

## All Join Hands

### *Dispatches from the world of community dancing*

• Shindig • Sit Squares • Solstice Swing • Urban Barn Dance • Barn Dance • Ceilidh • Chicken and Egg Dance • Community Dance • Downtown Dancin' • Contra Dance • Dances for Every Body • Dancin' in the Seats • Dancing Well • Family Dance • Farmer's Frolic • Folk Dance • Friday Fling • Hip to be Square • Hoedown • Hoolyann • International • Old Time Country Dancing • Old Time

### *Community Dance in Utah by Laraine Miner and Marian Rose*

*At a time in the not-so-distant past, community dancing was a valued and integral part of community life, not a relic to be revived or promoted as it is often seen today. Before widespread urbanization and the onslaught of consumer culture, people in smaller communities around the world danced as a form of recreation, celebration and connection. The waves of immigrants who populated North America brought with them their dancing traditions which, when combined and nurtured, created distinct regional traditions as can be found in New England, Louisiana, the American Midwest, Quebec, the maritime provinces and the Canadian prairies.*

*One such unique and fascinating dance tradition exists in Utah, where the Mormon pioneers (largely British and Scandinavian) brought their dances with them and, through the encouragement of Brigham Young and other church leaders made community dancing a vital component of everyday life.*

*Laraine Miner, a long-time CDSS member and Pourparler contributor, knows this culture intimately from the inside. She grew up in the tradition and has also been a performer, dance psychotherapist and academic researcher of Mormon pioneer dances. She is an effervescent presence on the dance floor and has a depth of knowledge of the dance form that most of us can only hope to acquire.*

*Here is her story:*

I come from a musical and dancing family and grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) at a time when dancing was a regular part of church life. My parents went to regular dances at church, and we danced a lot as teenagers – weekly dances at “Mutual,” monthly stake dances, yearly Gold and Green Balls and

dance festivals, etc. Sometimes we would get a key to the church and hold our own a private dance party.

I attended Brigham Young University where I performed and toured with the BYU International Folk Dancers a world-renowned performing group. During this time, I began to wonder why we weren't performing the

dances of my ancestors, the Mormon pioneers, since dancing was such a huge part of their lives. When I asked my grandfather about this early dance tradition, he reminisced fondly about the Varsouvienne and Waltz Quadrilles. At his suggestion, I contacted Ruth Partridge, who had played piano for those dances. As we talked, she became so excited that she jumped up, pounded out a tune on her piano, then grabbed me and whirled me around in a schottische, showing me how at one point the “whole floor would go down on one knee and up again.”

This was the beginning of my life-long passion for researching the community social dancing of my ancestors, and teaching and presenting these dances. As part of my master's research project on early Utah dances, I perused libraries and museum archives across the country and collaborated with folklorists and folk



Laraine Miner

musicians on the same path. I interviewed old-timers, musicians and callers, and, along the way, trained as a Dance/Movement therapist, which informs my day job as a social worker. In collaboration with Michael Hamblin and Utah State Folklorist Craig Miller, I collected more than 40 dances and published materials including music recordings, scores, and dance descriptions.

## History of Mormon Pioneer Dances

During the pioneer era of the mid-19th century, Utah was alive with community dancing. Everyone learned to dance, every third person was a fiddler, and you could dance almost every night of the week in the Salt Lake Valley. As colonies were being settled throughout the contiguous states of Idaho, Nevada, Wyoming, Arizona and Colorado, Brigham Young always sent a fiddler along with the craftsmen and homemakers. Community dancing served to lift the settlers' spirits and bond them together in a joyful way, easing the burden of the hard work of establishing a town.

In the 1980s when we were doing our research, community dances were still going strong in small rural towns like Oak City and Koosharem. We filmed a wedding and several festivals in small, rural hold-out communities where these dances are still a living tradition. However, even then we saw dances starting to disappear into the hearts and memories of the hometown musicians we met.

The Old-Time Utah dances that we found were mostly couple dances: Pattycake Polka, Varsouvienne, Two-steps and many different Schottisches, like the Heel-toe schottische and the Seven-step. Some of the round dances, like the Baltimore and Spat Waltz, were a combination of a waltz and a walking step. We found only two longways sets – Virginia Reel and Haste to the Wedding (aka Pop Goes the Weasel) – and one square, the Oak City Quadrille. Round dances in couples seemed the most widespread, since they require only two people and don't need a caller. We found no circle dances, except for Oh Johnny Oh and a version of Paul Jones called the Circle Two-Step.

Today there is still an amazing amount of dancing in Utah, but it is mainly performance and competition-oriented. Dance is no longer participatory or accessible to the average person. Craig Miller and I have had hopes that our field research into Old Time Utah Dances would

result in a revival of these wonderful old community dances. This revival has been happening in some parts of Utah, which is very gratifying. In the past years, I have held an Old Time Utah Dance Party series in various venues (barns, an historic church, a living history museum) and I have taught the dances to children in Utah schools and to various church groups. During this process, I've been most impressed by the way in which these dances bring people together in a celebration of collective joy. My purpose has become to create community and connection with dance, music and song—something that I feel has dropped out of our mainstream culture, where we have become so solitary and isolated. Yet, I believe that deep down inside we hunger for the “tribe”—a place where we are seen, heard, touched and cared for, a place where we can feel the oneness of moving, singing and laughing together, a place where talented musicians lift us right off our feet to express our joy. I have heard musicians say that the greatest compliment you can give them is to dance to their music.

In my day-job as a psychotherapist for children and families, I have learned that 60 percent of all children are insecurely attached to their parents. For this reason, I love seeing multi-generational families dancing together—moms dancing as one unit with their toddler; dads with a baby on their shoulders; older children dancing with their parents or grandparents. What better way for families and communities to bond than to play together by moving in synchrony to good music with good friends and family, creating a joyous sense of belonging and camaraderie.

That said, there are still barriers to creating a community dance in our modern culture. Venues are expensive, musicians expect to be paid, and dancers attend the occasional event where they dress up as a cowboy, hoot, holler for an evening and then go back to real life. Also, there is the wide-spread myth that real men don't dance.



However, there are times when that magical collective effervescence of community dancing happens, and it is these peak experiences that motivate me to keep on trying. The ideal situation is when folks in a group know each other and the musicians with a resulting exchange of energy. It helps to have a venue that is conducive for dancing and a goodly sprinkling of more experienced dancers who are willing to nurture the less experienced along. With all ages present, smaller children are more likely to join in and I've often seen older children taking the lead, pulling adults out on the floor. An intermission talent show helps too, and of course an array of yummy snacks to fuel the dancers.

I continue to feel hopeful that, under the right circumstances, through the efforts of people such as those in the Pourparler group and organizations such as CDSS and the National Folk Organization, community dancing will flourish and spread, bringing back into our mainstream culture that spirit of community that was once so vital, healthy and joyful.

*Laraine Miner has been nominated for the National Folk Organization Heritage Award to be presented in 2019 April Conference at Brigham Young University. Her publications Mormon Pioneer Dances is available through the CDSS online store at [cdss.org/vm-store/store-home/books/mormon-pioneer-dances-book-and-dvd-detail](http://cdss.org/vm-store/store-home/books/mormon-pioneer-dances-book-and-dvd-detail)*



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