

Teaching the Country Dance

by May Gadd, CDSS National Director, 1937-1972

The Teacher of Country Dancing should keep in mind that the movement is a perfectly natural one. We do not wish everyone to dance in exactly the same way. Many people will have an easy natural style, and they should be left alone as much as possible.

There are, however, certain fundamental points which the teacher should have in mind in order to help those people who need it.

1. The movement is by means of a spring from foot to foot. This spring comes from the ankle, but cannot be achieved if the body is stiff. A loose easy carriage is therefore essential. Particular attention should be paid to looseness of shoulder, and the pupil should realize from the beginning that the dance involves a "body" and not a "leg" movement.

2. Correct use of arms should be taught. They should be relaxed when not in active use, and loose when used for swings, turns, rings, etc.

3. Weight of body should be used to help the dancer. There is a slight tilt in direction of movement. It is best not to emphasize this point too much as it is easily exaggerated.

4. Connection with the music should be pointed out—turning, continuity, appreciation of the tune, elementary phrasing. It is difficult to teach phrasing in a wide sense as it must always depend on the dancer's feeling for the tune, but elementary phrasing can be taught by getting the dancer to realize that the grading of the spring on a movement such as "forward and back a double" is in accord with the accent in the phrase of the music. Beginners can realize that there must be sufficient impetus at the beginning of a movement to carry the dancer to the end. This must not be confused with a jerky over-emphasized spring on the first beat.

Class Teaching

It is very important to remember that as looseness of body is essential in order to obtain the spring, the pupils must be under no nervous strain. The teacher's aim must be to get them to relax and in order to accomplish this, it is very necessary to have a pleasant friendly atmosphere in the class. For this reason, it is well to avoid individual criticism at first.

Later on this may be helpful, but should always be employed sparingly or the dancers will become self-conscious.

Demonstration

Although demonstration is often helpful and necessary, it is well to keep in mind that we do not wish our pupils to merely imitate, but to develop their own style. It is often more helpful to dance in a set in the class, than to demonstrate by oneself.

Teaching of Figures

It is well to keep in mind that the figures are not the whole dance. From the beginning, we want our pupils to dance and not be overwhelmed by the difficulty of the figures. Interest in the beautiful patterns created can be developed at the beginning, but this must not be done at the expense of the movement. Explanations should be very concise, and a great deal of help given with the memory work at first.

It is often quickest to walk, without the music, but only a short piece at a time. This should then be danced immediately.

Music

The dancers should learn at the beginning to listen to the tune while dancing. It is helpful to let them listen to the whole tune (1) before learning the dance and (2) when the dance is partly known.



From a lecture/demonstration at the Teachers Conference, Federation of American Branches of EFDS, held at the Union Theological Seminary Gymnasium, New York City, on Saturday, December 29, 1928. May Gadd's lecture is taken from a report of the conference written by Susan H. Gilman, Secretary. Other speakers in attendance were: Marjorie Barnett ("The Morris Dance"), Olive Whitworth ("Organization of Folk Dancing in Schools"), Donald Tweedy ("Folk Dance Music"), May Elliott Hobbs ("Use of the Historical Interest of the Dances in this Country"), and Lily Roberts Conant ("Ways and Means of Propaganda"). The conference was chaired by Mrs. Hobbs.

Photo: May Gadd dancing with Bob Hider, Pinewoods, 1938 (by Perdue Cleaver)