

News from Canada — Remembering Cameron Stewart, Patriarch of Country Dance in Vancouver, BC

June 30, 1946 – April 21, 2018

by Jane Srivastava

Cameron Stewart and his wife Susan came to love old time musical traditions while living in Cape Breton in their hippy traveling years. They loved the playing, and they loved the dancing. When they came out west, Cameron attended the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, WA where he learned to call dances. Cameron's calling, playing, stage presence, and dance organization was inspired and mentored in those early years by Sandy Bradley and Greg and Jere Canote, (The Small Wonder String Band), Penn Fix, Frederick Park, and Sherry Nevins. Susan remembers: "The Pacific Bluegrass and Heritage Society put on contra dances in Vancouver from time to time; 1982 was the beginning of our own contra/square dances which we called Old Time Country Dances — they soon became a monthly event."

The dance always started with Penn Fix's circle mixer; children joined in for the first two dances. The sociability, the music, the sheer fun appealed to Vancouverites, a good thing as neither Cameron nor Susan was employed at the time, and music and dance provided a large part of their income.

By 1991 Marian Rose had started a second monthly Vancouver dance series at the Wise Hall, and Cameron and Susan stepped back from their organizing role to focus on their young family. Vancouver dancers continued the Stewart's dance series, and by 1995 up to 200 people attended bimonthly dances at the Capri Hall, which had a balcony where children played while parents took turns supervising. The *Vancouver Echo* quoted Cameron "It's amazing to see someone come and say 'I can't do it.' And then just try to hold them back at 11 o'clock." Cameron and Susan continued to call and play, accompanied to dances by their sons Duncan and Rory, who sold juice, Susan's butter tarts, and oatmeal cookies at each dance.

Always inclusive and encouraging, Cameron arranged 5-10-minute performances or demonstrations at the break to recognize local talent and provide a forum for other dance styles. In a bid to encourage new callers, Cameron wrote a series of essays, *Caller's Guide*, for "fledgling callers and interested others" in *Contra Comments*, the

Vancouver dance newsletter edited by June Harman. In one of these essays he shared the philosophy he clearly embodied: "Let's face it, everything we have learned we have learned from someone else. So, let's pass it on." Then Cameron expanded his community even further, calling a dance on national radio (CBC)

when, during an interview on Peter Gzowski's morning show, Peter arranged for a dance tune to be played and said "OK, Cameron, call us a dance." – and he did.



Photo of Camerson Stewart
by Susan Stewart

In 1988 Cameron and Susan, with the help of dedicated members of the growing dance community, organized Country Dance Camp, which morphed into Chehalis Contra Dance Camp, named for its location on the territory of the aboriginal Chehalis band. This too they passed on to others once it was established, though Susan stayed involved, memorably giving recipes to cook staff to provide good, strength-sustaining food to fuel dancers.

Over time, other dance events and series were established in Vancouver: the Sybaritic String Band monthly dance, and an English country dance 2-3 times a month. Summer dances at Robson Square in downtown Vancouver (organized by Nigel Peck) and Raincoast Ruckus (a February dance weekend first envisioned by Leona Axbey and initially supported by a CDSS grant) were popular in the 90's and 00's but no longer occur.

Now, 37 years after Cameron and Susan began organizing dances in Vancouver, attendance has dropped by half, but the joy factor is still high. The welcoming community Cameron established early on continues: experienced dancers dance with newcomers, all ages are welcome, there's no gender bias, and, as one young single mother recently commented "It's a safe place where I can bring my son and we can both have fun."

In addition to organizing dances, playing, and calling, Cameron had great talents as a singer /songwriter and a storyteller, performing at local storytelling events, and the Jericho Folk Club and Tipper series, often with his band Erratica. Erratica's album *We Sail on a Notion* includes Cameron singing his song "Regular Gas," which ends with the line "... I'm an average guy as you can see, there ain't much difference between you and me, we're just plain folk." Would that we could all be as "plain" as Cameron!

Cameron worked for 17 years designing signs for North and West Vancouver Municipalities and his wit garnered national attention. My favorite of his signs: "In a world where everyone is looking out for number one, who's taking care of number two? Pick up after your dogs. Thank You." He also designed a perpetual calendar, each page featuring a dance-themed woodcut.

In the past few years Cameron had successfully dealt with several health issues and a disastrous fall off his roof, applying the same dedication and hard work to returning to good health as he had to his dance, day, and side jobs. Therefore, it was a surprise to all that on April 21, 2018, after a short illness, and surrounded by friends and family, Cameron left us. At his memorial service on May 4, 2018, Cameron continued to build community: a standing-room-only crowd squeezed into a large church to say goodbye, Cameron's many instruments mute on the stage, family and friends speaking, singing, and playing tribute. Afterwards an impromptu jam began under a tree in the warm sunshine, and dancers absent from the dance halls for years reconnected with old friends and vowed to come dancing again, soon and often.

At the annual June dance/potluck, held in White Rock, BC, close to the US border to include dancers from Bellingham, WA (Vancouver's cross-border extended dance community), the band is always No Mean Feet (Bob McNevin, Michael Gix, Susan on keyboard, and Cameron on fiddle, banjo, or stand up bass). In June 2018 one chair was empty — but Cameron was in our hearts, and his memory continued to move our feet with the joy of dance.

Many thanks to June Harman and Michael Dyck who produced 13 issues of "Contra Comment," which provided much of the content of this article, to Dave Marshall and to Susan Stewart.

Jane Srivastava is a former CDSS Board member and worldwide dance gypsy who helps to organize dances in her home community of Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Contra Dance: Rainbows Over Ogontz

by Don Veino

This composition was inspired by an experience at CDSS Family Week at Ogontz. One day we had a quick passing storm come through the area which ended with a multi-rainbow arc crowning Ogontz Hall and the lake.

Formation: Becket, clockwise progression

A1 Left hand star once around, end facing neighbor across (8)

Join both hands with neighbor and half-pousette counter clockwise (ladies pushing to start), changing places with the other couple and going a little bit more, to face promenade direction (counter clockwise) in an oval around the whole set (8).

A2 Promenade with neighbor around the set (6). Ladies turn back over right shoulder WHILE gents continue forward (2) to swing next neighbor (8)

B1 Promenade back (clockwise) until all are opposite partner (8).

In long lines go forward and back. (8)

B2 Gents cross the set passing left shoulders, partner swing (16).

Alternative B parts for smoother flow and a longer partner swing:

B1 Promenade back (clockwise) until opposite partner (8),

Circle left once around (8)

B2 ... and a quarter more, partner swing

At the ends:

Wait out crossed over, and join the promenade in A2.

Style suggestion:

Depending on their preferred promenade hold, dancers could choose to facilitate the transition from the pousette in A1 to the promenade in A2 by taking crossed hands (right over left) in the pousette.