Don't be a square – dance!

Tullahoma News
Thursday, January 22, 2015
Kali Bolle, LIFESTYLES EDITOR

At one time, square dancing could be found in almost any American city or town, practiced by young and old, black and white, urban and rural folks alike.

Today, it's making a comeback as folks are re-discovering the joy of the foot-stomping, rollicking, barn-shaking good time known as square dancing.

Locally, the Estill Springers Square Dance Club is keeping the art of squaring dancing alive and well. Each Thursday, the club meets at the Estill Springs Community Center, where dancers of all skill levels, ages and backgrounds meet to dance.

"We have folks of all backgrounds from all over the area that come and dance with us," said club president Larry Wood.

In the photo are, from left, Bruce Evans, Susan Amelang, Peggy Heyden and Jerry Amelang. -Staff Photo by Chris Barstad

"We all enjoy getting to dance and socialize with each other. It's a great form of exercise and also a great way to meet people."

According to history.com, square dance aficionados can trace the activity back to their European ancestors. In England around 1600, teams of six male trained performers began presenting choreographed sequences known as the "morris" dance. This fad is thought to have inspired English country dance, in which couples lined up on village greens to practice weaving, circling and swinging moves reminiscent of modern-day square dancing.

Over on the European continent, meanwhile, 18th-century French couples were arranging themselves in squares for social dances such as the quadrille and the cotillion. Folk dances in Scotland, Scandinavia and Spain are also thought to have influenced square dancing, according to the website.

When Europeans began settling England's 13 North American colonies, they brought both folk and popular dance traditions with them. French dancing styles in particular also came into favor in the years following the American Revolution, as many snubbed all things British.

A number of the terms used in modern square dancing come from France, including "promenade," "allemande" and the indispensable "do-si-do"— a corruption of "dos-à-dos," meaning "back-to-back."

As the United States grew and diversified, new generations stopped practicing the social dances their grandparents had enjoyed across the Atlantic. Similar to English country dance and the quadrille, the "running set" caught on in 19th-century Appalachia. But instead of memorizing each and every step, participants began relying on callers to provide cues, and, as square dance calling became an art form in its own right, humor and entertainment.

During the early years of square dance in the United States, live music was often played by African-American musicians. Blacks also worked as callers and contributed their own steps and songs to the tradition.

By the late 19th century, waltzes and polkas had supplanted group-based dances in urban ballrooms. Even in the country, square dancing was beginning to seem dated, particularly when the jazz and swing eras dawned.

In the 1920s automaker Henry Ford resolved to revive the tradition, which he considered an excellent form of exercise and a way to acquire genteel manners. He hired dancing master Benjamin Lovett to develop a national program, required his factory workers to attend classes, opened ballrooms and produced instructive radio broadcasts for schools throughout the country.

Lloyd Shaw, a folk dance teacher, took up the cause in the 1930s, writing books about the rescued art of square dancing and holding seminars for a new generation of square dance callers.

In the 1950s callers began developing standards for square dancing across the United States, allowing dancers to learn interchangeable routines and patterns. Microphones and records made the activity even more accessible to the general public, since a highly trained caller with a booming voice no longer had to be physically present.

Along with standardized, or "Western," square dancing, unregulated regional styles, known collectively as "traditional" square dancing, continue to thrive today in certain parts of the country.

Square Dancing Today

"We have danced from California to Maryland," said Wood. "Square dancing is something you can find almost anywhere in the country."

Wood is correct. Square dancing associations exist across the country, including the Seattle Subversive Square Dance Society, Santa Barbara Dance Society, and The Folklore Society of Greater Washington, just to name a few.

According to tnsquaredance.org, there are over 35 square dancing clubs in Tennessee that hold weekly lessons and get-togethers.

The Estill Springers also teach line and round dancing, as well, according to Wood.

A line dance is a choreographed dance with a repeated sequence of steps in which a group of people dance in one or more lines or rows without regard for the gender of the individuals, all facing either each other or in the same direction, and executing the steps at the same time.

Modern social round dancing is choreographed and cued ballroom dancing that progresses in a circular pattern, counter-clockwise around the dance floor.

Dancing for Everyone

While some might consider dancing to be mainly for an older crowd, Wood said that all ages can benefit from square dancing.

"I have been dancing with my wife since we were kids," said Wood. "It has been something that we have enjoyed all of our lives and have even passed on to our three sons who now dance with their wives. We also have young folks such as teens and even grade schoolers who join us for classes. It's something everyone can enjoy and we encourage them to do so."

10 Reasons to Dance

Cardiovascular fitness. Dancing is a safe way to exercise. The level of exertion is up to each participant. You can rev it up for a high intensity workout or take it easy for a relaxing, yet beneficial workout. Dancing regularly can lead to a slower heart rate, lower blood pressure, and an improved cholesterol profile.
Healthy environment. Square dances are smoke and alcohol free.
Body and brain boost. Square dancers react to calls as they are given. This forces the body and brain to be tightly coordinated. A number of the calls are memorized which keeps the brain sharp.

Calorie burn. Dancing burns between 200 and 400 calories every 30 minutes of dancing. That's equivalent to walking or riding a bike.
Distance. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports recommends 10,000 steps per day to maintain physical fitness. It is estimated that a typical square dancer can expect to clock 9,000 to 10,000 steps per dance.
Sturdy bones. The side to side movements of dancing strengthen weight-bearing bones, tibia, fibula, and femur, and help prevent the slow loss of bone mass.
Rehabilitation. Dancing is a way to get back in the swing of things if you are recovering from an injury. Dancing keeps your joints moving, and is nice alternative to jogging or other high-intensity activities.
Social Aspects. Square dancing is a great way to meet people in a non-threatening, relaxed social atmosphere. You never know who you are going to meet. Lifelong friendships are formed, and many have met the love of their life.
Stress relief. Since Square Dancing is led by a leader giving commands, you become so focused on the "task at hand" that your other mental worries are forgotten, at least for a couple of hours.
Metal health. Studies have shown that activities that involve both physical mental activity at the same time help to slow the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

Join in on the Fun

The Estill Springers are holding free introductory square dancing classes at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 29 and Feb. 5. All ages and skills levels are welcome said Wood.

A special square dancing event will also be held from 7 to 9:30 p.m. on Saturday at the Ada Wright Center, located at 328 N. Woodland St. in Manchester.

For more information on the club or upcoming events, contact Wood at 968-0813. To find a square dancing group in your area, visit online at www.tnsquaredance.org.