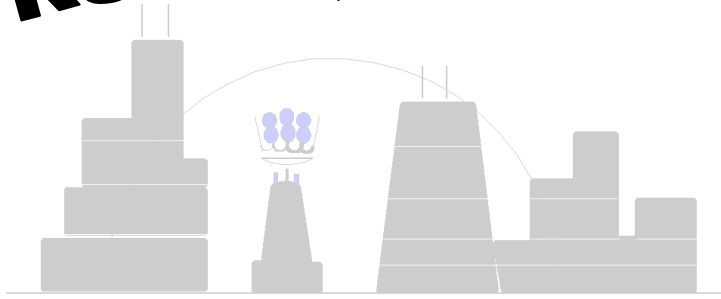


RSCDS, Chicago Branch



The Blethers

December 2008

Membership Thank You: Thank you very much to all who sent in membership renewals. Membership forms and payment may be sent to Marsha Spurlock, Branch Treasurer, P. O. Box 174, Warrenville, Illinois, 60555. A regular Branch membership costs \$30; checks should be made out to RSCDS -Chicago Branch. For further information, the membership form is posted on the Branch website: <http://rscds-chicago.org>

Treats Needed for 2009 New Year's Ball: Just a reminder that we would appreciate sweet and savory items for the dessert table at the New Year's Ball on Saturday, January 17th at the Ukrainian Center. The Ball begins at 6 pm with an hors d'oeuvres reception and promises to be a grand start to the New Year. For more information about the Ball, a downloadable registration form and cheat sheet are available on the Chicago Branch website at <http://rscds-chicago.org> under "Events".

When the Pen Meets the Ghillie: One of the Chicago area's most welcoming Scottish Country dancers is Sue McKinnell. Sue not only welcomes dancers as they arrive for class each week, but she also welcomes all to join in one of her signature dances. Here we welcome Sue's comments on devising dances:

I saw on your webpage that you began dancing in 1994. When did you begin writing dances, and how many dances have you devised since you began?

I wrote my first dance in September 1997. I actually composed it while driving downtown to some event. The figures just kept swirling around until they coalesced into The Frolic. Since then, I've written 268 dances, give or take a few, but I have some scribbled down on paper that may or may not get typed up.

Your dances have wonderful variety. How do you achieve this?

Usually I have a figure or variation of an existing figure occur to me that seems interesting, so I build a dance around it. But it varies. Some dances have been written to incorporate suggestions from others or happy circumstances in class (The Tom Senior Reel was written to use 4 person mirror reels at Tom's request; Doug's Strathspey uses a skewed hands across that happened during teaching.)

How does the choice of music come into play (sorry), when you are devising a dance?

I don't think about the music before writing a dance, nor do I think about the difficulty. The figures always come first; then I listen to music and pick a track the dances seems to 'dance' to. I have a few CDs I really like and I listen to tracks from them. Usually I have already thought about whether a dance is quicktime or a strathspey, but sometimes that changes based on how a dance works with music I listen to; sometimes a dance I figure can be a jig dances better as a reel and vice-versa. All of this is danced in my head when I pick music.

How much time does it take you to devise a dance, on average?

This varies widely. I used to write most of my dances at night; they would come to me when I was falling asleep, so I keep a pad of paper and pen next to the bed. But that hasn't happened much lately. I've written dances while driving, while eating lunch at work, while dancing a different dance in class. It's just whenever it strikes me. It *is* harder to write a dance by request. Sometimes I have to let my mind work on the idea/request in the background as I do other things - and that can take days or weeks. Writing time varies also. Usually I write a dance all at once, but sometimes a figure puts people in odd places or requires a different setup than normal and I need to work things out on paper. I've written dances in 5 minutes or less and I've had some take weeks to finally come together; average time is probably 15 minutes, not counting time to pick music.

Do you have any feeling ahead of time when one dance that you have devised is going to "go over" better than another?

My feelings about this are often wrong. :-) Sometimes I think a dance will be really fun and it may be too challenging. Some dances I think are pretty straightforward and might be boring turn out to be fun to dance. Some I think will be easy because they are basic figures turn out to be challenging. That's why I rarely 'throw out' a dance. I think dances have to be danced to really know how they will work. (It is amazing how well I am able to keep tempo and cover ground in my head - it doesn't always happen in reality.)

You "publish" your dance instructions on your website and encourage other people to take the instructions freely. How has this worked out so far?

Since I don't require people to notify me when they download dances, I have no real way of knowing whether people are dancing them or not. But there are pleasant surprises when someone mentions them or sends me email asking a question about a dance. When Rod Downey was here and we met for the first time, his comment was "You have a website" so I knew he'd been looking. And I've gotten emails from people about my dances. I discovered by accident that San Francisco Surprise was taught at Scottish Weekend and Charles Upton has 4 of my dances in *minicrib*. My ultimate goal is to publish the dances in books a few at a time as I have time and can afford the publication costs.

Are there any SCD devisers whose dances you particularly admire?

Roy Goldring - hands down. I don't think I've ever danced one of his dances I didn't like. I also like individual dances from others, but he is my favorite deviser.

Do you see any trends in dance devising, and do you have any other observations or insights into the art of dance devising?

I'm not really clued in on this. On the Strathspey list, some people have indicated others shouldn't write dances unless they bring something new to the genre, but others have said that it is impossible to predict which dances will catch on, so all dances are fine. I'm in the second group. Look at *Catch the Wind* - there's nothing new in that dance, but it is a wonderful dance to dance.

Different Kinds of Jigs and Reels, and How They Affect Dancing, by Chris Ronald:

To begin, everyone knows that a reel is not a jig, and vice-versa. And we can hear the difference - at least sometimes. We know that reels have an even rhythm that goes something like: "and, 1-2-3-and, 2-2-3-and," while jigs are uneven: "and, 1-2-3-and, 2-2-3-and," Moreover, the difference shows up in our dancing: a jig just begs us to dance skip change, but when we hear reel music, we have to modify our step in order to keep in time with the music: We have to dwell longer on the hop and on the close-up in third position, and this takes some of the liveliness out of the step.

But did you know that there are different kinds of jigs? There are "single jigs" which have relatively few notes in each bar of music, and "double jigs" which have many more notes.

Since single jigs have fewer notes, dancers find it easier to pick out the rhythm, and so teachers tend to use single jigs for practicing steps like skip change and slip step. Some examples of single jigs are the tunes used in 'Berwick Johnnie' and 'The Duke of Atholl's Reel'.

When it comes to reels there are even more differences. First, as with jigs, there are single and double reels. As you might expect, single reels have fewer notes, and you can hear the beats more easily. The "1-2-3-and" rhythm helps dancers practice the change of weight in pas-de-basque, for example. Single reels commonly used for teaching are *White Cockade* and *Duncan Grey* (used in *Wedderburn's Reel*, or *Ha! Ha! The Wootin'O' It!*.)

The double reels with many notes are among the dance tunes that we really love to dance to. Often called 'driving reels' they include *The De'il Among the Tailors* and *The Stuart's Rant* (*General Stuart's Reel*). But here the plot thickens, as rants and hornpipes also come into the category of double reels. They can be recognised from the numerous notes you can hear in each bar of music: just listen to *Lady Susan Stewart's Reel*, *Montgomerie's Rant* or the *College Hornpipe*.

As dancers, when we hear a double reel, we tend to think - as Ruth pointed out - that the music is being played much faster than in a dance with a single reel tune. But usually that's not true. We just think the music is faster, because there are so many notes. And the danger for our dancing is that we get ahead of ourselves, lose track of the bars, and the phrasing goes off. So when dancing to double reels we need to work harder than usual in counting the bars.

We often enjoy dancing to single reels that are based on songs, or pipe tunes. Examples of such tunes are: Irish

Rover, Mairi's Wedding, Peat Fire Flame, Bratach Bana, Let's Have a Ceilidh and Australian Ladies. These are all fun to dance, but you can have too much of a good thing. Bobby Brown explained that if there are too many such dances in a dance programme, and not enough of the other kinds of quick-time dances, especially the double reels, dancers may not get very energized. They may end the evening saying something like "The band was rather flat tonight," when the problem was not with the band but with the selection of dances in the programme.

One thing I didn't mention. How do you tell the difference between a hornpipe and the other types of double reels? Well, the only difference I know is that the last bar of each 8-bar phrase seems to have just three notes, and it sounds like "dum-dum-dum."

Happy dancing!

August, 2002, with permission by the author to reprint

2008 Timber Ridge Scottish Weekend, Highview, WV./Visit with Jeanne and Mike Millin in Williamsburg, VA:
by Robin Gaston

In late September, Liz Stake and I attended the 2008 Timber Ridge Scottish Weekend in Highview, West Virginia, up in the Shenandoah Mountains. We flew into Washington D.C. (Reagan Airport) and were relieved to wend our way out of D.C. traffic. As we neared the camp near the Virginia/West Virginia border, we discovered it was in the midst of apple country. We stopped at the Apple Restaurant where we sampled apple fritters and bought apple chips. On leaving camp we couldn't resist buying a couple bags of apples from the nearby farmer.

The weekend was a spectacular blend of superb music and teaching with an excellent group of 140 friendly dancers. There was an incredible lineup of musicians including Elke Baker, Liz Donaldson, Earl Gaddis and David Wiesler - to name just a few. Elaine Brunken (US), David Queen (England) and Eric Finley (Scotland) were the teachers. We knew Elaine from when she taught at one of our Branch weekends. She really knows how to distill the essence of a step or formation. In the class on strathspey, she emphasized keeping the character of the strathspey traveling step. Having the musicians play a variety of music, including the tango, helped us experience how the music can affect our steps. Her key point was that lifting the heel on the supporting foot gives the urge to move forward which creates the character of the step. Eric Finley led us through a great set of warm-up exercises including some ballet balances. He put us through the technical challenge of Sodger Laddie (Book 12 #9), a jig with consecutive reels of three across the dance that I won't even try to describe. The only way to do them was to think and dance the reel patterns on the floor and hope everyone else was doing the same. It was satisfying when it worked, but not a dance for a social program. David Queen has quite a sense of humor as evidenced by one of his dances for the Sunday morning classes - an "excuse me" Flowers of Edinburgh. That means at any time you could tap someone to take their place in the dance. He had about 16 or so people stand out as the dance started and then they could start tapping in - no restrictions on when or where. Quite a romp!

The camp is in a lovely setting with quite good facilities given its remoteness. Due to Liz's efforts, we were in the Lodge, which was one of the nicer cabins. We had a room with two bunk beds and a private bath - quite acceptable, although we had a few bug visitors which is to be expected in the mountains. Food was excellent and plenteous. Weather was cool most of the weekend which was great for dancing. I finally took my leg warmers off by the middle of Sunday morning class. Flashlights are requisite for finding the way back from the gym to the cabin areas after the evening dances. It was definitely one of the best out of state workshops we've attended.

We also had the privilege of visiting with Jeanne and Mike Millin, formerly of the Chicago Branch, who now reside in Williamsburg, Virginia. They have a beautiful home near the Charles River and graciously hosted us and showed us the sites, including a dance night with their Richmond, Virginia SCD group. It is a friendly group who regularly go out to a nearby pub for supper and drinks after dancing. Several of the dancers in the group had been at the weekend with us. We enjoyed whirlwind tours through Jamestown, Williamsburg and Yorktown. We definitely needed more time to enjoy the rich history of this historic area. Then on to Alexandria, Virginia, our base, as we spent five days exploring the sites of Washington D.C. We found a wonderful B&B in an 18th century style townhouse in Alexandria, with friendly hosts and lots of books - only a 20 minute commute by train to D.C. We covered a lot of territory in spite of some rainy weather. The Timber Ridge weekend combined with the visits to Virginia and D.C. was a perfect vacation. We highly recommend it.

Planning a Road Trip in Scotland?: For anyone taking the more scenic routes in Scotland, the following guide outlines some "Rules for the Road" when encountering Scotland's endearing native hill sheep population:

1. Playing Statues

Any single track road is suitable. It is usual for the sheep to look very determined, stubbornly facing oncoming traffic being totally unintimidated by any car, bus or lorry.

Note: Be firm - you are bigger than him.

2. Walking the White Line

This is usually a family pursuit. Teaching the lambs to follow the white line is an important part of a sheep's education.

Note: Be sympathetic we all have to learn.

3. Peek a Boo

The sheep hides round a sharp bend and leaps out just ahead of an approaching vehicle. An experienced sheep will be unmoved by a furious squeaking of brakes and then stroll off nonchalantly.

Note: Be alert, check your brakes and always wear a seat belt.

4. Having a Rest

Most sheep require a nap in the afternoon and tend to relax in the middle of the road.

Note: Be patient - sounding your horn will not usually work.

5. Ganging Up

The object is to mill about in a crowd without moving in any particular direction for as long as possible.

Note: Be hopeful - they will eventually become bored and give up.

6. Taking the Breeze

The most skilled animals lie on the verge and pull back their head only at the last possible moment getting a nice breeze as the car goes by.

Note: Be brave - they are.

7. Racing Cars

Sheep loiter on the verge and then race off just ahead of the car at an annoying pace of approximately 9 miles per hour.

Note: Be resigned - the sheep thinks he is winning.

8. Mountaineering

This requires feats of daring to leap across precipitous gullies and perch on high ledges which can distract the unsuspecting motorist.

Note: Be careful to stay on the road.

9. Follow my leader

The occasional hill walker may want to join in at the end of the line on a narrow mountain path. Sheep know not to walk too fast as walkers tire easily and have little stamina.

Note: Be understanding - we all have our little misconceptions.



Current Research about Stretching: Kinesiologists continue to study the relationship between stretching and movement. The goals of stretching or warming up before moving are to loosen muscles and tendons and also literally to warm-up those muscles and tendons. As we are beginning to learn, the most current research shows that "static stretching," or holding a stretch for 20 or 30 seconds, when done alone before exercise isn't actually warming us up properly.

Experts now advise warming up by beginning with a short -5-10 minute- aerobic activity, followed by stretching muscles while moving, a technique known as "dynamic stretching." The major benefit for following this type of warm-up regime is prevention of injury. While there is apparently still controversy over the extent to which dynamic stretching prevents injury, studies are showing that even if you are just going out for a stroll, your chances of injury are decreased quite a bit by doing some dynamic stretching before setting off.

The following are two exercises recommended for doing immediately after a short aerobic warm-up and as soon as possible before beginning any activity. More exercises and information from an article called "Stretching: The Truth," may be found at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/02/sports/playmagazine/112pewarm.html?ex=1383368400&en=20ea263c0f5c22e7&ei=5124&partner=facebook&exp=facebook>

STRAIGHT-LEG MARCH

(for the hamstrings and gluteus muscles)

Kick one leg straight out in front of you, with your toes flexed toward the sky. Reach your opposite arm to the upturned toes. Drop the leg and repeat with the opposite limbs. Continue the sequence for at least six or seven repetitions.

HANDWALKS

(for the shoulders, core muscles, and hamstrings)

Stand straight, with your legs together. Bend over until both hands are flat on the ground. "Walk" with your hands forward until your back is almost extended. Keeping your legs straight, inch your feet toward your hands, then walk your hands forward again. Repeat five or six times.

Chicago Area Scottish Country Dancing:

(From the Chicago Folk Dance Scene 2008-2009)

LOCH MICHIGAN SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCERS: Sundays, 6-8:30 pm; Bethany United Church of Christ, 4245 N. Paulina, Chicago, (1 block S of Montrose, & 1 block W of Ashland). Classes and social dancing, no partner required. RSCDS Chicago Branch class. Donation. Sept-May.

Info: Noel Chavez 708-848-9218, nchavez@uic.edu. Chicago Branch Web site: <http://rscds-chicago.org>

SILK & THISTLE SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCING: Tuesdays, 7:30-10pm; Kuhn Village Barn at Fermilab; donation. Summer A/C location: Ramsey Auditorium in Fermilab Wilson Hall High Rise. RSCDS Chicago Branch class. Taught by Doug Jensen. Beginners always welcome.

Info: Doug Jensen 630-232-9089h, 630-840-8194w, Mady Newfield 630-584-0825, folkdance@fnal.gov; www.fnal.gov/orgs/folkclub/folkdance.html

EVANSTON SCOTTISH COUNTRY DANCERS: Fridays, 7:30-9:30pm, Winnetka Community House, 620 Lincoln Ave, Winnetka; \$5; (Sept-June).

Info: Frances Gillan 847-564-2459, sackrag@aol.com

Upcoming Dates of Note: Saturday, January 17, Chicago New Year's Ball
 Saturday, April 4, Madison Ball
 Saturday, May 9, Ann Arbor Ball

2008-2009 Committee of Management: Dave Neuffer, Honorary Chairman; Mady Newfield, Honorary Secretary; Marsha Spurlock, Honorary Treasurer; Corrine McArdle, Gwen Leyffer, and Noel Chavez, Members at Large.

Website: <http://rscds-chicago.org>

Webmaster: Sue McKinnell

Blethers Editor: Carlyn Bromann