News from Canada ~ Poussettes on the Prairie

by Anne Morton

A new column featuring news about a Canadian event or group. Ideas for articles should be sent to Rosemary Lach, rosemarylach@yahoo.ca, or Bev Bernbaum, wturnip@sympatico.ca.

We are Village Green English Country Dancers. How did we get started? Who are we? What do we do? And who are our friends and connections in the wider dance community?

Village Green began more than thirty years ago. Here are Elizabeth Goossen's memories of those days: "David Williams asked John Trevenen to put together the English dance component of a British Folkways Show…this included country dancing, morris dancing and a maypole dance. Those of us who danced enjoyed it so much that we met several times in the following year. By the fall of 1976, we began to meet weekly. In those early days, John and David shared the teaching. We needed a name. One of the founding members suggested 'Village Green.' We all liked it. In the early days we spent many a sunny summer day dancing on the village green at Market Square in Winnipeg's Exchange District."

Village Green ECD at Crystal City; photo courtesy Anne Morton

So, who are we? To begin with, of course, we are dancers. The group has about fifty members. From September through May we show up faithfully for the Wednesday night classes, for much of that time bundling ourselves up against the Manitoba winter as we head out into the dark and cold. For the more adventurous, every other Sunday there is "challenge class" for those who want to learn more complex dances and refine their dancing.

Many of us are also workers. Village Green is hardly the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, yet we do have to plan, organize, take in money, and spend it—all the tasks that go into running any kind of volunteer organization. Village Greeners pitch in to act as board members, to decorate the venues for our special occasions, to sew dresses and costumes, and bring goodies, often homemade, for said occasions, to cook (turkeys included) for our Christmas dinner.

Some of us are teachers and how blessed we are to have them. For token payment, they give up their own dancing to instruct and call for people who stubbornly go left instead of right, pinch in instead of bulging out, and persist in carrying on animated conversations when they should be listening to the figures. The teachers must love dance very much to put up with us and we are very grateful that they do.[1]

Some of us play in our band, The Fine Companions, who give us the joy of live music at our special occasions and some of our Wednesday classes as well. Here is Elizabeth Goossen on the beginning of the band: "It is thanks to the encouragement of Sherman Himelblau that The Fine Companions came into existence. Elizabeth Goossen and Ron Harris played some English country dance tunes at a ceilidh. Sherman heard us and suggested getting together to play for the dancers. The next Christmas, December 1981, Roman Soble, Sherman, and Elizabeth played for six dances on the program of our annual Christmas dinner and dance. The band has grown over the years and now has seven members with a great variety of instruments—recorders, flute, clarinet, two hammered dulcimers, keyboard, various percussion and sometimes guitar.

As English country dancers we enjoy

1 As teaching aids Village Green has produced a dance manual, an instructional video, and a teacher training program.

contemporary dances and tunes as well as the old. Village Green is particularly fortunate in having a prolific resident choreographer in Elizabeth Goossen. We enjoy the opportunity to dance brand new dances, sometimes so new she makes changes as we dance them, all in the interest of creating that seamless flow which is a feature of her work. At our ball this spring we danced four of her dances, one of them specially commissioned by Village Green in honour of a certain wedding which had taken place the day before. The dance is called "The Best Is Yet To Be," to the tune "William and Catherine," also by Elizabeth. Twenty of her dances, with her own tunes or suggested tunes, have already been published as *Daisies In The Wind*. Copies can be obtained via our web site; the address is at the end of this article.

We have a full calendar of events. We hold dance evenings several times a year for members and friends. There are always some dances suitable for anyone to join in. Some evenings include a ceilidh where members share their talents as singers, storytellers, reciters and so on. The March evening is dedicated to John Trevenen, one of our founders, who died in 1996. In fall and/or spring there is a Saturday workshop; themes of recent workshops have been quadrilles, garland dancing and dances from *Daisies In The Wind*.

Our tradition has been to hold a ball and a weekend workshop in alternate years. The workshops help to increase both our dancing skill and our stock of dances. Since I've been a member Village Green has brought in the following as teachers and callers: David Millstone, Scott Higgs, Jacqueline Schwab. Sharon Green was here in 2010, along with The Flying Romanos. Some Village Greeners had heard the band while in New York and promised we would not regret the expense of bringing them in. And we didn't! Their music was fabulous and we raised the funds with an auction of treasures and talents.

Recent ball themes have been: Jane Austen, St. George's Day, Pearls of Wisdom (for our thirtieth anniversary), the Fort Gibraltar Gala, held in a reconstructed fur trade post and, this year, the Beltane Ball, on May Eve, April 30. We woke up to snow on May Morning—summer coming in Winnipeg-style.

Our dance evenings, balls and workshops are well supported by others in the Winnipeg dance community. Some Village Greeners also dance with other groups, such as MIFDA (Manitoba International Folk Dance Association) and the Winnipeg branch of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. A new development has been community contra evenings with live music held two or three times a year and jointly hosted by Village Green and MIFDA.

Our nearest neighbours in the dance community are in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St Paul, an eight hour drive away. Some of their dancers come up to our balls and workshops. A carload of dancers from here usually attends their October dance weekend. Some of our members have also travelled to Victoria in British Columbia to dance. This summer three members attended the Bay Area CDS English Dance and Music Week. Even farther afield, Village Green is twinned with Hawk Green Hoe Down Club in Cheshire, England. Several VG members have danced with them, and brought back dances for us. At the time of writing we are looking forward to the CDSS "travelling Executive Committee meeting" which is coming to town in November for a weekend of hospitality, dancing, and discussion.

With a commitment to outreach to the wider community, Village Green happily accepts invitations to perform in Winnipeg and in other parts of the province. Manitoba is famous for its summer festivals. Our dancers have danced at events such as the Winnipeg Folk Festival, Folklorama, the Herb Festival, the Gathering of the Nations, and the new cross-Canada festival, Culture Days. We have also appeared with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, in performances of The Nutcracker, in fundraisers for churches and in seniors' homes. The photo (on page 8), taken in 2005, shows Village Green dancing in a very Manitoban venue—a curling rink.)

The Village Green Morris Men and Hell's Belles Women's Morris Side sometimes perform at the same events as Village Green. They are such important parts of our community that each deserves a section of their own in this article (see page 10).

Attracting new members is a concern for Village Green, as for many organizations. When the CDSS board is here we hope to have an open discussion about our local dance scene, learning from them about ways to nurture and to encourage growth in our dance community. Like all organizations, we need new members to replace those who leave because of death, decrepitude or disinclination. And we know that there are people out there whose lives would be happier if they would come and join hands with us on the Village Green!

Village Green has a web site at www.villagegreenenglishcountrydancing.org. Copies of *Daisies In The Wind* can be ordered (use the email address) and back issues of our newsletter, *The Town Crier*, can be viewed there. This article was written by Anne Morton in much the same way as Tom Sawyer whitewashed the fence. Thanks, in alphabetical order, to Linda Clark, Elizabeth Goossen, Frances Harris, Katherine Himelblau, Sue Stanton and Daniel Stone, for their contributions. Any errors are mine.

(See next page for an article about the two morris teams, Village Green and Hell's Belles.)

Village Green Morris Men

The Village Green Morris Men (VGMM) were formed in 1974 by John Trevenen and David Williams. Meeting for special events at first, VGMM started performing regularly in 1976 at a local farmers' market and at the British Pavilion, The Mug Pub, in Winnipeg's annual multicultural festival, Folklorama. Other notable venues included the Winnipeg Folk Festival, the Renaissance Fair near Minneapolis, and annual performances in rural Manitoba at the Gathering of Nations and the Manitou Opera house. The group organizes a performance in Winnipeg each year highlighting morris, sword, and a mummers play, and we do numerous shows by invitation.

VGMM started as a Headington and Bampton team. We added Fieldtown in the early 1980s, and have since become very eclectic with numerous Cotswold and Border traditions, longsword, and rapper. We adapt and compose dances, such as our signature Hockey Dance to Stompin' Tom Connors' "The Hockey Song." (This can, indeed should, be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK--MQh2Lxk.) In addition to performing traditional mummers' plays, we have written new ones on Quebec separatism, the Iraq War, and other contemporary issues. The subjects of recent plays have included the historic fur trade and Shakespeare's tragedies (several of them—in one play).

The present membership is eleven dancers and two musicians. One original member still dances actively; several joined early on. There are three English-born dancers who learned morris here. The average age is about sixty. Sadly, three members of the original side have passed on, including our two founders. A boys' side existed in the 1980s. We are probably the oldest morris side in Canada and we think we set a world record for being the coldest when we performed outside on December 6, 1998 in minus thirteen degree celsius (8 F) weather.

Hell's Belles with the Boatmen; photo courtesy Anne Morton

Hell's Belles Women's Morris Side

The Hell's Belles Women's Morris Side enjoy making their sticks, hankies, bells and ribbons dance at Sunday morning practices and at various performances in and around Winnipeg. We have a repertoire of Cotswold and Northwest morris, and we also perform English country dances and garland dances with bowers of flowers!

The side was started in 1991 and was originally a mixed side, founded by Judy Goldsmith and Andy Klapper. It has been exclusively female for some years now. At one point the group had as many as twelve dancers and three musicians. Jeannie Gilbert and Colleen McCarthy took over jointly as squires in 1993 when Judy and Andy headed for bluer pastures in Kentucky. After Colleen left town in 2001, Jeannie has continued as our squire. Molly Pind, who has many years of morris dancing experience in Toronto, helps with our technique, and introduces us to many new dances.

We started life as Winnipeg Mountain Morris. If you are familiar with the prairie terrain around Winnipeg, you may gather that this name was intended to be tongue-in-cheek! Our name change occurred about six years ago, during one of our more crowded and hurried costume changes at a performance. One of our members muttered a splendid English expression of frustration—"Hell's bells and buckets of blood!" It occurred to us that Hell's Belles would be a very suitable name for a women's morris side, and we adopted it shortly thereafter.

We currently number ten dancers, so we are able to round up a reasonable set for our performances. We perform several times a year at cultural and historical events, often in conjunction with the Village Green English Country Dancers. We are lucky to have live music at all practices and performances, provided by our musicians, Roman Soble on accordion and Virginia Stevens on recorder (see photo). They are called the Boatmen, for, as they say, they help to guide us across the "River Sticks"!