

## ~ ~ The History of Square Dancing ~ ~

Square dancing has been our "official national folk dance" since President Reagan signed an act of Congress in 1982. Most Americans, however would likely never be caught dead square dancing. "Too embarrassing," they might say. Such is generally true of folk customs -- they are not popular. Thus, it remains a dance that few have really tried, particularly as adults. But dedicated square dancers just ignore the negative quips and enthusiastically continue with their Do-si-doe's, Spin Chain the Gears, and Ferris Wheels.

The origins of square dancing are complex and extensive. The square dance is uniquely American. Early in this century, as America urbanized, square dancing nearly died out. The dance got left behind and was almost forgotten. Henry Ford had a major impact in its revival. He extolled the virtues of square dancing in an attempt to foster a dance form that would counteract what he considered to be the evils of jazz. In 1923 Henry Ford engaged the full-time services of square dance caller Benjamin Lovett. Ford brought Lovett to Dearborn, MI where he remained for twenty-six years. At Ford's expense dancing instructors were invited to Dearborn to receive instruction. Ford sponsored a dance program for the Dearborn public schools, and soon Mr. Ford was sponsoring square dance programs in many other schools. Square dancing was also brought to numerous college and university campuses at Mr. Ford's expense. Ford sponsored a Sunday radio program that was broadcast nationwide. Over the radio Lovett would call dances that had been printed in the newspaper the previous week. Lovett maintained a "staff" of twelve to fourteen callers, all maintained by Mr. Ford's generosity. Eventually Henry Ford had a new, large dance hall constructed at Greenfield Village to contain the increasing numbers of dancers. Ford's good friend Thomas Edison began to produce 78 RPM square dance records under his Edison label. Old fashioned square dancing became the rage.

Folk dancing also received a major boost in the 1920's when the New York City public schools, the first major school system to do so, made folk dancing a required activity. But Lloyd "Pappy" Shaw should received primary credit for square dancing's modern revival. Shaw was superintendent of the Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado during the 1930's. Shaw shared his enthusiasm with his students and offered summer classes for dancers, callers, and national folk dance leaders. Returning to their respective homes and communities, the square dance revival began. Shaw's enthusiasm could not be contained in Colorado. In 1938, he organized a student demonstration team which performed exhibition dances in Los Angeles, Boston, New York and New Orleans. Thus, a lively group of high school students were largely responsible for the reintroduction of square dancing to the American public!

Originally, square dances had a caller in each square, instead of a single caller for the entire hall. That was the only way to hear the calls over the music if the group was very large. Improved public address systems, record players, microphones, and special square dance recordings have allowed for larger, better organized dances. Square dancing expanded rapidly after 1939. The dance especially expanded in the decade following W.W.II. Many American GIs had been introduced to square dancing at USO cantinas. After the war ended, large numbers of them turned to square dancing in pursuit of wholesome recreational activity. With "Pappy" Shaw in Colorado, and the impact of the returning GIs focusing on California, these two states led the development and evolution of modern square dancing.

Today, there are thousands of square dance clubs located in nearly every community of America. Dancers keep in touch and learn of current happenings through a multitude of flyers, newsletters and directories. More recently, square dancing has benefited from transportation improvements. Better highways and more dependable automobiles allow dancers to travel easily between communities, Visiting other clubs has become a major aspect. Square dancing is an excellent example of an authentic American folk custom. Its rural origins are vague, and its development and diffusion are difficult to trace. Like all folk customs, it is not popular, even among Americans, yet those who enjoy it are enthusiastic in their participation. At bottom, it remains a solid and enduring piece of American folk tradition. As dancers themselves are fond of saying, "Square dancing is friendship set to music."