

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FEDERAL AND STATE AFFAIRS  
House Bill 2385  
February 19, 2020

Chairman Barker, Vice-Chairman Averkamp, Ranking Member Ruiz, and distinguished Committee Members,

My name is Allen Hahn. I am President of the Kansas Square Dance Callers Association (KSDCA). First, let me say that we have no issue with Polka being recognized as an important dance form in the state of Kansas. Kansas is partly made up of immigrants from Germanic and Slovak countries who brought their ethnic dance forms with them. However, we believe it would be a great oversight not to recognize the important part Square Dancing has played and continues to play in the history of our state.

In the remainder of this document, I hope to show you why we would recommend amending H.B. 2385 to designate Square Dance as the State Folk Dance and to designate Polka as the State Ethnic Dance.

KSDCA is an organization of 34 square dance callers, round dance cuers, clogging instructors, line dance instructors, and contra prompters from across the state. KSDCA's members must demonstrate that they are able to lead dancers in the forms of dance that make up "square dancing" in Kansas. They are also required to be licensed by BMI and ASCAP, the two major music licensing organizations in the U.S., to publicly use music in their programs. Also represented in my comments is the Kansas Square Dance Association (KSDA), an organization of over 450 square dancers around the state, whose Presidents are Larry & Laurel Erickson. In Kansas and other states, the umbrella term "square dance" includes: square dances (8 dancers in a square formation acting as a team), round dances (essentially cued ballroom dancing done by couples in a circular dancer arrangement), line dances (a series of foot and leg movements done individually to music with dancers in lines), contra dances (a series of square dance movements done from opposing lines of dancers), clogging (a special form of tap dancing developed in Appalachia), and heritage dances (older forms of square dancing). Each of these types of dance is distinct, but one or more are often done sequentially at a typical square dance.

Square dancing is a form of dance that evolved from the country circle dances of England and the courtly quadrilles of France in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. History books record that it was brought to this country and it developed in different forms from New England to Appalachia. From there it was carried west by the settlers that traversed the Plains, some over the many pioneer trails that cross Kansas. As the dance moved west, it took on a uniquely American flavor that continues to evolve. In the mid 1920's, Henry Ford (yes, THAT Henry Ford) became dismayed at new forms of dance that were gaining popularity in America, and he sought to return to older dance forms. While visiting New England, he became enamored with square dancing, brought it back to Detroit, wrote a book about it, and promoted it. In the late 1930's in Colorado, an educator named Lloyd "Pappy" Shaw began to research the pioneer dances

from old-time fiddlers, who were also callers of the dances, and wrote the book, Cowboy Dances, detailing specifically how to do the movements and call the dances. He then led a team of high school dancers, the Cheyenne Mountain Dancers, all around the country demonstrating this folk dance. Soon, educators from around the country began attending summer seminars to learn about what Shaw called the “American Folk Dance”. Square dancing began to enjoy a renewed popularity.

In the 1940’s and 1950’s, with the development of good sound amplification and recorded studio-produced music, Modern Western Square Dancing became available to more people. The fiddler was replaced with studio-recorded instrumental music, allowing the caller to be his own one-man band. Square dancers began to organize themselves into groups, which were called clubs, though dancers do not need to be members of clubs to square dance. Clubs provided an entity to obtain the services of a caller and to procure a place to dance. They also organized the recruitment and training of new dancers. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, a square dance caller could load up his equipment and travel anywhere he could find a group of dancers. Thus, square dance clubs could be found in many towns and cities across Kansas, from Goodland to Pittsburg and Liberal to Atchison, and everywhere in between.

Through the years and still today, when some schools plan for Kansas Day, they include square dancing. I have a colleague in Hutchinson who, for several years, has visited elementary schools with a group of dancers on Kansas Day to demonstrate and involve the students in square dancing. Square dancing has often been in the Physical Education curriculum of many schools. As reported in the Hutchinson News, Hutchinson High School has a 52-year tradition of offering square dancing to their students the week before Christmas break. It has even included an alumni dance! It is important to note that square dancing is really an activity that people participate in, not one that they watch. Organizations from time to time plan square dance activities. I personally have been asked to call for school classes, family reunions, community recreation programs, private social gatherings, college student activities, Girl Scout events, church events, nursing home entertainment, and parades. In most of these cases, I am teaching those in attendance how to square dance.

Currently in Kansas, there are roughly 35-40 active clubs located in Chanute, Coffeyville, El Dorado, Emporia, Gardner, Great Bend, Harper, Hays, Hesston, Hutchinson, Lawrence, Manhattan, Osawatomie, Ottawa, Park City, Prairie Village, Salina, Shawnee, Topeka, and Wichita. Most of these clubs meet one or two times per month. Any dancer is welcome at any club. We estimate there are more than 600 active dancers across the State, based on organizational memberships. It is difficult to know precisely, because not all square dancers are members of KSDA or even clubs, for that matter. The oldest continuously active club in the state, Circle 8, formerly of Newton and now dancing in Park City, has been in existence since 1945, and 10 clubs are over 50 years old!

Square dancers do a lot of travelling to their own clubs, other clubs near and far, and larger events throughout the state and surrounding states. We have two publications within the state, “Travel On” and “Happy Tracks”, that keep dancers informed about when and where they

can find a dance as well as providing information of general interest to dancers. Many dancers look forward to the next dance and arrange their schedules to fit the dance calendar.

Square dancing has some healthful benefits, too. Some doctors have recommended square dancing as an enjoyable way of keeping the mind and body active. Square dancing is strictly alcohol-free because, just as in driving, alcohol impairs reaction time and the ability to correctly execute called dance movements. A dancer must be able to hear and execute a call, which keeps the mind active, and in an average 2-1/2-hour dance, a dancer may take 7,000 to 10,000 steps, which keeps the body active. It also relieves stress because a dancer, concentrating on the calls and the music, cannot think about anything else. It is a dance for all ages. We have dancers ranging in age from elementary school to over 90 years old. From a social aspect, we like to refer to square dancing as "Friendship Set to Music".

Square dancing is done in many venues. I personally was first introduced to square dancing in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in Shawnee by our school superintendent, who had a large group of 6<sup>th</sup> graders after school. My wife was introduced to it through 4-H in Marshall County, where square dancing was part of the 4-H Day competition. We were introduced to each other in 1967 through a student square dance club on the campus of Kansas State University. We have been actively dancing since then. Demonstration dancing has been done at the State Fair in Hutchinson for many years. Last fall we had a full day of square dancing at the Fair, and we will be doing so again in 2020. Some of the Hutchinson High School dancers demonstrated at this event, as well. The original Croco Hall in Topeka (on Croco Road) was designed and paid for by square dancers and featured a large wooden dance floor specifically for square dancing. Subsequently it suffered a fire and was rebuilt, then rebuilt again near Tecumseh when the land was condemned for a new Turnpike interchange. The challenge of rebuilding Croco Hall twice is a testimony to the commitment of square dancers to their activity.

A highlight of our year is the Kansas State Square Dance Convention in Salina each June. In 2019 there were 340 registrations for the 3-day event. Besides being a Kansas event, there were many dancers from Nebraska and other states present. In 2018, "Visit Salina" reported an economic impact to Salina of \$101,000. This was a conservative figure because it was from a formula based on number of nights booked by dancers at the host hotel and did not include the KOA campground and other hotels. In 2019 the Heart of America Singles Square Dance Association (HASSDA), a group covering the six-state area of Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, held their annual dance in July. In 2013, when it was in Manhattan, 360 square dancers were registered. In 2019, when it was again in Manhattan, 435 registered for the 3-day event. These dancers came from the six states, but there were also dancers from farther away. It will again be in Manhattan in 2020.

In 2008, Wichita was host to the 57<sup>th</sup> National Square Dance Convention. There were 6,000 registrations from all over the U.S. and from nine foreign countries, including Japan and Germany. It was estimated the economic impact to Kansas was \$2.5M for the 5-day event. In 2018, when the 67<sup>th</sup> National Square Dance Convention was in Kansas City, MO, Kansas dancers

were heavily involved in planning for, helping with, and attending the Convention. The economic impact was felt in Kansas as well as Missouri.

Since 2009, the Headquarters for CALLERLAB, the international organization of professional square dance callers, has been in Topeka. CALLERLAB employs 4 people in Kansas and 1 in Indiana. This 1,440-member organization has been responsible for standardizing square dance movements around the world and providing educational materials to callers and dancers alike on precisely how to do those movements. This allows a square dancer to dance from Maine to California, Japan, Germany, or Australia and feel right at home. All dance commands are given in English worldwide. CALLERLAB's members live all over the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia, Australia, and anywhere else square dancing is done. CALLERLAB has created pamphlets on almost any aspect of square dancing, including how to set up a Community Dance Program in one's local area to introduce square dancing to the public. CALLERLAB was also responsible for working out an arrangement with BMI and ASCAP to shift the licensing for listening to recorded square dance music from the clubs to the callers to make it simpler for clubs.

Beyond all the numbers, square dancing is just plain FUN! Square dancers will talk about the toe-tapping music, the excitement of solving a choreographic puzzle, the whirling skirts, the camaraderie, the chant of the caller, and the energy in the room. We hear square dancers talk about their "square dance family". The smiles on their faces say it all. You are welcome to visit anytime. The door is always open!

According to the United Square Dancers of America, 31 states, including all 4 of the states surrounding Kansas have made Square Dancing either the State Dance or the State Folk Dance. Some states have more than one official state dance.

KSDCA, KSDA, and the square dancers of Kansas think that now is the time for Kansas to recognize the importance of square dance and polka dance to the state.

#### **SUGGESTED WORDING OF PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO H.B. 2385**

**An ACT designating Polka as the State Ethnic Dance and Square Dance as the State Folk Dance.**

***Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Kansas:***

**Section 1. Polka, a dance that has been embraced and influenced by a variety of cultures across the state, is hereby designated as the official ethnic dance of the state of Kansas.**

**Section 2. Square Dance, the American folk dance, which embodies the spirit of the Kansas pioneer, and which is called, cued, or prompted to the dancers and includes squares, rounds, clogging, contra, line, and heritage dances, is hereby designated as the official folk dance of the state of Kansas.**

**Section 3. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after its publication in the statute book.**

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Hesston, KS