

# Homespun Community Dancing

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## **Study Guide**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Imagine the world when no one knew what television was. Imagine a time without radios, CD players, computers, video games or movies. In fact, for most of the time that people have existed, there has been no electricity at all. Life was slower. People waited for the sun to rise before they could start their daily activities. Many tasks were done by hand and took a long time finish, and there was little leisure time.

Today there is a never-ending stream of machines that do jobs for people, to make their lifestyle very comfortable and easy -- things like washing machines, automobiles, computers and electric lights. Quite often, leisure time today is filled with watching or playing with some electronic device. But what did people do for fun in times past? How did they entertain themselves before electricity?

People have always lived in communities. They feel better living around others, instead of living alone. Before having electronic devices to entertain them, people in the communities gathered regularly to dance, sing and play instruments. This has continued for thousands of years, from ancient civilizations until today.

### **OBJECTIVES OF OUR SCHOOL VISIT**

- Students will understand what life was like prior to modern media and electricity.
- Students will learn what roles homemade traditional music and dancing have played in peoples' lives.
- Students will observe the special qualities of the sounds of these traditional instruments: fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, clarinet, pennywhistle, recorder.
- Students will learn about the historical and geographical contexts of the music and dance.
- Students will participate in traditional dances from American and other cultures.
- Students will appreciate their role in the community of the dance.

## **KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS**

- Culture: the common artistic, intellectual and social practices of a group of people.
- Tradition: belief, custom, story, music or dance orally transmitted from one generation to another.
- Community: a group of people linked together by common conditions of life.
- Traditional Music: music from a long time ago that has been passed down through the generations, usually by an unknown composer, and at times, not written down.
- Traditional Community Dancing: any type of group-dancing done cooperatively, that has been passed down through the generations. Human beings have been doing this type of dancing for 9,000 years. Every culture on earth has a unique form of traditional dance.
- Musical Instruments: violin (fiddle), banjo, guitar, mandolin, clarinet, pennywhistle, recorder.
- Acoustic Musical Instruments: Any instruments that can make a sound without using electricity.

## **FOLLOW-UP ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM**

- Draw a picture of Peter, Paul & George playing traditional musical instruments: fiddle, guitar, banjo, mandolin, clarinet, pennywhistle, recorder.
- Draw a picture of one or more musical instruments.
- Draw a picture of a traditional dance.
- Write a story about going to a big dance a long time ago.
- Answer the following question in a written composition or oral report:  
What do you think life in America might have been like before the discovery of electricity?
- Make up your own song or tune about anything and teach it to someone.
- Do a report on how African and European music blended in America.
- Write down some traditions in your family and where they came from.

- Interview a traditional musician in your community and report to the class.
- Invite a traditional musician into your classroom to play music and talk about traditional music.
- Attend a traditional dance or concert in your community and report to the class about it.
- Learn a traditional tune on a musical instrument.

### **HISTORY TIMELINE -- When in the world did we start to dance?**

Here's a brief history of the world as we know it. Notice how long ago music and dance began to appear:

15 billion years ago: Big Bang - Universe is Born

5 billion years ago: Sun is formed

4.5 billion years ago: Earth is formed

150,000 years ago: earliest finds of human ancestors

75,000 years ago: use of clothing begins

60,000 years ago: use of tools begin

40,000 years ago: use of fire begins

30,000 years ago: cave paintings - art

15,000 years ago: humans in their present form: homo sapiens

10,000 years ago: agriculture begins

**9,000 years ago: first evidence of community dance**

5,000 years ago: first civilizations: invention of wheel and writing

5,000 - 3,000 years ago: ancient civilizations begin: Egypt, China, Greece, Asia Minor

2,500 years ago: Roman Empire

2,000 years ago: birth of Jesus Christ

1,000 years ago: moveable printing system invented in China

500 years ago: Europeans colonize America

225 years ago: United States independence

135 years ago: invention of the telephone

124 years ago: invention of the light bulb

120 years ago: electricity introduced into the home

100 years ago: invention of the automobile

100 years ago: first airplane flights

78 years ago: first television pictures sent through the air

70 years ago: most homes have electricity

50 years ago: most homes have televisions

10 years ago: most homes have computers

## **DANCING IN PREHISTORY**

People have danced for thousands of years. Archeologist Dr. Yosef Garfinkel of Hebrew University in Jerusalem has studied and compiled hundreds of examples of carved stone and painted pottery discovered at 140 sites in the Balkans and Middle East. Dating from 5,000-9,000 years ago, these pieces depict scenes that show simple figures in lines and circles, with joined hands and bent legs. These scenes are similar to the folk dances of today, which emphasize group participation and cooperation.

It's speculated that the pieces were created during the time when humans changed from being strictly hunter-gatherers to living in villages and planting crops. Dr. Garfinkel states that, "*The prevalence of what appear to be dancing scenes in the earliest art from the ancient Middle East suggests the importance of the dance in these preliterate agricultural communities. Dancing was a means of social communication . . . part of the ritual for coordinating a community's activities.*" He also suggests: "*In periods before schools and writing, community rituals, symbolized by dance, were the basic mechanisms for conveying education and knowledge to the adult members of the community, and from one generation to the next.*"

## **DANCING IN ANCIENT TIMES**

Dance was an important part of daily life in many ancient cultures throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Music and dance was used for work, worship, or to celebrate special events. In Egypt, workers labored to the beat of drums, and dance troupes were hired for parties, or religious ceremonies. Villagers in Africa celebrated special occasions with circle dances that involved the clapping of hands and leaps into the air (a form of which continues to this day). These were social event in which the whole village took part. Dance in the Middle East (such as belly-dancing) originated as a means of spiritual worship and self-awareness.

The use of dance in the world society has gone through many changes over the centuries, especially when one culture overtook another. Some dance forms, passed from generation to generation, have remained unchanged to this day, as people sought to preserve their dance heritage. Some dances have evolved due to a blending of cultures. Dance movements from one culture have been incorporated into others. There have been times when a group of people, or an invading nation sought to eradicate dance, seeing it not as an expression of joy or spirituality, but as immoral or indecent. Even through such times, dance has survived. Throughout history, dance has been a means of expression, whether emotional or spiritual, and has brought with it a sense of community and togetherness.

## **TRADITIONAL DANCING IN AMERICA**

Dance, along with music, has always dynamically expressed the spirit and personality of every culture. Traditional dance is part of this global language . . . and can be traced to the taverns of Ireland and to the ballrooms of Europe, to the Czarist palaces of Russia and further back still to the fluid tribal rituals of Africa and Australia. Representatives from all of these cultures brought their native dances when they landed in America. This augmented the dancing that already existed here among the Native Americans. Widely differing peoples who had little or no

exposure to one another gathered and danced on common ground.

English country dancing came to North America with the colonists. In New England especially, country dance was extremely popular through the early 1800s. Americans eagerly awaited new dance books from England; they also wrote their own dances and published their own books. <sup>(2)</sup>

The fiddle was novel and exciting when Europeans first brought it to North America during the late seventeenth century. It was replacing the pipe, tabor, and harp at country dances and other rural social gatherings in the Old World.

Fiddles were played in people's homes for dances and for pleasure, at community work gatherings like barn raisings and corn shuckings, and for celebrations such as birthdays and weddings, and at contests and fiddlers' conventions where musicians vied for awards and recognition.

By the 1800's, Cherokee Indians had incorporated fiddle playing and English country dancing into their culture. African-Americans playing the African banjo and the European-Americans playing the European fiddle formed the first uniquely American bands. The sound they created became the root of blues, bluegrass, jazz, country music and other genres -- music that we dance to today.

## **SOURCES**

John Noble Wilford, *In Dawn of Society, Dance Was Center Stage*;

[http://www.jordan-webb.net/ethnicedance/media\\_articles/nytimes\\_dance\\_article.html](http://www.jordan-webb.net/ethnicedance/media_articles/nytimes_dance_article.html)

Alan Winston, *English Country Dancing*;

<http://www-ssrl.slac.stanford.edu/~winston/ecd/history.htmlx>

Lori Heikkila, *Country Western Dance History*;

<http://www.centralhome.com/ballroomcountry/western.htm>

History of Blue Ridge Music (VA); <http://www.blueridgemusic.org/AboutMusic.asp>

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

For historical and current information on traditional community dance:

- English Country and American Contra Dancing; <http://www.cdss.org/whatisit.html>
- Folk Dance Association (see: The Library); <http://www.folkdancing.org>
- History of Dance; <http://www.centralhome.com/ballroomcountry/history.htm>
- Hudson-Mohawk Traditional Dance; <http://www.danceflurry.org>
- Timeline of all aspects of history: <http://www.hyperhistory.com>