

Conversation with Carolyn Russell

On December 16, 1995, while traveling from Anaheim to West L.A., James Hutson recorded a conversation with Carolyn Russell, founder of The Living Tradition, about the origins of her involvement in the contra dance community in Greater Los Angeles. This was part of the research for a history of contradancing in Southern California that was published in the book (*southern California Twirls* (1995) by James Hutson and Jeffrey Spero. What follows is a transcription of that recording, which was made in the noisy cab of Carolyn's truck. It is posted here with permission of the authors. Note that Patty McCollom made slight edits to facilitate posting this article on The Living Tradition Website, with permission from James Hutson.

A Conversation with Carolyn Russell

Recorded and transcribed by James Hutson.

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JH: How did you get involved in organizing dances in the first place?

CR: It started by accident. We had our first — I really don't know. I was playing some contras in the seventies with a band nobody in the contradance group has ever heard of, which was the Goat Hill Stragglers String Band. It was Geoff Glaser, Marian Goldsmith, myself, and some guy I can't remember. There were a number of people who had post-grad work, actually post-doctoral work, at UCI. Marian was a geneticist there,

taught genetics, and Geoff was living with Marian, and he always had a puppet show. I performed with the puppet show as a musician. And the Goat Hill Stragglers did work with the puppet show, and we put on a lot of square dances down at UCI with a guy — I believe there was a guy who had something to do with parking down there; he was a caller, and we worked with him fairly often down there. Then Geoff and Marian moved to the East Coast, around 1978 I think. I'm still in contact with Marian. She's in Japan right now, but she teaches at the University of Rhode Island. I still talk to her several times a year.

JH: Were you aware of the open band at Stoner Park? [referring to a monthly contradance series at a neighborhood park in West Los Angeles]

CR: I wasn't at that time, but right around the time they [Geoff and Marian] left, I found out about those dances, and I went over. I think the first dance that I attended was at Marine Park [in Santa Monica]. That was back in the days when — the first night I was there, I played on microphone. And the band when we started out [that night] was Barry Cole on autoharp and me.

JH: That was it?!

CR: That was before organized bands. Dave Leddel would come in about 8:30, and stand around, and then a few more people would arrive, and eventually they would get up [on stage] and play. But there weren't organized bands back then. Somehow I did that regularly enough, that I was also, although I never understood how it happened, I was on

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their Board for Mary Judson's last two or three years of business. Then of course she became too ill to —

JH: Right. [Long-time English Country Dance leader Mary Judson died in 1986.]

CR: She got [me into] that management situation, anyway. There were about thirty people on the board and you could never get enough of them together to do any voting or anything. But I played pretty regularly over there. Then around 1982 — But I was also playing — Carty [Wilson] had a house jam, and [out of] that jam, Larry Cusick, a fiddler, and Brenda Badders and I formed the Occasional String Band, out of that jam that was happening at Carty's. We started playing at a restaurant down in Seal Beach. Every Sunday morning we'd do this. And we got pretty easy with it. Eventually we started getting some other gigs. People would ask us to come do things at their house, etc. So we did that for a while, and then Chuck Galt came and joined us, becoming the fourth member of the Occasional String Band. Larry played fiddle; Brenda played spoons, dulcimer, bones, and sang; I was on guitar; and Chuck played the hammered dulcimer. Then at about the same time, Larry got his professorship up in central California, and Chuck got one of those off-to-France-for-a-year research projects. And so the band at that point could have dissolved, but I invited Carty and Renata [Wilson] and Hugh [Nestor] to join and we did it for a while. Around 1982 — and this is before Carty and Renata and Hugh joined us, but they'd come and play all the time.

JH: Has it always been an open band?

CR: Yes, our band has always been open. Around 1982 we started putting on things at my patio.

JH: That was in Huntington Beach, right?

CR: No, it was in Garden Grove. And we did that for five years. It was a free dance at my place. [Caller] Bob Proctor came down for a couple of years, [another caller] Drew [Tronvig] came down for a couple of years. Just did it. Keep it going. Letting people know about the real dances (laughs) which were at (unintelligible) and in Pasadena. Then we got to the point where we started finding halls and putting on dances. Don [Noone] and I were the band up in Pasadena for many years. For five years we were it. And then about maybe four years into it, we were joined by Ira [Gwin] up there, and sometimes Jack [Phillips]. But back in the early days of the Pasadena dance there was this caller, Stu Jamieson, who used to call these long running sets at 120 [beats per minute]. Just about wore us out. This was long before paid bands.

Drew was a one-man act for many, many years until Leda [Shapiro took it on]. But Drew was it, for — ever! He must have burned out somethin' fierce. And he got terribly wounded a couple of times. I felt badly about that. I've always felt a certain amount of loyalty to him, because he encouraged me lot. He kinda said, "why don't you try this," or "why don't you do this." I felt that I probably wouldn't have done it without his encouragement.

I don't know how things happened to me. I don't know how I got involved. Or why I thought I could put on a dance. Or

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put on two. There just comes a time when it seems like it's the thing to do. Nothing that I've ever set out to do ever turns out, and I've — I mean, if I aim at something, it's a sure bet that something else is gonna happen along the way, and I'll be doing something else instead. It's pretty serendipitous. But fairly steady and dedicated once I get underway.

The Cajun dance was more of a fluke, really. I got a call one day. Somebody had a gig, and it was a Cajun thing, and the guitarist was sick. Did I think I could do it? And I did, and I loved it, and out of that group — which were Wilfred Latour, Edgar LeDay, a lot of other people and myself — out of that group I started working with LeDay and Latour and I was getting some pretty good gigs for us. We performed down at the San Diego Folk Festival, and we did one birthday party down in San Diego which was mentioned on Talk of —

JH: Were these concerts, or were you playing for dances?

CR: These were all concerts. Then we were at the Old Time Cafe for six and a half years. Every six to eight weeks we were there, and there was only twice when we weren't completely sold out. Sometimes it was [sold out] a month in advance. It was a small club, but it was — A lot of worthwhile people [performers] would go through there. They [audiences] really loved those two guys down there. They really loved Edgar and Wilfred a lot. So, I don't know quite how it worked out, but Drew suggested that I should try and get a Cajun dance going. I don't know if Drew and I went to a dance together, if I took him down to a dance in South Central. I'd been taking

him to a Zydeco dance. I sure the hell didn't take him to a concert. It wasn't — I don't know. I don't know why he thought that. Maybe it was just my babbling on about it. But at any rate, we got a dance going. The first eight months of it was pretty scary. We didn't take any money out at all; we paid off the entire year's lease. It took us eight months to do it. And as you know, looking at whole — there's a critical point, before which it looks like everybody else knew where the good party was and only the leftovers came. And everybody sits around looking scared, unhappy. Well, it looked like that for about six months. We didn't know whether it was going to fly or not. And then it got to be real big. There were times when we had way over the legal limit.

JH: What did you do to promote it?

CR: Not much of anything, but we had some real good press. We had very enthusiastic — We had a *Westside Press* article, which — Now here's a money thing. When I got the *Westside Press* guy, who was interested in our dance, I tried to put him on to the contras as well, the association [i.e., the California Dance Co-operative]. I'd done that once before. I'd done that with a 1984 article about dance at my house. I turned that into a thing which ran in all issues of the [*L. A.*] *Times*, and promoted the Co-op, promoted the dances, all the contras. So I tried that with this

This was 1989. But we [Cajun] were on the cover of the [*L. A.*] *Times* Calendar section. Had a big article.

But, you know, the way Wilfred and Edgar were, they were so — their music

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was so honest, that you couldn't help but be touched by it, if you had any (unintelligible). And that's what kept the stuff going, as far as I'm concerned.

JH: In the early days did you use Leif [Hetland] as a caller?

CR: Sometimes, yes. We didn't use Leif much for our dances, but we used him for quite a few weddings, because he was real good with people who had no [dance] experience whatsoever. He was very patient with them. Leif was the first person who got contradance going in Orange County. He was working with Hal Rice, and I think he told me he started around '74 or something like that, '72? He had a good amount of time on us. And there was this lovely little hall, a women's club over in Liberty City, which is over about eight miles from me. Which, naturally, because it was a lovely place, they tore down. And he, Leif, and Hal Rice had a partner-thing going. We went over a number of times and would play, but we'd only play for half of it, because Hal didn't work with a live band at that time; I think he's learned to since. He was one of those guys who had to be able to control the volume, and he had to memorize whatever the music was.