

Contra Dancing from a Modern Western Square Dancer

by Andy Shore

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Where do I begin to tell the story of...

the unbelievably fun weekend I had at the LCFD Dance Camp in Sylvan Lake, New York.

After my exposure to a real Contra dance in Louisville back in March, several friends encouraged me to attend this weekend retreat. I'd had very limited experience with Contras and had never done any "gender free" contra dancing (I didn't attend the contra sessions at the last couple of IAGSDC conventions). I was a little nervous going for a weekend of dancing that was essentially new to me, with people I didn't know, but I figured it was a risk worth taking. After so much square dance related travel in the last month and a half, I wanted to do something new, fun, different and "just for me".

I registered for the camp, which is held at Jewish summer camp called Camp Kinder Ring (also known as Circle Lodge). I opted for the cheaper dormitory (bunk house) housing, since it was only for a couple of nights and I figured this would be the most social option, allowing me to meet more people. After registering, I got connected to the ride-sharing email list, and it was easy to get advice about where to fly in to, and arranged a ride from Laganardia with a nice (very tall) guy named Den. Friday mid-day I flew from FLL to LGA and Den met me at the airport in his very new car. The trip up to the campground was fairly smooth and quite pleasant, we talked about dancing and our backgrounds and a couple of friends we had in common (John & Chip from NYC).

Registering at the camp was smooth and quick. I saw Chris Ricciotti right then and he gave me a big hug. Upon check-in I was surprised that there were not name badges in our packets. It turns out that this group has a history of doing a "button room". They had a large stock of old magazines and press-on lettering and stickers and people made their own name buttons (someone in the group had one of those presses for finishing the process). This was a cool idea and allowed for some individuality and creativeness in the process. Some of the people who had attended before wore old buttons they had made in years past rather than making new ones. I was more interested in dancing and socializing rather than spending the time to design a fabulous button, so I did one that was quick and dirty but sufficed for the purpose. I did think it was a neat idea.

After registering at the campground, I picked a bunkhouse (number 8, of course, in honor of square dancing) and explored the campground a bit, learning the location of the various important buildings. The main dance hall was a very large "performing arts" building with a stage and a wonderful wood dance floor.

The entire event had the feeling of a fly-in (more like a "drive-in") or club retreat. There were something like 100 attendees, a good mixture of men and women (a few transgendered individuals, one fellow brought along his 5 year old son) and a range of ages from 20s up to 60s or perhaps even 70s. I'd guess that most were late 30s to mid-forties.

I knew a handful of the people ahead of time, mostly through square dance connections. Chris Ricciotti from Boston (who is the grand poobah of gender-free contra dancing) was there, Peg Hall from Connecticut, Deb from Delaware/Baltimore, and a couple of other Bostonians that I had met at square dance fly-ins or the iggle-wiggle hoedown. The group was incredibly warm and welcoming. People were very friendly and it was quite easy to meet people and find partners for the dancing. I didn't realize that this was a pretty regional event - of the attendees, I think

I may have traveled the farthest to be there. The vast majority came from around Boston, New York, and New Jersey areas. While gender-free contra dancing has been around for a while, it hasn't managed to spread and take hold in other areas. One of the organizers named Tom had been in Russia when I was there with Pink Triangles in Red Square and was at the fundraiser we did (and I called) in Moscow. Small world.

Friday night after a buffet dinner, the welcome dance began around 7:30. Much fun, very energetic. The individual dances seemed to last a long time (15 to 20 minutes?) and I was on the verge of being out of breath. Never wanting for a dance partner - everyone was quite nice in asking to or agreeing to dance. People didn't seem to book more than one dance ahead, if that.

The band for the weekend was The Moving Violations and they were terrific. Great energy and enthusiasm, very nice sound, and very creative. I bought the two CDs they had for sale.

The contra caller for the weekend was Carol Ormond from Ohio. She was very fun and was pretty good on presenting the dances quickly and clearly. She was also very cute (slight, short spiky hair, great smile) and had a nice sense of humor and joked and got along with the band quite well. I really enjoyed her choice of material and presentation. The dances that she herself had written/choreographed were all really fun and clever.

In "gender free" contras they eschew the men/women, boy/girl names and restrictions. They have armbands available and "bands" and "bare arms" dance together. While I understand the motivation for this change, I also found it a bit artificial and when I was trying to help an occasional lost dancer I found myself using terms like "ladies chain" anyway. I made a joke about it when I did Bear Necessities on Saturday afternoon. [Of course once you think about it, "gents" and "ladies" is a bit artificial, too. -Ed.]

Late Friday night after the Contra session was over, there was an "all request" dance and they asked me to do a modern western square as the first offering. I had brought some music on CDs. We had 9 or 10 experienced square dancers there, and I was surprised when Carol jumped into the square and did quite well. I asked her about it later and it turns out that she had been a member of the Minnesota Wild Roses for a while and some of her contra choreography definitely incorporated moves from modern square dancing - including "that dance" (more about it later). I did patter to Hot Stuff and Love Is In The Air as my singing call - especially to show that even though modern square don't typically use live music, it's not all boring twangy stuff. I got several comments and compliments on my calling and voice.

Refreshments were always at hand as well. In addition to always having cold water near the dance spaces, there was a full-time "snack room" with cookies and fruit and string cheese and crackers. Also hot water for tea, etc. This was nice both as another focal point for socializing and for keeping the energy level up for the dancing.

THE DANCING! What can I say. It was fantastic, fun, energetic, flirtatious, aerobic, vigorous, exhausting, fun, intoxicating, & fun. Contra dancing is much more about DANCING than is modern western square dancing. Contra moves are pretty simple, there's (almost) always a walk-through each dance at the beginning and square dancers have an easy time of getting most contra moves. People can come to a contra dance entirely "green" and be dancing for the evening. Contra is much more about dancing to the music, on the 8 beat phrases. The choreo (if good) is well-timed and very danceable on the phrase. Contra is much more about "flirting" - making eye contact with the people you are dancing with and swinging for 8 or 12 beats at a time. While repetitive, contra is fast and energetic. I soaked several T-shirts during the weekend. It's a workout. Unused to the style of swinging, I wound up with a sore left hip and a messed up right ankle but it was worth it. I just loaded up on ibuprofen and kept going.

Friday night it got rather cool, but my sleeping bag was plenty warm enough. One of my cabin mates snored lightly, but not enough to be a bother. Another had some kind of nightmare and yelped rather loudly in the middle of the night. The worst part was that the bunk beds were quite squeaky. While I had picked a quiet one, some of my cabin

mates made quite a racket whenever they turned over. Saturday morning there was plenty of hot water for showers. Then off to an ample breakfast.

Saturday AM I opted for the basic contra session with Chris rather than braving the contra medley with Carol. I probably could have survived the medley, but Chris went over a few of the basic moves and helped me out a bit. Then it was an all-skate with Carol and was quite fun. There were also sessions on English country dancing which I watched a bit but didn't dance. Also available at different times were Salsa, Schottische and Polka sessions.

After lunch on Saturday, I decided I needed a break and did some socializing and then called another 30 minute square dance session around 2:30-3pm.

I found out that Peg Hall and I attended Cornell at exactly the same time. We both graduated in 1981 - it was a fun and funny connection to make after knowing her for many years through square dancing.

Saturday late afternoon was more dancing with Carol and the band then din-din.

After dinner was a very nice "Variety Show" put on by attendees. Mostly musical presentations, some fun skits, singing, dancing, a joke or two. It was quite fun and I was impressed by the quality and variety of talent present in the group. A nice switch from the HTQ-style of "entertainment".

After the show as more dancing until almost midnight. This dance was a "costume party" dance - though I didn't bring anything special to wear, a good percentage of the campers were dressed up in quite a variety of outfits. Speaking of attire (if you can call a wig attire!) I didn't exactly bring the right clothes. I was more concerned with possible cool weather and didn't bring shorts or tank tops that might have been cooler to dance in. As it was I soaked several T-shirts (I did bring enough of those). My footwear was OK - sneakers and cowboy boots - though I should look into getting dance shoes if I'm going to continue this. Lots of the guys had very light capezio-style shoes with smooth soles and low heels. Many of the men wore kilts or skirts some or all of the time. Mostly those loose, light wrap-around things, which I'm sure were comfortable but didn't have good drape for really flowing with the dance. Chris had one on Sunday night that draped and spun very well.

Sunday morning was breakfast and more English dancing for the first hour or so. I watched some of that but didn't join in. I was saving my energy for the final contras and I was even more sore in hip & ankle and was trying to take it easy. One session of contras before lunch, then a farewell dance afterward. All much fun.

Carol choreographed a dance referred to as "that dance" (some of the campers had done it before and requested it as "can you do that dance again") which she titled ContraPositive which was very cool. It consisted of two intersecting contra lines (at right angles) where there is a square at the intersection. The choreo is the same for those in the lines as in the square and couples wind up progressing into and out of the square (and through the square into the other contra line) - very cool, very clever and very fun. We even did it in lined up squares and it has a "pass thru, move on" feel to it. I just might steal it sometime, if I can remember the choreo.

Goodbyes were said all around. I feel like I made a whole bunch of new friends. I definitely hope to make other dance camps in the future.

I got a ride back to NYC with Den and spent Sunday night at John & Chip's (Chip was on the road) but John and I got to visit and he took me to LGA on Monday morning. I'm still a bit sore & very tired but it was a great fun weekend.

I regret that I didn't take pictures during the weekend.

I highly recommend this to all my square dance friends. Try out high-energy contras sometime (hopefully the gender-free kind).

It'd be great to combine a fly-in with a gender-free contra weekend (with enough dance space for both groups) but get cross-over socializing and "intro" sessions for each group to the other style of dance.

See you in the Silicon Galaxy!

Yellow Rocks,
/Andy