

Remembering My Mentor, Legendary Caller Ralph Sweet

by Nils Fredland



learning to call singing squares. After a few years of getting to know his voice, I was hired by CDSS to work with Ralph to bring his vast collection of square dances together in a book. That life-changing experience began in 2008, and resulted in a print representation of the entire basis for our friendship. My copy of “On the Beat with Ralph Sweet” is VERY used, and reminds me every time I pick it up of this man who continues to touch my life. When I call dances, Ralph is never far from my mind.

Ralph Sweet was born on May 17, 1929 in Norwich, CT. His interest in contra dancing was sparked early on, discovering and pouring through his mother’s copy of the book “American Country Dances” by New York educator Elizabeth Burchenal. In Ralph’s own words:

“I’d just follow these little diagrams [in the book] and I’d get these little pictures [in my mind] and I thought it would be fun. I wondered if anybody was still doing contra dancing.”

On June 20th, 2019, a small corner of social media exploded with the news that Ralph Sweet had died. He celebrated his 90th birthday just one month earlier. I wrote the following post on Facebook later that day:

“I first heard the voice of Ralph Sweet through the speakers of my car stereo probably 15 years ago. That started a love affair with the weird and charming art form of ‘singing squares’ that has only deepened over the years since. I was fortunate to develop a close friendship with Ralph through mutual interests, curiosity, and collaboration. He was a force. Passionate and funny (OMG his laugh! The best.). And what a mind! In helping him put together his book (On the Beat with Ralph Sweet -- CDSS, 2010), I often found myself thinking how remarkable it was that he could recount in such astonishing detail so many stories from his over 60 year dance calling career. Ralph Sweet changed my life. I’m a better man for having known him. What a blessing, and what a loss.”

My relationship with Ralph was very specific. He was my mentor, dance calling colleague, co-author, and friend. Our point of connection was our mutual interest in contra and square dancing. As my Facebook post suggests, I knew of Ralph starting in 2004 when I got excited about

Lacking opportunities to learn from local people who were still doing contra dancing, Ralph got swept up in the ubiquitous square dance wave at the time and didn’t look back. He took his first square dance lessons as a junior in high school (a local teen club was offering the lessons “...to keep us off the streets, I guess”). Then Ralph attended the University of Connecticut, where the 4H Club was offering square dance lessons after their meetings (“So I joined the 4H Club so I could take the square dance lessons.”). Then, like so many of us that travel more hours getting to dances than we spend actually dancing, Ralph hit the road to attend traditional square dances all over Connecticut, and up into central Massachusetts and Vermont. Singing squares were the norm at the time, and so Ralph learned to dance and call them. A brief career in the military followed graduation (...while stationed in Texas he managed to go square dancing thirteen nights in a row!) He left the service, continued to develop as a dance caller, married, started a family, bought the old Powder Mill Barn in Enfield, CT, converted it to a dance facility, and began a twenty-five year career as a Modern Western Square Dance Caller. He shifted focus and became a high school physics teacher, and at some

point became a designer and maker of high-quality fifes, Irish flutes, and whistles out of his “Sweetheart Flute” workshop. The workshop was in operation for forty-three years before closing its doors, and Ralph’s instruments are played worldwide. In all that time, he never stopped calling dances, keeping to his square dance roots while fully embracing the contra dance repertoire.

I think it’s helpful to point out that learning was never a casual thing for Ralph. If something struck his interest, he was all in. That was certainly true of his journey into dance calling:

“I got this habit of taking a notebook with me and writing down, not only the names of the dances, but usually I wrote down the directions for all the dances [the callers] called. And then, if I kept going to one dance like Hadlyme, Connecticut with [caller] Harold Gates, I finally got all the words to all the calls that he ever called, and I’d go home and type them all up. And I still have that collection and it’s really a nice collection to have of all those different callers.”

I don’t know how many notebooks Ralph filled up in seventy years of going to dances, but I know he was still writing down dance calls at the contra dances in Greenfield, MA up until 2017. If Ralph wasn’t on the dance floor, he could almost always be found sitting off to the side listening carefully to the caller and taking notes. He never stopped trying to improve. Ralph was revered by the contra dance community, and could have easily rested on his laurels; but that wasn’t his style. He was always striving to be current. His enthusiasm and love for contra dancing were backed up by scholarship and hard work. He was, and continues to be, an inspiration to me. Based on what I’ve read on social media and heard in conversations since his death, I am not alone in that feeling. Appreciation and admiration for Ralph run deep.

We have lost with Ralph Sweet’s death his fantastically unique voice. My first interactions with Ralph were as his editor, and in that role, I was increasingly frustrated with his ‘personality’ which showed up on the pages he shared with me in a way that made having a style manual almost irrelevant. He wrote as he remembered, and that reflected how he lived in the moment, with intense passion. “On the Beat with Ralph Sweet” is an important resource for the dance community, certainly, but I sometimes feel like I didn’t do justice to the fact that Ralph’s voice could be

heard in how he wrote. Recognizing that feeling is part of my process of grief. Grieving is letting go, and by letting go I can allow Ralph’s voice to come through in all of its quirky and chaotic beauty.

It’s sad to lose someone you love. Lots of people loved Ralph Sweet, and so there is sadness—but there is also a celebration in sharing memories. Healing comes from remembering, and ninety years of living gives us a lot of time to work with. Those memories will keep coming, and the more we share them with each other the more we hold each other up in the pain of loss. That’s a community! And our community is what Ralph Sweet loved. He had unfailing faith in the wonder that is the contra dance community, and he found great pleasure watching others find a home inside that same magic.

I miss him so much. I will always be able to hear his voice in my head, which comes through in my calling, which is shared with dancers across the country and beyond. Recently, I taught a group of fifteen 10-to 12-year-olds to call Ralph’s signature singing square, “*The Auctioneer*.” This amazing group of children stood up on stage at Pinewoods Camp and with astonishing skill and energy called the dance for a pavilion full of dancers of all ages. I stood in front of them with my guitar and let their voices flood me with memories of my friend who gave me so many gifts. Ralph Sweet lives on.



Above: Undated photo courtesy of Sweet family.

Opposite page: Artist rendering of Nils and Ralph performing “*The Auctioneer*” together in 2010.