



# Fiddling & Frolicking

CHAPTERS OF ARKANSAS HISTORY • A PUBLICATION OF HISTORIC ARKANSAS MUSEUM

## 'Come on over to our house. We're having a dance.'

Clarke Buehling  
with his fiddle



You could have heard this anywhere in Arkansas. You could have heard it at Arkansas Post or in Batesville during territorial times. You could have heard it in Camden or in Fayetteville after the Civil War.

Whatever you might have called it, you could be sure there would be music, food, and fun. Also, there would be a lot of square dancing and other kinds of dances.

In some communities, mostly smaller ones across the state, you might have heard this as late as the 1970s. You might even hear it today.

Besides the Virginia Reel, you might dance waltzes and two steps. Most of the dances would be square dances like "Corner Girl," "Wave of the Ocean," or "Figure Eight." If enough people are dancing, there might be two or even three "sets" of dancers going on at one time.

You might have heard it called different names. During territorial times it was often called a "frolic." In recent years, it has been called a "pickin'." That comes from the habit of calling it "picking" when people play old time music together.



Rebecca Hochradel frolics  
at Historic Arkansas

The "caller" – the one who sang out the next move for the dancers to make – would stand where all the dancers could hear. If there was only one set, the caller might be one of the dancers.

Different callers might have different names for the moves the dancers would make. They would make up silly phrases to fill in between moves. A lot of dancers knew all of the moves, but the singsong chant of the caller was part of the fun.

The music would be "live." A fiddler would almost always lead the tunes. If there was no fiddler, a banjo or some other instrument could fill in. Still, a strong, lively fiddle was always the best sound for square dancing. Other players might use a banjo or a

*(continued on page 5)*


*"Swing your corner like swingin' on a gate  
Right and left and don't be late  
Big foot up and little foot down  
Make that big foot jar the ground"*




# The Official Fiddle



with them from back east, or even across the

Atlantic, when they moved to Arkansas. It's what they played at most all of the Arkansas dances and parties in the 1800's. It was easy to carry compared to lots of other instruments – oh, maybe a harmonica is easier to carry. But the fiddle was loud enough to be heard in a big room with lots of people dancing.

Now that you're reading about the fiddle, see if you start noticing it more. It's not just an instrument in history. It's all around.

Arkansas had a state tree (the pine) and a state bird (the mockingbird) and a state flower (the apple blossom) for a long time before it had a state instrument.

instrument. The bill passed. Now, Arkansas had an official instrument to go along with its official state tree, bird, flower and the rest.

In 1985 a legislator named Bob Watts introduced a bill declaring that the fiddle would be Arkansas's state

Mr. Watts chose the right instrument to honor. The fiddle was important enough in the lives of the settlers that it is what they packed and carried

# The Arkansas Traveller

Have you heard the story about the Arkansas Traveller? A fiddle plays a big role in that story.

You see, a man on horseback becomes lost in the Arkansas woods, late in the day. Then he hears music, and follows the sound until he finds a cabin with a man sitting in front, playing his fiddle.

The fiddler is not friendly or helpful to the stranger. When the stranger asks, "Can you tell me where this road goes?" the fiddler says, "Stranger, I've lived here all my life and that road hasn't gone anywhere since I've been

here." Their conversation goes on like that for almost ten minutes.

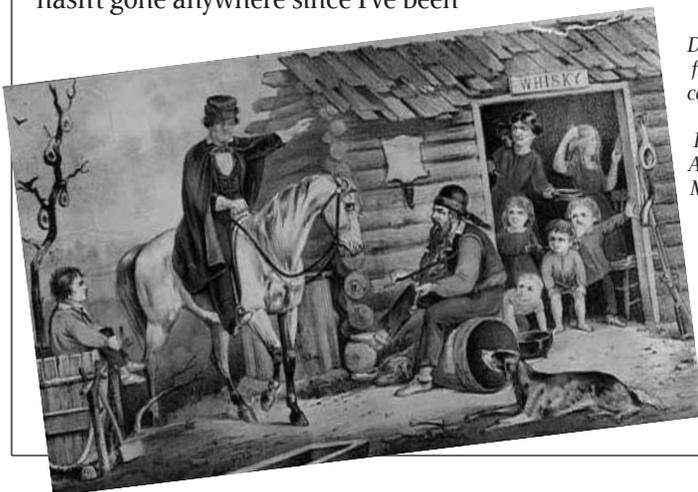
Finally the stranger, who is pretty unhappy by now, asks why the fiddler is only playing one part of his tune.

The fiddler knows the tune has two parts. But he's forgotten the second part. Slowly, it occurs to him that maybe the stranger can remind him how the rest of the tune goes. He decides he'll be more friendly.

The fiddler hands the stranger his instrument.

The stranger plays the whole tune, and suddenly that old fiddler is offering the stranger food and drink and a place to stay, if only he'll teach him "the turn of the tune." Pretty soon he's so filled up with happiness that he can't help but dance a jig, right there in front of his house.

See the two illustrations? The title of one is *The Turn of the Tune*. The title of the other is *The Arkansas Traveller*. Which title do you think goes with which drawing? (*The answer is on page 8.*)



Drawings from the collection of the Historic Arkansas Museum





# What's the Difference?



People ask about the difference between a fiddle and a violin. They look just alike. The answer that most fiddlers will tell you is, "Nothing, nothing at all is different. It's just in how you play it."



## Famous Arkansas Fiddlers



*Members of the Gathering perform at a Territorial Fair.*

Most old-time fiddlers were well known in their communities. But when they passed away, the only way someone would remember them is if the family kept talking about them. Maybe they would hand down the fiddle to the next generation. Another way to remember them would be if someone wrote about them.

People who study the history of Little Rock before the Civil War soon learn about Nathan Warren, the fiddler.

Many people wrote about him because they loved his fiddling, and they heard it at many parties.

Warren passed his musical knowledge to his sons. They played fiddles and brass instruments. They formed a band, the Ashley Band, and played for parties all over town in the 1840s and 50s.

Nathan Warren's sons were slaves. Mr. Ashley owned them. That's where the name of their band came from. But

Nathan Warren was a free man of color. He had been a slave, but an owner set him free. Why were his children slaves? Their mother was Mr. Ashley's slave, so they were, too.

Fiddlers are often associated just with European settlers. That is not the

whole story. Nathan Warren was not the only Arkansas fiddler of African descent. While his name is recorded for history, other unnamed African-American fiddlers are recollected in stories about the Christmas holidays,

especially. There was traditionally a week between Christmas and New Year's Day when slaves did not work. As the only holiday of the year, it was memorable and talked about. Fiddling and dancing were often mentioned as a part of the festivities.

The fiddling tradition belongs to at least two cultures of Arkansas history.





# People are still dancing!

People are still square dancing in Arkansas and across the country. Square dance clubs can be found in all American cities and many towns across the country. Most of them use a style called “modern western” square dancing.

In modern western square dancing, most groups use recorded music. The music is often the instrumental part of popular country-western songs. The caller sings the moves to the melody of the song being used. The dancers often dress in clothing with matching colors and patterns. The ladies wear colorful skirts, often with several petticoats. The men usually wear western style shirts and cowboy boots.

In some places, groups come together to do old-fashioned squares and other traditional dances. The Arkansas Country Dance Society is based in Little Rock, but it has members all over the state. They meet regularly to learn and perform traditional dances, including “contras” like the Virginia Reel.

The Society members pay close attention to clothing when they do performances. They make sure their clothes, shoes, and accessories reflect the period of the dances they are doing.

One group that started with Arkansas Country Dance Society members now specializes in Scottish traditional dance. One of their annual activities is the Twelfth Night Ball. It comes at the end of the traditional twelve nights of Christmas.

You can watch old time square dancing at the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View. The Ozark Folk Center is an Arkansas State Park devoted to understanding the ways in which people lived in earlier times in Arkansas.

From spring through fall, the Folk Center has musical programs on each night of the week except on Sundays. A major part of each program is square dancing. Each half of the program will open with one of the traditional square dances.

If you should go to a musical performance at the Ozark Folk Center, you would even be invited to come to the stage and dance. This happens when the band plays a “jig” or other kinds of traditional dances such as two-steps

or waltzes. It really doesn’t matter whether you are a good dancer. In the jig or “step” dances, each dancer is free to make up steps.

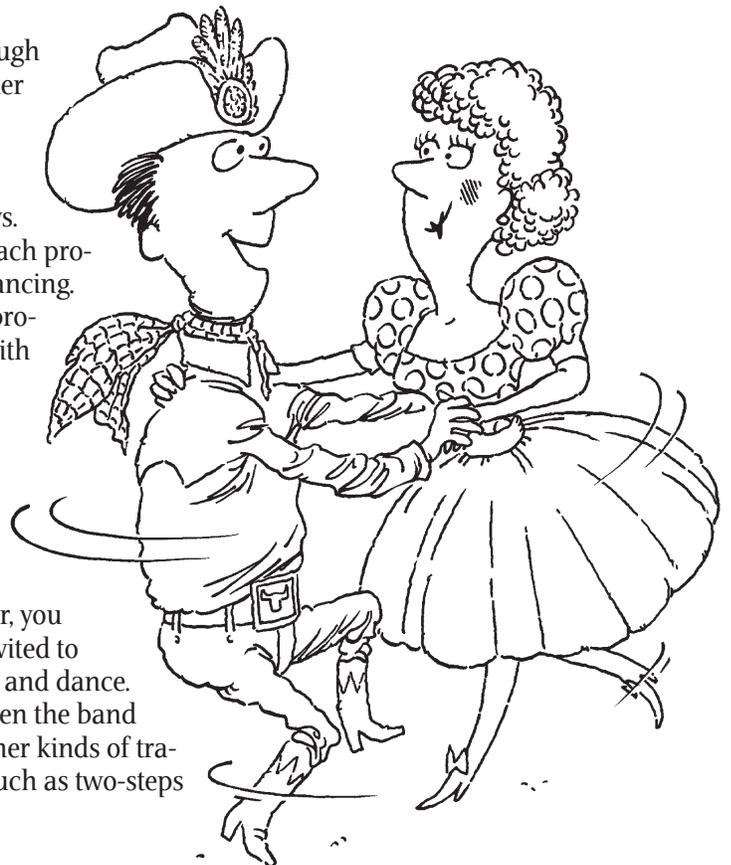
*Garland Dancers prepare to dance.*



PHOTO: JUDY KINSEY BETTES



*Between dances, the Arkansas Country Dance band takes a break.*





# 'Come on over...'



*continued from page 1*

dulcimer. If a piano or a bass were handy, somebody would play them. Mandolins and guitars came along around the late 1800s.

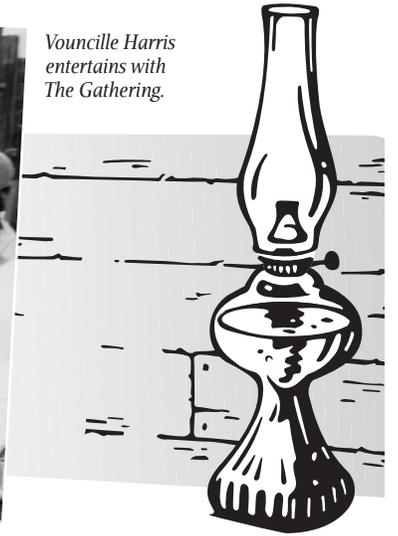
The band would play tunes like "Soldier's Joy" and "Leather Britches." Over the years, tunes like "Tennessee Wagoner" and "Mississippi Sawyer" were added. "Arkansas Traveller" is still one of the best-known square dance tunes in the whole country.

If they knew a lot of tunes, the band might play for hours without doing the same one twice. If they only knew a few, they would play those over and over as long as people wanted to dance.

In the summer time, the dancing would probably go on in the front yard. Lanterns would be hung on the porch. Tables of food would probably be inside the house.



*Vouccille Harris entertains with The Gathering.*



During cold weather, everybody would move inside. Furniture would often be moved out of the front room. The rugs (if the house had any rugs) would be rolled up and carried to another room. A bare, wooden floor makes the best square dance space.

You might have gone to the square dance by yourself. Maybe you were looking forward to meeting someone special there. You might have gone with someone or with a whole group of friends. You might have gone with your whole family.

Square dances weren't just for teens. Grandma might be sitting on the porch or she just might be dancing. Little ones might have their own

little set off to the side, making up their own square dance moves. Grandpa might be the lead fiddler,

with some beginner standing next to him learning the tunes.

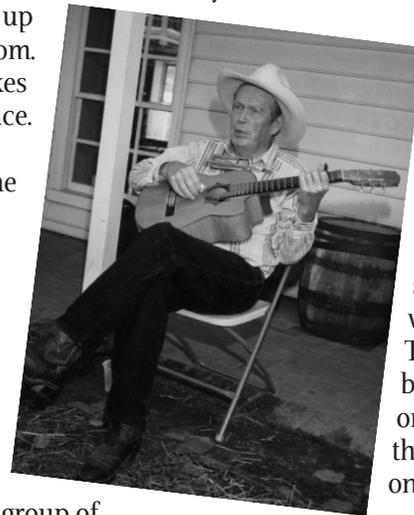
By the end of the night, the little

ones would be asleep on quilts spread on the porch. Some folks would have drifted away. One set of the strongest dancers would be left. The band would be calling out "just one more." But they would keep on playing.

Finally, maybe just before sunup, everybody would

climb into their wagons or onto their horses and leave. They would be back at work or in the fields or at church the next day. They would try to catch up on their sleep.

And on the next Friday or Saturday night, they would hear someone say, "Come on over to our house. We're having a dance."



*Glenn Ohrlin, of Stone County, sings cowboy songs.*

PHOTO: JUDY KINSEY BETTES



*Banjoist Clarke Buehling, of Fayetteville, specializes in 19th-century music.*



# Dancing the Virginia Reel

## Preparing to Dance

A line of boys forms, shoulder to shoulder. Six paces in front of the boys, a line of girls forms, shoulder to shoulder. Dancers in each line face the dancers in the other line. The

dancers directly opposite one another are partners.

The couple closest to the music and dance caller is the "head couple" (marked H in the illustration). The couple furthest from music is the foot couple (marked F in the illustration).



## Part One – The Turns

The first part of the dance involves everyone dancing the turns. Each of the calls listed below is completed in eight beats. When the caller calls the direction (such as "Honor Your Partner"), the dancers proceed.

### "Honor Your Partner"

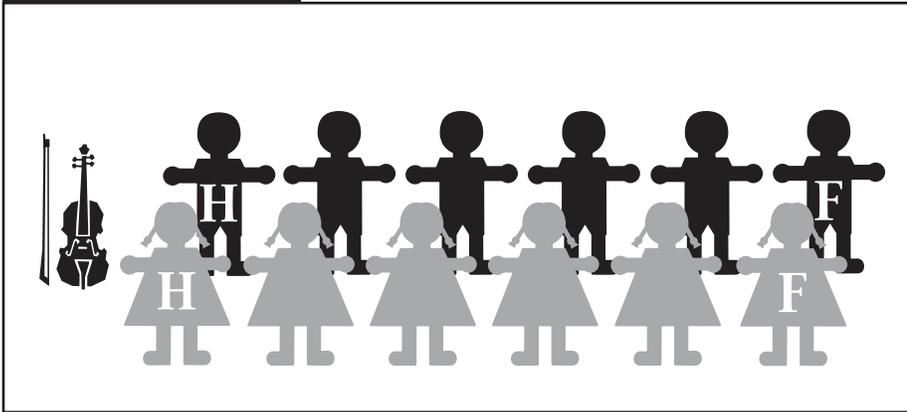
Partners go forward four steps, curtsy or bow to one another, and retire backwards to place in line.

### "Right Hand Swing"

Go forward toward partner, turn one another by the right hand, and return to place in line.

*(continued on page 7)*

### BEGINNING FORMATION



## The Virginia Reel Came from One of George Washington's Favorite

When folks came together for rest and relaxation in 19th-century Arkansas – to celebrate a harvest, to witness a marriage, to help raise a house or a barn – there were things you could count on. Dancing was one of them.

The dance that everyone knew was the Virginia Reel. It came to Arkansas the same way the language and the accents, the songs and the sayings, the ways of cooking and the ways of worshipping came – the pioneers brought what they knew.

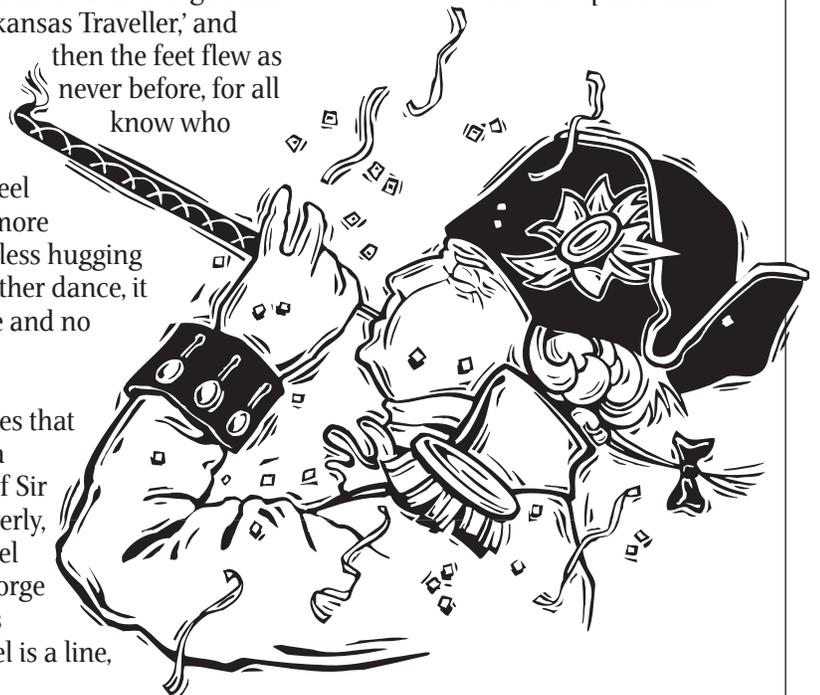
In the book accompanying the *Arkansas Historical Dance Series* (see Resources on back page), author David Peterson quotes C.E. Nash in 1842, who describes a military reception at a hotel in Little Rock.

"The opening dance was an old fashioned Virginia Reel. The George Band struck up 'Arkansas Traveller,' and then the feet flew as never before, for all know who

have ever danced this reel that there is more dancing and less hugging than in any other dance, it was all dance and no turn..."

Peterson notes that the dance is a descendant of Sir Roger de Coverly, an English reel said to be George Washington's favorite. A reel is a line,

or contra, dance, as opposed to a circle or square dance.





### “Left Hand Swing”

Go forward to partner, turn one another by the left hand, and return to place in line.

### “Two Hand Swing”

Go forward to partner, join both hands, turn one another to the right, and return to place in line.

### “Do Si Do” (*dough-see-dough*)

Go toward partner, pass one another by the right shoulder, pass back to back, and retire backwards to place in line.



## Part Two: The Reel

### “Head Couple Sashay Down”

Before the reel, the head couple joins hands and “sashays” to the foot of the line, then sashays back to their original place in line. (*To sashay (chasse) is to scoot sideways or, in dance language, do a “side step,” or “slip and close”*).

### “Right to the Center, Left to the Side”

Head couple meet in the center, link right arms at elbow, and turn one and one-half times. Now, the lady is facing the men’s line, the man is facing the lady’s line. The lady and man of the head couple offer a left arm to the first person in their partner’s line, swings them in place, and returns to the center with a right arm swing with their partner.

Now they are again facing the opposite line. They offer a left arm to the next person in line, swing them in place, and return to the center with a right arm swing with their partner. This reeling, “right to the center, left to the line,” continues until they reach the foot of the line.

On the final “right to the center,” the head couple swings one another to end with the lady on the lady’s side, the man on the man’s side.

The head couple joins hands and sashays back to the head of the set, drop hands and take their original place in line.



## Part Three: The March

### “Head Couple Cast Off”

Each partner in the head couple leads his/her own line in a march to the foot of the set. Each of them “turns out” and marches toward the foot of the set, in back of his/her own line.

The other dancers in the lines follow their leader, in single file.

The former head couple, after everyone comes under their arch, drop hands and stay in place, as the new foot couple.

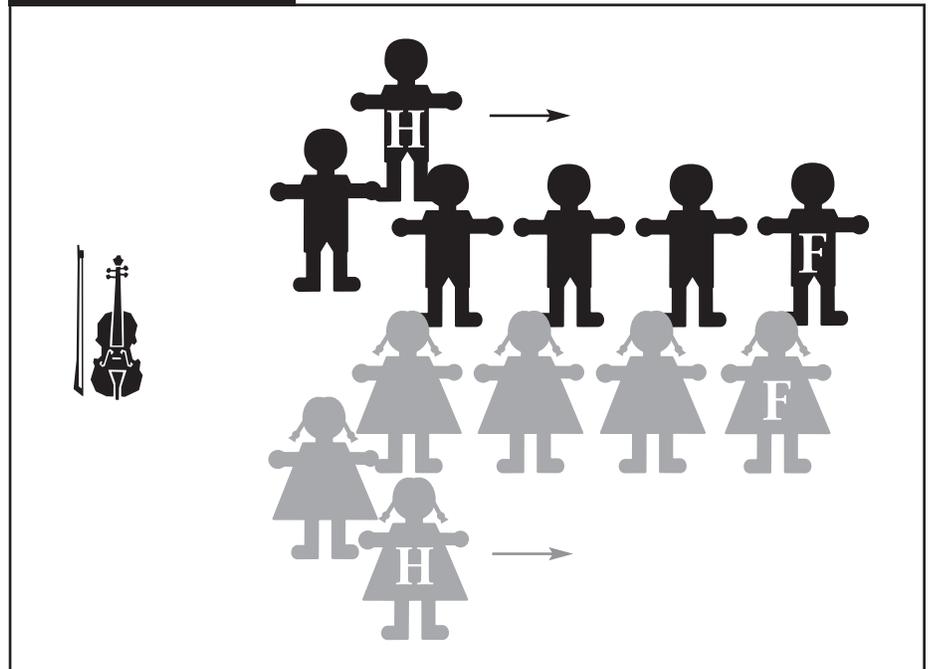
### “Honor Your Partner”

Now everyone is in the original formation and the dance starts over. Every one honors their partner, etc, and the new head couple sashays, reels and leads the march to the arch. This continues until everyone has had a chance to be the head couple.



*Virginia was the 10th state to join the union, in 1788. Arkansas was the 25th state, in 1836.*

### HEAD COUPLE CAST OFF

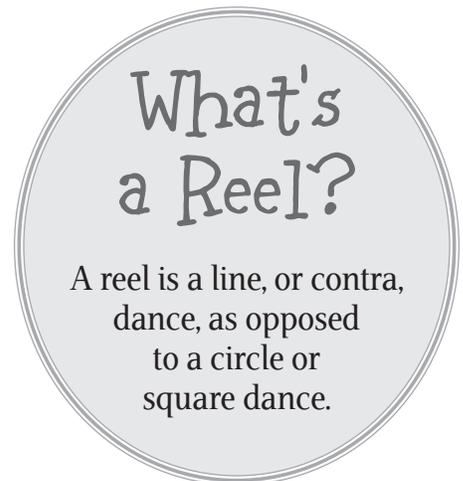


### “Head Couple Form an Arch”

At the foot of the set the head couple meet each other, join hands, and form an arch (like a “London Bridge”)

Couples after them meet each other, join hands, sashay under the arch and back toward the head of the set.

The second couple — who had been next in line after the original head couple — are now the new head couple.





# Ideas & Resources

The most authentic music to dance to is live fiddle music. Also live banjo, guitar, dulcimer and more. In lieu of live music, you may have to create your own tape of dance music, dubbing hoedowns back to back to last as long as a dance will last. The Ozark Folk Center has a good selection of tapes and CD's suitable to accompany dancing. (The gift shop is 1-870-269-3137). Explain that you need 19th-century instrumental hoe-down fiddle music to use with kids dancing in the classroom. Historic Arkansas's Museum Store may also have music you can use. Phone 1-501-324-9351.

Historic Arkansas has produced a 12-minute "Fiddle and Frolic" video from selections filmed by AETN and narrated by Charley Sandage. Rick Morrison talks about his place in a large family of Stone County fiddlers, and plays the fiddle his grandfather passed on to him. A short historical drama illustrates a 19th century Arkansas frolic. The party-goers



A modern-day builder of old-style instruments at a Territorial Fair.

dance the Virginia Reel. This can serve as an illustration to the dance instructions in this Chapter.

The frolic piece cited above comes from *The Arkansas Historical Dance Series*, a video produced by the Arkansas Country Dance Society, with David Peterson, and Arkansas Educational Television Network (AETN), with Charley Sandage. It highlights eight Arkansas dances. The video is available through AETN or an Education Co-op.

Investigate your local country dance or folk music groups. They may have folk willing to help you.

The Arkansas Arts Council sponsors artists, including folk musicians, who can come to your school through a grant. The Arts Council phone is 1-501-324-9766.

Historic Arkansas highlights participatory dancing at its open house events in May and December. Come join in for a refresher course!

## Arkansas History Assessments & Activities



### "Virginia Reel Came from One of Washington's Favorites"

Find accounts of life along the American frontier. In diaries, letters, and other documents, try to find references to entertainment referring to dances, parties, music, tunes, and such. See whether you can trace the movement of certain dances or tunes across the country from east to west.

*Frameworks: Arkansas history AS 5-8 TCC.1.2.*

### "Preparing to Dance"

Learn to do the Virginia Reel and perform it as a group in class or in presentations for others.

*Frameworks: Arkansas history AS 5-8 SSPS 1.2*

### "Come on Over"

Describe the details of a square dance held at a home somewhere in Arkansas during the 1830s, the 1900s, and the 1950s. Think about transportation, dress, food, home construction and furnishing, and anything else that might change from one period to the next. Explain which of these changes were caused by changes in available goods and services.

*Frameworks: Arkansas history 5-8 PDC.1.3.*

#### Contributing writers:

Charley Sandage, Starr Mitchell

#### Contributing photographers:

Staff of Historic Arkansas Museum  
Judy Kinsey Bettes

#### Designer:

Jann Greenland of Greenland Creative, Inc.



200 East Third St.  
Little Rock, AR 72201-1608  
(501)324-9351  
TDD (501) 324-9811  
www.arkansasahistory.com

Historic Arkansas Museum is a historic site museum, interpreting the territorial and early statehood periods of Arkansas.



An agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage

Accredited by the American Association of Museums

The museum opens its doors daily for tours of one of the state's oldest neighborhoods.

For information on other educational materials or for tour information, including special rates for student groups, call (501) 324-9351.

Answer from page 2:  
Left picture: *The Arkansas Traveller*  
Right picture: *The Turn of the Tune*