

# The Complete History of Square Dancing (Abridged)

## Resources

Tony Parkes – FAC September 9, 2021

(These links lead to full versions of the videos I included; due to time constraints, I played only a minute or so of each.)

Where does square dancing come from? Long story short, the dance formations and movements are European and the calls are African.

Two major strains in SD history – court & country (but similar in having groups of couples doing figures)

First callers we know of (1819 on) were Black, but written accounts focus on appearance & general style rather than specific calls & figures. I wish we knew more about what they called.

Court dances: 18th c. cotillion, 19th c. quadrille – figures mainly across the set; came from England, France, western Europe in general

Cotillion (French “cotillon”): a number of movements like circles and stars, called the “changes,” alternating with a more elaborate sequence called the “figure.” Changes were fairly standard and used in all the cotillions (there were many); each figure was unique to its own cotillion. A single piece of music lasted through all the changes and the repetitions of the figure. No calls; dancers must learn from a master and memorize the dances.

Dezais cotillion, 1725: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/1805>

Footwork is as important as figures; figure keeps everyone moving  
“Changes” get more complex later in dance

Strasbourg Cotillion, 1762: <https://www.regencydances.org/videos.php>

Very short changes, amazingly long figure (again everyone moves throughout)

Mr Turner’s Academy Cotillion, 1783: <https://www.regencydances.org/videos.php>

(nice variety of formations including lines of 4)

Contredanse française: La réverbère (Google: “The streetlamp”), late 1700s:

<https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/1911>

(“emerged from the cotillon and led to the development of the quadrille”)

Quadrille: No more “changes,” just 5 or 6 figures done to different musical selections with pauses. Still no calls until mid-19th century. Footwork gradually vanished in favor of walking.

The Quadrille Club (an English group) doing early quadrilles with period footwork:

Paine’s First Set (1812), figs. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/607>

Early Lancers (1816), figs. 1–3: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/6>

Early Lancers (1816), figs. 4–5: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/19>

Later Lancers without footwork (Carol Teten/Dance Through Time):

<https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/257>

Monterey Polka Quadrille, 1848: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/1690>

Reconstructed by Richard Powers

(an attempt to extend the life of quadrilles by merging them with couple dance steps & rhythms?)

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Galopade Quadrille, c. 1870: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= BuM\\_xPWYSw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuM_xPWYSw)

Reconstructed by Richard Powers

(has all-moving choreography that feels very modern, including continuous ladies chains in Figure 3)

Compare with The Rout (square dance, popular since the 1930s, using continuous chains):

<https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/556>

Called by Bob Dalsemer in 2009

Country-style dances: primarily visiting-couple figures around set – origin uncertain, but Scots/Irish influence seems obvious, especially in light of immigration statistics

(Note that reenactments of court styles are common, as many tunes and sets of directions have survived. However, country style in its formative years is all but impossible to reconstruct, as descriptions are cursory and even calls are fragmentary until around 1900. Country reenactments at square dance conventions are of necessity based partly on conjecture.)

Contras, squares vied for popularity through the years

Longways gained in England from 1650 to early/mid 1700s, judging from successive editions of Playford. Squares took over in US around 1800 (due to anti-British sentiment?); contras disappeared everywhere but NE in mid/late 1800s, then squares disappeared from formal balls around 1900.

Country-style squares developed throughout 19th century, never died out in some rural areas

Earliest callers (1819 on) were African American – whites decried the practice, but many whites took up calling (some Blacks were callers into the 20th century – North Carolina promoter Sam Queen learned in part from a Black caller named Bob Love)

By late 1800s, country squares appear to have jelled into the form familiar to us (see 1920s books based on interviews with old callers)

### **First revival (1900–1920s)**

Muscular Christianity – “a sound mind in a sound body”

Teaching of folk dance to schoolchildren & immigrants – northern European, English dances, eventually some American (see books by Elizabeth Burchenal – contras in 1918, quadrilles in 1926)

Cecil Sharp collecting in Kentucky – dance form was an outlier, but Sharp very influential

Big circle at Mountain Folk Festival, Berea, KY, 1993 (matches Sharp’s description in some ways):

<https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/612>

Caller: Theresa Lowder

1920s: First square dance books of the revival era (as opposed to quadrille prompters’ manuals)

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Henry Ford's crusade against jazz (from 1923 until his death in 1947)

Henry Ford dancers doing Lancers #5 at Wayside Inn, 1932 (silent):

<https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/1401>

1920s and 30s: Old-time string band music circulated via records, later radio

Radio barn dance shows had rhyming callers who influenced calling styles nationwide (as attested by Tolman & Page in *The Country Dance Book*, 1937)

Recordings: prompted quadrilles in early 1900s (e.g. Sears catalog 1908); Ford orchestra made records with and without calls for Victor, Edison, Columbia in 1920s; old-time string bands, some with calls (added for atmosphere, mostly not danceable), starting in 1920s

From Our House to the White House: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/333>

(the public discovers southern style dancing in the 1920s and 30s – National Folk Festival, St. Louis, 1934 is mentioned)

## Second revival (1930s–1950s)

Square dancing captured public interest (along with international folk dance to some extent) starting in 1930s (NY World's Fair had both, with Ed Durlacher and Michael & Mary Ann Herman)

Country Dance Society branches in NYC & Boston (both founded in 1915 to do English dance) added American dances to repertoire in 1930s

Texas – square dancing became a hobby ahead of other regions

El Paso Sun Carnival 1939: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/1260>

(silent, alas, but shows all-moving choreography – weave the ring, do-si-ballonet, weathervane)

Upstate New York & Pennsylvania – square dancing never died out (faux-hillbilly bands were extremely popular, helped make singing calls the norm in the Northeast)

New England – skiers from NYC & Boston discovered local dances (mentioned in Tolman & Page 1937)

Ted Glabach, Vermont, 1950: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/998>

(part of Green Mountain Land, a promotional film about Vermont)

Singing square to Jingle Bells – reportedly typical of New England events from 1930s to 1960s (before the contra dance revival that started in the mid-60s)

Lloyd Shaw – Colorado school superintendent who replaced competitive athletics with dance up & down his school, researched local styles & organized high-school-age performing group

Pappy's Kids doing Docey-Doe Hoedown (medley of visiting-couple figures), 1947

(silent film synced by David Millstone to Shaw's Decca recording):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA-Qoipv-Kk&t=252s>

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Recordings – George Wade (Victor 1931–35) apparently first to make danceable records  
Victor (Paul Conklin, Floyd Woodhull), Columbia (Lawrence Loy), Decca (Ed Durlacher, Roy Rogers)  
issued called albums in 1941

Magazines – American Squares, Rosin the Bow, Foot & Fiddle, Northern Junket, other regionals – dance  
calendars show multiple groups in most cities

Bob Osgood (Shaw's foremost disciple) and Sets in Order magazine – trad western as done in So. Calif.  
formed the nucleus of what became modern "western" square dance (MWSD)

Osgood's promotional film, 1951: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/654>  
Dancers were organizing into clubs & dressing up, but still doing traditional dances

Mildred Buhler, N. Calif, c. 1950: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/833>  
(very smooth exhibition, typically fast, no bounce or aerals – many popular figures & breaks)

Frank Lane at Asilomar, 1973: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/1267>  
especially Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree, starting at 5:30 – dancers' paths are curving part of the time,  
within a grid, like goalposting; curving paths would soon go out of fashion. Note adaptation of song lyrics  
("till I come marching home") into dance calls ("you all go marching home" on the promenade).

MWSD developed mid-1950s through c. 1980; Osgood & friends started meeting in 1960s to try to bring  
order out of chaos, eventually founding Callerlab and establishing levels: Basic, Mainstream, Plus,  
Advanced, Challenge

Jim Mayo calling Mainstream in 2010: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkHp2wpilG4>  
(East Hill Farm, Hash #3)

Interest in MWSD as measured by National Convention attendance: averaged 20,000 during peak years,  
recently below 4,000

Tech squares, 2011: <https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/185>  
(perhaps typifies the sort of group that will let modern SD survive)

Singing call: Sweet Home Alabama

Non-standard interpretations of some calls, but they're dancing to the music, and they really swing

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### Third revival (1960s–present)

Dudley Laufman sparked interest in traditional dance forms among high school & college age people, along with discovering & playing tunes that hadn't survived the "great purge"

This coincided with the larger revival & commercialization of folk music: songs, string bands

Contra dance groups appeared in most large cities & college towns, usually founded by someone who learned first- or second-hand from Dudley

Dudley dance in Richmond, NH, 1964: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br1MHXietLc>  
(film was made for US Information Agency, the government's overseas propaganda arm!)

Emphasis in contras more on music than calls – bands developed distinctive styles, borrowed from other genres like jazz and rock

Old-time squares held their own in a few places, were replaced by contras in many cities (even Asheville, NC); new old-time square series (rooted in old-time string band scene) started in Seattle, Portland OR, Washington DC, some southern cities

Popularity of squares at contra events hit an all-time low in 1980s (in my experience); since then, some prominent traveling callers have featured them & their stock has risen somewhat

As part of the rehabilitation of squares in the contra world, MWSD moves & terminology are no longer taboo (in contras as well as squares)

Survival eastern style dance in Washington County, PA (near Pittsburgh) with Jerry Goodwin, 1987:  
R&L Thru with a Pokey Four: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEspmgX8-vl>

Survival southern dance in Carcassonne, KY, 1991 (recorded by John Ramsay):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZufC1G8Du7E>

Caller: Harmie Griffie

Revival old-time square dance in Minneapolis, 1986:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWNmo7fOVVw>

Duck and Dive – caller: Gail Heil

Largest known revival square dance, Washington, DC:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e0Wu6A0wOA>

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[www.squaredancehistory.org](http://www.squaredancehistory.org)