn.

Balance and Swing. At this call, partners face each other and balance by taking four short steps backward and four forward. Then the gentleman places his right arm around the lady's waist and taking her right hand in his left he swings her to the right about.

Chasse All, Shashay All, or Sishay All. At this call partners face each other, join both hands and move around in a circle with a slide or glide step.

Grand Right and Left. At this call partners face each other, then join hands, the gentlemen moving to the right, the ladies to the left. The gentleman drops his partner's right hand and takes the next lady's left hand in his left; the next with his right and so on around. This is a movement in which the two lines, moving in opposite directions, weave in and out. When half way around the gentleman meets and salutes his partner, giving her his right hand, and they continue weaving in and out, back to the place of starting.

Now that the square dance and some of its terms have been defined, let us turn back to the setting at the beginning of the sketch. The fiddler mounts to his chair on the table, the caller takes his position near-by, and four couples take their places on the corners of the imaginary square. The fiddler strikes up a tune — sure enough, it's "Turkey in the Straw".

"Honor your partner", shouts the caller. The partners bow to each other.

"Lady on left", he calls. All turn and bow to the corner person.

"All join hands and circle to the left", he shouts. All four couples join hands and walk completely around to the left.

"Break and swing, and promenade back." Each gentleman swings his lady, and then arm in arm they walk back to the starting place.

"First couple balance and first couple swing." Partners face each other and take four short steps backward and four forward. Then each gentleman swings his partner.

"Down the center and divide the ring, lady go right and gent go left." The first couple walks down the center and between the opposite lady and gentleman. The lady turns to the right and the gentleman to the left, and then they return outside the set to their own places.

"Swing when you meet as you did before." This movement is performed as directed.

“Down the center and a cast off four.” The same couple walks down the center again; the lady walks through the space between the second and third couples, and the gentleman walks through the space between the third and fourth couples, then walking behind these couples, they return to place.

“You swing your honey and she’ll swing you.” All swing as directed.

“Down the center and a-cast off two.” The head couple walks down the center again; the lady walks between the second lady and gentleman, and the gentleman walks between the fourth lady and gentleman, and then both return to place.

“Now you’re home.”

Then the second, third, and fourth couples in turn, as the caller repeats the calls, perform the same evolutions.

Thus the evening moves along. A round dance, either a waltz, a schottische, a polka, a two-step, or the rye waltz, is interspersed between every two or three square dances. Toward morning the party breaks up and the dancers, tired but happy, go home. Good entertainment this, fascinating to the spectator, and exhilarating and joyous to the participant. Speed the day when the old fashioned quadrille becomes popular again!

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