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Source: *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 3 (1951), pp. 22-26

Published by: International Council for Traditional Music

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/835766>

Accessed: 22/04/2010 04:41

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THE TEXAS CATTLE COUNTRY AND COWBOY SQUARE DANCE

by

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TEXANS talk their region more surely than sociologists can draw it. The West Texas cattle country as distinct from the East Texas cotton culture and the northern Great Plains, however, is a clear sub-region. This is frontier territory. Much of what we say here applies also to other frontiers. It is one of the easiest frontiers to study, it is so recent that it has not passed completely away. It is my intention to consider one West Texas cattle country institution—the traditional square dance—in relation to the regional setting. Some of the factors might be: remoteness from population centres, relative scarcity of women, a marked cultural unity, social democracy, frontier pace of living, informal social controls, and certain specific aspects of the occupation.

Foremost would be the remoteness of life, the sparseness of population, the difficulty of communication and transportation. Understandably the social gatherings would be infrequent but lengthy; three-day dances were not uncommon. For Christmas dances at the Matador Ranch, says a participant:

“folks came all the way from Yellow House Canyon to Childress, 75 miles or more each direction. . . . We’d dance for a week, and if it got to snowing we’d stay two weeks.”

The place for dances never seemed to match the enthusiastic numbers, even when a courthouse or unfinished building was available. The difficulty in transporting building materials was a significant factor. Public buildings and homes alike were small. Small rooms meant compact sets, easily guided by a single caller, with no aid except possibly a chair to stand on.

The transportation problem also affected the dance floors. An old frontiersman says that during the Civil War, “sometimes a family would get ‘tony’ and hew logs on one side and make a puncheon floor for their homes and thus get into the ‘upper classes.’” In early days in Collins County most of the houses had puncheon floors, and the call to commence would be: “Partners to your puncheons.” Smooth wood was at a premium.¹ But despite rough floors I can detect no tendency in the dance steps to hopping or skipping or running.

Musical accompaniment tended to be limited to more portable fiddles and guitars with few pianos and bass fiddles. A good fiddler enjoyed a unique social position in the community, was usually prosperous, and was not expected to participate in fights to any large extent. Also, a music-loving ranch-owner would make work comparatively easy on a violinist who would entertain him at times.

On the secondary level, the transportation factors determined decorations, food, and attire. Through limited communication, “fashions” were not as pressing on the frontier, and besides they were hard to get. Furthermore, what was appropriate for an eastern city might not endure a horseback or wagon ride across the plains.

In this remote and unsophisticated setting the folk nature of the dance persisted. Musicians, dancers, and callers transmitted their lore through personal contact. Most fiddlers never had a formal music lesson in their lives and would not know a note from a cowtrack. Bob Pyron, owner of the 81 Ranch in Scurry County, learned to play from an old fiddler who had lost the index finger of his left hand. The result

was that Bob grew up without using that finger in his performances. And the tune was played not on a violin but on a fiddle. As one old-timer put it, you carry a violin in a violin case and a fiddle in a pillow case. The musician makes the principal difference, though a "fiddle" sometimes has a flatter bridge than a "violin" to allow for easier double-stopping. To improve the tone quality many fiddlers keep rattle-snake rattles inside their instrument; this is also thought to keep the spiders out and to be a protection against dampness.

In this pre-baby-sitting era, children played around the edges of the dance floor, imitated their elders, and joined in the sets early in their young lives. No dancing masters were needed here to teach from the printed page. The simple steps required little individual preparation; emphasis fell on the group patterns. Social and flexible, square dancing fitted the folk, and they loved it.

Men were scarce and women were scarcer. Square dancing was important in West Texas as the only kind of social gathering for men and women until the later establishment of churches. The dance has the elements for strong appeal, the sublime social experience in group rhythms being something of an alternative satisfaction for those who were later to enjoy brush arbour religion. The square dance survived even the shortage of partners. For the first grand ball in Amarillo, marking the formal opening of the Polk County courthouse in 1888, five ladies and more than a hundred men attended; some of the cowboys had ridden 75 miles for the event. Sometimes it was necessary to "heifer brand" some of the men with scarves on their arms; thus marked, they would dance "lady fashion."

Women were important to the success of square dances in many ways as planners, hostesses, and dancers. The frontier women worked against odds to bring beauty to the serving table, the hall, and their own attire. Though they generally lacked the voice to be callers and seldom were spared from the set to fiddle, they had the endurance to satisfy the demands of a steady succession of waiting partners.

The West Texas cattle country had a marked cultural unity, which influenced the square dance. It is estimated that 90 per cent. of cowboys at the beginning of the trail-driving period were from the South-east. Though the Southern "big set" of more than four couples has not been retained in West Texas (it is known somewhat in East Texas), many of the figures and much of the patter would appear to have Southern roots:

Ducks in the river, going to the ford,
Coffee in a little rag, sugar in a gourd.

Chase the 'possum, chase the coon;
Chase that pretty girl round the room.

Of about 100 South-eastern square dance figures I included in a list in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (December, 1942), about a third were known also in the South-west. The music perhaps even more shows its Southern origins. Minority racial groups—Negroes, Mexicans, Indians—were small or separate and made little impact on West Texas square dancing.

Social democracy, growing out of occupational homogeneity, prevailed in the cow country. Because of the nature of ranching, there were few social lines. Thus, frontier dances were open to all. Before the dance was to "come off," some of the men would mount their horses and ride over the area to spread the news: "There's a dance over to Johnson's on Friday—everybody invited and nobody slighted." A "private dance" was almost unheard of, and girls danced with bosses and hands with equal spirit.

Simple living was inevitable on the frontier. Much of the time was spent outdoors. Self-reliant, ingenious, and direct, the cowboy looked to amusements that had some active part for everyone. Everyone lived in the moment, and there were no casual spectators. The men worked hard, and the women just as hard, and everybody played as hard as they worked, when they did play. It was not rest but change. The dance style was vigorous, quite different from the formal Eastern ballrooms.

In the square dance some Texans prefer a simple light gliding step, while others do a smooth two-step. The two-step was the real contradance or quadrille step and has survived in Texas quite generally. The fundamental nature of the foot movement is defined in the caller's couplet:

Keep your pretty feet close to the ground,
And don't you dance your partner down.

This vigorous activity was sustained by simple but bountiful food. At the dinner connected with the dance still held to this day just before the spring round-up at the JA Ranch, the long table in the dining room which is lengthened to accommodate sixty people (about half the guests) at one time, is loaded from one end to the other with beef prepared in every form, turkey and dressing, boiled ham, creamed potatoes, sweet potatoes smothered in marshmallows, fresh beans, celery, several kinds of pickles, stuffed and unstuffed olives, fruit salad, iced tea, milk, coffee, several different kinds of pies, and cake and ice-cream.

Simplicity was the note, too, as the group joined in the preparations of the place, knocked the splinters off the floor, shared their few special clothes. Instruments, especially rhythm instruments, were improvised by those not in a set. The calls were not highly self-conscious, but they reflected the vigorous life and closeness to nature.

In this frontier setting conduct was not rigidly prescribed. A broad tolerance, however, did not usually give way to licence. General behaviour was orderly and respectful. As more families moved to West Texas, chaperones were an accepted feature at dances. Depending on the community, a waist swing or other move in the direction of an embrace might be forbidden.

The church came to West Texas in the 1880's as a rival answer to social cravings. As it grew in numbers, it became a strong agent of social control. Except for the relatively few Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, the Church was almost unanimous in its official opposition to dancing. As a substitute the play party—a musical game without fiddle and waist swing—was allowed. The scattered members were a little less severe in their judgment.

Besides the more general relations of the dominant occupation of West Texas, the environment, and the accompanying social institutions, cattle raising had certain specific effects on square dancing. The work cycle determined the occasions and frequency of dances. In so far as work would allow, frontier folks hungry for company took advantage of every excuse for a dance—patriotic holidays, weddings, housewarmings, and especially the beginning and end of the round-up and the long drive north. The frequency naturally increased with the thickening settlement. And dances became a natural part of local rodeos, which started in the 1880's.

The work lingo found its place in the colourful vocabulary of the dance callers. The square dance call has offered a fair opportunity for reflecting the culture of the region. In the first place, though the basic figure is pretty well set, a great deal is left to the discretion of the caller; he is in a sense a creative artist who leads the dancers

through a series of movements as he sees fit. In the second place, the square dance call in the South-west is seldom bound to a special tune and is thereby more flexible than a song. To fill the gap until the dancers are ready for the next direction and to add spirit to the dance, the caller employs traditional or impromptu patter. (Some claim this to be a post-Civil War innovation.)

Barbed wire fence and great big gate;
Promenade that gal and don't be late.

Tighten up the bellybands and loosen up the traces;
All join hands and get to your places.

Throw your loop and jerk your slack;
Meet your honey and turn right back.

Swing the bay filly on your right,
And now the sorrel and now the white.

Twist her tail till the old cow bawls;
Swing your opposite across the hall.

Whoa, whoa, rope that steer;
Bring him back to his little dear.

The work attire with some refinements and glorifications became largely the dance attire for the men. This was partly the cowpuncher's pride in the garb of his trade, partly a practical consideration for the appropriateness of his clothing to his environment, and partly the decision of a limited wardrobe. One West Texas pioneer says: "We would civilise up a bit when we went to a dance; that is, we would take off our spurs and tie a clean red handkerchief around our neck." Under ranch etiquette it was considered a sign of friendship for a man to take off his guns and leave them hanging outside on the saddle horn, but there is still the suggestive reference in a dance call: "Hands on your six-shooters, balance all."

* * *

The square dance as a phenomenon of the West Texas cattle country is most easily discussed in the past tense. That is, the characteristics I have outlined are most readily pointed out with fewest exceptions in the period from 1865 to 1885. Nonetheless, the square dance is still to be found rather widely in Texas to-day. Let us consider briefly how changes in characteristics of the region have affected the dance.

With more frequent dances and wider contact, the repertoire of the individual caller has grown from 15 simple figures to 50 or more, including a number of intricate ones. No longer are dancers satisfied to repeat a figure during the evening, and callers are tending more and more to use 2 to 4 distinct major figures in a single dance. The calls are becoming fancier and showing some more modern allusions in the patter. Round (couple) dances have in some places crowded the squares nearly off the programme, though among some more ardent modern square dance groups the trend is now away from round dances. In very few Texas communities have the Church and other institutions maintained such a conservative grip on social patterns that they have kept play parties alive to the exclusion of square dancing.

Square dancing survives in those rural areas where it was least weighed with the formality of the Eastern ball-room. In the cities, square dancing is partially a survival—since few native West Texans are more than one generation from ranching—partially a grand revival, or fresh exploitation. Why it has been revived nationally

and in Texas fittingly on a scale hardly to be equalled must be attributed to several influences. Basically, we are far enough removed from our humble past that we can afford to be proud of it. The Texas Centennial celebration in 1936 was a concrete expression which gave special encouragement. Recreation workers, first with the depression-time WPA (federal relief programme) and coming to a climax in the war time USO (recreation programme for the armed forces), seized upon the social values and pushed square dancing.

To me the revival has hope of being more than a passing fad because it is not an effort to imitate the ways of the past but rather to adapt the heritage of the frontier to current social need. The unhappy setting of the dance house with its strong drink and fast women is no more. Square dancing is again a family recreation and a community experience. The preferred costumes—full skirts for the women and fancy shirts and boots for the men—may imply a backward look. Actually, Texas square dancing is no sentimental vestige; it shows no signs of let-up as a contemporary activity.

This is not an isolated development in Texas or the South-west. Characteristically, Texas dances are bigger than almost any others. Literally thousands of dancers and large numbers of spectators overflow gymnasium or coliseum for occasional city-wide and regional festivals, while hundreds of clubs meet weekly all over the state. And though there has been considerable borrowing of figures from other regions, the basic style has not been seriously altered. Singing calls, widespread in the East, are slow to take hold in Texas, for example. If any style is going to dominate urban dancing over the country, it is as likely to be the South-west and the kindred West as any other.

Mr. OLCUTT SANDERS, in response to a question from Mr. WARREN ROBERTS (Indiana University), said there was not much solo dancing although there was a little step-dancing, much of it apparently an imitation of the negroes' dancing. Negroes working in the ranch country would often be asked to perform more or less as a form of entertainment. In the square dancing, the men would naturally introduce a certain amount of individual fancy stepping.

Professor OTTO ANDERSSON (Swedish University of Åbo) enquired whether there were any ballad-dances in America as in the Faroe Islands.

Mr. OLCUTT SANDERS said the ballads were certainly not accompanied by dance in his part of the country.

Mr. HOWARD J. DARINGTON (Salinas, Cal.) mentioned that in the early days in California there was some Spanish ballad dancing. The people would sing a story as they danced.

Several speakers, including Dr. ELIZABETH BURCHENAL (New York), spoke of the variety in the style of dancing in the different parts of the country.

Mr. SANDERS, answering Mr. CHARLES SEEGER (Washington, D.C.), said that the banjo was seldom used in the dance band.

Mr. DARINGTON asked whether the purists resisted innovations which were introduced by the dance clubs.

Mr. SANDERS said that each local group was a law unto itself and that the Texas Dance Federation did not impose its own standards.

A discussion, in which Mr. VINCENT DOLAN (Quebec), Mr. SEEGER and Mr. DARINGTON participated, took place on the introduction of acrobatic feats into the dance. It appeared that the custom varied in different parts of the country.

Professor OTTO ANDERSSON raised the question of the origin of the quadrille, but discussion was deferred.