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Square Dance

MEMORIES

—By C. Milton Harrison

I first heard about square dancing as a child while my dad and I were visiting my uncle near Geary. As they talked about their early days, I listened as my uncle told how he made a living for his family of thirteen children. To supplement his income, he played the fiddle at many square dances and round dances for fifty cents a night.

At age 18, I ordered a guitar from Sears or Montgomery Ward for \$4.50. I went to my first dance along about then too, which was held in one room of a home. There were no mikes or amplifiers in those days. The caller called from inside the square or if the dance was held in a large room or a barn, the caller stood between two squares and called.

I went to a lot of dances during the next year or two and then bought a fiddle. The first time I played for a dance, a neighbor boy asked me to play guitar in place of his sick cousin. "I don't know when to change chords yet," I remember telling him.

"That's OK," he said. "I'll tell you when to change, and it won't make any difference anyhow. After thirty minutes, they'll be so drunk they won't know the difference." I gave it a try and found out how right he was. That was way back in the 30's, and some of those dances became kind of rank.

We played just about every Saturday night at one fellow's house. In those days each gent paid 25 cents for a number and got to dance only when his number was called. One night two guys got into a fight and were really knocking each other around. The guy that lived there grabbed his gun and shot up through the ceiling. The fight stopped for a few seconds, and the guy with the gun ordered everyone outside. Once outside, the landlord made everyone form a ring so the two guys who were mad could get into the ring and fight it out. The ring was made; but just before the fight commenced again, the referee warned everyone not to get involved or he would shoot their rears off. The fight started again and lasted until the fighters were exhausted and headed back in for the dance. But most dances were fun.

At first our band consisted of a guitar and a fiddle; then we got a fellow to play the tenor banjo. About two months later, we added another band member who played the "Bull Fiddle" or bass.

Soon there was talk about non-alcoholic square dancing and even lessons (today, square dancing is traditionally a non-alcoholic or family activity).

I believe it was 1948 or 1949 when a bunch from Anadarko got a lady from Oklahoma City to come down and teach lessons in the Anadarko National Guard Armory. As I recall, her name was Maggie. The people who finished her class were called "Maggie's Rounders." Maggie wanted a live band to play for the graduation dance, and we were asked to play. The popularity of square dancing soon sky-rocketed. Towns all over the country were having lessons and square dances.

We were soon playing every night of the week and were asked to play on Sunday night also. We played one Sunday night, but then let it be known that we didn't play on Sundays anymore.

I was looking through some old calendars and noted that the first six months of 1952 we played fifty-four square dances. The records for 1952-1955 have been lost, but in 1955 we were one of the bands that played for the National Square Dance Convention in Oklahoma City on April 21-23. The late fifties were busy for us, although the prominence of square dancing began to fade. In 1955, we played for ninety-nine dances and began to see a decline in playing opportunities.

Figures for other years are as follows:

1956—54 square dances.

1957—54

1958—63

1959—46

1960—29.

In 1960, several clubs quit and some others started using records. On March 21, 1961, I played my last square dance—at Mountain View.

The South Central District had some of the best callers in the state or region. Most of the callers back then didn't charge for calling; just those who were teaching classes charged a fee. There were so many callers that dances traditionally had guest callers. Back then, even though many callers didn't charge, band members were usually paid about \$10 a night plus mileage for the driver. Not only did men call; women also called. My own daughter, Galeda Harrison, at 13, became one of the youngest female callers in the state.

We played many towns in Southwestern Oklahoma and Western Oklahoma before we quit. In fact, some of our band members moved on to form their own bands and keep the square dance tradition alive in other areas and states. I have many fond memories of those times.

In 1962, I went to work for the Anadarko Police Department and retired several years ago. We really did miss square dancing and started dancing again in 1980, although I pick up my Martin now only for personal amusement. Square dancing has a rich history and is still an important part of the social scene in Southwestern Oklahoma.

*(C. MILTON HARRISON, former Anadarko Police Chief, is a farmer, guitar player, and square dancer. He and his wife, Lois, had two children—Galeda and Richard (deceased). Mr. Harrison moved to Anadarko in 1926 and for years operated a dairy farm. This article is his first submission to WESTVIEW.) **

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