



News from Canada ~ Contra Dancing Has Blown Downwind to Nova Scotia

by Dottie Welch and Eliza West

The frost was on the pumpkins the last few nights and the fall foliage is at its peak with gorgeous red and orange maples all along the roads. The crisp evenings encourage folks to search out opportunities to warm up on the dance floor. “Let’s have a céilidh” we say, meaning come and enjoy Gaelic music and dancing. Lots of talented musicians thrive here in the Cape Breton and Scottish culture that brings tourists to Canada’s east coast. Yes, there is contra dancing here. It is part of a recreational dance community that includes Cape Breton square sets, modern square, round, ballroom, Scottish and English country, step and folk dancing (visit dancens.ca). Currently, there are two groups active in Halifax that focus on contras: Contra Time Dances and the Halifax Contra Dances. This is the story of how these two groups came to be!

Dottie’s Story: New England Roots and Contras in the Square Dance World

The evolution of contra dancing in Nova Scotia is a typical example of the strong connections between Nova Scotia and New England. In 1943 Ralph Page began leading a weekly square and contra dance evening at the YWCA in Boston, Massachusetts, partly to provide recreation for sailors and soldiers off the ships. Among those helping to teach were Bob Kinraide and Dottie Dickson; after the dance they would take Ralph for fruit and ice cream before he caught the milk train at 4 a.m. back to Keene, New Hampshire. Bob and Dottie were my parents, so I have wonderful memories of ski weekends in New Hampshire that included a Saturday evening square and contra dance. In later years my parents danced in Massachusetts with Ted Sannella at the Scout House in Concord and Roger Whynot in Belmont. (Roger, who began square dance calling in Nova Scotia in the 1950s, moved to the United States in 1969.)

In 1974 we moved to Nova Scotia and joined a modern square dance club in Halifax. At that time there were several square dance callers who also called contras as part of their program including John Essex, Brundage MacDonald and Vern Carmichael. In 1983, our advanced square dance club needed a caller, so I began calling and soon added contras to my programs. Our annual Maritime Conventions have always included some time featuring contras so I was soon recruited to participate along with Nelson Labor, Alex Ritchie, Chris Ayres and Ron Lowe.

After joining Callerlab (International Association of Square Dance Callers) in 1995, I became involved in the Committee for Community and Traditional Dance. This committee organizes an annual Beginner Dance Party Leaders Seminar. While attending the seminar before the Louisville Callerlab Convention in March of 2005, a group of callers attended the local Saturday evening contra dance. Bev Bernbaum of Toronto was calling and during the evening she used a delightful circle mixer by Cis Hinkle. As editor of the *Community Dance Journal*, I contacted Bev in order to publish the dance. Thus another connection was forged. (These journals are all available at www.callerlab.org under Documents.) By 2003 I had been calling contras for twenty years to mostly recorded music and as part of the square dance world. Then the New Times/Old Time Dance in

Halifax came to our attention and 2004 we attended one of these dances and were delighted to find the familiar New England contras of my childhood being danced to live music.

Dave’s Story: History of the New Times/Old Time Dances, 1990-2007

The New Times/Old Time (NTOT) dance started as the Saturday Night Country Dance in the fall of 1990. It was a spin-off group from the weekly International Folk Dances, which were mainly focused on the Balkan countries; through the 1980s, these dances had included some contras, waltzes and polkas. Something had to give! It was too much variety to pack into one night of dancing, so a subgroup started up with many of the folk dancers and peripheral friends. We danced monthly and included English country, New England contras, a smidgeon of Irish, Scottish and Welsh, and some old time waltzes, polkas, schottisches and British versions of tango. There were even a Polish Kujawiak and a couple of Czech polkas. In the fall of 1993, the event became known as the New Times/Old Time Dance.

During that first year recorded music was used, but the search was on for live music. The group had a succession of bands: Great Blue Heron, with popular local musicians including Ronnie MacEachern and Bill Plaskett; Snow Monkeys, a band from the



Halifax Contra Dances, October 2012

Shambala Centre; and then Gordon Stobbe and friends, starting in 1995 and continuing through to the final dance in 2007. By then, Joe Pratt sometimes filled in for Gordon, who was often out of town due to developments in his own music career. Gordon's versatility and geniality helped greatly through those years.

Dave Schlosberg called the dances. He had cut his teeth running set dances in Pictou County from 1975-1981, and he attended contra dances in Boston off and on. Jane Schlosberg taught most of the partner dances and often prompted the longways sets. They and the Folkdancers' Association of Nova Scotia, the sponsoring group, got a wonderful boost when Marianne Taylor came down (yes, "down," for sailors, we are downwind) from Boston) in the fall of 1991 to give a workshop in longways and contras. All through the years, attendance varied unpredictably between fifteen and fifty-five, probably averaging about twenty-eight. As the 1990s came to a close and many of the original group faded away, the European partner dances left the repertoire, except for the waltz. The dances became almost exclusively longways and

contras, with a few western Canadian and Québécois set dances and an occasional novelty dance.

In the fall of 2005, Eldon Cooper and Dottie Welch started calling dances. Eldon had recently moved from Ontario, where he had his own popular longways and contra group. Dottie, one of the premier square dance callers of the Metro area, had been involved with contra dancing since her childhood in New England. They energized the group greatly. However, by May 2007, due to various health problems and Gordon Stobbe's career developments outside of the province, the NTOT came to an end. Fortunately, Dottie started a new sequence called the Contra Time Dances, and a younger crowd started up the Smokin' Contra Dances (now known as Halifax Contra Dances). These two groups have kept the contra dance scene hopping in Halifax ever since.

Dottie's Story Continues: Contra Time Dances

Since January of 2008, we have held a Contra Time Dance about once a month from October to May. Our musicians are usually Joe Pratt on the fiddle and Skip Holmes on guitar or banjo, but we have welcomed



Dottie Welch calling at the Contra Time Dances, October 2012

several other excellent musicians when needed or possible. A typical evening includes mixers, contras of various kinds, one English country dance and waltzes. Attendance averages about twenty dancers who are a mix of dedicated contra dancers from the NTOT days, modern square dancers, new recruits and beginners. Our schedule is available at www.squaredance.ns.ca in the Calendar of Events. Being delighted to see a second and younger group of contra dancers, those of us with calling experience have shared our knowledge with the newer callers through workshops and personal mentoring sessions.

Amy's Story: The Smokin' Contra Band

Amy Louder grew up playing classical violin, but she finally found her calling playing dances in Grey County, Ontario: "I lived in Durham and was tutored by Bettie who was a much loved caller with the Glenelg Township Full Moon Dance Band. We had a contra band there and she showed us how to run the dances before she passed away from cancer."

Attendance at dances in Greenfield, Massachusetts, inspired the creation of a group of assorted musicians who called themselves the Smokin' Contra Band. "We loved the music and the community spirit that shapes this kind of social dancing." In 2007 the band began performing at local contra dances at least once every month in Halifax. Shannon Lynch accepted the challenge of learning to call for these events. The dance community was built from their circle of friends and it spread from there. Suddenly there was a rollicking and thriving young adult contra dance advertised as "like a square dance, minus the square, plus an East-Coast flare."

Eliza's Story: Halifax Contra Dances

As a native Vermonter, contra dancing was always in the periphery as I was growing up. I began dancing in earnest in high school, when I discovered the local English country dance group and from there made my way to Border morris, and finally became a frequent and fervent contra dancer. Contra became such a big part of my life that when I moved to Halifax for university, I sought out local dances and began attending Smokin' Contra Band's dances whenever I could. In 2011 the band asked the community to take over the running of the dance and a handful of community members began Halifax Contra Dances to meet the need. Along with our small group of principal organizers, HCD has the help of many other volunteers to keep the dance running. Halifax Contra Dances is truly run by a love of dance as much as by a group of people—we know that to have a dance to attend we all need to pitch in and make it happen.

While some of our dancers have been to contras elsewhere, many only dance in Halifax. We have folks who faithfully turn up to every dance and we also welcome around a dozen new dancers each month. Dances generally have fifty to a hundred people, and are held in a local church hall. The atmosphere is always friendly and playful and much effort is put into welcoming newcomers. Since Halifax has such a rich culture of traditional music, HCD is lucky enough to always have wonderful local bands playing for us. One of a handful of regular bands is Papilio, a neo-traditional group playing the music of Ireland, Scotland, the Maritimes, Québec, Brittany, Scandinavia, Galicia/Asturia, the Balkans and beyond, presented with a distinctive creative twist alongside folk songs and original compositions. The band consists of Anthony Rissesco on fiddle and vocals, Jennifer Publicover on flutes and bodhran, and Phil Schappert on guitars. Local caller Shannon Lynch is a longstanding part of the community, but other community members have been picking up the calling torch of late. To foster this in the past two years we have held a handful of calling workshops and launched new callers on our stage including Jonathan Franklin and Kat Kitching.

While Halifax has lots of cultural ties to New England, Quebec and other areas with great contra traditions, geographically, it's a bit off the beaten path, and a lot of dancers from away don't know that we're here. We'd love for this to change! We always welcome dancers, callers and bands from away. You can find out about our upcoming dances by following us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/HalifaxContraDances or emailing us at HalifaxContraDances@gmail.com.

Dottie Welch has a lifetime history of contra dancing as described in her story. She taught math for twenty-five years and has been calling for nearly thirty. Traveling to dances is often combined with camping, hiking and birding. She can be contacted at dwelch@eastlink.ca and on Facebook.

Eliza West has been contra dancing since high school. She came to Halifax from Vermont four years ago to attend University of King's College. An organizer of the Halifax Contra Dances, she is also a longtime member of On the Border Morris of Burlington. Eliza plans her vacations home around the Montpelier and Burlington contra schedules.

"News from Canada" features news about Canadian events and groups. Ideas for articles should be sent to Rosemary Lach, rosemarylach@yahoo.ca or to Bev Bernbaum, wturnip@sympatico.ca.