

Square dancers celebrate a ‘family friendly’ hobby

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By Kristin Danley Greiner, Iowa Farmer Today

With roots dating back to the 17th century in England, Ireland and Scotland, American square dance remained popular throughout the mid-to-late 20th century and was named the national dance in 1982, according to MasterClass.

Over time, square dancers aged and didn’t draw younger participants. But there’s been a resurgence in this activity in some areas of the country.

“We have dancers as young as 10 to dancers in their 80s. The ideal age for new square dancers tends to be empty nesters,” said Christine Steffy, president of the Metropolitan Chicago Association of Square Dancers, who is from McHenry, Illinois. “They have time on their hands, energy and are looking for fun activities they can do with their spouse.”

The COVID-19 pandemic cut into the activity, but a program that recruits new dancers of all ages has helped her group to grow.

“The U Can Square Dance project was proposed by Chicago-area square dance leader Pam Berg before COVID hit. It was put on hold during the shutdowns, but we were able to pivot once restrictions were eased,” Steffy said.



Carolyn and Will Grimes of Clinton square dance with the Riverboat Rustlers. They’ve been square dancing for 50 years.

Photo courtesy Linda Kuhle

“What hooks many of our new dancers is the sense of teamwork that develops as they learn the many calls during three months of lessons. By the end of that time, the students have become a community — a social network on the dance floor.”

Another hook for new square dancers is the puzzle-solving aspect. As soon as the caller gives a direction, the dancers have to execute the right steps, with the correct person(s), with the right timing.

“When dancers nail a complicated sequence and find themselves back at their home spot with their original partner, everyone celebrates,” Steffy said. “Square dance callers starts with easy directions such as ‘circle left’ or ‘into the middle and back.’ The calls become a little more complicated — ‘do si do’, ‘allemande left’ or ‘California twirl.’

“The fun part comes when the caller puts the calls learned together in time to the music and dancers do their best to keep up. That’s when it feels like ‘Simon Says’ for adults. Lots of laughing.”

David and Penny Byers of Cowgill, Missouri, have been square dancing since 2014 when they were in their mid-50s. Penny Byers said she saw a Facebook post a friend had shared about square dance lessons then set out to convince her husband to try it with her.

“It’s so much fun. You can’t ask for nicer people,” she said. “With square dancing, you have to make a commitment to it. You eventually fall in love with it and enjoy the social aspect of it. After COVID, it seems like people were looking for something more wholesome where they could connect with others and enjoy a family activity.”

Byers and her square dancing group spin around the floor to music from Lady Gaga, The Eagles and Santana.

“I’m a classic rock guy, so I love when we square dance to rock,” David Byers said.



The U Can Square Dance project proposed by Chicago-area square dance leader Pam Berg has helped draw younger square dancers to the activity.

Photo courtesy Pam Berg

In their group, a family with four kids ranging in age from 15 to 25 participate. David said they see a lot of homeschool students learning to square dance because it counts as credit for physical education.

“We’ve been taking our grandkids to square dance since they were born. I used to square dance with them in my arms in a square. Now they’re old enough to dance on their own,” David said.

Carolyn Grimes of Clinton, Iowa, enjoys square dancing with husband, Will. She said the average age of square dancers has been “creeping up.”

“When we started dancing in 1974, the average age was probably 45 and we were 29. Now I think the average age in Iowa is closer to 70,” Grimes said. “So you see, we have been dancing for 50 years, and it has been a really important part of our lives. We have made close friends, we have traveled to dance in many states including Hawaii and even Australia. I cannot even imagine what our lives would have been like had we not become square dancers.”

She agreed that square dancing took a hit during the pandemic, just like other in-person activities. To compensate for the social distancing, square dance clubs held Facebook Live dances so everyone could continue practicing their moves, but Grimes said it wasn’t the same.

“It didn’t provide the interaction with other dancers, the social aspect,” she said.

For those interested in trying square dancing, there are state associations, a national association and local clubs, many with an online presence directing newcomers how to join.