

English Country Dancing in Gainesville, FL

by Pete Turner



Photo courtesy, Pete Turner

The Gainesville English Country Dance group meets every Monday evening at a local church hall. Each week there are between 20 and 40 dancers, with calling by Randy Thorp to live music by the house band Hoggetowne Fancy. My question is: why is this English dance community in a quiet corner of North Central Florida successful? Why do dancers keep coming week after week? Since 2010 this dance has grown from a handful of dancers to an average of 30 each week. I think some features of Gainesville ECD provide clues that could be helpful to members of other dance communities.

Randy is an excellent caller, ably assisted by his partner Annette Merritt. Randy's calling is very clear and precise, perhaps reflecting his past work experience as a lab scientist and now as a librarian. His favorite saying is "One rule we have here is ... don't take dancing too seriously." Randy maintains a calm and pleasant presence as a caller, and isn't afraid to try new dances.

Annette gives introductory lessons each week based upon the moves which will be done that evening, and is very welcoming to newcomers and to returning dancers. She makes a point to find out the names of newbies, and introduces them to everyone during circle time at break, which also gives folks an opportunity to say their names and pass on information about upcoming dance and music events. Annette sends out weekly emails that are thoughtful and tailored to the dances for the upcoming Monday. I think one of the reasons the group has continued to attract dancers is that the dance consistently happens every Monday, with only a very few gaps over major holidays in the 5-1/2 years that Gainesville ECD has been happening

in this new format. Randy and Annette schedule their vacations around the Monday dance, and do everything possible to avoid canceling a dance.

Recently we've had some new callers from the Gainesville area step up to call a dance each week, including Annette, Al Rogers, Pam Morgan, Diane DePuydt, and snowbird Sam Rotenberg from Philadelphia, which has lifted Randy's calling load a little. We've had regional callers (Charlie Dyer from Jacksonville and John Rogers from Melbourne) step in to fill the gap during Randy's rare absences. There have been some excellent nationally-known visiting callers at our dance, including Colin Hume, Bob Green, and Brooke Friendly.

Another reason for Gainesville ECD's continued existence and growth has been the live music provided each and every week by Hoggetowne Fancy, a four piece group with recorders (John Monkus), bouzouki (Pete Turner), guitars (Bob Reynierson) and percussion (David Willkomm). The tunes come from both volumes of the Barnes' *English Country Dance* books,* supplemented with newer tunes that Randy emails to the band a few days before each Monday's dance. There is at least one new tune each week; the band's repertoire is now in the hundreds. The band has become quite good at adjusting tempo to Randy's requests, and enjoys the challenge of learning a variety of new tunes at short notice. The music ranges from traditional English country dance music from the Barnes books to classical pieces to jazz to ragtime.

Each week Randy writes up the names of the dances on a big board, and asks the dancers and musicians

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.

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