

**THE  
RALPH PAGE  
BOOK OF CONTRAS**

**THE ENGLISH FOLK DANCE AND SONG SOCIETY**

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# THE RALPH PAGE BOOK OF CONTRAS

Prepared for publication by JACK HAMILTON

The tunes edited and chords suggested by Leigh Dyer

## INTRODUCTION

Here are twenty-two American contras for your dancing pleasure. Eleven are modern, or contemporary dances; eleven are older, or traditional dances. Most of them were presented during my tour of Great Britain in 1966.

I called my first contra December 5th, 1930, in the Town Hall of Stoddard, New Hampshire, and have been calling them ever since. I suspect that this makes me a "traditional New England Caller".

We use a light walking step in all of our contras and dance them at a tempo varying between 120 and 130 beats per minute. It depends on what the dance is to a great extent. No one in their right mind would dream of dancing say, "Money Musk", "Chorus Jig" or "British Sorrow" at 130 beats per minute. By the same token, 120 beats per minute is a deadly and boring tempo for such as "Haymakers Jig" or "Portland Fancy".

The figures flow smoothly one into the other with no twisting or turning of the ladies. Our "right and left" figure is done without taking the hand of the opposite person; merely a "pass through" followed by a "courtesy turn" and repeated. On a hot, humid Summer night the "courtesy turn" becomes merely a turn as a couple with inside hands joined.

There is no limit to the number of couples in a contra set; if the room is forty feet long you could easily have twenty-five couples in a set. We like it that way. It seems friendlier to us if we have a lot of couples with whom to dance. Each contra is played from six to eight minutes, depending upon the dance, the mood of the crowd, and the ability of the musicians. For a few of the dances we occasionally play a medley of tunes; more often we do not. Our musicians say "if a tune is good enough for the dance, it is good enough to play all the way through". Certain contras are danced ONLY to a particular tune. Some of them are: "Money Musk", "Hull's Victory", "Chorus Jig", "Sacket's Harbor", "Old Zip Coon" and "Rory O'More".

For the most part we like to dance contras to tunes of Irish, Scottish or English flavor. We have done so since the settling of America and I assume that length of time makes it traditional to do so. A Southern mountain or Western tune does not seem to fit. Sure, they are American tunes but they were originated for a completely different kind of dancing. Within the past one hundred years we have come to use French-Canadian tunes more and more. Such tunes as "St. Anne's Reel", "St. Lawrence Jig", or "Glise a Sherbrook" are ideal for contra dances. Many of our best musicians are of French-Canadian derivation.

Of late years there has grown a tendency to change triple minor dances into duple minor dances. I am all in favor of that, wherever possible but I do think that a group should first learn a triple minor contra in its original form in order to get the figures of the dance well fixed in mind. Then, change it into a duple minor. It will seem a much faster dance and the inactive couples really have to be on the alert at all times.

My favorite contra? The one that I am calling at any particular moment.

With all best wishes,

Ralph Page

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THE ENGLISH FOLK DANCE AND SONG SOCIETY

Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regent's Park Road, LONDON, NW1 7AY

(01-485 2206)