Square Dancing in Missouri: 
The adherences and divergences to folk culture 
In the Midwest

Introduction

It is thought that square dancing, in its’ most early origins, was based on primitive culture’s ceremonies and that the square and circles in square dancing harkens the round patterns of agricultural fields. (Wakefield 7) Whatever the case, people are still whirling on their feet in circular patterns. But they are usually dressed fancy ties and frilly skirts and they dance within the comfort of a building, whether in a neighbor’s home, a church, or a 4-H club. Who are these people square dancing today, maneuvering across the dance floor in such intricate, seemingly complex steps? Is there something more to this dance than meets the eye? What can the history of this dance say about the present? In attempting to answer the questions above, the purposes for this paper developed. The previous questions led me to an even larger question of, how is this continuing folk dance still reflective of values closely associated with folk culture? And also, are there differences of values within square dancing communities depending on the region it occurs? This topic is pertinent to the field of Geography because in the technological age there is less and less evidence of the past and practices of the past, especially ones that shed light on concepts like “neighborhood” and “folk culture”. Secondly, the aim to evaluate square dancing in different regions permits contrast of place, and begs the question: are their differences in attitude, values, etc between square dances from one place to another? These questions will hopefully gravitate this research towards greater understanding of how square dancing may or may not still be associated with folk culture.
Results

The total number of square dancer’s surveyed for this paper number forty. The cities of Sedalia, Columbia, and St. Louis were chosen to represent the desired data. Percentages will be used to reflect the results I obtained.

The square dance I attended in Sedalia was small and out of twenty dancers, a total of nine surveys were collected. Participants were reluctant to specify their address; Fifty-six percent of those surveyed did not state their address. However, the forty-four percent that did were not from Sedalia, but from small towns surrounding the area. These towns are Mora, Lincoln, and Warsaw (all of which are populated by no more than twenty thousand people). Eighty-nine percent of Sedalia square dancers surveyed was married and sixty-seven percent stated that their total joint income was between 25,000-50,000 per year. The other thirty-three did not respond, leaving designated spot for income blank. A full one hundred percent of those surveyed were above fifty-five years of age. Seventy-eight of participants had learned to square dance in their hometowns, either Mora, Lincoln, Warsaw, and probably Sedalia. When asked where participants had learned to square dance, twenty-two percent had been exposed to square dancing at a 4-H club. Twenty-two percent had started dancing via introduction to square dancing clubs, and another two percent had started dancing at a neighbor’s house in the country. The remaining number only stated the city they were from and did not name a precise location. Friends, family, or a spouse have inspired one hundred percent of the participants to square dance. Also, reaping an united response of one hundred percent was the question of why the participants square dance. All of those involved in the survey stated that fun, exercise, and the possibility of meeting and keeping new friends was their reason for square dancing. As for the average number of years participants have been
square dancing, the average number was thirty-three years. It should be noted the number of years participants had been dancing range from eleven years to an astounding number of seventy years, which is essentially a lifetime of square dancing.

Columbia, MO is the second city where data for this survey was collected. A regular weekend dance was attended in which a total of thirty people attended. Out of this number, ten people completed a survey. The same questions, except for one, were asked of them that were asked of square dancers in Sedalia. Instead of asking participants to mark their income range, an inquiry that yielded little response, I asked what occupation was held by the respondent. The answers that were obtained are stated in the following paragraph.

The majorities, fifty-percent of those questioned, were from Columbia. Thirty-percent were from Moberly, a meager town approximately twenty miles north of Columbia. Twenty percent did not respond, leaving their address a mystery. Half were single (or widowed) while the other half were married. It was assumed that people would be more willing to state their occupation than their income, but still only fifty percent told of the profession they occupied. Of those that responded, one person was a retired professor, two were nurses, one was a homemaker, and the other was a product assistant for a pet store. Eighty percent of square dancers surveyed in Columbia were above fifty-five years of age. The remaining twenty percent were between forty-five and fifty-five years of age. One hundred percent of people had encountered square dancing in their hometowns of Columbia or Moberly. Introduction, or the spark of first inspiration to dance came to forty percent of people through a friend or spouse. However, the majority of those surveyed in Columbia came to square dancing due to self-initiation; it was something they had always wanted to do. The average number of years participants have been dancing is eleven years. The reason the ten people, one hundred percent of those surveyed, dance is for fun, exercise, and the social benefits of square dancing. One person of the ten also added that they enjoy the opportunity to travel that square dance permits.
The surveys reaped from St. Louis, MO flaunt the most various results. Twenty-one people were surveyed out of a countless number of people (a countless number because they dance attended was a regional dance that brought various clubs from the St. Louis area together to dance). Out of twenty-one people, one person was from Columbia, MO, two were from Illinois, two were from Bridgeton, MO, and two were from Kirkwood, MO. This leaves eleven people, fifty-two percent, from St. Louis, MO. Two participants did not respond. Twenty-nine percent of square dancers were single, while seventy one percent were married. Thirty-eight percent of participants stated that they were retired. Thirty-three percent held jobs as follows: nurse, teacher, Administrative assistant, Mechanical engineer, receptionist, mechanic, receptionist, and electrical engineer. Twenty-nine percent did not declare their occupation. Seventy-one percent of people were above 55 years of age. Five percent of people were between 45 and 55 years of age. Five percent of people fell into the age range between 35 and 45 years of age. Finally, ten percent of those sampled were between 0-25 years of age. Most people, eighty-one percent, were locally introduced to square dancing, that is they were introduced to it in their hometown. Others, ten percent, were introduced to it in places other than their hometown. For example, Nashville, TN and New Mexico are the two places that were named as being locations where participants first encountered square dancing. Again, the majority of people, 57 %, were inspired or introduced to square dancing due to a friend or family member. Out of this number, 17% were friends from church. Coming in second were schools or clubs, such as square dancing clubs, PE class, or P.T.O meetings. 33% were inspired to dance due to such institutions offering square dancing. 5 % were inspired by a specific square dance caller to begin dancing. Newspaper ads provided another 5 % of inspiration, and another 5 % of those desiring to square dance did so due to an individual appetite to learn. Of those above fifty-five years in age the average number of years they had been dancing was 23 years. Of those people between forty-five and fifty five years of age the average number of years dancing totaled
24. Four years was the average number of years dancing for those people up to twenty-five years of age. In St. Louis, as in all the other towns, 100% of people proclaimed that they dance for fun, exercise, and lasting friendships. Out of this percent, four people said square dancing strengthens the bond between husband and wife and one person announced that the clean environment nurtured by square dancing, one that forbids smoking or drinking, draws them to dance.

**Conclusions**

It is certain that various interpretations can be made from this data. As a disclaimer, any conclusions made by myself are subject to disagreement or dispute; they are only my own subjective deductions based upon academic research and the data collected from attending square dances.

The data collected from surveys does tend to support my hypothesis: that square dancing today, in the contemporary world and setting, still supports elements exclusive to folk culture. The data also varies depending upon the location it was retrieved. Finally, I will discuss the trends that occur within the data that point to the progressive aspect of square dancing because it does defy folk culture in a few ways. It should also be mentioned that no two factors of the data can accessed individually because many factors depend upon one another (as far as this research is concerned).

First, most individuals surveyed have lived either lived in one location, whether a large city or small city, all of their lives. It is in this location that they first became introduced to square dancing and where they still predominately dance today. This supports one aspect of folk culture: the tendency for diffusion to occur very slowly, if at all. Yes, square dancing diffused rather rapidly in the 1700s when it spread from Europe to the Colonies and from the colonies to the west because it was the latest dance craze. However, once square dancing was adopted in certain regions, certain peoples rooted it there. Perhaps it is not the nature of square dancing but the nature of the people who have a proclivity for square dancing that allows such permanent structures to be implemented.
This is where the age of participants may become relevant. As reflected in the data, the majority of square dancers are above fifty-five years of age. One could possibly assume this is due to the values of the time period when they began dancing. Most of the elderly people that square dance have been dancing for more than twenty years. This places them in a time when more traditional values, such as emphasis on family and community, were generally respected and maintained. Now, our society and the whole world is quickly progressing towards an ever more globalizing world. Traditional structures are disintegrating more and more rapidly. Examples of this include the various modes of transportation have made it easier for families to live apart; Divorce rates are higher, etc. Therefore, it could be that the younger generation is apt to forgo the possible pleasures of old traditions, such as folk dancing like square dancing, for pleasures of modern times, like DVDs and “cruising”, that reflect the current technological age.

Through personal interviews I also learned that many of the participants were married, and had remained so for many years. Furthermore, many indicated through verbal confession or through the survey that square dancing helps promote the bond between husband and wife. One woman said, “A square dance is like a date with my husband.” As an observer at three square dances this seemed to be the case with many couples. Participants, most of them aged past sixty still squeezed their spouse’s hand, smiling at them like a teenager on his first date. Although this information was gathered more intuitively, it supports conclusions made in the proceeding paragraph: That square dancing may be a tradition promoting cohesion of the family or it may be that those participants still believe and practice the values of a past they are familiar with, thus reflecting the family bond associated with folk culture.

The fact that many participants first became introduced to square dancing in school may also answer why a majority of square dancers are older. This is only a notion, and should be researched further, but many people began dancing in the sixties. This was the time when Lloyd Shaw was beginning to implement square dancing in school, as a
regular part of physical education. It could be that square dancing does not play such a common role in physical education anymore. Therefore, a number of younger lose the opportunity to be exposed to square dancing.

Guesswork aside, a lot participants had their first encounter with square dancing in places such as school or community clubs such as the 4-H or were introduced by friends from church. These locations work to promote the hypothesis that square dancing proliferates strict community values affiliated with folk culture. For example, square dancing does not occur on Friday nights in nightclubs, but rather in schools, community centers, or churches.

Certain findings have been contradictory to the original hypothesis: that a great range of difference would be found between two areas contrasting in population. This is not to say the study did not find differences between rural and urban populations. For example, simple demographics were dissimilar. In Columbia and St. Louis there were both more single square dancers and more square dancers were found younger in age. More people also began square dancing due to an independent desire to learn how to square dance. Could this be attributed to the autonomy that a city generally allows and nurtures? Or perhaps there are more people, which then accounts for a greater demographic distribution range. Despite these speculations, the overarching views and experiences of people in all cities were still deeply rooted to place and cherished the community promoting, friendship promoting aspect of square dancing. All participants seem to dance for the same reasons: exercise, fun, and fellowship. It could be questioned whether the fact that many square dance for exercise could be due to the evermore health conscious world and the fact that there is more time today then say fifty years ago to focus on keeping the body in it’s required shape.

Also, contradictory to the original hypothesis was the fact that square dancing is a recreational activity that has gained notability and dancing across all borders, internationally. There is a progressive nature to this dance, one that has allowed to be
taken to places such as Japan, where it is enjoyed abundantly. In addition to this knowledge, many people cited that they love the travels that square dancing permits. Gatherings and festivals are held across the year, every time of the season. This allows people to meet and form new friendships with people across the world. Therefore, though square dancing, as it frequently done at home, still reflects elements of folk culture the fact that it has permeated and gained popularity in urbanized countries like Japan defies traditional view of square dancing.

Final Summary

Findings in this study both supported, and did not support, the claim that square dance is a dance that mirrors components of folk culture. That information was explained in the latter portions of this paper. However, the future of square dancing should be considered. As many people stated, younger people are all but absent from these dances and the elderly are passing away. Some seen to think square dancing will die but others have faith that a revival will occur, almost implying that this revival will occur after a major change takes place in the world. The effect of certain movements and events, such as increasing population, upon square dancing may determine its future. Despite the trends, such as globalization, that pose threats to the conservation of folk culture, square dancing has still persisted. Further recommendation is suggested in certain areas. First, a fallacy was made with the age categories. It would have been more beneficial perhaps, to break the numbers from fifty-five above, into groups of ten. In doing this, the more precise age of a square dancer could be known and perhaps a majority of ages would correspond to a certain event, such as WW II, that sparked a renewed interest in square dancing. Most importantly, future trends in square dancing should be watched carefully, As the next few years may disable the qualities of folk culture still present today. This also raises the question of how and why are people able to keep their customs and beliefs
in the one of the most, if not the most, rapid, most populated, most technological age, in history?

Bibliography


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