

World's Oldest Square Dance Caller Keeps Central Valley Dancing

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Ernie Kinney says he won't call a dance on the day he dies. But maybe the day before.

Sound file: <https://soundcloud.com/thecaliforniareport/worlds-oldest-square-dance-caller-keeps-central-valley-dancing>

At 89, Ernie Kinney is the oldest active square dance caller in the world. That's according to CALLERLAB, the International Association of Square Dance Callers.

The former Marine and schoolteacher has called all over the world and in all 50 states. These days, he's still in demand — just sticking a little closer to his longtime Fresno home. He calls every Monday night in Hanford, about 45 minutes away. And every Thursday, dancers dressed in Western wear can find him calling for the Travelin' Pioneers Square Dance Club at the Clovis Senior Center outside Fresno.

"I'm the only caller who still uses 45 rpm records. That's all I have. I don't want to do that other stuff. I'm not gonna be here that much longer anyway," he says. "I'm gonna retire probably in 15 years."

Mirdza Ward does round dance cueing and has spent plenty of time around Kinney.

"You go to other states and you talk to your square dance friends and they cannot get over that we can dance to Ernie Kinney every week!" she says. "They're very jealous of that."

She says Kinney's "humor is funny as all get-out. Of course we've heard it a number of times but it gets funnier every time he tells it to us."

It's not long before Kinney comes up to Ward with a joke. "I've told 'em three times," he says. "Ten times. Never go to bed right after you take a laxative and a sleeping pill."

Kinney was born in Oklahoma but has lived in the Central Valley for most of his adult life. He taught in the tiny town of Cantua Creek on the west side of the valley for 24 years, the last 10 as superintendent.

"We would start in September back in those days with 350 kids. By mid-October, when the cotton was being picked, we'd have 500," he says.

Kinney says he started calling square dances when he lived in Cantua Creek. He's been invited just about everywhere as a caller, including Hong Kong, Tokyo, Australia, New Zealand, England and Sweden.

"I'll call until the day I die," he says. "Maybe not the day I die but until the day I die."