

STRICTLY COME SQUARE DANCING: HISTORIAN DIGS INTO DANCE'S HISTORY

- excerpt by Mary Pilon, December 16, 2009, Wall Street Journal

Today's Wall Street Journal takes a look at those struggling to save the last square dance. But where did square dancing come from?

Square dance caller and historian Phil Jamison may have found out. It's taken the teacher of math and Appalachian studies at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, N.C., over 10 years to unearth pieces of the puzzle that have been missing for centuries.

He and other square dance historians say the story starts in France.

There, dances like quadrilles were all the rage in the late 18th century and like today's square dances, featured four couples in a square. After the American Revolution, former colonials rejected all things British, including the country's dances. More en vogue French instructors crossed the pond to teach their trendy moves. French terms like "do-si-do," "allemande" and "promenade" still remain part of the modern square dancing lexicon.

The dances done in early America then didn't have a "caller," or someone who yells out the moves to dancers, like square dancing today. Rather, the expectation, Jamison says, was that dancers went to school, memorized the moves, then went to the ball.

Square dancing then was mostly done to live music, almost always played by African-American musicians. It's believed that many of these musicians became callers due to the gap in literacy and formal training among slaves of the time. Jamison says he found evidence of an African-American caller dating back as early as 1819 in New Orleans. Other African-American dance moves, instruments like the banjo and fiddle, and call and response traditions were also incorporated, he says.

"Even though we don't currently see the banjo, fiddles and square dancing as a part of African American culture," Jamison says, "they once were."

Calling gained popularity up and down the Appalachian range throughout the 1800s, Richard Severance, archive director of the Square Dance Foundation of New England, says.

Dancing numbers dwindled in the 19th century and opposition among religious groups of the time didn't help recruiting, either. "There was a puritanical belief that you shouldn't touch a young lady," Severance says.

Later in the century, square dancing was replaced by couples dances like waltzes and polkas in city ballrooms. But square dancing still thrived in rural areas.

In the 1920s, Henry Ford became a promoter of the old style of square dancing, opening a ballroom in Michigan. Ford promoted the dance among his factory workers and their families, historians say. He thought having square dancing in schools helped children learn manners, exercise, values and grace. In 1928, save-squaredancing.com reports, boards of education across the country endorsed the Ford square dancing program. (Perhaps it is he who so many of us have to blame for our grade- and middle-school gym class trauma.)

Many soldiers took the dances overseas during World War II, Severance says. To this day, there are still square dancing communities worldwide, all still call in English.

Around the 1950s modern square dancing was standardized. Lessons, which are still taught today, comprise of 69 standard moves. When the Western attire of slacks and petticoats became the norm, it was considered casual compared to the formal tuxedos and ballroom gowns of the time. Len Houle, president of the United Square Dancers of America says.

There are also "traditional" square dancers who base their moves more in the Appalachian style before the 1950s standardization. Today, traditionalists typically don't require lessons and dance to live music rather than recordings. For many traditional dances, no lessons are required to enter.

Partially due to dwindling numbers, modern square dancing groups made pushes in the 1980s and 1990s to be considered the official dance or folk dance of the U.S. President Ronald Reagan made square dancing briefly the national folk dance from 1982-1983. The USDA has put its national campaign on hold for now, until the group finds a legislator to support the bill, Houle says. However, there are currently 31 states that have officially recognized square dancing.

And as reported today, the numbers of square dancers are dwindling again, from an estimated 1 million dancers in the late 1970s to around 300,000 [2009] according to the USDA. Recruitment efforts continue.

"The doors are open to anybody and everybody," Houle says.