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**DANCING TO THE MUSIC:
DOMESTIC SQUARE DANCES AND COMMUNITY
IN SOUTHCENTRAL KENTUCKY (1880-1940)**

Burt Feintuch

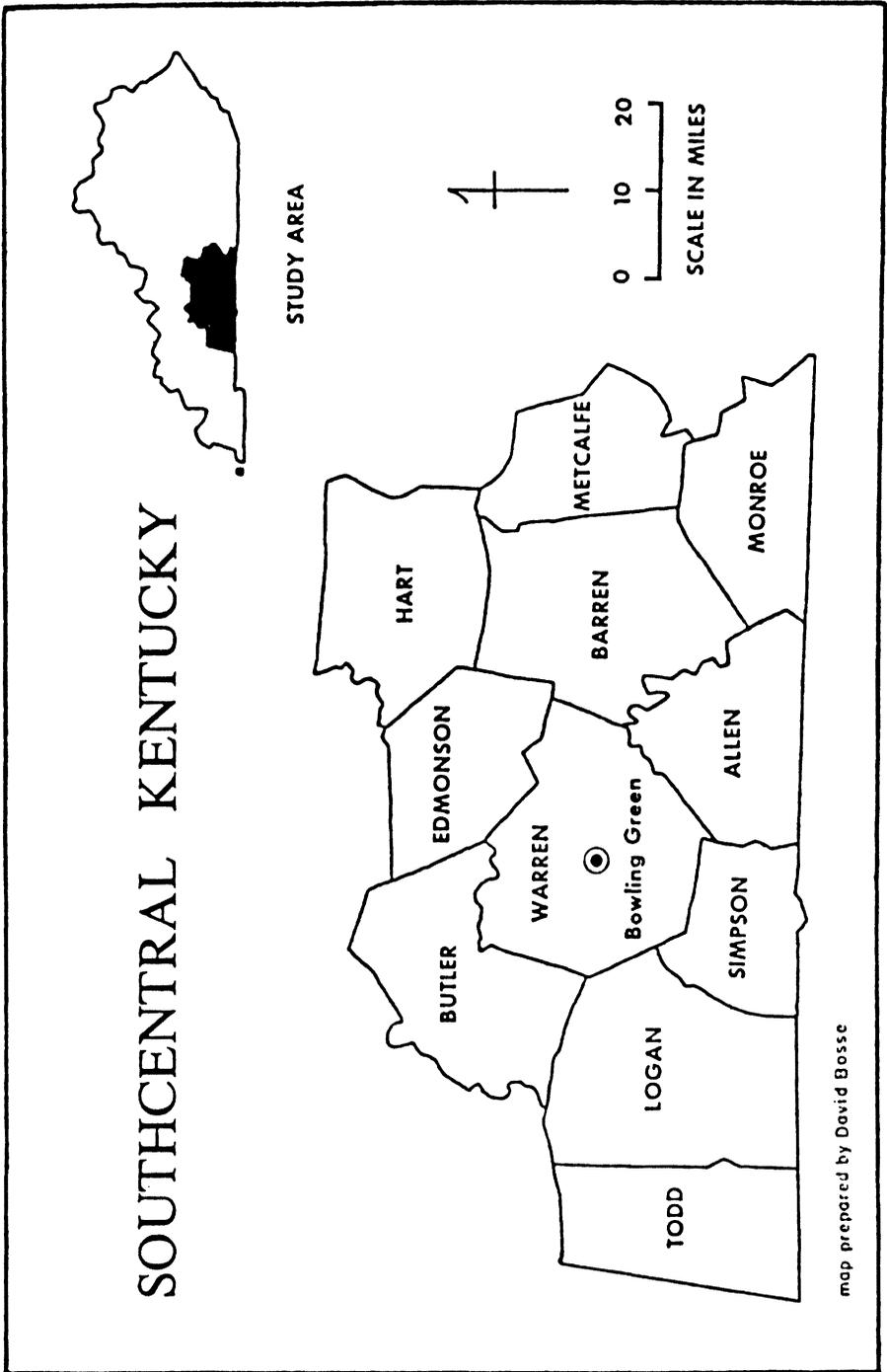
Scattered references suggest that domestic square dances—dance events held in the homes of one's friends and neighbors—were once common throughout America, and there are indications of antecedents in Great Britain, but there is no study which examines this practice in depth.¹ In fact, Alan Merriam has written that methods of dance reconstruction other than the use of written and pictorial sources have never been employed.² This article is the result of the use of oral historical means—interviews with twenty dancers, musicians, and callers, supplemented whenever possible by written documentation—to examine domestic square dance events in one area. In southcentral Kentucky from at least as early as the 1880s until the years of World War II, a vigorous tradition of square dancing in neighbors' homes flourished. Domestic square dances were a valued and frequent part of social life; a means for members of small communities to gather for expressive events, to be with friends and families, and implicitly to reaffirm many of the ties which bound them together in their social networks. When the community of dancers formed they acted out a representation of their sense of their own community, and that they did so frequently suggests the importance of this sense of community to the participants. Because of a lack of comparative data from other areas, it is difficult to judge whether my findings are unique or typical. Instead, it would be more appropriate to view this article as a beginning; a preliminary examination of an indigenous square dance tradition in its historical context.

I

American folklorists have paid little attention to the square dance. Joann Kealiinohomoku's survey article on folk dance cites no significant studies of square dance, and neither does an earlier major survey of dance scholarship by Gertrude Prokosch Kurath.³ Jan Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore* contains a section on dance, but the author only briefly mentions the square dance.⁴ The most recent study of square dancing—a consideration of social symbolism in a contemporary dance event—suggests that three articles are the extent of the attention devoted to the square dance in American folklore journals,⁵ and although the authors overlooked at least one important article, their assessment is suggestive of the paucity of published materials.⁶ The only lengthy study by a folklorist is David Winslow's dissertation which, despite the popular conceptualization of square dancing as either southern or western, is concerned with the rural square dance in the northeastern United States.⁷ There are no reconstructions of older square dance traditions in this country.

It is possible that this lack of scholarly effort may be attributed to questions of disciplinary territoriality: whose "property" is American dance, other than Native American dance, that is? The square dance and other forms of North American country dance seem to have fallen into the gap between European folklorists' interest in peasant dance and the interest of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists in Native American and nonwestern tribal dance. The emerging school of dance specialists who used to be referred to as dance ethnologists but now might better be characterized as dance anthropologists has also produced no studies of the square dance.⁸

This is not to say that there is no square dance literature; in fact, the opposite is true. A large body of publication focuses on square dancing as recreation. The folk dance revival movement in this country has generated a literature which ranges from philosophical to instructional.⁹ The best historical consideration, S. Foster Damon's *The History of Square Dancing*, represents an antiquarian's approach, also outside the mainstream of dance history research.¹⁰ Damon's fine, but short, book notwithstanding, we know more about square dance in revival than in its original social contexts. One project which might redress this imbalance would be a systematic search of regional literature, travelers' accounts and other printed records for descriptions of square dance events. Surprisingly, though, such a search yielded no useful data concerning southcentral Kentucky.



map prepared by David Bosse

II

The eleven counties I am calling southcentral Kentucky extend from Monroe County in the east to Hart County in the north and Todd County in the west. Other than by county, there is no uniformly agreed upon taxonomy for sections of Kentucky. Folklorists, geographers, journalists, and others who have cause to describe portions of the state disagree on how to do so. Most would agree that the area in which I did my fieldwork is part of the geographical section termed either the Pennyroyal, named after a local wild mint, or the Pennyryle, after a local pronunciation of that mint. Unfortunately, there is no consensus as to the limits of the Pennyroyal, and it is therefore difficult to say with any certainty whether my data is at all typical of the Pennyroyal. Neither is it possible to use the term "southcentral" with any assumption of a predictable response of recognition, as evidenced by the widespread but flexible use of the term in conversation and print; hence, the necessity of definition by county.

Other than census data, the best introduction to southcentral Kentucky is the 1927 *Geography of the Pennyroyal* by cultural geographer Carl Sauer.¹¹ According to Sauer, both the Wilderness Road from Virginia and the Ohio River served as conduits to the fertile land of southcentral Kentucky, resulting in a primarily agricultural way of life. Of those settlers and their descendants Sauer writes, "The present population of Kentucky is derived overwhelmingly from settlers who came within a single generation at the close of the eighteenth century. Virginians, Carolinians, and Pennsylvanians originally. . . they soon lost their distinctiveness in the effective melting pot of the transmontane frontiers. Largely unaffected since then by infusions of later and alien stocks, the Kentuckians possess a very strong background of tradition and kinship."¹²

In 1860, blacks constituted almost twenty-five percent of the population of the Pennyroyal, but this statistic had dropped to approximately twelve and a half percent by the time Sauer did his research.¹³ Currently most of the black population resides west of Warren County, and this may well be the legacy of a combination of geographic and historical factors which resulted in a greater proportion of slaveholding in that area.¹⁴ By 1940, the eleven counties I have grouped as southcentral Kentucky had a total population of approximately 186,000, of which there were roughly 18,000 blacks.¹⁵ Although the number of blacks declined in the period 1880-1940, the total number of residents grew slowly, from approximately 170,000 in 1880 to the roughly 186,000 mentioned above.¹⁶

Life and religion in southcentral Kentucky have traditionally been conservative. In 1927 Sauer wrote that “the people have continued to adhere to the soil in unusual measure. . . . Northern factory towns have not exercised as strong a pull upon the local population as might be expected,” and he elsewhere speaks of the persistence of a strong sense of continuity with the past.¹⁷ Farmers raise tobacco, corn and livestock (along with soybeans in recent years), and the church has always had a strong presence, with fundamentalist denominations being well represented.

In 1880, Bowling Green, the area’s largest town, had a population of over 5,000. Three other communities had populations in excess of a thousand.¹⁸ In 1940, Bowling Green remained the largest with its population of 14,500, and there were six other towns with more than a thousand residents.¹⁹ What emerges from these statistics is an image of a rural area served by local centers, and to the observer this still seems to be the case.

Whether the area constitutes a region is not easily determined. Folklorists have been vague in their use of the concept of region, and this is not the place to provide a definition.²⁰ It seems that we have been content to do fieldwork in locales, and then term those locales regions on the basis of our own presence and research there rather than using more objective criteria. If we are dissatisfied—as well we should be—with those standards, it is difficult to claim regional status for my eleven county area. At a minimum, though, historical and economic factors suggest the existence of some sort of underlying commonality in the area, and more impressionistically, there seems to be a shared awareness both of place, as in a sense of relationship uniting neighboring counties and distinguishing them from other areas, and of places, as in the general orientation toward Bowling Green, which serves as a regional center, and Nashville, the nearest metropolis.

III

Domestic Square Dances and Neighborhood Participation

The advent of calling, sometime around the War of 1812,²¹ ensured the popularity of the square dance, and it is probable that square dances have been held in southcentral Kentucky from about that time. My own fieldwork, however, coupled with several brief interviews on deposit in the Western Kentucky University Folklore, Folklife, and Oral History Archive, yields insufficient data concerning domestic dancing for the years prior to 1880, which is as far back as it is possible

to trace square dancing in the region; even that date, based on elderly informants' testimonies, is approximate. Nonetheless, until about 1940 square dancing in the home flourished, particularly in rural areas. With the approach of World War II, square dancing declined as a domestic activity. As transportation became easier, facilitating travel from community to community and from farm to town, square dances tended to move into larger, more public contexts—first to picnics and then to armories and dance halls. These events were staged by entrepreneurs, and the larger gatherings had replaced domestic dances by the early 1940s, symbolic of shifting notions of community occasioned by social change.

In southcentral Kentucky, domestic square dances exemplified traditional notions of community. Held almost every week during cold weather and somewhat less frequently in the area's sometimes enervating warm weather, the dances were an important context for socializing in rural districts. Next to church, they were perhaps the most regular of the various expressive events available to the members of rural social networks. If Sunday was the Lord's day, worship for many people followed a Saturday night of revelry. One informant describes his conception of his neighbors and one reason for dancing as follows:

Well, just plain common country people. Old farmers mostly. We didn't have jobs in town then. And a few of the children around here went off to schools, but most of us was just plain country folks. And we worked all week, and Saturday night we didn't have television to entertain us, so we'd all get together and have a good time.²²

A "good time" was a release from the obligations of work, a way to be with your neighbors, to perform, to court, and to affirm your place in your community. This sense of community always emerges in discussions of dances prior to 1940, and it is evident in the recurring use of the term "neighborhood" in descriptions of dance participants. Although we tend to connect "neighborhood" with populations of higher density than those of agricultural districts, the term has commonly been used to refer to social networks in rural southcentral Kentucky. The local concept of neighborhood is illustrated nicely in a 1940 thesis which concerns the area.

In local usage . . . a neighborhood means a group of families living close enough together to visit easily, to help each other with group work, to borrow tools, groceries, and medicines freely, and to know everything about each other's business. A neighborhood may be grouped around a

store and grist mill, a schoolhouse, a church, or an unusually influential family. The division may be along a creek or river, a highway, the boundary of a school district, or the confines of a party-line telephone. A neighborhood may be a few families on adjoining farms, or it may be an area four to six miles in diameter. The real line of distinction tends to be on similar beliefs and ideals rather than on geographical divisions.²³

In describing the people who came to the dances, one of my informants claimed, "Well, mostly just neighborhood when we had those dances. We just had the rounds like we had over in this neighborhood here. Well, they'd come from about two or three miles . . . it was just a neighborhood affair." Another claims, "The neighbors, the neighbors back in those days were very close together." "Whole neighborhoods would go," said one elderly informant. A neighborhood was as much a relationship of communication as one of proximity; that neighbors could be "counted on" and were available to help characterized their relations. "A neighborhood, see, back in those days was more like a family because if your neighbor's down there, and he got sick, and he needed something, why the neighbors would all go in and take care of everything."

In a world in which one could count on neighbors and where travel of more than a few miles from one's rural home was a rarity, it was virtually inevitable that socializing would take place on that scale: ". . . they went to neighbors' houses, by God, and danced, danced, by God, all night."

An octogenarian farmer sums it up:

Been living in this neighborhood for about sixty years, and I've growed up with the country, and . . . when I was young, why . . . folks all met together and had a nice time every Saturday night. We'd get the old fellow with the banjo, and we'd set the table out of the kitchen, get him up on the stove and play the banjo. And about six or eight couples would square dance. We'd have one of the best times. Everybody was young and happy. We didn't have much, but we—well, you see, we didn't have much if we had to dance in the kitchen. We'd take the kitchen table out and have room to dance. We done that many a time.

This concept of neighborhood is at the core of both the pragmatic and symbolic aspects of domestic dance. Participants learned of the dances through neighborhood channels. Word was passed in the course of visiting during the week, and the inevitable country store which was the commercial focal point of the neighborhood served as a source of information—signs were posted or information was shared

by word of mouth. Sometimes people would decide on the time and place for the next dance at the conclusion of an evening of dancing, and all the participants would know in advance of a dance to be held the following weekend. In later years, the telephone provided a channel, but it was still neighbors who received the calls.

The participants themselves were a cross-section of the neighborhood. Like church, a domestic dance was an open event, a public event within a limited social network, and the participants ranged from young to old. Attendance reflected an orientation toward the stable bonds of marriage and extended families. Entire families—children through grandparents—would attend, as would couples who were courting. Those not bound by the ties of marriage would also attend, but it seems as if the dances which served as an expression of neighborhood also may be viewed as symbolizing community norms such as those relating to kinship.²⁴ In my fieldwork, I have often heard people rue the passing of the dances because they were family events.

The domestic square dances would be held after supper (the evening meal). People would arrive on foot, horseback, or by wagon, in early years traveling as much as five or six miles. They would remove furniture from a room in the house—frequently the kitchen, the symbolic center of the house. Estimates of the number of participants vary, making it difficult to determine a specific pattern. One informant recalls dances attended by as many as a hundred neighbors; others speak of as few as fifteen, and many portray the dances as attracting thirty to fifty people. While the dancing was invariably in one room, overflow crowds would spread throughout the house and into the yard, where a fire might be built.

It was not at all uncommon for young and old to dance together, perhaps because almost everyone could dance, but the crowds were not evenly distributed by age. It was also not uncommon for young men to bring their sweethearts. In a setting where, according to virtually all my informants, everyone knew everyone else, courtship was monitored by many of the adults, and sexual improprieties seem not to have occurred, at least within the confines of the event itself. Although almost everyone knew how to dance, not all were able to do so because of limitations of space as well as personal preferences. Those who did not dance sat and watched, talked, and when refreshments were served, ate and drank.

Musicians and Callers

Local musicians provided the music. As would be expected, the fiddle was most common, and frequently a fiddler and a five string

banjo player would play together. Starting in the early decades of the twentieth century, a guitar was sometimes added. Generally the musicians were “just neighbors” rather than formally organized stringbands. If no fiddler could be found, another instrument became appropriate. The musician, or musicians, would sit so as not to block the dancing. It was apparently not unusual for them to sit on top of a table: “We had a big eating table. My daddy made it—what you call a dining table. I’ve seen that table big enough there would be three musicians in a chair on top of that table.” Some of the musicians would play one tune while the dancers completed a set; others report having played medleys, running through as many as four or five pieces during one set.

Sometimes the musicians were paid; other times they were not. At some dances, the participants would pass a hat or take up a collection. One fiddler is fond of relating a story of an extraordinary collection taken up at one dance where he provided music:

Yeah, one time I went to——down here and played. Me and——, right down here on that Mud Lick Road. . . . By God, I never seen nothing like it, and I had a fiddle, and they filled it full of paper money. Just dollar bills, you know. And then they finally got to dropping silver in it. Well, it got to where it [the fiddle] wouldn’t sound. . . . When we got home,——says “How we going to get it out?” I says, “Well, we’ll get a baling wire and hook it out.” It was way up towards a hundred dollars, a hundred and fifty. We hooked it out, and we like to never got some of them there quarters and things out. They wouldn’t come out, you know. This very fiddle I’ve got now. Now you talk about a dance.

In other instances, musicians would be “paid on the corner,” which means that each of the four couples comprising a set would contribute a small sum—a nickel in the early years, a dime or more later.

The dancing itself was directed by a caller who chanted instructions to the dancers. Callers were virtually always male; there are only very infrequent reports of women calling in instances when the male caller was outside having a drink or involved in some other temporary diversion. Callers were a necessity, and with the exception of one kind of solo display, to be discussed later, it was not appropriate to dance without a caller. Generally, the caller stood to one side of the dancers, although he himself sometimes danced or moved through them. In instances where several people knew how to call dances, they usually took turns. Calling is highly formulaic, and because of this it was apparently easy for some to learn to call through imitation and prac-

tice.²⁵ Most callers seem to have used the formulas in a number of fairly fixed sequences rather than using them to generate new dances at the moment of performance.

Calling was a performance, and, as such, had an attendant esthetic, perhaps best suggested by this bit of transcript:

H. S.: You take a real dance caller, and he knows all the steps and all the sets.

J. R.: There's a lot to it. . . . A good caller, he can just call on. He's got all this—

H. S.: And he does it in a singsong.

J. R.: It's kind of like an auctioneer or something.

B. Feintuch: He didn't sing, though, did he?

H. S.: No, just kind of chanted, and—"Get your partner, promenade on —"

J. R.: That's the way it went.

H. S.: And all such as that. He done it in kind of a tune. And it's quite interesting. I enjoyed it.

J. R.: He kept [time] with the tune you were playing on the instrument. That is what it was. And he sounded good—a good caller, he sounded good.

Some of the salient esthetic features of calling, then, are the ability to chant in a rhythmic fashion, to be heard, to keep time with the music, and to do so in a manner that "sounded good."

It is difficult to reconstruct dance movements themselves. We know that people are generally incapable of accurate descriptions of their own body movements, and because the dancers put themselves under the direction of a caller, they were free of any responsibility to remember the sequences of those movements which combined to make up a set.²⁶ Dancers tend to agree that many dances began with the command to "swing your partner" and ended with the reuniting of partners, but beyond that, the tendency is to recall some of the formulaic calls such as "ocean wave," "cage that bird," "right hand cross and left back," "circle left," "do si do," and others, without remembering how those movements fit into the overall scheme of the individual sets.²⁷ Again, this is because the primary responsibility for the choreography belonged to the caller. There seems to be nothing unique in the calls which the dancers remember. The same figures have been well known throughout the South, probably constituting a fairly constant core of nationally known square dance figures.²⁸

*The "Community of Couples"*²⁹

Sex roles at the domestic square dances reflected those of rural life. The public responsibilities—providing music and calling—were virtually exclusive male domains, as were the tasks of moving furniture out of the room in which the dancing was to be held, building fires outside, and other chores which might have been considered physical (as opposed to domestic) labor. Although local options generally dictated that liquor was not commercially available, it was almost inevitably present, and it too was apparently a male domain, peripheral in that it was usually consumed with at least a pretense of secrecy, generally outside. Women's responsibilities were more a reflection of household duties. They helped prepare and serve any refreshments (usually sandwiches), minded the younger children, and—like the men, but without liquor—tended to form their own small groups, taking advantage of shared interests, concerns, and observations. While women only rarely danced with other women, some informants report that this practice was more common in cities. Men never danced with other men, although one musician recalls several instances of dancers putting a dress on a boy who then served as a substitute for a female partner. Rigid conceptualizations of sex roles probably necessitated dressing the boy in female attire, since it would most likely have been unacceptable for a male dressed in masculine clothing to replace a woman. This sort of playing with definitions of sexuality has been noted in various festive contexts such as mumming and other types of drama.³⁰

Men and women were united in the couple, four of which comprised a square. During the dance the four couples sometimes played equivalent roles, as in swinging and promenading, but often one couple was featured, engaging in formulaic interactions with the other three by completing circuits of each of them in turn. A set generally ended when each couple had made the rounds in this manner.³¹ The dances, then, may be said to have been based in relationships between each man and woman constituting a couple and between the four couples who made up a square.

Those relationships involving couples may be seen as a microcosm of a worldview in which couples are a basic social unit. Richard Waterman has suggested that dance serves as a force for social cohesion, and it is apparent that this was so in the case of domestic square dances.³² In fact, if we look to dance structure we find in it a reflection of larger social structures. Domestic square dances virtually always commenced with an initial coupling followed by a series of movements in which

there were two possibilities, both of which are based in the relationship of coupling. Couples either acted as two-person units and interacted with other couples, using the stylized movement repertory of the dance; or couples temporarily broke up, and individuals interacted in a stylized manner with other individuals or couples. Dances seem always to have concluded with a re-coupling in initial positions; a symbolic affirmation of the primacy of the couple and of the status quo. The basic unit of the dance—the couple—was the basic unit of the community. As such, the dances supported general attitudes toward social organization in which couples were the norm of relationships between adults.

In the case of young, unmarried dancers, the domestic square dances served as reminders of their community's expectations regarding them as well as a context for experimentation with members of the opposite sex. In fact, the dancing may also be seen as a context which, although based in the fundamental unit of the couple, also provided an acceptable opportunity for participants to touch members of the opposite sex. Hence, the dance may be viewed as a time of sexual experimentation, deemed an appropriate part of the process which culminates in the formation of couples. Anya Peterson Royce has commented on the issue of dance as sexual contact:

Touching may also be acceptable or encouraged in the dance context, while it is not allowed in nondance situations. In Western civilization, legitimate opportunities for contact between people of the opposite sex used to be rare. Dancing provided one of the most frequent opportunities for tactile interaction, and people of both sexes put these opportunities to good advantage to size up potential marriage prospects.³³

Although sexual experimentation was almost certainly one of the attractions of the domestic square dance, we must remember that there were rigid constraints against more overt sexual activity and that the dances always ended with a symbolic statement of the primacy of the couple. It seems, then, that structurally the dances may be seen as relationships between couples, and that the structure accounts for what and how the dances communicated. Similarly, in their study of an ongoing square dance event in western Pennsylvania, Burns and Mack conclude that dance is "about the relationship of couples to community."³⁴ It is important to realize that as the dances moved from domestic settings, as a result of social change, the nature of the relationship between the dancing couples changed. That is, a structural change in the dancing was a result of change in the larger society. This will be discussed below.

Although couples were the primary unit of the set, there were occasional solo displays of dance virtuosity. This sort of dancing, which centers in complex rhythmic patterns of stepping, has a variety of names, many of which are known widely in the South. Names used locally include “jig dancing,” “buck dancing,” “buck and wing,” and “cutting the pigeon wing.”³⁵ Today the term “flatfoot dancing” is often heard. Some informants connect solo display with inebriation, but this is not the majority viewpoint. It does seem, though, that the solo dance displays were indicative of a heightened intensity of musical affect in which a dancer would “feel the music” in such a way as to have to resort to a special expressive outlet, a sort of display which disrupted the standard pattern of coupling. This sort of expressive “outburst” might well be similar in some ways to possession, glossolalia, and other examples of intense expressive behavior in some sectarian contexts.

Other Community Events

Perhaps the most common of all community events in southcentral Kentucky is the church service. Many writers have noted the traditional tensions between fundamentalist Christianity and dance, and such tension was (and is) certainly present in this part of Kentucky. Some churches forbade dancing of any sort. In an area in which small communities sometimes grow around a single church this meant that there were some neighborhoods where virtually no one danced, although play parties and other games were not uncommon. Other churches frowned on dancing, but many members of the congregation would dance on a Saturday night and go to church the following morning, as reported by one septuagenarian fiddler who said, “Yeah, by God, they’d dance and then go church on Sunday. Dance Saturday night. Sure. Plenty of them.” There were churches, too, which had no objections to dancing.

In addition to church and to square dances held in neighbors’ homes, community members had numerous other ways to get together. For example, agricultural life necessitated group labor, and it was common for friends to gather for events such as bean shellings, corn huskings, log rollings, and tobacco stripping. Sometimes a dance would follow. Musicians and singers would gather in a neighbor’s home for a musical party: an evening of singing old-time songs and playing music.³⁶ Card parties would bring friends together; rook was a great favorite. School events drew community audiences. In the years before radios became common, neighbors would visit friends who owned one, and an evening would be devoted to listening to the radio, particularly if the Grand Ole Opry was being broadcast. Excerpts from interviews illustrate the range of neighborhood social activities:

B. Feintuch: What other kinds of things would bring people together in other people's houses? People would visit, would have other kinds of parties?

H. S.: No, not unless they had, women had quilting parties then, you know. Quilting bees. Men have, oh—

J. R.: Maybe tobacco stripping.

H. S.: Yeah, tobacco stripping, log rolling, well used to be but that's been too many years ago. That was when they had log rolling.

O. H.: Use to on Saturday nights, there'd be just maybe one or two around the neighborhood would have a radio, the people, go to those people's houses to hear the Grand Ole Opry.

M. G.: And they used to have when I was growing up, they would have what you called bean shellings. They would have a lot of beans, you know. This room wouldn't hold them sometimes. Well, we'd shell beans a long, long time. And then we could turn it into a dance, and then we'd dance the rest of the night. I have done that a many a time, too.

J. B.: Well, I don't know. There's awful friendly people, and—they used to have corn shuckings, I've heard my daddy talk about that, you know. I don't know where, I can't remember that. It was back in my, before my time. Then they'd have a corn shucking and then that night they'd have a dance, you know. And a log rolling. They'd have log rollings, you know, help people clear new grounds, and roll the logs in piles and burn them that night. Then they'd have a dance. I've heard my father tell about places like that.

Domestic Square Dances and Social Change

As transportation became easier, in the 1930s according to informants, a new sort of dance context developed in southcentral Kentucky. These outdoor dances were not limited to one social network, as were the domestic dances, and they may be considered the first major shift from the domestic settings. In warm weather outdoor dances were common, and were most frequently promoted for financial reasons. Fourth of July picnics and square dances were held all over the region; refreshments were sold and sometimes an admission fee was charged. Musicians were hired. South and west of Bowling Green, the term "bran dance" is used to refer to these outdoor public dances, and although the origin of the term is obscure, it has been noted elsewhere. In a bran dance the dancers would cover the ground with bran or sawdust and dance on it, the bran presumably having been used to keep the dust down.³⁷

Participants in the outdoor dances were not members of a single social network. One informant says that people would travel as far as

fifty miles to such a dance, and that “you got all kinds of people in there.” These were not neighborhood events—everyone did not know everyone else. In fact, the outdoor dances were one of the very few social events held by whites but sometimes attended by blacks, an occurrence virtually unheard of in the domestic square dance settings.³⁸

Blacks participated in the outdoor dances in two ways: as hired musicians or as onlookers, remaining at the edge of the setting, never dancing. Two informants described black-white relationships as follows:

B. Feintuch: But they didn't dance?

H. S.: No, no, they never any of them ever—

B. Feintuch: Were any of them bothered by it?

H. S.: There was a real, just a—

J. R.: They, back then, see, what the, the colored people—I don't know, there wasn't too much communication between the colored people and the white people—

H. S.: Now the colored folks would have their own dances though.

J. R.: They was treated, they was treated all right.

H. S.: Yes.

J. R.: They treated every, the white people all right—we treated the colored people all right. But there was a, there was a distance between us.

H. S.: Yeah, they stayed in their place and we stayed in ours.

J. R.: They didn't, they didn't interfere with our carryings on.

By the late 1930s or early 1940s domestic square dancing had become a thing of the past in southcentral Kentucky. Those dances had been based in the fairly stable social networks of small neighborhoods, but by the Second World War those networks were increasingly affected by social change which rendered them less stable, less cohesive, and consequently less central to the lives of their participants. The most frequently reported cause of neighborhood instability was the change of attitudes toward travel. In the words of one informant, “Having the dances just—it discontinued in the homes. . . . I just don't know why. I suppose that we got . . . automobiles and things, you see, that took up, you know, we had more things to do, other things to do, and that stopped the dances in the home.” A person was no longer limited to his or her environs, and it was increasingly easier to travel from rural neighborhoods to the entertainments available in town. Roadhouses and dance halls in hotels offered dances which attracted larger crowds, and entrepreneurs produced dances in armories. One could meet new people at these public dances, and roadhouses and dance halls featured

round dancing along with squares. Round dancing is a common term for couple dances, such as the waltz, in which the men and women have their arms around each other. Domestic square dance events virtually never included round dancing. It may be that round dancing was considered more overtly sexual and therefore less appropriate for domestic settings.

Along with changing attitudes toward travel, liquor is commonly cited as a major cause of the domestic dances' decline. According to one informant, "That's what finally broke it up. It just got so—it got so out of hand that they couldn't, the ones that went just for a good time and dancing, they couldn't have a good time because the ones that went to show off, drink a little, got boozing it." Some connect the increase in intoxication with the effect of the military service on local youth during and after World War II. While others believe that the difficulties pre-dated the war, there is general agreement that alcohol was increasingly present, and that this caused fights, sometimes ending in knifings or shootings. With problems such as these becoming common, dancing became less appropriate as a domestic activity. In armories and dance halls it was easier to control such activities, and as a consequence dancing moved into public commercial contexts.

Both Frances Rust and Phillip J. S. Richardson have suggested that change in dance structure may be a response to changes in the larger social system, and this may be seen in the transformation of square dancing in neighbors' homes to dancing in public settings such as armories.³⁹ This transition was accompanied by a striking structural change. Although in both settings the couple was the primary unit, the relationships between the couples in the two contexts are of a different order. In domestic dancing the square defined those relationships, and the dance was a closed system in that during the dance each couple had an opportunity to interact with each of the other couples, and each dance concluded with the couples having returned to their original positions within the "community of couples." Everyone knew everyone else, everyone interacted with everyone else, and the network remained intact and well-defined. What was, and still is, called square dancing in public (rather than domestic) contexts such as armories is based in a circular rather than square relationship. Rather than one square for every four couples, public square dances begin with all the dancers forming a large circle. Couples join hands with each other and with those next to them. The dance movements involve breaking the circle into smaller shapes defined by two couples facing each other. Each two couples interact briefly, and then the couples move on and

are united with another couple, thereby forming another transient two-couple pattern. In theory, members of a couple would work their way around the large circle, interacting with every other couple, but in practice the caller rarely allows the dance to continue long enough. Rather than symbolizing a closed and stable network, as did the squares of the domestic dances, 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. The community of couples has become too large. As square dancing in southcentral Kentucky became a more public activity because of social change, dance structure changed to accommodate new circumstances. The change may be seen as a reflection of shifting concepts of community in which one's neighborhood no longer was the center of one's social life.

This has been a preliminary examination of an indigenous dance tradition—the practice of dancing in one's neighbors' homes, a practice which had, by about 1940, become untenable. In a southcentral Kentucky domestic square dance, the neighborhood participants gathered for a social evening, and in the dances themselves they symbolically acted out their norms of community in which couples were the basic unit and their social networks—their neighborhoods—were represented as a bound unit, the square. With the increasing mobility and instability which developed around World War II, the domestic dance contexts gave way to newer settings in which the older networks were not as significant, and as a result the nature of the dance symbolism changed. That in this case the domestic square dance exemplified its participants' concept of community is apparent; further study is needed to extend this conclusion to other dances and locales.

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NOTES

¹ For old world antecedents see George S. Emmerson, *A Social History of Scottish Dance* (Montreal: McGill Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 142-43 and J. F. and T. M. Flett, *Traditional Dancing in Scotland* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 269-70. A brief treatment of a northern United States domestic dance tradition may be found in Ralph Page, "Kitchen Junket," *Northern Junket* 1 (1953): 2.

² Alan Merriam, "Anthropology and the Dance," in *New Dimensions in Dance Research: Anthropology and Dance*, ed. Tamara Comstock (New York: Committee on Research in Dance, 1974), p. 11.

³ Joann Wheeler Kealiinohomoku, "Folk Dance," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 381-404. Gertrude Prokosch Kurath, "Panorama of Dance Ethnology," *Current Anthropology* 1 (1960): 233-54.

⁴ Jan H. Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), pp. 259-73.

⁵ Thomas A. Burns with Doris Mack, "Social Symbolism in a Rural Square Dance Event," unpublished ms.

⁶ Robert D. Bethke, "Old-Time Fiddling and Social Dance in Central St. Lawrence County," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 30 (1974): 163-84.

⁷ David John Winslow, "The Rural Square Dance in the Northeastern United States: A Continuity of Tradition," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1972.

⁸ See the overviews provided in Kurath, "Panorama of Dance Ethnology," and Anya Peterson Royce, *The Anthropology of Dance* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977).

⁹ One book which exemplifies both ends of that spectrum is Richard Nevell, *A Time to Dance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977).

¹⁰ S. Foster Damon, *The History of Square Dancing* (Barre, Vermont: The Barre Gazette, 1957).

¹¹ Carl Ortwin Sauer, *Geography of the Pennyroyal* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Geological Survey, 1927).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-58.

¹⁴ P. P. Karan and Cotton Mather, ed., *Atlas of Kentucky* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1977), p. 28.

¹⁵ Bureau of the Census, "Kentucky, Composition of the Population by Counties, 1940," in *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, Vol. II: *Characteristics of the Population*, Part III, "Kansas-Michigan" (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), pp. 204-10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sauer, p. 149.

¹⁸ Bureau of the Census, "Kentucky, Population of Minor Civil Divisions," in *Compendium of the Tenth Census of the United States: 1880*, Part I (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), pp. 149-60.

¹⁹ Bureau of the Census, "Kentucky, Population of Incorporated Places: 1940 and 1930," in *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, Vol.

I: *Population and Number of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), pp. 425-26.

²⁰ In a recent article Suzi Jones concerns herself with this problem. See her "Regionalization: A Rhetorical Strategy," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13 (1976): 105-20.

²¹ Damon, p. 245.

²² All quoted testimonies come from my own fieldwork.

²³ W. W. Chamberlain, "Folk Music in the Kentucky Barrens," M. A. thesis, Stanford University, 1940.

²⁴ In their consideration of a single square dance event (a sample of a series of ongoing dance events), Burns and Mack concern themselves with the symbolic nature of that event. See their "Social Symbolism in a Rural Square Dance Event."

²⁵ There are obvious parallels here to oral-formulaic theory, and further study is needed.

²⁶ Work in kinesics suggests that people are unable to describe their own bodily movements. See Ray Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).

²⁷ Ocean Wave is described in Ida Levin, *Kentucky Square Dances* (Louisville: Recreation Council, 1928), pp. 18-19.

²⁸ A national finding list of square dance figures does not exist, although there is one for one portion of the country. See J. Olcott Sanders, "Finding List of Southeastern Square Dance Figures," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 39 (1965): 319-21.

²⁹ This term is from Burns and Mack, p. 37.

³⁰ Herbet Halpert and G. M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Toronto: Published for Memorial University of Newfoundland by Univ. of Toronto Press, 1969) is replete with examples. See pp. 50, 58-59, 89, 93-95, 99, and 130.

³¹ This differs from more modern revived western or club square dancing in which all couples tend to remain active during much of the dance.

³² Richard A. Waterman, "Role of Dance in Human Society," in *Focus on Dance II*, ed. Bettie Jane Wooten (Washington: American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, 1962), pp. 46-50.

³³ Royce, p. 199.

³⁴ Burns and Mack, p. 37.

³⁵ Many of these terms are widely known. See for example the article by Gretchen Schneider, "Pigeon Wings and Polkas: The Dance of the California Miners," *Dance Perspectives* 39 (1969).

³⁶ See Chamberlain, "Folk Music in the Kentucky Barrens," which largely concerned musical parties.

³⁷ References to bran dances are scattered but not at all uncommon. For examples, see Richard Thornton, *An American Glossary*, 3 vols. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1962), Vol. III, p. 46; and Thomas D. Clark, *The Kentucky* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1942), pp. 127-28.

³⁸ Blacks greatly influenced white dance in the antebellum South, but in the 1880-1940 time period I am concerned with there were no opportunities at either domestic or public square dances in southcentral Kentucky for black-white interaction of the sort which would influence white dance form. Note that in the outdoor dances the blacks were spectators, not dancers. The standard reference for black-white dance influence is Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970* (Palo Alto, Cal.: National Press Books, 1972).

³⁹ Frances Rust, *Dance in Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) and Phillip J. S. Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1973).