

[CDSS](#) > [Resources](#) > [Advice & How-To](#) > [Square Dance](#) > History of Square Dance

History of Square Dance

The details of the story of the North American square dance invite a great deal of speculation, and a fair amount of disagreement among the many people who care deeply about the activity. While I don't presume to be a scholar and expert on square dance history, I have developed my own understanding of square dancing's journey through time.

EARLY HISTORY & THE QUADRILLE

Square dancing is a social dance form with English, French, and Scots-Irish roots. Early four couple dances in square and round formation can be found in John Playford's 17th-century English dance text *The Dancing Master*. Another four couple square formation developed in 18th-century France, probably independent of English squares and rounds. This French invention, named the quadrille, is arguably the main predecessor to the North American square dance as we know it today. The quadrille, and quadrille-inspired forms, developed over the course of a hundred years or so, and by the mid-19th century had swept both Europe and the Americas.

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Quadrille](#) Wikipedia entry — Overview on the development of the quadrille
- [Some Notes on the Lancers](#), by Ralph Page — Discussion of a popular 19th-century quadrille form called "The Lancers"
- [The New England Dance](#), by Dorothy Shaw — Brief discussion of early American square dancing in New England
- [Edson H. Cole: Fiddler, Caller, and Dancing Master](#) — Listen to several early 20th century examples of quadrille prompting by New Hampshire fiddler, caller, and dancing master Edson H. Cole. The site also includes brief historical background; Cole calling contras and other non-square formations, in addition to the quadrilles; and an interview with Kenneth Libby (conducted by Dudley Laufman), who attended some of Cole's dancing classes as a young man.

APPALACHIAN SQUARES

As the quadrille was gaining popularity in American cities and urban areas, a unique style of square dancing and fiddle music was developing in more isolated communities across the Appalachian Mountains of the American East. This style of dancing has many different names, including "Southern," "Appalachian," "mountain," "Running Set," and "old-time." Depending on whom you ask, Appalachian square dancing and old-time fiddle music have English, Scots-Irish, African, or other ethnic origins.

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [And It's Home Little Gal and Do-Si-Do](#) — An overview of Appalachian square dance
- [The Origin of the Appalachian Square Dance, part 1 & part 2](#), by Hugh Thurston — An

ON OUR SITE

[About Us](#)
[Spread the Joy Campaign](#)
[Centennial](#)
[Community](#)
[Conferences](#)
[Dance & Music Camp](#)
[Lifetime Contribution Award](#)
[Membership](#)
[Newsletter](#)
[Resources](#)

[CDSS Publications](#)

[CDSS Online Library](#)

[NHCTMD Library](#)

[Support & Funding](#)

[Advice & How-To](#)

[General Topics](#)

[Contra Dance](#)

[English Country Dance](#)

[Square Dance](#)

[What Is Square Dancing?](#)

[Styles](#)

[History](#)

[Caller Resources](#)

[Organizations](#)

[Traditional Groups](#)

[Traditional Callers](#)

[Video & Audio](#)

[Folk Song](#)

[Recruit Young People](#)

[College Starter Kit](#)

[Make It Happen](#)

[Mentorship](#)

[Youth Desk](#)

[Store](#)

interesting and compelling theory arguing the Scots-Irish origin of Appalachian square dancing

- [The Appalachian Mountain Dance](#), by Dorothy Shaw — Another brief discussion of Appalachian mountain dancing
- [Square Dancing in Haywood County, North Carolina](#), by Phil Jamison — Fascinating article from the Old-Time Herald about the 19th and 20th century story of Appalachian square dancing



TRADITIONAL WESTERN SQUARES

The quadrille and Appalachian mountain-style square dance forms traveled with the settlers of the American West, and a new style of square dancing slowly developed combining elements of both forms. This new form of Western square dance (now named, by some, "traditional Western") eventually captured the attention of the American public, through the efforts of a young educator in Colorado named Lloyd Shaw. Motivated in part by Henry Ford's book, *Good Morning* — which was written to help revive the "old-fashioned" American quadrilles, contras, and couple dances that had been, by the early 20th century, largely replaced by the jazz-inspired fashions of the ballroom — Shaw set out to publish a book of traditional American square dances with a particular focus on collecting and documenting dances found in the American West. The book, *Cowboy Dances*, gave rise to Shaw's popular caller training classes, as well as his nationally-traveling teenage dance demonstration team, the Cheyenne Mountain Dancers. All of this energy and exposure led to a square dance craze in the mid-20th century, with millions of Americans participating in the activity on a regular basis.

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Lest We Forget: Henry Ford and American Dancing](#) and [The Dean of American Square Dancing: A Short Sketch About Benjamin Lovett](#), both by Ralph Page — More information about Henry Ford and his dancing master, Benjamin Lovett
- [The Henry Ford Era](#), by Dorothy Shaw and Kenny Reese — A brief description of Henry Ford's influence on the American square dance
- [The Lloyd Shaw Era](#), by Dorothy Shaw and Kenny Reese — A brief description of Lloyd Shaw's influence on the American square dance

MODERN WESTERN SQUARES

This extraordinary interest in square dancing gave birth to the branch of the activity now named "modern Western." Many callers learned from Lloyd Shaw, then took their newly acquired skills and interpreted them for use in their own local communities. The 1960s and early 1970s saw a flood of new calls appearing as callers tried to outdo each other in creativity. It became difficult for dancers (and for other callers) to keep up with the vast number of new figures that were being invented; clearly, some effort at standardization was essential to support the continuing widespread growth of square dancing. As a result, the governing organization for modern Western square dance leaders, CALLERLAB, was founded in 1974. The original stated goals of the charter were: "To put the dance back into square dancing; establish standardization for calls; and provide adequate training for

callers."

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [History of CALLERLAB](#) — More information about the transition from the Lloyd Shaw era to modern Western square dancing, from the organization's website
- [Square Dance Foundation of New England 1960's Era Recordings](#) — Listen to audio examples of popular callers from the early days of MWSD. Five of the callers included were charter members of CALLERLAB. These recordings made available through the meticulous work of Jim Mayo for the Square Dance Foundation of New England.

TRADITIONAL SQUARES TODAY

In the midst of the growth of modern Western square dance, traditional dancing continues to exist in many areas. Traditional squares have lately been experiencing a surge of interest as part of contra dance programs across the country, as well as in dance series devoted to old-time mountain style and traditional Western square dance. Traditional square dancing also happens spontaneously at gatherings with a music jam, eight willing dancers, and a caller to facilitate the action on the dance floor.

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [The Dances in Bradford, NH \(c. 1942\)](#), [Duke Miller calling a Dance at the Peterborough NH Golf Club \(August 20, 1965\)](#), [Glenn Pease: Old-time Barn Dance Caller \(c. 1973\)](#) — Three fascinating pages offering descriptions and audio examples of traditional square dances (which also include contras and couple dances) in New England in the mid-20th century, all from Walter Lenk's website
- [Dare to Be Square](#) — Blog post describing a recent (2011) old-time square dance in Hallsville, MO
- [Reinventing Square Dancing](#) — Recent (April 2011) NPR piece on the traditional square dance scene in Washington D.C. (make sure to scroll down to the bottom of the page to find the piece)
- [I Was a Teenage Square Dance Caller](#), by Paul Silveria — Article in the Old-Time Herald by Portland, OR caller Paul Silveria, who gives an entertaining personal account of his role in the thriving traditional square dance scene in the Northwest
- [A Grand Ole Time in East Nashville](#) — YouTube clip showing a great example of a traditional square dance happening at a house party

There is a constant stream of new square dances being written, taking inspiration from both the modern Western style and traditional forms. In the contra and traditional square dance worlds, there is a blossoming group of young and talented callers and musicians, as well as a large population of young dancers for whom this activity seems to resonate. There is commitment on both the modern Western and traditional sides in supporting the growing interest in square dancing. With continued persistence, patience, strong leadership, and knowledge and respect for the roots of the North American square dance, there may be another square dance heyday on the horizon.

ADDITIONAL LINKS

GENERAL HISTORY

- [A Brief History of Square and Round Dancing](#) — A brief history of American square dance, with a particular focus on how modern Western square and round dance developed

[History and Heritage of Modern American Square Dancing](#) — Website by the European Association of American Square Dancing Clubs; presents a summary of essays on the history of the American square dance (a selected few of which are offered as links above)

PERSONAL HISTORIES

- [Notes from Ralph Sweet's presentation at NECCA](#) — Ralph's personal square dance history, as presented to the New England Council of Callers' Association in 2005: his evolution from traditional square dancer and caller; to MWSD caller; to active supporter, dancer, and caller in the contra dance revival
- [This is My Square Dancing Life](#) [pdf], by Bob Brundage — Wonderful book by this MWSD caller, with his personal account of the evolution of the American square dance in the 20th century
- [Bob Brundage Interviews for the Square Dance Federation of New England](#) — Read or listen to Bob Brundage's interviews of significant traditional and modern Western square dance callers, both active and retired

QUADRILLE

- [The Lancers: Some Historical Notes, Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4](#), and [The Lancers in Europe](#), all by Ralph Page — Five-part series documenting more information on the Lancers
- [Quadrilles and Cotillions](#) — Interesting discussion of the differences between Cotillions and Quadrilles, from the FIDDLE-L discussion group

APPALACHIAN

- [West Virginia Square Dances](#), by Bob Dalsemer, and [Kentucky Mountain Square Dancing](#) [pdf], by Patrick Napier — Two books from the CDSS E-Library focusing on communities dancing Appalachian-style squares

MODERN WESTERN SQUARE DANCE

- [Western Style Square Dancing is in Trouble](#), by Ralph Sweet — Ruminations on the future of modern Western square dancing, excerpted from a 1965 book by Ralph Sweet (with a brief introduction by Clark Baker)

OTHER

- [Australian Square Dancing](#) — A window into the influence American square dancing has had on the international square dance scene
- [Northern Junket, Dance History Index](#) — Links to all the Ralph Page articles mentioned above, in addition to many other fascinating articles and commentary on the history of American social dancing
- [An Online Guide to Square Dancing](#) — An introduction, history, overview of types of square dancing, links and general tips

Country
Dance and
Song
Society

ABOUT US
What We Do
History

COMMUNITY
Blog
Events Calendar

LIFETIME
CONTRIBUTION
AWARD

NEWSLETTER
CDSS News
E-News

SUPPORT US
Ways To Give
Membership

116 Pleasant St.
Suite 345
Easthampton
MA 01027-2759
413-203-5467

CONTACT

Office Staff
Directions

Mission and Vision
CDSS Business Model
Governing Board
Committees
2014 Annual Report

CENTENNIAL

Centennial Tour
Centennial Fundraising

Affiliate Directory
Member Directory

CONFERENCES

**DANCE &
MUSIC CAMP**

Life at Camp
Photo Gallery
Scholarships
Program Weeks

Current
Past

MEMBERSHIP

Individual/Family
Groups

RESOURCES

CDSS Publications
CDSS Online Library
NHCTMD Library
Support and Funding
Advice & How-to

Donor Recognition
Donate Now

STORE

Catalog
Shipping
Payment
Gift Certificates
Wholesale
Submissions