Marathon Contra Medley Makes History at River Falls

by Dave Marcus

Medley, noun. A cloth woven with wools of different colors or shades. And that is just what it felt like on August 21 when six bands, eight callers and perhaps a hundred and fifty dancers wove themselves into what was probably the longest contra dance medley ever to take place: seven hours of continuous, flowing, happy, sweaty, wonderful contra dance. And it was free, with voluntary donations to Heifer International requested.

The marathon's venue was River Falls Lodge, located in a cove on the Middle Saluda River, a mile or so below the escarpment of the Blue Ridge Mountains that forms the border between North and South Carolina. River Falls Lodge is owned by a member of the Greenville-based Harvest Moon Folk Society, which sponsors Saturday evening contra dances that regularly attract people from Asheville, Charlotte, Atlanta and elsewhere. These dances always have a healthy mix of young and old, and the same was true of the marathon.

After a potluck breakfast and an hour and a half of Sunday morning waltzing, the medley began. Starting with forty-four dancers at 11 am and ending with eighty or so at 6 pm, the lines never petered out. A time or two they became thin, but a call would go out for more dancers and we'd be quickly back to two good lines.

Dancers joined in at the top or bottom of the lines, danced up and down the lines one, two or many more times, and then dropped out for a swim, a visit, a snack or just for a change in partner. Some couples danced up one line and down another, circling the floor repeatedly.

The callers handed the microphone one to another every hour or so; the bands slipped on and off seamlessly, one member at a time. Each caller did his or her own program. When switching callers, the new caller simply started by calling the last dance of the previous caller, and then moved on to his or her own set of dances.

The bands each played a dozen or more tunes, by agreement ending each hour with something well known (to make the transitions easy). While that tune was being played, the rhythm player would be replaced by the player from the next band. When the sound man was happy with the rhythm sound, he would signal the lead fiddlers to swap, and then other melody players, and so on until one band was gone and another took its place, often without the dancers noticing.

One of the really amazing things about the day was how all of the transitions—and just about everything else—went off exactly as planned. The two sound guys, Weogo Reed and Mike Compton, provided excellent sound all the way through—six bands, no sound checks.

River Falls' mountain location—and a break from Mother Nature—meant that the sweltering temperatures and high humidity that had taken roost in the region this summer (and had been a significant concern in planning the marathon) were not too bad; the high temperature for the day was in the low nineties with only sixty percent humidity. The organizers took great care of musicians and callers with water runners and cool washcloths, not to mention numerous fans. The dancers self-cooled in a large swimming hole a hundred feet behind the building.

Top: Seth Tepfer; middle: Dave Marcus and Laurie Fisher of Holy Coyote; bottom: Barbara Groh with the band BDT; photos by Marvin Ashburn; used with permission.

The potluck lunch turned into an all-day smorgasbord as dancers kept arriving from all over during the day. (About a dozen tents of dancers had come up for the Saturday dance the night before and stayed over, camping by the river or in a field.) The Lodge has a large covered patio in front with a variety of leftover swings and furniture. Two or three long tables were covered with food until after 6 pm, when a marathon birthday cake was cut for the marathon's organizers, Ron Arps and Pam Harders.

The dance raised more than $3500 for Heifer International, an organization that has successfully helped more than four and a half million people in its sixty year history and hopes to reach out to millions more in the next few years. Thirty-three band members, callers and sound guys donated their services and Leon Chapman provided use of the Lodge at a discounted rate.

Although this was never labeled an advanced dance or for advanced dancers, the crowd was more than competent to keep it going, learning eight to twelve dances an hour without a single meltdown. There was a lot of variety in the dances, with Becket formations, a Sicilian circle and even a square sprinkled among the contras, and some of the dances were challenging, with contra corners and other less-common moves.

Caller Diane Silver, who brought the marathon to a high-energy conclusion, sums up what many of us felt, and at the same time explains the real reason why there were no meltdowns:

"The thing that I think I liked best about the whole event was that it really brought a new level of community cooperation to contra dancing—it became less about me-and-my-partner, and more about making sure the whole thing kept going and worked smoothly. Dancers were 'with' the callers in the effort to transition to some pretty-darn-challenging dances on the fly with no walk through, and in making sure the dancing never stopped."

Will this become an annual event? Will other groups try to outdo it, each wanting to hold the record? No one knows the answers, but I think that everyone who was at River Falls that day will tell you that the magic of this first marathon contra medley will never be replaced.

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