

Squaring up

Gay and lesbian square dancers turn this gender-specific dancing on its ear, giving some callers an education in the process

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

The tape player on the deck spills some boot-tapping, fiddle-swaying music into the mild Friday night air. On the back lawn of a comfortable southwest Portland home, eight women "square up," standing in pairs, waiting for the cue.

"Bow to your partner," calls a jovial male voice from the tape. And the ritual begins.

It's the Women's Caucus of the Rosetown Ramblers, Portland's gay square dance club. For most of the dozen women members, not all of whom are do-si-do-ing tonight, square dance time is play time — a respite from heavy-duty schedules that tax the brain instead of the body.

They say they love square dancing because it's physical, because there are no issues — beyond deciding who dances the "girl's" part and who dances the "boy's." There's nothing to get enraged about. Square dancing is about routine, repetition, about a ritualized, almost courtly form of fun that got lost on dance floors sometime between the tango and the twist.

In the square, every dancer counts equally. There are no stars. Bow to your partner and remember your right from your left. Follow the call, and you can't go wrong. Life should be this straightforward.

The presence of gay square dance clubs — and the growing number of women in the 120-member Rosetown Ramblers — says something political, whether the dancers want it to or not. When gay men and lesbians square dance, they turn inside out a dance routine rooted in the most conventional male-female roles.

Once upon a time, square dancing was an arena for a rather supervised form of dating. Even the costumes were exaggerated versions of male and female dress — crinolines that stuck out like starched lampshades for women, cowboy shirts, bolero ties and scuffed boots for men. And the calls play on a romantic notion of courtship: "Swing that lady and promenade her home."

Gay and lesbian square dancers turn this gender-specific dancing on its ear, giving some callers an education in the process. Cheryl Dumolt, president of the Rosetown Ramblers club, was one of the first women to break the club's all-male ranks two years ago. She remembers some baffled callers who scanned the room, trying to figure out which were the "gents" and which were the "ladies."

"They look around a square, and there's eight moustaches, eight T-shirts and blue jeans," she said.

Where it still happens in barns and hoedowns, square dancing is a fairly benign social ritual, a chance for people from across the county to



E. Ann Hinds

meet, flirt and dance within the safety of a crowd and the formal limits of square dance calls. In the Rosetown Ramblers, those limits serve a different purpose, providing an opportunity for gay men and lesbians to meet on turf that isn't charged with politics or personal issues. You don't even have to come out — and most members of the Women's Caucus won't do so fully, agreeing to talk but declining to be named in an article.

Emerald Goldman thought she might square dance her way into some new friendships when she joined the club in January. "Unlike square dancing in junior high school, this is not based on heterosexual tension," she said. "I'm a really strong feminist. Now I'm ending up having some really nice male friends from the group."

The women in the group say they've learned about teamwork; if one person forgets a move or promenades the wrong way, the square can dissolve into a human bumper-car arena. And they've learned to cover their goofs, to smile and keep stepping.

The club dances at least once a week, and there are periodic events that bring together gay square dancers from all over the Northwest region. Classes for newcomers begin this month, with free lessons on September 1 and 8.

The women of the Rosetown Ramblers dance in the thickening twilight. "Spin chain through . . ." says the caller, cheerily. "Boys circulate double . . . recycle the boy."

There is a shuffle on the grass, some giddy laughter. A bit of gender confusion — "Wait, we have two 'boys' together," someone says. No problem. Dumolt stops the tape. It may be just for fun, but there are lessons in the square that you can pocket and carry back to life. You miss a step; you stop and notice and laugh; then you square up, hit the music and try the dance again.



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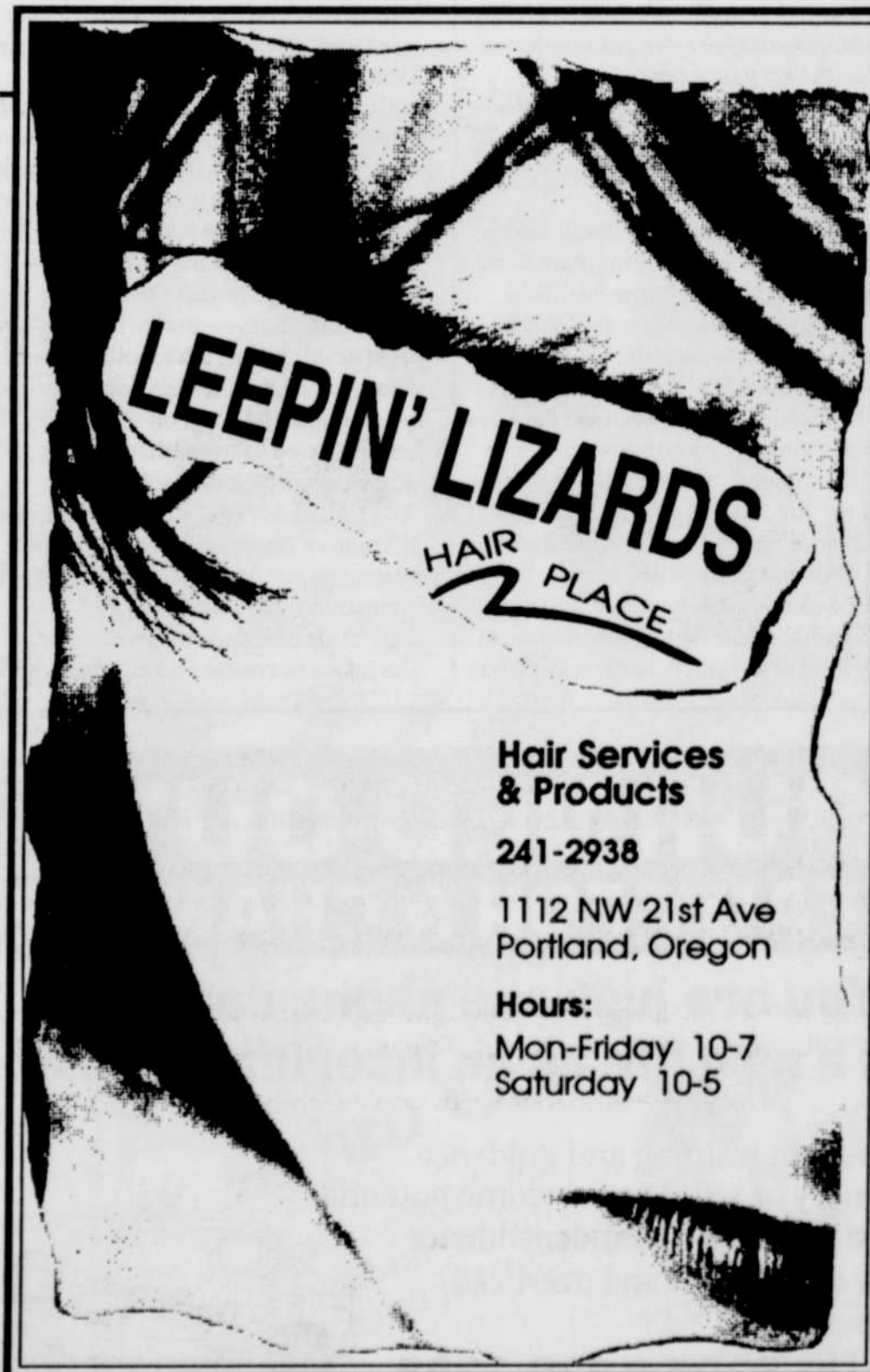
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