Lifetime Contributer—John Ramsay

by Susan Todt, with John Ramsay



2008, Dr. John and friend doing Pattycake Polka, Dance Discovery performance; photo by Jeff Sadler.

"Dance of a Lifetime," a free event honoring Dr. John Ramsay will be held at the Jewish Community Center, 2 Millstone Campus Drive, in Creve Coeur, Missouri, on Saturday, October 16. Pre-dance potluck and socializing will begin at 5 pm, with the dance from 7 pm till midnight. RSVP: dancewithus@att.net.

The gymnasium is huge, but the dancers fill the space; there must be two hundred people on the floor. Ages are varied, as are the costumes: many girls in flowing Regency-era gowns (most homemade), a few boys with ruffled shirts and one with a wooden sword at his side. Fathers dance with daughters, mothers partner sons; size doesn't matter, nor does level of experience. But the dancers are impressive in the style and timing they exhibit; they know the dances and the figures and are obviously dancing with the music, as well as with one another. Best of all, they're having fun! It's reflected in their smiling faces, their exuberant movements.

This scene reflects the effort and vision of one man. John Ramsay has been participating in and teaching country dance for most of his life. In his eighth decade he began offering dance lessons to various homeschool groups in the St. Louis area: a series of sessions culminating in a ball such as the one described above. Over the past few years he has introduced some twenty-five hundred young people and their parents to the joys of English country dance. This at an age where many retire and are content to slow down and look back over a life well lived: Dr. John, as he is known by many, continues to be active and involved in his community. In his own words, "I seek to explore the wonderful mystery of life, especially as revealed through folk culture; to help others appreciate life's variety, to expose the relationship between prejudice and ignorance." Roots of his social conscience came from his parents who jointly spent their lives working for economic justice and a common humanity.

Born in 1930, John was the first of three brothers to graduate from Berea College in Kentucky. While at Berea, he joined the Berea College Country Dancers, a troupe of college students who perform Anglo-American folk dances. Upon graduation in 1952 (he majored in Agriculture), he went to Warren Wilson Junior College outside Asheville, North Carolina, where he served as Dairy Manager and Instructor of Agriculture. There he assisted Clothilde and Julio Guisasola with the College's country dance program. He moved with his family to Celo Community, a landholding cooperative in western North Carolina, in 1955, where he operated a small dairy farm and taught public school for several years. He organized from among his seventh graders a dance troupe called the Easter Leggs (the girls wore pastel-colored skirts, and the group performed at several venues in the area). In 1966, he completed his PhD. in Animal Breeding at Iowa State University while also taking over the leadership of the international dance club on the campus. For the next seven years he was associate director, then director, of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina. In 1974 he returned to Berea College as the director

of Recreation Extension, where he was "responsible for keeping the folk arts (dance, music, storytelling, crafts) alive by using them." Under his direction the Berea College Country Dancers gained worldwide recognition: they gave a special performance for Queen Margarethe of Denmark at the National Festival in Svendborg in 1994: they represented the United States at the International Year of Youth Gala at the Royal Albert Hall in 1985 and were introduced to Princess Anne; they danced in Japan, Seoul, San Salvador, Rome, the British Isles, Luxembourg, Mexico and Guatemala. John also founded the Berea College Alumni Country Dancers, and organized

tours for this group to Korea in 1984, Czechoslovakia in 1987, Shanghai in 1990, and to Sweden in 1993.

Since moving to St. Louis in 1995, John has branched out into many different areas. He works as an ESL teacher for the University City School Board, and a substitute teacher for the Clayton public schools. He is active in his local AARP chapter, and was Volunteer of the Year in 2006. In 2002 he was a founding member of Dance Discovery, the dance troupe that was formed to participate in the events surrounding the Bicentennial Celebration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Dance Discovery continues to perform several times a year at various historical venues; John is responsible for researching

and documenting much of the troupe's repertoire of historical dances.

Truly a Renaissance man, interested in

everything, and involved in the world around him, he gardens, plays the violin with the Silver Strings, serves as MC for Virginia's Silver Steppers (a tap dance troupe to which his wife, "B", belongs), and

continues to promote folk dance whenever he can. One of his most recent ventures was the creation of a workshop for young leaders, to train them to bring dance back to their communities. CDSS awarded a leadership grant to the workshop, and during the weekend of September 26-27, 2008, over fifty young adults were given experience in leading dances, calling for a group, and working with musicians.

John Ramsay has been "Uncle John" to me for my entire life (my mother is his older sister). I don't remember serving as the flower girl at his wedding (I was only three) but have the pictures to document it! For the past

thirty years, he has been my mentor, providing me with music, dances and suggestions for programs, but most of all serving as a model of what a dancing master should be. When I asked him what he felt had been his most significant contributions to the world of traditional folk arts, he had this to say:

"There are four particular areas where I have had some impact on CDSS. Other people also contributed and I'll try to recognize the most important ones. Nothing ever happens unless others respond. The responders deserve the most credit.

1. Family Camp. My sons Martin and Loren were of school age while I was Director of the John C. Campbell Folk School so it was natural that

I organized a weeklong family course utilizing the dance, music, and song traditions of the School. CDSS music director Philip Merrill, who spent his summers





Top: 1951, l-r: Mildred Cornett, Frank Smith, Hazel Watson, John Ramsay, Helen Kaiser, Swedish Schottische, Dodge Gym, Berea College; photo courtesy Berea College. Bottom: 2007, l-r: John Ramsay, Bob Green, Marty Aubuchon, Lyndon Blaylock, Lancers Quadrille, Dance Discovery performance, St. Charles Community College; photo by Jeff Sadler.

with us, was one of the master teachers. The Family Course quickly became our most popular course. CDSS took note and followed suit within a few years.

- 2. Buck Dance/Clogging. Although a strong cultural element in Appalachia, clogging was frowned upon by some of our leaders partly because it became caught up in competitive programs. I saw it as exciting, requiring skill, and a medium for artistry as well as being an important part of our heritage. I made use of local talent to teach it at our courses at the Folk School. Ethel Capps, who directed the Berea College Christmas Country Dance School, told me that the interest in clogging generated at the Folk School forced her to include Appalachian clogging in her programs. Jim Morrison, a Dartmouth intern at the Folk School, was soon being used to teach clogging in Berea and subsequently, when he became CDSS director, in other situations.
- 3. Shape Note Singing. Bicky McLain first called my attention to the tradition of community singing from songbooks using shapenotes. I invited several local groups to have a singing convention at the Folk School. We had eighty plus singers, a dozen leaders, and three pianos. They sight read parts from the Stamps-Baxter songbooks with amazing speed and gusto. Soon after the convention, Pam Kelly heard about an old time singing school teacher, Richard Moss, who lived up Shooting Creek. A group of us went up to his house to sing from his father-in-law's old *Christian Harmony*. The rest is history. Moss, a fine singer and charming man, later taught the tradition at Christmas School, at Pinewoods, and then at the Smithsonian.

4. My wife, B, and I were asked to teach country dances to some homeschoolers in St. Louis in 1997. The six-week course caught on and we were holding similar classes for homeschool families four nights a week all over the county within a couple of years. I wrote an article for the *CDSS News* (May/June 2007), following the conclusion of one such course, encouraging other leaders to contact their homeschool communities. The country dance movement in the homeschool communities has grown wonderfully. Susan Todt has put her efforts into Arkansas, Glen and Judi Morningstar are having great success in Michigan, and we hear of other similar developments throughout the country.

Throughout my life, I have found country dance and community singing to be a great way to bring people of all ages and persuasions together in a operative activity with amity, joy and civility. I may have given my life to country dancing, but—of more significance—country dancing has given me a great life."

Brad Foster, Executive and Artistic Director, will present the CDSS Lifetime Contribution Award to Dr. John Ramsay, at "Dance of a Lifetime," on Saturday, October 16, in Creve Coeur, Missouri. Predance potluck and socializing will begin at 5 pm, with the dance from 7 pm till midnight.

RSVPs: dancewithus@att.net.



Above right: 1948, Berea College Country Dancers. Above: 2009, St. Charles Homeschool country dance series dressed for the concluding ball. John Ramsay is on far left and his wife B Meyer is on far right; photo courtesy John Ramsay.