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HOG-RASSLE:

Impromptu Behavior at Old-Time Square Dances

BY JAMES KIMBALL

“Hog-Rassle” is a term used by some old-timers in rural areas to describe a square dance evening where the participants behave in a disorderly manner. The term generally seems to be used by those who disapprove of dancers who don’t go by the rules. The participants, on the other hand, see themselves as interjecting fun into an

otherwise repetitive, predictable tradition. By doing the unexpected, adding one’s own moves or pranks, or just dancing in an extra exuberant manner, a dancer can bring laughter to the whole set. Such behavior is strongly discouraged in carefully regulated versions of square dance, as found in organized club, recreational, and school

settings; but in many rural dances, watching and experiencing the unexpected is not only tolerated, it is enjoyed by most as part of the fun.

The rural caller and musicians often add their own version of the unexpected: a call that will deliberately mix everyone up or a humorous musical reference, which will



“Snake in the grass” figure with one dancer leading his set through all the others. Birdsall Grange, 2017. All photos by the author.



Left: Dancers preparing for a lively swing. York, New York, 2000. *Right:* Dancers in a two-hands-held swing, which gives a firm hold and allows for very fast spinning during figure. York, New York, 2000.

make the dancers smile. Existing literature on the topic of square dancing rarely mentions divergence from the expected norms—except in disapproving terms. My discussion of this interesting aspect of rural entertainment is based on some 40 years of observing traditional dances in the rural northeast, on interviews with participants, and on historical accounts reaching back to the early 19th century.

A search for the source of the term does not turn up much. *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* gives us:

Hog-wrestle n. (also hog-stomp; 20c+; US) a noisy, inelegant, low-class dance. (Green 2005, 725)

In a 1926 article, “Quadrille Calls,” for the American Dialect Society, Edwin Piper puts the term in perspective with other popular labels for traditional dances, which have commonly included squares:

Dancing party, party, dance, ball, bop, bovery, shindig or shindy, stepping-bee, bog-rassle, hoe-down, barn-dance, assembly... Ball for the ceremonious, *bop* for the informal, a *bovery* if danced in a bower; an *assembly* for a dancing school, a *shindig* for rowdies; *bog-rasslin'*—utter contempt. (Piper 1926, 391)

Peter Young, in his study of Ontario, Canada's dance halls and summer dance pavilions gives us a vivid use of the term by one old-timer. The reference here is to a hall in Brighton, Ontario:

The Spring Valley Dance Pavilion may sound like an innocent enough dance hall, but don't let the name fool you,” says Basil McMaster. “It could just as easily have been labelled, ‘The Bucket of Blood,’ or, as some of us called it, ‘Hog Wrestle’,...

This roadside hall is not written up in local history books. No, the Spring Valley Dance hall was everything that the pavilion at the Presqu'île Hotel—Quick's Pleasure Palace—was not. To begin with, access was easy. You simply walked a few steps north of town (less than a mile) and *voilà*, Hog Wrestle awaited you ... the emporium operated between the mid-'20s and the mid-'30s, finally going down in a blaze of glory when fire destroyed the hall.

...Entertainment was usually in the form of a fiddle player and caller, often accompanied by a pianist. (Young 2002, 164)

In contrast to these references to dances, an on-line search for “hog wrestle” will turn up mostly sites dealing with a type of county or state fair competition, where four men are required to catch a hog in a muddy pen and deposit it, butt first, into a large barrel. The ultimate reference to wrestling a hog, of course, goes back to the common but tricky task on many a farm of having to catch a pig.

The first time I heard the term was from an old-timer in the 1970s in the Geneseo, New York area, a man who was describing a type of rural round and square dance that he didn’t care to attend. He preferred a more controlled affair—perhaps, even the highly regimented square dance clubs, which had evolved in part to get away from the unruly behavior attached to some dances after the Second World War.

There are numerous references in old newspapers extolling the virtues of a properly managed dance:

The ball held in the Opera House, Friday evening of last week... was certainly one of the most satisfying affairs we have witnessed in a long while. The gentlemen were handsome and courteous, and the ladies as tidy, as pretty, and as merry as could be; and each had suspended from their waist an elegant program of the dance. Nothing but delight could be the result.

From the *Avon Springs Herald*, October 13, 1892

Certain callers become known for keeping the crowd under control:

... Happy Bill’s orchestra became famous in a day when the old fashioned square and contra dances, the waltz, the polka and the schottische were popular. Bill was especially gifted at calling the changes for square and contra dances. He had a voice and often sang his call, and always insisted that every figure should be executed properly; sharp raps of his violin

bow always called the dancers back to their places if a blunder was made. Bill’s music was right, his calling was right, and he insisted that his dancers should dance correctly.

From Obituary of Happy Bill (Jared Wells) Daniels

Cortland Democrat, November 30, 1923

Old time fiddler and caller, Mark Hamilton of Black Creek, New York, contrasted the dancing of his parents’ generation with his own: “Years ago, their square dancing, the round dance, all their dance was done graceful. The square dance, they never played ‘em awful fast. And those men and women, they’d make so many graceful steps—they didn’t just run around and around. And when they’d meet their partner, they always bowed...”

This was the ideal.

By the 1940s when Mark was playing dances around Allegany and Cattaraugus



“Right and left through” figure, as described by Mark Hamilton, Pavilion, New York. 2007.

Counties, he was seeing the rise of excessive twirling, swinging, and many improvised moves, along with a general rowdiness, which he attributed to the Second World War generation:

That started over here to Bolivar during World War II, right where I was playing. When they'd do the right and left, they done that—hold on and twisted their hands up. But that's not the proper way. But as long's they want to do it, I don't care whatever they do. That twirlin' started in about the same time . . . but it got so they took so much time twirlin' that they wouldn't get enough time to get around while you was callin,' you know . . . That fancy stuff was when the moose juice gets to workin' and just to show 'em off. (Hamilton 1992)

The first hint I had that I was living in hog-rassle country was at the first dance I attended after moving to western New York in 1976. It was in a Lion's Club hall, which had a busy bar at one end of the room. It was only about the second or third set into the evening when a woman went flying out of the set and crashed into the wall. Clearly, the crowd was drinking, and this would hardly be an elegant affair.

A few months later, I noticed a *Penny Saver* ad for a barn dance at a new horse stable, just out of town. For a partner, I took a new college librarian who had done a little recreational square dancing and was starting to enjoy the newly arrived contra dance scene in Rochester. But this barn dance was something else. She got pulled and yanked and bumped, and swung and twirled until she was dizzy and had to sit down. Some of the men, in particular, danced with great energy and a lot of impromptu moves, all of which she found to be too unpredictable—even rude. And it was clear that she never wanted to go to another one of these dances.

A similar experience was described by a young LeRoy school teacher in 1816:

Friday, August 30th...I went to Mr. McPherson's to quilting, and they danced in the evening. I have heard about the Scotch balls, but I never attended one



“Jitterbug swing” figure, where couples get to show off some fancy footwork and twirling. York, New York, 2003.

before; indeed I never wish to again. There was no more regularity among them than there would have been among so many little Children 6 years old. I thought sometimes I should be pulled in quarters, if a gentleman asked me to dance there was no excuse would rid me of them, but dance I must. (Beach 1816)

An energetic swing was clearly referred to in the following, from 1874, long before any proper dance manuals admitted to its existence:

When Pat and partner arrived at that particular phase of the mazy dance, known

as “Ladies to the right!” both went in for all there was in the figure. Neither of them we are certain missed a single demi-semi-quaver, and the final “balance and swing partners” was illustrated with marvelous pigeon wings and wound up with a velocity perfectly bewildering and yet in a blaze of glory...

Jamestown Daily Democrat, February 22, 1874

From Arthur E. Crocker’s written memories of mid-19th century Broome County, we have the following:

...During all this last change all the young men would vie with each other in jumping the highest and spreading his legs over the greatest amount of space and making the most noise, and generally showing his favorite steps. Every movement would be in time to the music, and before the dance would be over every dancer would be in a profuse perspiration.

“Reminiscences of Finch Hollow,” compiled by Rena Crocker Leezer, 1973

From Arch Bristow’s *Old Time Tales of Warren County*, we have another good example:

There are some steppers among the crowd at the Kansas House tonight. Nathaniel Martin is dancing with Nancy Hare. There are few who can outdo him on the dance floor ... He’s limber as an eel, his feet move like lightning. He gets in a lot of stuff that’s all his own, fancy bows and quick, clog steps. How he does spin Nancy around when the caller shouts, “Swing your partners!”...

Eighteen sets should be dancing tonight, but the onlookers take up so much room only fourteen sets can manage to dance. And they have to cut down on the real fancy swinging. No room for a fellow to swing his girl off the floor.” (Bristow 1932)

Most of the dances that I attended over the next decade or so—and continue to attend occasionally—have not been particularly outrageous. Especially those in rural grange halls or school gyms, where no drinking is allowed; these have been lively, but generally well managed. The energy level

is always high, and there are those who add extra turns and swings—but nobody (except a child, perhaps) is lifted off the floor. I don’t think any of the participants would have classed them as hog-rattles. These dances are, of course, officially labeled “Round and Square Dances” and have been pretty much a continuation of what many of the now older aged participants had done in local high school gyms, often following basketball games in the 1950s and early 1960s.

One day, however, I heard that a band I didn’t know was playing a dance at the South Hornell Grange—about 40 miles south of Geneseo. I took my tape recorder and video camera and figured I could do some documentation of a different dance crowd and new musicians. It was clear when I arrived that this was indeed a different crowd. There were several teenagers drinking beer and maybe something stronger out in the parking lot. The only obvious grange participation seemed to be minimal: the man collecting the admission at the door, one set of older couples at the end of the hall, and those running the food counter inside. This was largely a younger crowd. As the band started and the leader called for sets on the floor, I set up my camera and got ready to let it run. Somebody needed a partner, and very quickly, I was in the midst of a set that danced like no others I had ever experienced. I was pulled and yanked, and in the midst of more twirling and wild swinging than I could imagine. I had found a hog-rattle.

Even at the tamer dances, which I have documented the most, elements of the impromptu abound—a surprise call that mixes everyone up, extra twirls and vigorous swinging, ganging up on one individual in the middle of a circle, inventing a new way to do some particular figure, etc. These are important elements of the old-time rural dance, which are not permitted in the carefully taught modern or western square dance clubs or in most recreational square dance settings.

It is just these impromptu moves that bring these dances alive to those who enjoy them. The called dances here are much simpler and more repetitive than those

of the club dance; but the level of fun is, I think, much higher, as the individuality of certain dancers, the joy of the unexpected and pleasure from both being watched and watching become significant elements of enjoyment.

A favorite dance at the Hopewell Grange went to the tune of “Coming ‘Round the Mountain.” The first gent swings in turn with the second, third, and fourth ladies, each time bringing that lady back to his place where they circle with his own partner. Eventually, with all four ladies circling around the gent, the call is:

Drop your hands, stop right there,
Tickle his ribs and muss his hair!

Done as called, the figure is funny enough, as the four ladies tickle the gent and mess up his hair. But the Hopewell dancers often went beyond the call. The gent’s shirt tails might be pulled out, his pant legs rolled up, and shoelaces tied together. On occasion, extra ladies might join the circle. There was one set that I especially remember, which involved two teenage couples. As the circle started to grow around one of the young gents, more girls joined in from the sidelines and then a couple guys jumped in. When “Drop your hands...” was called, the fellow in the middle bolted for the door, with all the others chasing after him. This brought the whole dance to a stop for a few moments, amid great laughter, until the set could be reassembled.

Another dance that has often encouraged a similar group response is “Kiss Her In The Moonlight.” Generally done to the tune of “Listen To The Mockingbird,” this call had become a great favorite throughout the region by the 1940s, and remained so to more recent times. In this figure, each couple in its turn promenades the outside into the middle of the square. At the call, “Kiss her in the moonlight,” or “Kiss her if you dare,” some self-appointed person usually turns the overhead lights out. As the couple kisses or hugs in the middle, others in the set—and sometimes from outside the set—will rush the couple, add more kisses, muss their hair, roll up a pant leg, pull out shirt tails, and the like.



Dancers in the “grand right and left” figure, adding an overhand twirl and a kick or two. York, New York, 1993.

A favorite embellishment among some western New York dancers is for a gent or lady in the grand right and left to turn an unsuspecting dancer 180 degrees around so he or she winds up going the wrong way—the gent moving in the ladies’ direction and the lady in the men’s. It all works out when they get back home and usually brings smiles to all in the set. And, lastly, sometimes a surprise is generated by the caller. After repeatedly following the main figure with an “allemande left” call, the caller may suddenly switch to “allemande RIGHT”—creating momentary chaos and extra fun.

Improvisation is central, of course, to many of the world’s dance traditions. Here, however, we are dealing with a set dance tradition with expectations that it should be done right. The fun in the old-time rural dance may just come from doing some of it wrong. ▼

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