Going full square

Once-popular folk dance making a comeback

Laura Anderson
Special to the Times

Local folks — including Ed Herrera and Brenda Kaffenberger, seen here — kicked up their heels at a square dance workshop last week.

Photo by Chris Rourke

An old form of dance is making a comeback in Gunnison.

Last Thursday, Oct. 20, nine couples gathered at Oddfellows Hall for a square dancing workshop. These workshops allow couples to hone their steps and learn some new calls.

Jerry Junck, who is a professional square dance caller, ran the workshop.

"Jerry's a friend of ours," said Ron Kibler, who recently learned to square dance with his wife Karen. "I told him, 'I'll get the people together and you can come do the workshop.'"

The Kiblers dance twice a week at their winter home in Arizona.

"We needed to find a place to keep square dancing," said Ron, who has played a vital role in creating interest in square dancing locally.

"It seems like Karen and Ron are the driving force," said Connie Leonard, who was involved in past Gunnison dancing groups more than 20 years ago and still enjoys getting out on the floor with her husband Ron.

"It's amazing how much you remember," she said.

Junck started the dancers in a "Sicilian Circle," where any number of couples practice steps in a circle instead of a four-couple square, to warm up and to establish which calls they know. After a short break he arranged them into two squares.

According to Kevin and Jeannine Nelson, square dancing is what keeps them young.

"You go out and move around," said Kevin Nelson. "You can make a mistake and still have fun."

He also said the dances can get complex.

"(The caller) twists you up and unravels you and somehow gets you back with your partner," said Nelson.

According to Jeannine, "You never see a frown."

There are four different levels of square dancing, ranging from simple to more complex. Mainstream, which is the lowest and most common level, consists of 67 "calls" — or instructions given by the caller to the dancers.

Mainstream Plus is also common and adds 32 moves to the basic repertoire.

The caller is vital to the square dancing process, since he directs the dancers by singing and calling dance moves.

"You just have to be able to react," Kibler explained.

According to Junck, you don't learn all of the moves at once.

"It's like learning your ABCs," he said. "First you learn how to spell, then you can make words, then you can build sentences and paragraphs."

Junck has been calling square dances for 45 years. He began calling when he was a senior in high school.

"I got some records and just started out," said Junke.

Now Junke tours nationally throughout the summer and fall. He spends his winter calling dances in Mesa, Ariz. He also teaches calling classes.

Besides last Thursday's workshop, weekly classes are offered at the Gunnison Community Center. Irvin Wyatt of Montrose calls and teaches these classes for the Gunnison Gorge Dancers.

The first class graduated 11 new square dancers last April after 16 weeks, and the group continues to grow. Their current class has 22 new dancers in training.

Each week dancers learn several new calls so that by the end of the class they know all 67 Mainstream steps.

"It's great exercise," said Leonard, "We wish more of the younger people would get involved."

Bill and Sandy Dowis graduated into the Gunnison Gorge Dancers in April. According to them, square dancing is "a blast."

"There's a sense of camaraderie," said Bill. "It's almost as much fun messing up as when you do it right."

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Bill Dowis
Gunnison Gorge Square Dancer

IF YOU GO

What: Square Dancing Classes
Where: Gunnison Community Center
When: Thursdays, 6:30-8:30 p.m.
Who's Invited: One and all
Find Out More: Call 6418060