

# Dance Across the Divide

By Marty Albini

If you started dancing in the last 15 years, you probably don't remember a time when an evening included both squares and contras. It probably seems normal that the square and contra dance worlds don't overlap much. There are callers and dancers bucking this trend (and always have been), but they are paddling upstream.

This isn't just an issue of style—the cultures of the two worlds seem like separate islands. It seems that people of Modern Western Square Dance (MWSD) and contra just don't interact. It wasn't always like that, and it doesn't have to be.

Two people building bridges between these worlds are Rose Styczinski of Spokane, Washington, and Kathy Johnson of Helena, Montana. Together they're organizing the contra program for the 69<sup>th</sup> National Square Dance Convention (NSDC) in Spokane (June 17-20, 2020). Their goal is to transform the contra portion from an open mic event with recorded music to something more like a contra dance weekend. The intent is to attract contra dancers to the event (perhaps to explore square dancing) and to introduce square dancers to contra dancing as it is practiced in the wild.

This isn't the fool's errand it may appear. Rose and Kathy got to know each other at the USAWest Square Dance Convention in 2015, where Kathy organized the contra portion. She and I had raised the funds for that event (including a grant from CDSS) and recruited bands, callers, and dancers that became the model for this year's NSDC.

That USAWest was about one-sixth the size of NSDC—600 dancers compared to nearly 4,000. The contra turnout at that convention was as large as usual for an NSDC (around 30 for daytime workshops and 60 for the evening dances).

The contra dancers we had recruited got some exposure to squares, and they experienced the version of contra that square dancers expect at a convention.

That repertoire tends to be chestnut dances from years ago—dances that have fallen out of favor in the broader contra community, making them novel to present-day contra dancers.

The USAWest effort paid off beyond the event. Based on connections made there, a consortium of four square dance clubs in Billings, Montana, agreed to host a contra dance group in their hall. As a result, Montana now has a fourth contra dance community, started by Amy Letson (who called at USAWest) and her husband Bill.

Square dancers weren't afraid to try contra dancing as we know it now. Several dancers asked me where they could find contra near them, and one caller asked where he could find a band like the ones we brought. Getting contra dancers to try MWSD is harder. It takes more than building a bridge—people only cross if they're welcome on the other side, something the MWSD community struggles with.

If you'd like to join us in Spokane to help reach across this division, register for NSDC69 at [www.69nsdc.org](http://www.69nsdc.org). If you'd like to participate as a caller or musician, please contact me at [marty.albini@bozemanfolklore.org](mailto:marty.albini@bozemanfolklore.org).

A bridge is just a start, and it's a necessary one. We mean to dance across.

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**Below: (Left to Right)** *Some of the Montana dance callers: Amy Letson, me (Marty Albini), Derek Gallagher, Steve Braun, and Vicki Watson.*

