

## Play Parties – First Cousins to Contra Dancing When Fiddle Music And Dancing Were “Of The Devil”

By Marielon Ratliff, Assistant Professor of Music, Winthrop University, Rockhill, SC

Play-parties are a uniquely American phenomena. More than just a singing game and yet not meeting the requirements to be termed a “dance,” the play-party could be said to be a hybrid form, exhibiting characteristics of both games and dances. According to Mary Jeannette Howle, who writes about them in the March, 1997 issue of the *Music Educators Journal*, play-parties were a main form of entertainment in rural America during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. All kinds of people— young and old, rich and poor, male and female— enjoyed the opportunity to experience the singing, rhythmic movement and social interaction of the play-party.

Play-parties came about as a result of the prevalent religious bias against dancing and fiddle music. The American frontier communities were isolated and had to create their own entertainment. House-raising and other events were often enlivened by breaks where people would participate in play-parties. Other times, special evening get-togethers would be planned for the specific purpose of engaging in play-parties. Often, light refreshments were served.

Basically, a play-party is a folksong which is sung a cappella; no instrumental accompaniment is allowed or needed. Participants clap to the beat and perform movements which reflect various aspects of the text. Certain movements are often reminiscent of the forbidden square dance movements which were considered by many of the early settlers to be wicked and dangerous. Parents would not hear of their youngsters attending a barn dance, where folks were dancing to that wicked fiddle music, nor would they themselves support such an event. However, play-parties were considered harmless fun for all ages. The elements of the square dance, such as “peeling the orange”, the use of the square formation, making a star and do-si-so, which sometimes crept into the movements of play-parties, were tolerated, maybe because the adults knew so little about the specifics of the square dance that these movements were not even recognized for what they were! Also, the absence of fiddle music or accompaniment as well as the innocence of the texts being sung were other contributing factors to the acceptance of these movements borrowed from the square dance.

Usually, there are also elements of the singing games found in the play-parties, where certain ideas inherent in the text of the songs are acted out or pantomimed. One of the fascinating things about play-parties is to see how the movements and formations adapted for the particular songs reflect the text. For example, in the play-party, *Jolly Miller*, two double circles represent two mill wheels turning to grind the corn. The miller walks around his mill wheels surveying his bounty, as the people in the two circles each walk in contrasting directions (one circle moving clock-wise, the other moving in a counter-clockwise direction). In the African American play-party, *Circle 'Round the Zero*, the participants make a single circle, which represents the zero. The person who is “it” walks around the zero, circling it, just as the text says. In *Needles Eye*, the singers form a single circle which represents a single thread. Two people hold hands and form an arch. Those in the circle, holding hands, pass under the arch, representing a thread going through the eye of a needle.

Sometimes, the motions of a play-party allowed people to get all tangled up together with their arms around each other. An example of this is *Draw A Bucket of Water*, where the participants are placed in a square formation in groups of four. Each partner clasps hands and the square space thus resulting from the two sets of clasped hands is the “well” referred to in the song. The singers mimic drawing a bucket of water from the well, and, as the song progresses, they end up with their arms all around each other in a tight huddle. Thus, they are representing the part of the text that says, “four in a sugar bowl.” In play-parties like this one, the young people had a chance to get close to each other in a way that was accepted by their parents; after all, this was simply a “play-party” and not one of those formal, forbidden dances.

There are literally hundreds of play-parties still being sung and played today in classrooms and communities throughout the country. They are historically interesting, and educational because of the various music and social concepts which can be taught with them. If you ever have an opportunity to learn play-parties, go for it and enjoy! They are great!



# Getting To Know You – Getting To Know All About You

## Profiles of Two Officers

**Mark Mohon** is a software engineer and married to Kimberly Hart. They have a 10 pound miniature poodle, Charlie, who thinks he is an only child, a 20 pound cat, Dude, who is not bothered by much and Gypsy, another cat that hates Charlie. Mark's hobbies include dancing, stained glass and hiking (good that he lives on Monte Sano).

He started dancing at the Burritt at least 10 years ago. Mark said he was invited to dances for a couple of years before he ever made it to one. Imagining himself in a country-western outfit and having been traumatized by grade school square dancing made him reluctant to come. But, he enjoyed it from the start. The atmosphere at Burritt was friendly and unpretentious, and at that time, you just dropped your money in the box at the front door. "I still enjoy the playful atmosphere and being comfortable with people I have just met," says Mark.

"Although I have driven as far as West Virginia and Florida to dance, my work travel has allowed me to dance in Boston, Phoenix, and Seattle," concludes Mark.



How many engineers does it take to decorate fake trees? (Two .. Mark & Bryan!)

**Bryan Walls** is another engineer/computer geek. He's the only person we know who has decorated parts of his house using compact Macs to create unique bookshelves.

After dancing for many years – beginning in 1988 - he met his lovely wife, Diane, at an Atlanta Dance Weekend. They are well known for offering their home as a "party house" after big dances or as a place for gathering to play games and share delicious food.

Bryan says that when he first started dancing Huntsville dances were held in the old church house at the Burritt Museum and he felt like he was right at home. He says, "Connecting with people is still what I enjoy most about contra dancing." He has traveled to numerous dance weekends in the southeast and has also been to a dance week in the Galapagos Islands and another in Guatemala. He enjoys Cajun/Zydeco, swing and English Country dancing as well as contra dancing.

## Blue Moon 2005



Left to right: Nancy Evans greets dancers at the registration table. Doug Roth & Jane Norrell pause to reflect upon those perfect contra corners... David Kaynor, Naomi Morse & Elvie Miller had us all dancing up a storm! Chuck Weber's extensive experience with trees qualifies him as our expert banner hanger. Rueven Anaf-Shalom, Shelly Vann, Vicki Herndon & Doug Roth still dancing at the After Dance party. Dedicated sound technicians Stevie Nix & Pat Camp assessing the room.

# Huntsville Calendar

Huntsville dances are the 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturdays of each month in the gym at Faith Presbyterian Church, 5003 Whitesburg Dr., South, in Huntsville (corner of Whitesburg & Airport Rd.). Beginners' Workshop at 7:00 PM then the regular dance is from 7:30 – 10:30 PM. Admission is \$7 (\$6 for members), \$4 for teens, free for ages 12 & under. Remember to bring comfortable, non-scuffing shoes for dancing. Bring someone new to a dance this month!  
 Contact Bryan Walls (256) 837-0656 or email: [bwalls@pobox.com](mailto:bwalls@pobox.com) or visit <http://secontra.com/BACDS.html> for more info.

Date	Caller	Band
July 2	Jane Ewing	Nashville Weather
July 16	Vicki Herndon	Chip Gulbro & Steve Nix
August 6	Chrissy Davis-Camp	Jim & Inge Wood, Tabitha Mowen
August 20	TBA	TBA
September 3	Jane Ewing	Chuck & Katrina
September 17	Harry Delugah	Chip Gulbro & Steve Nix



## Area Dance Gypsy Calendar

DATE	LOCATION	CALLER	BAND
July 1	Nashville	Chrissy Davis-Camp	Wingates
July 2	Chattanooga	TBA	Fred Park Family Reunion
July 8	Nashville	Susan Kevra	Eric Merrill, Abigail Washburn & Russ Barenberg
July 9	Birmingham	Jane Ewing	Carter's Little Pills
July 15	Nashville	John Sharlet	Kaleidoscope (formerly Tom, Kat & Fiddle)
July 22	Nashville	Jane Ewing	TBA
July 22	Sewanee	Eddie Doss	Jim & Inge Wood with Tabitha on piano
July 23	Chattanooga	TBA	Ed Baggott & Elsie Peterson
July 29	Nashville	Ed Wilkinson	Wingates
Aug 5	Nashville	Chrissy Davis-Camp	Nashville Weather
Aug 12	Nashville	Susan Kevra	Russ Barenberg, Fred Carpenter & Brian Christianson
Aug 19	Nashville	Eddie Doss	Playin' Possum
Aug 20	Nashville – FREE Centennial Park	Susan Kevra	Russ Barenberg, Fred Carpenter & Brian Christinson
Aug 26	Nashville	Kendal Broadie	Ed Baggot & Elsie Peterson

**FoOTMaD (Birmingham)** dances 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturdays at the YMCA, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave & 23<sup>rd</sup> St, 7:30 PM <http://www.bamalong.com/bed.him>  
**CTDS (Chattanooga)** dances 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Saturdays at All Saints Academy, 310 E. 8<sup>th</sup> St., downtown; 8:00 PM. Contact Steve at (706)937-4991, Claire & Bryant at (423)876-7359 or <http://contranooga.org>  
**Misty Mountain Dancers (Sewanee, TN)** dances at 8:00 PM at the Legion Hall in Sewanee, TN. Call (931) 598-0814  
**NCD (Nashville)** dances almost every Friday at 8:00 PM at Woodbine Community Center, Burbank & Oriel. Contact Chrissy at (615)210-6808 or John, email: [DanceFools@aol.com](mailto:DanceFools@aol.com) or <http://dancenashville.org/>

### A Bit Farther Away, But Well Worth The Travel

**CCD (Atlanta)** dances on Fridays & alternate Tuesdays. <http://contradance.org>  
**KCD (Knoxville)** dances every Monday. <http://www.kornet.org/kcd/>  
**MCD (Memphis)** dances on the 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Fridays. <http://hometown.aol.com/horse lovers/index.html>  
**Sautee Community Dances (N. GA)** once a month from Sept – May. <http://sauteecontra.home.mindspring.com/>

### Upcoming Dance Weekends

**Mentone 500** is Birmingham's weekend in Mentone, AL. Aug 19-21. <http://banalong.com/2005weekend.hrm>  
**Chattaboogie** is Chattanooga's 1<sup>st</sup> ever dance weekend. Sept 23-25. <http://chattaboogie.com/>

## New NACDS Officers

New officers were officially elected at the June 18 dance. These folks will be working hard to lend guidance to the dance group. Your input is always appreciated, so send suggestions to any officers at any time.

President	Mark Mohon
President-Elect	Steve Whitmore
Secretary	Shelly Vann
Treasurer	Bryan Walls
Producer	Doug Roth
Property Custodian	Steve Nix
Newsletter Editor	Linda McAllister
Membership	Beth Riggs

As newsletter editor, I am particularly interested in your input. If you have any ideas that will help make our communication interesting and informative, submit your ideas, pictures and/or articles to me at any time. *Linda*

## Yahoo Group Reminder

To find out about dance gypsy opportunities and discuss dance related issues, join our yahoo group at:  
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NACDScontraCummunity/>



## Members/Friends Directory Being Updated

NACDS prints a directory periodically to help us keep in touch with each other. It's time to update that directory.

Please send your name, address, phone number and email address to me at [ibbeth\\_r@yahoo.com](mailto:ibbeth_r@yahoo.com).

Remember, you don't have to be a member to have your name listed in the directory. (But, know that we would love to have you become a member, when you're ready.)

Thanks for your help in getting this new directory out promptly and accurately. *Beth*

**NACDS**  
North Alabama  
Country Dance Society

4304 Holmes Ave. NW  
Huntsville, AL 35816  
Address correction requested

**Please Join Us!** Send just \$10 for one, or \$15 per family, to the address above.  
**Or Renew Your Membership!** Make checks payable to NACDS. (mailing label shows renewal date)  
Members receive monthly newsletter, 2 guest passes, and a \$1 DISCOUNT to each regular dance!

# Yes!

## There is a dance July 2

Jane Ewing – Caller, Nashville Weather – Band

Enjoy a fun evening of aerobic exercise then you will not have to feel guilty about eating all that 4<sup>th</sup> of July barbeque and homemade ice cream.