

HINTS ON TEACHING CONTRAS

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FORMATION OF SETS: You may wish your couples to promenade into a contra set from a circle, or you may simply teach them how to form a set without any previous knowledge. Have the couples, one behind the other, facing the head of the hall, the caller and the music. The lady in on the gentleman's right. Any number of couples may dance a contra but there should be at least 6 couples in each set, and an even number of couples might simplify learning. Remember, the head of the set is closest to the caller, and the foot, or bottom of the set, is at the other end. Now have partners face each other, each moving back so that there is a distance of about 4 to 6 feet between the men's line and the women's line. (Experienced dancers will take this position at once. When a contra line is being formed, however, the first couples form the head of the set and from then on other people joining the set do so by building the set toward the bottom.) If there are as many as twelve couples, 2 sets might be formed instead of one.

STEP: A simple light dance-walk with an occasional addition of individuality, especially on the balances, and when changing body direction.

In some contra dances such as PETRONELLA the formation explained above, with all the men on one side and all the ladies on the other, is used. In others, such as GOOD GIRL, MAPLE LEAF JIG, and GREEN MOUNTAIN VOLUNTEERS, the dance is done in a "Crossed-over" position, which is accomplished as follows: Starting at the head of the set, the gentlemen count off one, two, one, two, all the way down to the bottom. Now the gentlemen who are numbers one, exchange places with their partners. These people who have changed places are known as ACTIVE COUPLES. Those who remained at home in the set are the INACTIVE COUPLES. Cues or calls are directed to the ACTIVE couples. In this formation there is an alternation of men and women on both sides of the set. This must be maintained throughout the dance and is accomplished as follows: as an inactive couple finds themselves at the top of the set they stand out during one complete contra pattern, but must exchange places before the next pattern begins. Now they begin dancing the next pattern as an active couple. When an active couple reaches the foot of the set they will stand out one pattern, but change sides before the next pattern begins, and now they will be inactive until they again reach the head of the set.

RHYTHM: Contra dancing flows from one figure to another as the phrases of music command. In order to prompt call a contra dance the person doing so should be sufficiently aware of the phrasing of the music so that he can give direction on the beats immediately preceding the beginning of the phrase intended for the dance figure.

EXAMPLE: if the caller wishes dancer to circle left, CIRCLE LEFT might be allowed two beats of music, and should precede the beat on which the dancers start to circle. "Circle Left" should be called on beats 7 and 8 of the preceding phrase, and the dancers begin to circle on count one of the following phrase.

EXAMPLE: ACTIVE COUPLES DO-SI-DO requires 4 counts or beats of music and would be called on 5, 6, 7, and 8 of the phrase preceding the phrase of 8 counts which would be required to do the do-si-do.

There are many contra dances, ranging from very simple to those which are much too complicated to use with beginning dancers. Although rooted in Irish, Scottish and English dancing, contras are an American tradition. There are some newly-composed contras, many of which are fun to do, but I still love the old ones best.

Teachers of American square dancing could do much to heighten the interest in contras by using the contra formation for teaching simple square dance figures such as "ladies chain" and "right and left through." If every teacher would do this, before we knew it, contras would be a definite part of our square dance program.

Be sure the dancers understand how a contra set should look before actives cross over, so that both the actives and inactives will realize the role they have to play.

Mention that it is "normal and essential" to stand still with no dancing to do when reaching the top or the bottom of the set. When couples standing out exchange places (partners exchange places) the dancing role or status also changes. **ACTIVES** become **INACTIVES** and vice versa.

CUES OR CALLS PRECEDE THE DANCE ACTION!!

Dance to the music!! Use light steps. Add a step close step, or a little jig if the music makes you feel like it!! Or if you feel like it for any other good reason.

RELAX, ENJOY IT.

Swings are **USUALLY** long and **EASY**.

Almost every figure is done to a phrase of eight counts or multiples of 8, but eliminate any counting, if used at all, as soon as possible. The music tells us when to cue and when to dance.

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