

# Contra Dance Seeds

by JoLaine Jones-Pokorney

When Ron and Cathy Arps decided to spend six-months as organic farm volunteers in New Zealand, they thought it would be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. But ever since that first trip in September of 1998, they have made the journey again and again, planting seeds of an entirely different kind – the seeds of contra dance communities.

Contra dance is a vigorous folk dance brought to the New World colonies from England and France and mainly centered in the New England states until the 1960s when it spread across the US and Canada. Contra dance “gypsies” travel far and wide to attend dance events. Contra devotees speak in almost reverential terms about the experience: “I belong to the church of contra.” “Contra is the most fun you can have standing up.” “Contra is adults at play.”

It truly takes a village to hold a contra dance. There needs to be a band of several musicians, a caller to give the moves of each dance, and at least 30 dancers. This community aspect is one of the strongest appeals to those who love this dance, but it also means that it is not possible to simply call up a couple of friends and hold a contra dance. It requires a good solid core of people who know what they are doing.

The Arpses fell in love with New Zealand, but the lack of contra dancing made it a difficult six months. “If New Zealand had contra dancing, it would be perfect,” says Cathy. Each of the communities where they stayed during their tour had a wooden-floored community hall that was perfect for this type of dancing. Those community halls planted the seed in the Arpses’ minds that New Zealand might be fertile ground for growing contra dance communities. That seed grew into a full-blown plan when they returned to the United States. As they attended dances back home in North Carolina, they would pose the question to their fellow dancers. “What would you think about spending the month of February contra dancing in New Zealand?” They received such positive responses that they knew their idea was workable.

The Arpses went back to New Zealand in February of 2001 to research travel routes and transportation, accommodations, meals, sight-seeing and hall rentals for thirty dancers, callers and musicians. They found a contact person in each community who would promote the contra dance events and provide a sound system for the band and callers. They also had to have a good estimate about what all of this would cost each of the participants. By February of 2002, they were ready to take their first group of thirty “Contra Ambassadors” to New Zealand for a month of sight seeing and contra dancing.

“Those folks were brave! We did too much, too many dances and a very hectic schedule. We learned a lot on that trip,” says Cathy. But it wasn’t too hectic to prevent them from scheduling the next trip in 2004, and again in 2006, and the most recent one in 2008. Even though Ron and Cathy do not advertise the trip, word of mouth from those who have been has made sure that the last two have filled months in advance and had waiting lists of eager contra dancers, musicians and callers from all over the United States and Canada. This, despite the fact that the musicians and callers are “amateurs” instead of the big name bands and callers that are usually part of the foreign travel contra dance events. Cathy is an accomplished fiddle player, so the backbone of the band is assured, but the rest is composed of whoever happens to register that

can play an instrument. Callers also are the luck of the draw. And instead of getting to dance with lots of accomplished dancers like at most dance events, these contra ambassadors spend the month walking through the simplest of dances with community halls full of beginners.

But traveling in this way also has its benefits. “The best part about being a contra dance 'ambassador' was that it gave me something chatty which helped to engage locals in conversation,” says Carol Glass, a dancer from Michigan. “In stores, cafes and on the bus, it was a great way to find out about people.”

It wasn't just locals that the ambassadors connected with. They encountered other tourists in their hostels and on hikes, always offering an invitation to the next contra dance. There were often several nations represented at a single dance. Glass recalls that she met tourists from Vancouver on a city bus in Dunedin and invited them to the dance that evening. Not only did they attend the dance, they met a Vancouver dancer and were excited to find that they could contra dance when they got back home to Canada.

The flirty aspect of contra dance revealed a few cultural differences between the New Zealanders and the North Americans. Jean Sumner, a dancer from Virginia, remembers, “a fellow I chatted with, then danced with, responded to a partner gypsy (a move where the man and woman circle each other looking deeply into each other's eyes) after a moment's attention by laughing and turning his head away saying, "Kiwis just can't handle this much eye contact.”

The Arpses must have been correct in their assessment that New Zealand was ripe for contra dancing because since their ambassadorial journeys began, there have been three contra dance communities created. The first group to form was in Wellington where they now have monthly dances and their own band of local musicians called “Chili Jam.” Dunedin formed a dance community after the 2006 trip that is so enthusiastic they dance every week. The newest group is in Christchurch, formed after the most recent trip in 2008.

The energy behind the new Christchurch contra dance community is Bill and Liz Baritomba. Bill and Liz have been active in the folk music and square dance communities in Christchurch for many years, but only danced contra when the Arpses' tour came through every other February. When the 2008 tour came to Christchurch, they decided they were ready to contra dance more often than once every 24 months, so they packed a bag and joined the tour for the next 10 days. Bill spent a lot of time with the callers learning dances and figuring out how the calls matched the phrasing of the music. Bill thinks the time is right for he and Liz to create contra in Christchurch. “We are both retired now, and the large dose of dancing with [the Arps tour] really enthused me - it has the best of everything - great music - really moving to the music - laid back people - varied enough to stay interesting.” Thanks to the Baritombas' organizing, the Christchurch community held its first dance in March.

Bill admits, “From my own selfish viewpoint, I want people to dance with! Some of the people who have been coming are friends I have known for awhile who have done other types of dancing (such as Scottish and square dancing). They are finding contra a bit more relaxed, yet still satisfying. Also people enjoy the inclusiveness of the activity - new comers can always fit it.”

Though Bill is a recent convert to contra, he has discovered the heart of it – new comers can always fit in, which is the idea that inspired Ron and Cathy Arps a decade ago when they saw the first of those quaint New Zealand community halls. No matter what hemisphere one travels to, a community hall spilling lively music and laughter into the summer air is always a welcome sight.