

Hoedowners Square Dance Club

When most people think of getting active or exercising, they picture gyms, healthy clubs, bicycles, or pools. However, if one ventured in the Roundhouse in Wood River last Saturday, they would have seen a lot more laughs than any gym could boast. The Hoedowners Square



Dance Club in Wood River is a long-standing, excited group of seniors who enjoy a regular schedule of music, socialization, healthy activity, and fun. Most of us haven't completed a do-si-do since a grade school gym class, but these square dancers encourage you to visit them and consider a social activity that is almost too much fun to be healthy!

Celebrating their 70th anniversary in 2019, the Hoedowners Square Dance Club of Wood River is the oldest square dance club in Illinois. In 1947, Ring and Marjorie



Ringering attended a Boy Scout event featuring a program on square dancing, and their feet started tapping. They learned how to dance and call, and soon started teaching classes in their apartment, and by 1949 they had formed "Ring's Hoedowners Club." The name eventually was changed to the "

Hoedowners Square Dance Club" , and the organization boasts a long and varied history.

One member reminisced that in the 1950's, the group met on Sunday afternoons in a local church with a television in the adjoining room. Their kids could watch

television while the parents danced away the afternoon. Other members remember when they traded babysitting with other dancers so everyone could occasionally enjoy a night away.

In the post-WWII era, the club thrived as many towns in the metro-east had similar square dance groups. Back then, members could attend dances almost every night of the week, but over the years, most groups merged or folded. The Hoedowners, however, continued to thrive.



Today, the group is part of the St. Louis Metro Square and Round Dance Association, a group of nine clubs in the St. Louis metro area. Each club has scheduled dances, usually twice a month, and they strive to schedule the dances so they don't conflict with other groups. Members can visit various chapters and dance almost as often as they wish.

Ruth Leech joined the Hoedowners ten years ago - she had attended a 50th wedding anniversary party featuring square dancing as entertainment; she thought it looked like fun, so she came back and joined in the new dancer training of the Hoedowners and Dandy Dancers since she wanted to learn as quickly as



possible. She was able to dance at the national convention in Louisville, Kentucky the following spring with the 50th wedding anniversary couple. Another member, Henry Kallal, agreed to his first dance, just to pacify a neighbor who kept inviting him to visit. He told his wife, "We are going to have to go at least once; we'll get there, say we didn't like it, and go home." However, he found that "the people were the nicest you ever want to meet and we loved it." He and his late wife were members for ten years! Henry is now co-president of the club. Current co-president, Pat Vogel, said she was going through a divorce and was lonely

when someone invited her to square dance. She said, "I never laughed so much in my life," and has continued attending for 13 years!

The most veteran dancers, though, are Agnes and Bo Semith, who have been part of the group for 48 years. Bo has been calling dances for 50 years! "We were PE majors in college and we had to take activity electives. We met in a square dance class and we've been dancing ever since."

Agnes told us that she started with lessons, as did most of the group, but today's lessons are a little more relaxed. Ring Ringer, the founder, originally taught lessons at his home in the late 1940's. It was very crowded, and he carefully structured the dance education. Men were taught to promenade with their shoulders touching, and taught dancers to slide their feet, not pick them up. He didn't allow any dancers to join the cub dances until they were deemed "ready."



Today, the club offers lessons, taught by Agnes and Bo, both for beginners and advanced students. The beginner classes start in the fall, usually September, and last through the school year, or until the dancer graduates. By the next fall, the new dancers have learned enough to participate in the regular dances, but can polish their skills with Tuesday evening classes and workshops around the area. The club hosts a dance two Saturday nights a month. Current co-president, Pat Vogel, says "Learning to square dance is a commitment because lessons are every week and they build on each other, so a person can't come one week, be gone for three, and return. So much is taught. . but it's fun because of the music, the laughter, and the friendships."

The music of today's square dance isn't what most of us would expect, either. The Hoedowners often feature songs classified as oldies, country and western, modern, spiritual - even Lady Gaga was heard on a recent evening. One member said, "If it's a really popular song, someone has probably written a square dance routine to it."



Whether one is interested in the social connections, the physical activity, or just loves good music, square dancing is alive and well in the metro area. Over and over, the members continually shared the same idea - "Come have a good time with us. Square dancing is good for the mind, soul, and body."