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**In the steps of kings  
The St. Augustine Art Association  
becomes a royal ballroom once a  
month when local dancers recreate  
the majestic movements of past  
generations.**

**By TIFFANY AUMANN  
Compass Editor**

. A small band of dancers has

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discovered one doesn't  
need modern frills to  
have a good time --  
simply a healthy dose of  
music and a sure-footed  
partner.

These dancers have  
found English Country Dancing, a form of dance  
once practiced by kings and courts, featured in films like "Pride  
and Prejudice" and a favorite pastime of president George  
Washington.

It's enchantingly graceful, rooted in history, and according to  
these dancers, a great way to meet people and just a lot of fun.

The St. Augustine English Country Dancers meet the fourth  
Friday of each month at 7:45 p.m. at the St. Augustine Art  
Association, 22 Marine St.



Once a month, a group of  
dancers travels back in time to  
enjoy frivolity of old.

*By TIFFANY AUMANN, Staff*



Jubilee band member Sandra  
Arozqueta plays the bass during an  
English Country Dance.

Long lines of couples face each  
other in two rows, the violin begins  
to sing and a dozen skirts  
commence swirling like fluid tops.  
Proper gentlemen take their ladies  
by the hand, leading them in  
circles, passing them by with  
dipped shoulders and stealing  
waggish glances.

The steps are simple, smooth and  
even. Even children and  
newcomers, quickly recruited into  
the weaving throng, seem to follow  
along easily.

"This is dancing for people who  
don't do any other kind of dancing,"

enthusiastically said Ron Gemmell, who donned a crisp kilt and knee socks and whisked a surprised first-timer into the fold.

Despite the friendliness of the dancers and guiding prompts of the dance's caller, some people remain intimidated to try something new.

"It's hard to get people to come the first time. It's confusing the first time," said Charlie Dyer, founder of the loose-knit group and caller for the dances. "I tell people to come three times and then it will click."



Ron and Barbara Gemmell cut the rug.

Dyer compared the learning process to the building of sentences -- once you get the words, or moves, down pat, it's easy to string them together.

"We had a great time," said Karen Rochelle, who had brought her daughter along to December's dance for their first visit. "We'll be back. It's just a lovely feeling."

Dyer first learned English Country Dancing in Connecticut and started a group in Jacksonville two years ago. While meeting with Contra dancers, he began to occasionally introduce English Country dances to mix. They were well-received and a splinter group was formed for those who wanted to pursue the more reserved dance style. Although Contra dancing is more quickly recognized by most, it evolved from English Country Dancing. Dyer lovingly described Contra as English Country's "raucous grandchild."



Rick Haven, left, awaits his turn while the rings of dancers swirl about.

Because their 'ballroom' at the Church of the Good Shepherd was not air conditioned, the group moved to the St. Augustine Art Association about a year and a half ago. Shortly thereafter, the dancers added more merriment to the festivities by adding live music.

Traveling from Orange City and Altamonte Springs, the musicians of Jubilee make lengthy journeys once a month to accompany the dancers. Motivated by a passion for the music, the string ensemble plays for a portion of the donations, which is shared with the art association for rental of the hall. Visitors are asked for a \$7 contribution.

The majority of the music was written for its own corresponding dance and comes from the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet the band also performs Christmas carols and classically-flavored modern pieces by composers and selections by Henry Purcell.

The earliest recorded history of English Country Dancing was put on the page in 1651 by John Playford in "The English Country Dancing Master." Its roots, however, are surmised to trail back even further into the 1400s.

"For the next 150 years it was THE social entertainment for the upper class," said Dyer, who has a collection of approximately 300 dances, although only a sliver of that number are performed on a regular basis.

"(Contra dancing) is peasant dancing," Sam Lindenbaum said. "This is court dancing."

"This is much more delicate, much more refined," joined his wife Ella.

One might picture a reserved, regal affair, but the genteel dancing, followed by bows and curtsies, is far from stuffy. From 25 to 35 dancers young and old and from all walks of life drift about light-footed with wide smiles upon their faces.

Sam first discovered English Country Dancing in the 1950s. He was seeing a girl at Juilliard -- "Not me," piped his wife -- and wanted to get to know her better.

"You want to see the girl so you have to be doing what she's doing," he said.

Eventually his romantic interest in the girl faded but his passion for the dance was never lost. It is the "lovely music" that continues to fascinate him.

"We have to seek (places to dance)," said Sam, who learned of St. Augustine's group after he met Dyer at a Contra dance festival. He and Ella, of Hilton Head, decided to make a stop on their journey to Boca Raton last week just to take their turns on the dance floor.

Tailor Rick Haven agreed that finding followers of the dance style is not easy.

"There's a lot of Contra dancing in Florida but it's hard to find English Country," he said.

New England states offer a greater abundance of such dances, according to several dancers.

Haven and his wife Carol were once members of the Williamsburg Heritage Dancers. It was in Virginia that Rick began dancing, lured to dances to research what type of clothes to sew for dancers' commissions.

Although the dancers at the art association range from casual to elegant in attire, clothing was once played a sportive role in the social events.

Carol explained the dances and dance attire were useful means of attracting a mate in the 1600s and 1700s.

In those days, sacque back and polonaise dresses were the fashion and were held up by dance tapes, so not to tangle a dancer's feet. But it was the pockets of the dresses that were most unusual. Separate from the seams of the gowns, the pockets were tied around the waist and accessed through slits in the dresses. If a young woman wanted the attention of a suitor, she wore her pocket, ornately embroidered to show her skillful needlework, on the outside of her dress and thereby announced her romantic interest.

Many of the dancers commented that they feel the flirtacious nature of the dance continues today.

"This has a lot of playfulness. You can sorta flirt in a gentle way," explained Meredith Munsey, who flitted across the floor in a burgundy colored gown fitted with pannier to recall the wide-hipped fashion of yore.

Dyer agreed.

"When you know what you're doing and there's this tension with our partner, it's a great feeling," he said.

English Country dance lost its popularity with the acceptance of the waltz, which was at first deemed scandalous because of the close physical contact required. It has yet to make a roaring comeback, but in St. Augustine there is still a chance to dance like royalty -- simply slide on some dancing slippers.