**The Dance Beat**

*by Phil Jamison*

# THE KENTUCKY RUNNING SET

It was danced, one evening after dark, on the porch of one of the largest houses of the Pine Mountain School, with only one dim lantern to light up the scene. But the moon streamed fitfully in, lighting up the mountain peaks in the background and, casting its mysterious light over the proceedings, seemed to exaggerate the wildness and the break-neck speed of the dancers as they whirled through the mazes of the dance. There was no music, only the stampings and clappings of the onlookers, but when one of the emotional crises of the dance was reached — and this happened several times during the performance — the air seemed literally to pulsate with the rhythm of the "patters" and the tramp of the dancers' feet, while, over and above it all, penetrating through the din, floated the even, falsetto tones of the Caller, calmly and unexcitedly reciting his directions.

(The dancers held their bodies) erect, motionless, with every limb loose and relaxed. . . . This reposeful carriage, together with the swift, gliding movement, gave to the dancers an impersonal, detached appearance, as though they were moving in a dream or under hypnotic influence.

The dancers often improvised step-variations of their own, e.g. kick up their heels, drag their feet lazily on the floor, or do a hoe-down step or two, i.e., a heel-and-toe shuffle, or clog-dance step.

When music was used at dances, it consisted of unaccompanied fiddle or fiddle with banjo. Throughout the dance, onlookers as well as the dancers would reinforce the rhythm of the music by "patting," i.e., alternately stamping and clapping. "Patting" is done in various ways, but the usual method is to stamp with the right foot on the strong accent and clap the hands on the weak one, the executant throwing his head back, inclining his body to the left and emphasizing the movements of the feet and hands so that the rhythm may be seen as well as hear.

The fiddler and the banjo-player each have an assistant, a "beater," who, sitting at right angles to the instrumentalist, "beats" the strings between the bridge and the player's left hand with two pencil-like wooden sticks. These sticks, being flexible, strike all the strings simultaneously and this produces a rhythmical drone effect which, if the "beater" is deft in his movements and skillfully varies his rhythms, adds depth to the tunes and gives material aid to the dancers.

The players in Kentucky generally managed, notwithstanding the melodic poverty of the tunes, to play them with such force and adandonment that they made excellent accompaniment to the dance. . . . The dancers set the tempo, varying it from moment to moment at their pleasure, and these variations it is the duty of the player to follow as though he were accompanying a song.

Hanlon Mountain Team; Southern Appalachian Photographic Archives Mars Hill College

This is what Cecil J. Sharp reported seeing when he traveled to the southern Appalachian Mountains in 1917, in search of traditional songs and ballads. Sharp's theory was that the Kentucky running set he observed was related to the folk dances of his native England, which had been lost from the traditional culture there. According to Sharp, these dances were brought to America sometime in the 18th century by immigrants from northern England and Scotland. They remained close to their pure form due to the isolation of the settlers in the mountains.

As Sharp described it, the dances were done with four (or more) couples in a square (or circular set). Each figure is initiated by the first couple as they dance their way from one couple to the next around the set. When the first couple reaches the fourth, the second couple proceeds to the third, initiating a chain reaction of dance figures until all couples have done it. A few of the figures that Sharp mentions by name are: "Shoot The Owl," "Bird In The Cage," "Wild Goose Chase," "Going Down Town," "Chase The Squirrel," and the "California Show Basket."

This account, printed in Part V of Sharp's *The Country Dance Book* (London: Novelle and Co. Ltd., 1918), provides an interesting eyewitness view of the dances of Eastern Kentucky of 70 years ago.

In 1987, there are still some local and indigenous dances to be found around the country. In future issues of the Old Time Herald, I will feature some of these as well as cover other topics relating to traditional dance and clogging (or "hoe-downing," as Sharp says it was called). I welcome ideas, comments, and contributions to this column from any interested dancers, musicians, observers, or readers. Write to me c/o the *Old-Time Herald*, P.O. Box 1362, Galax, VA 24333. ■

## LOOK!

Anyone is welcome to submit articles, reviews, etc. to The Old-Time Herald for consideration. We do not guarantee return of unsolicited material so be sure and send a copy and not the original. All material should be typed double-spaced, and contain the sender's return address. All letters to specific writers should be sent to them c/o the *Old-Time Herald*. Any photos must have a not (insofar as possible) as to photographer, date photo was taken, and names of people in the photo. All material must be in to the magazine 2 months prior to publication of the first of the month. For example, for the next issue (Nov.) all materials must be in no later than Sept. 1.



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The OLD-TIME HERALD
Vol. 1 No. 1
Fall 1987
Published by
The Old-Time Music Group
P.O. Box 1362
Galax, VA 24333
703-236-7808

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The Old-Time Herald is published quarterly the first of August, November, February, and May.

Cover photo of the Slate Mountain Ramblers by Alice Gerrard, 1987, at the Old Fries Theater, Fries, Va. Seated L-R: Richard Bowman, Bill Mansfield. Standing L-R: Dan Williams, Barbara Poole. Back cover of the Slate Mountain Ramblers by Alice Gerrard.

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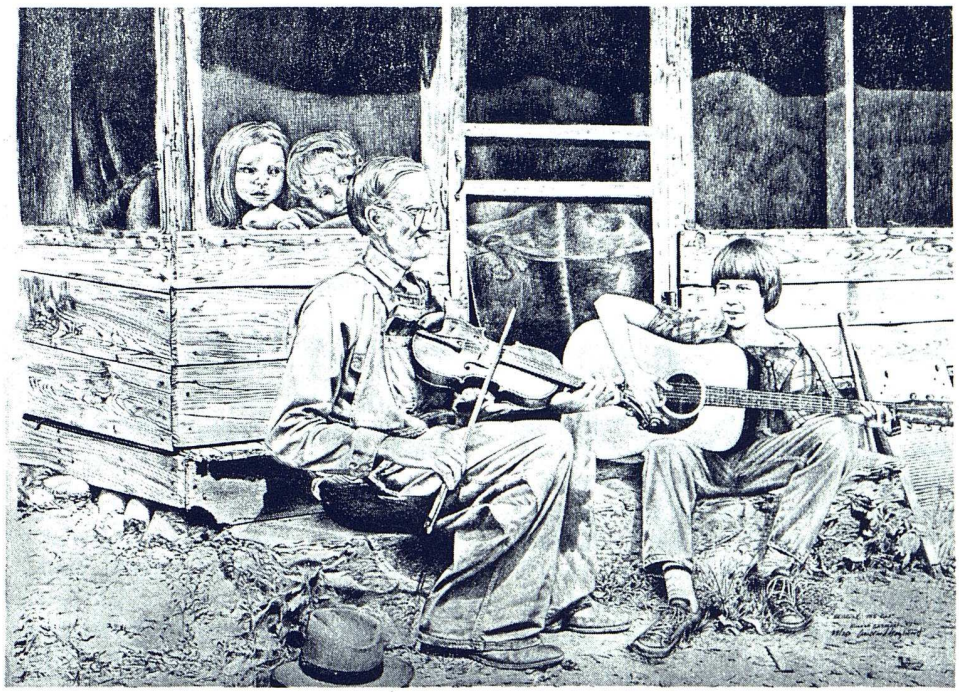

"Bridging the Gap"
by Willard Gayheart

The pencil sketches which appear throughout this issue of the *Old-Time Herald* are by Willard Gayheart of Galax, Va. Willard is also an accomplished musician and plays with the Galax - based bluegrass band, The Highlanders. Used with permission.

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