Toronto is a friendly city, and a creative hotbed. It’s a city where people are moving quickly, yet ready to offer assistance at the drop of a hat. It makes sense, then, that Toronto is where some of the earliest virtual dances at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were born.

The Toronto English Country Dance Assembly (TECDA) started a weekly Friday night dance a couple of weeks after the world closed down, on March 27th. The brainchild of Cathy Campbell and Maxine Louie, the dance quickly gained a following across the continent and beyond.

Toronto Contra Dance (TCD) started a virtual dance in April, around the same time that a couple other communities were launching their dances. Becky Liddle, president of TCD, reached out to the local callers’ collective to get things rolling, and Cathy Campbell offered early assistance based on the learnings of the TECDA dance.

The dances, it turned out, were fun, much to many dancers’ surprise. While it was clear that virtual dancing certainly wouldn’t replace the in-person experience that we all know and love, for many of us, it was an opportunity to move, enjoy great music, connect with other dancers, and engage with our community members like never before, developing new friendships and networks.

As the virtual dance trend took off, organizers began sharing their learnings. Zoom was a bit of a minefield, especially in the spring; security was a big issue, and tips and guides were shared to keep dance events safe from Zoom-bombers. Claire Takemori, from the Bay Area Country Dance Society, became a central figure in the effort to collect information and share broadly, and many communities launched events under her tutelage.

A big part of the exploration and experimentation happened, and continues to happen, amongst callers. Completely new questions arose, such as: How do we adjust dances for a living room? What adaptations need to be made so that dancers don’t progress and have to figure out how to adjust on the fly?

Tunes were slowed down to a tempo of 110 beats per minute, as we realized dancers couldn’t move as quickly without shared weight. Dances with a lot of clockwise motion were discarded or adapted, as people were getting dizzyer dancing solo. Dances with a lot of interaction outside of the minor set were also thrown out, as most dancers’ living rooms just didn’t provide the space to allow for much beyond the set of four.

Callers started congregating, collaborating, and revising dances. Louise Siddons from Scissortail (Oklahoma) launched her Wednesday Walkthrough; Shared Weight launched an online callers’ email list; and an online callers’ collective was spearheaded by Claire Takemori to discuss innovative ways to keep virtual dances fun and engaging. Suddenly singlets and doublets were de rigueur. Uncommon figures were reexamined for the virtual dance context. And crossover from other dance traditions was explored.

All told, two clear silver linings emerged from all of this collaboration: callers and organizers were connecting across communities like never before, developing new friendships and networks. And an outpouring of creativity inspired a new look at the dance traditions we all deeply love.

They say that constraints breed creativity—that certainly has been true in our folk dance communities!

The Birth of All Hands In

Through all of this, the Toronto virtual contra dance continued to grow, drawing dancers from across North America and beyond and attracting top talent in both the featured musicians and callers.

Becky Liddle paired up with Drew Delaware, a Toronto caller with a technology background who was enthralled by the challenges and unique questions that virtual dancing brought, and the two tagged-teamed to bring the Toronto Virtual Contra to life every two weeks.

Meanwhile, other communities started looking into creating events of their own. But there were barriers to entry, most notably having tech-savvy volunteers, not to mention a paid Zoom license that would allow for a dance event to happen.

We also quickly realized that a lot of “virtual contra groupsies” were showing up at all the dances. It was as if each weekend was yet another dance festival, and one could travel the continent from the comfort of their own living room. Most communities didn’t have enough local dancers wanting to dance virtually to warrant their own dance. And with the ability for dancers to join dances anywhere, the calendar had become quite full. This also impacted the musicians, who were relying on donations from those in attendance.

Noticing these issues, Drew and Becky started floating the idea of sharing the Toronto virtual contra dance with the idea of sharing the Toronto virtual contra dance with other communities.

The idea was simple: participating communities would be provided with a “community room” of their own to connect and socialize with their community members for half an hour, and then all communities would join the main dance together. At the end of the dance, dancers would have the option to stay for randomized breakout rooms to meet new friends from other communities.

In exchange, participating communities help promote the dance and provide one volunteer to assist with the dance every six to eight weeks. Toronto Contra Dance provides the technology, works with the talent, and coordinates the overall effort. All told, the idea was to ensure it was a very manageable contribution for even the most resource-strapped of communities.

In the first few weeks of opening the Toronto dance to other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.

It just so happened that Toronto’s invitation to join All Hands In came as the Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers’ board was meeting to discuss ideas for holding online events, and staying engaged with their community. According to Cliff White, “we were just coming off our summer break after holding a handful of haphazard online events in the spring. The board immediately and enthusiastically embraced Toronto’s invitation. It seemed like a perfect way to offer our community something beyond what we could offer on the local level. Since there was no financial commitment for our board, and only a modest commitment of volunteer time, that also made the collaboration very attractive. Toronto made it very easy to participate.”

“All Hands In gives us an opportunity to engage with our local dancers. That is one of the most important things for us right now: keeping our local group engaged and involved, at least at some level,” said Cliff.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Jacqui Grennan had been wondering about a way to reach out to local dancers and see how they were doing, especially those who weren’t already participating in Zoom dancing.

“The All Hands In breakout rooms have provided a resource that helps to make this happen. It was really...
Virtual Dancing & the All Hands In Initiative

By Drew Delaware

Toronto is a friendly city, and a creative hotbed. It’s a city where people are moving quickly, yet ready to offer assistance at the drop of a hat.

It makes sense, then, that Toronto is where some of the earliest virtual dances at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were born.

The Toronto English Country Dance Assembly (TECDA) started a weekly Friday night dance a couple of weeks after the world closed down, on March 27th. The brainchild of Cathy Campbell and Maxine Louie, the dance quickly gained a following across the continent and beyond.

The Toronto Contra Dance (TCD) started a virtual dance in April, around the same time that a couple other communities were launching their dances. Becky Liddle, president of TCD, reached out to the local callers’ collective to get things rolling, and Cathy Campbell offered early assistance based on the learnings of the TECDA dance.

The Toronto virtual contra dance continued to grow, drawing dancers from across North America and beyond and attracting top talent in both the featured musicians and callers.

The Birth of All Hands In

Through all of this, the Toronto virtual contra dance continued to grow, drawing dancers from across North America and beyond and attracting top talent in both the featured musicians and callers.

Becky Liddle paired up with Drew Delaware, a Toronto caller with a technology background who was enthralled by the challenges and unique questions that virtual dancing brought, and the two tag-teamed to bring the Toronto Virtual Contra to life every two weeks.

Meanwhile, other communities started looking into creating events of their own. But there were barriers to entry, most notably having tech-savvy volunteers, not to mention a paid Zoom license that would allow for a dance event to happen.

We also quickly realized that a lot of “virtual contra groupies” were showing up at all the dances. It was as if each weekend was yet another dance festival, and one could travel the continent from the comfort of their own living room. Most communities didn’t have enough local dancers wanting to dance virtually to warrant their own dance. And with the ability for dancers to join dances anywhere, the calendar had become quite full. This also impacted the musicians, who were relying on donations from those in attendance.

Noticing these issues, Drew and Becky started floating ideas to discuss innovative ways to keep virtual dances fun and engaging. Suddenly singlets and doublets were de rigueur. Uncommon figures were reexamined for the virtual dance context. And crossover from other dance traditions was explored.

As the virtual dance trend took off, organizers began sharing their learnings. Zoom was a bit of a minefield, especially in the spring; security was a big issue, and tips and guides were shared to keep dance events safe from Zoom-bombers. Claire Takemori, from the Bay Area Country Dance Society, became a central figure in the effort to collect information and share broadly, and many communities launched events under her tutelage.

A big part of the exploration and experimentation happened, and continues to happen, amongst callers. Completely new questions arose, such as: How do we adjust dances for a living room? What adaptations need to be made so that dancers don’t progress and have to figure out how to adjust on the fly?

Tunes were slowed down to a tempo of 110 beats per minute, as we realized dancers couldn’t move as quickly without shared weight. Dances with a lot of clockwise motion were discarded or adapted, as people were getting dizzier dancing solo. Dances with a lot of interaction outside of the minor set were also thrown out, as most dancers’ living rooms just didn’t provide the space to allow for much beyond the set of four.

Callers started congregating, collaborating, and revising dances. Louise Siddons from Scissortail (Oklahoma) launched her Wednesday Walkthroughs; Shared Weight launched an online callers’ email list; and an online callers’ collective was spearheaded by Claire Takemori to discuss innovative ways to keep virtual dances fun and engaging. Suddenly singlets and doublets were de rigueur. Uncommon figures were reexamined for the virtual dance context. And crossover from other dance traditions was explored.

All told, two clear silver linings emerged from all of this collaboration: callers and organizers were connecting across communities like never before, developing new friendships and networks. And an outpouring of creativity inspired a new look at the dance traditions we all deeply love.

They say that constraints breed creativity—that certainly has been true in our folk dance communities!

The Toronto Contra Dance and other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.

In the first few weeks of opening the Toronto dance to other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.

The All Hands In invitation to join All Hands In came as the Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers’ board was meeting to discuss ideas for holding online events, and staying engaged with their community. According to Cliff White, “we were just coming off our summer break after holding a handful of haphazard online events in the spring. The board immediately and enthusiastically embraced Toronto’s invitation. It seemed like a perfect way to offer our community something beyond what we could offer on the local level. Since there was no financial commitment for our board, and only a modest commitment of volunteer time, that also made the collaboration very attractive. Toronto made it very easy to participate.”

“All Hands In gives us an opportunity to engage with our local dancers. That is one of the most important things for us right now: keeping our local group engaged and involved, at least at some level,” said Cliff.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Jacqui Grennan had been wondering about a way to reach out to local dancers and see how they were doing, especially those who weren’t already participating in Zoom dancing.

“The All Hands In breakout rooms have provided a resource that helps to make this happen. It was really important for us to learn from our community members and take their feedback into account when planning our events.”

The Toronto Contra Dance and other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.

In the first few weeks of opening the Toronto dance to other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.

In the first few weeks of opening the Toronto dance to other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.
Anti-Racism and the Folk Revival

By Ezra Fischer

This piece was written and published online by long-time CDSS member Ezra Fischer. It has been split into two pieces and abridged. The first half is an analysis of the history of the first folk revival and Cecil Sharp and was published in the fall 2020 issue of the CDSS News. The second half, which follows here, focuses on how our history informs our present and should influence our future. The essay is published in full at ezafischer.com.

Although the first folk revival was a hundred years ago, many of its core elements are still alive today. Our community rejects urbanism and modernity as fiercely today as Sharp and his cohort did in their time (despite many of us living in cities and being tech workers of some sort—again, just like Sharp and his cohort).

Much of our song repertoire still celebrates and mourns along the same nostalgic lines of the first folk revival. We sing “hoorah for the life of a country boy” and mourn that “the horse’s day is gone.” Our communal sings honor people who have memorized their songs. A piece of paper may be allowed, but looking at a phone is frowned upon. This has barely changed in over 100 years. Nicholas Hiley, Head of Information, British Universities Film & Video Council, writes of Sharp’s time:

“The myth of the illiterate folk singer grew in strength. As might be expected, contemporary folk singers possessed not only manuscript notes of songs, but also collections of printed ballad sheets and newspaper clippings containing the words to songs in their repertoire. However, the collectors were so insistent upon folk memory that these resources were carefully concealed, as folk singers realized that it was better to appear to have a considerable memory than a large collection of ballads.”

In “City Folk: A Narrative of Creating Community in America Through English Country Dance,” Stephanie Smith shares a fantastic and, to my experience, accurate encapsulation of our modern dance communities:

“...perhaps the best way to start our journey is by asking the question: ‘How can our community connect with other communities? How can our community be anti-racist?’”

There are many good reasons for rejecting modernity and urbanism, but there are a lot of racist reasons, too. Many of us cringe when we hear conservative politicians refer to the “inner city” or describe cities like Atlanta and Chicago as “crime infested.” We know it for the poorly veiled racist language that it is. We have no patience for people who wrap themselves in the Confederate flag and claim to be celebrating only an amorphous tradition when we know that slavery was the bleeding core of the Confederacy and no amount of historical revision can change that. But we give ourselves a free pass for longing to put our cell phones away in our cabins at Pinewoods for a week. When we yearn for “an era of graciousness where people can relate to one another politely with elegance and grace,” who are the people we are thinking of? How were people of color faring in those days?

These questions are of particular importance in the current political moment, when our government has been run for four years by people whose primary slogan, “Make America Great Again,” calls for a similar return to an earlier time. We know they are talking about a time when racism, sexism, and hatred for LGBTQ+ people had free reign and when white men’s position of power was even more total. Meanwhile, earlier this year in England, a white nationalist group has suggested a hostile takeover of morris teams for race-based reasons almost identical to those of 100 years ago.

By no means am I suggesting an equivalence between our community of dancers and musicians and the red-hat-wearing MAGA supporters or white nationalists in England. Our nostalgia-driven activities are not their nostalgia-driven activities, and their dream of a backward-looking social revolution has no parallel in our community.

What I do believe is that, because of our tradition’s history of racism, because we continue to venerate many of the qualities from the first folk revival, because we have been joined in rejecting aspects of modernity and urbanism by a group of contemporary racists, it is even more important for us to take explicit steps to speak out against racism of all sorts, including the racism in our own tradition. We must examine our community’s feelings about modernity and urban living and either find ways to actively distinguish them from their historical and contemporary associations with racism or, frankly, drop them.

As active participants in an ongoing folk revival, we have the power to shape it. Our modern traditions began in racism, but they don’t have to end there. Through words and action, we can use the strength of our community as an anti-racist force.

My sword team, Still River Sword, found our way to a consensus statement, and I’m proud of our work. As a first step in this community process, we invite you to join us in making a statement and donating money to an anti-racist organization (Still River donated to Lawyers for Civil Rights and the Equal Justice Initiative). By no means are we or I any more authoritative or righteous on this topic than you, so we hope that you are having your own conversations, and we look forward to reading what you come up with.

As you can tell from this writing, I do hope that we are all able to acknowledge the past as an important part of our expressions of support for racial justice.

As for what comes next, your ideas are as good as ours! How can we make the “frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily” within our folk communities that being anti-racist requires? I look forward to working with you all on this.