

“Circle up Four on the Old Dance Floor”: Old-Time Dancing in Chilhowie, Virginia

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A circle of 50 or more smiling dancers completely rings the dance floor, holding hands. At the first notes of the fiddle, they begin a resilient bounce downward in time with the music, and some dancers clog, setting up a group rhythm that can be seen, heard, and felt. The caller says, “All join hands and circle to your left,” and the old-time square dance begins at the congenial Chilhowie Lions’ Club in southwest Virginia as it always does on Friday nights. At the caller’s commands, the dancers weave patterns that involve the whole group, as they drop back to change partners or take hands in a “right hand chain” — right hand to the partner, left hand to the next person all the way around the circle. When the caller says “circle up four,” the dancers form sets of two couples each on the periphery of the circle. They make designs together by taking hands, going under each other’s arms, or changing places, all at the caller’s command. They circle up four again and again, each time making new designs, until the caller finally directs them into several concluding patterns that involve everyone, as individuals and couples travel in lines down the dance floor and join with friends to build a community by ones, twos, and fours. Throughout, the sounds of dancing feet keep time with the bluegrass, country, or old-time music played by the band.

Old-Time Dancing History

Old-time square dancing probably has its roots in several kinds of dance: English country

dancing, Scottish and Irish reels, African ring plays, and Native American social dances. Some believe that from country dancing came “sets” or coordinated group patterns; from reels came couples traveling in paths around each other in groups of four; from ring dances came the circle which begins and often ends the old-time square dance. From all the above-mentioned traditions came the expressive individual footwork known variously as flatfooting, clogging, or buck dancing. Along the way, old-time square dancing has taken in elements of the popular dances of the times, such as African American Charleston steps and rhyming calls of western club square dance figures. In this century, old-time dancing has been a regular recreation for European Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans in the central Appalachian region. It has evolved to its present form over a period of 300 years of interaction among these groups.

Each area has its own characteristic style, and people from one region can tell where another dancer comes from by the way he or she dances. North Carolina, Kentucky, and Virginia dancers have distinct movement styles and incorporate different elements in their square dances. Even within southwest Virginia, each area has its own particular qualities. The stylistic choices made by dancers over generations have been influenced by a variety of factors, including politics, economics, and patterns of migration. For example, old-time dancers in the coalfields region have chosen to include many African-American elements in their dance because of their historical experience. During the first third of the 20th century many African American southerners were brought in to work in the mines, and interethnic solidarity was forged by oppressive living and working conditions. In common dance halls provided by the coal companies people of both groups could see each other’s dancing and trade ideas. As a result, the

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local dancing became more percussive, and more angular in appearance than the dancing of other areas such as the Blue Ridge.

In Chilhowie, dancing has been influenced in part by its location in the southern portion of "The Great Valley" of Virginia, east of the coalfields and west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It stands on a major traffic corridor running from Pennsylvania to Tennessee which has continually brought new residents and new ideas to the Valley since pre-Columbian times. Valley residents have developed a love of variety, which is evident in the many different kinds of dances enjoyed in an evening, in the frequent changes within each square dance, in dancers' desire to learn and practice new steps, in the varieties of music used for old-time dancing, and in the several callers who share the microphone at Chilhowie. Every Friday night at the Lions' Club, along with old-time square dancing, dancers do clogging, in which each person improvises footwork in time with the music. Each evening also includes several waltz and two-step tunes and at least one mixer, such as a Paul Jones or a Broom Dance. In addition to gathering on Friday nights, many dancers attend one of the area's several other

old-time dance establishments on Saturday night and one or two nights during the week. Some get together on Mondays to practice new forms such as country-western line dancing or western club square dancing.

Even though they may be lifetime area residents whose parents danced, some dancers at the Chilhowie Lions' Club have learned only within the last 15 years due to the local renewal of interest in old-time dancing. Chilhowie resident Evelyn Sturgill theorizes that this cultural revitalization is part of a growth in regional self-esteem. "We have learned to appreciate all the things we were ashamed of. We get out our old quilts and things we used to make. We have had a revival of appreciation of our heritage."

Dancing has become the primary form of recreation for many Lions' Club dancers. As Gene and Jane Salyers responded when asked about other recreation, "I don't know what we *did* do before we danced!" Dancing is said to be a source of fellowship, and a community of dancers has developed as a result of seeing each other several times weekly at dances and lessons. Dancer and musician Bill McCall, remembering the unexpected condolences sent by dancers on



Two girls observe and learn clogging techniques from more experienced dancers in Chilhowie, Virginia.
Photo by French Sturgill

the death of his mother, says, "I think people are as congenial as they ever were. I think the reason we don't show it is because we don't visit [as we once did]. I think this [dancing] has sort of overcome some of that." Care is taken that everyone has an opportunity to dance. Caller Kirby Smith says, "If you don't have someone to dance with, come on your own. We'll make sure you get somebody."

Chilhowie's Old-Time Dancing: Form and Style

By the beginning of this century, old-time square dancing had reached its present form. Louise Widener, born in 1899, describes most of the figures danced today as having been done in country homes in her youth; a whole circle would break into small circles of four, and all the small circles would dance at the same time, "making puzzles" by holding hands and going under each other's arms.

Today, each square dance includes an initial circle left and right, swing, promenade, and a large group pattern such as right hand chain, followed by at least six different two couple patterns, and, finally, two to four large group patterns. Many people keep clogging steps going throughout, so that the group rhythm on which the dance depends is audible, and the downward pulse of the whole group on each beat is visible. At the direction of the caller everyone works together in pairs, in groups of four, and in the group as a whole to produce clear designs and synchronized dancing.

In the first half of this century, old-time dancing in the valley surrounding Chilhowie was primarily a rural, home-centered recreation. In some communities dances were held every night in different homes for two weeks around Christmas. In others they were held more or less weekly in homes year-round, as well as in conjunction with cooperative work parties, such as quiltings, corn shuckings, and barn raisings. A fiddle usually provided the music, sometimes accompanied by banjo, guitar, and bass. At home among friends, everyone could take part.

Today's old-time dancing, though it now occurs in public places, still inspires individual expression in the footwork and group coopera-

tion and teamwork in the many small and large patterns. Old-time dancing is still, above all, inclusive rather than exclusive, encouraging everyone to participate, and seasoned dancers are always ready to teach newcomers.

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