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Definition of Community in Old Time Dancing in Rural Southwest Virginia

Susan Spalding

Introduction

A string band strikes up a rhythmic tune and a circle of dancers, one hundred or more, falls into the beat together. "All join hands and circle to the left," directs the caller, beginning an old time square dance each Friday and Saturday night in several communities across Southwest Virginia. Old time square dancing is one of the two oldest regional forms of dance which continue to change through community participation. The other form is a dance of "rhythm-making with the feet" (Hall 1984-85, 201), a solo dance known variously as clogging, flatfooting, or buck dancing. Old time square dancing typically begins with one large circle and with patterns (1) for the whole group; proceeds to a middle section of one or more patterns for two couples, who form the "square;" and ends with one large circle or patterns for the whole group. Dancers use the term "old time square dance" to differentiate this community-based form from western club square dancing, which was popularized mid-century and is taught, with classes of increasing levels of difficulty, through a national organization. Both forms of old time dancing have evolved since the eighteenth century through the interaction of European-Americans, African-Americans, and Native Americans, and are performed to music of the old-time, bluegrass, country, or country-rock variety, depending upon the community (2).

A few studies have correlated old time square dancing with community, and particularly with the interrelationship of individualism and cooperation so closely identified with the traditional Appalachian lifestyle. Burt Feintuch, in his historical study of a small Kentucky mountain area, discovered that a change in the dance structure accompanied a change in social structure, hence increasing mobility and a shift of the dances from domestic to public settings. "The public dances reflect a social structure in which all do not know each other, and while it is possible for everyone to participate, it is also unlikely that all will have an opportunity to interact with each other" (1981, 65). In the community he studied, the form of the dance shifted from the circle, in which everyone interacted, to the four-couple square, in which participants interacted only with those in their own squares, rather than with the entire group. In a forthcoming article, Paul Tyler discusses square dancing in a rural midwest area, finding the continuing square dance tradition to be a central

part of the "shared memories [and] practices that reenact those memories and reinforce people's commitment to their shared identity and common past." As a practice which reenacted shared memories and identity, square dancing served as the foundation for a community which was no longer defined by geographical boundaries. Gail Matthews produced an in-depth study of the connection between a community's values and its dancing. By examining, in close consultation with dancers in Haywood County, North Carolina, three related dance aesthetics, she found the "stylistic fusion of freedom [in the footwork] and group cooperation" in the patterns to be central to the local worldview. The "possibility of working together to achieve a desired goal and allowing each person in the community to retain his or her unique identity while in the process of enacting community goals" is a "complicated concept succinctly expressed in mountain square dance." Dance forms which do not incorporate these values are rejected by old style and freestyle dancers (1983, 147) (3). Each of these studies finds links between dancing and the concept of community. However, in two areas in Southwest Virginia only one hour's drive apart, old time square dancing enacts contrasting perceptions of community in even more specific and subtle ways than these studies have identified.

Although superficially similar, the old time dancing in various communities in Southwest Virginia and surrounding states exhibits differences significant to the local dancers, who can identify the place of residence of other dancers on the basis of movement style. Besides interviews, informal conversations, and observation and Laban Movement Analysis of the dancing, my most important source of information has been participation in the dancing and experiencing the learning process in each location. Through verbal and kinesthetic interaction, the dancers led me to an understanding of the specific aesthetics of each area's dance traditions. Their responses to the finished video documentary (4) made while doing research, and to the rough footage that served as the basis for the documentary, also provided invaluable information.

What has emerged for me is the fact that in each case the dancing enacts very different perceptions of what a community is and how it should function: how the individual and the couple participate in the larger group; how men and women relate; how

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the group defines “participation” in the dance; how the dance itself is situated within the dance event, and the dance event within the broader community; whether the particulars of dance style are communicated verbally or kinesthetically; kinds of space and touch relationships among dancers; and the primary goal or purpose of the dancing.

I have chosen here to discuss only the central portion of the square dance in each community—the four-person patterns. I analyze this part of the dance only in terms of its expression of definitions of community and the individual’s relation to it, though certainly other lines of analysis are possible. In one instance, community is perceived as process. Individuals interact in fluid ongoing patterns, the groups of four mutually negotiating their own pace. They are rhythmically, but not spatially, coordinated with the larger group. Association among all dancing individuals is facilitated by the multiple repetitions of a single four-person pattern. In the other instance, community is defined as structure. Couples dancing together produce a smooth-running organization. They are visually and temporally synchronized through the cooperation of each individual. Dancers are challenged by rapid changes of patterns, and often the same two couples dance together repeatedly within one square dance.

The two local dance events I consider here take place about fifty miles apart in southwest Virginia, one in the Blue Ridge region and one in the Great Valley region (see Figure 1). The two dance events share certain characteristics: both are locally based

and both have been in existence for at least eight years, serve as fundraisers for worthy causes, and attract small business, secretarial and trades people, and manufacturing workers, most of whom keep a small farm or large garden in addition to the other work they do.

Fancy Gap

Fancy Gap is located atop the Blue Ridge Mountains in an area which has, in its economy and population, remained remarkably stable throughout this century. There has been little in- or out-migration, and because factory work is readily available in nearby towns, the county boasted an unemployment rate of only 4% in 1989. The furniture and textile industries and the Blue Ridge Parkway construction affected the economic base of the region, and contributed to the gradual evolution of local community structure and cultural expression.

Every Friday night since 1971 two to three hundred people gather in the cafeteria of Fancy Gap Elementary School to dance to the old time string band music of Whit Sizemore and the Blue Ridge Ramblers, and to support the school through the Parent Teachers’ Association, for whom the dance is a major ongoing fundraiser. Dancers express pride in having been able to raise funds to send a class of students on a major trip, and express concern that new volunteers keep stepping forward to make the dances and their proceeds possible. In many cases, three generations of dancers within the same family regularly attend the dance. During an evening, different partners are chosen for each

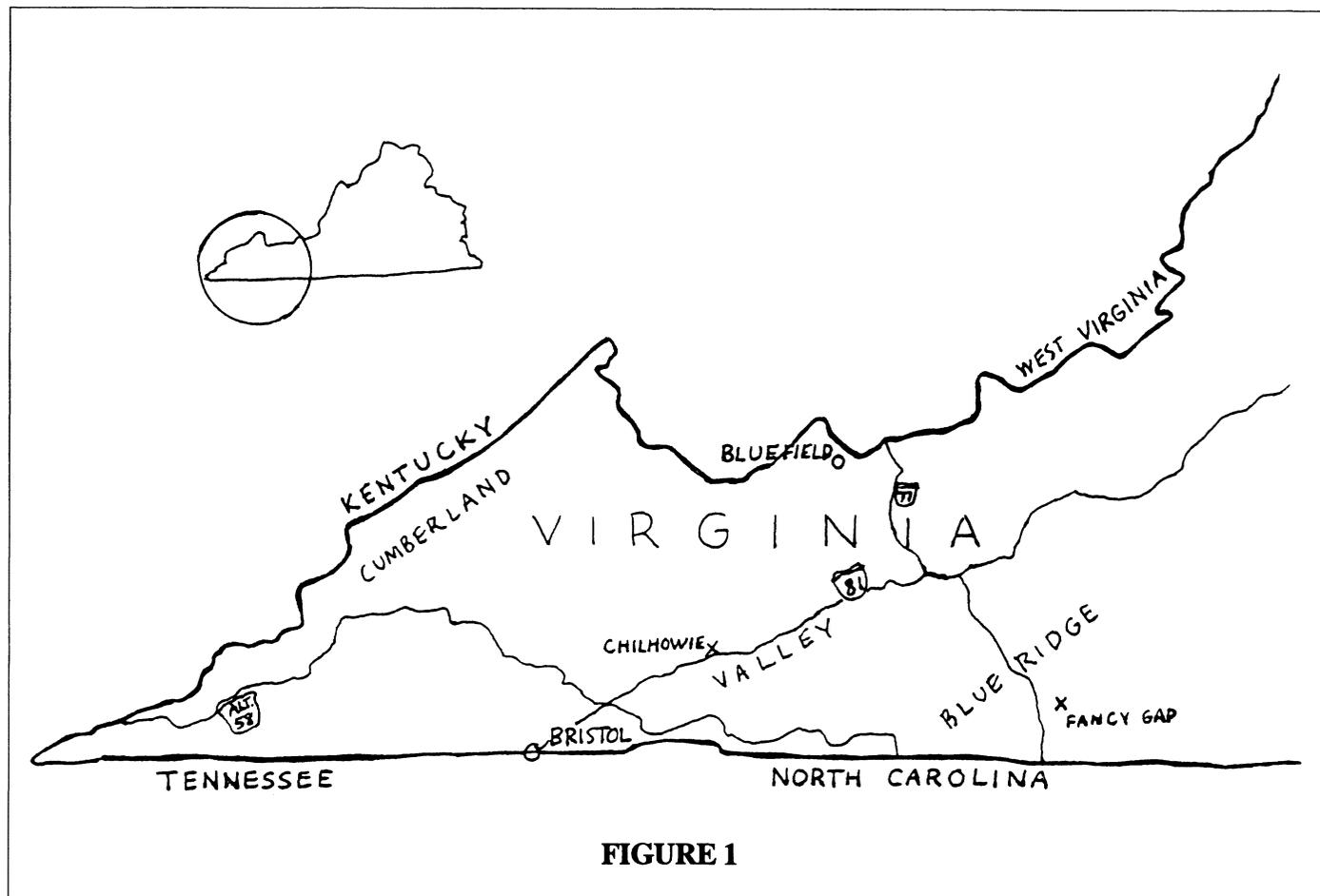


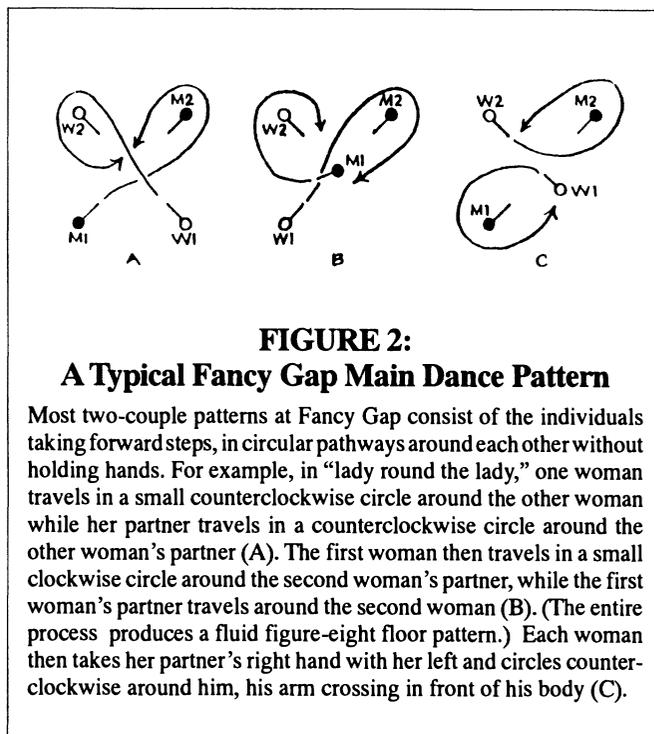
FIGURE 1

square dance, maximizing interaction among individuals. Other recreation enjoyed by these families includes wagon training, county fairs, and family get-togethers, all traditionally rural pursuits.

In Fancy Gap, each evening includes eight square dances of about fifteen minutes each, for a total of two hours, or two-thirds of the evening. Between square dances, people flatfoot or two-step for never more than three minutes. Square dancing, then, is the focus of the evening. Before each square dance, caller Verlyn Brady announces which main dance he will include as the central portion, and dancers choose whether or not to participate according to their main dance preferences. For example, "Georgia-Alabam" is the most popular main dance, and attracts the largest number. "Chase the Squirrel," a much more difficult pattern, is saved for later in the evening when experienced dancers are ready for it. Once the circle has formed, Mr. Brady calls the initial patterns for everyone. He then calls the main dance, which involves sets of two couples dancing together, and he generally does not speak again until he perceives that the dancers are tiring and it is time to call them back to the circle for the concluding patterns for everyone. For as long as ten minutes, in the middle portion of the dance, couples meet with other couples, each time repeating the same pattern at their own pace. No effort is made by the caller or the dancers to synchronize with the other sets of two couples who are also performing the same pattern. Significantly, most two-couple patterns at Fancy Gap involve the individuals dancing circular or figure-eight pathways around each other without holding hands (see Figure 2). Each dancer has permission to "go behind another's back," so to speak, disappearing momentarily, but returning to re-connect at the proper time, as established by the pacing of the group of four. By doing this kind of dancing, the dancers weave an environment for each other, a web of connectedness. The fact that this is called the main dance indicates that this is the most important part of the predominant dance form, that it is fundamental to the dancers' reasons for participating.

I found learning to dance difficult at Fancy Gap because most patterns do not involve hand-holding, so I could not be led through the dance. Subtle non-verbal cues indicate which dancer will remain still and which will travel around him/her. Because we were not trying to synchronize with other groups of four, when I had trouble learning, my group simply repeated the pattern for my benefit. No verbal instructions were given, but the woman who chose to stand still exaggerated her postural cue, stepping firmly downward with flatfoot steps and straightening her back, so that I could see it and understand that I was to travel around her. My partner gently pressed my back so that I could tell in which direction to travel. The teaching process took place within the dance, without hesitation, and also without verbal description as to where I should go or how.

Having completed the pattern with one other twosome, a couple turns and looks for another pair that is ready to dance with them. During the wait of a few seconds, people flatfoot (5) side by side with their partners, all the while scanning the crowd for other available couples. It is important never to dance twice with the same pair in one dance, so two free couples who have danced together already will both wait for others to become available. Throughout the dance, a consistent group rhythm is maintained by a slight downward pulse, lowering the center of gravity on



each beat of the music, allowing the knees to bend slightly, and rebounding resiliently on the "and." When another free twosome is spotted, the two couples flatfoot toward each other in a clear forward path and move directly into the pattern, in contrast to marking time in place as they did while waiting. No effort is made to maintain the shape of the large circle which was established at the beginning of the dance, or to move around its periphery while connecting with other couples. Couples move readily into the center to join with others, completely dissolving the original circular formation. The resulting appearance is a cheerful, rhythmic free-for-all in which an overall spatial structure is forfeited for maximum opportunities to interact.

The dancers' individuality in relation to the group continues into the beginning of the final patterns for everyone. When Mr. Brady perceives that the dancers are tiring, after doing the main dance for about ten minutes, he will call, "Swing your partner and promenade." All sets of four finish out the entire main dance pattern they are in, even if they have just begun it, before following the directive. There is no sense of urgency or of speeding up the pattern, no glance in the direction of the gradually forming circle. Upon completion of the pattern they are doing, each two-couple set swings and promenades, filtering from the center of the dance floor into a place in the line of couples promenading around the periphery of the circle. People in the circle subtly adjust to allow others to fit in. The whole process takes about thirty seconds, and couples chat as they proceed around the room. Mr. Brady says that dancers have told him they like his style of calling because by saying so little he does not interfere with their ability to hear the music and to dance, the latter referring to interacting at their own pace with a variety of other couples.

Chilhowie

An hour's drive west of Fancy Gap is the small town of Chilhowie, resting in the center of a section of the Great Valley

which extends from Pennsylvania to Tennessee. This valley has been a north-south travel corridor since pre-Columbian times, so the area has always been the recipient of influences from all directions. During the first half of this century, there were already several large towns in the valley, and as early as the 1920s roads were so good that it was not unusual for people to travel up to thirty miles by car to reach these towns. Louise Widener, born in 1900, recounts a wide variety of recreational opportunities in her childhood, including local college commencements, numerous fairs and tent meetings that came through the area, doing "Japanese dancing" in a play directed by an outside professional at a local opera house, and dancing the Charleston in 1925. Residents of this region experienced mobility and exposure to outside influences unparalleled in the Blue Ridge, and developed a taste for change and variety.

Friday nights in Chilhowie find middle-aged couples going out for an evening of old time dancing at the congenial Lions Club, conveniently located off an interstate highway. Each week a different band is booked to play, with musical styles ranging from old-time to country, from bluegrass to country-rock. The Lions Club dance itself has been running regularly since 1989, but the dance out of which it grew began in 1981 (6). A number of the regular dancers have only learned to dance in the last decade, as a result of attending these dances. Although their parents had danced, they themselves were forbidden to dance because of the association of music and dancing with roughhousing and lack of responsibility. Musician Bill McCall says that when he was growing up in the 1930s and 1940s "a boy with a guitar was considered trifling." Perhaps more importantly, several local consultants report the experience of embarrassment, beginning in the 1930s, about "hillbilly music" and the local traditional lifestyle in general. It is only since the early 1970s that old time dancing has been revived among valley residents. Evelyn Sturgill explains, "We have learned to appreciate all the things we were ashamed of. We got out our old quilts and things we used to make. We have had a revival of appreciation of our heritage." Old time square dancing is simultaneously a return to an art form of an earlier age and a novel recreational activity. In fact, the Friday night dance is one of several dance occasions in the area each week that include lessons in clogging, waltzing, two-stepping, and square dancing as well as regular dances featuring old time dancing. As a result of mutual interest, a community of dancers has developed. Most say that dancing is their primary form of recreation. "I don't know what we *did* do before we danced," say Gene and Jane Salyers, two of the dancers who teach classes for the others.

Two or three fifteen-minute square dances punctuate the three-hour evening, which consists of a variety of forms including two-stepping, clogging, waltzing, polka, and country-western line dances. The central portion of the square dance at Chilhowie consists of six to eight different "circle-fours," as the four-person patterns are called. The caller chants out each action of each circle-four, making sure that all groups are synchronized. Usually one pattern is followed immediately by a second, called in the same detail and followed by a call to swing first the "corner lady," or woman to the man's left, and then the partner, and promenade. The dancers simultaneously and immediately begin the promenade, which occurs on the periphery of the circle and never lasts more than a few steps before the next call to

"circle-up-four" with yet another pattern.

Very often the same two couples may circle-up-four with each other for all or most of the calls because the calls come in such rapid-fire succession, the patterns must always be synchronized, and the general structure of the circle must be maintained. The goal here is the fun and skill of doing a variety of different patterns, rather than connecting with as many people as possible. The circle-fours are never announced before the dance, but present an on-the-spot challenge to the dancers. Several different callers take the microphone at Chilhowie, sometimes as many as three on a single night. Those judged best are the ones who most effectively facilitate everyone making the frequent pattern changes clearly and accurately at the same time. Sometimes the caller chants, "*Couple* up four on the old dance floor" The couple is the functional unit of this square dance, joining with one other couple repeatedly to efficiently form the required patterns. By contrast, in Fancy Gap, though everyone has a partner, most four-person patterns involve individuals circling each other, rather than couples joining hands.

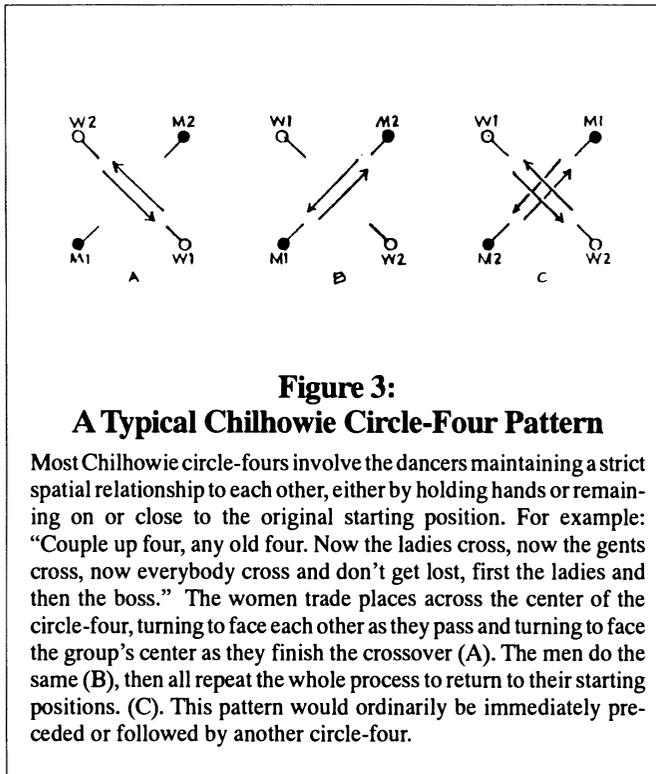
The four-person patterns are here referred to as "circle-fours," a structural description. They are formal elements that are part of the whole square dance. In Fancy Gap, it will be recalled, the similar configurations were identified as the "main dance," the primary component of the square dance.

In the six circle-four patterns called during a typical single dance at Chilhowie, strict spatial relationships are always maintained among the four dancers, either by holding hands or by staying on or close to the starting position. They watch not only those in their own circle-four, but also the others in the dance to be sure they are synchronized with them. Some glance toward the caller to be more aware of the next call when it comes. Knowing where the others are is important to these dancers, and this knowledge is achieved both visually and by touch. They must see each other or hold each others' hands in order to keep the entire group moving as a unit (see Figure 3).

When I had difficulty learning a transitional movement, my partner took me aside, off the dance floor, and described to me how to do it, demonstrating with his hands. "Keep holding my hand. Walk around me, all the way around. Walk forward, don't turn." He then led me through it once or twice, with verbal prompting, before taking me back into the dance. In order not to disrupt the smooth functioning of the rest of the dancing group, I had to be removed momentarily from the dance for my lesson. The lesson was delivered with description and included some practice before returning to the dance.

The Chilhowie dancers like to practice square dancing so that they can all be precisely together and present a polished appearance. The design of the arms in the circle-fours as well as in the swings and promenades contributes to the clear visual image. The primary caller, Kirby Smith, who has been calling and teaching square dancing in the area for fifty years, was not present at the Lions Club on the night of the videotaping for the documentary. Thinking that the film crew would return on another night, Smith practiced with the dancers the following Friday to get them all doing the movements in exactly the same way, so they would look even better than they had for the first taping.

The relative importance to the dancers of the visual effect was further evidenced by their responses to viewing the thirty-



minute video documentary, which included ten-minute segments of dancing at Fancy Gap, Chilhowie, and one other community. Upon watching the documentary, each group expressed disappointment that they had not appeared at greater length in it. A few from Chilhowie asked me if the reason so little of their dancing was shown was that they looked "too professional" for a program about old time dancing. After the general showing, the Chilhowie dancers set up a monitor in a back room, and nearly everyone spent considerable time watching the rough footage and commenting upon it.

In contrast, the Fancy Gap dancers, after the group viewing of the documentary, were not interested in watching the tape further; instead, they went on to spend the evening dancing just as they would ordinarily. The goal of their dancing is interacting, and this is how they prefer to spend their time. To the Chilhowie dancers, style and improvement of one's skills are important, and they used the video footage as an aid to this end. Within a year after the taping, some of them told me of their planned exhibition of dancing under Kirby Smith's direction at the Virginia Highlands Festival in nearby Abingdon. Fancy Gap dancers have never mounted such an exhibition in their twenty-year history (7).

Conclusion

The association of old time square dancing with the expression of community is more intricate and subtle than formerly imagined. The present examination of that relationship extends the findings of earlier studies. In Fancy Gap and Chilhowie, the overall structure of the square dancing has not changed during this century, despite the move from domestic to public settings, as Feintuch found in Kentucky, though it has become more complex in its internal structure. Fancy Gap dancers continue to use the figure-eight patterns without holding hands, which they

have used throughout living memory. The difference is that now everyone does them simultaneously, while formerly only one couple progressed around the circle, dancing with each other couple in turn. Chilhowie dancers still choose the hand-clasping patterns they have used throughout this century, but now, more than in previous years, each square dance incorporates many patterns, one after the other.

The Chilhowie experience parallels in some ways the midwestern square dance studied by Paul Tyler in that the community is not geographically based but is founded in the dancing itself. However, in Chilhowie, the dancers have become friends through the dancing, rather than being lifelong acquaintances who perpetuate their ties and shared memories in the dancing.

Both communities reflect Gail Matthews' conclusions that in square dancing the group works together to achieve a desired goal while individuals retain their unique identity. The question at hand is: precisely how is this achieved? The two communities studied have very different answers to this question in terms of their definitions of dancing and its purpose, and in terms of their definitions of community and its functioning.

In Fancy Gap, in the Blue Ridge, an area of relative economic and demographic stability within this century, old time dancing continues to be part of a fabric of varied recreational outlets, such as wagon trains and county fairs, which the same community shares. In Chilhowie, in the Valley, where mobility and variety have been the pattern for generations, old time dancing has provided the basis for the development of a community of dancers. The traditional forms resonate with many of these dancers as a part of their heritage, while also providing novelty because they have only recently been widely revived and because of the many changes within the dance.

In Fancy Gap, dancing is a fluid, ongoing interaction incorporating as many people as possible. Facilitated almost entirely by non-verbal communication, doing the dance is what is important; it is one of many ways in which this community interacts. In Chilhowie, dancing is the skillful production of a variety of clear, synchronized visual designs. As the primary recreation or hobby, it is practiced and polished with the aid of self-critique and lessons to produce a unified total picture. Underlying the dancing of both groups is a collective rhythm, which appears slightly more pronounced at Fancy Gap where interaction is kinesthetic rather than visual. Both groups incorporate footwork throughout the square dance patterns.

While individual expression is limited in Chilhowie to the footwork, in Fancy Gap it involves not only the footwork, but also the pacing of the main dance patterns, the choice to participate on the basis of the proffered main dance pattern, the dissolution of the circular structure for the major portion of the dance to allow individual interaction, individuals rather than couples circling each other, and the personal pacing of returning to the circle for the final large group patterns. The Fancy Gap dancers' responsibility to the larger group is to cement relationships among themselves by interacting with as many other individuals as possible, including trusting each other to go behind the back. Whole families attend in order to support the school, the center of the community, as well as to reinforce connections among the community members. Chilhowie dancers' responsibility to the group is to participate in producing the

desired visual image and to keep the entire group smoothly functioning. Financial support of the Lions Club's other activities is peripheral to the dancing. The individual arrives and participates as a member of a couple for the purpose of socializing with other couples. Each individual, as part of a couple, is challenged by the complexity of patterns, the rapidity with which one follows another, and the necessity to maintain the unity of the entire dancing group in terms of both temporal and spatial accuracy.

Each group's perception of what a community is and how it should function can be distilled from its dancing. In Fancy Gap the community as a whole is the significant entity and is maintained by continual interaction among its members, each individual interacting with as many others as possible. Considerable freedom of choice within a set framework is evidenced by small groups establishing their own pace for interaction

within the common rhythm, negotiating timing through non-verbal cues. Interaction is the goal; community is a process enacted as ongoing travelled pathways fluidly encircling one another. In Chilhowie, synchronicity, structure, visual appearance, and order are primary values. Clear spatial relationships are established, with everyone in place — physically in contact with nearby dancers and visually accessible to everyone else. The goal is producing visible patterns by the smooth functioning and efficient operation of the entire unit and all its members; community is a structure in space and time.

These conclusions do not negate the many similarities in the dancing of the two communities, but offer some beginning steps toward subtle differentiation which allow for more meaningful comparisons and generalizations with regard to understanding regional aesthetic values.

NOTES

1. Because the term "figure" is never used in Southwest Virginia to describe the interaction of the couples, I have chosen not to use it. Instead I use the term "pattern" for general reference, and the local terms when speaking specifically. In Fancy Gap, two-couple patterns are called the "main dance" and in Chilhowie they are called "circle-fours" or "circle-up-fours." The patterns for all the dancers together in circles or lines have no general name in either community, but only identifying names for individual patterns.

2. For history and descriptions of these musical styles, see Bill Malone 1968.

3. Dorothea Hast discusses the production of community in contra dancing, a different but related form, through "sensory perceptions, transformation, repetition, and habit memory" (1993, 28).

4. The thirty-minute video documentary *Step Back Cindy* was produced by Appalshop, Inc. under the auspices of the Virginia Commission for the Arts and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

5. Flatfooting is footwork dancing, a version of what Frank Hall calls "rhythm-making with the feet." In each community it has different form and style. In Fancy Gap, the feet are kept close to the floor, and Calvin Cole says, "You just pat a tune with your feet." In Chilhowie, the equivalent form is clogging, which consists of many steps improvisationally combined. In both communities, some dancers wear taps on their shoes to enhance the sounds of the feet.

6. In 1981, Lois Swann purchased the Bethel School, which had been closed by the school system, in the nearby town of Damascus. She offered Friday night dances to old time music. In December 1988, she discontinued the dances, but French Sturgill, a regular dancer at the School House, as it had been called, and a Lions Club member, arranged with the Chilhowie Lions Club to hold similar Friday night dances. Only one month elapsed between the closing of the School House dances and the opening of the Lions Club dances in January 1989, and many individuals continued to dance in the new location.

7. In July, 1993, twenty-seven Chilhowie Lions Club dancers performed at the National Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., organized by the Smithsonian Institution.

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