

# CONTRA DANCING DEFINITIONS

Compiled by Dottie Welch, Nova Scotia, 2016

## **Allemande Right (or Left)**

Two dancers firmly join right (or left) hands about shoulder high with elbows down and close together for a quick turn (Pigeon Wing). Pull away from each other while turning to produce a firm supportive tension. Both walk forward around each other. Once around brings dancers back to starting location, facing direction determined by the next call. Allemande Left Once and a Half around will exchange the location of the two dancers.

## **Balance**

This is a four beat action done on one spot. The Forward and Back version or the Step-Swing version is often the prelude to a swing.

**Forward and Back Balance:** Face each other and join both hands. (Men palms up, ladies palms down.) Step towards each other with your right foot, step away from each other with the left foot. Pull each other gently as you step towards, push gently as you step away.

**Step-Swing Balance:** Holding both hands, step on the right foot, swing the left foot across, step on the left, swing the right foot across. This is sometimes repeated for a Double Balance.

**Side-to-Side Balance:** This is usually used in a wave of four or more dancers facing in alternate directions. Step to the right on right foot, touch beside right with left foot while looking at dancer on the right, step to the left on left foot, touch beside left with right foot while looking at dancer on the left.

**Each Four Balance Double:** A group of four dancers work together in a small circle moving towards the center of their circle for a forward, touch and away from the center for a back, touch. Repeat the forward and back to make it "double".

## **Box the Gnat**

This is a square dance call that begins from two facing dancers of opposite gender. The dancers loosely join their right hands, and raise them to make an arch. Maintaining hand contact the lady turns left and goes under the arch (back to the gent) while the gent turns right and walks forward around the lady. Both dancers turn half around and end facing each other having exchanged positions. (Also see Swat the Flea.)

## **Butterfly Whirl**

Usually from a Star Promenade, the two dancers in the center push off from each other to begin the turn and then the gent and lady with arms around each other's waist turn full around with the center dancer backing up and the outside dancer walking forward. A common sequence is the following: gentlemen do a left allemande, then "scoop up" their partner by putting their arm around their lady's waist for a Star Promenade. Next the gents push off with their left hands and the two couples butterfly whirl back to long facing lines, or it might lead into a Ladies Chain.

## **California Twirl**

A normal couple reverses their facing direction by having the lady go under their upraised joined hands as both dancers move forward in a small semi-circle.

(Also see **Dixie Twirl** which is an As Couples version of California Twirl.)

### **Cast Down**

In a contra line, the designated dancers face up and turn outwards to move down the outside of the set. From a position in or near the ladies' line the turn is to the right, and from a position in or near the gents' line the turn is to the left. The call may be Cast Down around 1 or 2 or perhaps Cast Down to the foot.

### **Cast Off**

Each active dancer and the adjacent inactive dancer turn side by side three-quarters around, with the active dancer moving forward and the inactive dancer moving backward, until both dancers are in line facing in, the active couple ends below the inactives. (At least 4 beats are allowed, sometimes 8 beats.)

From a wave or mini-wave, two designated dancers who are adjacent and facing in opposite directions hold their adjacent hands and turn three-quarters around pivoting on their handhold.

### **Circle Left / Circle Right**

Circles are usually danced with the other couple in your group of four. Join hands in a circle. In most situations when gents and ladies hold hands, men have their palms facing up, ladies facing down. You should be looking at the back of the person next to you and walking forward (*not* facing the centre of the circle and stepping sideways). Eight steps are allowed for once completely around the circle.

When fractions are used a Half Circle will exchange the two couples, a 1/4 or 3/4 Circle will move dancers 1 place or 3 places respectively. The ending facing direction is flexible and will depend on the next call.

### **Contra Corners (Turn Contra Corners)**

In a proper contra, or triplet, the two dancers of each active couple turn each other with the right hand halfway around, turn their first contra corner (dancer diagonally to their right at the start) with the left hand once around, turn each other with the right hand about half around, and turn their second contra corner (dancer diagonally to their left at the start) with the left hand once around. Each turn is done in about four counts of music so that the entire figure uses 16 counts. The next call is often Actives Swing. If there is no Swing, use a right turn with partner to return to the starting place or do as directed.

### **Courtesy Turn**

The gent takes the lady's left hand in his left hand, and puts his right hand behind her back (usually where her right hand is resting on her back palm out). The dancers are side by side as they turn around to their left to end facing across the set.

### **Dixie Twirl**

From a line of four dancers, the center pair arches and all dancers in the line maintain their hand holds. The right end person (taking the dancer originally on their left along behind) leads through the arch and on towards the opposite end of the line. Meanwhile the two dancers on the left side of the line walk around to their right in a half circle. The result is a line now facing in the opposite direction with the dancers in the same order as when they began. Dixie Twirl can be described as a version of California Twirl in which each couple is acting like one dancer.

## **Dosado (Dos-à-dos) (Do-si-do)**

Two facing dancers, hold arms in a relaxed position down by their sides as they walk towards each other passing right shoulders. They slide sideways back-to-back and then back up (walk backwards, don't turn around) passing each other by the left shoulder to return to they started. Some of the more experienced dancers add one or more spins to their left as they move around the other dancer. When dancing with beginners it will help their orientation if spins are kept to a minimum.

**Left Dosado** is a similar action beginning by passing left shoulders .

**As Couples Dosado** is a Dosado done by two facing couples who each work as a unit so the ladies pass right shoulders, the couples slide back-to-back, and then the couples back up with the gents passing left shoulders.

## **Down the Centre Four in Line**

All dancers face down the hall, away from the music in short lines of four people. There are usually 6 beats to walk down, 2 beats to turn around and 4 beats or more to come back. The simplest way to turn around is "Turn Alone" (drop hands and individually turn half around on the spot). The recommended turning direction is to face the other half of your couple as you turn around (that way everybody has someone to smile at as they turn). There are other ways to turn the line around – see California Twirl and Wheel Around for some options.

## **Figure Eight**

From two couples facing in long lines, the designated dancers will individually dance the path of a figure eight beginning by moving between the other two dancers and across the set with the lady having right of way. For description purposes suppose the starting point is a standard improper duple beginning with couple 1 crossed over. Lady 1 begins by moving down between the 2s and across the set, out around behind lady 2, into the center and down again between the 2s and across the set to come up around behind gent 2 and back to her starting point. Meanwhile, Gent 1 begins immediately after lady 1 and moves down between the 2s and across the set, out around behind gent 2, into the center and down again between the 2s and across the set to come up around behind lady 2 and back to his starting point.

## **Half Figure Eight**

From two couples facing in long lines, this is simply half of a Figure Eight. The designated dancers will each dance one loop of the figure eight beginning by moving between the other two dancers and across the set with the lady having right of way. Each dancer continues by going out around the dancer who was diagonally opposite them to end facing in across the set from their starting point.

## **Gypsy**

This is akin to a swing without physical contact, arms by your sides. Two dancers walk around each other while maintaining eye contact over their right shoulder. Usually "melts down" into a swing.

## **Hey for Four**

This move has wonderful flowing motion. There are several variations in starting formation, but it is typically one couple facing another across the set or all four dancers lined up somewhere in the Hey pattern. Those facing start first, followed almost immediately by the rest. Each dancer walks along a three loop pattern while crossing to the other side of the set, looping around, re-crossing the set, and looping around back to the starting point. Sometimes dancers leave out a small part at the end in

order to adjust smoothly into the next call. The fun part is that everybody does this at the same time, crossing paths in a weaving motion.

**Rules of the Road:** Pass one shoulder in the centre of the set with the person of the same gender; pass the other shoulder with the person of the opposite gender on the side of the set; individually loop in the same direction as the going out pass and then pass the same shoulder again coming back in.

**Example from facing couples with ladies designated as leading:** Ladies pass right; all pass opposite gender left; ladies loop left while gents pass right; all pass opposite gender left. That is Half a Hey (8 beats), repeat it all one more time for a Full Hey (16 beats).

### **Hey for Three**

Similar to a Hey for Four but the path has only two loops. Suppose dancers A and B are facing with C behind B. The two facing dancers pass right (A and B), those now facing (A and C) pass left while B loops right, new facing dancers (B and C) pass right while A loops left, A and B pass left while C loops right, A and C pass right while B loops left, B and C pass left while A loops right, C loops left. All are back where they started.

### **Ladies Chain / Courtesy Turn**

This call begins from two couples facing each other across the set with each couple having the gent on the left and the lady on the right. Ladies extend right hands to each other and pull by. Meanwhile the gent adjusts to his right ready to take the coming lady's left hand in his left hand. Ladies place their right hand behind their right hip, palm facing out. Gents place their right hand on the lady's right hand and wheel (or scoop) her around. The gent backs up and pivots while the lady continues to walk forward, until both are facing back across the set as a normal couple. This is an old call so think about the elegant action as the gent helps the lady turn in her hoop skirt.

### **Long Lines Forward and Back**

Join hands with the people next to you on your side of the set making long lines running the length of the hall. One long line faces the other across the set. The two lines walk towards each other for a count of four and then back away from each other for four. Count: "Right, two, three, touch. Back, two, three, touch." The challenge is for everyone to do it with the music at exactly the same time.

### **Mad Robin (Sashay Round)**

From two facing couples, the adjacent dancers do a sideways version of Dosado while each is facing the person across the set. The caller must specify who goes in front.

### **Orbit**

While two dancers are doing something in the middle, the other two dancers move in a circle around the center dancers.

### **Pass Through (Pass Thru)**

Two couples or two lines of dancers move forward to meet; each person passes the opposite person by the right shoulder and awaits the next call.

### **Petronella Turn**

Four dancers, equally spaced around a small ring, each move into the position of the dancer on their right in four steps while individually turning clockwise. The name of this call comes from a traditional contra dance that uses this action. The folk process has added a "clap-clap" of hands on beats 3.5 and 4 of the 4-beat movement. Usually these turns are preceded by a four dancer balance.

## **Poussette**

From facing couples, each dancer joins both hands with the dancer they are facing. Hands should be chest high with elbows bent and some muscular resistance in the arms. As designated by the caller, one gent pushes forward while the other gent pulls backward until it is possible for those pushing to slide past each other back-to-back. Then the gents reverse rolls to pull or push their partner back into the contra lines. When the two couples have exchanged places a **Half Poussette** has been completed. Continue the same pull or push motion until the couples can again slide past each other back-to-back. The gents again reverse rolls to move their partners back into the original position. This completes a **Full Poussette**. Some dances call for a series of alternating direction Half Poussettes to move the top couple down the line in a weaving action around a new couple each time.

## **Promenade**

Normal couples (lady on the gent's right side) move forward in the designated direction (the default is a counterclockwise direction). Couples reach across to join right hands like a hand shake and join their left hands underneath. There are other styling variations: Varsouvienne position has both of the lady's hands up in the air near her shoulders, gent holding her left with his left and reaching behind her shoulders to hold her right with his right. Also the Courtesy Turn position is sometimes used.

**Promenade Half** is called when dancers are in long facing lines. Use promenade handholds while gents pass left shoulders and couples move as a unit across to the other line and turn left to face in.

## **Right and Left Through**

From two couples facing each other across the set, each couple with the gent on the left and the lady on the right, facing dancers extend right hands to each other, pull by each other, and place their left hand in the left hand of the dancer who has crossed the set with them. Complete the action with a Courtesy Turn.

From two couples of no specific gender facing each other across, the facing dancers pass each other with right shoulders adjacent. Then each couple wheels half around to their left (dancer on the left backs up while dancer on the right moves forward).

## **Right Hand High, Left Hand Low**

From three dancers holding hands in a line, the middle dancer raises his/her right hand, the dancer on the left walks under the raised hand, followed by the middle dancer turning under his/her own hand, while the dancer on the right walks around behind. The effect is to turn the line around as a unit preserving the order of the dancers.

## **Rollaway (or Rollaway with a Half Sashay)**

From two dancers facing in the same direction and holding adjacent hands, the designated dancer “rolls” across in front of the other dancer, turning a full 360 degrees to end on the other side, as the other dancer steps back and then forward, adjusting sideways as necessary, to move smoothly into the vacated position. The result of the call is to exchange the positions of the two dancers.

## **Sashay**

A Sashay in contra dancing is done by two dancers who join both hands and move sideways using a series of quick “side, close, side, close, ...” steps.

### **Star Left / Star Right**

Stars are usually danced by a group of three or four facing in a small circle or box. For a right hand star, extend your right arm into the centre of the circle. This pivots you slightly so that you are looking at the back of one of the people next to you. Gently grasp that person's wrist. The person behind you will grasp your wrist. Walk forward, circling around your joined hands. Eight beats to get once around and back to where you started. In some dances, it is more appropriate to use a handshake grip with the person opposite you to form the star, rather than the wrist grip. In other dances a "finger tips up and just touching" star is preferred. This latter minimizes fumbling and makes transitions to and from other formations easier, but it is not as cohesive a unit.

### **Star Promenade**

Star Promenade usually begins with two gents (or ladies) turning left or right in the center of the set, then each active dancer reaches out and picks up (or scoops up) another lady (or gent) by putting their arm around the back of their waist. Each picked up dancer also puts their arm around the others waist or on their shoulder. The large star of four couples continues to move forward pivoting around the center handhold of the originally active dancers. The caller must specify the amount of turn or simply give the next call if a specific distance is not important.

### **Star Through (Star Thru)**

Star Thru is a square dance call that starts from a gent facing a lady. The gent places his right hand against the lady's left hand, palm to palm with fingers up, to make an arch. As the dancers move forward the lady does a one quarter (90 degrees) left face turn under the arch, while the gent does a one quarter (90 degrees) turn to the right moving around the lady. The dancers end side by side and facing in the same direction.

### **Swat the Flea**

Swat the Flea is a left hand version of Box the Gnat. Beginning from two facing dancers of opposite gender, the dancers loosely join their left hands, and raise them to make an arch. Maintaining hand contact the lady turns right and going under the arch (back to the gent) while the gent turns left and walks forward around the lady. Both dancers turn half around and end facing each other having exchanged positions.

### **Swing**

Master the swing and you're guaranteed to have fun at a contra dance. Partners face each other in "ballroom" position (Gent's right-hand flat on the woman's back, lady's left hand on gent's right upper arm or right shoulder blade, other hands joined and extended out to the side). Each dancer adjusts sideways to their left so the two bodies are offset enough to allow forward motion around each other. Walk forward around each other in time with the music. In 8 beats dancers should be able to go around twice. End by pointing the joined hands in the next facing direction and then releasing hands and opening up so that the lady is on the gent's right side.

To use the **Buzz Step** place right feet near a central pivot point with the outsides of the right feet adjacent. Use a scooting motion to move forward with the right foot moving in a small circle around the pivot point and the left foot pushing. Avoid bobbing up and down, it should be a smooth and level motion with both dancers moving in sync with the music, one scoot per beat (step on the right on the down beat, and on the left on the up beat). Lean slightly away from and look at your partner.

### **Turn Alone**

Each person turns around in place. It is polite for dancers to turn towards the person they are currently interacting with. When in a line of four, center dancers should turn towards the near end dancer and the end dancers should turn toward the center of the line.

### **Turn as a Couple**

From a couple with hands joined, the couple turns half around in such a way that the lady remains on the same side of the gent (normally the lady is on the gent's right-hand side). The two common options are a California Twirl or a Wheel Around.

### **Two-Hand Turn**

Two dancers join hands with each other and rotate clockwise as a couple. Hands are held at chest height with elbows slightly bent. Hold with supporting tension and move with a smooth walking step. If moving through restricted space pull elbows in and relax again when space allows.

### **Veer Left / Veer Right**

From facing couples, each couple works as a unit and moves forward and diagonally in the given direction to end in a two-faced line.

From a two-faced line, the given direction must be toward the center of the line. Each couple works as a unit and moves forward and diagonally in the given direction to finish in back-to-back couples.

### **Weathervane (Across / Full Around)**

From facing couples the dancers Veer Right first to make a two-faced line. Sometimes the call begins in a two-faced line, which could be either left-handed or right-handed. The dancers adjacent between the couples link arms (hook elbows or use your standard arm hold). The couples then move forward around the link point, pivoting like a weathervane swinging in the wind. Weathervane Across would end after the couples have exchanged places (equal to a Couples Trade). A Weathervane Full Around would end after a complete rotation back to the starting point.

### **Wheel Around**

A pair of dancers with nearest hands joined reverse direction by rotating as a unit, with the right hand person moving forward as the left hand person backs around. This movement is usually done in four counts of music.

### **Wheelbarrow**

Wheelbarrow is the description for pairs of facing dancers with both hands joined. Usually the caller designates one of the dancers to push forward 4 beats and then pull backwards. (Also see Poussette.)