

An old form of dance reaches a new generation

By ERIN MATHEWS Salina Journal

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With the microphone in his hand, 6-year-old Damien Smith was fearless.

The Wichita second-grader — who was the youngest caller ever at the Kansas State Square Dance Convention — helped his grandma Tammy Gough sing and call out the moves that about eight squares of dancers, or 64 people, followed Saturday at the Salina Bicentennial Center. But before and after he took the stage, Damien clammed up, only shaking his head yes or no and giving the occasional one-word response.

“He’s quite the little ham,” Gough said. “You wouldn’t think so because he’s not talking to you now, but he is.”

Gough said Damien has been traveling to square dances with his grandparents since he was a toddler and learned to help her call dances when he was 3.

“I was singing a song practicing and he sang it with me, and I thought, ‘Oh, that’s kind of cool,’ so we just started doing it together,” Gough said. “It’s a lot of fun. Lots of memories.”

Saturday grandma and grandson called “Down in the Boondocks,” which they changed to “Down in the Barnyard” at Damien’s suggestion. They also brought props, occasionally holding up a toy version of their favorite animals.

Damien has also learned to dance and knows all the basic moves. After he called his song, he danced while 17-year-old Peter Denning, also of Wichita, took over calling “Dynamite.”

Denning, who also was taught to call by Gough, was making his third appearance at the state convention Saturday. He’s an old hand now, having called four entire two-hour dances by himself.

Dana Schirmer, executive director of Callerlab, an international association of square dance callers, said square dance calls such as “Recycle” or “Pass the Ocean” are an international language. Even dancers who don’t speak English know what to do when they hear the English version of the calls.

“I was in Japan about three years ago, and I was able to call to them and dance with them, but I had to have an interpreter to talk to them,” he said. “It’s a beautiful international activity because of that. You can get in a square and be friends with everyone in the room.”

This year’s state convention, which drew about 500 people, was the 35th to be held at the Bicentennial Center, which has a contract to host the event through 2020.

Jo Ann Radiel, of Salina, president of the Kansas Square Dance Association, said the group likes Salina’s central location, the support of the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce and the large, uncarpeted spaces at the Bicentennial Center.

“Salina has excellent restaurants and wonderful ice cream, and let me tell you, square dancers eat a ton of ice cream,” said dancer Pat Haskins, of Topeka.

Pat and Forrest Haskins, her husband of 52 years and dance partner of 37 years, serve as dancer coordinators for the convention, heading up 33 committees from across the state of dancers, callers and cuers — who direct a circular form of dancing.

Forrest Haskins said dancing is excellent stress relief.

“When you listen to the caller, you forget what was stressing you,” he said. “You’re having so much fun and concentrating on what you’re doing, and all the problems you came with are no longer there.”

The form of dancing practiced by pioneers who had a fiddle and a fireplace as the country expanded to the West has made some concessions to modern times, Forrest Haskins said.

“Now the callers use laptops with their music on it instead of fiddles, or they’ll hook their iPhone up,” Forrest Haskins said.

Dances Saturday afternoon were casual dress, with jeans and shorts not being uncommon. Saturday evening’s events were expected to be more formal square dance attire, including dresses with petticoats and matching shirt and ties for dance partners.

Pat and Forrest Haskins said they frequently traveled to square dances and the hobby has made them friends across the country. They said square dancing is a tremendous family activity, and their children danced, as well.

Now that they are in their 80s, they only average about one dance a week, Forrest Haskins said. At their peak, it “would be nothing to dance 13 nights in a row,” he said.

He said they once rode a bus with other dancers and a caller and danced in five states in one day — Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico and Colorado.

Forrest Haskins said a dancer walks between 5,000 and 7,000 steps during a dance, which adds up to about 3 miles by the end of the night. But there’s a catch.

“I’ve got to be honest; we also have what we call finger food, and square dancers are excellent cooks,” Pat Haskins said.