

Continuing Education for Callers

by Michael Kernan

The 15th annual Central New York (CNY) Callers' Gathering hosted by Syracuse Country Dancers took place on Saturday, March 19, 2016 at the Pine Lake Environmental Campus of Hartwick College in Oneonta, NY. Usually held in Syracuse, these gatherings provide an opportunity for callers and prospective callers to get together and workshop dances in a friendly and supportive environment.

Each year a theme is selected. The first CNY Callers Gathering in 2002 was one of three such gatherings nationwide in which a group of callers attempted to dance all 41 of Ted Sannella's triplets. Other CNY gatherings have explored: chestnuts, unusual formations, dances for one-night stands, the Gene Hubert legacy, English country dances, "living room dances" (dances for small numbers of people), dances from Larry Jennings' *Zesty Contras*, squares, the Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend syllabi, and "100 Years of CDSS" (part of the centennial celebration). A full list and the history of the Callers' Gathering are available at <https://syracusecountrydancers.org/special-events/callers-gathering>.

Callers who participated this year included Katy Heine, Hilton Baxter, Michael Kernan, Alice Morris, Ed Bugel, Gary Kielar, Peter Blue and Robbie Poulette. The theme was 21st century dances. Prior to the event, each caller, plus others who were unable to attend, submitted three to five dances—some composed by well-known callers, others by little known composers, or some by our participants. The selections were arranged in a document sent to the participants before the gathering. Our package

included over 30 dances and we tried out 21 of them. As any dancer or caller knows, there has been an explosion of extremely creative choreography created in the past 16 years. We examined the trends and how this relates to past choreography.

We met at 9:30 a.m. for coffee and bagels. Sitting in a circle, we introduced ourselves: the callers, the band Traverse (Bernie Neumann, Liz Brown, and Carol Mandigo) and several dance angels who helped us to practice our dances. Rotating through two callers, we worked on two dances at a time, dancing each for seven to nine rounds. Returning to our chairs, we critiqued the two dances.

In a spirit of lively but respectful analysis, we talked about what we liked in each dance as well as what we saw as weaknesses in the choreography or more effective ways to teach or call the dances. We observed the challenges in teaching new moves that are variations of established figures and also questioned the success of some variations. As callers are teachers, we want the dancers to have the best experience possible. We must be able to communicate the dance figures which we possess on our little note cards to the dancers in a tone and manner by which they can both understand and enjoy.

At the end of the day's session Katy asked what we had observed about our selection of dances. I think that we were all too exhausted to think thoroughly at that time but combining our comments with the notes taken by Alice and Robbie, it is clear that orbits,

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Photo by Sarah Doherty

to put stars, smiley faces, etc. next to their favorite dances. On the following week Randy repeats the most popular dances. The dancers like rushing up to the board to register their vote, and a cell phone photo of the board at the end of the night serves as a handy record of which dances were done and how they were received.

Randy and Annette put a good deal of effort into outreach, and have organized dances at public libraries in Gainesville to raise awareness of ECD in our area, and also dances for home-schooled students in nearby Ocala. The English country dancers perform each year at the Florida Folk Festival in White Springs on Memorial Day weekend, with Piper Call running the performance practices. Each year we invite the audience to join us on stage for a participatory dance, and have had 50+ novices enjoy English country dancing. Some of our snowbirds from the frozen North have liked the dances so much that they've decided to return to Gainesville each winter. The visibility of Gainesville ECD has been helped by our videographer Patrick Harrigan, who has put some 250+ videos on YouTube as a resource for dancers and musicians. Since 2013 there have been over 100,000 views of these videos, which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQ5wHq80q2SDEwvK5LoeFguwKywQfi-eg> or by searching for "Gainesville English Country Dance."

The English dancers have worked to promote ECD with the Gainesville Old-Time Dance Society (GODS, godsandance.org), which focuses on contra dancing at the Thelma Boltin Center in Gainesville. Some of the current GODS steering committee members are active in the ECD community, and the GODS have now incorporated English dances into contra dance weekend events. Given the ability of many ECD callers such as Colin Hume and Brooke Friendly to call contra dances too, and vice versa (Gaye Fifer), this has made a lot of sense. Good relations between the Gainesville ECD group and the GODS have been to the benefit of both English and contra dancers.

The Gainesville ECD make use of the diverse talents of the caller Randy, the social facilitator Annette, the musicians of Hoggetowne Fancy, and of course the enthusiasm and enjoyment shown by the dancers. We've been fortunate to have a great group of dancers who are committed, and willing to learn challenging new dances. Together we've been able to create a dance community that is welcoming and self-sustaining. Now that you know we are here every Monday night, we hope you'll stop by and dance with us during your travels in the Sunshine State!

* Available from the CDSS Store, <http://store.cdss.org>.

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loops (i.e. wide promenades) and passing through to ocean waves featured prominently. When there was a four-in-line down the hall, the changeover at the end was something other than turning alone or as a couple; instead, e.g., "threading the needle" or "tagging the line." The dances that we explored had generally high piece counts and mostly symmetrical movement.

In discussing the future of contra dance, we wondered whether there will be a split between older dancers who prefer the traditional figures and a more leisurely experience, and those who like flourishes (swing moves, etc.), constant motion, new figures and more figures. We had a brief discussion comparing the stylistic differences of festival and local dances and to the divergence of square dancing. We noted the growth in popularity of techno-contras, the influence of other dance styles (like swing) to add flair to contra, and the gender-neutral dance movement. We briefly discussed the language that we use to identify roles in contra dancing.

As with many professions, this day was a continuing education course for us callers, giving us the opportunity to review, refresh and learn and we will be able to use some of these dances in our upcoming programs. This is my third CNY Callers Gathering and I am thankful for the information imparted and the cooperation of the other callers.

We began our weekend with a dance in Fayetteville the night before and a dance at Pine Lake that night, called by several of the workshop callers. The band was Balter (Peter Blue, Carol Mandigo and John Potocnik). Fun! And special thanks to our hosts, Peter Blue and Robbie Poulette of Pine Lake. The 16th CNY Callers' Gathering will be in Syracuse on March 18, 2017; information will be presented later on CNY's website.

Michael Kernan began dancing contra, English and community in 1998 and started calling in 2011 in the greater Albany NY area. He is coordinator for the Burnt Hills, NY contra dance.

