

News from Canada ~ Mayne, the Little Island That Dances

by Lael Whitehead

Very few people have heard of Mayne Island. One of British Columbia's Southern Gulf Islands, Mayne is located exactly halfway between Vancouver and Victoria. It is a modest little place. Roughly circular in shape, the island measures only twenty-five square miles, and is home to only twelve hundred permanent residents. Our community is a motley patchwork of retirees, aging boomers, gardeners, small farmers, trades people, artists, writers, musicians, hermits, curmudgeons, Lions service club members, drunks, potheads, Anglicans, pagans, rednecks and yoga buffs. Most of the time we even manage to get along with one another!

Some people think that not much happens on Mayne Island. It's true that life here has traditionally been tranquil and slow-paced. Formerly, if you weren't keen on playing cribbage on Fridays, or badminton on Mondays, if you hesitated to join the theatre society, or the garden club, or the quilter's guild, you may well have found yourself at a loss for something to do in the long lonesome evening hours. For years you may have wondered whether leaving the excitement of the city for such country isolation hadn't been a giant mistake after all.

That is until recently. A few years ago something out of the ordinary happened to our sleepy, unsuspecting community, and life has never been the same since—Mayne Island discovered country dance.

It started with a class offered in 2006 by

resident "renaissance man," Brian Crumblehulme who has lived on Mayne for decades and been involved in just about every aspect of island life. He is a gardener, carpenter, food historian, cook, erstwhile hotelier, actor, director, and political activist, and also a former member of Vancouver's Historical Dance Society and passionate about dance.

The official focus of the class was ballroom dance. Although I'd never been particularly drawn to this genre, I love dancing generally and was eager to seize any opportunity on offer. There were about eight of us in Brian's class. For several weeks we muddled our way through foxtrot, polka and swing. Then we took a stab at salsa and tango. We waltzed and sambaed and jived. I enjoyed the dancing, but wasn't smitten. One night, however, Brian decided to introduce our group to English country dance.

I still remember those first sessions vividly. We all, at the beginning, felt out of our depth. The unfamiliar figures were downright baffling: "set and turn single" was awkward and ungainly; "four changes of rights and lefts" produced collisions and a few muttered curses, but there was something magic about the music. The thought of learning to move with grace to such uplifting melodies was tantalizing. And I loved the fact that, rather than the exclusiveness of couple dancing, this form of dance brought everyone in the room together in a shared experience.

The turning point came for me while learning

an elegant three couple dance called The Braes of Dornoch. My partner and I were executing a slow and elegant two-hand turn, eyes locked, arms extended. The soulful melody infused my body and I began to move in perfect sync with the music. Suddenly I felt time and place fall away. I felt as if I had been translated into pure light, pure energy. All the day-to-day tensions and worries of life evaporated. Only the music and the movement and the sense of a deeply shared human connection were left.

I was hooked. So, it turns out, were most of the others. When Brian's class was over we decided to form a dance club with an emphasis on various forms of country dance. We called ourselves Dance On Mayne. We took turns "calling" simple dances for each other. Brian's wife, Mary, began to play the piano for some of our dancing, along with Dave, a flautist (and leather worker) living on the island. We also used CDs for the faster dances.

Our group was very small at first; at times we felt discouraged, but we persisted. Eventually, new people joined. Pamela Rice, who had been an active member of a Scottish dance group in Langley, BC, moved to the island and soon had us learning Scottish country dances. Not long after that Ken Brock, who has a background in contra dance, joined the group and began calling for us. With more dancers on the dance floor the energy and enthusiasm of the group soared. It was a positive feedback situation: the more dancers we had, the more fun we all had dancing. The more fun we had, the easier it became to attract new dancers to join in!

These days we meet every Sunday afternoon for a couple of hours and divide our time between English, Scottish, and contra dancing. We have five regular callers who take turns facilitating the dancing. We've grown from six dancers to fifteen or more. Not bad for such a small community.

Dance On Mayne now sponsors three annual events open to the public and to off-islanders—a Hallowe'en contra dance, a Robbie Burns supper (with lots of Scottish ceili dancing), and an English country ball. We also host several less formal "dance-outs" during the summer. For each event, we try hard to arrange billets for anyone coming from out of town, and often party late into the night after dancing in good ol' Mayne Island style. Members of the dance communities in Victoria and Vancouver have told me that our dances are some of the most enjoyable dance events they attend in the whole year.

Our first English country ball was pretty slapdash, with music provided by a pick-up band

and all of us taking turns calling the dances. But as time has gone by, we have become more professional. Now for both our contra and English dances we hire experienced callers and bands. Last year our English country ball had seventy dancers, some coming from as far away as Seattle and Portland.

What I find especially wonderful is how country dance is starting to become a regular part of other island events. Dance On Mayne members have participated in the Fall Fair Parade, performed at island fundraisers, and been a feature act at our local church fair for the past several summers. Country dance has also become a key part of our annual Mayne Island May Celebration. Every year, on the Saturday of the May long weekend, two or three hundred people gather at the farmer's market outside the Agricultural Hall. Dance on Mayne, as well as Quicksbottom Morris Dancers from Victoria (my husband, Richard Iredale, is a member), each perform a set of dances before a huge circle of spectators. Then the entire crowd processes down to the park, first to watch the Green Man crown the May Queen, then to gather round the festive Maypole while sixteen women dance the colorful ribbon dance. The celebration concludes with circle dances involving the whole community, followed by lots of cake and lemonade. Even those who seem shy or unfamiliar with dancing are soon grinning from ear to ear as they are swept into the circle. At such times, I fully believe that dancing could solve all the problems of the world. There is certainly no better way to promote as sense of harmony and community that I know of.

Hopefully our example will inspire other small communities around the province to rent a hall somewhere, put on their dancing shoes, and get the music going. We have shown that it's possible to start very small, to be inexperienced at both dancing and calling, and still to have a whole lot of fun. Furthermore, persistence pays: skills improve with practice, and once word gets out that dancing is not only great exercise, but one of the most joyful, life-affirming and community-strengthening activities, we humans can engage in, numbers can't help but grow. Dance On!

Lael Whitehead dances, writes, and makes music in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia. She is an active member of and frequent caller for the Victoria English country dance community. See Dance On Mayne's website.

Photo courtesy the author

"News from Canada," which debuted last year, features news about Canadian events or groups. Ideas for articles should be sent to Rosemary Lach or Bev Bernbaum.