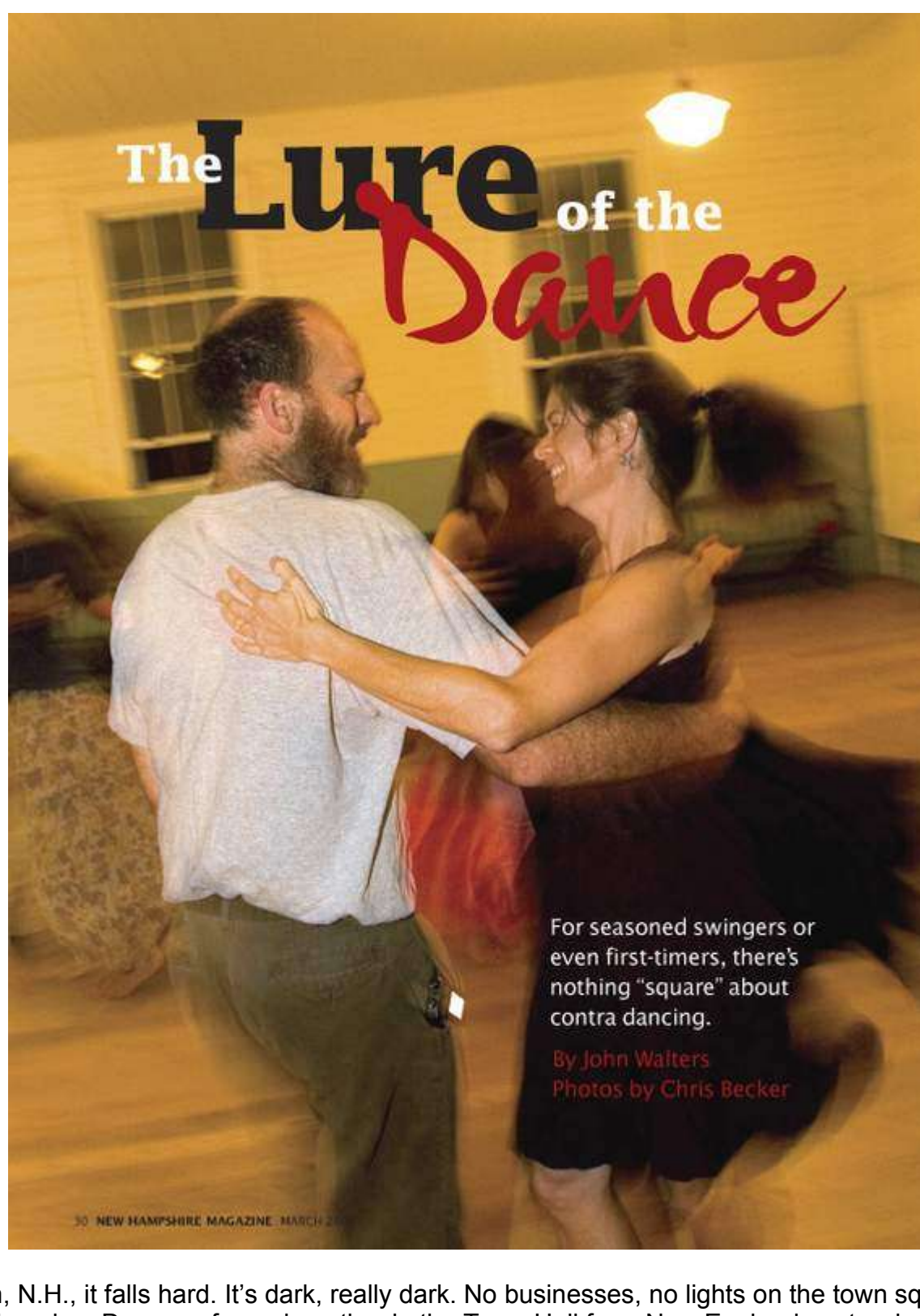


The Lure of the Dance

By John Walters

Photos by Chris Becker [NH Magazine, March 2006; www.NHMagazine.com]



When night falls in Nelson, N.H., it falls hard. It's dark, really dark. No businesses, no lights on the town square. But once a week on Monday night, the joint is jumping: Dozens of people gather in the Town Hall for a New England contra dance. They are continuing a centuries-old tradition — and they're having a whole lot of fun.

The 219-year-old Town Hall is nothing fancy. It's a big open room with wooden floors, wooden walls, wooden benches, wooden coat pegs all around and a small wooden stage. (If you need to "knock on wood," this is a good place to be.) The dance floor measures about 10 x 12 yards; comfortable for this crowd, but during the summer, you sometimes get people waiting outside to take a turn. On this night, it's about 30 degrees outside — but thanks to the dancers, it's warm enough that some of the windows are open.

At first glance, New England contra dancing looks and sounds like square dancing. "The main difference is the form of the dance," says Lisa Sieverts of Nelson. She's a business consultant by day, volunteer organizer of the Nelson dance by night, and a pretty fair dance caller herself. "In a square dance you're in a square formation, four couples, eight people. In contra dancing, you're in long lines. You dance with your neighbors, and then you move on. You end up dancing with everyone in the hall."

It's a great way to make friends ... and then some. "People have met, started relationships, married, divorced, the whole gamut," says Sieverts. "They disappear for a while, then maybe they come back, or just one of 'em comes back."

Compared to singles bars, it's a low-key atmosphere. "You can come and go, you can dance with anybody. It's not like a date, where you spend the whole evening with one person," says Deb Keller of East Alstead. She ought to know; she married a guy she met through contra dance. Indeed, she married into one of the first families of the scene: Her husband is musician Randy Miller, the brother of ace fiddler and violin maker Rodney Miller.

Rodney's not here tonight, but a couple of other living legends are. Peterborough's Bob McQuillen takes his turn on piano, as he does every Monday. The fiddler is Harvey Tolman of Nelson. Between them, they've been playing music for about a hundred years.

Tolman is a master of Cape Breton fiddle, and is considered one of the best players in the country. But you won't hear that from him — or much of anything else for that matter. He prefers to let his fiddle do the talking.

McQuillen cut his musical teeth with the Ralph Page Orchestra. Page was the leading dance caller of his day and is widely considered the founding father of modern contra dancing. "I would go to a dance and bring the tunes home in my head, and see if I could play them on the accordion," McQuillen recalls. After a while, he asked Page if he could sit in with his squeezebox. "He said, 'Bring it next week.' So I sat in and had the time of my life. At the end of the evening, he said to me, 'Well, if you would like to be a part of this orchestra, you come next week. You're hired.'"

That was in 1947. Since then, McQuillen has played at thousands of dances, composed more than 1,200 dance tunes, won a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Governor's Arts Award and represented New Hampshire at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Now in his mid-80s, McQuillen is probably the oldest person in the room tonight; the youngest are teenagers. The Nelson dance is one of the only places where you see all ages participating and interacting as equals. "There's no age barrier," says 19-year-old Katie Weiss of Spofford. At the moment she is dancing with 23-year-old Jeff Petrovitch, who adds, "It's a really great community. I look around, and I consider all these people my friends."

I'm starting to think that the world would be a better place if there were more contra dancing. Maybe we can send McQuillen and Tolman to the United Nations.

How long has there been dancing in Nelson? "Ralph Page said it went back 250 years, and he was dead serious," says Bob McQuillen. "That was 50 years ago when he said it."

Other estimates are a bit more conservative. "There were documented dances here as early as 1804," according to Sieverts. "Probably earlier than that, but there's no proof."

Contra dancing comes and goes: Just when you think it's dying out, there comes a revival. The Nelson dance has also come and gone. The current incarnation dates to the late 1970s, when a caller named Peter Temple moved to the area. At the time, there were monthly dances in different towns, but he wanted a weekly get-together. "I thought we'd just do kind of an informal dance," he recalls. "I got a couple musicians in the area, and we started in January of 1978." For a few years it was in Harrisville, before moving to the Nelson Town Hall.

"The idea of doing a short, low-key dance was new," he says. "None of the musicians or callers gets paid, people just come in when they want to."

That informality is on display tonight. Each dance involves a fairly intricate sequence of maneuvers. But if somebody messes up, it's laughed off, and the dancers get back on track — sooner or later, more or less. And people slip in and out in the middle of a dance, to take a breather on one of the benches along the wall.

There's a rotating crew of musicians and callers. The driving force behind tonight's dance is a bearded, ponytailed man whose voice echoes off the walls, and who occasionally steps into the crowd to rescue dancers gone astray. He turns out to be Don Primrose of Sullivan, who first attended a dance as a preteen in 1965. "I got thrown out of the first two dances I went to" by none other than Ralph Page, he says. "I was raising hell, talking. Ralph used to take it pretty serious."

But Primrose kept coming back, and eventually took to the stage. "I started calling because there wasn't a caller one night," he says. "I got up there and Bob [McQuillen] was talking to me, and I started calling dances."

"Seven or eight years ago, I made a deal with Bob. The dance was faltering then, and we said we'd be here every Monday night until we died. The deal didn't seem very fair because Bob is 40-some-odd years older than me, but I'll carry it through. I'll be halfway around the world and I'll get back here for Monday night."

And sometimes other nights. "A few years ago, Christmas fell on a Monday and they'd never danced on a Christmas night," says Primrose. "Bob and I decided to do it regardless. After that, we decided to make Christmas an honorary Monday, so we dance every Christmas night." In 2005 that meant a special dance on Sunday and the usual gathering on Monday.

If that's not enough dancing for you, there's always the "Iron Dancer." Lisa Sieverts explains:

"It happens twice a year, Memorial Day and Labor Day, in multiple locations. You can dance on Thursday in Cambridge, Mass., Friday and Saturday in a number of locations. On Sunday we have dawn dances in Brattleboro, Vt., where we dance from 8 at night until 7 Monday morning. Monday you come here to Nelson. If you do that, you get a certificate and a medal."

But if you're not that sold on contra dancing, Sieverts and company will welcome you anytime to this ancient wooden floor in Nelson, N.H. If you need some help, they're happy to oblige. If you screw up some of the steps, nobody will mind. You'll get some good exercise, meet some good people, and who knows — as with Deb Keller, it might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. NH

For information on contra dance in New Hampshire, we suggest these Web sites:

The Monadnock Folklore Society, www.monadnockfolk.org, for dances in the Monadnock Region, including Nelson.

The Dance Gypsy, www.thedancegypsy.com, a clearinghouse for information on various kinds of public dances.

Dudley Laufman, www.laufman.org. Laufman is one of the all-time great callers and fiddlers.

Great Meadow Music sells contra dance CDs and songbooks at www.greatmeadowmusic.com.

Give it a whirl

— Places to Dance —

Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend
Held annually during Martin Luther King Birthday weekend in January at the University of New Hampshire at Durham. Brings together dancers, musicians, and callers for a bounty of dance, music, discussions and friendship.

Manchester Contra Dance
Manchester Unitarian Church, 669 Union St.
Workshop/lesson 7:30; Dance 8 p.m.–11 p.m.
Price: \$7
(603) 529-1586; pmatmht@greenet.net
Second Fridays year round

Exeter Contra Dance
First Unitarian Society of Exeter, 12 Elm St.
Workshop/lesson 7:30; Dance 8 p.m.
Price: \$6, students \$3
Please wear a separate pair of clean-soled, soft-soled shoes.
(603) 679-1915; holt.e@comcast.net
Second Saturdays year round

Francestown Contra Dance
Francestown Town Hall, Rte. 47 and Rte. 136
8 p.m.–11 p.m. — Price: \$6
(603) 487-2480; nhdancecaller@aol.com
Second Saturdays year round

Gilmanton Contra Dance
Gilmanton, Academy Building, town offices
8 p.m.–11 p.m. — Price: \$6
(603) 267-7227;
Second Saturdays (not in July or August)

Milford Contra Dance
Milford Town Hall
8 p.m. — Price: \$6 (under 12, \$3; under 6, free)
(603) 487-2480; nhdancecaller@aol.com
www.milford.nh.gov/recreation/events/milford_nh_contra_dances.htm
Fourth Fridays year round

Nelson Contra Dance
Nelson Town Hall
8 p.m. — Price: \$3
(603) 827-3732; harts@ultranet.com
www.monadnockfolk.org/html/local_dances.html
Every Monday year round

Conway Contra Dance
Salyard's Museum, 110 Main St.
7:30 p.m.–10:30 p.m. — Price: \$6, \$3 for kids
(603) 383-4589; Email: d_hrding@sau9.org
First and third Fridays (not in July or August)

Keene Family Dance
Keene, Heberton Hall, 60 Winter St.
6:30 p.m.–9 p.m. — Price: free
(603) 352-0157; gzachariah@ci.keene.nh.us
www.ci.keene.nh.us
First Fridays (except June–October)

Wentworth Traditional Square Dance
Wentworth Town Hall, Rte. 25 and East Rd.
8 p.m. — Price: \$7; \$4 children
(603) 764-9993; pkoelb@earthlink.net
First Fridays (not in July or August)

Windham Contra Dance
Windham Town Hall
8 p.m.–11 p.m. — Price: \$6
Air conditioned. Please bring change of shoes to protect floor.
(603) 487-2480; nhdancecaller@aol.com
First Fridays year round

Kingston Contra Dance
Town Hall, 163 Main St.
8:30 p.m.–11:30 p.m. — Price: \$8
Please bring soft-soled shoes to protect the floor. Refreshment pot-luck at the break. Please bring a dish to share.
(603) 770-7988, (603) 772-5355; glenncopp@rcn.com
Fourth Saturdays (not in July or August)

Walpole Contra Dance
Hastings House, Union and Main Sts.
Workshop/lesson 7 p.m.; Dance 7:30–11 p.m.
Price: \$8, \$6 students
(802) 257-9234; ethan@riseup.net
www.walpoledance.org
Third Saturdays year round

Keene Contra Dance
Heberton Hall, 60 Winter St.
8 p.m.–11 p.m. — Price: \$7
(603) 835-7889; jrmiller@sover.net
Fourth Saturdays year round

Deerfield Country Contra Dance
Deerfield Town Hall, 6 Old Centre Rd.
8 p.m.–11 p.m. — Price: \$7; children \$3
(603) 463-7771; taylorgorman@juno.com
First Saturdays (except June–October)

Dover Contra and Square Dance
Dover Town Hall, 288 Central Ave.
8 p.m.–10:40 p.m. — Price: \$7; students \$5
Soft-soled shoes only
(603) 664-2513; peter.yarensky@unh.edu
First Thursdays (year round)

Peterborough Contra Dance
Peterborough Town House, 1 Grove St.
Workshop/lesson 7:30; Dance 8 p.m.–11:30 p.m.
Price: \$8
(413) 369-4369; zakon-anderson@comcast.net
First Saturdays (not in August)

Peterborough Snow Ball
Held annually on the weekend after Martin Luther King holiday
Peterborough Town House, 1 Grove St.
Four callers and bands perform for three hours each.
(413) 369-4369