

American Week, Pinewoods 2014

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by Chuck Abell



Photo by Garrett Fondoules

When I first heard about the Country Dancers of Rochester (CDR) scholarship program for CDSS camps, I developed an immediate interest. As a new caller—and as an experienced musician—I was looking for any opportunities to hone my skills in both areas, and just to collaborate with other callers and musicians.

Having never been to Pinewoods before, I was initially struck by the mellow, woody environment, along with the two beautiful lakes/ponds situated next to the camp. Pinewoods is truly a New England paradise.

The next revelation was the outdoor dance pavilion, again tucked back in the woods. There really is nothing like dancing outdoors in a covered pavilion in mid-August. From the first night it was evident that magical things would happen in the pavilion over the course of the week—in many ways, it was really the center of the camp. The final thing that struck me right from the start was the diversity and the energy of the campers. I confess, I was bracing for something perhaps a little more on the stuffy side when I first registered, but that notion was well wide of the mark —teenagers, college students, young couples, middle-agers, and more “seasoned” dancers all converged at the camp for a week of creativity and true rejuvenation.

Some snapshots of the next six days:

- Gathering at 10 am every morning for Phil Jamison’s Southern Squares class. What a great tradition, and a great teacher. Having no sense of what distinguished a Southern Square from a New England or Western square, I quickly came to understand that Southern Squares are about improvisation, about calling to the beat of the music, not to the phrasing. What a liberation! For the rest of the week, we took turns inventing—and calling—squares to the great old time music of Julie Metcalf and company, always under the skillful guidance of Phil, who really seems to me to be David Kaynor’s long-lost Southern brother! Well, brothers in spirit at least...
- David Cantieni’s “tunes by ear” class which became a virtual playground of ideas and genres. Being one of the few instrumental “ensemble” classes, we were charged with preparing each evening’s “proceSSIONal”—a joyous musical march through the darkening woods just before the evening dance. (“When the Saints Go Marching In” never sounded so good!)
- The daily camp gathering that followed morning classes, but preceded swimming and lunch. A time for jokes, songs, stories, contests, and other spontaneous acts of generosity by staff and campers alike. It was the one time of the day when we really came together as a single camp, and it was an honor to see otherwise taciturn campers get up and perform in front of 150 audience members.
- The Roadhouse after-dance party, midweek. Okay, I’m biased here—being one-third of the nominal “house band” charged with backing up a small parade of crooners, blues singers, and jazz soloists—with a room full of enthusiastic swing, blues, and bossa nova dancers—is right where it’s at for me. They pretty much had to drag us off the stage at 1:30 am.
- Emily Troll’s music ensemble class—that is, band class for musicians. Okay, I confess, some of the “touchy/feely” interpersonal games at the start of each class reminded me a little too much of the upcoming school year (not an image I wanted to entertain), but once we got past those, the class was really useful and helped spawn several small instrumental ensembles that took the stage at Camper’s Night (see below).

- Gaye Fifer’s “Dutch Crossing” —hard to really put this into words, but definitely a highlight of the week. Look it up on YouTube if you want. Basically, a dance that requires 16 couples, takes 55 (intense) minutes to teach, and five minutes to actually dance. A great teamwork activity.
- Swimming Squares. Yes, real Southern square dances, performed while swimming in the lake. Not only hilarious but a great form of exercise. Just be careful when “ducking for the oyster.”
- Camper’s Night—a true highlight. A chance for (very talented) campers to run the evening dance. Somehow, I ended up in five to six music ensembles, so I never got to dance until the second half, but it was well worth it. A memorable, and somewhat revolutionary, segment: David Cantieni’s entire ear training class joined by Ann Percival’s entire chorus class performing “Wimoweh” as a contra dance set. It actually works!

And the list of highlights goes on: the food, the lodges, the pre-dinner parties, the after-dance parties, the midnight swimming, the networking, the afternoon old time jam sessions led by Larry Unger, the not-so impromptu marshmallow fight at dinner one night, the full moon over the lake as I drifted to sleep in my bunkhouse...

Looking back, both my calling and my playing have improved as a result of being at American Week—not only do I have an expanded repertoire of dances and tunes, but my skills have sharpened considerably. Had it not been for the CDR grant, and matching CDSS scholarship, I most certainly would have missed out on an invaluable experience.

Chuck Abell is a contra dance caller and musician from Rochester, NY. His band, Tempest, featuring fiddler Tim Ball and several other great western NY musicians, just released its first full-length CD, Equilibrium, and will be touring extensively over the next year to promote the release. Keep an eye out for them, or visit www.chuckabell.com for more info on the band.