

A Brief History of Square and Round Dancing

Veronica Ann McClure

February 5, 1987 (revised February 8, 2011)

Today's square and round dancing is a continuation of the social dance history of western civilization. This tradition has always emphasized a group of dancers moving through space making large patterns, with a steady, rhythmical base supporting the melody of the music. An early form was a line of dancers who made circles, spirals, and followed-the-leader. The line could be divided for concentric circles, lines, columns, ranks, or squares. Individuals moved as a group so that it could make these patterns. Over and over, references describe a group creating a basic shape, moving through other formations, and returning to the starting shape, just as when we do some calls and then promenade home.

Coinciding with these group dances are couple dances in which one of a few couples separate from the group, dance for the group, and then rejoin the group. Both types are in Italian dance manuals of the 15th and 16th centuries and appear to have been danced in all parts of Europe.

In the 17th century (the Puritan era), what became known as “English country dancing” (then it was just “the dancing”) was widely popular. However, the name may be misleading as the dancing was also done in cities and by the upper classes—it was not “hayseed” or “bumpkin” at all. In 1651, the first book describing this dancing, *The English Dancing Master*, was published. This was also the beginning of the Baroque style of dance, which reached its greatest development in the French courts. There is much surviving documentation about both and how they influenced one another, especially in England and France.

Because the North American continent was colonized by Europeans, especially the English and French, we inherited this dancing. During the Revolutionary period, the formation most popular was two lines facing, then called “longways” and now “contra.” In the second half of the 18th century,

the square formation, then called “cotillion” (the spelling has changed over time), became popular. In the 19th century, the square formation became the “quadrille” while the name “cotillion” morphed to several other uses. All through the 19th century it was a dominant force in the ballroom, and a mainstay of all the classes, although class differences show in the manner of dancing.

In the late 18th century, a folk dance became popular in upper class ballrooms because of the same mindset that fueled the French and American Revolutions and idealized “the common man.” It was the waltz. It was considered shocking not only because of its low-class origin but because dancers turned their backs on the group and concentrated on themselves instead of working as a group. Not only that, they turned around and around together, creating the first “round dance” in the sense that we today use the term.

For several decades, the terms “waltz” and “round dance” were equivalent (like “car” and “automobile” now). In the 1840s, the polka arrived. Because it was a couple dance with turns, it was also called a waltz and a round dance. As other couple dances were introduced, including gallops and schottisches, they too were called waltzes or round dances to distinguish them from the square dances, *regardless of how much or how little they turned*. Throughout the 19th century, “ballroom dancing” meant squares and rounds.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the history of western dance was disrupted as never before by ragtime and jazz. Both have characteristics opposite to western tradition, particularly more emphasis on individual improvisation, a tendency to stay on the spot and move body parts, and complex or multiple rhythms. These were brought to the forefront of popular interest by black musicians and dancers and the whites who copied them. Squares and rounds became unfashionable and were danced only by those who were either unable or uninterested in keeping up with the latest from the cities. Among them were rural folks in New England, Appalachia, and the American West.

In the 1920s, Henry Ford of Model-T fame worried that the flamboyant popular dancing of the day might ruin forever the more elegant and genteel dancing his grandparents had done. He decided to revive the “old” style by building a beautiful ballroom, hiring Benjamin Lovett (a dancing master from Sudbury, Massachusetts) to run classes and dances, and publishing a book called *Good Morning*, in which the late 19th-century squares and rounds were revived “after a sleep of twenty-five years.”

Ford’s revival influenced Lloyd Shaw, a high school educator in Colorado,

who decided to include dances of the American West in the physical education curriculum. The old-timers he worked with had been young people in the 19th century and told him about local variations on the usual 19th century dances. Shaw augmented this information with 19th century dance manuals and liberally edited the results according to his own needs and those of his high school dancers, who were, as one might guess, an energetic group.

Shaw and “The Cheyenne Mountain Dancers” danced in many locations, making their version of 19th-century dance particularly well-known. After World War II, the healing senses of “home” and “American folk,” together with greatly increased communication and travel, coincided with the growing interest in Shaw’s “Western” squares and rounds. Colorado became Mecca and people who went there wanted to bring this dancing to their own communities. Charlie Baldwin, the “granddaddy of square dancing in New England,” was one of them.

At first, these “Western” squares and rounds tended to have short sequences with predictable repeats, fairly energetic tempos, and a lively style of movement. Dancers learned by watching and listening but usually did not need many lessons. As more people became interested, more ideas began to flow, resulting in more square dance calls and round dance steps. This, in turn, created the need for more technical understanding on the part of callers and cuers, more training for dancers and more written materials such as round dance cuesheets and caller’s note services. The information explosion of the 20th century hit the dance world. Further, it contributed to a slowdown of the tempo and energy level of the dancing, which coincided with an aging dance population.

Today’s modern western square and round dancing are so richly developed that there is more material than most dancers want to learn. Subgroups have been created in which dancers use certain portions of the material. An emerging question is whether these subgroups will be part of the whole, new branches on the family tree, or wither and fall off.

Western squares and rounds are only a part of today’s total, for social dance is fragmented according to age group and subculture. We have—and take for granted—a much wider sampling of movement and musical styles from more different cultures than have ever before been available. (Perhaps, as the globe seems to shrink, we will have to look to outer space to find those things which seem truly “outlandish.”) It is hard to imagine today’s culture without the dancing derived from the jazz tradition, i.e., Broadway’s show dancing, tap dancing, jitterbug-lindy-swing, and the solo dancing associated

with rock. We also have round dancing and the dancing usually meant today as “ballroom dancing,” as well as the “traditional” squares and contras which survived through the ragtime and jazz eras. They too have changed along the way, for change is often equivalent to survival.

Squares and rounds (in all their forms) continue the dance tradition of western civilization as well as or better than anything else in this wide and beautiful array. We need to understand and appreciate this heritage without negating other forms or being vaguely sentimental and emotional. We need to understand that change is normal and that we are not dancing exactly as we did 50, 100, or 200 years ago. We are one of a number of forms of recreational dance and a vital part of the dance world. We have a proven vehicle for fun, fellowship, and community-building to enjoy, share and continue.

However, as for the nature of square and round dancing—or any other dancing—to come, only the dance historians of the future can tell us where we will go from here.

Happy dancing!