

A SECRET WORTH SHARING

Several years ago, I believe that it was about 1990, I called a dance in a small town in Western Kansas, population around 2000 people, it was the Friday night of Mother's Day Weekend. I have a brother who at that time lived in a town about 100 miles to the west of this town. He decided to come and surprise me at the dance. He drove all that distance, stopped at a couple of places to find out where the dance was going to be held, and to no avail, had no luck. No one could tell him where the local square dance club danced. This is just one of the many problems we have in this square dance activity, everyone wants to keep it a secret.

I love this activity, I think that it is safe to say that we all feel the same, or we wouldn't be here this weekend.

I feel much stronger about this activity than most because I have made a living calling square dances since 1981, needless to say I'm concerned, our activity is dying a slow death.

I'm not going to stand up here and tell you about any kind of "Plan", I don't have such a thing. I am going to try and convince you however, to revert back to something that my folks planted in me when I grew up on a dairy farm in Southern Illinois, and at the age of 8 started milking 70-75 cows twice daily. I'm talking about the old adage, HARD WORK.

Nothing worthwhile comes easy, it takes lots of hard work, it is about time that we stop giving excuses for no beginners, clubs folding, no young people, too many weeks of lessons, too many calls, too many levels of calls, no one wearing square dance clothing, etc, etc. It is time we all rolled up our sleeves and got to work, no more excuses. I'm sure that this weekend we are not going to discuss anything that we haven't heard before. Hopefully, together, we can come up with a shot in the arm that it might take to get us all rejuvenated.

The best form of advertising is word of mouth, we can do demo's, advertise until we are blue in the face, but unless we go by and pick up the new beginner dancers they are not going to come to the first night of lessons on their own. So was the case in 1975, when we took our beginner lessons, the only reason we went was because some folks drove by the house and picked us up and took us to lessons. They continued to do so until we finished our 12 weeks of classes. They also drove us to our first few dances, by this time we were hooked and we started taking turns driving. This effort on their part not only showed us this wonderful activity, but it also gave us some life long friends.

Square dancing is not for everyone. Not everyone can learn to square dance, but we must do our best to bring these folks to lessons and let our callers do their magic and keep them having fun. We all know that if they don't have fun the first night, they won't come back for the second.

People keep saying, "If we don't get some young people in the activity we are not going to survive." In my opinion we need to concentrate on other areas of recruiting. All the years that I have been on the road, I've made lots of friends. I spend many nights with these friends in lieu of staying in a motel. You would be surprised at the number of grand parents that are helping raise their grand children, simply because mom and dad don't have the time. It seems that the young people these days have to work 2 jobs, 50-60 hours a week, just to make ends meet. For this reasons the grandparents baby-sit the grand kids.

Leisure time is in very short supply, so folks, let's rethink our focus group. Since the young parents don't have the time, let's look to those who do. Today it seems that

people are retiring younger. We have lots of 55-60 year olds retiring, and this age gets younger all the time. Many of these people have their children raised and often times are looking for activities to share together. Maybe we should go after another group of people. Since the young folks don't have the time, perhaps we should try and convince the folks that do to take lessons, the retired people.

If we tried to recruit some of our public figures - folks would want to associate with them. A perfect example is when Jimmy Carter was elected President, 5000 square dancers from the state of Georgia went to Washington, D.C., to dance at one of the Inaugural Balls because he belonged to the Peanut Promenaders of Plains, Georgia. In the summer of 1977, my first National Convention, it was rumored that the President was going to attend, 30,000 plus attended the convention that year, 8800 attended this past year in St. Paul, Minnesota.

If the Principle or Superintendent of Schools Square danced, we would never have a problem finding a place to dance. If the Sheriff or Police Chief danced, people would like to rub elbows so to speak with them. If the Dentist or Doctor danced, the same would hold true. People like to be associated with public figures. We need to give this area of recruiting a lot of thought.

Square dancing is the best-kept secret in the world. We need to educate our Chamber of Commerce's, our police departments, and our city offices. When our travels

take us to a new town, try to find where the club dances. No one seems to know there is a square dance club in town, let alone where they dance!

We also need to advertise more. You can go into almost any discount store, grocery store, retail store, etc., and look at the bulletin board, there is nothing posted about the area square dance club activities. Why is it that there are flyers posted for garage sales, line dance classes, gospel singings, but not square dances? I know that the store personnel update their bulletin boards weekly, why can't we return weekly and give them a new flyer.

When we do demo's to advertise lessons, we need to go to the stores that have all of the activity, this is not the mall. We need to go to the discount stores, the Target's, K-Mart's, Wal Mart's, etc; this is where the people are.

Another good place to advertise would be in the rest areas along the interstate. This, the federations or associations could take upon themselves to make a tri fold type handout listing all of the clubs in the area and the local contacts, I feel this would be quite helpful for travelers. We can also contact our state highway departments, and volunteer to clean up a section of highway. They not only provide you with a sign that says the square dancers are doing their part in cleanup, but it is usually "Free" advertising, and we all know we like free. Let's not forget about advertising on the home front. Many of us display decals on the cars, vans, and RV's we drive. Ladies, many of you enjoy flying colorful banners outside your home - think about flying a colorful square dance banner.

Now let's address the dance level issue.

Yes it's true, 30 years ago we had larger crowds, we all danced together, at one level, but times change. We now have more than one level, which gives us more than one dance floor, but that's not bad. We all like different things in our lives, if everyone drove a General Motors car, it would be boring. The same with square dancing, we need levels. Not everyone can dance 5 times a week. Lots of folks can only dance 5 times a month, yet others can only dance 5 times a year. In my opinion we don't need to move calls from one

list to another, if we callers are not able to teach folks to have fun in a few short weeks, then perhaps we need better teachers.

One of the most popular excuses that we hear from other callers and dancers is that it takes too long to get new dancers into the activity. That's just what it is, an excuse. If we as callers can't show these new folks a good time the first night, they won't be back for the second. We should be able to show them a good, fun dance in a few short weeks.

I spend the winter months as resident caller for Sunburst RV Park in Harlingen, Texas; I must say that my situation is different from that of a lot of other callers. I have made it work quite well for not only me, but also the square dance activity.

The folks that come to South Texas, for the most part are there for 2 months. This means that we have to be able to teach them the Basic list of calls in 8 weeks. Some do stay another month, and if so they can learn the Mainstream list also.

When they leave at the end of the season they are not able to do a lot of dancing simply because you can't find a basic level club around the country.

When they come back the second season they may take a review and or Mainstream lessons and dance Mainstream that season and for the remainder of the spring and summer.

It usually takes them 2 to 3 seasons before they take Plus and are able to do very much dancing during the summer. Even then, many of them are not able to dance during the summer simply because clubs go dark, they are visiting the grand kids, etc., etc, etc.

Yes it's true, it takes me at least 2 to 3 years to get these folks into the activity. But once the cycle gets started, it just keeps growing and growing.

Let's address the clothing issue for a bit. We live in such a casual society; acceptable square dance attire has gone thru some changes in the past few years. That's fine, but, if we don't look like square dancers, no one knows we are square dancers. In my opinion the clothing issue is just another excuse. I like to dress casual as much as the next person, but there is a time and place for this. We all have gone to that restaurant either before a dance or after a dance and heard the many positive comments about the way we square dancers dress, not only from the employees but other patrons. I feel casual attire is appropriate for any daytime dance activity, reserving square dance attire for the nighttime dance.

I wish to thank the Conclave committee for asking me to be the guest speaker. I also wish to thank each and every one of you attendees for taking time out of your busy schedules and joining me this weekend in an effort to provide that booster shot that not only we need to keep us from getting stagnant, but also to provide some new and fresh ideas to possibly rejuvenate the activity.

In conclusion, where is our activity heading!!! Right down the tubes if we don't get off our backsides and go to work. We have got to advertise, display bumper stickers, fly flags, pass out brochures, wear the clothing, etc, etc. We need to share the enthusiasm we feel for dancing! People who know us, should know that we square dance. Lets look like square dancers as we "walk the walk" and "talk the talk". Let's all do our part to share this great folk heritage so worthy of preserving!

Updated 6/9/04