

Gender Free Dancing – A Brief Historical Perspective

By Chris Ricciotti

- **Early Tribal and ritual dances** were often danced in groups, segregated by gender
- Many **eastern European dances** have been segregated by gender, as was appropriate to their cultures and traditions.
- **Early English and Celtic Traditions** often had male only teams of morris dancers (the “Morris Ring”) in English until recently only recognized all male groups of dancers.
- **1600: Queen Elizabeth the 1st** had her own tradition of women dancing together in the court, purely for their own pleasure, and for hers.
- **1700’s: The “Molly” culture** (The word *molly* (also spelt as *molley*, *mollie*, *mally*) is a pet-form of the female forename [Mary](#).) A vibrant underground culture of homo-sexual men and cross-dressers in England. Dancing, cross-dressing and mockery of the social expected norms were a big part of their social gatherings.
- **1800’s - 1900: Mining Camps & Frontier Dances** As men traveled across the country in search of land and gold, dancing went along with them. Women were few and far between, so for entertainment, men danced with each other, taking different roles
- **1840’s – 1870’s: The Mormon church** had dances for teens that were segregated by gender as a way to keep the sinful thoughts of lust from entering recreational activities. This dancing filled a social need for connection.
- **1860’s: Civil War Era** Civil war soldiers often danced together for their own pleasure, entertainment & companionship, and because men were not allowed to dance with other enlisted men’s wives. Straws were drawn to determine who danced the “ladies” role. Dance etiquette manuals by 1870 stated: “Men should not procure partners with other men when ladies are waiting for partners”.
- **Late 1800’s – early 1900’s Cowboy & Saloon Dances** Many Cowboys and travelling men frequented saloons for social time and entertainment and often danced together. Most women would not enter a saloon. These were often referred to as “Stag Dances”.
- **Late 1800’s and early 1900’s – Men’s and Women’s dances at University settings.** Women had dancing parties where one partner was typically dressed as male, the other female. Hasty Pudding Club (male cross-dressing) group starts at Harvard University. Dancing routines in women’s attire often a part of their performances.
- **1890-1930 NYC “Drag Balls” & “Tenement Dance Parties”** The Bowery and lower east side of NYC, had many “Drag Balls”, or smaller more private “Tenement Dance Parties”, events where effeminate men, homo-sexuals, and butch women came together, often one partner cross dressing in elaborate or formal costumes. The rule was, a “male dressed” partner could dance with a “female dressed” partner (regardless of gender). This rule was more relaxed at tenement dances. By the late 1890’s some drag balls hosted over 500 dancing couples.
- **1900 – 1930 Argentine Tango** In Buenos Aires men outnumbered women 4 to 1. Men frequently danced together in brothels, and this is where the culture of “Tango” was born. Men danced together to practice to be a better “lead” for women who eventually came. It was a dance of equals where either partner could steal that lead, and that tradition carried over when men danced with women. Male to male dance partners had a strict code of ethics. A man could be killed if he moved in on another man’s male dance partner.
- **1930’s (early)** Lydia Andrews book “Come and Dance, Everybody” (1978) mentions a dancer named Alberta, in Granby, Vermont, who is great evidence that some level of gender-non conformity in dancing was permitted for some people in some communities throughout contra dance history who now would identify as LGBTQIA.

- **1940's World War II** While men were at war, and women were at home and also taking on male jobs, women often be in social situations where they would dance together, due to lack of men. In the war, men also danced together – in Scotland “Reel of the 51st Division” is traditionally only in a set of men only, as it was in the prison camp by the men of the 51st division that this dance was created.
- **1953** Dudley Briggs writes an article about how to work with groups of dancers where there is a large imbalance of gender, noting that all should be included in the spirit of the dancing.

MODERN GENDER-FREE DANCE TRADITIONS

- **1970 Carl Whitman**, RSCDS Certified instructor and gay political activist, got gays and lesbians and local families together for English & Scottish Country dancing at his barn in Golden, Oregon. His community pressed him to change “Gents” and “Ladies”, and he developed “Reds” and “Blues” (Gent’s role wearing red ribbons, Ladies role wearing Blue), which eventually changed to Left & Right file, and diagonal references. This was the foundation of what eventually became “The Heather and the Rose” dance community, which still dance gender-free English and Scottish dances in Oregon. In 1980, his partner Allan Troxler moves to Durham NC, soon followed by Carl, and they start an ECD dance there. Carl died in 1986.
- **1970's & 1980's Local Callers** Cindy Green, Susan Elberger & Kathryn Wedderburn and others start calling barn dances for LGBT private parties and social groups.
- **1977 – 1985 The Boston Gay & Lesbian Folk Dancers** With help from Dee Michel & others, this group was organized and danced at Harvard University, doing mostly international folk dancing, and occasionally some contra & square dancing. Though short lived, many of these dancers eventually became part of the LGBTQIA+ gender-free dance community around New England years later.
- **1981 – 1998 Les Be Gay an Dance (Minneapolis, MN)** Starting in 1981, they developed a style of calling where no reference was made to gender - not even by role identification. This style came out of the group founder’s philosophy of being completely free of any of the restrictions that our society places on gender – a political statement/movement. Carol Ormand was a part of this group, as a dance leader.
- **1986 Chris Ricciotti starts calling for Gay & Lesbian Community in Providence** using “Gents” & “Ladies”.
- **1988 Chris starts Jamaica Plain Gay & Lesbian Country dancers**, using “Gents” & “Ladies”, is asked by this group to change role identification to meet their needs, and comes up with “Armbands” & “Barearms” (gents role wears an armband, ladies role does not.) NEGAL (North East Gay & Lesbian) Country dancers is formed as an umbrella group for JP, Hartford, & Albany and other gender-free dance groups that are forming.
- **1989 NEGAL's first Gender-Free Weekend Dance Camp** August, Greenfield, NH.
- **1990 NEFFA'S 1st Gender-Free contra dancing session** – Natick, on auditorium stage. This continues yearly at NEFFA thru till around 2012(?) This session was the 1st annual session at any folk festival in the USA involving a huge number of dancers (not *specifically* identifying as LGBTQ+) to experiment with a gender-free dance environment. NEFFA coined the term “Gender-Free” as the title for this dancing session.
- **1992 NEGAL become LCFD** Lavender Country & Folk Dancers to be more inclusive of Bi and Trans dancers.
- **1994 West Coast Queer Dance community begins**
- **2010 (approx..) Portland, ME Intown Contra dance uses “Jets” and “Rubies”** as their gender-free terminology, later switches to “Larks” & “Ravens”. Other groups start experimenting with terms such as “Leads/Follows” “Lefts/Rights” “Ports/Starboards” “Stars/Moons” “Elms/Maples” “Lions/Giraffes” and “different colors”.

- **2013 (late that year) Idea of “Larks” & “Ravens” is born**, by Frannie Marr & Susan Michaels while on a phone call about community dances where they don’t want gender terminology. They decide on “Larks” & “Ravens”.
- **2014 Hampshire College** starts experimenting using gender-free terminology. After using 3 or 4 different terminologies, they settle on “Larks” and “Ravens”. **Frannie shared “Larks” & “Ravens” with Margaret Pigman and Laura Gorrin of “Circle Left”** in December of 2014.
- **2015 (January) 1st groups to officially adopt “Larks” & “Ravens”**: Berkeley, CA Contras & Circle Left (CA).
- **2016 JP & West Coast Queer Community adopts “Larks” & “Ravens” for their weekend camp.**
- **2017 LCFD May Dance Camp** first uses “Larks” & “Ravens”. More discussion in dance communities about this.
- **2018 A number of dance weekends and series** adopt “Larks” & “Ravens”. Lots of on-line discussion of “Larks” and “Ravens” with a number of callers and dance communities entering this discussion.
- **2019 Our “Larks” & “Ravens” discussion group at NEFFA.**
- **WHAT NEXT??**