

| CONTRA DANCE |

Old time dance still has lots of life



Peggy Brady

Special to the Democrat

About 12 years ago Vicki Morrison attended her first contra dance, held at the Warehouse on Gaines Street. Not knowing what to expect or that there were introductory lessons taught early in the evening, she arrived well after the dance had started.

“As soon as I sat down someone asked me to be their partner,” said Morrison. “I was pretty much lost the whole time, but the friendliness of the people and the energy and joy in the room made me eager to return again. I haven’t missed a dance since.”

Contra dance is fundamentally a form of social folk dancing with roots in English country dance. Think Jane Austen in “Pride and Prejudice” and people dancing in the parlor. However, modern contra dancing includes a partner and neighbor “swings,” things that were unheard of back in Austen’s era.

Contra has been danced in New England dance halls for several hundred years, and made its way across the U.S. beginning in the 20th century. It is a community event, where people can connect with the music and with each other. Contra dancing is related to its better-known cousin, square dancing, but isn’t limited to groups of four couples.

So what’s the big deal about contra dancing? Plenty, said Morrison.

“I am still amazed at



Vicki Morrison.

Newcomers are welcome at Tallahassee’s contra dances, which generally happen on the second and fourth Friday of the month.

how contra dancing affects me on so many levels. First there’s the exercise aspect, which makes you feel better both physically and mentally,” she said. “Second, it is a mental activity. Third, it is a true community activity and a social occasion. Fourth, you will smile. A lot. I used to joke that if everyone were to contra dance it might be the answer to world peace. Or budget negotiations.”

After three years of dancing, Morrison decided to try being a caller. The caller teaches each

IF YOU GO:

What: The Tallahassee Community Friends of Old Time Dance’s Contra Dance with Smoky Hollow String Band and caller Vicki Morrison

When: 7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Friday. Those new to contra dancing are strongly encouraged to come at 7:15 p.m. for a beginners’ orientation.

Where: Tallahassee Senior Center 2nd Floor Ballroom, 1400 N. Monroe St.

Cost: \$8 adults, \$7 seniors, \$5 students, \$3 kids

Information: Dances are usually held on every second and fourth Friday of the month. Visit www.tallydancer.com for complete schedule.

dance before the music begins and prompts participants during the dance. It can be a compli-

cated job. “There are a lot of things coming together at once, like the tempo of the

music, remembering the order of the figures and remembering which hand is left and which is right,” she said. “Calling is really fun. My role is to teach each dance thoroughly but quickly, trying to describe verbally how to do certain figures. I get the same satisfaction teachers must get when they see the ‘Oh, now I get it!’ reaction from their students.”

Contra dancing is suitable for middle schoolers and up, and a safe, alcohol- and smoke-free family activity. There is no require-

ment to have a partner to attend; experienced dancers welcome newcomers and will ask them to dance. It’s also a tradition to change partners after each dance, so lots of people meet new friends during the evening.

“Once the teaching is done and the music starts, it’s a thrill to watch the dancers having so much fun,” said Morrison. “Everyone is smiling and laughing, greeting and interacting with each other, captivated by the music, and engaged in the moment.”