

It's the Same Joy Everywhere

by Alice Boyle

Last week, I was in Washington, DC for work. I knew I'd be done at the National Science Foundation in time to catch a late flight back home on Friday evening, but instead, stayed until Saturday so I could go dancing at Glen Echo. I've played at the Spanish Ballroom a few times, but I had never danced in that wonderful space. I was super excited for the evening—what a blast! Will Mentor called, and Riptide provided the very fine music. In the second half, I was in a hands-four with a dancer in his late 20s. After teaching the dance, Will announced that it had been written by a caller from Florida. "*Florida!*" said the young man, with a hint of condescension. "*They contra dance in Florida?*" His statement raised my heart-rate. "*Sure they do!*" I replied. But as he asked where, the music started, and I wasn't able to educate him further.

The brief encounter niggled. I live in a small city of 50,000 people in eastern Kansas. I am from Canada and have also lived in Costa Rica, England, and many parts of the USA. I have been part of contra dance communities in Tucson, AZ; Ithaca, NY; Vancouver, BC; and southern Ontario, and I play dances across the country with my band STEAM.* I didn't seek out a job in Kansas, but got a job as a professor at Kansas State University. It wouldn't have been my first choice geographically, but I love my job, and I value the many good things about my lifestyle and adopted community. I regularly play and dance in Lawrence, KS; Kansas City, MO; Lincoln, NE; and Wichita, KS, all within approximately two hours of my home. My husband and I joined forces with three others to revive a long-dead monthly dance** in our own community. If that Glen Echo dancer couldn't conceive of contra dance communities in Florida, then imagine what he'd think of dancing in Manhattan, Kansas!

The next day, I flew back to the tiny MHK airport where parking is free and security only opens after the incoming plane arrives. It was a glorious, warm, golden fall day. Late afternoon, we drove out of town 20 miles on an empty highway and dusty gravel roads to a modest farm where a local church was holding its annual potluck and dance. About 20 people were

eating on lawn chairs in the late afternoon light, including our dear musician friends and many other friends we've made through their church connection. After eating, we all went to the barn—a *real* barn. The dirt floor downstairs sheltered farm equipment and tools, and up the steep wooden stairs, the loft provided a wooden floor where dancers had to negotiate big wooden support beams. We played... two fiddles, plus a banjo or guitar. We played our hearts out with no sound system. Our callers were both fairly new to calling, but the dancers didn't care. They couldn't help but move to the music, they found their partners and swung, and they smiled. They experienced the same age-old joy in physical expression of lively fiddle music that contra dancers everywhere experience.



As I played, I thought about the contrast between my Friday and Saturday nights. Part of me wanted to burst out and tell them about that gorgeous hall and all the other amazing dances I've been lucky to participate in. But why? Not a single person dancing in the barn had the slightest idea that the Spanish ballroom existed. They'd never heard of Brattleboro or Concord or Asheville or NEFFA. They'd never heard of Will Mentor or Riptide. But I realized that it

DIDN'T MATTER. Nor did it matter that the Glen Echo dancer know that we dance in Florida and Kansas. Yes, sharing ideas, tunes, styles, dances, expertise and perspective is what CDSS does, and is valuable. It helps people grow in enjoyment and skill in dancing, calling, and playing. But it fundamentally doesn't affect the bottom line. By dancing, we are engaging with our neighbors, making new friends, and connecting with our communities via channels that are apolitical and unplugged. By dancing, we are also engaging with traditions that run deep, connecting us to people of all sorts who have lived at different times and in different places. We are united, whether we know it or not, by expressing the innate connections between rhythm and footfall, between melody and physical gesture.

*Steam, <http://dancetosteam.com/>

**<https://www.facebook.com/groups/anafranklin/>

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