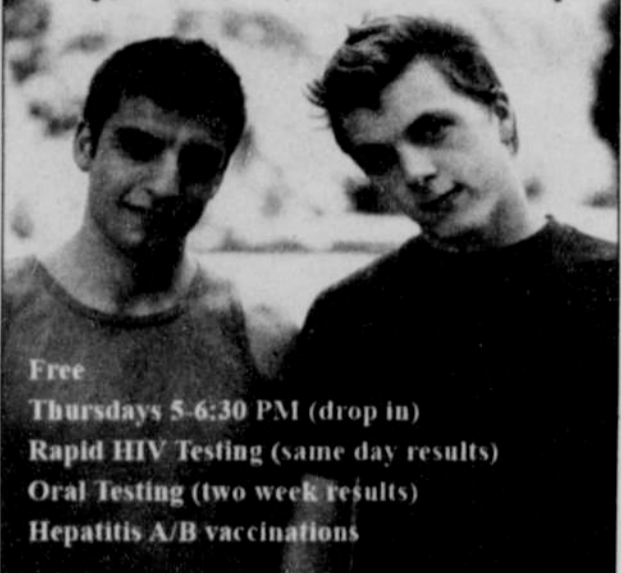


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culture



The Rosetown Ramblers attend a 1986 convention in San Francisco.

Silver Squares

Gay and lesbian square dance club approaches age 25
by Rebecca Ragain

Dick Burdon remembers when Portland's gay square dancing club, the Rosetown Ramblers, initiated new members with rituals similar to what one might encounter during a good-natured fraternity hazing.

When rookies graduated from their dance class and wanted to join the group, they might have been required to dance with a roller skate on one foot to prove their worth.

Or maybe to dance with a pair of pantyhose tied around their waist so that the legs—which were weighted with a potato in each foot—dangled down toward their knees.

"Try to dance and keep that from tangling!" says Burdon, chuckling and pointing at a photograph of someone trying to do exactly that.

Burdon had just come out of the closet when he joined the Rosetown Ramblers in 1983, which was the club's first year in existence. "I found a lot of support and liberation from being part of it," he recalls.

Today, the 76-year-old returns that support by helping other gays and lesbians learn how to square dance. And these days, there's no hazing at graduation.

Square Dance Class: What to Expect

Starting each fall, the Rosetown Ramblers hosts two 10-week square dancing courses for beginners. (Intermediate dancers are also welcome.) This year's classes begin Oct. 10 and take place on Wednesday evenings through April.

Come to class wearing comfortable clothes, because—unlike straight square dancing—there is no formal dress code for gay and lesbian square dancing.

Rick Hawes, a square dancer since 1984, quips: "We'll dance nude or as gussied up as straight folks. Or even more so, like the 6-foot-tall drag queen in roller skates."

Classes are open to singles and couples. Traditional square dance terminology is maintained even in gay and lesbian clubs, so new dancers will decide whether they want to learn the "boy" or "girl" part. (It's up to you; biology is irrelevant.)

After mastering one position, many gay and lesbian dancers choose to learn the other.

Square dance has a language of its own. The announcer is the "caller," who explains how to do

the different dance formations, or "calls," which have names like Dosado and Promenade.

Of course, when it comes to physical activities, hearing something explained is not necessarily the same as understanding how to do it.

That's where Burdon comes in. During class, he and other experienced square dancers, or "angels," join the beginners on the floor to help demonstrate the calls. Whenever possible, an angel will partner with a beginner so the new person can truly get the feel for the move.

"They do better [dancing with an angel] than two people who don't know what they're doing dancing together," explains Burdon.

If you do make a mistake, try not to worry about it. According to Scott Philips, who joined Rosetown Ramblers 19 years ago, "The more you do, the easier it gets."

Wide World of Square Dancing

Classes are just the beginning of the fun. The Rosetown Ramblers also offer a club night on the third Wednesday of every month and a dance every first Saturday.

And then there's the traveling.

It might start with a day trip to Eugene to dance with the local club Spin Cycle Squares. Or maybe attending a full-weekend "fly-in" (a mini-convention) in Seattle or Vancouver, British Columbia, sounds intriguing.

Just be prepared to return to work on Monday thoroughly exhausted.

"When you're first learning, you dance till you drop," says Burdon. "You don't think you can miss a single dance."

Before long, you might find yourself flying across the country to attend the annual convention of the International Association of Gay Square Dance Clubs (IAGSDC).

Like the Rosetown Ramblers, which was a charter club of the international group, the IAGSDC is turning 25 in 2008. The association boasts 49 member clubs, plus a few associate and affiliate organizations.

Every year, approximately 1,000 dancers from these various clubs converge for a four-day convention filled with socializing, sightseeing and, of course, dancing.

STEPHEN J. SUTTON