

A HISTORY OF THE SUMMIT THURSDAY DANCE

The Thursday Night Summit Dance began when the Fine Companions Band left the Germantown Country Dancer's English dance in a huff in February 1976. Relations with the sole caller and organizer had been difficult since the band's beginnings in 1972. Band members Julia Tillson, Dann Neubauer, Pat Disque and Liz Snowdon decided that they could no longer play for dancing there. As a band interested in playing for English dancing but with no place to play, there seemed but one thing to do--start a dance of their own. Pat Disque, sometimes called our inspirational director, was the one who really believed it could happen. Julia Tillson, having the greatest musical background, was to be the musical director. Liz Snowdon, who would follow details to make the dance happen, was the organizational director.

The basic scheme was simple. What did you really need to make a dance? We had a band. All we needed was a caller and a hall. Julia asked if we could use her church's hall at FUMCOG in Germantown. The group at that time was used to only one person in the dance community calling and that person was the one with whom we had just split. The more we thought, the more it became apparent that we each knew at least one dance and probably could get people through it. If we could find ten such people, we would have enough dances and enough dancers for an evening. Among our first evening's callers were Connie Waring, Charlie Karl, Peter Laurence and Bob Trotta. The whole thing was rather primitive, but it was a dance. Thursdays had started.

The next month we thought we would try it again. We had decided that the FUMCOG hall was not too good in acoustics or in location, so when Pat Disque discovered the Watertower Recreation Center in Chestnut Hill, we moved there. It was a city-run recreation center whose rental fee was perfect--it was free. We decided that although we really didn't need the money, we should charge one dollar (collected on the honor system) because people do not really appreciate something that is free and because in the future there might be expenses. We had several more monthly dances and stopped for the summer. When we started again in September at the Watertower, we went to two Thursdays a month--first and third.

We decided that first year to have some Saturday workshops for our own improvement. We invited Cindy Green to give a leader's workshop Feb. 19, 1977 and Marshall Barron to do a musicians workshop March 19, 1977. Both, of course, were accompanied by evening dance parties. Marshall in particular was amazed by the cooperative spirit. The musicians danced, the dancers called, and the callers played. There was no leading personality.

During this era, some of the basics of the dance developed. Anyone who wanted to could call. Early callers included Connie Waring, Tom Senior, Charlie Karl, Jim Morgan, Laurel Cornell, Liz Snowdon, Jim Gregory, Bill Farkas, Julia Tillson, Dann Neubauer, Bob Trotta, Paul Erfer, Pete Laurence, Norman Lampert and Pat Disque. Liz Snowdon made an attempt for the major portion of a year to call callers early in the week to make sure that there

were enough callers, to see if there was a balanced dance, and to be sure that the band could play the tunes. As these things go, people who said they would come didn't, others appeared, and the advanced planning became a study in futility.

The Watertower was a friendly host allowing us to use either the gym or later the auditorium. In the summer we would go out onto the pavement at the rear of the building. This was cooler, but you ran the risk of bicycles in the set, dogs peeing on your music bag, and the occasional stray ball. Because the staff at the Watertower had set hours, it was necessary to stop the dance and have "bodies out" promptly at 10:30.

Since there was no time to socialize at the dance hall afterwards, people decided to go out for a beer. First, we went to McNally's in Chestnut Hill, but while we were spilling over with music and dance, the bar patrons were watching televised sports. We were not compatible. Someone looked into the seedy Hill Tavern next door. Soon we found that it was usually empty, that Tom the Irish bartender liked our music and our business, and that the juke box played Irish jigs, reels and waltzes. The bar became a place to hang out after the dance as well as the best place to do those Irish dances which took so long to teach. One set could be squeezed between the bar stools.

During this year, yet another band left the English dance--also in a huff. This group, led by Jim Gregory(now of Vermont) and later Jim Tarrentino, began to dance on second and fourth Thursdays in tandem with the Fine Companions's dance. Their repertoire was traditional squares with a pick up band. Usually a special local caller was asked to anchor the dance. It was only natural that on the occasional fifth Thursday we should join forces for a combined dance. In July of 1977 the leadership of this square dance passed to Jan Alter.

The idea of having an English May Day was started in the Spring of 1977 by Val Kolaga. She got a permit for the park, some makeshift ribbons, a post hole digger, and some kind of Maypole(We even used a Diane Bryman carpet tube one year). All met in Pastorius Park for the first Sunday in May, bringing to the picnic morris teams, food, drink, instruments, madrigals, folk dances, frisbees, and anything else for fun. On one of our May Day Sundays, some teenaged handbell ringers came to the park with the assistant pastor of St. Martin's church. Since his wife was a folk dancer, it was only natural that we should get acquainted.

Meeting the people from St. Martin's was fortunate as relations were becoming strained at the Watertower. The civil service staff were eager to get home early and the newly instituted 9:45 closing time would cramp our style. On June 15, 1978, we moved to St. Martin's Church in Chestnut Hill.

Shortly after moving, we were not able to use the hall because of a conflicting church activity. We felt that we could not go back to the Watertower(although we did in later years) as we had just left there. Liz had just been to a recorder concert at the Top of the Hill shopping center. She asked the owner of the Greek souvlakia restaurant(now Roller's) if it would be all right to have a dance there in the shopping center. This would give us a covered space for musicians and two long covered

spaces for longways sets. You could dance to the bank and back. We had a very large crowd that night--45 people.

When the two groups decided that amplification was needed, Jan built homemade speakers to go with the Radio Shack amplifier which he bought with our joint funds. The few mikes were shared by the band members. Among the callers for the English nights were Jim Morgan, Tom Senior, Jan Alter, and Liz Snowdon. When callers were in short supply for the Fine Companions's nights, we would persuade someone who had never called before to try it. One night, no callers showed up and the band quickly discovered that it could call an entire evening. The square dance which was being called by Dick Kraus, Lane Neubauer, and Pete LaBerge was having the opposite problem. They knew that a specific caller was scheduled, but they were not sure who would come to play in the pick-up band. One evening Phil Anthony showed up with his guitar providing the only music of the evening. There were no records or tapes for backup.

Several factors lead to the growth of the dance. The hall was lovely and pleasant to be in. Although we did no publicity ourselves, several bits of publicity came our way. A friend of Liz's who did spots for NPR did a 5 and a 9 minute spot on our dance. Elma K. Sabo wrote a piece in the Inquirer Magazine section in July 1980. Mostly people came because they were told by other dancers about the fun to be had. Then contra dancing began to filter into our dances changing the dance to a more popular form.

Our first solid introduction to contra dancing came through two events. In the spring of 1978 Tony Parkes and Yankee Ingenuity came to Germantown Country Dancers with the joint sponsorship of the Philadelphia Folk Song Society to do an afternoon workshop and an evening dance. We had never had such fun or heard such music. That spring Connie Waring persuaded six or so people to go to NEFFA--our first. The following year nine carloads went--we had the contra bug. The Thursday dances were now English and contra and square and contra. The fifth Thursdays were all contra.

After the folk dancing assistant pastor left St. Martin's, it was less possible to keep good communications with the church. Our March of 1979 Saturday afternoon workshop and evening dance with Bob Dalsemer intruded on a church wedding. We seemed to do a good job of closing and cleaning up (they didn't know that we could break in through the kitchen window after we had locked up for the odd pair of glasses or keys left behind). Unfortunately, every week the sexton waxed the floors and every Thursday we dancers stirred up the wax making dusty footprints to the water fountain and back. Our solution was to stop waxing. Theirs was to ask us to find another hall.

Barbara Bekker had become one of our new callers and organizers. She had recently met the new pastor of the Summit Church which was fast gaining a reputation for community service. Through this connection, we were able to rent our current hall. To solidify the agreement, she did several dance workshops for the Summit Church including one weekend retreat in the Poconos. All, of course, without a fee. We moved to Summit Church in November 1980.

As summer approached, it became clear that the heat in the Summit hall was going to be a problem. Those of us who had looked for halls before were not willing to move, but Barbara negotiated the use of the Creffield School gym for the summer. While the ventilation was better, the stage was poorly lit and uncomfortable, there was no water fountain and the rest rooms were small. In the fall we returned to Summit.

That fall(1980) Barbara Bekker along with Connie Waring, Val Kolaga and David Wilkins started the Summit Third Saturday series. Since the Thursday dancers stated that they would never put any event in direct conflict with the GCD functions, the third Saturday seemed natural. New Year's Eve dances were also started by Barbara that year and continued through 1984 under her sponsorship. About a year later, Jan Alter replaced Val and David as an organizer of the Saturday dance.

As the dance continued to grow, the English and square dances almost entirely dissappeared,. There were still two distinct organizational structures--one, the Fine Companions (Julia Tillson, Enid Diamante, Dann Neubauer, Jamie Tillson, Liz Snowdon, and Bob Fitzmeyer)with pot luck callers--the other, Jan Alter organizing with a pick-up band. The pick-up band was generally anchored by Dann Neubauer, Enid Diamante and Wesley Steinsen. In January 1982 it was agreed between Jan and the Fine Companions that the dance would benefit if it became more like one contra event and if the music could be guaranteed by one group. It was decided that the Fine Companions would play each evening and, for the first time since the dance's founding in 1976, there would be pay for the musicians and a caller each evening. The theory was to pay for responsibility. The formula took money off the top for rent and group kitty and then divided the remainder of funds among the band and a single responsible caller for the evening. Shortly thereafter, a small stipend was given to the opening and closing person. With this, the fee increased to \$2 (our first increase since 1976), and someone was asked to sit at the door to collect money--the honor system was gone. Also, Jan purchased a good used sound system with adequate speakers and an ample number of microphones. This was done in a joint agreement with the two Thursday groups, the Third Saturday group, and Germantown Country Dancers.

In 1982 or so, groups of touring bands and callers coming through the area were beginning to hear of our dance. Attendance had increased to the 90-120 range which made it financially worth their while to visit. The skill of the dancers and the friendly spirit of the group made it a great stopover on an east coast tour schedule. Because the house band had to step down on these occasions, a formula was worked out for the frequency of these special guest events. Jan, to whom the coordinating of this fell, carefully dealt with quality control, worked out a generous payment schedule, and housed many of these guests himself. Swallowtail remains the most popular group to come to Thursdays claiming our record attendance of 278. Could anyone actually dance in that crowd?

Late in 1984 many callers began to discuss the idea of changing the organizational structure of the dance and to make some improvements that would allow for growth. There was a tension between the two organizing forces that did not seem able to be resolved. In January 1985 there was a meeting of the entire group at Dick Kraus's house with Dick guiding the conversation to discuss the future of the dance. From this it was decided that a committee of seven dancers, callers, and musicians elected by that interested group should meet to develop a set of governing rules. Julia Tillson, Connie Waring, Carol Hendricks, Jim Kitch, David Wilkins, Sam Rotenberg, and Bob Morris met and developed such a document. The committee's proposal was accepted later in the spring and put into effect in June 1985. The initial governing body elected are: Julia Tillson, Carol Hendricks, Sam Rotenberg, Cinda Edgerton, Tom Senior, Lise Dykeman, and Vince Budnick. For the first time in its history, the dance was being run by the group itself, not by an individual or a band.

by Liz Snowdon
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