

# Let's Contra Dance—an Intro

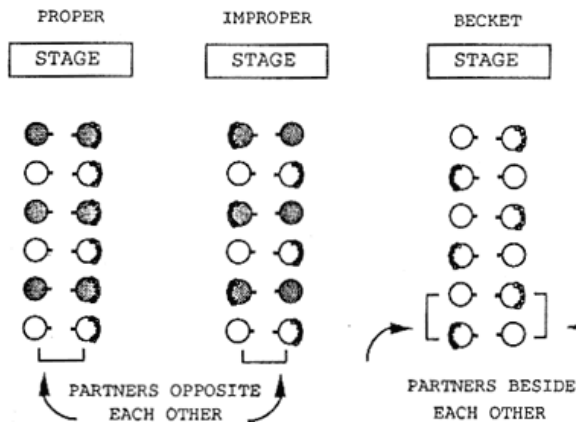
By Erik Hoffman

## **The Cheat Sheet** (well, sheets): A Brief Definition of The Set, Contras & Music, And Figures

Below I use pictures from Mary McNab Dart's *Contra Dance Choreography, A Reflection of Social Change*. I lifted the images from the website of The Country Dance & Song Society, [www.cdss.org](http://www.cdss.org).

### Danced in a Set:

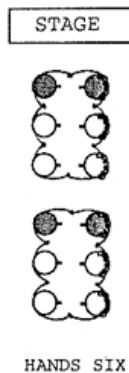
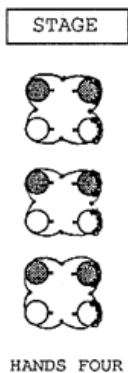
Contra dances are danced in a set. It is a line of couples as seen here:



And there are three ways we line up. These days the most common form are Improper and Becket.

Most important here is to see how you line up with your partner to make a "set."

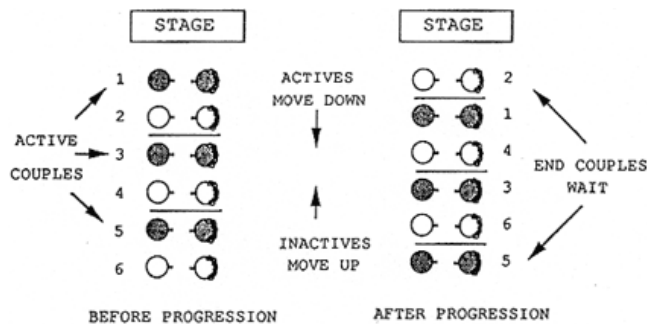
Then we find out who we're going to start with. We callers say, "Take Hands Four from the Top!" And sometimes we say, "Take Hands Six," too, but not very often, so, in the next image just look at "Hands Four":



In the Hands Four pictures, the Ones are greyed in and the Twos are left blank (or the Twos and Threes in the hands six).

Most important to note here is these circles are still in the Set formed when we started.

Couples are going to progress to a new couple each time through the dance.



Here notice that after one time through the dance, a sequence of figures danced with the circle of four, the Ones (Actives) have progressed to the next Twos (Inactives) and get to do it all again.

Notice above that a couple close to the ends of the lines moved "out of the set," and now wait, and change numbers to migrate the other way. At the STAGE end, also called The Top, a "Two Couple" (Inactive), this time couple number 2, that moved out will turn into a One (Active) and move their way down, away from the stage.

At the other end, called The Bottom, a "One Couple," here couple number 5, moved out of the line—didn't find a "Two" to dance with, thus will wait one time through the sequence to become a "Two Couple" and start migrating towards the stage.

These ideas will be a great help in understanding the basic motion of The Set as you dance. If you understand this, almost all mistakes made (which even we experts still make) can be corrected.

## Contra Dance is Choreographed to the Phrase

The sequence of figures is phrased to a fiddle tune, a 32-bar reel or jig. What does this mean?

The reels and jigs we use are almost always constructed in Parts of 16-beats, 16-steps, subdivided into major phrases of 8-beats, 8-steps, and divided again into minor phrase of 4-beats, 4-steps.

So, adding up the steps, one time through a tune is 16 x 4 or 64 steps. Then the tune is repeated and the dance, the sequence of figures is repeated. One time through the tune is one time through the dance and the progression happens so as you progress, you get to do the dance with the next couple down (up) the line.

The 16-beat phrases are often repeated. The first 16-beat phrase we call A, the second, B. Thus, we talk of the tune's form AABB.

## Figures are Timed to the Phrase

Some figures we do are easy to figure out: Circle Left or Right, which tend to take a "major phrase," 8-beats, and I'm sure you already know what to do.

Long Lines Forward & Back is also descriptive so, I'd be surprised to see someone being confused unless they don't speak English... Forward & Back takes 8-beats; Forward taking 4-beats, as does Back.

A Star is also relatively descriptive, and we do [left-hand](#) stars and right-hand stars. Also 8-beats for either direction.

Many of us remember the Do Si Do from dancing in school.

As we dance, we learn more figures, and know how long they take and where we need to be to carry out the next figure.

Mary McNab Dart made [a](#) list of descriptions of figures. Most of us see how they work in a walk-through then get the feeling by repetition. Thus, I'm not going to go through descriptions of figures. You'll find them in the Dissertation section after this Cheat Sheet.

## Mistakes are part of learning!

We all make mistakes. Often, they're fun. Laugh, move on, you'll learn and eventually help someone through a dance!  
Anything Worth Doing Is Worth Doing Poorly! It's how we learn!

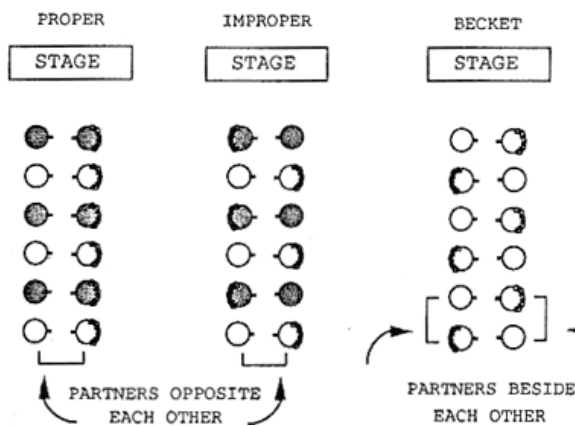
## The Dissertation: Lot's of Words and a Bit of History

### The Set

Contra dancing is a form American folk dancing that's in a type of dancing that is called a "set dance." It's a partner dance that is related to square dancing, big circle dancing and something that was dubbed "running sets." It can also be called a "figure dance."

A set dance is a dance that's done by dancers standing in a formation with other dancers. Think of marching bands, all standing and marching in formation, all in their prescribed spots. Contra dancing is kind of like that.

The contra formation is dancing couples standing in a line facing the band and caller. The picture on the left shows three basic



formations. Two of these formations, proper and improper, have your partner in the other line. One, Becket, has your partner standing next to you looking at a couple in the other line.

Since the 90s improper and Becket are very commonly called and proper dances have pretty much disappeared. When I started dancing, in 1980, proper dances were common.

Set dances are primarily formed by couples, and in these couples, there are specific roles. Historically couples were assigned

and almost always conformed to Ladies and Gentlemen (Gents) roles. Women learned the lady's role and men learned the gent's role. In the last 15 years or so, many communities dancers have advocated for changing these terms to non-gendered terms, thus, we have landed on Robins and Larks.

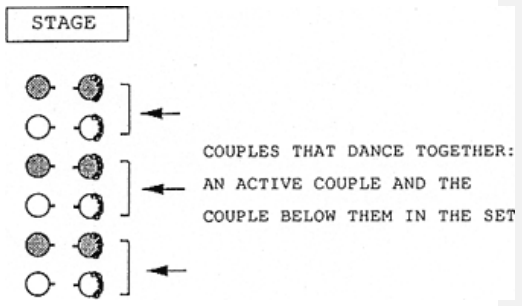
Now that we know that a set is composed of dancing couples lining up in a set, a major set, if you will, we come to the technical term of "the minor set." After lining up, the caller says, "hands four from the top," and dancers make circles of two couples. Then dancers are told, "in each circle the couple closer to the band with their backs to the band are the number Ones, and the couple facing the band but a bit farther away are the number Two couples."

Note: the diagrams I'm using are from the book *Contra Dance Choreography*, by Mary McNab Dart. Thus, proper is in the set description, and "actives" and "inactives" are used for the Ones and Twos. When I started calling, in 1985, that's what we used. It took 10 or 15 years for those terms to fall away.

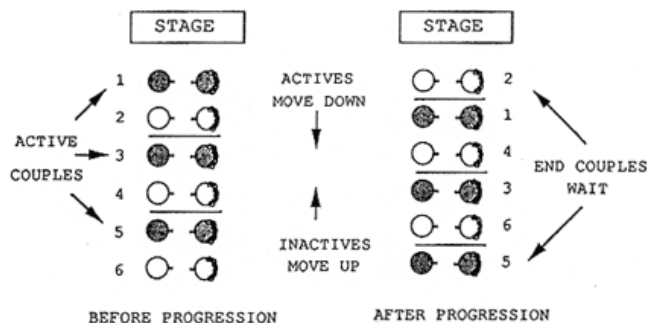
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Now that that's said, look at these diagrams:

In this picture, we see "the minor set," the groups of four that will carry out a sequence of figures and then progress to a new couple.



And this picture shows how progression works. After carrying out a sequence of figures, the 1s progress down and the 2s move up to carry out the sequence with the couple they meet. Notice how numbering the couples shows how they migrate through the line:



Also notice how the “minor set” resets with a new couple but two couples progressed out at both ends of the set. These couples wait where they are and change numbers. At the bottom of the set, Ones (actives) become Twos (inactives); at the top,

Twos become Ones.

### Connection to the Music

Music for contra and square dances are traditionally fiddle tunes. Where many square dances can be danced “to the beat” of a tune, contra dances are danced to the phrase. The vast majority of contra dances are choreographed to 32-bar jigs and reels. These jigs and reels usually have two 8-bar sections that are repeated. The first section is generally called the A part, the second section is called the B part. Thus, we call this common form of music AABB.

In “Dance Speak” the choreography of the figures are associated to the part of the music, now A1, A2, B1, and B2. A bar, or measure, contains two beats and dancers step with the beat. Thus an 8-bar measure has 16-beats, or 16-steps. Thus a 32-bar jig or reel has 64 beats, 64-steps. These tunes have further divisions. The 8-bar, 16-beat sections can be divided into a major phrase of 4-bars or 8-beats. Those major phrases can be further broken into two minor phrases of 2-bars or 4-beats. Contra dances use this phrasing to choreograph a contra dance.

Contra dance figures are timed to these phrases. There are 16-beat Figures put to an A or B part:

- Down the Hall Four in Line and Return
- Hey for Four
- Ones (twos) Go Down (up) the Outside and Return
- Ones (twos) Go Down (up) the Center, Return and Cast Off

- Contra Corners

There are 8-Beat Figures that are placed on the first half or the second half of a part, the 1<sup>st</sup> major phrase or the 2<sup>nd</sup> major phrase of an A or B part.:

- Robins Chain
- Right & Left Thru
- Half Hey

And there are 4-beat figures that can be slotted into any minor phrase of a part.

- Balance
- Spin or Sashay one position
- Allemande once around

## Descriptions of Figures

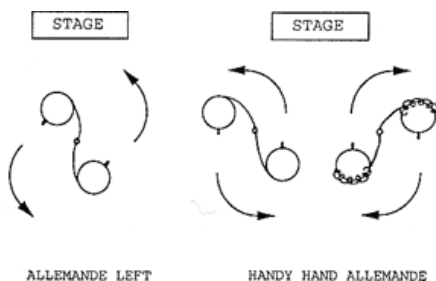
It's wonderful that The Country Dance and Song Society ([www.cdss.org](http://www.cdss.org)) has posted the full text of M Mary McNab Dart's book, *Contra Dance Choreography: A Reflection of Social Change* on their website here:

<https://www.cdss.org/elibrary/dart/tradition.htm>

Below I've copied the descriptions of most of the figures we use to choreograph contra dances, some of which are also found in square dances from Appendix B of her book.

### CONTRA DANCE FIGURES

**Allemande left (right):** Two dancers take left (right) hands and walk around one another, pulling slightly on one another's arms to facilitate the turn. The grip is not the one we use to shake hands, but is a grip with the thumb pointing upward, with which it is possible to exert tension more effectively. "Once around" means that the dancers walk completely around one another and back to where they started. Fractional turns are measured in relation to this. A handy hand allemande means that as one couple goes between the other, they allemande with the nearest hand, the dancers on one side of the set using the opposite hand from the dancers on the other side of the set:



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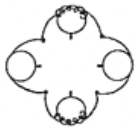
**Balance:** The balance has many variations, but the most common one is a move performed by stepping on the left foot and kicking up the right (or vice versa), and then stepping on the right foot and kicking up the left (or vice versa), in a four count sequence. The balance is found in three settings in contra dance: two dancers may take one hand or both and balance facing one another, usually preceding a swing; four dancers may take hands in a circle and balance together; or four dancers may take hands in a wavy line (adjacent dancers facing opposite ways) and balance together:



STEP ON LEFT  
KICK RIGHT



STEP ON RIGHT  
KICK LEFT



CIRCLE BALANCE

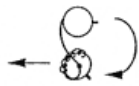


WAVY LINE BALANCE

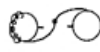
**Box the gnat:** This is a figure borrowed from western square dance, and is a means by which two dancers change places. The two dancers face one another and take right hands; the woman turns and backs under the man's right arm while the man crosses to her place, turning to face back the way he came; the dancers end the move each occupying the original place of the other:



BEGIN



BOX THE GNAT

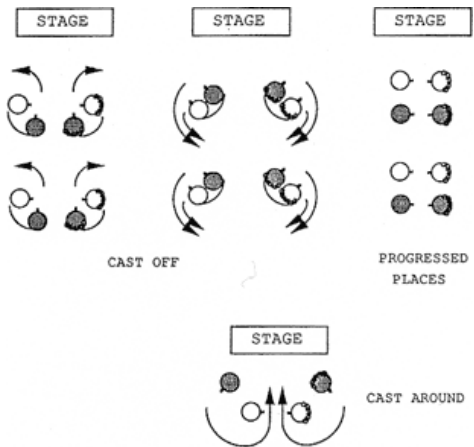


END

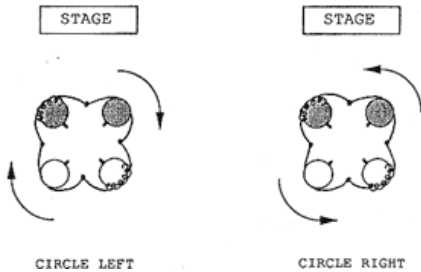
**California twirl:** This figure is similar to "box the gnat" in that two dancers use it to change places. But it is different in that the dancers begin and end the move standing side by side instead of facing one another, and the man takes the woman's left hand in his right. The woman walks under the arch made by their joined hands, while the man walks around her to his right to change places, with the end result that the dancers are still side by side, but facing the opposite way (*Country Dance and Song Society Newsletter 95 [1990]:8*):



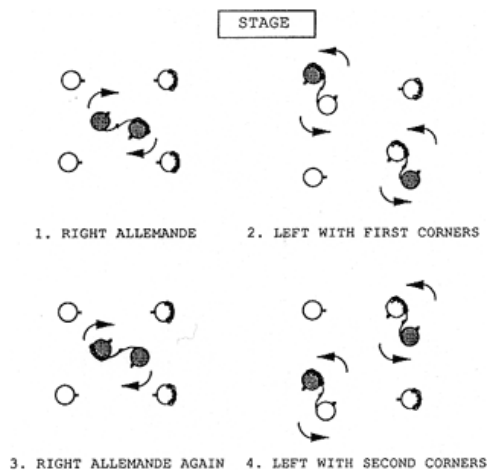
**Cast off (or around):** The cast off is a figure commonly used to accomplish the progression in a contra dance, especially in the more traditional dances. Actives couples stand between the inactives and either take inside hands or put their nearest arms around these inactives, and turn with them, ending up below the inactives in the set. Casting around another couple generally means that the actives turn to the outside of the set and walk out and around the inactives:



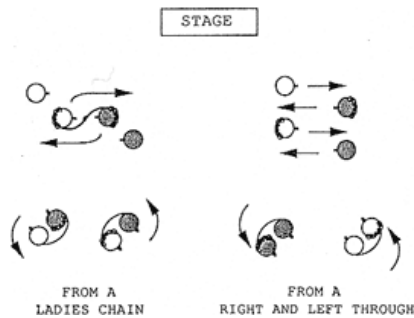
**Circle left (right):** Four dancers (or six in triple formation) take hands in a circle and walk to the left (right) one full turn and back to place. Fractional circles involve turns of more or less than one full turn:



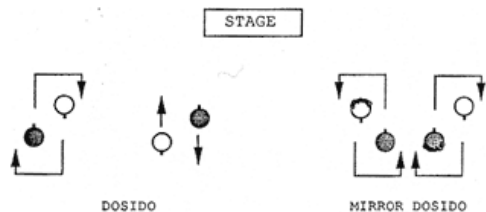
**Contra corners:** Contra corners is a traditional figure in which the active couple performs a series of allemandes with the couples on either side of them, and with each other. To begin contra corners the active couple allemandes right with each other in the center of the set, and then each of them allemandes left with the person across the set to their right diagonal; the actives then return to the center and allemande right with each other again, and then allemande left with the person across the set and to their left diagonal. (Note that each inactive person is turned by two different active dancers, one from each side.) This completes the contra corners, and the active couple will usually come together again in some fashion as they finish the figure:



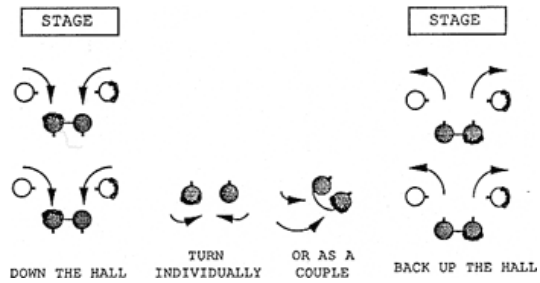
**Courtesy turn:** The courtesy turn is a way in which a couple turns around halfway, usually following a half ladies chain or a half right and left through. The man takes the woman's left hand in his own left hand and places his right arm around her waist, taking her right hand at the right side of her waist. In this position the couple turns together one hundred and eighty degrees. Today's contra dancers often dispense with the courtesy turn and accomplish the turn with a twirl instead (see "twirl"):



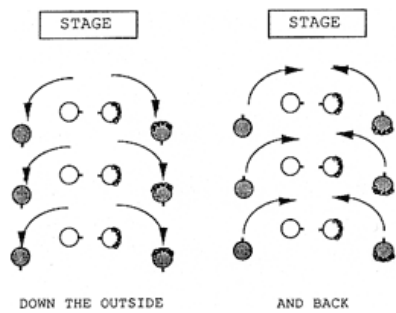
**Dosido:** The basic dosido figure is executed by two dancers who pass right shoulders with one another, pass back to back, and back up passing left shoulders and returning to place. A mirror dosido is one in which the dancers on one side of the set begin the dosido passing right shoulders, and the dancers on the other side of the set begin the dosido passing left shoulders. In modern contra dance choreography it is common to do a "dosido once and a half," which means that the dancers complete the basic dosido figure and then pass right shoulders again, moving past one another, often to swing someone else. Many of today's contra dancers like to twirl themselves around as they do the dosido:



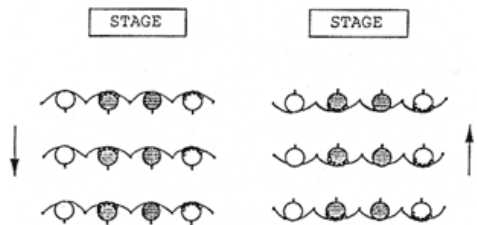
**Down the center and back:** Active couples go down the center and back while the other dancers watch. The dancers may turn individually before returning up the hall, or they may turn as a couple. The caller will usually specify which way to turn, since the method of turning affects the dancers' positions for the next figure:



**Down the outside and back:** This figure is traditionally performed by the active couples, who turn away from the center of the set and walk down the outside of the set, and then turn and come back to place:



**Down the hall four in line:** The four dancers in a minor set all walk down the hall together in a line of four. Usually the active couple is in the middle, but not necessarily. The caller will specify whether the four dancers should turn individually or as couples before coming back up the hall, since the method of turning affects their positions for the next figure:



**Figure eight:** This figure is usually executed by the active couples around the inactive couples. While the inactives stand still, the actives walk around them in a figure eight pattern. Both a whole figure eight and a half figure eight are common in contra dances. Often the inactives will move slightly to facilitate the movement of the actives:

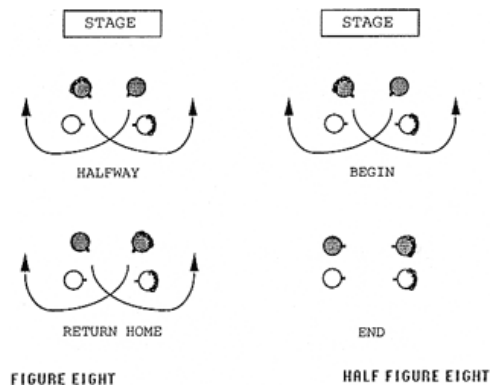
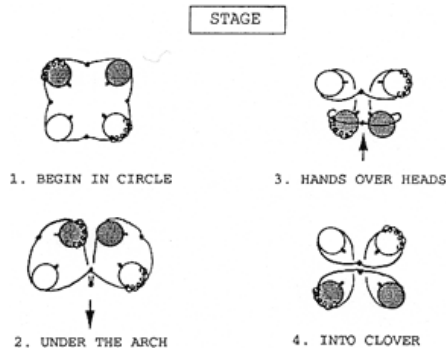


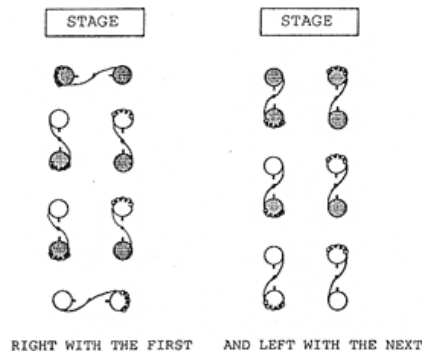
FIGURE EIGHT

HALF FIGURE EIGHT

**Four-leaf clover:** This figure is from square dancing and is performed by four dancers. It begins with dancers holding hands in a circle. Two dancers walk under the arch made by the joined hands of the other two, and then turn back-to-back bringing their own joined hands over their heads and into the center of the circle:



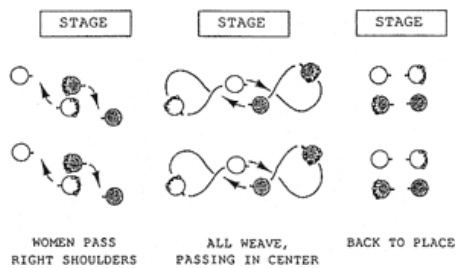
**Grand right and left:** This figure from the square dance tradition. In a contra dance it is usually executed around the large circle or oval formed by the two sides of the set, joined at each end. Dancers walk around the circle taking right hands and then left hands alternately with successive dancers as they pass:



**Gypsy [now a right (left) shoulder turn]:** The gypsy is a figure borrowed from English country dance. It is done by two dancers and may be done either with the right shoulder or the left shoulder. The two dancers circle, facing one another and without touching one another, and eye contact is maintained continuously:

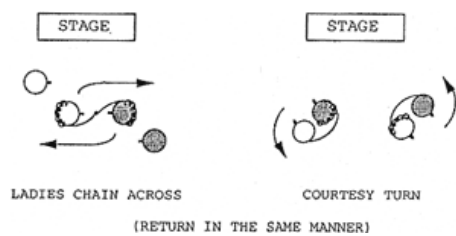


**Hey for four:** This weaving figure has been borrowed from English country dance and is now quite popular in contra dances. Four dancers weave around one another without touching. Two dancers begin the figure by passing right (or sometimes left) shoulders, and the dancers continue to pass right shoulders in the center of the set and left shoulders at the sides (or vice versa) until they have returned to place. Some new dances include fractions of heys, and heys on the diagonal. The contra dance hey differs from the English country dance hey in that it is done in a smaller space and does not have the expansive elegance given to it in the English country dance tradition:

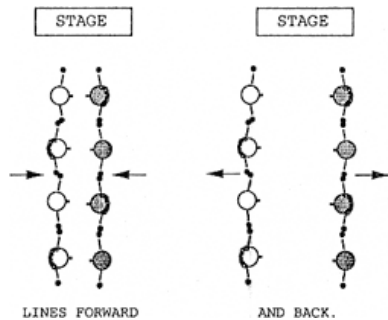




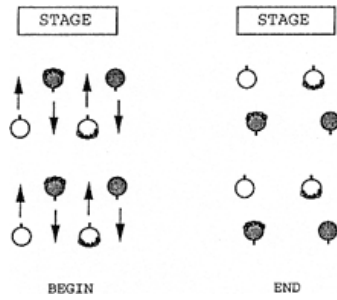
**Ladies chain:** The two women take right hands and cross the set, where they are turned with a courtesy turn by the man on the opposite side. The women then take right hands again and cross back to place, where they are once again turned, this time by the man on their original side. This figure is often performed only half way (across the set) without the return. Many of today's dancers like to use twirls in place of the courtesy turns. There are newly composed dances that include chains for the men instead of the women:



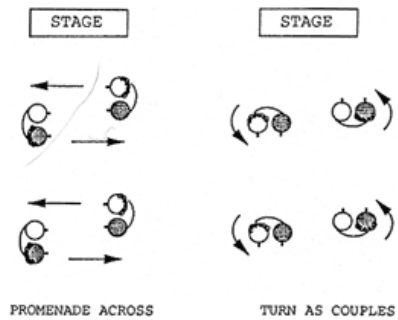
**Long lines forward and back:** Dancers take hands along the sides of the sets, and the two long lines walk four steps toward each other, and then four steps backwards to place:



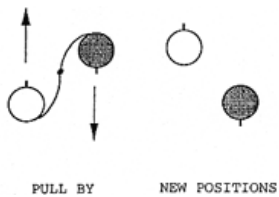
**Pass through:** This figure is performed by two couples who pass by one another as they walk in opposite directions. The dancers on the right (usually the women) walk in between the dancers approaching. This figure may be done up or down the set or it may be done across the set:



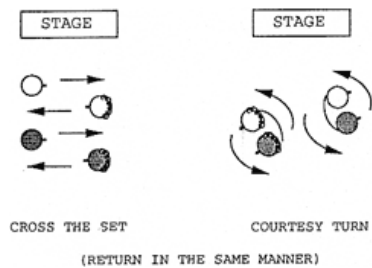
**Promenade:** The two couples in the minor set walk across the set in promenade position passing one another, and then turn into the place vacated by the other couple. The promenade hold varies regionally:



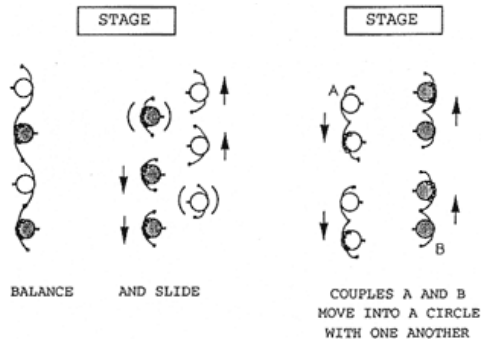
**Pull by:** Two dancers take hands and pull by one another going opposite directions. This figure may use the right hand or the left hand depending on its context, and it may occur along the set or across the set:



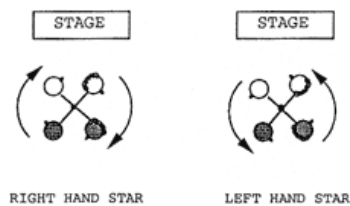
**Right and left through:** Two dancers on one side of the set change places with two dancers on the other side of the set by passing through (passing right shoulders with the dancer directly opposite) to the other side, and doing a courtesy turn; then in like manner the two dancers pass through again and return home to another courtesy turn. The "right and left through" is often done only halfway, without the return:



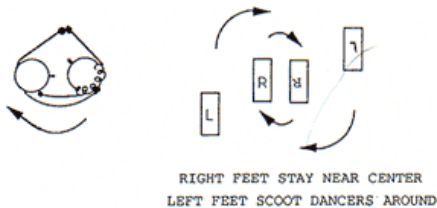
**Slide:** This term simply refers to a movement to the right or left, usually no more than one or two steps. One common use of the slide is in the balance in a wavy line, when after one balance the dancers slide one place further down the line and balance again. Another common use is when a couple moves together down the side of the set to circle with a new couple:



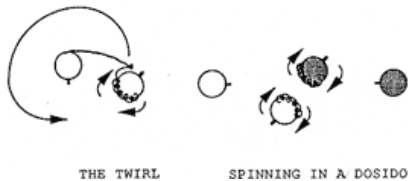
**Star:** The star left (right) is performed by four dancers, who place their left (right) hands together in the center of their little circle and walk around counter-clockwise (clockwise). The hand hold used will vary regionally, the most common holds being the handshake hold with the person opposite in the star, and the wrist hold in which every dancer takes the wrist of the dancer ahead. To star once around brings one back to where one started. Fractional stars are also used in contra dance:



**Swing:** The swing is performed by two dancers, who most commonly hold one another in ballroom position (the woman's left hand behind the man's upper right arm, and his right hand on her lower back, their other hands joined), and turn clockwise together. A walking step may be used with the swing, but the buzz step is more popular in modern contra dance. The buzz step is a scooting motion in which the dancers' right feet stay close to their center of gravity, while their left feet scoot them around in a tight circle. Dancers lean back slightly as they swing, "giving weight" (see Dancing Style below). There are alternate holds for the swing, particularly for same-gender swings. When a man and a woman swing, the swing ends with the woman standing to the right of the man:



**Twirl:** The twirl is not a contra dance figure, but it is a popular variation used in place of the courtesy turn in the ladies chain figure. Instead of the man putting his right arm around the woman and turning around with her, he takes her left hand in his and she turns clockwise under his raised left arm, revolving one or more times, while he turns counter-clockwise in place, guiding her all the way around him and facing her as she goes. Another kind of "twirl" happens when dancers turn themselves around solo as they execute a dosido or a hey for four:



Another website for descriptions of figures is here:

<https://www.ibiblio.org/contradance/thecallersbox/Glossary.htm#corners-square>

### **A Bit More History**

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Where did contra dancing come from?

The longways set is be found in many cultures. I've danced the Boureé in longways sets from France, and longways sets from Galician dance from Spain. The formation of "A Longways Set for As Many As Will," along with sequences set to music as they were done in England were brought to the New Land with the East Coast settler colonists. But in the New Land there was a problem: back home in England and Europe were taught "correctly" by dancing masters.

OK, dancing masters came to New England, too, but not in enough numbers to facilitate the number of balls and events. Thus someone, most likely a fiddler, figured if they call out the next figure in the dance they didn't need a dance master. Hence the birth of calling.

That's why we call it "traditional American dancing."

Why is it called "contra dancing?"

I've heard two theories, and there's probably a bit of truth to both:

- 1) In the dance we stand "contrary to our partner."
- 2) In England they called their folk dancing English Country dancing. Then France started importing English Country dances where they became quite popular. Then the colonies of the New Land went to war with England, named the land they essentially stole from the Indigenous People, and, winning the war, called it The United States of America.

The French helped the Colonists in their Revolution. Thus, for many, after the success of the Revolution there was an appreciation of French and a distaste for British. Thus, the now Americans

wanted to do some of that “French country dance,” but that “country” with a French accent slurred into “contra.”

Many, maybe most, of the early dances were proper. The men started on their side, and the women on theirs.

When I started dancing in 1980, about half of the dances we danced were proper and unequal. Many improper dances were also unequal. Unequal means the Twos were often significantly inactive and the Ones got all the action, hence the monikers “Active” and “Inactive.”

The preference to have most dances be equal is relatively recent. As this trend grew it was clear that the labels Active and Inactive were no longer descriptive, therefore using Ones and Twos has been adopted widely.

I miss those dances of old: they had a very different feel. Ralph Page, the man who single-handedly preserved contra dancing from the 1920s through the ‘50s said, “Any idiot can be an Active, you have to think to be Inactive.” And it was true. It’s the Inactives who make sure the lines are kept straight tasked with keeping the distance between minor sets appropriate. The Inactives’ job is also to help the Actives get to where they need to be to keep the dance going. And, as Mr. Page is turning in his grave, Inactives can cheat if they can also carry out their duties like swing their partner as Actives go down the outside or swing someone in the next set as Actives do something in the center as long as they’re back in time.

As stated above, I love those old Chestnut which got called regularly when I started dancing. These days two of these Chestnut dances are remembered for their signature figures, not for familiarity of the actual dance: Petronella and Rory O’More. I also love the Modern dances that keep us all moving as we flow from one figure to another in new and exciting ways. We live in a time when Contra Dancing is evolving, borrowing from blues and rock and roll music, and using more figures from English Country dances and Modern Square Dances. And there are many choreographers, including me. I love making up dances, composing tunes and being a part of the changing Contra Dance world.

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