

News from Canada ~ Finding My Tribe and Bringing It Home

by Janice Ferri



I discovered contra dance rather late in life. A friend who had recently attended some dances and spoke about the joy of having dance in her life again persuaded me to go with her. I felt that I was taking a big step out of my comfort zone by going to a dance that I had never heard of and had no idea how to do, with people I had never met. Today, I find it is important for me to remember what I thought I was risking—looking foolish, unable to catch on to the dances, feeling like an outsider, nobody asking me to dance, and generally having a terrible time. In Ontario where most people have never heard of contra dance, this is what many newcomers expect.

To make a long story short, despite my gloomy predictions, it was love at first dance for all the usual reasons—being swept up in the music of the live band (which I had not expected), the warm welcome, dancers who gently pointed me in the right direction when I made a wrong turn, the caller who taught each dance, the excitement of everyone dancing with everyone, the energy, the smiles and eye contact, the hand clasp and swinging. To my surprise, I felt that I belonged. In fact, after a couple of months, I started to tell friends that I had found my tribe.

This happened in Guelph, Ontario in the fall of 2010 and the band was Relative Harmony. By the spring of 2011, I had begun to wonder out loud with some friends if it would be possible to start a regular contra dance in our home town of Fergus, Ontario. By that time, dancing once a month in Guelph just wasn't enough for me. We talked with the caller, Judy Greenhill, who suggested that we do a pilot project of two dances over the summer when most other dances were taking a break. This was very good advice. First, it allowed us to test the waters for interest in a Fergus dance. Secondly it showed us the other side of the love of dancing—the need to find a proper hall and pay the rental, to pay the band, do the publicity, and get ready to welcome dancers into a dance community.

Although these dances were not wildly successful, we were encouraged enough to start a regular dance on the fourth Friday of each month. There is a saying that “if you build it, they will come,” but in my experience, they will only come in sufficient numbers to cover the costs if you constantly find ways to share your enthusiasm with people. This includes posters, ads in the public events section of the newspaper, radio and cable TV interviews, and writing the occasional article for the newspaper. Talking to church groups and doing a simple demonstration is good and can also lead to a photo in the local paper.

The very best way of sharing your love of contra dance is by word of mouth, one or two people at a time. Whenever I meet people and they ask me what I do, I always say that one of my projects is organizing contra dances in Fergus. “What is contra dance?” they ask. At this point, my friends roll their eyes as I launch into an enthusiastic sales pitch for contra dance. If they seem interested, I ask if they would like to be on our email list and usually they give me their contact information. Then I whip out a small flyer from my purse with the dates of the next dances and say I hope to see them there. Friends say I have become a “contra evangelist.”

An important and enjoyable way of publicizing our dances is to go to dances in other towns. At these venues I meet others who have been bitten by the contra bug and who are likely to come to our dances. I always take our flyers for the information table as well as a sign-up contact sheet. I am always amazed at how far contra dancers will drive to get their “fix.”

As we began our second year, we set up our own web site, [ferguscontradances.ca](http://www.ferguscontradances.ca). This was a big step and is still a work in progress. One of the features is a calendar with dates of local dances highlighted. A click on the highlighted date brings up the poster for the dance. Currently we advertise dances in Owen Sound, Durham, Guelph, Hamilton and Toronto as well as our own. Dance organizers in other towns will usually return the favor and advertise our dances on their website.

Now in the fall of 2013, we are well into our third year of dancing and can look back with a sense of satisfaction at how far we have come.

We have a contact list of well over a hundred people and have moved to a better venue. We are beginning to develop a core of regular intermediate dancers. We are grateful to our house band, Relative Harmony, and caller, Judy Greenhill, for their encouragement as well as great music. Louisa Kuitert who creates our posters and designed and maintains our website is an important behind-the-scene presence. The *CDSS News* has been a help to us in connecting us to the larger dance scene and printing articles with advice and comments that I often quote.

Our goals for the future include finding ways to welcome and nurture new dancers while also providing challenging dances for experienced dancers; attracting more university students by supporting carpooling and incentives to bring new people; attracting young families by perhaps offering a one hour family dance time at the beginning of the evening. Our main goal, of course, is to continue to be able to draw from this deep well of joy that we create together.

For more about the Fergus dance, see <http://www.ferguscontradances.ca>.

Janice Ferri began contra dancing in 2010 and has not looked back. She always hosts a party at her house after the dance where everyone sings together. Dancing, singing, eating, drinking together—does it get any better?”

Photos for the article are by Kris Corley; the article’s author is dancing on this issue’s cover (she’s in the striped skirt on the right).

