

The Exec Visits Victoria, BC

by Doug Plummer

Sometimes a singular place, like a dance hall, can act like the heart of a community. When we danced English the first night, everyone said, “To really understand us, you need to see where we usually dance, at Dan’s Hall.” At the contra dance the next night: “Wait till you see what it’s like at Dan’s Hall.” At the community meeting and showcase on Sunday, we finally found out.

What is it about this Storied Hall That Dan Page Built?

Twenty years ago, he sold off the land that the original 19th century farmhouse stood on, and moved the house down the hill to a new foundation. His wife mentioned, wouldn’t it be nice to have a place to have her morris team practice, so he built an addition on the side of the house. It soon became a regular spot for community dance groups.

When Rosemary Lach started the English dance and when she finally had a contingent of musicians to play for them (which became The Dancehall Players, led by Ann Schau, now with their third CD), she moved the dance to Dan’s. He made it a homey place, with a wood stove and personal trinkets and tea at the break. Whatever was needed, Dan made it happen. There were so many musicians that there was barely room on the floor anymore. One week they showed up and Dan had built a stage off the end of the hall.

It was the antipode to the chilly, institutional basement church social halls that often function as our dance locations. It centers the community in that rare amalgam of friendship, connection and place.

Dan Page took up the fiddle late in life, in his fifties, and he became a prolific writer of fiddle tunes. The contra dance band on Saturday played the entire program of dances solely using Dan’s compositions. Rosemary says about Dan’s music: “He’s in touch with everyone’s delight. If I go away somewhere he writes a tune because I go away somewhere. He’s written a tune for Suzanne’s raspberries, and Ann’s dad, and Jen knitted him socks one year and he wrote Jen’s Socks of Many Colors. He just writes tunes of everything that people do.”

As such, the Victoria dance community has a wonderful cohesion even deeper than is typical for our tribe. The English dancers particularly are a solid, supportive group, having raised a large contingent of their own callers and musicians (it’s an island, and it’s expensive to bring in talent). There are three morris sides in the community (including the oldest morris side in Canada), there’s a Newfoundland square dance group, and a contra dance series now ten years old. At every event they serve tea at the break. These are a few of the discoveries the Executive Committee made during its February 2016 visit.

These Traveling Exec meetings have a threefold purpose. First, we have work to do and decisions to make, and it’s our face-to-face time. We get far more done than ever happens on a web conference meeting, and we get to know each other.



Then, we and a community get to know each other. A primary purpose of CDSS is to help local communities do what they do better, and we learn from embedding with one for a few days. The community puts on a ton of work to make these

events happen, and it often brings them together in ways they don’t expect. For example, the contra dance had over a hundred people attending, which is double their usual attendance.

And finally, we both take away notions for how to make things even better. Rosemary sums up the results:

“I was pleased with the weekend. I think we have improved communication between the contra and English groups, both here and in Vancouver. And Bev [Bernbaum’s] workshop improved the confidence of Victoria’s contra dancers. And the potluck certainly helped develop more of a community feeling among the contra dancers. And having all the morris sides and the singing felt very inclusive.”

What did we learn about Victoria? That you’re a cohesive, well-knit and well-functioning community with a stunning diversity of dance styles for such a small city. And that you really care about your tea.

WEB EXTRA! A tune by Dan, <http://www.cdss.org/programs/cdss-news-publications/cdss-news>.