

The Dance Floor Story

Amazing things can happen when Contra dancers sit idle for too long.

This spring, the Kennebec Contra Committee was talking, once again, about restarting our dance series. We'd had this discussion every spring since the pandemic caused us to shut down our dance in March of 2020. But it never quite seemed safe to do so. The new variants of the virus kept the pandemic going, and we had to wait another year.

This year, however, we seem to be coming out of the pandemic. Dancing was beginning again, in Maine and elsewhere. The latest COVID surge had passed through Maine early and relatively mildly. Perhaps it was time to restart. We checked with our old venue, the Hallowell City Hall, and found that they were still in COVID lockdown and not ready to rent their ballroom. We had a meeting in June to discuss other possible venues.

We quickly zeroed in on the idea of doing outdoor dances during the summer and early fall, both for additional COVID safety and to give us more time to find an indoor venue for the winter. All the possibilities we considered involved dancing on grass or pavement or setting up a portable outdoor dance floor. I offered to host a dance on my property in Winthrop if we could find or build a floor. To my surprise, nearly everyone on the committee was willing to give it a try.

There had been a portable floor in Maine up until 2020. Built for Maine Fiddle Camp, it had also been used at the Common Ground Fair every year. But in 2020, lumber prices shot up and a lot of building materials were hard to find. The Fiddle Camp dance floor was stored on a trailer out in the open. Someone saw a neat stack of unattended lumber, and made off with it. The trailer was recovered, but not the dance floor. All that was left were 15 "extra" floor sections that had been kept elsewhere on a second trailer. Nothing was done to replace the floor in 2020 or 2021, as both Fiddle Camp and the Common Ground Fair went virtual for those years. In 2022, Fiddle Camp reopened in person, at a new venue, where there were already some other dance spaces, so it didn't need the portable floor.

We talked with Doug Protsik and Jeff Raymond about the Fiddle Camp floor, and looked at the remaining extra floor sections. Rebuilding the floor actually looked feasible. If we could get the lumber, it would just take time to assemble the new floor panels. The committee took the bait. We planned a dance for Saturday, August 13, and announced it at the Common Floor Contra on July 10. We were committed.

Doug told us where to find the lumber and explained how the floor panels should be built and assembled. We placed an order with Hammond Lumber for 4000 feet of 1x8 pine boards, to be delivered on Monday, July 18. We started work on Tuesday the 19th, meeting in the evenings and sharing a potluck supper. It was a slow start: we got only a few sections done that first evening, due to

time spent setting up jigs and figuring out how to do things. The next Tuesday we got more done, and agreed to meet on Thursdays as well. We also found other times to get together. We pulled in more volunteers. Many of my neighbors joined in, and we even got some people from Fiddle Camp. We didn't just have to build the floor. We had to mow the meadow grass in the orchard, level and smooth the ground, prepare a canopy against the possibility of bad weather, and do a hundred other things involved in starting up a dance in a new location. We worked flat out for nearly four weeks and had everything finished and ready to go just one day before the dance.

Building the dance floor was an amazing experience. We came to the project with a wide range of experience. We had professional carpenters and people who had never held a screw gun before. We all learned from each other. Some of the less experienced people contributed some of the better ideas. When we saw something that needed to be done, we had someone step forward and just do it. They might have a different way to do it than we originally thought, but it was just as good. We worked through 90-degree heat. We spent a lot of time putting tarps over things to protect them from rain and pulling them back off to get started working again. Sitting down to dinner together after (or sometimes just before) the work session helped us bond as a team. It was awesome.

Our dance on August 13th was a celebration and a reward for all of our volunteer effort. We had a lot of our regular dancers, quite a few people from Fiddle Camp, and a large contingent of neighbors. It's important to get the neighbors involved if you want to be able to keep doing this sort of thing. We had a wonderful time, and generated a lot of joy.

The portable dance floor is back. It was used at twice more (including for the September Kennebec Contra) before it went to the Common Ground Fair. The Kennebec Contra Dance has set up a GoFundMe page (see below)* to give people a chance to contribute to the cost of materials, and the floor has been donated to Maine Fiddle Camp with the understanding that KCD can make use of it for future events.

Thanks to everyone who helped with this effort. It was a crazy idea, maybe, and a big risk. But it needed to be done, and we did it.

- Jens Dill for the Kennebec Contra Dance Committee

* <https://www.gofundme.com/f/common-ground-dance-floor>

