The History of Square Dance

Swing your partner and do·si·do—November 29 is Square Dance Day in the United States. Didn't know this folksy form of entertainment had a holiday all its own? Then it's probably time you learned a few things about square dancing, a tradition that blossomed in the United States but has roots that stretch back to 15th-century Europe.

Square dance aficionados trace the activity back to several European ancestors. In England around 1600, teams of six trained performers—all male, for propriety’s sake, and wearing bells for extra oomph—began presenting choreographed sequences known as the morris dance. This fad is thought to have inspired English country dance, in which couples lined up on village greens to practice weaving, circling and swinging moves reminiscent of modern-day square dancing. Over on the continent, meanwhile, 18th-century French couples were arranging themselves in squares for social dances such as the quadrille and the cotillion. Folk dances in Scotland, Scandinavia and Spain are also thought to have influenced square dancing.

When Europeans began settling England’s 13 North American colonies, they brought both folk and popular dance traditions with them. French dancing styles in particular came into favor in the years following the American Revolution, when many former colonists snubbed all things British. A number of the terms used in modern square dancing come from France, including “promenade,” “allemande” and the indispensable “do·si·do”—a corruption of “dos·à·dos,” meaning “back-to-back.”

As the United States grew and diversified, new generations stopped practicing the social dances their grandparents had enjoyed across the Atlantic. This was not the case in every region, however. Similar to English country dance and the quadrille, the “running set” caught on in 19th-century Appalachia. But instead of memorizing each and every step, participants began relying on callers to provide cues—and, as square dance calling became an art form in its own right, humor and entertainment. During the early years of square dance in the United States, live music was often played by African-American musicians. Blacks also worked as callers and contributed their own steps and songs to the tradition.

Square dancing has been our "official national folk dance" since President Reagan signed an act of Congress in 1982. Most Americans, however would likely never be caught dead square dancing. "Too embarrassing," they might say. Such is generally true of folk customs -- they are not popular. Thus, it remains a dance that few have really tried, particularly as adults. But
dedicated square dancers just ignore the negative quips and enthusiastically continue with their Do-si-doe's, Spin Chain the Gears, and Ferris Wheels.

The origins of square dancing are complex and extensive. The square dance is uniquely American. Early in this century, as America urbanized, square dancing nearly died out. The dance got left behind and was almost forgotten. Henry Ford had a major impact in its revival. He extolled the virtues of square dancing in an attempt to foster a dance form that would counteract what he considered to be the evils of jazz. In 1923 Henry Ford engaged the full-time services of square dance caller Benjamin Lovett. Ford brought Lovett to Dearborn, MI where he remained for twenty-six years. At Ford's expense dancing instructors were invited to Dearborn to receive instruction. Ford sponsored a dance program for the Dearborn public schools, and soon Mr. Ford was sponsoring square dance programs in many other schools. Square dancing was also brought to numerous college and university campuses at Mr. Ford's expense. Ford sponsored a Sunday radio program that was broadcast nationwide. Over the radio Lovett would call dances that had been printed in the newspaper the previous week. Lovett maintained a "staff" of twelve to fourteen callers, all maintained by Mr. Ford's generosity. Eventually Henry Ford had a new, large dance hall constructed at Greenfield Village to contain the increasing numbers of dancers. Ford's good friend Thomas Edison began to produce 78 RPM square dance records under his Edison label. Old fashioned square dancing became the rage.

Folk dancing also received a major boost in the 1920's when the New York City public schools, the first major school system to do so, made folk dancing a required activity. But Lloyd "Pappy" Shaw should received primary credit for square dancing's modern revival. Shaw was superintendent of the Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado during the 1930's. Shaw shared his enthusiasm with his students and offered summer classes for dancers, callers, and national folk dance leaders. Returning to their respective homes and communities, the square dance revival began. Shaw's enthusiasm could not be contained in Colorado. In 1938, he organized a student demonstration team which performed exhibition dances in Los Angeles, Boston, New York and New Orleans. Thus, a lively group of high school students were largely responsible for the reintroduction of square dancing to the American public!

Originally, square dances had a caller in each square, instead of a single caller for the entire hall. That was the only way to hear the calls over the music if the group was very large. Improved public address systems, record players, microphones, and special square dance recordings have allowed for larger, better organized dances. Square dancing expanded rapidly after 1939. The dance especially expanded in the decade following W.W.II. Many American GIs had been introduced to square dancing at USO cantinas. After
the war ended, large numbers of them turned to square dancing in pursuit of wholesome recreational activity. With "Pappy" Shaw in Colorado, and the impact of the returning GIs focusing on California, these two states led the development and evolution of modern square dancing.

Today, there are thousands of square dance clubs located in nearly every community of America. Dancers keep in touch and learn of current happenings through a multitude of flyers, newsletters and directories. More recently, square dancing has benefited from transportation improvements. Better highways and more dependable automobiles allow dancers to travel easily between communities, Visiting other clubs has become a major aspect. Square dancing is an excellent example of an authentic American folk custom. Its rural origins are vague, and its development and diffusion are difficult to trace. Like all folk customs, it is not popular, even among Americans, yet those who enjoy it are enthusiastic in their participation. At bottom, it remains a solid and enduring piece of American folk tradition. As dancers themselves are fond of saying, "Square dancing is friendship set to music."

http://www.rollanet.org/~jrd/dance/History.html