



Cooperation and Consensus—Scissortail Traditional Dance Society of Oklahoma

by Louise Siddons and Jill Allen

There's been a surge of dance activity in Oklahoma recently—an advanced English country dance series, Irish set dancing, and a couples' dance series—all under the auspices of our statewide CDSS affiliate organization, Scissortail Traditional Dance Society (www.scissortail.org). Dance communities ebb and flow for a variety of reasons, and I'm not going to pretend that I can fully explain in this article why Scissortail is experiencing such enthusiastic growth. I am, however, going to point to several strengths in our community and several recent events that have contributed to our renewed energy—including a visit from the CDSS Executive Committee in November 2014. I hope, too, that knowing more about Scissortail and traditional dance in Oklahoma will encourage you to include us in your travels!

Thirty years ago, traditional dance in Oklahoma was fairly limited, and individual communities were unconnected. In 1988, international folk dance leader Noel Osborn decided to bring contra dancing to Oklahoma City, and, with the help of Oklahoma City International Folk Dance members and our neighbors in Dallas, TX, organized a Saturday night contra dance that almost instantaneously became a quarterly series—due to clamorous popular demand. Fast forward five years, and Scissortail Traditional Dance Society was born, with an organizing board and regular dances. Over the ensuing decades, Scissortail members helped refurbish several venues, including a charming rural dance barn and an historic urban hall. Carol Barry, international folk and contra dancer, was introduced to English country dance in the early 1990s by the Dallas, TX and Little Rock, AR dance groups and started the Oklahoma City ECD group in 1998. Musician Michelene Cyphers heads up the Scissortail Megaband, which welcomes new and experienced musicians interested in playing for contra dances.

photo by Coleton Gambill

In April 2011, we held the first student-organized community contra dance in Stillwater, on the campus of Oklahoma State University; later that year, University of Oklahoma students and faculty helped create a community dance in Norman. The Stillwater and Norman dances joined Scissortail soon thereafter, starting our shift toward being a statewide organization. In 2012, following the tragic death of caller and dance organizer G. Wesley Brown, the Tulsa community also joined Scissortail. Across the state, we've taken advantage of Scissortail's centralized resources to support emerging dance series, coordinate band and caller bookings, and build a vibrant, close-knit organization. As CDSS Executive Committee member Dorcas Hand observed, at dances in multiple cities, "The whole community seemed to come out!" At the same time, each dance has its own local organizing committee that ensures consensus and responsive programming in each city. I believe that our recent growth is a direct result of the qualitative and material strengths offered by Scissortail as an umbrella organization, in combination with outstanding leadership at the local level.

When the CDSS Exec visited Oklahoma just over a year ago, there were already great things happening—and we were proud to share our community with them. As Exec member Jill Allen relates in the sidebar, Scissortail is more than just dancing!

Although I'm proud of how much we had to show the Exec, I'm also pleased by how much we learned from them, in formal and informal ways. For example, I was utterly fascinated by David Millstone's presentation on the history of traditional dance in the US—which ended up being a jumping-off point for an equally fascinating, extended conversation about racial diversity in traditional dance history on the sharedweight.com callers email list. Less officially, individual conversations between Exec members and students led to some exciting developments in my own local dance, in Stillwater. Two of our student leaders, Alysa Smith and Shea Bailey, were encouraged to step off the dance floor, showcasing their musical talent in "Polka Breaks" that expand our contra dancers' repertoire. We began organizing field trips to regional dance weekends: first to When In Doubt, Swing, in Dallas, TX, and last fall to the CDSS Centennial Tour stop in Lawrence, KS. Student participation in dance weekends enhances skills, inspires ambition for our local dances, and connects them with the dance community as a whole. Students from Norman, Jackson Bockus and Susannah Pyatt, have joined the Scissortail Board as youth representatives.

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Scissortail Is More Than Dancing by Jill Allen, CDSS Exec

Flashback to November 2014: the traveling CDSS Executive Committee was in Oklahoma, participating in dances and meeting with organizers to see what was going well in the Scissortail dance and music community, and conversely what challenges they were facing. We found successes on many levels, but most noticeably, they had created a well-functioning governing board of strong and generous individuals who meshed well, were of open mind to supporting new endeavors, and believed in the importance of community. Their umbrella model was working so well despite such diverse affiliate groups and a huge geographic area. The only real challenge they could think of was the imminent loss of a beloved dance hall, which has since been met successfully.

We found active participation and organization by students at two major state universities, spearheaded by Louise Siddons and Miranda Arana, and with the local Boys and Girls Club. According to Mike Morse, board member (and former president), the group recently held two fundraisers: one to support a member in need and another to donate \$1000 to the church where they dance. The community helped one of their members, Mark Cashion, to convert his barn into a dance space. They function with a membership model and yearly individual dues of \$15, which offers a \$2 discount at any dance in the area and a deeper discount for special events. In addition to Flamingo Fling, Scissortail collaborates with Dallas, Houston, and Austin, TX to offer a rotating annual English dance weekend, Set for Spring.

Why do they function so well among themselves and with others? They encourage individuals and affiliates with financial and educational support. If a group needs a little extra for a sign, or to make up for a loss at the door, the Scissortail board offers support. There is a refreshing lack of entitlements, preferences or hierarchies. This group has taken cooperation to another level. Their motto seems to be "Of course we'll help; let's try it!"

This spring, Jill Allen completes her sixth year on the CDSS Board and the Executive Committee. As the Exec's liaison to visited communities, she has enjoyed meeting people all over the US and Canada and discussing their unique issues.

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Jean died this past June, surrounded by family who sang by her bedside. Her last performance came at a concert in Kentucky just one year ago, when Susie Glaze, John McCutcheon and Kathy Mattea came to sing for Jean one more time at the Union Church in Berea. Jean spent the entire evening singing along from her front row seat. At the end of the evening, Jean turned around in her wheelchair and directed us all in “The Peace Round.” Then, with Jean’s family gathered around her, the room stilled and then echoed with the beauty of the Ritchie family goodnight song, “Twilight A-Stealing.” Thinking on it now, it was a fitting close to a life of love and music.

*Twilight a-stealing over the sea
Shadows are falling dark on the lea
Borne on the night wind, voices of yore
Come from the far off shore.*

Thinking on it now, it was a fitting close to a life of love and music.

These things are important—honoring friendship, listening to elders, reclaiming our heritage, protecting the land. Music is important, and afternoons spent enjoying good company. Life deserves to be celebrated, and Jean Ritchie taught generations to celebrate life.

Dan Schatz is a Grammy® nominated folksinger, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer. His most recent album, The Promise of the Sowing, was released on Folk-Legacy Records in August 2015.

WEB EXTRA: <https://soundcloud.com/dan-schatz/now-is-the-cool-of-the-day>.



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More recent developments might not be directly traceable to conversations held that weekend, but they were surely inspired by the energy and enthusiasm it engendered. Carol Barry’s Advanced ECD series has encouraged callers and dancers alike to challenge themselves anew. Eager dancers prompted Noel Osborn to launch a couples’ dance series this fall with a series of progressive lessons in Scandinavian dance (schottische and hambo). Last August, I started an Irish set dancing series in Stillwater which draws dancers and musicians from around the state. Tulsa organizers are targeting recruitment at their contra dance, having taken advantage of the organizers’ workshop at the Tour stop in Lawrence to build strategies based on other communities’ successes.

If I could point to one thing that has enhanced our state’s dance communities more than any other, it would be travel. Almost all of the callers, dancers, musicians and other volunteers who are involved in organizing our events travel regularly to dance weekends and workshops throughout the South and Midwest, and some go much farther afield—including abroad. We all bring new knowledge and ideas back with us, enriching Scissortail. Nowhere was this proactive approach to travel more visible than in Lawrence last autumn—Oklahomans were in workshops organized for callers, organizers and musicians, and participated as dancers in English country dancing, morris dancing, contra, waltz and more.

If you’d like to include Oklahoma in your travel plans, consider joining us this spring for the Flamingo Fling, with Great Bear Trio and caller Mary Wesley. More information about Scissortail can be found at <http://www.scissortail.org/> or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/scissortail/>.

Louise Siddons is a dance caller and organizer in Stillwater, OK—and elsewhere—and Vice President of Scissortail Traditional Dance. She’s particularly interested in youth recruitment, to which end she is running a workshop for the Next Generation of English country dance leaders at CDSS’s English Dance Week at Pinewoods this summer. In her spare time, she’s a professor of art history at Oklahoma State University. She is grateful to Noel Osborn and Carol Barry for information about the early history of Scissortail.

photo by Marcelle Lipke