

News From Canada: Celebration of Callers A Workshop at Hands Across the Water 2019

by Peggy Roe and Rosemary Lach

The Victoria English Country Dance Society (VECDS) celebrated its 20th anniversary this year. During their 20 years of dancing they have often provided training for aspiring callers at Hands Across the Water, their annual workshop weekend. As a result of discussions held last year among callers from the Pacific Northwest, a more intensive, three-day workshop for experienced callers was planned for Hands Across the Water 2019. An extra day was added, Bruce Hamilton, a well-known caller and teacher of callers, was hired to lead the workshop, a maximum of 10 participants was decided on, and Ann Schau, a talented and experienced pianist and founder of the Dancehall Players, agreed to be our musician. The scene was set.

Activities for the callers included all-day workshops Friday and most of Saturday plus calling the Sunday morning workshop for dancers attending Hands Across the Water. In addition, callers attended one regular workshop and the two evening dances.

Friday morning, 10 callers from British Columbia, Washington, and Ontario gathered at Dan's Hall, a wonderful space built by the late Dan Page for weekly English dances as well as Newfoundland dancing and house concerts. The day alternated between talk sessions and calling sessions. We talked about working with musicians, helping

dancers move with the music, preparing a program, meeting dancers' expectations, distractions on the floor, and giving and receiving feedback. We struggled most with the feedback system Bruce taught. It requires stating only observed facts: "I didn't know which way to turn after the star left" and not assumptions or opinions, such as "you should have kept calling longer." The caller responds with a simple "thank you," does not try to explain or defend, and stores the feedback for later consideration. Dancers from VECDS kept us nourished with home-made snacks and lunch.

We all submitted three dances to Bruce and Rosemary, who then determined the program that we would call on Sunday morning when we would have 90 minutes for 10 callers! Nine minutes each to change callers, ask the band to play the tune, teach the dance, call the dance, introduce the next caller, and allow the sound man to adjust the sound—this was a challenge and a lesson in efficiency and brevity! The pressure was on.

Friday evening we joined local dancers and dancers attending Hands Across the Water for the Friday night dance called by Rosemary Lach and Bruce Hamilton. Saturday morning there were more workshops and practice calling. As Ann Schau was unable to attend one session, we practiced calling to our own vocalizations, a skill Bruce encourages callers to acquire so that they can give dancers an idea of the rhythm and tempo of the tune when there is no musician accompanying the teaching. Saturday night we danced to the calling of Nan Evans.

Sunday morning calling was both scary and thrilling. We'd been given very exact instructions about how long our dance could be, and we were filled with the advice we'd accumulated all weekend. There were more dancers in the room than most of us were used to, and we knew Bruce was taking notes in the corner. I appreciated the time we had spent with Ann during our workshops. The Dancehall Players are so talented and experienced that the music was a rock of reliability. We could see how much each of the other callers had improved over the weekend. We were high! We celebrated our collective success in the final feedback session with Bruce. We all cared so much for everybody's success as well as our own.





Above: Demonstrations as a teaching tool on Sunday morning—Sharon Gavin, David Gray, Arlene Tumber, Rob Barton (with his back to camera) **Opposite page:** Bruce and Ann Schau in deep discussion. Photos taken by Martha Burd.

Workshop Highlights

- Laughing, supporting, commiserating, sharing.
- Meeting with other experienced callers to share problems, questions, encouragement, advice, and stories. We were all experienced callers, but some of us have more opportunities to call and plan programs. We call to groups of differing size and levels of dancer experience. When a question came up (e.g. “How do I get the dancers to move to the music?”), Bruce had suggestions (“mention the music frequently, so the dancers know it’s important”), and so did the other callers (“play the tune first and, if your band can’t play under the teaching, doodle under it yourself - “circle left - diddledee, diddledee, diddledee dum, doo diddle, diddle, dump de dum”).
- Learning about the “contract” that exists between caller, musicians, and dancers. The contract is the (unspoken) expectations that the dancers have of the caller— mostly that there will be a lot of dancing, with minimum interruption. The caller has a certain amount of credit just for being there and earns more for every dance that is fun, for a well-designed program, and for dances that start quickly and go well. Credit is spent for anything that the caller does to take away from

that: too much talking, unclear instructions, making a mistake, taking too long to get a dance started, not showing respect for the dancers. If enough credit has been accumulated, the caller can spend some of it taking time to demo a move or teach a bit of history about the dance.

- Receiving much useful advice from Ann Schau on how to work with a band to improve the experience of the musicians, the dancers, and the caller.
- Having Bruce as mentor and guide as we explored the delights and difficulties of being a caller.

WAIT! Here’s one more tip, from caller Heather Webster, of Vancouver. **W.A.I.T. Why Am I Talking?** *Keep talking to a minimum; it draws down on credit.*

Thank you to VECDS and CDSS, through the Mary Kay Friday fund, for their financial support of this workshop. And thank you to the Victoria dancers for holding this well-organized event, for providing such fabulous talent, and for giving us the opportunity to practice our skills.

Peggy Roe attended the callers’ workshop. She is a dance caller and choreographer from Vancouver BC.

Rosemary Lach planned and organized the workshop. She is a dance caller and organizer from Victoria BC.