

Swing your partner! Square dancing returns to Ukiah

Carole Brodsky
Ukiah Daily Journal
February 21, 2017

Everyone has an opinion of what true “Americana” consists of. Whether it’s basketball, Boston Cream Pie or the Ford Model A, some institutions are beyond dispute, and square dancing rates high on the list.

Lawrence Johnstone, long-time caller for the Ukiah Promenaders, a decades-old square dance club is on a mission- to bring the classic dance form back to Ukiah and inspire a new generation to enjoy what for him is an enduring family legacy and just plain fun.

“My mother was from Hopland, one of 10 children in the Harpe family,” says Johnstone. “She was always very musical. She was in a band, playing mostly French horn, and marched across the Golden Gate Bridge the day it opened. During World War II, she was in an all-female Marine Corps band.”

Johnstone’s father, a Petaluma dairy farmer met his mother at a Boonville square dance in 1939.

“Dad made sure he’d be at the next dance Mom was attending. When she got there, Mom was told her admission had already been paid for. Literally, if it wasn’t for square dancing, I don’t think I’d be here,” he smiles.

Johnstone was encouraged to learn to dance in high school. “My mom was my first partner. We danced together until one night, she slid under the car and cracked her rib. Then I danced with the caller’s wife. During high school, I could never get any of my friends to try it, but I continued on and joined the UC Davis Cal Aggie Square Dancers.

“I became a computer programmer in Santa Clara until I got tired of the press of people. Dad retired, he and Mom moved back to Mendocino County be close to her family, so I moved up here.”

Many people might recall Johnstone behind the counter at Computer Scene, where he worked with family friend Alec Rorabaugh for many years until his retirement. When not dancing and calling, Johnstone has a computer repair and servicing business which focuses on home visits.

In 1993, Johnstone was asked if he was interested in becoming a square dance caller. “The Callers Association offered a weekly class in Castro Valley. I went every Sunday morning for about four months. At the end of the class, the Promenaders asked me to take over as the club caller, which I did in April of 1994. I’ve been calling for that club ever since.” He’s called for other clubs- the Konocti Kickers, the Redwood Coasters in Fort Bragg, and currently calls for the Frontier Twirlers in Willits and the Singles and Pairs in Santa Rosa.

Johnstone stresses that most people have an erroneous or outdated impression of what square dancing actually is. “What’s been shown in musicals either isn’t square dancing or isn’t today’s

dancing. The song, 'Oh Johnny Oh' is not today's, modern square dancing. Most people got a taste in elementary school and decided, 'I never want to do this again.' That's frustrating. Mostly, they were taught by people who were not active square dancers, other than playing what was on a record they owned. No wonder kids got turned off," he says.

Four-couple square dancing came together sometime in the 19th century, developing from multiple forms including Quadrilles and English/Irish Country Dancing to form something completely American. "Jack Murtha, a Yuba City caller once said that the Virginia Reel was George Washington's favorite dance. All sorts of different dance forms drew together and became traditional square dancing."

"Henry Ford was looking for something for his employees to do, to knit together the company socially. He hired a dancing master to teach square dancing to his employees. There's still this beautiful building near Detroit that was built to that purpose," he continues.

In the '50's, square dance groups multiplied around the world, primarily due to overseas military bases. "People from outside the bases would dance with the enlisted men and started their own groups in Japan, Sweden, Germany, literally all over the world." To this day, regardless of the country, square dance calls are always given in English. "The movements and names are standardized worldwide. 'Allemande Left' is always the same, everywhere."

Today's square dancing has changed from a specific set of memorized routines, to a dance form that incorporates a high degree of spontaneity, orchestrated by the caller.

"Some callers got tired of repetitions and decided to make stuff up on the fly. Instead of memorized routines, you learn basic set of 'calls.' In California, it's called 'Plus,' which consists of 98 different calls," says Johnstone. In the Midwest, the "Mainstream" system consists of 68 calls. And of course, for the committed, advanced levels exist. What Johnstone is proposing is to teach is called the "Sustainable Square Dance List," which is about 50 calls. "We can learn that in about 12 weeks. Then we can build a group with a sustainable size, and build the club to a size that can expand if desired."

Square dancing requires four couples, and beginners learn by doing, with lots of support.

"You're interacting with three other couples. It really is a team activity- everyone has to do their part for the square to succeed. We start with couples in a square, or in a big circle of couples. We identify who your partner is, who your corner is, which, if you're a woman is the guy on your right. Then we learn some calls- 'Circle right,' Do-Sah-Do, Promenade, and others. The old-time 'Do-Si-Do' call got lost along the way. Then you learn the same routines and calls within the squares. I try to guide people through the calls while they're moving. As you master one, you move onto the next."

Square dancing requires listening to the caller as well as dancing. "That's not something that most people do unless you're a stenographer. You're not just learning names of calls, you're learning the process of listening and reacting to the caller's voice. Modern square dancing isn't memorized. While I'm teaching, there's a lot of repetition, but good callers will change things up and do things in different orders to add some variety."

"Traditionally, men used to wear long-sleeve shirts so that ladies had something to grip onto instead of the man's sweaty arms. Nowadays, we've gotten away from that. Anything we can do

to open this up for new people is good. I don't tell anyone that they have to dress- just to come in comfortable, presentable in clothes that wouldn't get you frowned at in church," he smiles.

"As you go through the class, most people want to start dressing the part. Big dances might say, 'traditional square dance clothes required.' The clothes are frozen in the '50's- long sleeved shirts, bolo or handkerchief ties, skirts with petticoats that will fly out when you twirl. Shoes should be anything comfortable that will slide and won't leave marks on the floor," he continues.

Calling is singing, and Johnstone has a wonderful, sonorous voice. "I'd be in the bus stop in eighth grade, by myself, singing the calls- I didn't think I could sing. I'd tape myself singing, it sounded so horrible," he smiles. "I started buying my friend Joe Saltel's calling cassettes and sing along with them in my car. I always credit him as one of the influences behind my calling."

There are criteria for good callers, says Johnstone. "Charisma, timing, how well he or she delivers the calls with the music. My favorite callers are the ones that are good at timing, singing, and creative enough to make things interesting."

And the music? Twangy fiddles are not necessarily the music of the day. Square dancing has embraced much of popular culture. "Today, music producers write strictly for the industry. The music is tied to callers' preferences: rock and roll, jazz, big band, which I love. A friend arranged 'Für Elise.' We can square dance to Beethoven," he smiles.

One thing Johnstone loves is the camaraderie and sense of fulfillment that comes from dancing. "When we do a demonstration, I tell people these are not professional exhibitionists, they enjoy coming out and having fun with each other. If something goes wrong, you're always among friends. You can trust each other. At the National Square Dance Convention, 5,000 people come from all over the world. The ladies put their purses under the chairs and they will be there when they come back."

Johnstone has been to every national convention since 2008. He has been a caller at some conventions has been recognized numerous times by the Northern California Square Dancers' Association as one of the top 10 callers in the northern half of the Bay Area.

"My favorite thing about square dancing is how spontaneous and unpredictable it is. I can't just go on autopilot and assume what's coming. I'm convinced that square dancing helped keep my parents alert and active. I don't really see older dancers declining mentally the way you see other seniors," he notes.

Maybe square dancing is the new stress reduction for the next generation. "You have to leave your worries at the door, because you don't have time to think about them on the floor," he smiles.

The Tam Twirlers Club of Marin County has a web page that takes dancers through a multitude of calls. "It doesn't have pictures of people. You pick a call, pick a play button and graphic figures go through the motion of the call." But don't be daunted, says Johnstone. Square dancing does not require previous experience, and singles as well as partners are welcome.

"I wish we had a better way of introducing square dancing into the schools. We need to get a caller in there who really knows to teach, but I've learned I'm not the best at teaching kids," he laughs.

Johnstone's greatest wish is to share his passion with his community, and inspire people to enjoy what is clearly an enlivening, delightful way to socialize, make friends and burn a few calories. "I don't like to see something that's been around this long to just disappear. The Ukiah Promenaders has been an institution since 1955. I sincerely hope we can keep it going."

Right now, classes will convene at the Ukiah Senior Center. "But you absolutely don't have to be a senior to participate," he smiles. Johnstone's plan is to hold classes on Thursday evenings from 7:00 to 9:00. "If we get a large enough group, we'll expand beyond 9:00."

Johnstone asks interested parties send him an email at loj@loj.name or give him a ring at (707) 462-0239 so he can determine if there are enough participants to form a class. To visit the Ukiah Promenader's webpage visit www.loj.name/promenaders/. Johnstone's square dance page can be accessed at <http://loj.name/index.htm>