

The Sets in Order
AMERICAN SQUARE DANCE SOCIETY
Presents

THE CALLER/TEACHER MANUAL

FOR

CONTRAS

WITH 101 READY-TO-CALL CONTRAS

by Don Armstrong



PREFACE

WELCOME TO THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF CONTRA DANCING! Whether this is your initial introduction to this phase of square dancing or whether you have been dancing or calling Contras for a number of years, we feel that as you read this manual a whole new world of dancing pleasure will open for you.

These line or string dances or Contras, as you will be calling them, have their roots deep in traditional American dancing but are just as current, exciting and challenging as any of the other dance forms in the square dance family.

As you dance Contras you will suddenly discover not only the "lost art" of moving to the rhythm of the music but the great pleasure of dancing to the musical phrase. As you call Contras you will experience a new sense of satisfaction in watching the dancers "relax" in their dancing. Don't be alarmed if you find that they're *actually* smiling from the sheer joy that comes with dancing to good, well-timed calling and to the accompaniment of truly fine dance music.

We're delighted that Don Armstrong has felt the timely need for this teaching manual. If ever there was a square dancing answer to football's "triple threat" man, it would have to be Don. Over the more than thirty years that he has been active in square dancing he has conducted classes, written and recorded a number of fine singing calls, taught college students how to call and dance and has himself called in all sections of North America as well as in such places as New Zealand, Japan, Great Britain and Germany. Whether it's teaching a round dance, calling a square or prompting a Contra, Don is completely "at home" behind the microphone.

A brief biographical rundown on Don shows that he started square dancing in upper New York State and continued to dance in the Northeastern part of the United States and in the Texas area before World War II. During the War he danced whenever opportunities presented themselves in Ontario and Quebec, where he served as the senior engineering test pilot for the Royal Canadian Air Force. During his 12 year career as an experimental and prototype test pilot, Don had the opportunity to dance and call in virtually every area throughout North America. It wasn't at all unusual for him to spend the week testing aircraft in Arizona and then to fly home for a weekend of calling in Florida.

He met Marie, who was to become Mrs. Armstrong, when they both attended the Dixie Folk and Square Dance Institute in Atlanta, Georgia; Marie as a square dance calling student, Don as a member of the staff. The two have been kidded many times because Marie came for the short course and stayed for the long course.

Today Don divides his time in the pursuit of many interests. The radio station he founded a number of years ago in Port Richey, Florida, is thriving. Part of the year is spent on the Grand Cayman Island in the Caribbean,

part in Costa Rica where he has business interests, a portion in Colorado where he is active in the Lloyd Shaw Foundation and serves on the staff of Peaceful Valley and a week each Summer on the staff of Asilomar. With all of this he still travels with square dancers each year to all parts of the world, occasionally gives flying lessons and in general is just one busy fellow.

Don's prime goal in preparing this manual is to put into the hands of callers a tool for passing along the enjoyment of Contras to dancers. The methods used by the author all have been perfected over many years of teaching experience. The order in which the material is presented and the teaching techniques that are described, if studied carefully, will help you become a proficient and successful Contra caller.

We also would like to point with great respect to the pioneering endeavors and continuing contributions made to this activity and to this book by Ralph Page of Keene, New Hampshire. Because of Ralph's inspiration and guidance, Contras have been kept vitally alive to be enjoyed by today's square dancers everywhere.

We must also salute the untiring efforts of the Lloyd Shaw Foundation for its research into the field of Contras and for its many fine Contra recordings. We're particularly pleased that Mrs. Lloyd (Dorothy) Shaw has written the Foreword which begins on the next page. While we're at it we must say "thank you," too, to Michael Herman of Folkdancer Records, to the late Frank Kaltman of Folkraft Records and to Scotland's own Jimmy Shand for much of the fine music that accompanies today's Contra Dancing.

And so, we hope that you will enjoy and make good use of this manual. It can be the key to many wonderful hours of Contra Dancing fun. We are confident that once you experience the thrill of watching a floor filled with happy dancers following your prompting of the Contras, you will never again be tempted to plan an evening's square dance program without including at least one Contra tip.

Bob Osgood, editor

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FOREWORD

I WATCHED A LITTLE 4-SET GROUP OF DANCERS in a small, bright hall with interest, pleasure and a certain amount of pride. They were school teachers and other school-oriented people, gathered from all corners of our metropolitan area. It was May and it was the last dance in their third year of dancing together in this place and under this caller-teacher. When they first started, their aim had been to try to reintroduce the American folk and square dance into the Junior and Senior High Schools of the area. They had been dancing with increasing joy and confidence for three seasons.

I do not remember just when it became clear to them that they had given up their idea of propagandizing the entire county. But, early, and without talking about it, they had clearly given it up in favor of *learning to dance themselves* for their own amazement and delight. They discovered that you cannot teach what you have not learned from both study and experience! They *had* to learn to *dance!*

Educationally, they covered the field: one superintendent of a large suburban district; two principals; several classroom teachers; two people from the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind; and so on. But there were also four people in their middle-forties who had once danced on the great Cheyenne Mountain school exhibition team! (They had promised not to let on that they knew a blessed thing about it.) They simply had to learn

to *dance* . . . beautifully, comfortably, joyously . . . aware of the rhythm, subconsciously hearing the tune, feeling the sweep and grace and beauty of the figures; in other words, just *dance*, simply enough that the heart and feet were in charge, instead of the head.

Since they could only find time for two two-hour sessions twice a month from October to May, they had lots of time to forget what they learned. They were starting out with all sorts of handicaps you see. It was going to take a long time to become “high-level” if they ever did! One of them asked once what was meant by “high-level,” and I said that to me it meant that you know how to dance so beautifully that people watching you were literally “carried away!” They said they might as well give up that goal, but I was not so sure.

I said to their teacher and caller . . . “Start right out with some of everything, the very first night: basic square, contra, simple mixer, circle, and so forth. From the very beginning let’s emphasize *grace*, regard for the *music*, respect for each other. But let’s base this class as we go along on a solid foundation of *contras* and see what happens. CONTRAS as the basic builders of dance awareness! Because CONTRAS, above all other forms, teach a sense of *dance*.”

You are going to ask: “Why do they?” You will find the answer beautifully set forth in the excellent text that makes up this book. I am only going to say that they *do*

if you meet them fresh and well-taught, to the right kind of music. It is *music* that makes people dance, not what the caller tells them to do, although that's important too.

On the very first night, after the quaking dancers had dutifully gotten through *Slaunch to Donegal*, (Don Armstrong will soon tell you why *Slaunch to Donegal* is a good contra with which to start) I whispered to their caller, "Don't forget to tell them to keep their lines straight." And he never did forget! Why is it so important to keep the lines straight? The best reason I know is *because it's beautiful*. And seeing a group of ordinary humans weaving the warp of a pattern in the weft of two straight lines is *beautiful!* These people still think of themselves as beginners but they keep the straightest contra lines west of New Hampshire!

Let's come back to now: May of 1973. Our little pilot group has danced together only 15 times a year for three years. I am watching them with delight. Right now they are doing a "docey-do hoedown," something you may never bring yourselves to do; but that doesn't matter. It does matter that they are whooping with laughter and dancing lickety-cut, weaving and interweaving, twirling, taking little bows. (No use to try to tell them how lovely they are; they wouldn't believe it!)

Suddenly, two of the women, who once danced as kids in school in the Cheyenne Mountain gym on Wednesday evenings, simultaneously catch something out of the air and they spontaneously end their phrase, as they turn back into place, with a feather-light but clearly audible . . . *STAMP* — *stamp-stamp*. Right on the beat. It's hornpipe music and that has a triple accent at the end of the 16-count phrase. The music tells you to do that, so you do it! For a moment the feet become instruments, very softly, in the band. It's elegant; it's gay; it's people! And it is *Contra* . . . contra sneaking into a square dance and feeling perfectly at home, because it has been at home there for centuries.

This pilot group romped through *Thady You Gander* safely on the second session, never missing that elegant straight line. Much later they swung around crosswise and danced *Sackett's Harbor*, without realizing that they had incidentally learned a thing called "contra corners," or that they had celebrated a famous naval victory in the war of 1812! They danced the *Quiet Contra* and the line became a row of little squares again.

They learned the *Aston Polka* and incidentally learned to do the polka, absolutely painlessly . . . to the music of Sweet Georgia Brown. They danced 6/8 without even knowing it, but their pulses knew. (They never attempted *Rory O'More*, but I know one group that makes a yearly ritual of doing *Rory O'More* together because they only meet once a year and it is a challenge to see if you can remember this difficult dance after so long a time.)

But when our pilot dancers line up for the last dance of the evening, it is always the same one: *The Hills of Habersham*. It is no mistake that this dance is listed on the International list of the world's best dances, for it has everything, including the fact that it is a very simple contra dance, in waltz time!

Nearly all dances tell a story. That is, in one sense,

what we mean by *choreography*. When you dance the *Hills of Habersham*, you form, with your two long facing lines, the banks of the Chattahoochee River, that great river that rises in the Hills of Habersham in North Georgia, and goes meandering southward until it drops at last into the Gulf of Mexico. The knowledgeable choreographers made the action to portray long crosswise swings and swoops of shining water; and little eddies running lengthwise along the shore, and little whirlpools in the middle. You are dancing them! Mary and Fred Collette had made a perfect dance, but they could not find the perfect tune for it. They had applied for help from a very great music man and he could neither find or compose it. And then, one romantic autumn day, the music man and a great dance teacher, with their wives, drove across the Continental Divide in Colorado, with the intention of coming down the Valley of the San Juan River into the town of Durango, with the purpose of finding the autumn aspen leaves in their prime. It was an absolutely right day, and at the end of it the weary and soul-satisfied travelers gathered in the motel restaurant for dinner. There was a little live orchestra playing dance music, softly and sentimentally and very well. Gradually, one by one, we all realized that the tune that had just come up was long-ago familiar and lovely; and someone exclaimed: "Love's Dream after the Ball!" And the Hills of Habersham had a tune, to which we have danced it ever since. That is the way great dances are made, especially contras.

It is quite natural that our current square dance should be so mechanical, so right-angled, so unconcerned with the physical grace of movement of the dancers. We are living in that kind of environment. By the end of another generation we shall probably have drawn it back to rhythm and grace and the joy of movement with not quite too much gray matter involved.

In the meantime we still have all of the old things too, hiding in corners. We still have great rivers that run, polluted, to the sea; we still have romance, even disguised in dirty jeans; we still have moonlight and roses and starlight on seascapes; and all kinds and conditions of music!

This observer thinks that we have here a very fine and inclusive manual for the person who wants to dance or teach contra dances. It is difficult to pick out any single thing that is omitted from this careful text. The thing to do with it is read it, study it and use it. The result could be a new dimension, a turning of the corner in the American Square Dance, back to rhythm and grace and fun.

Trying to dance a national folk dance using only squares is like living in a house with seven rooms, six of which are locked, the windows boarded up, the delightful contents locked inside. We are grateful that, with this Manual, Bob Osgood and the American Square Dance Society have opened the door into the most spacious of these rooms! Let's go in and dance contras together in jig time, reel time, hornpipe time, and waltz time. *Thank You, Bob!*

Dorothy Stott Shaw