

## Where Do Square Dancers Come From? From Phys Ed to Western Star

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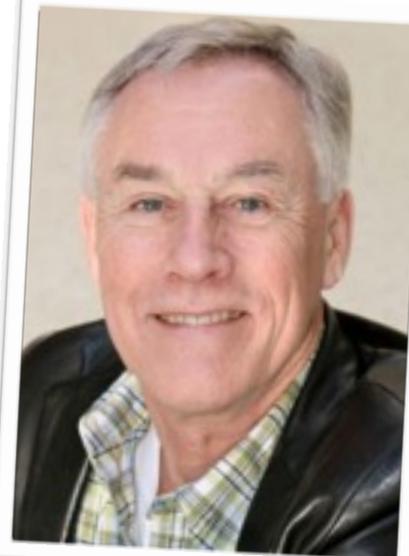
I wasn't permitted to dance as a child because I grew up in a staunch, rural Southern Baptist home in northeast Louisiana. The first dance I ever did was the Mashed Potatoes which I learned while watching Dick Clark's American Bandstand while my mother was in the yard working in her flower beds and my twin brother wasn't home. At first, I had to use a dining room chair for balance, but I soon had my own footing. Before I graduated high school, I had attended a dance (unbeknownst to my parents).

In 1963 when I first attended college (30 miles from home and living on campus), my first PE class was Social Dance, the second was Tap Dance, and the third was Folk Dance. In that Folk Dance course, I was

introduced to square dancing. I came out gay in 1970 in Atlantic City, NJ (long story), and moved to San Francisco in 1977. By 1983, I was looking for a gay social dance club (I love to waltz and polka) and found that there had been one but no longer. In the B.A.R., there was an article about a gay square dance club called Western Star Dancers and the new class they were starting. [Flash back to college: square dance; that didn't take a lot of energy.] I called the

contact, Scott Carey, and grilled him about the purpose of the club and whether or not it was truly a beginner class (another long story about quasi-beginner class). I attended my first square dance class (and we both were gay!) in February 1983.

I felt a part of the club and just started "stuff" because I'm not just a joiner, I'm a doer. I started a few projects at Western Star Dancers, and one of them, The Travel Guide, became my first publication contribution to the IAGSDC. Prior to that, I had been the person who sewed the first IAGSDC banner and been a co-producer of the image. Things spring-boarded, and I went on to create Bradley Bell, the Medallion Project, and the Memorial Panels. I found loving people to take over all those projects.



This is not about what I did, but it is a story about unconventional investments into square dancing. While I'm not able to attend every convention any more because of conflicts with my current involvement with the Miss America/Miss California program, when I attend, I love being a fly on the wall watching people participate in projects that I started. If you see something you can do better or have suggestions for improvements, just do it. If your intentions are not to hurt someone but only to provide opportunities for others, do not ask for permission. Do it! Square dancing in the gay community has been a part of my life since 1983, but the seed was first planted in Monroe, Louisiana, in the spring of 1965 in Folk Dance class.



Freeman as **Steffy**

TELL YOUR STORY  
 (500 words or less)  
 Submit to the newsletter!

## A Big Promenade Into History

### Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame Honors Square Dance Club

Chi-Town Squares was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame for its 25 years of breaking barriers between LGBT and non-LGBT square dancers, while teaching and providing a venue for LGBT square dancing in Chicago and the central U.S. The 2012 Induction Ceremony was held on Monday, November 12, 2012 at the Chicago History Museum.

Chi-Town Squares, Chicago's gay and lesbian square-dance club, was started in 1987 by Jerry Cohen, a well-known community activist who himself became a posthumous Hall of Fame inductee, and Ron Goldman, a DJ from Carol's Speakeasy. David Boyer, the bar's manager, had heard there was a desire to form a square-dance club in Chicago.

About 30 students signed up for lessons in response to ads placed in gay newspapers. Classes were held at the Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ, which also was a home to the Good Shepherd Parish Metropolitan Community Church and other LGBT organizations. The first caller was the late Lin Jarvis, who, along with his wife, Barb, helped to gain attention and grow the club.

Chi-Town Squares now has more than 125 members and six club callers, two of whom are on staff in any given year. It is a member of several umbrella organizations, including the Metropolitan Chicago Association of Square Dancers, of which it is the only gay member club and the largest of any club in membership. Chi-Town Squares also belongs to the International Association of Square Dance Clubs.

Through its affiliation with the Chicago association, Chi-Town Squares has helped to erase barriers between LGBT and non-LGBT square-dance communities. Though some have been reluctant, most other clubs have opened their arms to Chi-Town Squares, attending classes and dances.

As a member of the international association, the club proudly hosted an international convention at the Chicago Hilton and Towers from July 1 through 4, 2010, attended by more than a thousand square dancers from all quarters of the world and of all persuasions. Many of the out-of-towners attending were also present to witness that year's Pride Parade.



Mayor **Rahm Emmanuel** with Chi-Town Squares Board **Bob Sundal, Rich Sehnert, Joe Kerouac, and Rob Sierzega**. Photo by Bob Siegel

Chi-Town Squares is a teaching organization, offering instruction in all levels of square-dance steps. Because of its high-level instruction, members of other clubs often attend lessons. One of the six callers on staff travels the world calling square dances in such places as Japan, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.

The club also has fostered associated groups, the best-known of which is the She Devils, a bearded drag troupe in typical square-dance attire. Chi-Town Squares has also helped to develop new clubs in such other cities as St. Louis (Gateway Squares) and Grand Rapids (Grand Squares). Many members also dance with the non-LGBT Recyclers square-dance club in Chicago's northern suburbs and attend the Chicago association's semiannual dances.

In its 25 years, Chi-Town Squares has provided alternative activities for LGBT persons in addition to bridging a cultural gap between square-dance communities that are often aged 55 and higher.

## FUTURE EVENTS

SQUEEZE THE HIVE  
Salt Lake City, UT  
July 3-6 2014  
squeezethehive.com

SWING ME IN ST. LOUIS  
St. Louis, MO  
May 22-25, 2015  
swingmeinstlouis.com

TORONTO CONVENTION  
Toronto, Ontario  
July 1-4, 2016  
toronto2016.com

## Decision Time

### The future of the IAGSDC Newsletter

As we gear up for convention, we look forward to all the friendships and traditions that we expect to encounter from year to year. It's also a time to look back and discover what we've done and how we can do it better in the future.

Over the last couple years the association has evolved to be more inclusive and to address the needs of a broader base of dancer. We have also seen clubs struggle to stay active while we have new clubs that are exploding with energy and membership. We need to understand these trends and learn from club's successes and trials. The question is, what is the best vehicle to share that knowledge?

The newsletter through the years has been less than effective in gathering information on club celebrations and events, and it has not been a real vehicle for sharing club knowledge with the rest of the association. Is the newsletter still relevant? How should it be transformed or replaced? If it still has a place in our communication stream, we need to make sure that it is making a difference and that clubs are involved with the process so that we can share the information and ideas that can help us grow as an association. In the last two years I've put out numerous calls for submissions with less than stellar response. Is there a better way to gather this information? Or is that information being shared in other ways such as Facebook and Twitter?

We also have competition. Convention goers are also getting information by individual convention newsletters on a regular basis. This is content that used to be shared through the IAGSDC but now directly accesses convention attendees. I strongly feel that all the information should be consolidated into a single communication stream so that all IAGSDC members have access to convention information. This can only work if we have a team in place that can handle the amount of information that conventions want to deliver and that newsletters are compiled and published on a consistent and reliable basis.

I'd like to have a serious discussion with clubs and dancers at convention as to whether the newsletter is still a worthwhile publication or if it needs to evolve as well? Should this be the last publication? You can let me know at [chair@iagcdc.org](mailto:chair@iagcdc.org).

## The New El Camino Plus Dancers in Palo Alto, CA!



(Left to right) Tim Tannatt, Dale Lemmerick, Steven Higaki, Deb Gordon, John Weidmann, Greg Burge, and Beth Godfrey.

INTERESTED IN SHAPING THE DIRECTION OF THE IAGSDC?

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS TO IAGSDC BOARD POSITIONS.

The following positions are up for election in the 2013-2015 cycle:

Vice-Chair  
Secretary  
Club Liaison

The positions are two-year terms. Nominations will be taken at the San Francisco Executive Board meeting on July 4 at 1pm. Delegates will nominate. Candidates must be present to accept the nomination.

Host cities for Conventions 2017 and 2018 will be decided at this board meeting as well. We look forward to hearing from clubs interested in hosting. They can present their bids at the meeting as well.

## IAGSDC BOARD

Bob Hazen, **Chairman**  
Keith Gehrig, **Vice-Chairman**  
Kent Tolleson, **Secretary**  
Michael Pemberton, **Treasurer**  
Phil Davis, **Club Liaison**

### **Contact Information**

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### **Comments? Questions?**

Email us at [info@iagsdc.org](mailto:info@iagsdc.org)

The electronic version of the newsletter may be seen at: [www.iagsdc.org/main/resources](http://www.iagsdc.org/main/resources)

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