

CHANGING TIMES: THE FUTURE OF YELLOW ROCK

By Ed Foote (reprinted from American Square Dance Magazine)

In recent years we have seen a sharp rise in sexual harassment issues in the news, including confidential agreements, high profile trials, and resignations of people in prominent positions. What is and is not sexual harassment is a subject of widespread debate.

Yellow Rock, including variations with other names, has been part of the square dance activity for over 50 years. This name for hugging was invented by a caller calling at Yellow Rock Barn outside of Kansas City, MO. For decades people considered Yellow Rock harmless fun and a way to increase friendliness in square dancing. But in these changing times of sexual harassment focus, it may be time to take another look at Yellow Rock.

The Board of Governors (25 callers) of CALLERLAB did so at its recent annual convention, where considerable time was devoted to a discussion of the issue. Male members, who comprise a majority of the Board, were genuinely concerned about whether they could be accused of sexual harassment if they called Yellow Rock. In addition, they worried whether they could be accused if they themselves gave someone a Yellow Rock.

Female members of the Board described their experiences of appropriate and inappropriate Yellow Rocks that they had received over the years. It quickly became clear that there is a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate hugging, and that this line is different for each person - both the giver and the receiver of the Yellow Rock.

Male callers were concerned that they might be reported to CALLERLAB for an ethics violation if they call Yellow Rock, even though there is currently nothing specific on this topic in the CALLERLAB Code of Ethics. They were also concerned they might be reported if they gave a Yellow Rock to someone -- reported either by the person who received the Yellow Rock or by someone viewing the action from across the room.

More on Yellow Rock. It was suggested that callers take a poll of their home clubs, to see if people liked Yellow Rock. But it was quickly noted that unless this was a secret ballot, no one would vote against it because such a stand could cause embarrassment and be perceived as unfriendly. Also, if just one person voted against Yellow Rock, that person might possibly claim sexual harassment in the future, based on that person's definition of what is appropriate.

One caller said he only calls Yellow Rock with the original partner. This was fine decades ago, when most couples were married. But he recognized that in this day of so many singles dancing with various people during a dance, this is probably no longer appropriate.

The story was told of a well-known caller who started a large beginners class. This caller recognized that the personal space of new dancers was much larger than those who have danced a long time, so he intentionally never showed Yellow Rock until later in class. This caller had to miss the third night of class, and the replacement caller showed Yellow Rock. The next week half the class had quit, because their personal space had been invaded in a manner unacceptable to them.

Bottom line. The Board took no vote on this issue, and callers are free to call Yellow Rock as they wish. But many callers on the Board said they had already stopped calling Yellow Rock, and others said they planned to do so. They all agreed it was just a no-win situation for them.

So, while Yellow Rock will not be going away, it is likely to be used far less in the future. When you notice that the use of Yellow Rock is in decline, remember the observations made here and you will know the reason.

A note to callers. At the meeting, male callers asked the female callers what to do if a woman walks up to you with arms outstretched, obviously wanting a Yellow Rock. This can happen at any time during a dance, and especially in a "thank you line" at the end of a dance. If the male caller steps forward too far (in the mind of the woman), it could be considered an aggressive move. But if he does not move at all, this could be considered unfriendly. What to do?

Answer from the female callers: The male caller should turn his body sideways 90 degrees - this will cause the woman to turn her body to face the same direction as the man. Then the man puts his arm around the woman's back and gives a half hug. The female callers said this was a perfect solution.

Likewise, if a male approaches a female caller with arms outstretched, the female caller can turn sideways 90 degrees and give a half hug. This keeps her in control of the situation.