



## News from Canada—Chehalis Contra Dance Weekend

by Sally Sheedy and Jane Srivastava

### The Preamble (JS)

Vancouver Country Dance was founded in the late 1980s by Cameron and Susie Stewart; in time they also organized a residential contra dance weekend named Chehalis for its original site, Chehalis, British Columbia. In the '90s, June Harman and Michael Dyck founded Vancouver English Country Dance. As with many dance communities, ours waxes and wanes in numbers and financial stability but never lacks in joyful participation. We'd love to have you join us anytime—you can find out more about us, and when and where we dance, at <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/vcountry>, or just google Vancouver Contra Dance.

We were asked to write an article for the *CDSS News* just before this year's Chehalis Contra Dance weekend and we've decided to make the weekend the focus of this article. During the weekend I asked for volunteers to help write the article: first to volunteer was Sally Sheedy, from Bellingham, Washington. Uh oh, not a Vancouver dancer, and this article is meant

for the Canadian dance section of the *CDSS News*! But wait a minute, one of the unique things about the Vancouver dance community is the international flavor: dancers from Bellingham and Vancouver regularly travel back and forth to each other's dances, and on a larger scale travel up and down the coast for dances, balls, and dance camps. We relish being part of the Cascadia dance community. What more appropriate than that this article be written by a Bellingham dancer?

### The Weekend (SS)

This September, I attended the annual Chehalis Dance Weekend for the third time. I'm fairly sure there were more people at camp this year, and I am certain that there was more energy!\*

The drive to camp is very pretty, a harbinger of the site, set on the banks of the Chehalis River which was flowing fast and near to overflowing by the end of the very rainy weekend. Dorm rooms,

eating, dancing, and workshop space are all in one building; some attendees stay in tents or RVs on site. The parquet dance floor has doors on two sides leading to a deep, wrap-around porch. As well as providing for cross ventilation, the porch provided a gathering place for dancers to visit or play with hula hoops brought by a dancer. Many dancers ventured off the porch, despite the pouring rain, to explore beautiful paths along the Chehalis River; one dancer spent part of Saturday afternoon in a chair near the river bank, reading under a golf umbrella.

This year Chehalis hired young talent and encouraged young attendees, offering \$100 scholarships to attendees 30 years of age and under. The combined age of the two-member band Uncle Farmer was less than my age. I am more of a contemporary of the second band that played the weekend, Seattle's KGB, who, despite being a little older than UF, played their music with youthful enthusiasm and verve.\*\*

I don't know enough about music to explain how this is true: their music was very different, but both bands' music was eminently danceable. On Saturday night, each played a half-hour concert, giving us a chance to really listen to the music. Dancer Charlotte Gurney provided a palate-cleansing concert intermission with a Celtic song of unpronounceable title, and a rendition of Shenandoah, both of which brought tears to many dancers' eyes.

The callers were young, too. Maggie Jo Saylor, from Chicago, was in constant motion as she called, danced in place, or jumped into a line during a walkthrough. Her voice and her instruction were both crystal clear. Chehalis was Seattle's Michael Karcher's first weekend-long calling gig. In the five years he has been calling he has amassed a sizable inventory of interesting dances. His analytical mind draws him to consider the geometry of the dances and moves him to attend to all aspects of what makes a great evening of dance.

I attended several workshops. First I listened to Uncle Farmer in their Variations, Accompaniment, Improvisation workshop. They played the same tune several times in different ways, demonstrating a variety of rhythms and phrasing. Later, KGB, in their Putting Together a Good Set List for Dances workshop shared some of their tune lists, organized by type (reels and jigs), or by feel (bouncy or smooth). I also took part in Michael Karcher's I'm a Contra Dance Caller, Ask Me Anything session. He talked about the flow of energy through the course of an evening, when you want the highest energy sets, and what to do before and after the break.

With some trepidation, I attended Maggie Jo's Improv, Comedy, and Theatre Games workshop. It turned out to be a very safe space—and we all enjoyed

ice-breaking and trust-building games together. We started in a circle throwing an imaginary ball around and across to each other, complete with sound effects. In similar fashion, we said our names in what started as a random sequence. It was in effect a memory test. We then created a different sequence with a different set of words, and then tried to keep the two different sequences going at the same time. Tricky, and fun!

The campers took an active part in making camp special. I took part in the clothing exchange, taking home a glitzy top and a chenille jacket. In turn, having recently done a seasonal shift in my closet, I contributed a lot of shirts to the exchange, and enjoyed seeing some of them on their new owners. They looked good!

At the break on Friday night, two "bullyboys" (JD Erskine and Brian Robertson) led us in singing sea shanties, with great gusto! The clear booming voices, telling tales of life on the sea, made me feel as though we were rolling on the briny deep; I could almost hear the waves serving as percussion. (Though maybe that was just the rain on the roof!)

Merilee Jones, who must have a pitch-pipe in her head, led a rounds workshop. We learned multiple parts for about ten different rounds. Most were new to me, and they all were beautiful. Sometimes, in order to hear one another better, we moved around the room in circles as we sang the separate parts—it had an amazing effect on the sound.

Lastly, I'd like to tell you about some of the conversations I had during the weekend. I overheard the sound technician, for whom contra was somewhat new, ask about the difference between square dancing and contra dancing. One of the dancers suggested that square dancing is more about the choreography, the caller, and the square. Contra is more about the music and the flow and the entire room of dancers. Obviously, these distinctions could be the beginning of a long conversation!

One of the younger dancers said that the youth scholarship had made it possible for him to attend, and the music was fantastic, though he mostly listened; he appreciated the fact that there was no pressure to dance—he could lounge near the dance floor on comfy cushions, read, and still enjoy the music. Though he was disappointed there were not more young folks, he admitted that dancing with older folks, too, was part of what made contra dancing special.

Another camper noted that contra dance is an activity that single people can do, as partners change from dance to dance, and the culture is very inclusive. Yet another commented that live music is a big part of what makes contra dance special. And a dancer who has been dancing for many years

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to the World, Doris Humphrey's *Square Dances*, Eugene Loring's *Billy the Kid*, and Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*, as well as her other smaller productions, such as *Hell on Wheels* and various solos, show a clear and deep understanding of the dances of the people, and themselves gain in reality because they are built on this sure foundation. The folk dancer who sees them is awakened to a new appreciation of the eternal vitality of the country dance, and an increased understanding that its qualities are in no way dependent on costume, period, or a particular style, but rather that rigid insistence on a static preservation will tend to destroy them, and that, so long as the foundations are true—and on this depends the truth of the opening statement—tradition will surely be more truly preserved by allowing each generation to recreate the dances in its own terms.

*May Gadd (1890-1979), CDSS's longtime director, was an expert on English and Anglo-American folk dance. Agnes De Mille consulted with her on Rodeo as well as on De Mille's choreography in Brigadoon and Oklahoma.*

**Web extra!** A brief clip of the Colorado Ballet performing the Hoedown section of *Rodeo*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKChyxd9Mn>.



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said appreciatively that there were many good-looking “older” women at camp. Though this last was said tongue-in-cheek, it was true, and I’m sure that frequent dancing is responsible!

**The Postscript (JS)**

VCD and VECD are both proud affiliates of CDSS, which has supported us in the past with financial backing (a promise to cover half of any loss up to a designated amount) for English and contra workshops, and for the Raincoast Ruckus contra dance weekend when it was first proposed. This year, Chehalis received financial backing and a CDSS Outreach grant of \$200 to underwrite two youth scholarships. The grant was instrumental in giving us the confidence to move ahead with our plan to offer youth scholarships to all who asked. The good news is that we actually made a profit this year, and were pleased to return the grant to the CDSS Outreach Fund to be recycled to support another dance or song endeavor.

\* Seventeen percent more came in 2015 than in 2014. About half the dancers/musicians came from the United States: Texas, the East Coast, Alaska, and all points in between. Canadian dancers came from BC (including a large contingent from Vancouver Island) and Alberta.

\*\* Uncle Farmer is Ben Schreiber, Michael Sokolovsky; KGB is Julie King, Claude Ginsberg, Dave Bartley

“News from Canada” features news about Canadian events and groups. Ideas for articles should be sent to Bev Bernbaum, [wturnip@sympatico.ca](mailto:wturnip@sympatico.ca), or to Rosemary Lach, [rosemaryklach@shaw.ca](mailto:rosemaryklach@shaw.ca).

**Web extras!**

- Sunday afternoon contra video by Lisa Siddons: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDwOIWgJbbc&feature=youtu.be>
- Dance video by Doug Butler: <http://photography.doug-butler.com/chehalis/h590d314d#h5934eea3>
- Singing video by Doug Butler: <http://photography.doug-butler.com/chehalis/h5934ef17#h5934ef17>
- Sunday afternoon waltz video by Lisa Siddons: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUSHeVnzS2g&feature=youtu.be>



Chehalis Dance Camp (Doug Butler)