The OcraFolk Music and Storytelling Festival in June, the Ocracoke Independence Day celebration, and the Ocracoke Fig Festival in August are opportunities for islanders and visitors to come together on the dance floor. As many couples as can comfortably fit in the room form a circle. When the musicians strike up a lively tune, the caller, who almost always dances, announces, “Honor your partner,” then “All join hands, and circle left.” So begins the traditional Ocracoke Island Square Dance.

Although it is called a square dance, it would more accurately be described as a big circle dance. The dance proceeds in three parts: the initial big circle, a middle section of one or more two-couple figures, and a final big circle or grand march.

In 1992 Bob Dalsemer, president of the Country Dance and Song Society, visited Ocracoke and was surprised to discover a “big circle” dance tradition on the island. For many years, this style of dance was thought to exist only in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

It is time to revise the history of this dance.

The big circle dance is almost certainly a form of the English country dance. In 1651 Thomas Harper in London published *The English Dancing Master* by John Playford, a manual containing more than one hundred tunes and dance figures. The manual documented many figures, including dances in the "round" for an indefinite number of couples, and sets (geometric formations) for two or more couples. The Scots-Irish "Square Four" and other four-handed reels also influenced the earliest settlers from the British Isles.

For years, big circle dances were occasions for socializing in many coastal communities in Virginia, Maryland, and Eastern North Carolina. The Outer Banks was no exception. The Ocracoke square dance was held regularly from the mid-1700s until the early 1960s. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the dances, with eight to twelve couples, were often held in private homes. Later they were held in public spaces, including the lodge of the old Doxsee Clam Factory, on the dock at Captain Bill Gaskill's Pamlico Inn, at Stanley Wahab's Silver Lake Inn (now the Island Inn Commons), in the old Ocracoke School Recreation Hall, an abandoned WWII building that had been moved to school property, and in the building that now houses the Ocracoke Variety Store.

By the middle of the twentieth century several factors combined to nearly extinguish the dance. The establishment of a WWII naval base on the island and subsequent improvements in transportation and communication, including paved roads, ferry service, telephones, radios, and television, led to a dramatic increase in connections to the outside world and to tourism. With the steady increase in visitors an ever-larger number of attendees were unfamiliar with the dance. There was no precedent for teaching the dance to newcomers, and islanders soon became frustrated with the confusion and disorder that resulted. Rock & roll and the jitterbug, the popular music and dance of the 1950s, soon displaced the traditional island square dance.

Although there were occasional attempts to revive the dance in the 1970s, these endeavors were thwarted by the steady decrease in the number of islanders who were familiar with the dance, and by the lack of a qualified teacher.

By the time Bob Dalsemer visited Ocracoke, it had been thirty to sixty years since his interviewees had actually performed the dance, and, sadly, no one alive was able to reconstruct it faithfully. However, in 1996 a small group of islanders gathered in the Ocracoke School gymnasium, along with several musicians, to attempt to recreate the Ocracoke Island square dance. It soon became apparent that our bodies remembered what our minds had forgotten. In the course of one evening the essential elements of the dance

were recaptured.

To my knowledge, no other coastal communities in Maryland, Virginia, or North Carolina have maintained a living tradition of the big circle dance. However, as Dalsemer observed, finding a long tradition of the big circle square dance style on Ocracoke, "extends the range of this form well outside the Appalachian Mountains and suggests a variety of possibilities regarding dance origin and migration."[1]

Undoubtedly, as settlers moved westward, they carried their dance traditions with them. The big circle dance is to this day a vibrant tradition in the mountains of North Carolina, Virginia, East Tennessee, and West Virgina. It can even be found in Ohio, Indiana, and other areas of the Mid-west. Unfortunately, this dance form has gone extinct everywhere on the coast, except on Ocracoke Island.

Although the Ocracoke square dance is no longer held every Saturday night, as in years past, it is kept alive at special events throughout the year. There may be some confusion as newcomers learn the figures, but the enthusiasm, excitement, and broad smiles on the faces of dancers young and old are testaments to the value of holding hands, looking your neighbor in the eye, moving to the rhythm of lively music, and feeling part of a welcoming community.

The Ocracoke Square Dance is an important tradition that captures the spirit of this extraordinary village.

Click here for complete instructions for performing this dance.

[1] "Old Time Square Dancing on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina: Notes from Interviews with Ocracoke Island Dancers, September 13-15, 1992" by Bob Dalsemer in *Country Dance and Song*, Volume 26, July 1996.