

A History of Round Dance Teachers' Association Of Southern California

Written by Merle Cramlet, May, 1984

The old fashioned Square Dance (barn dance) that was popular in the early 1900's was an orchestra controlled affair (they hired the caller) and was most often held in the loft of a barn. Each caller had a repertoire of 8 or 10 dances that were always called the same. Of course the orchestra had an important part for they not only played the hoedown music, but the "Varsouvienna," the "Rye Waltz," "Eva Three-Step" and other "old time" dances.

Because the orchestras were expensive and the calls were never changed (and there was much drinking), Square and Round dancing almost faded from the American scene.

In 1948, Lloyd Shaw of Colorado Springs was the recognized Square Dance Leader. He felt that ballroom dancing and square dancing did not mix, but some folk and old-time dances added variety to the program. He wrote what is believed to be the first Round Dance book in which he listed basic Round Dance figures and a few rounds such as "Black Hawk Waltz" and "Laces and Graces." In 1951, a couple of popular rounds were "Blue Pacific Waltz" and "Beautiful Ohio" which were written by a Folk Dance instructor. At that time, Folk Dancing played an important part in Round Dance development.

At first callers taught and even wrote their own dances, using their own brand of basics and their own written and oral cues. In 1952, there was a great deal of confusion when Helen Horne and Ralph Maxhimer each wrote dances to "Tennessee Waltz" music. Round Dancing was in a state of confusion and disorganization and might have disappeared from the picture had not Helen Horne asked all local callers to meet and try to solve the problem. It was June, 1952, that Gerald and Iola Reeser, Merle and Joy Cramlet, Med McMasters and Jack Hoeheisal met with Helen. They decided that although very few were interested, something had to be done.

During the next two meetings, it was determined that an organization was needed in order to standardize terms. In October, 1952, the RDTA of Southern California was formed, and callers and teachers who joined during the first year were considered Charter Members. Clarke Kugler, Ivan Louder and Merle Cramlet were on the first Standardization Committee and wrote the first set of organization-approved terms. Med McMasters was the first President and Joy Cramlet the first Secretary. The original problem of two dances written to the same music has never been solved.

Ray Shaw, brother of Lloyd, and some other callers objected to a Round Dance organization because they thought that Round Dancing was a definite part of Square Dancing and should not be separated in any way. This problem might never have been solved had not a group of Ballroom teachers threatened to make it mandatory for all R/D and S/D teachers to be licensed by the State. In order to prevent this, they forgot their differences and raised money to send Jim York, a popular caller and a lawyer, to the State Capitol in Sacramento.

The meetings for the first year or two were mainly business with very little dancing. Fortunately, Martin Treib (one of the Charter Members) had been a Dance Master in Europe and was a big help. Bob Osgood, publisher of "Sets In Order" magazine gave his support. Gordon Moss (another Charter Member) choreographed many challenging dances and also wrote much on the philosophy of Round Dancing. Johnny Velotta, a very enthusiastic member, was in the janitorial business and developed and sold "Speed Up" and "Slow Down" for the floor -- a real boon for Round Dancing.

The greatest need was for records suitable for Round Dancing, so specialized record companies were created. Bob Osgood met the challenge with "Sets In Order" records produced by Merle Olds, who later went on to form "Hi-Hat" records. Doc Alumbaugh formed the "Windsor Records" label. Sunny Hills was the largest Square and Round dance barn in Southern California and they started producing Round and Square Dance records also.

At first Square and Round dance clubs were caller and cuer controlled -- but before long clubs were being formed by the dancers and Square and Round dancing was growing by leaps and bounds.

New callers were joining the parade but they objected to the rounds — it meant more work for them — besides, few were qualified. New dancers were not taught the basics so they thought Rounds were not “fun” and took time away from their Square Dancing.

This was a very trying time for Round Dancing — the clubs were not enthusiastic about hiring a cuer just for the Rounds, and the ballroom teachers who had joined RDTA felt that the square dancers were retarding its growth. They succeeded in changing the rules so that just being a caller was not enough to be a member of RDTA. Also, the oral test was made more difficult. Fortunately, the membership was large and members still maintained the pioneer spirit – so they doubled their efforts and promoted more R/D classes. To make it easier for the callers, in 1953, RDTA decided to choose one round to be taught each month. The first Round of the Month was “Side By Side,” written by Julie Passarello, one of our members.

The ROM proved to be a boon, and in 1956 an Intermediate Level ROM was added; the Advanced Level ROM was added in 1966.

In order to bring all Round dancers together, a “Fun Level” Round-Up was started in 1954. The first Intermediate Round-Up was in 1966, and the Advanced, or “Rose Ball” in 1971. Since 1974 there has been an “All Level Holiday Ball.”

We are proud of our organization, not only because it was the first and largest of its kind, but because other groups have followed in our footsteps. We have inspired and given direction not only to our members, but to R/D leaders the world over. Our efforts have been felt by all ages and all levels of society. We have brought single people together as a group and have given them many hours of dancing pleasure. We have given married couples a new lease on life – an activity that they can afford and share together, with or without their friends, and we have brought people together forming new lasting friendships.

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Standardization Committee

By Merle Cramlet, 1984

The Standardization Committee was not only the first committee, but the most important to our existence in those early days. Many of the terms were taken from Square and Folk dancing, and most of the dances were “Old Time Dances” and mixers. The cue sheets were very simple and left room for many variations. In 1953, we had standardized only a few terms, and it was Ginger Osgood, working with “Sets In Order” magazine who set the standards by publishing the cues for “Side By Side,” the first ROM (written by Julie Passarello, one of our members).

The first committee members remained unchanged for several years, but in 1960 the authority and duties of the committee were well enough established that they could be written, and thus preserve the continuity of the committee as the members were replaced.

From the beginning, it was understood that the responsibilities of this committee were too important to be left in the hands of *one person*. That is why Standardization has always been a “committee.” Since 1979, the Committee has been “progressive” (the second member replaces the Chairman, and a new member is appointed by the RDTA President). The new member receives a notebook containing unfinished business from the preceding year, sheets containing By-Laws and Rules & Procedures pertaining to Standardization, and a sheet of instructions on things to consider when voting on new terminology. Also, the Chairman receives a sheet of instructions and a form letter to be sent to anyone wishing to present a dance that does not conform to our Syllabus, asking them to help with the description of the new figure (remembering that it should be adaptable to other routines). The new member also receives a copy of the 1960 “Authority and Duties” and the latest edition of the Syllabus. The new member, armed with all of this information and two years experience, should make a good Chairman. One little problem — finding someone dedicated enough to withstand the abuse and hard

work for three years. (Can you imagine telling a popular R/D teacher with a large following that they cannot show their OWN dance because it does not conform to RDTA Standards?)

Each Chairman handles the job a little differently. Some have monthly meetings, others communicate with the others by phone and mail [*now email, too! –Ed*]. If the members live a long distance apart they may have a breakfast meeting before the RDTA meeting. At the meeting, the discussion is mainly about new cue sheets, new terminology to be written up for vote, complaints, how to handle clinics, and the problem of members not using standard terminology. We, the members, can help by offering suggestions in writing to the Chairman, and by allowing the committee time to evaluate the need and various ways a new figure or term might be applied.

Why so strict? — With hundreds of teachers throughout the nation, teaching Round Dancing, it would be disastrous if we, the creators of Round Dancing as we know it today, would be lax in our efforts to keep Round Dancing the true art form in its own right. We must never use terminology from other dance media without first modifying it to fit our style and purpose.

[Ed. Note — In the late 1990's, it was decided to adopt Roundalab's Phase Standards in addition to our own Syllabus. The RDTA of Southern California Syllabus has numerous terms and figures which were NOT covered by Roundalab.]