

# The downsizing of Square Dancing

By George N. Smith

Where have all the dancers gone? Sounds like the lyrics from a song, does it not?

There is a saying that says "We have found the enemy and the enemy is us."

I think that cliché applies to our square dance activity.

## INTRODUCTION

Hi! My name is George Smith with an "N" in the middle. I started square dancing in 1938 when I was in the 5th grade at Stevens Elementary school at 12th and Columbine Street, Denver, Colorado. Chet Preisser was our leader. It was a cotillion type of group that danced two Fridays a month at the Greenleaf Lodge near 3rd and Fillmore. (I'm not sure of the name of the building or the exact location. — can anybody help me?)

I began calling square dances while attending Colorado A&M at Ft Collins, Colo. in 1948. I was a member of the Aggie Haylofters. I also called square dances for Bob Swerer's band, the Sons of the Rockies as they toured around the area.

The Aggie Haylofters had their 50th Anniversary reunion April 4, 1998 at the Lory Student Center ballroom.

In growing up I conflicted with my peers in that I played sports and also liked to dance. From our home at 7<sup>th</sup> and Saint Paul Street I would ride my one-speed Iver Johnson bicycle, with big tires, to 23<sup>rd</sup> and Fairfax Street for a once-a-week dance lesson. Three times a week I would ride my bike to City Park to practice/play Young American League football/baseball for the Denver Athletic Club (DAC). Their designated field was near the Museum of Natural History. There is no direction to the above summary other than to establish the fact that I have been part of the Western square dance world almost from what is considered its beginning, when Lloyd Shaw revived the activity in the late 30's and early 40's. My opinions and observations that follow therefore may have some validity and weight bearing qualities vs. some newer dancers who just got on the square dance float in the parade.

As an aside, I had the pleasure of meeting Lloyd Shaw in Ft Collins in the late 40's when he was the M.C. at one of the Aggie Haylofters festivals. What a dynamic man he was - and what a rich, resonant speaking voice he had. But I digress, so back to the subject. Where have all the dancers gone?

## **THE PIPELINE**

For many years now, our square dance activity has been on the decline. "No big deal," you say. You are having fun and the numbers don't affect you. And besides, all activities have an ebb and flow to them, and square dancing is just on an ebb. I don't think so.

People enjoy people and people like to tell others when they have found a good thing—a good restaurant, a good shop, a place of business or a fun thing to try. Square dancing was like that a few years back. Square Dancing was fun and you told your friends about it. Your friends joined in the square dance activity and shared your enthusiasm and they in turn told others and lo and behold a pipeline of free advertising developed. Square dancing flourished.

Today, the pipeline has lots of breaks in it. Why? Because no longer is it a given that square dancing is fun. It's fun for the dwindling few, but it is not fun for the masses like it once was, resulting in lots of drop outs.

There are several legitimate reasons for dropping out. Health, family obligations, changes in work schedules, etc. When a drop out is prompted due to a negative reason, a break or flaw in the pipeline of advertising occurs that can never be repaired. As a result a whole line of potential dancers is lost.

Square Dancing is a people activity. It is also a team activity. Your team at a given moment has eight members and if your team does what the caller asks you to do, it is a lot of fun - hence you become an ambassador for square dancing and that is how the activity stays alive - by word of mouth.

Do you think it pays to advertise? Not with money - it doesn't. Money spent to promote square dancing on TV, radio and newspaper is a waste. It isn't cost effective. Do you think that a square dance exhibition at a mall or a TV appearance by some group brings in new dancers? Negative. I guarantee you that no amount of promotion money thrown at advertising campaigns on TV, radio, newspapers, etc., will keep square dancing alive. Money isn't the answer - and our leaders can't see that. Only word of mouth advertising will work. But, for the sake of this article, let's say that it did work and we had a whole room full of new dancers. Ah, yes, now we are home free - our prayers have been answered. Want to bet?

The emphasis is always on new dancers. How many new dancers are in your class? How many new dancers are at the beginner's hoe-down? How many new dancers are at the Fun, Friendship and Frolic? I believe our associations, both local and national, our leaders, both local and national, approach the square dance population problem from the wrong end of the hose. The main problem to solve is not the drop-in-rate, i.e., new dancers but rather the drop-out-rate caused by negative dance experiences which in turn cause damage to the pipeline of advertising.

When do negative dance experiences occur? How can they be corrected? Can they be corrected?

Square dancing in some form is here to stay. It is a fun escape from the pressures of life. It is a good clean form of recreation done with a quality segment of our population. However, square dancing is going through an evolution process and it may never be the passion for as many people as it once was. You can't stop evolution but you can influence it with an attitude change. I believe the callers, not the dancers, need to establish and enforce the attitude change.

### **ATTITUDE CHANGE IS NEEDED**

There are two major components in square dancing. You need pupils and you need someone to teach them to dance. There are good teachers and there are not so good teachers, resulting in good dancers and not-so-good dancers. Nobody can argue that there isn't a correlation between teachers and the dancers they produce. However, there is no correlation between the

number of years someone has called/taught or danced versus the "ability" of said caller, teacher or dancer. A 50-year leader is not necessarily better than a 20-year leader and a 20-year dancer is not necessarily a better dancer than a two-year dancer. The number of years of service isn't as important as the quality of the product. It is my opinion that the quality of our product, square dancing, has eroded severely, resulting in the loss of many dancers and hence their pipeline of friends.

How do you stop the erosion? With an attitude change. You put (the ability to) "dance" back into the square dance. Our present form of square dancing more often resembles a rat race rather than anything that looks like smooth movement, i.e., eight people doing whatever they are doing with grace and dignity in time to the music.

To Dance is to move in a controlled fashion to the beat of the music.

Square dance footwork is about as simple as it gets - take one weight change with each beat of music. A good teacher stresses dancing to the beat of the music. A good dancer tries to move to the beat of the music. Each square dance basic in our dictionary has a specific number of weight changes assigned to it. The caller should know how many weight changes are required and allow the dancers the correct number of beats of music to execute the call.

Sounds simple to me.

Apparently it isn't simple because too often the caller doesn't allow the dancer the allotted time to execute the movement. This results in the dancer being forced to disregard moving to the beat of the music to be in the proper place for the next call. This procedure is known as Clip timing and it results in a rat race style of dancing which in turn helps to take Dance out of square dance.

### **RECORD COMPANIES HELP THE RAT RACE**

Many of our high-powered national traveling callers who come through town occasionally, and the callers who produce and/or put their voice on singing calls are guilty of clip timing. I refer

to it as “calling over the speed limit.” This results in a trickle down effect that greatly contributes to the overall problem.

How so, you ask?

The recording artists that produce the singing call records that our industry uses, have a huge and vital influence on how our dancers dance and hence they play a large part in the continued erosion of our dance quality. Local callers (leaders) buy singing call records of songs they like and think they can use. Local callers too often deem the choreography on a given record to be accurate, i.e., the number of beats of music allotted to do the moves correctly since (1) the record is a commercial square dance product and (2) it is recorded by a big named caller. Therefore the local callers, more times than not, perpetuate what they hear on those records and far too often the choreography on those records is clip timed.

Several times I have done a clinic on timing for our Denver Area Square and Round Dance Association. It was very disconcerting to see just how easy it was to find clip timing done on good records by good callers. Local callers need to challenge each singing call they do as to its accuracy and not accept the choreography as is.

So how do we get new prospects?

## **LET’S RECRUIT**

We have a party. Have you ever heard of a Tupperware party or an Am-Way party? I bet you have—and I bet you didn’t hear about it on the radio or TV. You heard about it by word of mouth.

So, lets have a square dance party. Actually there are square dance parties happening all the time. They are called “One night stands” Square dance parties are all over the place. Churches, service groups, birthday parties, anniversaries, weddings, neighborhood parties—its endless. Lots of people have parties at which they square dance.

To me, a square dance party is the bottom step or primary step on our stairway to square dance success. The 2nd step is group lessons. The 3rd step is what happens after lessons when students try to dance in the real world. The 4th step is joining a Club. The 5th step is to still be dancing one year after classes are finished. The 6th step is to not get burned out. Find a level that is comfortable and strive to be a smooth, reliable dancer at that level. The 7th step is to be a booster for square dancing and help keep the pipeline of verbal advertising intact. When you run out of friends to tell about square dancing then find people who are not your friends and work square dance talk into your conversation. Every happy square dancer needs to promote and recruit even after you have run out of friends.

Lets go back to step #1. The square dance party. The caller for the “one-night stand” party has one goal and that is to see that those people have a good time. If they have a good time, he might get another job from it, i.e., (word of mouth advertising like in square dance recruiting.)

The odds are that those people did have a good time because it’s hard not to have a good time. It’s almost fool proof. Any caller, be he seasoned or a rookie or somewhere between, will show those people a good time. On a scale of 1 to 10 they won’t know how much fun they had, but they had fun.

The fun is inevitable but the degree of fun is not. The group of people for the most part knew nothing to start with but they all learned something new together. They laughed and interacted as a group and it was fun. No peer pressure.

A seasoned caller would have scored higher on the fun chart from 1 to 10 than a rookie caller. Nevertheless, it wouldn’t matter since it was the “first step”—an introductory to square dancing.

Where it does matter is where these new people go for step #2, i.e., lessons.

Scenario #1: You have a group of people who think they want to learn to square dance and they have a seasoned leader to teach them.

Scenario #2: You have another group of people who think they want to learn to square dance and they have a rookie leader to teach them.

Is it likely that both classes will graduate with equal dancing ability? I think your answer would probably be “no.”

The only thing those two groups will have in common at the end of their lessons is a diploma that says “Welcome to the world of square dancing.” Are they now able to do a good job dancing in the outside world with “experienced dancers?” Are they ready for step #3? Probably not, and it is at this juncture that far too many dancers decide not to go on to step #4. Here’s where we lose people through a negative experience. And, we lose their friends too.

It is at this phase of our activity that we, as leaders, need to be concerned. It’s not how many new dancers we have in class, but how many can we get through step #3.

As a footnote I need to mention a weak spot on the caller’s side as we try to develop good leaders. You don’t need a license to call square dances and you don’t need a license to teach. How does one get started as a caller? The caller associations suggests you get four or five couples together in the basement, garage, or rec. room and teach them to dance as a trade off while you learn to call and teach. To me there is something wrong with that picture.

Step #3 is without question the most critical and fragile time in a new dancers life. It is at this phase when we lose a staggering percentage of dancers to the ranks of dropouts. They gave it a try but decided not to go on. What’s wrong? Step #3 must be solved or else our square dance activity will continue its demise and seek its own level for survival’s sake; a level that needs no leadership to sustain itself. Sort of like horseshoes. You don’t need leadership to play horseshoes. But, there will always be horseshoes as a recreation. There will always be square dancing, with or without leadership, as a recreation.

It is no wonder we lose people at Step #3. Look at the culture shock that awaits new dancers. It’s like boot camp. It’s like going from grade school to college, skipping middle school & high school. We have callers of unequal ability “graduating” dancers of unequal ability making the playing field uneven to start with. The new dancer then goes to his or her first dance after lessons are over to try out the new found skills. Zappo!

What they find is more like an obstacle course rather than a dance at their level or a little above where they can gain some proficiency and confidence. They get clobbered. They have a negative experience and drop out resulting in a break in the advertising pipeline that connects them with their friends. Unless our leaders address and solve the clobbering that goes on at Step #3 any money spent on advertising is money down the drain.

## THE ANSWER

Ok, smart guy. What's the solution? The callers' association or the council or both together or whatever group runs a given area needs an ongoing new dancer program for new dancers only. It should be at a constant location or two. Area callers would agree to call for a minimum fee or none at all—depending on the take at the door or maybe at the end of the season the surplus could be dispersed. The new dancers would have been issued a badge from the callers or the council or both, depending on the sponsoring group at graduation time. The badge would allow the new dancer to attend the new dancer dances for the going rate. "Experienced" dancers would not be allowed to get in unless they agreed to dance at the new dancer level. The dances would be for new dancers to gain confidence. It would not be for "experienced" dancers to show off all the junk moves that can be done to help disrupt the square. The cutesy moves that take "dance" out of square dance, the bumps and grinds and roughness that only adds to the frustration of the new dancer.

We need to let the new dancer develop. We rush them along too fast. We don't let them learn to enjoy dancing to the beat of the music. When they get out of class, they are hit with all the junk that isn't in the book—all the slang dance moves that people have "fun" doing at the expense of some fragile new dancer.

If a caller teaches his class to dance by "the book" then his dancers soon learn there is a lot of stuff being done that he didn't teach them.

If a caller teaches his class all the junk that they will find when they graduate then he didn't teach them to "dance." He taught moves that can't be done to the beat of the music.



“Beginner hoe-downs” that some clubs offer don’t work for several reasons: (1) other clubs’ and/or leaders are unwilling to send their dancers for fear of losing them. (2) The dance is seldom at the new dancers level of comfort and every other tip or every third tip is a true beginner’s tip. (3) It is usually a dance that stretches the new dancer and adds to the frustrations. (4) There is lots of disruptive “styling” being done that was not taught in class.

In summary, new dancers need their own dance without the distractions of the “experienced” dancers unless the experienced dancer is willing to conform to the beginner level for the sake of new dancers survival. Dancers who like to dance to the beat of the music have a hard time finding a dance where they can do that.

Dancers who can’t dance to music do junk and call it “fun.” However, junk dancing is usually rough and could injure someone who isn’t ready for the junk move. If someone gets injured by rough dancing, chances are we have lost them forever.

Many articles have been written recently advocating “put fun back in square dancing.” How do you define fun? It’s tough to define. All I know is one’s fun shouldn’t be at the expense of any of the other seven people in the square.

### **ANGELS-GOOD OR BAD?**

Flashback#1 Earlier I mentioned the “one night stand” square dance party. It was a success and it was fun. It was fun because everyone was on the same page. There was no peer pressure. No angels!

Flashback#2 Earlier I mentioned new graduates should have a series of dances at their level without “experienced” dancers present unless the “experienced” dancers were willing to dance at the new dancers level. No peer pressure. No angels!

What—no angels? What’s wrong with angels?

Today’s angles, in general, are rarely given any guidelines as to proper conduct. There is no

job description furnished. The angel gets to dance free in exchange for helping those in their square that are having trouble.

Years ago most clubs had a club caller that exerted his leadership in the running of the club. That caller also taught the new class and therefore had more pride and control over his product and how well they danced when classes were over. The caller greatly influenced the personality of the club. Today, a lot of clubs don't have a club caller. As a result the club personality is a composite of two or three dancing couples or several club officers who are in charge in any given year. The officers influence what the guest callers call. If the club hires someone to teach a class, they influence what kind of new dancers will be produced because they furnished the angels that in turn influence how the new class turns out. The caller in that situation says "they hired me to call and/or teach so I better do what they expect since they are paying me." To say that today's square dance caller is a leader is almost oxymoron.

I'm not sure when angels first appeared on the square dance scene. Years ago a club would sponsor a beginner's class to feed into their club. Three club couples, usually the officers and usually longtime dancers, would be the class sponsors for the entire series of lessons. They would be at class every night and fill in where needed. Sometimes they didn't dance at all. If the squares were even, they would be in a corner of the room visiting or playing cards. If one or two couples were needed, they would rotate their services throughout the night. Frequently the caller and his wife would join with the three sponsor couples to demonstrate how to do a basic or how to do proper style that went with a basic. The sponsors were there to help the caller when called upon.

Square dancing is not like it once was. We don't dance as well as we once did. Our level of quality dancing has gone down but our level of junk dancing has gone up. If you ask the big name callers who have been traveling this country for at least thirty or forty years they will tell you our square dance quality is way down compared to what it used to be. Square dancing in any other part of the world is done better than it is here in the United States and yet it is our national folk dance. What a pity. One of the reasons for the decline in quality dancing is our angel system—be it the cause or the effect.

I think angels should be seasoned dancers who have been at it a long time. Today angels aren't in class for the right reason and usually they are dancers from last years class who think they are to help teach the new class. So here is another scenario where you have people who still aren't proficient dancers teaching new people how to dance.

I think everyone should go through lessons (square and round) as a student at least twice and maybe more—and they should pay to do so. Where did the idea start that says if you go through beginners class once you are then eligible to attend anybody's new class as an angel free? If you see a movie twice do you get in free the second time? Besides, lessons are fun. In fact there is no greater fun in the square dance process than lessons.

Everyone is on the same page with no peer pressure.

Angels should be seen and not heard. Angels should strive to dance in such an elegant way that new students might ask them a “how to” question if one occurs.

There should be only one instructor in class. A good angel only helps if a student asks for help or when the caller assigns an angel to help someone during a break. Otherwise, an angel should be there to fill out a square.

If angels are at lessons with the proper attitude then it works. No angels with “hot dog” attitudes please. Stay on the same page—no peer pressure. Let new dancers have time to develop.

Earlier I suggested that new dancers should have their own series of dances on a regular basis. They should hold the dances several times a year at one or two area locations. Either the callers' association or the Denver Area Council or both should promote the dances.

Participating callers would be required to call only the agreed upon basics and would strive to get the dancer to ‘Dance’ on time to the music at a comfortable tempo. Experienced dancers would be encouraged to join in but only if they agreed to dance at the new dancer level and not interject the junk moves that aren't in the book that only serves to interrupt the flow of the dance.

The number of basics used would escalate as the series progressed through the dance year. All callers teaching a class and their students would be encouraged to participate in the program. The initial dance or two would feature the use of 25 to 30 basics and the subsequent dances would add a few more basics with an emphasis on variety within the list. We need to slow down the pace of adding new calls. What's the rush?

The dancers would pay the going rate to dance and the participating callers could get paid a minimum fee after the hall rent was paid. Any surplus money could be given to the promotion fund. There's one major catch to this program for it to succeed and that is a new attitude and purpose would have to prevail—that of letting dancers learn to enjoy the real pleasure of square dancing in an atmosphere where there is no peer pressure. There would probably be no round dancing. Maybe a mixer or two. You have to be careful not to dilute the original purpose of the dance.

Speaking of diluting the purpose of the dance, how about a plus tip or two at a mainstream dance? I personally think it's not good for square dancing overall. At a new dancers dance you offer mixers. At a mainstream dance you offer mainstream squares and Phase II and easy Phase III round dances. At a plus dance you do plus and Phase III & IV round dances. If you think it is ok to do plus every third tip at a mainstream dance then doing an advanced or challenge tip every third tip at a plus dance should be ok. I don't think so.

I think it is fine if a club has its own format that is different from other clubs. It's really nice if they draw enough dancers to pay the bills. Square dancing is hurting and it could be that too much diversification is part of the overall problem. Each club can't be everything to everybody . . . that's why Mexican restaurants don't serve Chinese food.

Now, lets talk about why we dance like we do. I mean, overall, how our recreation has evolved to where it is.

In part 2 of this series I said, and I quote, "Square dancing in some form is here to stay. It is a fun escape from the pressures of life. It is a good clean form of recreation done with a quality segment of our population. However, square dancing is going through an evaluation process

and it may never again be the passion for as many people as it once was.”

We live in what I call a “High Five” society. It’s no wonder we don’t dance with grace and dignity like the book says we are supposed to. There’s too much every day outside influence going on. The world is moving too fast. There is too much “hurry” going on. We live in a loud, raucous, in-your-face era short on respect for anything and anybody. All of which means that we as leaders need to work that much harder to maintain the dignity that square dancing has enjoyed all these years.

Now more than ever it is time for our leaders to lead instead of following. In summary we all need to perpetually recruit new square dancers, and we all need to work at keeping every dancer we get, dancing for many years. We need everybody rowing the same boat in the same direction.