

SQUARE DANCE — HOUSTON STYLE

By Twyla Woody

"Swing your partner, do-si-do..."

Many people do not realize that a cultural phenomenon has revolved around square dancing in Houston for almost seventy years. Square dance is a specialized folk dance with four couples positioned in a square. Couples 1 and 3 are known as head couples, and couples 2 and 4 are known as side couples. A caller, who does not usually participate in the dance, cues the dancers to complete various movements or steps, which they have learned previously. The sequence of steps varies with the song or pattern being called. The music may be anything from pop to country to Broadway musical or even rock, adding to square dancing's broad appeal.¹

The beginning...

Square dance has its roots in European folk dance, with various circle dances done across the United States. Modern or Western square dancing did not become popular until the 1940s. In the early forties a few clubs around Houston held dances with about three squares or twenty-four dancers. When soldiers returned from World War II, reunited couples wanted to engage in social activities together, and interest in dancing began to mount. In 1947, Dr. Carl Journell, a dentist, started teaching square dancing in Houston and

had so many applicants that he had to limit the class size. One class had 140 couples.

At about the same time, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department began offering free square dancing classes in various city parks. After ten lessons, a class graduated and formed a square dance club. Clubs grew like wildfire, and many had waiting lists. After six months, new dancers were considered experts, and they spread the dancing fever to their friends.

Journell also conducted classes in Beaumont and in East Texas. Herb Greggerson, who some say actually taught Journell how to square dance, taught in San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Rio Grande Valley. As South Texans learned to square dance, the excitement grew, and dancers flocked to the area from all around to attend numerous square dance jamborees.

With several jamborees being held in Houston in 1947, it became apparent that organizing a common alliance would facilitate planning and coordination. The Square Dance Council of the Houston Area formed and entered into a partnership of convenience with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. The Council enjoyed the use of

Over 20,000 square dance enthusiasts attended the 35th National Square Dance Convention in 1987 at the Astrodome. Dancers marched in by state during the Parade of the States, and the Texas dancers formed their state's iconic shape. Afterwards, all the dancers spread out across the floor to form squares and dance.

All photos courtesy of Houston Square and Round Dance Council.





Caller Lew Torrance (at microphone and wearing glasses) served as president of the Houston Square Dance Council from 1962 to 1963. At that time, square dances predominately featured live music.

economically-priced park buildings for its dances, and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department enjoyed widespread community support for a popular recreational activity. As part of this agreement, a trust fund controlled by the Houston Parks and Recreation Department was established. All of the money paid by dancers for use of buildings, including for jamborees and festivals, went into the trust fund. Blanche Marrero, the trust fund officer, paid the bills using these monies. Blanche, a co-organizer of the Council, became the key connection between the two organizations, teaching classes for the Houston Parks and Recreation Department and acting as Council secretary. Also in 1947, Dr. Journell's teen exhibition group participated in Texas governor Beauford H. Jester's inaugural ball.

The Spring Festival . . .

The Square Dance Council and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department sponsored their first Spring Festival on April 8-9, 1949, at the Houston Coliseum. Funded by proceeds from previous jamborees, the event was free to all local and state club members. Dancers received tickets in advance through their clubs. Spectators paid twenty-five cents. All workers and callers donated their time and talents. Callers came from across Texas and as far away as California and Connecticut. At that time, the Coliseum remained open under the balcony, providing room for hundreds of dancers to dance there in addition to the space on the main floor. Organizers arranged for 100 "tourist court units" and 250 double rooms in hotels and motels at a cost of \$4 to \$6 per room. The list included the Warwick, Milby, Texas State, Plaza, Sam Houston, San Jacinto, Fannin, and Woodrow. After dividing the list, half of the hotels were recommended for travelers coming from east of Dallas and the other half for travelers coming from the west.

At that time, the Houston area had over sixty clubs

and about 5,000 members. A total of 9,950 dancers and spectators attended the first Houston Festival, which also included folk dancing since it was customary to alternate a square dance with a folk dance song. The Coliseum held 171 marked squares, and overflow squares danced wherever they could find a spot. One report estimated that dancers formed over 200 squares. At the time, participants typically paid fifty cents to a dollar to attend special dances. To keep dancers abreast of the square dance news, the organizations initiated a square dance newsletter for the Houston Council and surrounding area clubs.

In addition to the various jamborees, the Spring Festival became an annual event put on by the Square Dance Council of Houston and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. This tradition has continued every year since 1949. As part of each festival, exhibitions featured such specialties as Journell's dance team from the School of the Deaf, who performed in 1950; and the Wheel Blazers (wheel-chair dancers) from Waco, Texas, and the Skating Square from Galveston, which performed in 1954.

The Boom . . .

The level of interest continued to grow. By the late 1940s, Houston had over 100 clubs and hundreds of callers; and by 1952, the annual festival, known as the Square Dance Spring Festival, was regarded as the outstanding square dance talent roundup in the country. Award winning exhibitions and long, colorful, swirling western skirts became quite a draw for spectators and dancers. Nationally acclaimed callers included Rickie Holden, who trained the Radio City Rockettes, and Les Gotcher, the caller for the Hollywood movie set. Herb Greggarian's Bluebonnet exhibition had appeared on the Fred Waring television show. The ticket price had risen to \$1 for a dancer but remained twenty-five cents for a spectator. The event continued to be held at the Coliseum and to be co-sponsored by the Square Dance Council of Houston and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department.



The Spring Festival in 1949 had spaces marked for 171 squares on the Coliseum floor. The scene was described as looking "like hundreds of ants."



Dancers at the 1987-1988 Houston Hoedown.

Square dancing was in its boom. The Spring Festival's attendance reached approximately 25,000 in 1953. The following year, Mayor Roy Hofheinz encouraged participation in saying that square dancing promotes unity, develops group fellowship, creates wholesome activity, and "teaches grace, rhythm, and confidence."² Dances featured more than thirty different callers and round dance cuers. Two live orchestras often played for the event. A caller would call a tip, or two songs, then a round dance was cued, after which the orchestra rotated out and a new caller took the stage. Round dancing, in which individual couples dance in a large circle formation, did not require a specific number of couples, so extra couples could take part.

In 1954, a group of callers organized the Callers Association, which allowed callers to share ideas with one another. Some callers called full-time for a club while others called only occasionally. Some also taught square dance. Terms, definitions of calls, figures, and cues became standardized, and over a period of time, the "professional caller" emerged.

The square dance movement decreased in popularity somewhat, about this time, driving the existing square dance record companies out of business or forcing them to look for other sales revenues. This resulted in a lack of good square dance music until new record companies formed that catered to square dance's needs. Larger orchestras played for recordings, and pop music was often choreographed for square dance or round dance. This eventually led to the current practice of calling to recorded background music and the demise of the square dance orchestra.

The 1959 Festival witnessed remarkably heightened enthusiasm when Houston's ABC Channel 13 televised the Saturday night dance. Exhibition groups included The Rockettes and The Houston Polka Dots.

Visitation between clubs became a prime objective by 1962. For attending a dance at another club, members earned points for their club toward the "Steal a Banner" contest, which climaxed at the Spring Festival. On the festival's opening day, the *Houston Chronicle* billed it as "Texas's Biggest Festival" and dedicated the entire front page to square dance stories.

Highlights of the last fifty years . . .

Chairing the Festival became the Council president's responsibility, and presidents began designating a theme for the event. The Coliseum hosted the festivals for twenty-five years before it moved to new locations such as the Albert Thomas Convention Center, Fondren Recreation Center, Astrohalla, Astroarena, Pasadena Convention Center, Ft. Bend County Fairgrounds, and Galveston's Moody Gardens. The *Houston Chronicle's* art editor served as the pre-festival chairman in 1964, bringing increased media exposure to the dance. At the 1967 Festival, the music for callers and dancers switched from live bands to records. That same year saw the formation of the Camping Squares. The campers met at a campground for a relaxing weekend with square dances held in the evenings on-site. Houston hosted the Texas State Festival in June 1970 with dancers coming from across Texas and the country.

Initially, round dancers, unlike square dancers, did not have cued steps to follow. They memorized a routine for a song and then simply danced while the caller sang that tune. In the 1970s, round dance steps began to be taught, and callers started cuing rounds. A caller might do a cued number followed by an uncued one. After a few years, the steps became standardized with more consistency from one dance event to another. Dancers could dance to a new song by following the cued steps or movements. This led to the practice of having cuers who exclusively cued round dances. In 1974, the Houston Council changed its name to the Houston Square and Round Dance Council (HSRDC), incorporating both groups of dancers in one organization.

Other changes in 1975 included the introduction of clogging to Houston and the formation of a four-square adult exhibition group, The Spirits. Members came and went, but The Spirits danced standard and uniquely choreographed numbers at festivals for over thirty-five years. In 1976, HSRDC added a ball to honor club officers to its annual itinerary, and the group held its first woman-chaired meeting. The Spring Festival moved to the fall season and, in 1985, changed to its current name, the Houston Hoedown.

Houston hosted the 35th National Square Dance Convention in 1987 at the Astrodome complex, which included the Astrodome, Astroarena, and Astrohalla. The convention, chaired by Lee and Lettie Reed, was entitled "Promenade Eight in the Bluebonnet State." A total of 20,164 dancers came from across the United States and the world to dance at the convention. Forty-two different exhibition groups performed, and round dancing had become popular enough to merit a special dance area and times. Two fashion shows, one for teens and one for adults, showed off the latest apparel. One of the convention's biggest highlights, however, was a massive Parade of the States in the Astrodome with each state's song played as those dancers arrived. Dancers formed a silhouette of Texas on the dance floor.

Since the Houston Square and Round Dance Council includes folk dancing and clogging, in addition to square dance and round dance clubs, the 1996 Hoedown featured exhibitions by two clogging groups. The 1997 event also included contra dancing, which continues to be done using a live band and resembles the stroll in formation but with



The Houston Square and Round Dance Council in the 2011 Houston Hoedown Grand March wearing the "Council" dress designed by Twyla Woody, shown second from right. Her husband, Woody, far right, carries the HSRDC officers' banner.

more energy. At the forty-eighth annual Texas State Square & Round Dance Festival held at the Galveston Convention Center in the summer of 2010, the HSRDC coordinated the Pre-Festival activities and dance on Friday and was heavily involved in the whole festival. Activities included the Friday night dance itself, and the seashore after-party, where twenty-eight squares danced "under the stars" on the beach.

Plans are underway for the 2012 Hoedown, November 16 and 17, featuring Dee Dee Dougherty, national caller from Minnesota. Dee Dee started square dancing at the age of three and clogging in an exhibition team by age six. Attendees can expect some of her calls to include a bit of yodeling—another of her specialties. The event will be held at Moody Gardens.

Square dancing today

Almost all square dancing today is done to recordings. Wade Driver of Rhythm Records indicates that, surprisingly, about thirty percent of callers worldwide still use vinyl records; the majority, however, use digital recordings.³ "God Bless America" ranks first as the square dance recording with the most all time sales. Square dancing enjoys popularity in many countries around the world—but it is always called in English.

Several variations to the four-couple square format can be found, with "Progressive Squares" topping the list. In this stylization, dancers move around the dance floor by completing movements with specific nearby couples per the caller's direction. After traveling around the dance floor, the original squares "magically" reform at the end with the same couples in their original positions.

Most of today's dances arrange the dance numbers into "tips" composed of two numbers followed by a break. With

basically two types of numbers, patterns (now commonly called patters) and singing calls, the first number in a tip is frequently a patter. The caller directs the dancers to execute certain moves; and although music plays in the background, the sequence of moves does not follow the music. The singing call, used routinely for the second number, is a series of steps choreographed to a specific song. Callers sing certain parts of the song, and for other sections of the melody, they sing words that correspond to the step

directions. Breaks between tips range from three or four minutes to as long as ten minutes. Sometimes during the longer breaks, either round dancing or line dancing is cued.

Ladies' square dance skirts vary in length from a few inches above the knees to ankle length. Numerous styles and unlimited color combinations can be seen, but the majority of women continue to wear full skirts. Some dancers wear pants or other street apparel, choosing not to have a square dance wardrobe.

Houston square dancers have received invitations to do exhibitions at all types of events and locations, including grand openings; other festivals; senior citizen, assisted living, and Alzheimer's facilities; schools; birthday and anniversary parties; weddings and even funerals. Most clubs have theme dances such as sock hops, Veteran's Day dances, luaus, ice cream socials, chili suppers, and Halloween dances. Most of these events include special food. Square dancing always has been, and continues to be, one of the most economical forms of recreation around. Today's dance charges in Houston average about \$6 to \$7, unless a meal is included, which raises the price to about \$15. Most square dancers will tell you that the number one thing they like about square dancing is the vast number of friendships they make, and that the only way to learn how much fun it is, is to get involved in it.

For more information on HSRDC, a club near you, lessons, and more, visit www.squarethru.com or email info@squarethru.com.

Twyla Woody and her husband, Charles (or "Woody" as he is known), are currently in their second year as HSRDC presidents. They have been active members of the Bluebonnets and the Tomball Promenaders square dance clubs for six years. Twyla has a M.Ed. with Special Education emphasis from the University of Houston and has worked in education for thirty-five years. She is an educational diagnostician for Cypress Fairbanks ISD.