

House Dances and Kitchen Rackets:

Traditional Music Styles of the Northeast
By Nicholas Hawes

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1 Clarence J. Turner holds a sign board used to announce dances in the 1930s at the Guiding Star Grange, Greenfield, Mass. Mr. Turner's parents paid off the Grange mortgage in only four years by running weekly dances.

PHOTO BY NICK HAWES

2 Joe Cormier from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, plays for the Quadrille at the French Club, Waltham, Mass., while Bill Chaisson calls the figures.

PHOTO BY JOHN M. BISHOP

It's Saturday night.

The second-floor ballroom over the town hall in the small Monadnock village of Fitzwilliam, N.H. is filled with dancers. It's a mixed crowd: some old folks, some young, mostly people in their mid-20s to early 50s. They are standing in couples, chatting restlessly, forming the long, double lines in which traditional New England *contra dances* are done. No one has announced that a contra is coming next, but then no one has to: all of these people have danced to Duke Miller before.

"I don't think Duke's changed his program in 30 years," my partner tells me. "Starts with a contra, three squares, a polka, and a break. Then the second set always begins with 'Chorus Jig'." She smiles happily. "He's just great!"

The small bandstand is crowded. Of the nine or ten musicians on the platform, only two have been hired to play: the lead fiddler and the piano player. These two sit back to back, the better to hear each other. Directly in front of them is Duke Miller's chair. There is no discussion of upcoming tunes. Like the dancers, the musicians know what's next.

Duke Miller works his way slowly across the bandstand. He is a solid-looking man in his 80s and wears a dark suit and tie and highly polished boots. He is rumored to be in poor health – in fact, it is said that this might be his last regular dance in Fitzwilliam – but there is no sign of sickness in his voice. It is surprisingly young and strong.

"All right. The first dance is 'Chorus Jig'. First, third, and every other couple is active. You all know how it goes: active couples down the outside and down the middle. Cast off. Turn contra corners..."

Duke nods to the fiddler; the fiddler nods to the piano player. The piano sounds out four chords "for nothing," and the dance begins.

"Chorus Jig" is a classic contra and a great favorite throughout New England. Each active couple dances the complicated figure through with the couple next in line – four movements, one to each 8-measure phrase of the music. After 32 measures, the tune repeats and so does the dance, but somehow each active couple has moved one place down the set and has a new couple with whom to do the figure. And so it goes, repeating again and again, until each couple has danced with every other couple in the set. Depending on the size of the hall, this may take up to 15 minutes.

Once, twice, three times through the dance, Duke calls out the changes, reminding the dancers of the next move a measure or two ahead. Then, for a while, he just watches. Finally, sure that everyone's all right he settles back comfortably in his chair and closes his eyes.

This is not his first Saturday night in Fitzwilliam.

Each Saturday night, all across New England, in town and grange halls and church basements, people are dancing. There is nothing organized about these dances. They simply happen, a series of independent and very local affairs. Each is unique and is supported by a different community. The Fitzwilliam dance is one of the oldest and most old-fashioned in style. Duke Miller's mixture of contras, quadrilles, and *singing squares* dates from the late 1920s and early 1930s, a period when the rural New England communities were more homogeneous and travel was more difficult than it is today.

Nowadays, most Yankee communities prefer a program of all singing squares like those called by Ralph Higgins of Chesterfield, Mass. In a singing square, the dance directions are sung like lyrics to the melody of a popular tune,

such as "Darling Nellie Gray" or "Redwing." Unlike the contra or quadrille, where the dancers are reminded of the next figure a measure or two ahead, in the singing square the directions are given at the moment when the figure is to be danced. This makes it difficult to dance the figure in time with the appropriate music. Regular dancers solve this problem by memorizing the calls (in fact, many dancers sing along with the caller). Newcomers, however, have to stumble through behind the beat until they learn the dance.

One special feature of the square formation is its *exclusivity* – each couple dances only with the other three couples making up their set. Since New Englanders always dance three squares in a row before taking a break, this means that the same eight people dance together for as long as half an hour. And since many of the sets re-form after the break in the same spot on the dance floor and with the same four couples, the "all singing squares" program gives rural New Englanders an opportunity to strengthen and celebrate long-standing family and community relationships now being threatened by the spread of suburbia into the countryside. You may not know your neighbor any more, but you do know who you're going to dance with on Saturday night.

Interestingly, the "newcomers" – the city people who have moved in large numbers into the small towns and villages now only a short commute from the cities – have adopted as *their* favorite dance the traditional New England contra dance. And they've chosen it because, unlike the square, in a contra it's virtually impossible *not* to dance with every other couple in the hall. A contra dance is a great way for a group of relative strangers to gain a sense of community.

30 years ago only a handful of contras like "Chorus Jig" were commonly done, but the contra dance revival has grown to such proportions over the last 15 years that in some parts of New England it is possible to dance contras five or six nights a week. Major dances, though, are still held on Saturday night. On special occasions, "dawn dances" and contras are danced from 8:30 p.m. until 6 or 7 a.m. Despite the simple, repetitive nature of contra dances and the small repertoire of basic moves (dos-à-dos, allemande, swing, etc.) from which they are constructed, the number and variety of contras is apparently unlimited. So, too, is their adaptability. I've seen contras danced at weddings and private parties, in backyards, in hallways, on village greens, in parking lots, and in bars.

One of the most interesting group-dance traditions of the Northeast is the *quadrille*. Technically, a quadrille is a sequence of short square dances performed in sets of four (sometimes eight) couples. It was brought to this country from France and England in the early 19th century. Originally, each quadrille consisted of as many as five separate dance figures and, at the height of its popularity, there were literally hundreds of different quadrilles. Many of the individual figures linger on as "prompted squares" at old-fashioned programs like the Fitzwilliam dance. But the quadrille as a *sequence* of dances survives only in Franco-American and Canadian Maritime communities.

Each Saturday night at the French-American Victory Club, in the Boston suburb of Waltham, a three-figure quadrille is still performed. The house band of electric guitars, piano, and drums leaves the stage, and a fiddler and caller take their places. Several dozen people get up to dance. At first glance, the Waltham quadrille appears merely to be a series of rather simple square dances, done in sets of four couples under the direction of the caller. Repetition, the secret of the quadrille, becomes apparent only after watching the dance carefully several times. The quadrille is *always* the same – the three figures are danced in the



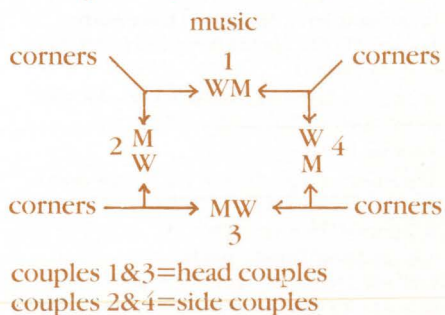
Contra formation

(although only six couples are shown here, contras can be danced with "as many as will")

	music
M = man	1 MW
W = woman	2 MW
	3 MW
	4 MW
	5 MW
	6 MW

Square formation

(quadrilles are danced using the same formation, although the numbering of couples may be different)



Members of the Maritimes community of greater Boston still dance the old quadrille figures from "down home" every Saturday night at the French Club, Waltham, Mass.

PHOTO BY JOHN M. BISHOP



Suggested Reading

Nevell, Richard. *A Time To Dance*. St. Martin's Press: New York, 1977.

Sweet, Ralph. *Let's Create Old Tyme Square Dancing*. Pub. Hazardville, Conn., 1966. (Contains an appraisal of traditional dance activities)

Tolman, Beth, and Ralph Page. *The Country Dance Book*. reprint 1976; original printing, 1937.

Van Cleef, Joy. "Rural Felicity: Social Dance in 18th-Century Connecticut," *Dance Perspectives* 65, Vol. 17, Spring 1976.

Wells, Paul F. *New England Traditional Fiddling*. Insert booklet for LP recording of same title (see discography).

Discography

Beaudoin, Louis. *La Famille Beaudoin/The Beaudoin Family*. Philo 2022. jacket notes by Paul F. Wells.

Boudreault, Louis. *Old Time Fiddler of Chicoutimi, Quebec*. Voyager VRLP 322-S. (jacket notes by Louis Boudreault)

Campbell, John. *Cape Breton Violin Music*. Rounder 7003. (jacket notes by Mary Campbell and Mark Wilson).

Cormier, Joseph. *The Dances Down Home*. Rounder 7004. (jacket notes by Mark Wilson; insert booklet by Sam Cormier)

Cronin, Paddy. *The Rakish Paddy*. Fiddler FRLP-002. (jacket notes by Frank H. Ferrel)

Doucet, Tom. *I Used to Play Some Pretty Tough Tunes*. Rounder 7010. (jacket notes by Robert Coltman)

Robichaud, Jerry. *Maritime Dance Party*. Fretless FR 201. (jacket notes and insert sheet by Tony Parkes)

West, Ron. *Vermont Fiddler*. Fretless FR 132. (jacket notes by Norma West Mayhew).

Various Artists:

The Music of Cape Breton, Vol 2: Cape Breton Scottish Fiddle. Topic 12TS354. (jacket notes and booklet by John Shaw)

New England Traditional Fiddling John Edwards Memorial Foundation, JEMF-105.

40 (jacket notes and insert booklet by Paul F. Wells)

same order every time the quadrille is performed. In Waltham, the quadrille is danced three times a night. In contrast, in the Maritimes, the local version of the quadrille is danced dozens of times in an evening, with breaks only for step dancing and an occasional fox trot.

To an outsider, it might seem boring to repeat the same dance so often, but dancing is not all that's going on here. The quadrille to the community of Waltham (like the Fitzwilliam dance to its community and the singing squares and contras to their communities) is more than a dance – it's a statement. It says to the dancers, their families, and friends, "This is who I am and this is where I belong." And that's a very important function of the New England Saturday night dance.

At the center of all traditional dancing in the Northeast is the fiddler. Without him, there is no dance. Only the flute, and earlier, the fife, has ever challenged the fiddle's dominance.

Since the earliest days, the roles of fiddler and caller have been intertwined. In some cases, certain dances were done only to specific tunes and the fiddler, in choosing the tune, also chose the dance. But many fiddlers developed independent reputations as callers. Often the fiddler would just announce the dance and briefly review the figures before beginning to play. Some fiddlers, like the late Ed Larkin of Vermont, would call the changes and simultaneously play the tune.

A fiddler alone was enough to make a band for a small dance. In fact, at the informal house dances, or "kitchen rackets," there was rarely enough room for more musicians anyway, and often the fiddler had to perch precariously on a stool in the kitchen sink. In the early 20th century, the accompaniment (if any) was provided by the parlor pump organ. Today, piano back-up is standard, and guitars, mandolins, tenor banjos, and flutes round out the orchestra. Still, no matter what the make-up of the band, it's the fiddler who sets the tempos and chooses the tunes.

Although each of the major traditional Northeastern communities (Yankee, French Canadian, Scottish, and Maritime) has developed and maintained its own vigorous and distinctive fiddle styles, all share characteristics that distinguish them from other major fiddle regions of North America. Among these characteristics are: *unison* (one rarely hears harmony or countermelodies), *distinct articulation*, and *absence of variation*. Additionally, there is a high degree of musical literacy. Many fiddlers learn much of their repertoire from printed sources, and tunes in the "flat keys" (F, B^b, and even E^b) are not uncommon.

All of these fiddle styles, all of these traditional dances, are still alive all over New England. Indeed they thrive at the Saturday night dances. New England musicians and dancers will present their traditions daily and in evening concerts at the 1981 Festival of American Folklife, for your enjoyment and participation.