WLG 180

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

Folk Dancing: A Rich Tradition

Shay McNeil, WVU Extension Agent, Jefferson County
Kay Davis, WVU Extension Agent, Greenbrier County

Educational Objectives

1. Increase knowledge of West Virginia's rich cultural heritage through folk dancing.
2. Understand the health and social well-being benefits of folk dancing.
3. Highlight the resources available for incorporating folk dancing in your club and county meetings.

Mountain Heritage and Folk Dancing Legacy

The early settlers of Appalachia and the area that is today West Virginia came from a number of European backgrounds during multiple immigration waves. According to the book, *Mountain Heritage* the culture of West Virginia is largely derived from Celtic (Scotch-Irish) culture. Many German and Swiss people came to this country during the Civil War. The opening of large coal mines in the 1880s and 1890s brought an influx of Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Austrian, Polish, and Russian immigrants. When they came to West Virginia, they brought with them their culture, music, and dances.

West Virginia's folk dancing culture is a result of the folk music and oral tradition of these early settlers. Events, such as the Vandalia Gathering, West Virginia State Folk Festival, and West Virginia 4-H Heritage Dance Weekend, celebrate the rich culture of Appalachia and West Virginia.

Since 1976, the Vandalia Gathering, which is a celebration of West Virginia's mountain culture and folk life, has brought dancers, musicians, storytellers, and craftspeople from all over the state to showcase their talents at the State Capitol Complex grounds in Charleston, West Virginia. The Vandalia Gathering is held each Memorial Day and is sponsored by the West Virginia Division of Culture and History. Irish, Swiss, Scottish, European, and Appalachian styles of dances are demonstrated in traditional costumes. It is likely to find well-known folklorist, musician, and

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square dance caller, Mack Samples, flat-footing or calling square dances at the Vandalia Gathering.

Each year in June, the West Virginia State Folk Festival rolls back the hands of time and

presents a variety of folklorists. A grassroots event, which was started in 1950 by Dr. Patrick Gainer, is aimed to preserve traditional West Virginia life and culture so that citizens can appreciate and respect the achievements of those that have gone before them.

The Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia teaches, shares, and celebrates the heritage arts. The name "Augusta" was the historic name of West Virginia during the period of its earliest settlement. While the Augusta Heritage Center is best known for its intensive weeklong workshops, it also offers a variety of year-round activities.

Dancing Stars of Yesterday and Today

Brookley R. (Rush) and Ruby Butcher were instrumental advocates in teaching folk dancing to countless spectators at festivals and at West Virginia 4-H Heritage Dance Weekend. Folk and square dancing were part of the 4-H club and camp programs that Rush attended, which is where he first became involved with folk and square dancing. When he became a WVU Extension 4-H agent, he and Ruby started a 4-H folk dance group in Nicholas County that traveled to various festivals throughout the state.

Rush and Ruby Butcher, along with their children, Keith and Judy, and their 4-H dance group traveled the state teaching folk and square dancing. They started out by teaching simple folk dances and getting members of the audience to participate by joining a dance set.

The couple also started the West Virginia 4-H Heritage Dance Weekend, which is held at WVU Jackson's Mill State 4-H Camp every March. This event has become one of the more popular state-level 4-H events with more than 400 4-H members and volunteers attending. In 1978, the first dance camp was held at WVU Jackson's Mill. Throughout the past 35 years, they have taught thousands of West Virginia 4-H'ers how to love their state and mountain

culture through folk and square dancing.

In 1994, the first group of 4-H Dance Ambassadors was created to perform for a national gathering of 4-H leaders. The West Virginia 4-H Dance Ambassadors have a love of folk dancing and desire to share their skills with others. The 4-H Dance Ambassadors teach dance workshops at West Virginia 4-H Heritage Dance Weekend, Volunteer Leaders' Weekend, state 4-H camps, and perform at a variety of venues and events.

Today, there are many opportunities to participate in a variety of dance styles, such as square or contra dancing. A list of these fairs and festivals can be found at *WVculture.org* or *WVcommerce.org*.

Folk Dance Steps: Making History Come Alive

Many popular dances of today originated from basic folk dance steps. A review of basic steps and the country of origin provides a historical look into West Virginia culture.

Polka

A central European dance originating in Bohemia during the 19th century, the polka is a lively couple dance in a moderately fast duple meter. It is still popular, today, throughout Europe and the Americas.

Schottische

One of the oldest dances, schottische is a round dance. It is a combination of a polka and a circular hop. The basic step is side step to the left, then right, followed by a turn in four steps.

Its origin is credited to both Germany and Scotland, but it has left a mark on Argentina, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and the United States.

Waltz

This smooth pulse partner dance is one of the most popular of all time, being considered a ballroom dance as well as folk dance. The waltz step is known for its three-beat count. As you step, you can count 1-2-3 with two three-count waltz sets creating a box square. Popular waltz songs include "Tennessee Waltz" and "Time in a Bottle."

With the origin uncertain, the countries of France, Germany, Austria, and Italy all claim ownership. While the waltz's popularity was pre-World War I, it continues to be popular worldwide among today's dance enthusiasts.

Contra Dance

Originating in the United Kingdom, the contra dance is a folk dance in which couples dance in facing lines. Contra dances have callers that provide instruction.

Jig

A lively folk dance developed in 18th century England, the jig quickly spread to France, Italy, and Spain. Today, we think of the jig in Irish and Scottish dancing. The jig includes hops, as well as skips and toe brushes. Famous jigs include the Horn Pipe and the Light Jig.

Reel

As the most popular form of Scottish dancing, the reel is a variety of country dances where groups of two or more dancers perform traveling figures combined with steps. The reel originated during the 16th century; however, reel variations were also popular in Ireland during the early 17th century. A popular United States reel is the Virginia Reel.

Activity

Ask participants to share their memories of folk dancing as a child or adult.

Dancing for Health

As a state, West Virginia ranks first in obesity among adults and second in the least amount of physical activity. In an attempt to combat these trends, folk dancing can be used as a low-cost, family-friendly, and community-based physical activity for West Virginian families.

Other countries have initiated dancing programs to improve health. For example, in 2007 China initiated compulsory folk dancing along with

Ballroom Day in order to fight childhood obesity. Supporters praised the efforts that encouraged fitness and cultivated students' social graces and sense of collectivism.

A more recent Germany study of adults showed that dancing is perceived to be a multi-dimensional activity that contributes positively to several aspects of human well-being, including emotional benefits, creative benefits, and physical benefits.

Dancing promotes several physical qualities, such as flexibility, strength, balance, coordination, and speed. Older adults seem to receive greater health benefits than younger members. This encourages folk dancing to be used, not only for youths, but for adult groups as well.

Here are some other reasons, beyond the health benefits, to dance:

- Opportunity for personal and group mastery
- Fun and fellowship
- Music appreciation
- Social adjustment
- Understanding of our cultural backgrounds

Sources

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