

Dance Your Way Through American History

devised by Glen Morningstar

The basic “Dance Your Way Through American History” course is three days long. On day one, I dress up in Colonial attire and play the fiddle as the students come into the dance area. They sit in front of me as we discuss the history of the day as it influenced why people danced, how they dressed, and what type of music and dance were being enjoyed. I do a quick “counting to the fiddle phrase” warm-up, then up they stand, and line up in a long column facing me. They check their height and put the tall on their left and the small on their right. The teachers who are with me, and I, arrange them in the proper sets of three couples, four couples and six couples.

The dances are from Colonial dance collections like *Griffith**, plus English country dances of the day. I ask for a demonstration group and am challenged to pick one group (centrally positioned), from all the hands that are in the air...these are typically third, fourth and fifth graders...sometimes together, but more often as separate grades. I walk the demonstrating group through the dance, asking the observers to note the person standing in their corresponding spot. The demonstrators are always recognized with a big applause from the group.

From there, all groups are simultaneously led through the dance. Recorded music is cued up and away we dance with music. Occasionally I'll do a dance where I let them know that after one time through, they'll dance without my prompts. No problem!! On day two I wear nineteenth century attire and play the five-string banjo as the students file into the dance area. We recap day one, then head for the history of dancing in the 1800s. We dance quadrilles and old contras on day two. Day three is western square dance attire and we dance squares, disco, ceilidh and Hawaiian dances. Day one is characterized by a little bit of tomfoolery within the dance groups, but the light bulb begins to light. Day two is characterized by the “ahaa, it's fun!” and clear exhibition of helping each other with little attention to self-consciousness, and day three is “really into it” day.

I enjoy getting hugs from a lot of the students. I share with them all the benefits of dancing...math skills when counting phrases...audible recognition skills when dancing with the music...”helping your neighbor” skills...working as a group...thinking and planning ahead...recognizing others for their contributions...getting in the movement groove. Fantastic kids and teachers!!!

* *John Griffiths, Dancing Master, 29 Country Dances* by Charles Cyril Hendrickson, Sandy Hook, CT: The Hendrickson Group, 1989. ISBN: 1-877984-00-0 52 pages. Out of print.