

GROUPS

Remember the Bugs Bunny cartoon where he square dances with two feuding hillbillies? The country bumpkins try to match wits with the wily hare, but he gets the better of the two as he leads them through a crazy (and violent!) square dance. If you watched *Looney Times* as a kid, that was probably your first impression of square dancing: odd characters, twangy country music and yokel calls.

Over time, your impression of square dancing probably hasn't changed much. First in junior high you likely suffered through square dancing in phys ed, feeling like a geek, forced to dance with assigned classmates (of the opposite sex, of course). And today, all you see on television and in the movies are old straight couples wearing silly matching polyester outfits.

Well, throw those old images away! In the hands of today's gay and lesbian community, square dancing is now a high-energy, exciting activity where you meet new friends and build a sense of community.

"It's definitely not your grandfather's square dancing," says Karin Kelley, president of the Rosetown Ramblers, Portland's gay and lesbian square dance club. "It's about the people, the camaraderie and the dancing. You just need to let go of any preconceived notions and give it a try. You'll be surprised!"

You might be thinking: "Yeah, right. Square dancing is still square dancing."

Wrong. Today, gay men and lesbians have taken this old, boring activity and turned it into a fun, upbeat social event fit for anybody.

Improving square dancing

There was a time when square dancing was done mostly by white, straight America. All that changed in the early 1980s when the gay and lesbian community discovered and adopted it.

But first some improvements had to be made. Gone is the dress code—no more silly matching outfits and frilly crinoline skirts!

Also discarded is the requirement for assigned partners. Now, you can dance with whomever you choose, and singles are welcomed.

Even the music has taken on a more modern, upbeat flavor. During a typical night you might hear the Beatles, the Pointer Sisters, Garth Brooks—even the Village People. (This is gay square dancing, after all!)

When gay men and lesbians saw the fun and camaraderie this new square dancing offered, they began forming clubs all around the country, including here in Portland.



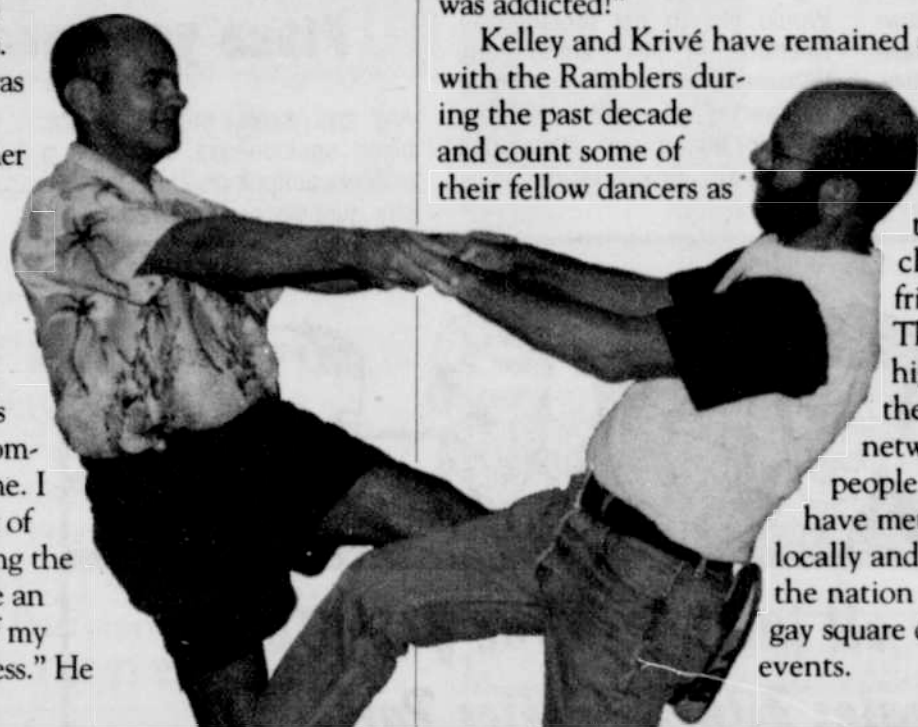
In 1983, the Rosetown Ramblers began. It was one of the founders of the International Association of Gay and Lesbian Square Dance Clubs, an organization that now comprises more than 60 organizations around the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan.

Founding member Dick Burdon recalls how the Ramblers started out, oddly enough, by enlisting the help of a straight woman. "The Ramblers were just starting, and they didn't really

know what to do," he recalls.

"Jan Phipps was a local caller, and she and her husband agreed to teach those first classes. It was all new."

Involvement in the Ramblers changed Burdon's life. "I was just coming out at the time. I didn't know a lot of gay people. Joining the Ramblers became an important part of my coming-out process." He



thought that was the end of it. But it wasn't," Krivé adds with a mischievous grin. "Lo and behold one night we were at the old Eastside Bar and we saw fliers for the Ramblers. There was a gay square dance group after all!"

Reluctantly, Kelley kept her promise, and the two started the square dance class that fall. "I thought I was going to be bored to tears," Kelley laughs. "But I wasn't. I found out that it was a lot of fun. And the people were so nice. After just a few weeks I was addicted!"

Kelley and Krivé have remained active with the Ramblers during the past decade and count some of their fellow dancers as

their closest friends. They speak highly of the strong network of people they have met both locally and around the nation at major gay square dance events.

Why square dancing isn't square

The Rosetown Ramblers want you to do-si-do

BY PAUL FINDLAY

speaks of the Ramblers as "his family and friends" and has remained active with the club during its 18 years.

Friendship set to music

Burdon's feelings are typical. When you talk with gay and lesbian square dancers, you often hear them speak of family, friends and community. Square dance has long been called "friendship set to music," which is particularly true for gay men and lesbians.

"There is an incredible sense of community in square dancing," longtime caller Michael McMullen says. "Square dancers really treat each other as family."

Indeed, many "families" have been formed through square dancing. "Square dancing is a wonderful alternative to the bar scene," McMullen says. "You get to meet people in a nonsexually charged environment and connect with them on a deeper level."

McMullen knows this well; he met his longtime partner through square dancing. For others who are already partnered, square dancing is an opportunity to make new friends and strengthen bonds with your mate.

Kelley and her partner, Risa Krivé, began square dancing almost 10 years ago. Krivé had long been interested in square dancing (and the beautiful crinolines she saw the straight women wear!), but Kelley wasn't interested.

"Karin told me, 'I'll square dance...but only if it's with a gay square dance group.' Karin

Annual convention

One of the most exciting gatherings is the International Gay and Lesbian Square Dance Convention. Each year between 1,300 and 1,500 people from throughout the world get together for a long weekend of dancing and partying.

Although the primary focus is dancing, of course, the convention offers many other events and traditions—some with a distinctly gay twist. One of the most popular is the hilarious Honky Tonk Queen contest, which pits lip-synching drag queens against each other in categories such as talent, beauty and dance ability. (The coveted tiara is a crown covered in tacky velvet and Christmas lights and topped with an old cowboy boot.) Finding an empty seat at the show is next to impossible.

Another activity is the Moonshine Tip, a dance customarily held at midnight during the convention. After the dancers enter the ballroom, they strip to their birthday suits and (you guessed it) dance in the nude! The Moonshine Tip always attracts a crowd of a couple hundred dancers. No spectators (or cameras) are allowed.

In addition to the annual convention, many of the larger gay and lesbian square dance clubs sponsor weekend dance events known as fly-ins, so called because dancers fly in from all over to attend. The Ramblers' own fly-in is held every year on Halloween weekend. (Imagine 150 costumed witches, devils, ghosts and pirates all square dancing, and you get the idea.) Attending fly-ins during the year helps tide dancers over while they wait for the next annual international convention.

Rick Hawes was the co-chair of the convention when it was held in Port-

land three years ago. In 1990 he co-founded Heads to the Center, for advanced gay and lesbian square dancers.

"We believed that the Ramblers would be overextended if they tried to be responsible for both the upper and lower dance levels," Hawes explains. "Heads to the Center provides an opportunity for gay dancers who are interested in the higher levels to continue to learn and stay in a socially comfortable environment."

Teaching the beginning level is the job of instructor Cornell Trouw. A square dancer of more than 20 years, he decided a few years ago to try his hand at calling and teaching.

"The part I like most is teaching new people to dance and seeing how much fun they have when they discover that they're actually dancing," Trouw says. "This happens the very first night they try square dancing."

Active in the community

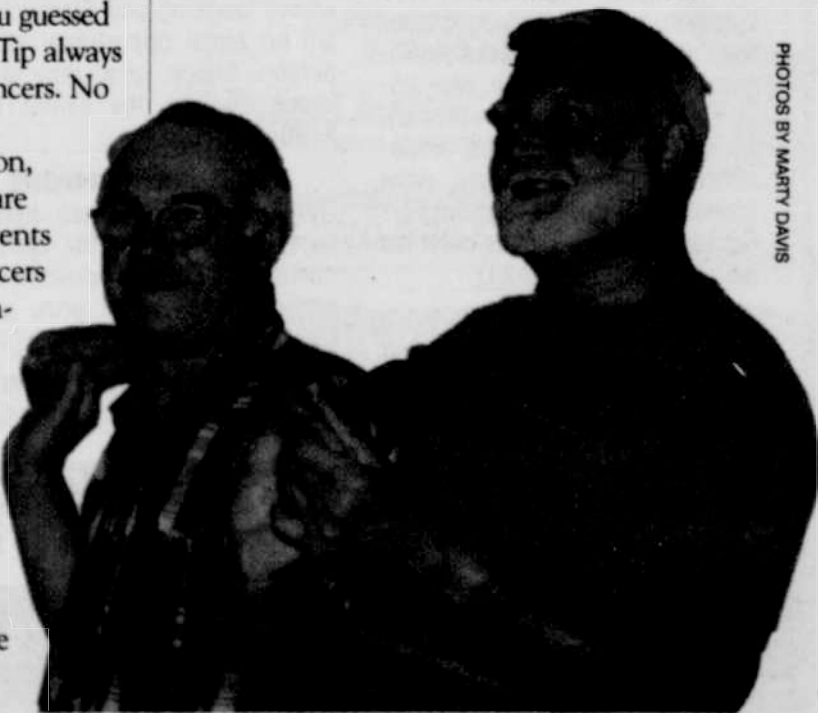
Being active and involved in the community is a square dance tradition, and the Ramblers are no exception. Every month they sponsor a skating party and country western dancing. In addition, the Ramblers make a donation of \$1,000 each year to the Audria M. Edwards Scholarship Fund, which benefits gay and lesbian students pursuing a secondary education.

The new season of classes starts Sept. 26 and meets 7:30 p.m. every Wednesday for about six months. The fee can be paid by the session, by the month or by the week. You must complete the classes to join the club.

The Ramblers have various square dance levels, and these classes cover the first two levels. Club members join in as experienced partners during the classes, and regular Wednesday evening dances continue throughout the year after the classes end in April. **[E]**

Contact the ROSETOWN RAMBLERS at 503-234-9944 or www.rdrop.com/users/ramblers. The monthly skating party is held from 7:30-9:30 p.m. every third Monday at Oaks Park, which is located at the east end of the Sellwood Bridge. Admission is \$5. Country western dancing is held from 10 p.m.-1:30 a.m. after the monthly square dance every first Saturday at the Portland Metro Club, 618 S.E. Alder St., and \$5 gets you in. Prospective members are invited to try a free night of square dancing from 7:30-9:30 p.m. Sept. 12 and 19 at Trinity United Methodist Church's Fellowship Hall, 3915 S.E. Steele St.

PAUL FINDLAY is a Portland free-lance writer who's not ashamed to say he loves square dancing.



PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS