

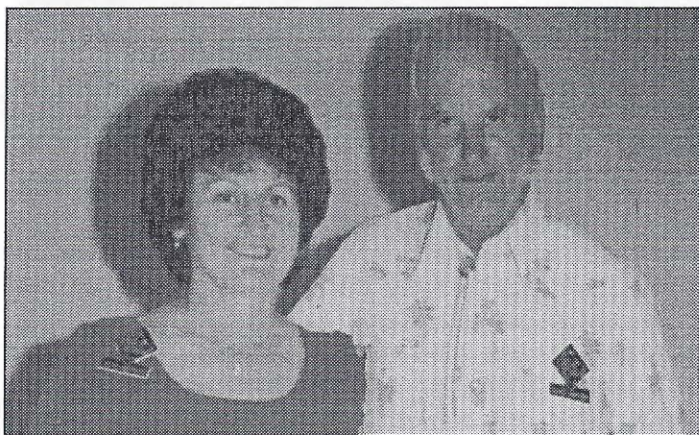
## *Circling the Square:* Square Dancing in Novato

*By John A. Trumbull*

I have over the years heard the complaint "There is nothing to do in the evenings in Novato." This was not necessarily accurate; at least as some of us remember "the good old days." Whatever one may say, square dancing was what kept a lot of Novato adults entertained (and physically fit) between 1955 and 2000. Square dancing is as good physical activity as Pilates and/or Curves, and in addition it is done to lively music as an activity for couples in a social setting. To dance with any level of competence the dance hall must be both alcohol and smoke free,

and his wife, Bunny. I also consulted Bill and Joan Almeida, and with Mei and Walt Louie (president of the Stump Jumpers in 1973), and Mrs. Harry (Elsie) Anderson. (These latter three persons have danced with both the Stump Jumpers and the Novato Squares during many of the past 40 years).

Square dancing apparently started in Novato about 1953 when a number of couples (including George and Penny Cavallaro, Jim and Avis Brashears, Elsie and Harry Anderson, George and Ethel Hale, Doug and Laura Larson



*Harry and Elsie Anderson dressed for a hoe-down in 1981. Note they are wearing Novato Squares name tags.*

because, as with close order drill, dancers can't allow their attention or reactions to become impaired.

For three or four years in the mid 1970s, Susan and I were members of the Stump Jumpers square dance club. In addition to my memory for this article, I have consulted with Dave Milano (the caller for the Stump Jumpers club from the early 1960s until the club's dissolution in 2000)



*Walt Louie, Bunny and Dave Milano and Mei Louie in the 60s. Note Dave's Stump Jumper badge.*

and Richard and Jean Beebe among others) met under the name of "The Country Mixers." They danced at the I.D.E.S.I. Hall with Kelly Bassett as the caller. The club flourished and grew until 1955 when a division of opinion resulted in a split. The result was formation of the Stump Jumpers and the Novato Squares. Both clubs still danced at I.D.E.S.I. Hall, but on different evenings. The rent for

the hall at that time was \$10.00, and the hall was usually available for rent.

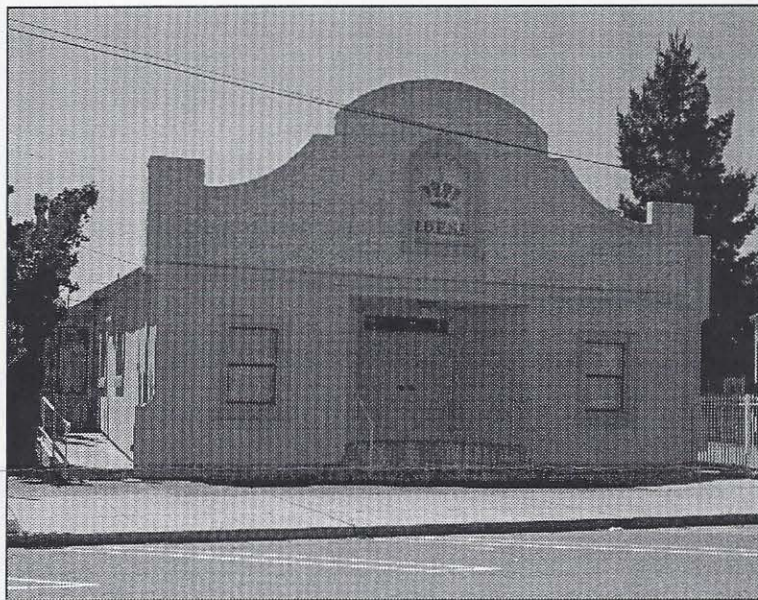
Popularity of square dancing grew and by the end of the 1960s there was dancing at I.D.E.S.I. Hall every week night, plus a general participation "hoe-down" somewhere around Novato every Saturday. The Stump Jumpers danced to calls by Mel Bemis, then by Charley Bassett, then by Skip Graham and, starting in the 1960s, by Dave Milano. The Novato Squares first danced to the calls of Bill Owens, Bob Elling, and then Ray Bettencourt before the club closed in 2000. The Double Diamonds followed Merle Bascom; the Fiddle Footers danced to Bill Crumpler; and the Spinning Spurs of Santa Venetia for the calling of Larry Twist and Gordon Collins; all at I.D.E.S.I. Hall. There were other dance clubs in the immediate area: among them were the Huffs & Puffs (started by employees of the Fireman's Fund with Tom Walton as their caller), the Adobe Dancers in Petaluma, San Rafael's Haybalers and the Flying Heels composed mainly of dancers from southern Marin.

While there were some "professional callers" who had reputations and followings like modern rock stars, others such as Dave Milano called mainly for the pleasure and relaxation it afforded them. Dave recalls his normal fee for a midweek workshop was \$10.00. Weeknight workshop sessions were partly recreational and partly instructional. Dave recalls traveling to Oakland once a month for an afternoon workshop given by the Caller Association (part of the national Caller Lab) to learn the calls for each month's new steps and formations. He would bring these back to the club and teach them on workshop nights. Each "tip" would consist of a "patter call" wherein the instructional material would be taught by demonstration and by practice "walk-throughs," followed by a "singing call" which would allow the uninterrupted application of both new and old steps.

Over time dancers gravitated toward different goals in their dancing. Some aspired to competitive dancing, which culminated at the regional or national mega-conferences, such as the annual Reno gathering. The challenge was to master a larger number of more intricate steps, and

exhibit your prowess with precision timing and elaborate costuming. Slightly below that level was the challenge level, wherein the dancers pit their knowledge and reactions against the ability of the caller. Callers would vary their formations within the rules of position and cadence, and the dancers would strive to execute them. Then complexity diminished through the "fun" or recreational levels, until at the "beginner" level new dancers were only required to respond to 16 or 20 "basic" figures that the caller might employ.

Square Dancing reminds me of the military's version of close order drill. To start the "tip" of a square dance



I.D.E.S.I. Hall in 2006

four couples face each other in a square configuration. The challenge for the dancers and the caller is to call a pattern for the entire square that will have the same people in the same positions at the end of each of the musical exercises that comprise the tip. To be successful, each couple must coordinate their movements both with their partner and with the three other couples in the square. On the other hand, I would compare Circle Dancing with ballroom dancing and I equate Line Dancing as a choreographed version of the Twist. During the 1970s Circle Dancing began to be frequently introduced during break times between tips (often using different callers). In a circle dance there is a single giant circle comprised of all the couples who choose to participate. The couples dance together as a pair with each couple following the pattern directed by the caller while the entire group progresses in a large circle around the floor. Line Dancing, by contrast, features each dancer operating independently of but in concert with all the other dancers. This allows maximum latitude to individual style so long as one maintains one's position and does not intrude on the neighboring space. The advantage of this dance for confined venues is that the group as a whole does not travel around the floor, and one need not have a partner.

The clubs did not restrict their activities to I.D.E.S.I. Hall. There are a few of the early dancers that remember when the occasional afternoon dance at a summerhouse pavilion in the valley behind "Joe's Crossroads" (Joe Simmontachi's pub that used to occupy the last valley on

the west side of the north end of Redwood Blvd. just south of the Atherton/San Marin Drive traffic light.) The Milano's recall the annual trips to Fort Bragg, the scene of Dave's first Saturday night hoe-down performance. The Stump Jumpers would camp out at Russian Gulch State Park and dance with the Timber Twisters club. This was a family affair, and the children of the dancers would look forward to their "woodsie" as avidly as their parents did.

Several of the clubs would organize trips to the annual square dance convention in Reno, where the numbers of each club's costume was jealously noted. Many Stump Jumpers have fond memories of the three day weekends they traveled to LaPorte to dance with the Timber Twirlers of Challenge, CA. In addition to the dancing, club mem-

mid-tip and walk out of the hall, leaving the caller calling to an empty floor; this was commemorated by a badge in the shape of a skunk and bearing the word "Stinker." (The "stinkers" would return as soon as they had qualified for the badge, and go on with the dancing.) Elsie Anderson recalls that the "Knothead" badge commemorated participation in a pajama breakfast following a hoe-down evening and adjournment to the house of some unsuspecting caller who was roused out to call a morning tip to the pajama clad roisterers.

The Stump Jumpers collected their evening's entrance fee in an actual stump, cut and carved for the club in the mid 1950s by George Cavallero, Richard Beebe and Jim Brashears. Like the Stanford Axe, the stump became the



*Some Stump Jumpers in 1981*

bers and their families sported in and around the lake and the Milano cabin. This outing was the subject of a full page feature article in the August 11, 1982, Novato Advance. (I am sure members of other clubs have similar stories, because mixing and mingling was a major part of square dancing.)

Nor did the participants restrict themselves to serious dancing. The Milanos recall that dancers would accumulate activity badges. Those who danced on the beach at Fort Bragg on a Sunday morning were awarded the "Son of a Beach" badge. Dancers who participated in wrapping the caller in toilet paper while he was calling a tip won a "Mummy" badge. Upon occasion a club would stop in

object of a number of prank "thefts" by other clubs. They would hold the stump for ransom, to wit attendance at the villainous club's hoe-down by a designated number of Stump Jumper couples. Since the club closed down in 2000, the historic stump has been offered to the Novato History museum.

Membership in the Stump Jumpers has been subject to cycles. Dave would give periodic Beginner's Classes, the first two being free prior to imposition of the normal \$1.50 fee per evening. It would be normal to have 12 to 16 couples in a class, of which about 50% would join the club and dance as regular members. Sometimes there would not be enough interested parties to support a beginner's class and

club membership would decline. People dropped out for many reasons: leaving the area, sometimes death of a partner, illness, or joining another club. We may also note that square dancing used to be one of the activities introduced to high school students during Physical Education. Inflation affected the activity. Declining attendance stretched club revenues. I.D.E.S.I. Hall eventually raised its rental rate to \$100.00 and it became increasingly

tern, and then either make or purchase the new club dress in that fabric and pattern to wear on visits to other clubs and to hoe-downs. Over the years this became an increasing imposition of Mi-lady's time and/or budget, but it was a coup for a club to arrive at another club's function with three or four squares all costumed alike. Please note that during my period of participation the hemlines were at or just below the knee, and two or three net petticoats were



*Some Novato Squares in 1981*

unavailable due to conflicting activities. This forced the clubs to seek other venues either on a temporary or permanent basis. Usage regulations interfered with the clubs' ability to decorate the hall for hoe-downs and visitations.

All these were adversities, but what Bunny Milano believes had the greatest adverse impact on the square dance movement was the increase in two working-spouse families. She points out that when the woman has to hold down a job in addition to raising a family, there isn't the time to go out one or two nights a week to dance. Dance time is taken up by quality time with the family as a whole. One of the ancillary activities of membership in a square dance club was the design and construction of the club dress. Each year traditionally required a new "costume." This meant the ladies needed to agree on a fabric and a pat-

mandatory to assure the proper flair of skirts on the spins.

In my opinion we have lost a little of the quality of life by the demise of square dancing. It was an activity where people of all ages and walks of life met and socialized. It was my personal experience that dancers were friendly and accepting, even at hoe-downs where four different clubs might be represented in one square. Other clubs have been as active and as long-lived as the Stump Jumpers, but my contacts with them have been more attenuated, and any slighting of their history is unintentional. I welcome the opportunity to tape interviews on this subject for addition to the Historical Guild's oral history library.

