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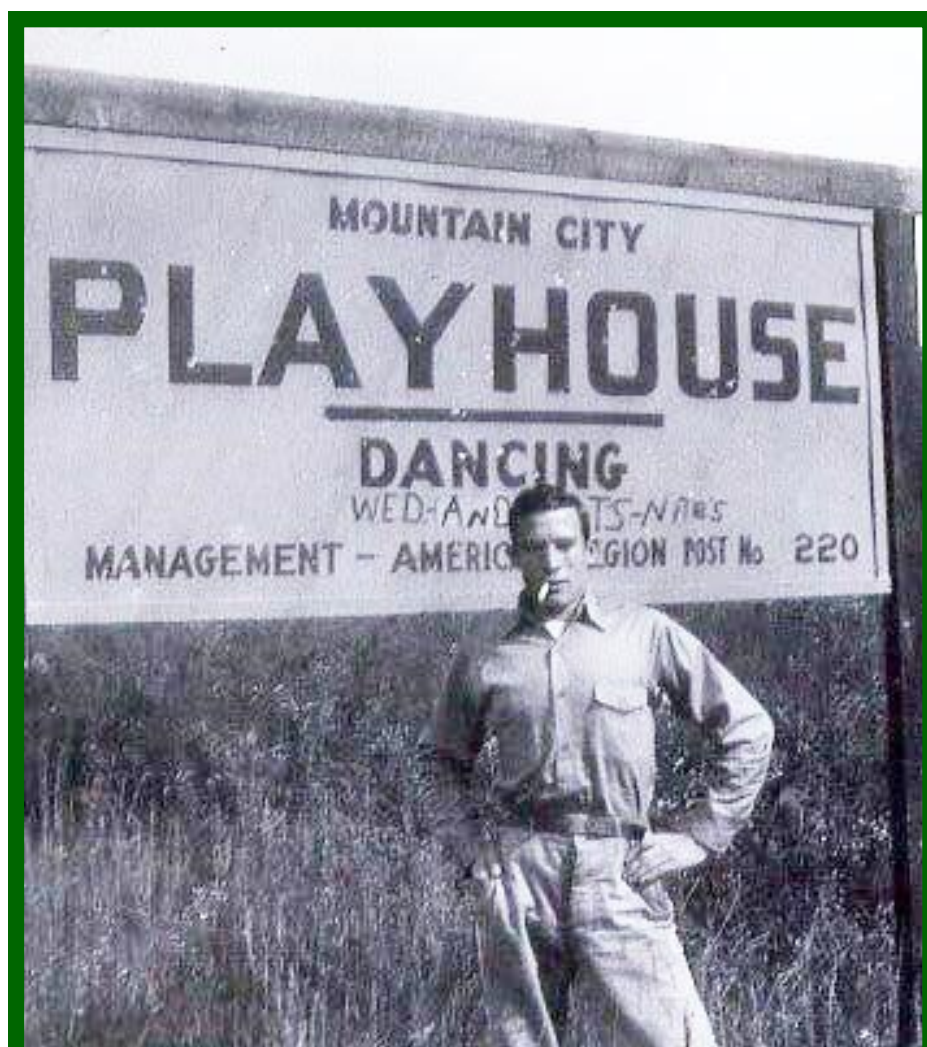
The Mountain City Playhouse

“Mountain square dancin’ is nothin’ but figurations done on the dance floor by human bein’s,” said an old-timer to a Foxfire interviewer.

That description pretty well sums up a tradition as old as this nation, with roots in European dances like Irish jigs and Scottish reels, as well as waltzes and other forms of “round” dancing. A square dance is a dance for four couples (eight dancers) arranged in a square, with one couple on each side, facing the middle of the square. Square dances were first documented in 17th century England but were also quite common in France and throughout Europe. They came to North America with the European settlers. Jigs, reels and waltzes all meshed to influence Appalachian square dancing and its offshoots, buck dancing and clogging, and in turn to become the major influence on

today’s Western-style square dancing. “Buck” dancing is an individual “folk dance” where the dancer’s shoes, often with metal taps ap-

plied, are used as percussion instruments, striking the floor rhythmically with heels and/or toes. Some say its origins are with African-Americans



Circa 1960, the sign on the highway with Willie Giles posing in front

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during the era of slavery. In any case, “buck” dancers were the individual stars of the Playhouse on Saturday nights in summer.

Nineteen U.S. states have named the square dance as their official state dance, and traditional square dancing could certainly be called the official dance of Rabun County. In Rabun County’s early years, square dances were originally held in homes to provide neighbors with entertainment and social interaction in an era without elaborate transportation and entertainment options. Square dancing at the end of a hard day’s labor was seen as welcome refreshment and was described by all as “good, clean, wholesome fun for all ages.”

As Rabun County’s tourist business grew in the 1920s, dancing was often offered by hotels where visitors and locals intermingled to the sounds of local fiddlers. One hotel in particular was famous for the square dances on its veranda. The Mountain City Hotel, near the intersection of the Black Rock Mountain Road and the north-south highway, often featured the well-known Sheriff Luther Rickman as its caller. In the 1930s, there were also dance halls at Timpson and at Hall’s Boat House in Lakemont as well as in other locations.

World War Two brought a hiatus to dance halls, but from 1946 through 1948, the Clayton Fire Department held square dances every Saturday night in the high school gymnasium. Every dancer paid 50 cents, which went to raise funds for the fire department.

Returning war veterans from the local American Legion Post took over the dances as a fundraiser and bought a building in Mountain City near Cox’s Lake, where a

dance hall called Barron’s Playhouse had once stood before being destroyed by fire. It is unknown when the American Legion building came to be known as the Mountain City Playhouse, but the name probably referenced the dance hall of the 1920s. The 1950s brought dancers from far and wide including many counselors from Rabun’s numerous summer camps and summer residents of Lakes Rabun and Burton. By the 1960s, attendees paid \$3 each or two for \$5 to square dance or just to watch and listen.

A disastrous fire in January of 1963 destroyed the building, but American Legion Post 220 collected

a small amount of insurance and begged and borrowed the rest to raise money for a new building, which opened in May of 1963. The dance floor measured 130 by 70 feet. There was also seating for about 800 spectators and a large stage for shows. Wrestling was often featured on non-dance evenings.

Attendance skyrocketed in the new building. One hallmark of traditional Appalachian



Teenage fun at the P

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square dancing is the use of live music. At the Playhouse these musicians might include a matron like Maude Ivie on piano, a high school student like Alton Smith on drums, or a printer like Duncan Taylor on guitar. Classic songs like “Down Yonder,” “John Henry,” “Alabama Jubilee,” and “San Antonio Rose” were mixed with new-fangled dance crazes

like the Bunny Hop and the Twist.

Callers were extremely important to square dancing, with a “call” referring to the name of a specific dance movement. Traditional Appalachian square dance uses a comparatively small number of calls, usually between ten and thirty, depending on

could be heard from the building’s open doors and windows all over the tiny town. One reporter in 1968 described the scene as “orderly pandemonium.” This report in the Atlanta newspaper suggested that “from late April until the second week in September, the population of Mountain City triples on Saturday night with 1,500 dancers and spectators at the Playhouse.”

Alas, times changed. Young people and their elders found other forms of entertainment calling them to sit home in front of the TV or search out the bright lights of the big city. “Good, clean fun” with a live band and centuries-old music and dance traditions lost its appeal. The Playhouse ceased Saturday night dances in the early 1980s. Square dancing remains, however, an important element in Appalachian cultural history and unforgettable fun to those who experienced it in its heyday at the famous Mountain City Playhouse.



Playhouse, circa 1965

the caller. Some of the famous callers at the Playhouse included Roy York, Larry McClure, and Apple Savage. Caller Roy York, who had been calling square dances for 60 years, yelled out the moves like “Shoot the Star,” “Four-Leaf Clover,” “Left-Hand Allemand” and “Promenade” at maximum volume. The music

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- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.

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Barron's Playhouse in Mountain City was a dance hall and entertainment emporium located on Cox's Lake just a stone's throw from the Playhouse location of the 1950s and 1960s. It burned in the 1920s and was not rebuilt.