

Square-dancers try to rebuild 60-year-old club

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PRESCOTT, Arizona - Square-dancing is a Western tradition.

And like of a lot of traditions, it's facing an uncertain future.

Around the state, clubs are closing for lack of members.

"Clubs all over Arizona have folded," said square-dancer Cherie Hatzopoulous, citing rising costs to hold dances, from insurance to the cost of the venue. "Most-square dancers are senior citizens on a fixed income, and they can afford four or five dollars to come here and dance. With that kind of money, you can't pay much for a hall."

In Prescott, the local club, the Mile-Hi Squares, was fortunate enough to get permission to dance in the Washington Traditional School gymnasium after they lost a prime location.

Remember when...?

Do you remember when square-dancers used to perform on Prescott's courthouse plaza?

Mary Noble, a Mile-Hi Squares member, does.

"The club danced on the square for 67 years," she said, "but the city won't let us dance there anymore."

She said about three years ago, the club was told "we weren't popular enough that we drew enough crowds," and, after being cut back from weekly dances to monthly, then just one dance for the whole summer, the club was eliminated entirely from the schedule.

"People on the square would come and they'd watch us and see how much fun it is," Noble said.

"Mile-Hi Squares is part of the history of Prescott. We used to be out there every Saturday night from June to August."

That lack of exposure is one of the key reasons why the club has been losing membership, she said.

"I haven't given up on" getting back out there, Noble added. "I know a lot of old-timers who ask me all the time, 'When are you going to get back to dancing on the square?'"

"Friendship set to music"

Saturday night, about 40 people danced in the gymnasium. It was warm, with several large fans working to cool off the dancers, and caller Dan Nordbye, who came from Tucson, trying harder to heat them up.

Sounding like a combination of auctioneer and karaoke singer, he alternated between giving commands and singing along.

"If such a thing could be true," he sang, "I'd love you much more than I do...you're gonna promenade halfway...walk in a square..."

The women's colorful dresses swished and swirled in time with the beat.

"It's friendship set to music," Mile-Hi member Debbie Bell said. "It's good people having good fun."

She believes square dancing's flagging popularity can be attributed to society's impatience.

"It is a commitment to learn how to dance. You've got to learn how to do it," she said, but today, people want instant gratification. "They want to live for right now."

Her husband, Keith, said they've been square-dancing for 25 years.

"I just love dancing with my wife," he said, with a wide smile. "This is a good way to do it and we have a lot of fun together."

A little help from their friends

Determined not to lose another club, dancers from other Arizona clubs have been showing up to support Mile-Hi club dances in Prescott.

"We depend on people coming up from Phoenix," Hatzopoulous said, "otherwise, this club would have folded."

"The Prescott club was on the verge of trouble, where they may have had to disband," Tim McCauley, president of the Phoenix-based Tomahawk Twirlers said. "So we took up the call, and there's a group of us who come up from the Valley to help keep them alive."

Mile-Hi President Jack Minter is looking for a revival. After several years without lessons to bring in new dancers, the club is offering a series of 10 lessons this fall.

"It's not going to die," he said. "There's a spirit of, 'Hey, let's make this a club again.'"

The Mile-Hi Squares start new lessons on Thursday, Sept. 11, from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at Washington Traditional School, 300 E. Gurley Street, for \$5 a student per lesson. Call Jack at 602-751-3147 for more information.