

# Thirty and Thriving: The Birth and Long Life of Capital English Country Dancers

by Nancy Yule

It is 30 years since Capital English Country Dancers (CECD) held its first event and a thriving dance community began to grow in the New York State's Capital District. And like most fires it all began with a spark. Nancy Yule fell in love with English Country Dance (ECD) in 1975 while attending Folk Music Week at Pinewoods Camp, as a guest of her father. Both of Nancy's parents were from England. Her father enjoyed sharing his love of music and dance with his daughter, and her mother shared her recollection of dancing ECD as a school girl.

Others had similar awakenings, and in 1989, Nancy gathered a small group of English country dancers who wanted an ongoing ECD in the Capital District. She had immersed herself in local dance and music, and, with the ensuing experience and network, took a chance starting an ECD group. The newly formed group of ECD planners had attended Amherst dances led by Cammy Kaynor and shared a vision of Cammy's dance.

Nancy asked Cammy Kaynor if he would call/play a monthly dance near Albany. He felt it was too far, but thought we could run it "with a little coaching and guidance." Cammy offered "to hold an afternoon workshop for dancers, musicians, and callers simultaneously." He felt that understanding all three roles would improve any of these roles. With "feedback and pointers in a low-key setting" callers "wouldn't feel challenged and defensive." The things that matter are nurturing "a feeling of community amongst the dancers, ...put[ting] newcomers at ease...", and guiding "the band and the dancers without interfering with the artistic expression of both."

On Sunday, October 29, 1989, Capital English Country Dancers' first event was led by Cammy: an afternoon workshop followed by a potluck and evening dance. Cammy invited music workshop participants to join the evening dance band. Because Cammy had a reputation as a dynamic contra dance caller and musician, he drew curious contra and folk dancers and musicians. More than fifty dancers danced in the basement of St. Stephens

Lutheran Church, just East of Albany, NY!

## English Country Dancing Takes Off

The group of planners moved ahead. They created a monthly series of Sunday afternoon dances, drew up bylaws, became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit group member of Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS), and were awarded a NYS Arts Decentralization Grant. The first CECD Board included Nancy Yule, David Barnert, Veronica Skinner, Julie Raskin, and Craig Brandon.

CECD programming was very extensive. The grant provided funds for skilled callers and musicians who could lead dance band and dance workshops. Music Chair David Barnert, facilitated networking and played in the dance band. For musicians new to ECD music, three months of informal weekly band workshops were held in Joan Mullen's music studio.

It was hoped that a dancer attending the workshops would become an ECD caller. When no one came forward, Nancy took on the challenge. She attended caller workshops, was mentored by callers of CECD dances, and became apprentice to ECD caller Fried Herman. As Nancy became a caller, other local dancers took up calling at occasional CECD sampler

dances with musicians from music workshops. For many years, the DanceFlurry Festival also scheduled a sampler for these callers and musicians.

When the grant ended in December 1990, the monthly dances continued, as well as occasional dance and music workshops. CECD facilitated other ECD opportunities, such as dance band workshops in dancers' homes and a six-session Old Songs English dance band class, led by musician Larry Wallach. CECD collaborated with the yearly DanceFlurry Festival to enhance ECD programming, and the Flurry quickly became a February draw for out-of-town English country dancers. Old Songs also added ECD to their yearly festival, held in June, and included some ECD in a

*"... That we pulled this off... was something to celebrate! That it continued ... was an even greater reward." — Cammy Kaynor*

contra dance, sparking dancer interest in ECD.

As dancers became more skilled and attended English balls, they wanted a local event where they could dance effortlessly with other experienced dancers, enjoy scrumptious refreshments, and dress up. In 1994, CECD started two dance parties a year. One was an Autumn afternoon dance party, which took place during The Scottish Dancers Fall Dance Weekend, and the other was a Spring Dance Party. The dance parties continued for ten years, until the Fall Dance Weekend phased out and an ice cream social replaced the Spring event. The Stockade Assembly started soon after.

During this period of creativity, CECD Treasurer Victor Skowronski started choreographing dances. Caller Gene Morrow premiered Victor's Raffe's Waltz at CECD, then called it at the DanceFlurry and, thereafter, Victor's choreography became very popular.

To grow, a dance community must attract newcomers and engender their confidence, while keeping the interest of regular dancers. Introductory workshops with "dance angels" were held prior to monthly dances. In 1993, Nancy and musician Laura Hagen teamed up to teach weekly ECD classes at Shaker H.S. The classes continued for six years, until a dance workshop began at Union College.

The Capital Region has a strong folk music and dance tradition. CECD's focus on music as well as dance tapped into that tradition, and the community of dancers developed a deep & abiding interest in English Country Dancing, its music, and its history. With CECD having paved the way, new ECD leaders emerged with their own visions and started independent events:

In September 1993, Gail Griffith established a monthly dance in Troy with a rehearsed drop-in band and as many callers as wanted to participate—it ran for five years.

Some small groups formed bands. DayLilly played when Gail called dances at festivals and local events. When Don Bell started organizing dances in 1993, Amadeus and then HeartsEase became the house band.

In 1999, a group of dancers started an ECD workshop at Union College. Recently, the Union workshop phased out and a beginner workshop was established in Troy.

In 2005, the Stockade Assembly began semi annual dance parties for experienced dancers after CECD



dance parties ended.

Meanwhile, Hudson Mohawk Country Dancers grew into the DanceFlurry Organization (DFO)—an umbrella organization for affiliates. CECD benefits from greater exposure through the DFO website and from DFO outreach funding.

### Attracting Newcomers

Nancy began to call outreach dances at regional festivals, historic houses, and other events. Often a group of CECD dancers would demonstrate dances prior to audience participation. Dance rehearsals and performance strengthened the commitment and skills of CECD dancers. Audience participation attracted some participants to attend CECD dances.

Recent outreach was in December 2018 at Capital Repertory's Miss Bennett: Christmas at Pemberly. CECD gave a pre-show demonstration of English Country Dancing onstage, and then the audience joined in dancing. Later, the actors performed ECD as a part of the play.

### A Bright Future

CECD is going strong with ample season members, regular members, and many newcomers. The dancers value those who make our dances: callers, musicians, organizers, volunteers, donors, new dancers, and regular dancers. Outreach programs continue. CECD remains flexible as other groups emerge with different visions, and as the dance community and dancer preferences change. Recently, CECD transitioned from leadership, primarily by the founder, to leadership by a strong and enthusiastic Board. It has great potential to be self-sustaining for many years. It's ablaze with energy.

**Photo:** CECD outreach at Capital Repertory Theatre "Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberly".