Sturtevant—A Hike-in Dance Camp

by Carol Ormand

Over Memorial Day weekend 2014, I had the rare pleasure of calling at a unique dance weekend. I know, I know: every dance weekend is unique and many of us think our local dance weekend is the best. But I’ve been dancing for nearly three decades and calling for two dozen years and I’ve never been to a weekend anything like this one.

The first thing that distinguishes Sturtevant from all other camps is its location: the weekend takes place at Sturtevant Camp (http://sturtevantcamp.org), in the Angeles National Forest in Southern California. This gem of a camp, in the San Gabriel Mountains, was founded in the late 1800s, when mountain resorts had a somewhat different flavor than they do today. You know: rustic cabins, rather than five-star hotels. Even in this modern age, Sturtevant Camp is accessible only by foot, though we hired mules to carry some of our gear. The four-mile hike in felt a bit like a trip back in time, leaving behind both modern amenities and modern intrusions. The trail to camp is gorgeous and gentle. We took our time, admiring Proterozoic gneisses along the trail, arriving shortly before dinner on Friday afternoon.

The other things that distinguish Sturtevant dance camp from all other weekends arise from its location. The camp is small; the dance hall (which doubles as dining hall) has room for, at most, thirty-two dancers, with no room to go down the hall. I think this is the only weekend I’ve ever been to where I can honestly say I knew every dancer’s name. In a group this small, a weekend community develops almost instantly. And it’s a select group—those who choose to hike into a rustic camp in the national forest to dance for a weekend, it turns out, are a lovely and fun group of people.

The schedule for the weekend is a bit unusual as well. The usual dance workshops in the morning and early afternoon give way to a long break in the afternoon to allow everyone to go hiking (or to indulge
in other diversions). Mt. Zion, Mt. Wilson (with its observatory) and a mountain pass are all within a few miles of camp. The evening dance is followed by milk and Jocelyn’s homemade cookies. You know how everything tastes better after a hike? Those cookies. Wow. They were exquisite, even the day I didn’t go hiking.

And that brings me to the food... every delicious bite of it. At every meal and snack, the inestimable Brenda Goodwin accommodated five different dietary groups in our tiny community. This is no small feat, when all of the food (and drink) has to be packed in by mule train. There’s no running out to the grocery store to pick up another half gallon of soy milk. Did I mention it was delicious? It was better than that.

And oh, yeah, it’s a dance weekend! Well, it’s more of a dance party, in a way. You know what it’s like to dance at a house party, where there’s barely enough room but everybody there is a friend? It’s like that, all weekend. It was a treat to call there, for many reasons. The intimate setting allowed me to “get away with” things that just aren’t usually possible with larger groups. (When I saw we had just sixteen dancers, at one point, I taught and called Rod’s Quad #2.) The entire community was also beautifully accommodating when a group of hikers who’d been camping nearby stumbled into our Saturday night dance. I threw my regular program out the window and reverted to my most beginner-friendly dances and they were immediately welcomed and swept into the action. The Sturtevant Camp manager and the mule train driver were also dragged into the dancing at various times during the weekend, to everyone’s delight. It’s such a treat to be part of a community that clearly understands the importance of sharing the joy of contra dancing with new people. And of course we had spectacularly great music by the Avant Gardeners (George Paul and Laura Light). I spent a good part of the weekend marveling at the piano, which had been flown to the camp helipad and then carried about a quarter of a mile down to the dance/dining hall.

I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to call at Sturtevant. It’s clearly a camp that’s not for everyone; if a comfortable bed and a perfectly level dance floor are more important to you than a spectacular setting and a small, close-knit community of wonderful people, there are plenty of dance weekends for you to choose from. But if a weekend of hiking and dancing to fabulous music in the woods sounds appealing to you, don’t miss Sturtevant.