Rochester, Vermont Contra Dance

by Aaron Marcus

Dear CDSS. Thank you very much for the grant of \$150. Once I paid Pierce Hall \$30 per night (a very special rate), an appropriate fee to the band and caller, and to our local sound person when needed, I ended up \$40 under in June, \$40 over in July, \$40 under in August, and \$39 under in September. Though I accompanied musicians in June, July and August, I paid myself nothing. As a result, I only need \$79 dollars of your grant to make up for the loss; you can have the rest back to serve another great dance project. Your assistance has been very helpful. Your contribution has helped me get this series kicked off,

while paying our musicians, callers, hall, and occasional sound man enough to bring them back next year. Other dance organizers tell me that this series will inevitably draw more dancers next year if I keep at it. I announced and described you as a sponsor, and you got a big round of applause. I will once again mention you in next year's series.

This completely new summer dance series had four dances on the fourth Thursdays in 2010, with attendance of nineteen

dancers in June, thirty-five dancers in July, twenty in August and about fifteen in September. What we lacked in numbers, we made up for in enthusiasm! We had a great return rate; many of the dancers came to two or three of the dances over the summer. Most dancers were completely new to contra dance, and some had been on a long hiatus from dance ever since they moved to this valley. Perhaps because of the collaborative atmosphere due the fact that nearly everyone was a beginner, the dance space felt magical.

The dance hall is small and beautifully magnificent (and was likely one of the original halls were dances were held before living memory). It was truly inspirational to bring together the community in this way. The contra dances were also one of the first events to happen in Pierce Hall in many decades (though built as a community building for the town in 1916, it was used in recent decades only as a Masonic Hall). The board members in charge of restoring the hall were very appreciative that the dance brought

in local community members to see and support the restoration work. There were smiles everywhere, and the dancers learned quickly, soon graduating to heys and other such figures.

The dancers were open to trying anything. The simplest dances could be so much fun in that hall. In July, we did "mostly squares" with Will Mentor. I also got to support emerging callers and dancers from the Mad Robin Caller's Collective, and emerging local musicians such as Ellie Marshall of Washington, Joanne Garton of Montpelier, and the Old Sam Peabody Band of Woodstock, Vermont. Since there are

hardly any local musicians and callers, I encouraged dancers to come sit in with the band to develop skills and understanding of how contra music works. Only a couple local musicians took me up on this, but it was an enjoyable experience. I believe part of the magic was also a result of the great acoustic music. The music sounded fabulous every dance, especially the roughlyin-tune upright piano that rang beautifully through the hall. Everyone I have talked to would like to see the series continue next summer, and



Rochester Contra Dance, August 2011; photo by Burma Cassidy

several dancers expressed their interest in helping.

Though not part of my series, the White River Valley Players, a well known organization in town, had a contra dance also in Pierce Hall, as part of a special event on Saturday, May 8 (Swing into Spring). For that dance I collaborated to provide the band and caller. The dance was very helpful in kicking off the summer series, and it showed what may be possible—over fifty dancers attended that Saturday dance despite the blustery weather.

In organizing this series, it was very helpful to be a dance musician myself. Not only could I save money and have fun by accompanying a single musician, I already knew all the local musicians to call, and the ins and outs of music and sound for a dance. It was also helpful to be a longtime dancer in Vermont because I have friendships with many of the callers and other dance organizers in the region. Organizing this dance helped me develop a healthier respect for all the other dance organizers out there

who cheered me on. The work they all do is truly a labor of love.

My flyers were a surprisingly effective way to get the word out locally. I could have made them more colorful, but the word clearly got around due to the flyers at all the grocery stores, post offices and restaurants within two towns of Rochester. These towns are also very small and so word of mouth was very effective. I also published the event in four local newspapers and on the White River Valley Players email list; all brought in some dancers. I did not put many flyers at other dances in the region, but I believe many of my friends did (Don Peabody, David Millstone, Will Mentor, Pete Sutherland, and Montpelier dance organizers). The upper White River valley is only accessible by small slow mountain roads from most other towns, so on a Thursday night, we inevitably got mostly local dancers.

I am considering moving the series to a Sunday to increase participation, but I suspect it would create as many problems as it might solve. It would certainly make it easier for dancers from out of town to make the drive if they wanted to come over the mountain, but it would also compete with all the local Sunday events that already happen all summer in the valley (other contra dance series are an hour away, and are held on Saturdays, so they do not compete: Norwich,

Montpelier, Tinmouth, Woodstock, Burlington, Bristol/Middlebury). The

other benefit of the Thursday dance is that nearby musicians and callers like Pete Sutherland and Will Mentor are often not otherwise committed on week nights, and have the opportunity for an additional local gig.

I am also considering decreasing the price (currently "\$8 adults, \$5 for 21 and under"), or making a sliding scale if it will increase attendance. Most people in this valley make a living by stringing together multiple jobs, and money is tight. Some people also showed up with little kids who might only dance a few dances. I am considering making kids free to make it easier on parents. With the low number of dancers, I haven't bothered attending the door, and the honors system has mostly been working out.

When the Old Sam Peabody Band played in September, we determined that with current numbers,

we can get away without using a sound system when there are five plus band members, just bringing a mic and amp for the caller. Because we were using Joe Schenkman's very limited sound system, we ended up putting a microphone in the middle of all the Sam Peabody musicians, and remarkably, we could hear every one of them.

Finally I want to thank Ethan Hazzard-Watkins and the energy he brought to the first Youth Dance Weekend (Plymouth, Vermont). It was this that inspired me to start a contra dance series for the community of the upper White River. To me, the community here now feels more complete.

POSTSCRIPT, AUGUST 2011: "We had a second season with similar attendance to the first—a small mostly local, and very enthusiastic crowd. This

year, we broke even. A very nice new sound system with sixteen channels was donated to Pierce Hall last winter, and that made the dances more affordable and enjoyable to organize—I've learned the basics of running a soundboard. This year, I had help designing and hanging fliers from some of the dancers. The hall committee continued to be very supportive. They helped collect money at the door, and they put a large sign out in front of the hall for our dance.

"All but one of our musicians and callers were from within sixty miles of our dance, and this season we have begun to see musicians who live locally in the White River valley surfacing to sit in behind the band. We are beginning to build up a supply of musicians right here in our

valley who can play for contra dances.

"The applause was so thunderous and unceasing at our last dance of the season, that it was clear that we will need to continue the series for a third year to appease our eager dancers. For me, the most rewarding thing of this whole experience has been watching how it brings our small isolated community together." ~A.M.

CDSS Outreach Funds are available to CDSS members and nonmembers, see our website, www.cdss.org/grants-support.html, for information and an application, or write to linda@cdss.org. For a list of recipents so far this year, see page 6.



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