

# Contra: Homegrown in Saskatoon

By Liz James

In November of 2018, a small but enthusiastic group of dancers gathered in a tiny room above a shoe store in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan... determined to contra dance. Contra dancing was new to many people there. A couple of us had contra danced before in other cities across North America. Several of us remembered the dances organized in the late 1990's by the Saskatoon Folk Music association. Those dances were always based on having guest callers, including Pippa Hall (Ottawa), Stephen Methot (Calgary), John Wheeler, and John Michael Seng-Wheeler (Virginia). The "guest caller" dances always had good turnouts with enthusiast dancers who longed for regular events—but they never quite got off the ground. Why? None of us locals knew how to call. For a regular dance community to bloom we knew that would

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have to change... With wild enthusiasm and a great deal of patience and generosity of spirit on our side, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work.

We split up the duties... Paul Gitlitz, who'd danced all over North America, was the technological spearhead, and coordinated the musicians. He also populated the Google drive folder, and gave lessons relying heavily on David Kaynor's book "Calling for Beginners," which he read over and over. Paddy Tutty and Booker Blakely stepped in as musicians and callers, and Liz James took on the role of "Facebook Overlord," supplementing Paddy's excellent email and poster work with some social media publicity.

We knew it would be hard. Teaching people to contra dance is tricky. Teaching an entire room of *new* people while you are learning to call, turns out, is even trickier. We learned to modify, modify, modify. Some callers were



at the level of trying to imitate the beautiful swelling of music and elegant grace they'd experienced in other places. Other callers began with an intro that went along the lines of "I can't really hear the beat in the music yet, so as you dance can you please yell out the numbers one to eight along with the beats?" Which, turns out, works just fine. In fact, it's pretty good for teaching new dancers how to hear the beat, too.

We were working with a budget of zero dollars and zero cents, and will be forever grateful to the musicians who showed up to play for free in... awkward conditions, knowing they might need to figure out what type of tune to play on the fly, adjust as needed to compensate for a caller who might wander a little, or even abandon their instrument entirely to stand in as a dancer for a bit.

Brainsport—a local shoe store to whom we will always be very grateful—donated the room above their store for free. It was small, and featured many pillars, which caused a unique kind of calling in which "watch out for the pillar" was frequently worked into the spaces in the music.

There was much giggling, much ending up in the wrong spots, and we invented a contra move called, "REBOOT"... which is when the dancers all shuffle back to their original spots and the caller glares in frustration at the dance card and tries to figure out what happened. The glaring was not entirely effective, as the problem was rarely with the dance card.

But over time, the dancers learned the dances along with the callers, and we problem solved as a group. The musicians waited patiently as we walked through the dances to try to figure out what was happening and why.

For much of the winter we read everything we could find online, watched YouTube videos, learned to count in our heads (some of us), and practiced biweekly in the room above the shoe store. Paul researched tirelessly, and taught us to write our own dance cards, and how to work with a band. We learned the importance of attitude—that people could have fun as a dance was falling apart, but that visible frustration on our parts could kill an evening faster than any mistake might.

Slowly, we improved to the point where the calls were punctuated with "I can't believe it's working!" instead of "watch out for the pillar". Buoyed by our progress, we decided it was time for a real dance. We rented a hall, and hoped for dear life that Paddy's posters and Liz's Facebook enthusiasm would attract enough dancers to pay for it.

To someone who's danced contra in big cities, maybe this dance might have seemed less than impressive. It certainly featured more reboots than the average contra event might. There was much milling about, and giggling. But there were also these magical moments where everyone got it and the whole hall moved as one. We even got to conclude several dances with proper swelling of music followed by the swinging of partners (rather than the usual "dance until it dissolves" model). And, in the photos, there are grin after grin of people thinking "we've finally got it". It was a hard win, but it was a win. More dances are already being planned for the fall!

We're not yet sailing through events the way they do in big cities, but we've accomplished something we're proud of. We have a community born out of a love for a dance and a belief that, with enough patience and a good sense of humor, Contra can be homegrown anywhere!

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