



December 20, 2008

Longtime dance caller keeps club members turning and twirling

By *BOBBI SEIDEL*
STAFF WRITER

On a dark, cold Friday night, the gymnasium at Spruce Street School in Lakewood is a haven of light, warmth and music.

Men and women are square dancing in the big room, the wide bottoms of the women's dresses and skirts twirling in the air as the women quickly swirl and turn. The men, in plaid or fringed Western shirts, move with equal speed and grace.

At the front of the room, Manny Amor calls out the figures, or movements, the dancers are doing. A tall, thin, gray-haired man, he calls in the smooth-throated voice of a 1940s big-band singer.

His rapid-fire calls are reminiscent of an auctioneer's chant: "Swing through ..., swing through again ..., whoop! to the middle and back ..., turn 'em all around ..., now you zoom through. ..., look to the corner!"

The members of the Ocean County-based Star Thru Squares club quickly follow the calls, set to melodies of his choice by Amor, 80, a retired Freehold Township High School physical education and health teacher.

The dancers circle each other, step forward and back, smack each other's palms, lock arms and twirl, change partners and regroup in a blur of legs, arms and smiles.

He has been calling square dances for 55 years, since December 1953, says Amor, a New York native who has lived in Lakewood since 1960.

"I still love it," says Amor, snazzy in a white shirt with pale blue and white ruffles, a light-blue vest and trousers and a sequined colonel, or string, tie.

As of February, he'd called 2,000 dances for Star Thru Squares, formed in 1961. He's their only caller.

"We've been very faithful to him," says Pat Stephens, 81, of Toms River, a club member since 1974.

"He's a good teacher, a very good caller. He's got the patience of a saint," says club president Evelyn Wooley, 81, of Neptune, a 10-year member of the club, which has about 23 members.

"Every caller has their own style," Wooley adds. "They sing differently, just like people talk differently. He's good, very good."

Amor creates a list of calls in his own shorthand for each dance but often ignores the list.

"I spend time memorizing singing calls and working on material," says Amor, a divorced father of three grown children and a songwriter and cartoonist in his spare time. "But when I get out here, I make it up."

He creates calls to go with melodies that include rock 'n' roll, big band, gospel and country. His caller's case -- like a small suitcase -- is packed with 45 rpms that he plays on a record player made for callers, says Amor, who has 2,000 records at home. He uses a microphone and speakers.

"With the right kind of rhythm and my words, you can do square dancing," he says.

Playing the melody of "Margaritaville" by Jimmy Buffet, he uses some of the song's words and some of his own: "It's promenade .,.,. you go halfway around .,.,. you veer to the left .,.,. it's nobody's fault."

To a ragtime song, he sings: "You circle to the left. You go walkin' round. .,.,. You promenade her high and wide. Won't she make a lovely bride? My Coney Island washboard gal."

"He's great," says Fred Ziegler, 72, of Point Pleasant Beach, a square dancer for 21 years. "You don't go back to callers you don't like."

"When we first started with him, he had a lot of costumes he would wear -- a clown, a leprechaun, a New Year's baby," Wooley says. "He's an entertainer."

"He's a terrific caller," says Barbara O'Rorke, 77, of Manchester, a club member since 1976. "He gets us all moving. If we make a mistake, he's able to get us out of it."

Amor also calls for other clubs. Since 1997, he's called for the Do-Si-Dos in Freehold Township.

"I've called in 13 states," says Amor, who learned to square dance and became a caller after being introduced to it in college. "I used to call six times a week. Now? Three. I remember one year looking at the calendar and seeing I was booked every Saturday all year."

"I've gone as far west as Cleveland, as far north as Maine, and down to Miami. My rule today is I want to be in my own bed at night," he says, smiling.

He estimates there are about 40 callers in the state, says Amor, who also teaches square dancing. Lessons are necessary before anyone can join a dance, he says.

"It takes a year to learn it, then it takes three or four years to do it," says Joan Martin, 65, of Manchester, a club member since 2001 who took lessons with Amor.

Square dancing has different levels, Amor says.

"There's a basic level. It might be 20 figures, or movements. That's what they do at barn dances -- no barn -- held in halls. It's for people who don't know anything. I start off by saying, 'The most important thing is to listen to me.' Then I say, 'The man's on the left, the lady's on the right.'"

"Mainstream is the second level -- 69 figures, or movements, including the ones they've learned before. Plus level -- that's approximately 103 figures. People who want more can move on to advanced levels."

More than dancing is involved, club members say.

"Friendship, exercise, good clean fun," O'Rorke says.

"You don't need a partner. You can be single and come," Martin says. "And square dancing is supposed to be good for your brain and your heart."

"It's the cheapest entertainment around," Amor says. "It's \$4 per person per night, a donation. They dance 2 and a half hours and get refreshments."

Yet this pastime of a simpler, long-ago time is on the decline.

"This group at one time was 70 to 80 strong," Amor says. "We're now down usually to one square -- eight people -- at dances. Today, in New Jersey, there might be approximately 30 clubs. In the Shore area, there might be five.

"It has become a senior citizen activity. We have to go out and recruit more people. That's why we have lessons," says Amor, who also works with children at a school in Howell.

And, Central Regional High School in Berkeley teaches square dancing as part of gym, Martin says.

Additional Facts

SQUARE DANCING

Lessons

Instructor: Manny Amor.

Where: Echo Lake Park, Howell.

When: Start in September.

How long: Two hours a week for about 28 weeks.

Join

Club: Star Thru Squares.

Meets: 8 p.m. Fridays.

Where: First, third and fifth Fridays of month, Spruce Street School, Lakewood; second and fourth Fridays, Taunton School, Howell. No dances when school is closed or in summer.

Information: (732) 364-5438.
