

Origins of Contra Dance in New Zealand

By Lenny Bloksberg

History often starts with the tellers' own perspective. I don't know if there was Contra Dance in New Zealand before I arrived in 1995, but I certainly couldn't find any when I got here. In fact, I couldn't find much evidence of dance at all, and I have done what I can to change that.

I was once a professional dancer. I enjoyed the discos of the 1970's and in the 1980's I became a professional ballet dancer. I was director of the University of California Ballet Company and I was hired to dance leading roles in a number of community and regional dance companies as well as a number of supporting roles in a variety of international dance companies. I got to dance ballet with The Joffrey, the San Francisco Ballet and The Dance Theatre of Harlem, as well as more traditional dance with the National dance companies of Puerto Rico, Senegal, Scotland and Ireland. All of this was great fun, but my wife didn't like dancing with me.

My wife and I discovered Contra Dance in California in the 1980's but we really didn't start going regularly until we moved to Michigan. I had finally found a form of dance that my wife enjoyed dancing with me. Contra Dance is very popular in Michigan and there was a dance every Friday and Saturday night of the year somewhere within an hour drive of our home. As a professional dancer, I began to research the origins of Contra Dance.

Looking back at the history of dance, I wanted to understand where Contra Dance fit in. Ancient tribal dances were often a kind of ritualistic communication, much like bee dancing. This evolved into religious ceremony, performance and personal expression. Some time around 1000 to 1500 the concept of people dancing as couples begin to appear. Around 1200 to 1400 the French started calling a dance with a line of women facing a line of men "Contre Danse". Some people cite this as the origin of the modern term Contra Dance, but the term died out before the form was carried to the Americas, so it's hard to see how there could be a connection. Traditional village dances evolved and the Scottish Highland and Irish dancing evolved somewhere around 1000 to 1600. These dances became very formalized and the common people wanted to take back a version they could enjoy, so Ceilidh dancing was born, probably between 1600-1800. During the 1700-1800s, the German term for folk dance was "Contra Danse" and Beethoven famously wrote many adaptations of German folk dances called "Contra Dances". Given that this term was in use at the time the form was taken to the Americas, it is much more likely.

When the settlers went to the Americas, they took the Ceilidh dances with them. In the Americas, Ceilidh was called "New England Country Folk Dancing", later abbreviated to "Country Dancing" and many people believe that the modern term "Contra Dance" is a slight slur of the traditional term "Country Dance". The early manuscripts on Contra Dance included only dances and tunes carried over faithfully from Ceilidh. To this day, Contra Dance includes circle sets, square sets, Long-way sets (any number in a line) or short way sets (defined number in a line) so the French hypothesis about lines facing each other seems unlikely.

Over the years, Contra Dance evolved in a different direction from Ceilidh. The literature on Ceilidh says that Ceilidh should be done with "free drunken abandon". The puritan settlers didn't really like this so they changed it so that Contra should be done with "free creative expression". This has resulted in a few differences in the styles. Ceilidh is often much simpler and doing exactly what is called is considered rather important while Contra dances can be much more complex and dancers are not just allowed, but encouraged to improvise and take liberties with the steps. Ceilidh is often done with a lot more space so you have more room to throw yourself into the dance and less chance of hitting people while Contra is usually done a lot closer so you move with a bit more control and finesse. The big innovation of Contra came in a new form of long line. In most Ceilidh dances, the head couple does the "active" version of the

dance while everyone else in the set is “passive”. Contra Dance changed this so every other couple is an active then passive, so there is a lot more going on all the time.

In the 1700s, Contra Dance was focused predominantly in New England and the long-line sets with alternating active and inactive couples became the dominant form. During the 1800’s Contra Dance was carried down into the Carolinas and Virginia and in the Appalachian Mountains it began to evolve into a new style of Mountain Dance. I have studied this and called for the New Zealand festival of Mountain music and dance several times. At the New Zealand Contra Dance festival I have demonstrated what it is like when you try to fit a Mountain dance to a “square” Contra tune as well as what it’s like when you try to fit a basic Contra to a “curly” mountain tune. All good fun. Also in the 1800’s, Contra Dance was carried out West. Contra Dance (in the New England form) became very popular in the Carolinas and the Mid-West in the early 1900’s and some purpose built Contra Dance halls to hold hundreds of dancers were built in the 1920’s to 1940’s in those places. As the form was carried further west, the square sets became the most popular and Western Square Dancing evolved from the same square set Contra and Ceilidh dances. Contra Dance faded from popularity with WWII but saw a huge revival in the 1960’s. I got seriously involved in Contra Dance in the 1990’s in Michigan where I had the privilege of dancing in Lovett Hall, a purpose built Contra Dance hall that Henry Ford had built for his weekly Contra Dances in 1937.

I really enjoyed the chance to dance with my wife and I began to train to be a caller. Bob Stein was my primary teacher and I was just about ready to start calling for the regular group when I took a job at a biotech company in New Zealand. On arriving in Auckland we found the 1996 Auckland Folk Festival and went looking for music and dance. We found lots of great music but the dance was very sparse. There was a dance hall where a number of ethnic folk dance clubs demonstrated their dances and there was a Ceilidh that was more hooning than dancing.

I spoke to the committee about starting a Contra Dance group and tried attending several of the ethnic dance groups. There was no other folk dancing throughout the year to be found in Auckland at that time. The various ethnic dance groups seemed to spend most of their time debating the correct traditional way to perform the dances and I might get 15 minutes to dance at a 2 hour session, so my wife and I quickly lost interest. The festival committee told me that the dance program was by invitation only and they only invited the traditional regular clubs, so they were not interested in my offer to help get Contra Dance started. I asked them about advertising in the club newsletter to get some musicians to perform for a Contra Dance for me and I was told that the club did not want their musicians distracted from performance with these dances. Things were not looking good for Contra Dance in New Zealand in 1996.

Over the next few years, whether by my influence or others, the folk music committee started hosting 1 or 2 Ceilidh dances throughout the year and the Hamilton festival had a Ceilidh. I got myself invited to call the occasional dance at other events and I organized a few Contra dance evenings as social events for various organizations. Around 1998 the Christchurch story began (see below) but neither of us was aware of the other for some time. I met Hamish Dublon around 2010 and he was keen to get a Contra group started in Auckland but he thought it was impossible because he didn’t know any callers. Well that was the one part I had covered.

Hamish organized a hall and some musicians and we started the Auckland Contra Dance club in 2012. Hamish knew about the Christchurch group and we got a lot of support from Bill Baratompia. By this time there was a thriving Scottish Ceilidh club in Auckland that hosts a lovely dance once a month and in 2016 an Irish Ceilid group started hosting monthly dances. With those forms well represented in Auckland, the Auckland Contra Dance club tries to focus on dances that are distinctly different from the Scottish and Irish, not because they’re not part of the Contra repertoire, but because we want to provide a different experience in the hopes that keen dancers might come to all 3 folk dance groups.

Contra Dance Seeds

by JoLaine Jones-Pokorney

When Ron and Cathy Arps decided to spend six-months as organic farm volunteers in New Zealand, they thought it would be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. But ever since that first trip in September of 1998, they have made the journey again and again, planting seeds of an entirely different kind – the seeds of contra dance communities.

Contra dance is a vigorous folk dance brought to the New World colonies from England and France and mainly centered in the New England states until the 1960s when it spread across the US and Canada. Contra dance “gypsies” travel far and wide to attend dance events. Contra devotees speak in almost reverential terms about the experience: “I belong to the church of contra.” “Contra is the most fun you can have standing up.” “Contra is adults at play.”

It truly takes a village to hold a contra dance. There needs to be a band of several musicians, a caller to give the moves of each dance, and at least 30 dancers. This community aspect is one of the strongest appeals to those who love this dance, but it also means that it is not possible to simply call up a couple of friends and hold a contra dance. It requires a good solid core of people who know what they are doing.

The Arpses fell in love with New Zealand, but the lack of contra dancing made it a difficult six months. “If New Zealand had contra dancing, it would be perfect,” says Cathy. Each of the communities where they stayed during their tour had a wooden-floored community hall that was perfect for this type of dancing. Those community halls planted the seed in the Arpses’ minds that New Zealand might be fertile ground for growing contra dance communities. That seed grew into a full-blown plan when they returned to the United States. As they attended dances back home in North Carolina, they would pose the question to their fellow dancers. “What would you think about spending the month of February contra dancing in New Zealand?” They received such positive responses that they knew their idea was workable.

The Arpses went back to New Zealand in February of 2001 to research travel routes and transportation, accommodations, meals, sight-seeing and hall rentals for thirty dancers, callers and musicians. They found a contact person in each community who would promote the contra dance events and provide a sound system for the band and callers. They also had to have a good estimate about what all of this would cost each of the participants. By February of 2002, they were ready to take their first group of thirty “Contra Ambassadors” to New Zealand for a month of sight seeing and contra dancing.

“Those folks were brave! We did too much, too many dances and a very hectic schedule. We learned a lot on that trip,” says Cathy. But it wasn’t too hectic to prevent them from scheduling the next trip in 2004, and again in 2006, and the most recent one in 2008. Even though Ron and Cathy do not advertise the trip, word of mouth from those who have been has made sure that the last two have filled months in advance and had waiting lists of eager contra dancers, musicians and callers from all over the United States and Canada. This, despite the fact that the musicians and callers are “amateurs” instead of the big name bands and callers that are usually part of the foreign travel contra dance events. Cathy is an accomplished fiddle player, so the backbone of the band is assured, but the rest is composed of whoever happens to register that can play an instrument. Callers also are the luck of the draw. And instead of getting to dance with lots of accomplished dancers like at most dance events, these contra ambassadors spend the month walking through the simplest of dances with community halls full of beginners.

But traveling in this way also has its benefits. “The best part about being a contra dance -‘ambassador’ was that it gave me something chatty which helped to engage locals in conversation,” says Carol Glass, a dancer from Michigan. “In stores, cafes and on the bus, it was a great way to find out about people.”

It wasn't just locals that the ambassadors connected with. They encountered other tourists in their hostels and on hikes, always offering an invitation to the next contra dance. There were often several nations represented at a single dance. Glass recalls that she met tourists from Vancouver on a city bus in Dunedin and invited them to the dance that evening. Not only did they attend the dance, they met a Vancouver dancer and were excited to find that they could contra dance when they got back home to Canada.

The flirty aspect of contra dance revealed a few cultural differences between the New Zealanders and the North Americans. Jean Sumner, a dancer from Virginia, remembers, "a fellow I chatted with, then danced with, responded to a partner gypsy (a move where the man and woman circle each other looking deeply into each other's eyes) after a moment's attention by laughing and turning his head away saying, "Kiwis just can't handle this much eye contact."

The Arpses must have been correct in their assessment that New Zealand was ripe for contra dancing because since their ambassadorial journeys began, there have been three contra dance communities created. The first group to form was in Wellington where they now have monthly dances and their own band of local musicians called "Chili Jam." Dunedin formed a dance community after the 2006 trip that is so enthusiastic they dance every week. The newest group is in Christchurch, formed after the most recent trip in 2008.

The energy behind the new Christchurch contra dance community is Bill and Liz Baritompas. Bill and Liz have been active in the folk music and square dance communities in Christchurch for many years, but only danced contra when the Arpses' tour came through every other February. When the 2008 tour came to Christchurch, they decided they were ready to contra dance more often than once every 24 months, so they packed a bag and joined the tour for the next 10 days. Bill spent a lot of time with the callers learning dances and figuring out how the calls matched the phrasing of the music. Bill thinks the time is right for he and Liz to create contra in Christchurch. "We are both retired now, and the large dose of dancing with [the Arps tour] really enthused me - it has the best of everything - great music - really moving to the music - laid back people - varied enough to stay interesting." Thanks to the Baritompas' organizing, the Christchurch community held its first dance in March.

Bill admits, "From my own selfish viewpoint, I want people to dance with! Some of the people who have been coming are friends I have known for a while who have done other types of dancing (such as Scottish and square dancing). They are finding contra a bit more relaxed, yet still satisfying. Also people enjoy the inclusiveness of the activity - new comers can always fit it."

Though Bill is a recent convert to contra, he has discovered the heart of it – new comers can always fit in, which is the idea that inspired Ron and Cathy Arps a decade ago when they saw the first of those quaint New Zealand community halls. No matter what hemisphere one travels to, a community hall spilling lively music and laughter into the summer air is always a welcome sight.