

~ ~ The History of Round Dancing ~ ~

The beginning of round dancing, like that of square dancing, has its roots in antiquity. Quite literally, dance has been a part of human life since before recorded history. Examples of prehistoric cave paintings, which have been found, seem to indicate dancing. Throughout most of history, dancing was performed by individuals and meant to celebrate, help prepare for certain activities such as hunting or war, but mostly to entertain others. Couple dancing is a relatively recent development with its roots in the sixteenth century. Closed position dancing is of even more recent origin dating only to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most of what we know today stems from the "Waltz", originated in Germany and developed primarily in France, the "Contredanse", also from France, the "Cotillion" and finally the "Quadrille", which is credited with being one of the roots of our modern square dance. Foxtrots, two-steps and swing are exclusively American. Many of the Latin dances we currently enjoy were greatly modified, by early twentieth century dancemasters, from their original versions.

Our modern round dance developed from the pioneer days along with square dancing. In order to not have to stop dancing, the early dancers would, between tips, dance such things as the early, simplified waltzes, polkas, schottisches and other dances which have been lost in history. Over the years, the inclusion of the more modern ballroom rhythms and figures were introduced, culminating in our modern round dance which has reached the point of being recognized as a dance form all its own.

As square dancing became more complicated with more and more complex figures added, so did round dancing. Routines became more precise, and there were a growing number of them. One of the major changes in round dancing was the addition of the Latin rhythms - cha-cha, tango, rumba, etc. This addition opened up a whole new area of teaching/learning/challenge. Later on, some of the English ballroom steps began to find their way into round dance routines, and there was greater attention to body and head position. As in square dancing, not all dancers were pleased with or accepted some of the changes. Many were quite content with the easy two steps and waltzes. These changes inevitably led to the development of "levels" of round dancing - not to indicate that one level of dancer might be better than another level of dancer, but to provide a means of identification and communication. Today, you will find round dances generally divided into four groups: Easy Level, Square Dance Level, Intermediate (which has three sub-divisions), and Advanced. The classification is based upon the steps in the dance, the timing and timing changes, positions and sequence.

The increasing complexity of round dancing has had a major impact upon the total square dance picture in at least two aspects. First, there has been a tendency to separate squares and rounds, particularly at the higher levels of both. The growth of clubs devoted wholly to round dancing has been tremendous. At major festivals, one finds separate halls for rounds. In fact, most states have a separate round dance festival. There is even a national round dance festival. Some old timers find this tendency to separate squares and rounds unfortunate, since they are branches of the same tree. The other area of impact has been in cueing. With the increasing complexity of the dances and the large number of dances used, many dancers found that they were neither interested in nor able to memorize that much material. They began to ask for help from the round dance leader to prompt them or cue them through the routine of the dances. Round dance teachers and leaders soon found that a major part of their job was becoming the cuer of dances. They also discovered that cueing produced a much larger circle of dancers on the floor. Some areas of the country opposed cueing for a long time, feeling that dancers should learn the dances and be able to dance them only to the music, as they had done in the past. However, volume and complexity have overcome most of the "purists", and the cueing of round dances is almost a foregone conclusion around the world of square dancing.

Judy Pottinger 2005