



# APPALACHIAN BIG CIRCLE

*United States*

## Background Notes

The Big Circle dancing in the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States was first brought here by settlers from the British Isles. The dancing was then subject to influences of French, Native American and West African traditions, which created a new American tradition. Many of the figures performed within the context of this dance can still be found within the repertoire of the English Country Dances, the most popular style of dance performed during the colonial period. The different parts of this dance are referred to as figures rather than steps because the dancers create figures, patterns or shapes when they work with their partner or group.

This dance relies on an American contribution to dance, that of a “caller.” The job of the caller started as the one gentleman who had a knack for remembering all of the dances and figures. This person would cue the dancers in case they forgot what was coming up next in the dance. This caller started adding in his own sayings and colorful phrases or “patter.” These callers eventually started making up their own dances. With the use of a caller, this dance demonstrates many of the elements found in a community. There are leaders and followers, and everyone must work together in order to accomplish a common goal.

Another element that is often added to the figures of the Big Circle dance is a type of step dancing called clogging. Clogging, as well as its later relative tap dance, has its origins in the British Isles. In Ireland, step dancing of jigs, reels, and hornpipes has been developed to be a very sophisticated dance form. But, in the Appalachians, these various forms came under the influence of other groups who either lived or settled there. Most influential in this context of culture were the West Africans who arrived in this country largely as slaves. It is the music and dance tradition of this group that gives the upper body involvement that is often seen, especially in the dancing in the southern Appalachians.

All of these elements still exist in various areas of Appalachia. Since folklore is not static, but is a constantly changing, dynamic process, this dance form continues to evolve today.

## Suggestions for Teaching

1. You can teach this dance by using either the couple figures or simply use the large group figures. In this later form, the dance is quickly taught and is a good icebreaker.
2. This dance can be as simple or as complex as you wish.



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3. Practice calling the dance. As the children get comfortable with the figures, have them try calling.
4. The sequence of this dance could be set and done the same way each time, or the figures could be arranged in various combinations.

**Source:** This dance is from the Appalachian Mountains.

**Formation:** Circle of couples all holding hands, lady on the gents' right hand side.

**Meter:** 4/4

Dancers follow instructions by caller. Calls are for ladies and gents, but can be given for one's and two's.

### Big Circle Figures

**Circle Left:** Join hands and walk to the left (clockwise).

**Circle Right:** Walk to the right (counterclockwise).

**Into the Middle and Back:** Walk into circle (one, two, three, together) and back out. Into the center can be done with claps, stamps, bows, curtseys, loops (individual turns), quiet yee-haws ("quiet as a mouse") or loud yee-haw's ("big as a house"). It can be done as a group or with gents only or ladies only.

**Promenade:** Couples hold left hands below, right hand joined above and walk side by side with the gents on the inside (counterclockwise).

**Wring out the Dishrag:** Both pairs of joined hands go up and the lady walks counterclockwise around her partner, continually facing the gent. When the lady gets back to original position, she turns one time counterclockwise in place. Arms come back down into promenade position.

**Gent down, Ladies around:** Gent goes down on one knee, lady walks counterclockwise in front of the gent, holding right hand until she gets back to her place in promenade position. Can also be done with lady's going down on one knee and gents walking around clockwise.



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- Queen's Highway:** From promenade position, lead lady splits and walks clockwise around the outside of the circle. Each lady waits her turn and follows as everyone else continues to walk counterclockwise. When the lady gets back to her partner, the two join hands in promenade position.
- King's Highway:** Same as Queen's Highway. Gent passes behind partner to travel clockwise around the circle. When the gent gets back to his partner, he passes behind her to get back into promenade position.
- London Bridges:** From promenade position, the lead couple lets go of hands and turns to face other couples making an arch with inside hands. The next couple ducks under the arch and follows, then turns to form an arch. Each couple goes under all of the arches before turning to make an arch. When there are no more couples to go over, the lead couple lets go of hands, turns, and follows the last couple then continues to promenade to recreate the circle.
- Wind up the Big Ball of Yarn:** Starting with circle to the left, the lead gent lets go of the person on his left and "winds up" the circle by slowly leading everyone in a spiral pattern to the center. When he reaches the middle, the leader turns back to lead out of the spiral. After he gets to the outer part, he continues to circle left to create one circle again.

### Small Circle Figures

- Promenade Around the Room:** Promenade with your partner anywhere around the room, staying within the dance space and avoiding other couples.
- Find Two More & Circle Up Four:** Two facing couples join hands and circle to the left or right according to the directions of the caller.
- Star Right: (Right Hand Over)** Everyone puts right hand into the middle to make a star and walks forward (clockwise).
- Star Left: (Left Hand Back)** Everyone puts left hand into the middle to make a star and walks forward to get back to place (counterclockwise).

Before doing these figures, count off around the circle to establish odd and even couples.

- Odds Turn About:** From promenade position, odd couples turn to face even couples.



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- Everybody Backs Up, on to the Next:** Everyone backs up four steps, then odds travel counterclockwise to the next even couple as even couples take four steps forward to their place.
- Dive for the Oyster:** Odd couples duck under arch formed by even couples (4 steps) and back out (4 steps). Even couples do likewise. Odd couples duck under again going under the arch, dropping hands with partner and continue to hold hands with the evens as the odds go around to their place and the evens turn under their own arch. All dancers end up in a circle in their place.
- Dig for the Clam:** Same as Dive for the Oyster with the even couples leading.
- Birdie in the Cage:** The lady of the odd couple goes into the center of the circle while the other three dancers walk to the left.
- Birdie Hop Out, Crow Hop In:** The lady of the odd couple returns to her place in the circle and the gent of the odd couple goes to the center as the circle continues to the left.