

ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK

CONTRA DANCING COMES TO NORTH PARK

By Steve Hon

“Dance with the music, dance with your partner,” have been the opening words of the Contra Dance caller in North Park for almost 30 years. New England Contra style dances were all the rage in the United States in 1800 and began to flourish again in the 1960s as a result of the growing interest in folk and other forms of traditional music.

According to **A Contra Dance Primer** by Les Francey and Farrell Boyce, Contra Dancing is a form of American folk dance in which the dancers form two parallel lines which run the length of a dance hall. Each dance consists of a sequence of moves that ends with the couples having progressed up or down the set. As the sequence is repeated, the couple will eventually dance with every other couple in the set. Most of the basic moves in Contra Dancing are similar to those in square dancing (swings, promenades, dos-â-dos, allemandes). Unlike square dancing, contra dancers dress informally and the atmosphere is a community dance rather than a club. Derived from English Country Dancing in the 17th century, the French converted the name country dance to *contredans*, then turned around and claimed the English term was a corruption of the French.*

Contra Dancing started in San Diego with students at UCSD in 1971. After graduation, those students continued dancing in various locations around San Diego until settling in at the United Commercial Traveler's Hall at 4569 30th Street for over 10 years until the late 1980s. United Commercial Travelers (UCT) are a not-for-profit fraternal insurance society, affiliated with the Masons, founded in 1888 by traveling salesmen. UCT had occupied the hall on 30th Street since 1956. Later, the dances moved to various locations in and around North Park including a period at the elegant Art Deco designed Silvergate Masonic Temple (fans of **The Da Vinci Code** please note) at 3795 Utah Street. For over a decade, the dances have been held at Trinity United Methodist Church at 3030 Thorn Street. Trinity Methodist has been at that location since 1915, and will celebrate their 90th anniversary in North Park in 2005.

At present, Contra Dances are normally held three Friday nights a month and one Saturday. Dances begin at 8 PM and a newcomer's session starts at 7:45 PM. For more information check out their website at www.SDFolkHeritage.org.

*Based on “A Capsule Chronicle of Contradancing, Part I by James Hutson, Contra Corners Fall 1994.