News from Canada ~ Hamilton, Retooling for Dance Prosperity

by Les Francey, Ben Bolker, and Tara Bolker

The Ambitious City, Steeltown, The Hammer. Most people in the United States have never heard of Hamilton, Ontario, the ninth largest municipality in Canada, standing in the shadow of Toronto. However, Hamilton's thriving traditional dance community compares with some of the larger North American cities. As well as having a long-established international folk dance club and Canada's oldest branch of the Royal Scottish CDS, Hamilton is home to a variety of Anglo-American music and dance, including a monthly contra dance, a weekly English country dance, and an organized pick-up band.

This February, Hamilton Country Dancers marked twenty-five years of contra dancing while laying a strong foundation for the next twenty-five. This was not inevitable, though—the beginning of 2012 could equally have found Hamilton with no contra dance at all.

In Fall 2010, HCD was at a crossroads. A plan to alternate the monthly dance with the Hamilton English Country Dancers initially backfiredattendance fell—but the experiment did give way to more ideas and conversation. A second experiment, combining the two dance genres in a single evening, starting with English for the first hour and contra for the rest of the evening, also didn't fly. Previous English dances that had substituted for contra dances had drawn a substantial crowd with a high ratio of experienced dancers from nearby dance communities, most of whom were happy to contra dance as well, and the typical HCD dance drew relatively inexperienced dancers, most of whom were willing to try English. But this time, there were problems. The newer contra dancers didn't get ECD ("Where are those great fiddle tunes?'), and the newer English dancers didn't get contra ("All that spinning!") Experienced English dancers were willing to do both but not at an advanced/ beginner level, and experienced contra dancers were just plain frustrated.

Cut to the present. The HCD dances are steadily growing, with new dancers joining (and returning) each month and veteran dancers rediscovering the dance; the blend of enthusiasm and experience is invigorating.

What happened?

Over the last year a committee of five new and veteran organizers* and others has set about renewing and reinventing the contra dance scene in Hamilton. The committee strives for consistency, scheduling the

dances for the same Saturday of every month, even where it falls close to winter or spring holidays, and encouraging a consistent schedule within a dance evening. Keeping the halftime break short while allowing an extra few minutes for socializing between dances has helped maintain HCD's reputation for friendliness and balance the social energy with the energy on the dance floor.

The community has also turned its attention to encouraging and developing local talent. Tara Bolker introduced Contra Schoolhouse, workshops devised to develop dance callers and dancers at a wide range of different experience levels. A few regular dancers who had called a dance or two, in a pinch or as part of an open mic night, were game to practice the skill and call from time to time to help out HCD; while these novice callers didn't stick (this time), longtime dancer and Hamilton English Country Dance organizer Les Francey decided to dust off his box of cards and start calling contra dances again after a long hiatus. Contra Schoolhouse also turned up experienced dancers from the area who didn't know about HCD's dances in their backyard, and it brought back some former HCD dancers who had drifted away from the community.

Another new venture is the HOB (Hamilton Open Band), founded to provide local music for HCD dances. Although still just getting started, the HOB aspires to the tradition of open contra dance bands like Boston's Roaring Jelly or Philadelphia's SPUDS. While half the band are contra or English dancers, most of the rest had never been to a dance (after giving it a whirl, most have decided that they'd rather be up on stage than down on the floor). Some of the traditional folk musicians were surprised by the Zen of dance music-all those times through the same tune—and a few of them have started a tradition of slipping out to the pub for a pint during the break, after which they say that the second half of the dance is much more entertaining! The HOB debuted with leaders Ben Bolker and Gwen Harper as a piano-fiddle duo; it rapidly added several more fiddle players, and then diversified to include the usual range of contra dance band instruments. Since its inception the HOB has played for six HCD dances and four Contra Schoolhouses; beyond Hamilton, they played at the Mill Race Folk Festival in nearby Cambridge, and will be playing for an upcoming community dance in Waterford and an English country dance in Simcoe.

Meanwhile, back at the English country dance...

While HCD has concentrated on reviving the local contra dance series, HECD is focusing on improving the small but thriving weekly English dance. Since 2010 the group has moved from an affordable but pillar-impeded room, using only recorded music and averaging ten to twelve dancers a week, to a hall with a beautiful wood floor, live music every other week, and the additional dancers needed to help sustain the changes (with a record attendance so far of 28). HECD has now taken on a year-round schedule (no summer break) and extended its dance from two to two-and-a-half hours.

When Les Francey and Lynn McIntyre decided to start an English country dance in Hamilton five years ago, he wanted to go big and have a monthly dance on a Saturday night with live music, but she argued that a weekly dance series with recorded music would be the best way to go, so that people who were looking for weeknight activity would get into the habit of going each week and the cost of admission

could be cut down. He eventually came around to her point of view, people kept coming, and HECD kept dancing.

This past summer Tara organized English Infusion weekend, the first ever English country dance weekend in Hamilton, which drew about sixty people and gave the local dancers their own enhanced vision English country dance. In November HECD was able to subsidize Tara's attendance at the Puttin' On the Dance organizers' conference in Vermont.

Just this week Les taught the dance "Mary K" to a roomful of dancers of varying levels, with great success and enjoyment for all. He says, "I remember coming back from Pinewoods one year and stopping in Amherst, Massachusetts for one of their summer dances at Whately Barn. There were about thirty dancers there, live music, and quality dancing. I thought that if I had a local dance like that, I would

never travel anywhere else to dance. I am still traveling to other places but my local dance is still inching toward that vision."

Different groups with different visions. Definitely related but not the same. The Hamilton contra and English dance groups have found strength in diversity; while sharing the joy of dancing, the two dance communities support each even when running separately.

* Nora Gaskin continues in her role as HCD coordinator; she is joined by Stephen Fuller, a founder of HCD and the fiddler for Back Up and Push, the HCD house band for sixteen years; Susan Hassell, a longtime contra dancer and volunteer who returned to dancing after an extended absence; Stephen Skilbridge, contra dancing less than five years and filled with excitement and ideas from his new-found dance world; and Tara Bolker, contra and English country dancer who brings an international perspective after her recent move from Gainesville, Florida.



The Hamilton Open Band, a.k.a. The HOB; photo courtesy Tara Bolker

Les, Ben,and Tara all dance contra and English country in Hamilton and beyond. In addition to organizing and teaching for the weekly Hamilton Englisg country dance, Les calls for contra dancing from Toronto to Buffalo and plays recorder with the HOB. Ben also fiddles outside the HOB for contra and English dances throughout the region and dances with Cold Barn Morris in Hamilton. Tara shares in the teaching for HECD, calls for contra, English, and community dances

throughout the region, and dances with Wolf at the Door Molly in Cambridge, Ontario.

See these Hamilton websites for more information about contras, English, HOB.

"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.