



An Australian Square Dancing Story

The Epicentre of a 1950's Entertainment BOOM!



Compiled from original records by:
Tony Vickers-Willis (2008)
in collaboration with Jim & Beth Vickers-Willis

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This is a story about the great Australian Square Dancing BOOM! of the 1950s, with the city of Melbourne at its epicentre, and highlighting the central role played by Melbourne couple, Jim & Beth Vickers-Willis.

This is not the story of how square dancing got started in Australia. American caller Joe Lewis and Australian caller Bill McGrath were key players who laid the foundation in the late 1940's for the entertainment BOOM! that followed. Insights into that interesting story are provided in an article written by long surviving Melbourne caller Jack Murphy titled "Square Dancing – How It All Started" available online at the Jim Vickers-Willis web site at <http://www.vickers-willis.com/html/squaredancingjackmurphy.htm>.

Although clearly a very well-known caller, Jim was also not the only caller in Melbourne, nor obviously Australia for that matter, during the 1950's. There were many great callers of the time, including Eddie Carol, Joe Lewis, Bill McGrath, Les Schroeder, Ron Jones, Leonard Hurst, Irene Hewitt, Wally Cook, Graham Rigby, Jack Murphy, Graham Rigby and Gary Cohen to name just a few, and Graham Rigby's excellent book 'Great Australian Square Dance Callers - Over Half A Century' (2005) provides a wonderful history of these people who fronted square dancing in Australia. A chapter from Graham's book, titled 'Kings of Melbourne's Golden Era: 1950-1953', is available on line from Jim's website at <http://www.vickers-willis.com/html/squaredancinghomekings.htm>.

So, here is Jim and Beth's square dancing story – from inside the eye of a storm.

How They Got Started?

Shortly after World War 2, Jim and Beth Vickers-Willis were married and bought their family home in Brighton. With that purchase came a substantial mortgage – however, they struggled with these normal financial commitments when unexpectedly they had babies who set up world medical history, requiring many operations. Their two children, Suellen (4 ½) and Peter (2), were born with double hare lips and cleft palates. Medical science said that such an event in one family was all but impossible - but the near-impossible happened. Jim was heartbroken, but he didn't throw in the towel. He set to work to make money for plastic surgery operations that cost hundreds of pounds.

Jim had been a journalist for 17 years with The Sun News Pictorial (although this included 7 years military service during the war). When Suellen was born, Jim got two years absence from his paper - his £27 per week salary as a journalist could not cover these unexpected medical costs

(NB: there was no government subsidised public health scheme in those days). So he opened Thirst Aid Posts on Melbourne's busy docks at Port Melbourne to cater for persons awaiting the arrival of overseas ships. He made the money necessary for his daughter's operations then went back to journalism.

When son Peter was born also with a double hare lip, he knew he'd have to go through the hoops again and was ready to go back to the canteen business when by chance he went to a charity square-dance and spied an opportunity to cover these debts.

Just after the 1939-1945 World War, there was an entertainment vacuum just waiting to be plugged - people no longer stood around the piano and sang or recited as they had done in pre-war days. The youngsters of the day mostly just stood around at parties and talked..... and drank! Television broadcasting did not commence in Australia until 1956. So, in swept the Australian square dancing BOOM!

Before the BOOM!, square-dancing was thought to be as dead as a dodo. It had been tried and it had failed, in several capital cities after introduction by possibly the world's greatest square dance caller, American, Joe Lewis, a few years earlier. It just didn't catch on. Pockets of enthusiasts remained, but they were few and far between. Melbourne had one caller, Bill McGrath, who ran a small club in the upper-crust suburb of Toorak.

Kinder Surprise!

Jim and Beth were among young married couples in the newly developing Melbourne suburb of East Brighton, who were trying to get a kindergarten and church hall built. The fathers had working bees each Sunday morning. They set up a fund-raising committee (The South Brighton Provisional Committee) and all sorts of functions - a lawn-growing competition, raffles, fetes, and barn dances.



One night somebody persuaded Bill McGrath to come down to one of the barn dances and call some square dances. The picture above right shows caller Bill McGrath (front right) encouraging a square dance set which includes Beth going under the arch with Peter Tidex.

That night, everyone enjoyed themselves very much, and some people on the committee decided to set up a local square dance club in Brighton, at which Bill McGrath was the caller.

Beth and Jim were amongst the first dancers - and quickly realised it was great fun. Jim thought, "There's something in this. It appeals. It has possibilities. But something's wrong. Why hasn't it caught on?"

Months later Jim was still thinking. He had become a square-dance fan. Gradually he found out where the faults lay. He decided what square-dancing had to offer, and what the Australian public wanted, then dovetailed the two together. He evolved a unique form of square-dancing,

which some have described as being as far in advance of the American hillbilly style as baseball is in advance of rounders. He turned it into a sport. But more about that in a moment.

Beth was a very good dancer right from the start, and a set invited her to join them. In his autobiography, 'The Magic of Life' (2005), Jim says:

"They told her they had been a bit cautious about asking her because they thought they might have to have her husband as well; they thought I was a terrible square dancer. Beth assured them I would not mind, so she became the number one lady in this set - which later on became my square dance exhibition set. . . . Some might say I became a caller because I was such a rotten dancer!"

A few weeks later the committee ran another kindergarten charity barn dance but could not get Bill McGrath along again, so Jim dressed up in an old slouch hat, learnt the words of one simple square dance and had himself announced as 'Bill McGraw' - and called his very first square dance.

Developing Jim's Brand of Square Dancing

Jim was convinced he was on to something good. He began to tackle his calling. Commenting on this, People Magazine (July, 1953) wrote:

"When Jim bought a microphone and pickup and began practicing calling far into the night, his attractive black-haired dark-eyed, young wife, Beth, muttered in despair, "You're going bats!", and went to bed. But his keen business mind had seen a way of earning money necessary for the doctor's bills yet to come."

The trouble was Jim felt so terribly embarrassed singing in front of others. To get up at the microphone, and actually call a dance to a group of his friends, was very difficult. It was also hard to get anybody to agree to dance to his calling! When he did manage to get them, to reduce his embarrassment he used to take the microphone out onto the terrace where the dancers could not see him and call the dance from there, while they would dance inside.

Around this time, Jim and Beth decided to hold a square dance party at their house. They danced to records by the great American square dance caller Joe Lewis.

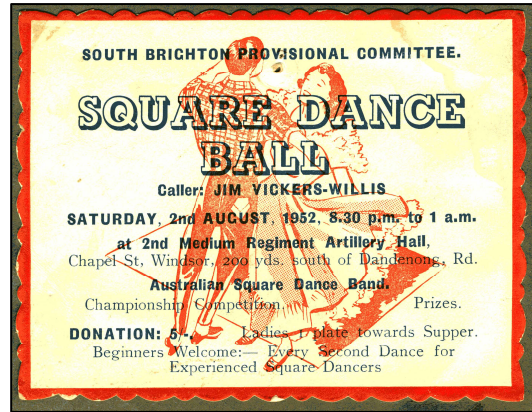
Jim was especially impressed when one of their friends - Alf Allen - arrived at one of these square dance parties at Jim and Beth's home with his usual half dozen bottles of beer, but became so interested in the square dancing that by the end of the night he said in surprise. 'Oh, I forgot to unpack them from the boot'. When the entertainment was so absorbing that Alf Allen forgot to get his beers, Jim felt there must be something in this square dancing! The next time Alf went to one of their square dance parties, he didn't even bring beer.

Jim and Beth were also impressed with the fact that square dancing was a clean, healthy, good-fun type of entertainment in which people let their hair down, and really enjoyed themselves.

After guest calls at some small dances held in local halls, a crowd of friends would often return to his home and carry on until all hours of the morning.

Jim's First 'Square Dance Ball' – 2nd August, 1952

Jim says the turning point in his life occurred when the committee agreed to run a square dance to make money - and Jim was to be the caller. The committee printed tickets that looked very impressive, announcing the first 'Square Dance Ball' with Jim Vickers-Willis and the Australian Square Dance Band.



Jim had, by this time, done one or two 'guest calls' at various dances and had met a band of musicians - led by a very original and creative musician, Mrs. Frankie Rintel - who were playing for nothing at a charity dance. They agreed to play for nothing and Jim was calling for nothing, so all the committee had to pay for was the cost of the hall. Jim managed to hire a big Army Hall in Chapel Street, Windsor, for only 10 shillings (A\$1) a night.

The committee built a platform of planks laid over barrels and Jim commented that every time his foot tapped on the stage the microphone would bob up and down. The committee then went to work around the neighborhood, and, although practically nobody was interested in square dancing at that time, sold nearly 500 tickets at 5/- each. Most of the buyers came to the dance.

People Magazine (July 1953) wrote:

"I know that the majority of the crowd weren't a scrap interested in square-dancing," he [Jim] admitted later, "but once they had paid their money they were determined to get something for it. They all turned up. At first it looked like being a classic flop. The microphone went bung and most were beginners who didn't care whether they danced or not. In desperation Jim started the Alabama Jubilee, which was a popular record at the time, with his own variations. It caught on, and the crowd went mad. With the ball rolling, the night developed into a tremendous success. The Alabama Jubilee became Jim's theme song".



Jim called the few square dances he knew and, when he ran out of material, he called them over again! It was a remarkably successful night, considering they were all such amateurs. And, the Melbourne newspaper Jim worked for, The Sun News Pictorial, produced a large middle-page picture that attracted a lot of interest on the following Monday morning, as did a rival paper, The Age (see pictures above). Also, square dance caller Bill McGrath arrived and did not call, but just joined in with the dancers like the real good sport he was.

The almost *hijacked* patrons of the charity ball fell under the spell of square-dancing and became the nucleus of the 464-strong Melbourne Square Dance Club which Jim formed to consolidate his newly-won ground.

Jim's Melbourne Square Dance Club was well organized with Secretary Miss Betty Tidex and Treasurer Miss Cathy Randle putting out the club's first newsletter on 6th September 1952, called "Strictly on the Square" (pictured at right) - with a circulation of around 500 copies. The Club began planning a Square Dance Ball at the Royale Ballroom.

Then came Jim's big chance. But first.....



A Flood Almost Changes the Course of History

Before the Square Dancing Boom developed, Jim called for a number of small charity dances. He and Beth were on their way to a dance at a Catholic church in Toorak road, Toorak. The dance started at eight and they were in good time but they were held up when their car stopped in the middle of a flood in North Road, Brighton. There was a half hour delay until Jim got the spark plugs dry and they got going again.

As they arrived at the church hall they found that the dancers were just leaving to go home. They turned back, helped Jim and Beth to set up and get on with the dance - which turned out to be a roaring success.

At the dance that night were Barry and Rex Brennan - the sons of promoter John Brennan of the Earls Court Ballroom, a significant centre of pre-television entertainment. They went home and told their father of this great new dance entertainment and about the caller who ran it. That is why Jim was invited to an audition - and Earls Court and John Brennan became major promoters of square dancing. Jim commented: "If I had taken longer to get out of that flood, it could have changed the whole course of the history of the Square Dancing Boom."

Launching a new Career at Earl's Court

Melbourne Radio Station 3DB, ever on the alert for something new, engaged an American square dance caller and started a Saturday night square dance program. Then the management of Earl's Court Ballroom in St. Kilda - with promoter John Brennan at the helm - entered the picture and suggested opening a radio square dance program originating from the ballroom.

There was some doubt about the American caller - some square dance sets had walked off the floor one Saturday night and said they could not understand him - and one of John Brennan's sons had been at a charity square dance which Jim 'called' in Toorak, and had enjoyed it.

So Jim was invited to go down to Earl's Court Ballroom, the big St Kilda (Melbourne) ballroom for an audition. The American square dance caller was invited to attend on the same afternoon.

He duly went down to Earl's Court and did his audition call in front of the 3DB and Earl's Court executives - and an empty hall. Beth and Jim had 'leaked' the news around, via Beth's sister Joan Tainsh (who also became a square dance caller) and some of their square dancers, that Jim had been invited to Earl's Court for an audition - and Jim and Beth suggested they might like to come and back them up.

So, after the American caller had auditioned, Jim was invited up on to the stage. Then, out of the shadows and through the archways of Earl's Court came scores of beautifully dressed dancers in their colourful outfits and formed up sets on the floor in front of him.

He called a demonstration dance briefly, then seized his opportunity and invited the square dancers to go out and invite in all the radio and ballroom executives so that Jim could teach them square dancing. The surprised executives were dragged into the sets and, there and then, they taught them to square dance and had them clapping and stamping their feet, and thoroughly enjoying themselves. So, Jim got the job and commenced calling at Earl's Court.

His partners in this 1952 venture were John Brennan (Earl's Court Manager) and Radio station 3DB, a pre-television period in Australia when the big ballrooms and radio were at the centre of public entertainment. 3DB had the right to broadcast shows from Earl's Court's air conditioned Diamond Ballroom, including the very popular 3DB Earl's Court Radio Square Dance Party on Saturday Nights from 10.30pm to 11.30pm.

This arrangement tightened up the commercial control of square dancing. Earl's Court and 3DB were first movers in their own fields to take a big interest in square dancing.

The picture at right shows John Brennan (Earl's Court) shaking hands with Jim after signing the agreement. 3DB's programme manager Norman Spencer (left) looks on, with John's three sons (Rex, Barry & Ian).

The agreement involved, first of all, a one-hour program on Radio 3DB each Saturday night, broadcast from an Earl's Court public square dance - Jim was the caller (pictured top next page). At this time, Jim knew only about six dances. However, practically no one else knew any more, other than Bill McGrath, and so he just called the same dances over and over again, and set about learning some more. Broadcasting



on radio, Jim built up a huge personal following.



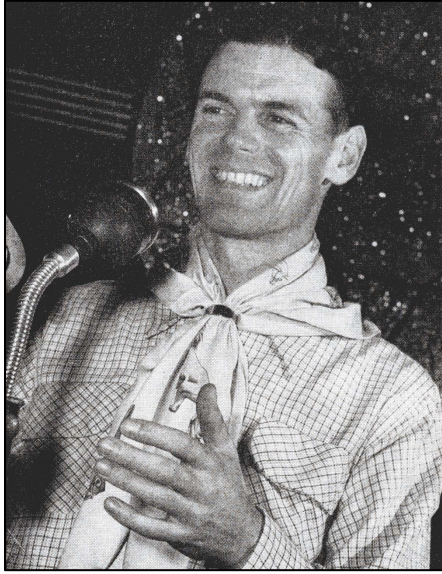
Jim immediately started beginner's classes and 68 people turned up the first night, 150 the next, and within weeks square-dancing had taken over the four halls of Earl's Court. Since then, the snowball rolled down hill. In December 1952, he formed the National Square-dance Club and the Square-dance Bureau which handles bookings for dozens of callers he has trained. In January, he left his journalist job, finding his income from £100 to £180 a night, six nights a week, quite enough to live on. He also had a radio program, wrote a weekly newspaper column, and wrote *the* book on Australian square-dancing (pictured at right), and was also managing director of his two small *Thirst Aid* companies. Beth, long ago convinced that he wasn't 'going bats' after all, worked with him and was a member of his exhibition set.



Jim, of course, was not the only ace caller in the field. There were others who claim to be a bigger noise than he. But he doesn't argue. As long as they are developing interest in square-dancing he was happy. He had a following of staunch supporters who like his work and admire him personally.

His success was neatly summarized by this letter to a newspaper:

"Orchids to Jim Vickers-Willis, Australia's top caller. His marvelous personality, speaking and singing voice, and his variety of calls are all a good square dancing crowd could wish for..."



But success didn't come without effort on his part. Ted Gray, the Engineer from radio station 3DB, took a tape recording on the first broadcast night and Jim was able to listen to it during the following week. When he heard his performance, he was shocked by how bad it was: he felt his speech was not clear enough, and that he was singing flat in various places. He listened to it over and over, and corrected himself. Over several weeks, he improved his calling immensely.

When the big square dance boom really got going - which eventually turned into what was probably one of the biggest entertainment booms anywhere in the world - and other competing callers entered into the field, Jim had improved so much that he was way out in front and hard to catch.

The Earl's Court proprietor, John Brennan, taught Jim a great deal about promotion. He was one of the old-time boxing promoters, and back in the John Wren days an opposition promoter tried to turn his car over and kill him. He had four of his sons Barry, Rex, Ian and Kevin working at Earl's Court, and they all set about the promotion of square dancing.

Jim, Beth and the Brennans worked hard for about six weeks, and then one night people started to come from everywhere. Trams were pulling up and unloading. The numbers went up that night from 300 to about 800 dancers. John Brennan told Jim: 'It's started - now you watch what happens'. Sure enough, the numbers went up over 1,000. Then Jim had to open another night and then another, and then the numbers went up to 2,000 a night.

At Earl's Court, the numbers were growing in an incredible fashion. John Brennan, shrewd promoter that he was, decided to open a private square dance club at Earl's Court in one of the smaller halls - and proceeded to invite all the newspaper, radio, store promotion executives along to learn square dancing. Once they had all been taught, they became enthusiasts, and when Jim would write articles for the newspapers, if something got wrongly cut out, the sub-editor involved was likely to feel in danger that the manager would call him into his office and haul him over the coals! Needless to say, square dancing got a tremendous run everywhere, with many interesting stories.

Jim's square dances from Earl's Court were broadcast on Radio 3DB 5 times per week, including "Square Dance Club of the Air" on Sunday mornings.

Other radio stations also broadcast some square dancing - Radio 3AW broadcast Bill McGrath on Sunday mornings, whilst Eddie Carol was broadcast on 3UZ for half an hour on Wednesdays from Leggetts Ballroom. Jim had left Leggetts because he considered an agreement had been broken when, without his knowledge, a caller outside his own group of callers was hired to call on Mondays and Tuesdays. Jim was not available to call for them on these nights.

At least one listener had a preference for Jim's Radio call sending in the following letter to The Sun newspaper:

"I agree with "Regular Listener" of Caulfield that the 3DB square dance programmes are far ahead of the programmes from other stations. The happiness that is exuded over the air from Jim Vickers-Willis and Peter Surry is something that I think no other station will ever capture. My parents, who are by no means young and who have never even seen square dancing, would not miss one of these programmes for worlds – their favourite and mine being the Earl's Court Sunday morning programme. We think this one is a gem. Congratulations to Jim Vickers-Willis, the real leader of all the other so-called leading callers. Long may he reign to give happiness to thousands of listeners. "Appreciative" (Bahryn).

Jim's Square Dance Clubs & Callers

Almost overnight clubs sprang up across Melbourne suburbs - established by and affiliated with either Jim or, his now rival, Bill McGrath. Eventually more than 300 square dance clubs existed in the state of Victoria alone. Some of the better known clubs affiliated with Jim Vickers-Willis were the following:

Hawthorn, Toorak, Teenagers, Beginners, Melbourne, Caulfield and McKinnon, St. Georges Club St. Kilda, Albury, Nepean Club, Sandringham East, Koornung Heights, St. Augustines Club Mont Albert, Lone Star Club - Fairfield, Melbourne High School, Brighton Footballers, Ansett Club, Commonwealth Bank Footballers, Caulfield Wanderers, Rosebud Club, and Camberwell RSL Square Dance Club.

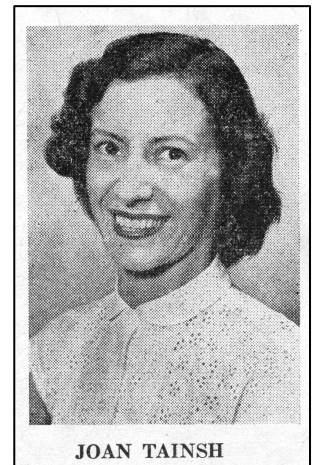
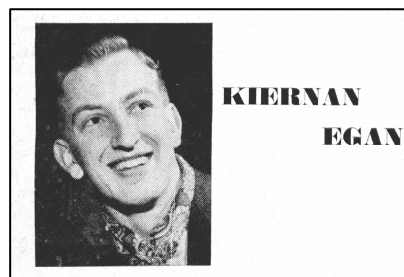
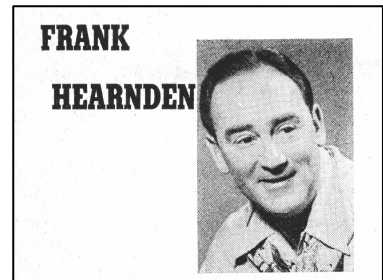
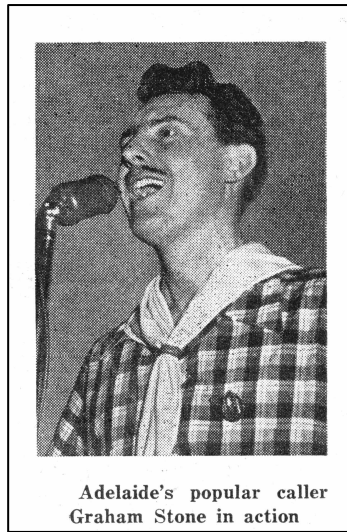
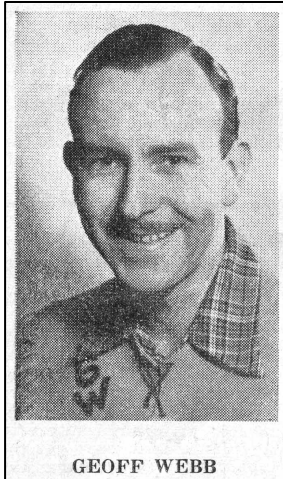
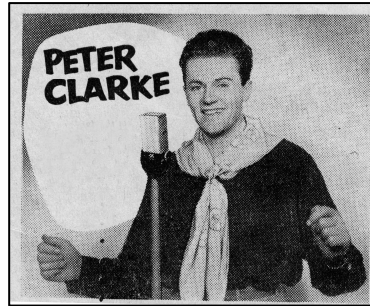
Each square dance club had its own caller, who had been accredited by either Jim or Bill McGrath. Jim trained about 50 callers which collectively were known as the Jim Vickers-Willis Square Dance Callers Group

A rival caller got 25% of nightly earnings from his callers. Jim however, did it for free because he said it encouraged square dancing.

Callers accredited by Jim included the following:

Jim & Frank Hearnden, David Rintel (New Brighton Club), Kiernan Egan (started calling at St.Peter's Toorak one of the very first clubs started by Jim VW. Took over at Earls Court when Rex Brennan became ill. A successful dancer previously in Jim's exhibition set), Rex Brennan, Geoff Webb (former RAAF bomber pilot), Peter Clarke, and John Watkins. Jim also trained and accredited family members including his three brothers Charlie, Bill, and Eric plus also his sister-in-law Joan Tainsh. A few are pictured below.

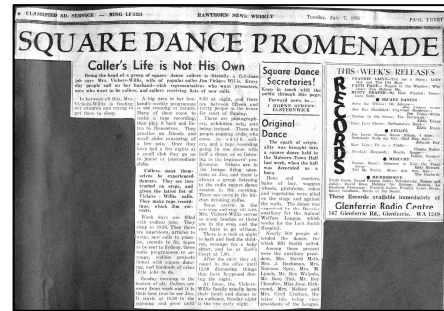
A few Callers trained by Jim:



So, what was it like being head of a group of square dance callers in the 1950s. Reprinted below is an article from the Hawthorn News Weekly (July 7, 1953) that tells this story:

SQUARE DANCE PROMENADE. Caller's Life is Not His Own

Being the head of a group of square dance callers is literally a full-time job, says Mrs. Vickers-Willis, wife of popular caller Jim Vickers Willis. Every day people call on her husband - club representatives who want promoters, men who want to be callers, and callers receiving lists of new calls.



In between all of this Mrs. Vickers-Willis is feeding her children and trying to get them to sleep.

A big item in her husband's weekly programme is the training of callers. Many of them come in to make a tape recording, then play it back and listen to themselves. They practice on friends and small clubs consisting of a few sets. Once they have had a few nights at a small club they go on to junior or intermediate clubs. Callers must themselves be experienced dancers. They are instructed on steps, and given the latest list of Vickers-Willis calls. They make tape recordings, which Jim corrects.

Week days are filled with endless jobs. They sleep to 10.30. Then there are interviews, articles to write, new calls to practice, records to fix, tapes to send to Sydney, three radio programmes to arrange, endless projects linked to square dancing, and hundreds of other little jobs.

Sunday morning is the busiest of all. Callers are away from work and it is their best time to see Jim. It starts at 10.30 in the morning and goes until 8.30 at night, and there are between fifteen and thirty people in the house for most of Sunday. There are photographers, exhibition sets, sets being trained. There are people running clubs who come to catch callers, and a tape recording going on in one room with half a dozen or so listening to the beginners programme. Others are in the lounge firing questions at Jim, and there is always a group listening to the radio square dance session in the morning. There are more in the kitchen drinking coffee.

Some arrive in the morning and stay until 3.30. Mrs. Vickers-Willis serves as many lunches as there are in the oven and the rest have to go without.

There is a rush at night to bath and feed the children, arrange for a baby sitter, and be at Earl's Court at 7.30.

After the show they sit around in the office until 12.30 discussing things that have happened during the night. At home, the Vickers-Willis family usually has their lunch and dinner to an audience. Sunday night is the only early night.

Early Promotions

Using his journalistic ability to write articles, Jim had published some feature newspaper articles in The Sun News Pictorial, which aroused attention – he then snatched at every possible scrap of publicity offered. And the snowball started to roll as described in this article by David Burke, reprinted from The Sun Newspaper (July 1, 1953):

Square Dancing Boom – Bigger, Better & Boomier

Sixty thousand carefree Victorians will have “climbed the golden stairs” before this week ends. Callers have sung themselves hoarse – it’s a seven nights out of seven job – and each will have made, maybe, £100 for their trouble.

Hardly a suburban hall does not echo nightly to the clap of a do-si-do and sales of records and apparel soar.

Can square dancing keep up this dizzy tempo?

Ten months ago the fad of a few, today square dancing is more than a £1,000,000 industry in Victoria. The fantastic success story of how it has set husbands and wives, grandmas and grandpas. Sons and steadies, bowing and swinging alike, have been written already.

But, can square dancing last?

This is the 64-dollar question of the moment. This is the question people are asking, and answering, in train and tram, by bar and fireside. Whatever the pessimists say (non-dancers of course!), the f-a-c-t-s point to one thing – square dancing is bigger, better and boomier, than ever. It is –

- *Drawing 30,000 competitors to The Sun Cup heats alone.*
- *Packing 2000 nightly into just one ballroom, with queues 200 yards long.*
- *Cutting attendances at movies and “old style” dances, but building big radio sessions and boosting baby sitting.*
- *Tying up practically every hall in city and suburbs (some square dances HAD to be postponed to allow recent Senate elections to go on).*
- *Attracting hundreds who want to learn the lucrative calling business.*
- *Becoming a popular health cure; many patients are square dancing to forget their worries – on doctors’ orders.*

Can it.....? Whom should we ask to answer this poser but Jim Vickers-Willis, Sun journalist turned caller, who rides the crest of the square dance wave with a phenomenal success story all his own. Jim has made as much as £180 for one nights calling. He has trained callers free, runs a booking bureau for them – free – and seeks no “cut” of their earnings. He works 16 hours a day, seven days a week, with his pretty wife, Beth, who is unofficial secretary and favourite member of his Exhibition Set, as well (they have two children who don’t square dance, but only because they are infants).



All this for the boyish, friendly voiced, 35-year-old ex-spitfire pilot, who taught himself calling 18 months ago in the front room of his Middle Brighton villa, to help out at local kindergarten charity socials!

Just back from another whirlwind promotion trip to Adelaide (4000 the average nightly attendance), Jim says –

“I am convinced that square dancing is fast becoming a most attractive feature of our national life. Square dancing has everything that Australian have been awaiting to fill the post-war vacuum of an all-time low in social entertainment. It has been specially tailored to suit Australian likes and dislikes – there is very little of the hillbilly left. We changed the monotone calls for a rhythmic, singing variety. We have put form into the dancing and, particularly for youth, we have made it competitive and exciting. Those who pooh-poo the future of square dancing forget that it has rocketed into more than a £1,000,000 industry. And charity has reaped handsome profits.”

Stores have done a huge trade in clothing and accessories. For men, sports slacks and shirts, golf shoes and scarves. For women, cotton frocks, gay skirts, fancy petticoats, off the shoulder blouses, and strapless bras.

In the Vickers-Willis opinion, the 60,000 Victorian who now sashay and allemande at least once a week will quickly snowball into five or six times this number within a year or two, at the present rate.

At Earl’s Court St. Kilda, 11,000 pay £2750 weekly to go square dancing. There are 12,000 in the National Square Dance Club, 15,000 in affiliated clubs, more than 5,000 in the country.

Other callers such as Bill McGrath and Eddie Carol have their own big followings.

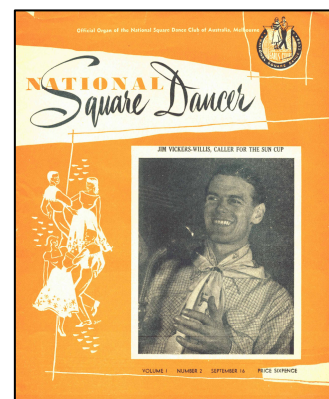
Not long ago, Jim was jamming his home every Sunday with 20 Or 30 yelling enthusiasts, and teaching them calling with £450 tape recorder. He taught scores, and then – in his own words: “I had to stop. I was collapsing”.

He has had to refuse 400 applications from would-be callers in the past few months. Six of Jim’s pupils have left their jobs and become professional callers,. One, Joan Tainsh [Jim’s sister in-law] is a housewife. Another has moved to Adelaide to feed the new demand.

“I don’t deny that square dancing may lapse in some centres which draw a scattered patronage, or have unqualified callers,” Jim says finally. “But local clubs are thriving more and more and square dancing is entrenching itself in the homes where radio or record sessions have given a whole new zest to the parties. So many people, of all ages and situations, have learnt what wonderful, unequalled fun square dancing really is – and they’re just not going to give it up. Can it last? Grad your partners and form a ring!”

Earl’s Court became the headquarters of the National Square Dance Club (NSDC), previously known as the Melbourne Square Dance Club. In Victoria there were reported to be 30,000 registered square dance devotees in 1953, of which NSDC and its affiliated clubs accounted for 15,000.

NSDC produced its first member’s magazine on September 2, 1953 called the National Square Dancer - the first Australian magazine devoted to square dancing (the cover of Issue #2 is pictured right).



Backed by promoter John Brennan, Earls Court Halls were hosting thousands of dancers, 5 nights per week:

- Tuesday - Beginners Club (Earls Court)
- Wednesday – National Square Dance Club (Earls Court) for the senior club
- Thursday - Intermediate Dancers Club
- Friday – National Square Dance Club
- Saturday - National Square Dance Club (Earls Court) incl. 3DB Square Dance Party Plus Junior Club

3DB was also airing square dancing 3 hours per week. And Jim was continuing to write a weekly square dancing column for the The Sun News Pictorial.

In a 1953 article in the Observer headed “Audience Enjoys Square Dance Spectacle”, Jim comments that:

“..there is no doubt that when a square dance is presented properly with a mixture of ordinary square dances, in which all dancers take part, demonstrations by beautifully turned out exhibition sets, and hardly-fought square dance competitions, it can be a thoroughly enjoyable spectacle.”

Being a Square Dance Caller had its moments for Jim. In March 1953, when opening square dancing at the Royal Palais in Albury the Border Morning Mail reported the following story:

“A huge crowd milled around the floor...when square dancing was introduced under caller Jim Vickers-Willis. The din was deafening at times, and the caller had to appeal for less noise so that his calls could be heard. What the dancers lacked in skills they made up for in enthusiasm, but as the night progressed many sets showed signs of ‘catching on’. Hardest worked man in the Palais was the caller, and also the most patient. He coaxed, pleaded, and cajoled the milling crowd, and in doing so revealed the personality that has made him one of the highest paid callers in Australia.”

During the Boom, many deals were done on a hand shake. Typical is this story about the manager of **Glens Music Store** in Collins Street (Mr. White):

When Jim's first record came out he called in to speak to Mr. White and asked him: "How many of my new record do you expect to sell?"

"Oh, fifty to one hundred", said Mr. White.

Jim asked: "How much profit do you make on each record?"

Mr. White said: "Two Shillings on each one."

Jim said: "How many of my new records could you sell if I advertised you from Earls Court and on the radio?"

Mr. White replied: "Many hundreds."

So Jim said: "If you pay us one Shilling for every record you sell, we will advertise you. It would be better to sell many hundreds of records for a shilling profit, rather than one hundred records for two shillings profit."

Mr. White agreed - so they shook hands on the deal.

This arrangement caused great competition among retailers: if you walked into Coles at almost any hour of the day you would hear Jim's record playing loudly to attract sales.

Expansion - Opening at Leggetts Ballroom

Jim also opened a square dance at the big Leggett's ballroom, in Prahran, on Friday nights.

Before the boom started, he had called in one afternoon to see the Proprietor Phil Leggett and asked if he had any nights available for square dancing.

He said he was free on Friday nights, but wanted to know how much Jim wanted as a fee. 'Nothing; Jim replied. 'Nothing?' echoed Phil. 'That's right', Jim said: 'I want half the profits'.

Jim saw a slight smile come over Phil Leggett's face, and knew he was thinking - 'Oh well, there probably won't be any profits, anyway'; and so they shook hands on the deal. Nonetheless, in typical Phil Leggett style, he and his partner Bruce Holdsworth set to work to organise Jim's square dance night efficiently.

Well, the first night they broke even. However, it was quite a success, and Phil and Bruce said they thought it was a very pleasant type of entertainment, and a very nice type of people who attended. On the second night they made £10, and Phil solemnly counted off £5 for Jim and £5 for them. The third night they made £20 - and they shared it equally again. By the fourth night the crowd had swelled and Jim got £30 for his share. He went home to Beth absolutely delighted. His salary as a journalist was only £27 per week and here he was, with 3½ hours square dance calling, earning more than that.

Then it grew and grew and Jim would go home to Beth at night with £100, and laughingly count out to Beth 'One for you, one for me, one for you; etc. in just the way that Phil Leggett used to do with him with the takings behind the scenery at Leggett's Ballroom.

Phil Leggett and Bruce Holdsworth were a couple of good sports, and they knew Jim and Beth's difficulties with their babies, and they clearly got a lot of fun out of the whole business with them. Beth and Jim were absolutely delirious with delight - and Jim said "At last I can out-earn the costs of hospitals and doctors!"

Dancing Away Inhibitions

Psychologists call them 'inhibitions; but, while teaching square dancing to thousands of men and women, Jim realised that it was such things as fear and doubt and guilt and misinformation which often held people back from enjoying life.

Jim saw this night-after-night when teaching about 1000 men and women to square dance at the Tuesday beginner's night at Earl's Court.

He would have a big circle in the middle of the main hall, teaching the beginners the basic steps. Under the eaves at the side of the hall there would be many men sitting out the dance - their aim 'to watch for a while!

The fact was they were scared of making fools of themselves and had Jim and Beth not done something to trick them into getting going, very likely they would have gone home after the first couple of dances and would never have been seen again.

They had pretty girls in their exhibition sets, including Beth, who went out under the eaves and asked the men to dance. The girl would then take a man by the hand, lead him into the big circle, plonk him by some unaccompanied lady in the circle, and go out and get another one. In this way the girls 'saved' hundreds of inhibited men and turned them into happy square dancers. Once they had survived the first dance, and found that they could do it quite easily, their fears were allayed and you couldn't keep them off the floor!

Further Expansion Across Borders

When Jim went across to open square dancing in Adelaide, promoter John Brennan did a magnificent job.

By this time, the only night Jim could possibly spare away from Melbourne was Monday night. The people in Adelaide said, "There has never been anything successful on a Monday night in Adelaide!" Nevertheless, Jim said it could not be any other night.

Well, John Brennan got his promotion going so well in Adelaide that he had the press and the managements of the main ballroom and one of the main stores all co-operating. Full-page pictures of Jim were published in the daily papers without any cost to us. On May 18th 1953, the opening night, they all set out - including their musicians from Earl's Court, and their exhibition set, and they square danced on the tarmac at Essendon aerodrome before they left Melbourne (pictured below):



In Adelaide it was pelting with rain. When they arrived at the Palais Royale Ballroom they found they could not get in. There was such a huge crowd that it was jammed all round the entrance. Eventually more than a thousand people overflowed the hall that night and they overloaded the trams on North Terrace.

At one stage Beth and the exhibition set girls were trying to force their way through the crowd at the front door and Beth had the trousers (which had just been ironed) of the male partners on her arm. With the crowd pushing around her, she found the trousers being torn off her arm. Beth called out: 'Help - I'm losing my pants!' The crowd apparently opened up magically and let her through.

After two weeks in Adelaide the dance had to be transferred to the huge Centennial Hall at Wayville. In this great barn - plus the two connecting annexes that were opened up on each side - Jim taught 4,000 beginners to square dance each night.

Jim had many nights like that and he used to look out from the stage in wonder. There were more than 50 amplifier speakers in the main hall alone, and the dancers farthest from him were so distant that they seemed only about two inches high. It was a beautiful sight from the stage with all the colourful frocks and happy faces and a really throbbing air of excitement and happiness.

Beth in her pretty square dance outfit (often an off the shoulder frock) would always be down there on the floor working hard to organise the sets and help people to join in.

Coca Cola trucks would drive right into the four corners of the hall and unload their drinks. At the end of a lively dance, when everybody was hot, Jim would say something like, 'Promenade off the floor, have a Coke there's lots more; and those thousands of people would descend on the Coca Cola. Within a few minutes all the stocks would vanish (picture of coke advert).

Week after week Jim flew over to Adelaide, and stayed in the Honeymoon Suite at the old South Australian Hotel, where their famous doorkeeper would not allow our square dance party to wear polo necks in the lunchroom.

What Made Jim's Brand of Square Dancing So Popular?

So, what was so special about the style of square dancing introduced by Jim in Australia?

Australian square dancing was distinctive - although square dancing's origins were from America (itself based on traditional European dancing), more than half the square dances that became popular in Australia during the 1950's boom originated in Australia. This productivity was fuelled in Melbourne by a spirited competitiveness of various square dancing camps - two in particular, the Jim Vickers-Willis and Bill McGrath camps. It was once said that "McGrath sounded like Footscray (salt of the earth) but attracted the Toorak crowd (the well-to-do), whilst Jim sounded like Toorak but attracted the Footscray crowd." Whilst Bill built up square dancing through the burgeoning Square Dance Clubs, Jim performed at the large public ballrooms which were broadcast on radio, and also on television. Rivalries developed as Jim, in particular, gained celebrity stature, and a huge public following.

Letters to the editors of Melbourne's newspapers highlighted the significant competition that existed between these various square dance camps. Here is one such letter in early 1953:

"Congratulations to Jim Vickers-Willis. Maybe he is not the best caller but my votes go to him for his wonderful personality which has brought a great deal of happiness to thousands. Both Eddie Carol and Bill McGrath are excellent Callers, but why must they spoil themselves with wisecracks aimed mainly at Jim, whom I have yet to hear do likewise. Are they jealous or can't they stand the competition? Orchids to square dancing and long may it live. Alabama Jubilee (Brighton)

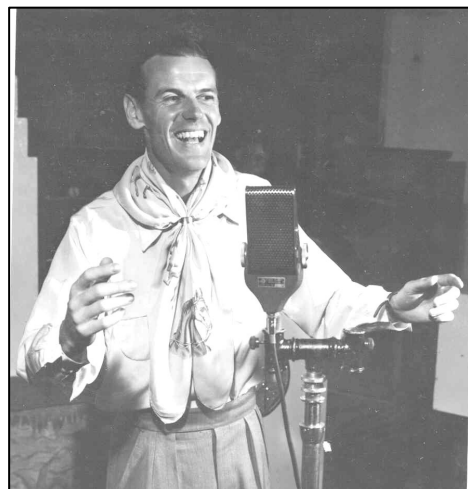
Jim also became popular because of his very particular style of square dance calling - a style that was uniquely Australian rather than American hillbilly - a style Jim calls "Australian Hoedown".

Jim based his reforms on three points which are discussed below – calling style; competition; and, dress.

Calling Style

Jim's calling approach had the following features:

- The dancing was fairly simple, often repeating 6 to 8 basic steps for most of the night enabling everyone to join in,
- The calling was mostly directional with each step being called, rather than calling a phrase that required a movement (i.e. a sequence of steps),
- The singing style was melodic rather than country, which was easier for Australian audiences to understand



Keeping it interesting but making it as uncomplicated and simple as possible was what Jim found to be a vital key in helping very large numbers of people to join in the square dancing. He kept it easy but interesting by creating variety – mixing 2/4 time tempo followed by 6/8 time, and using dance arrangements (rather than more and more complicated steps and movements) to keep the dancers interested. In the first two years of the square dancing boom Jim's regular square dancers came to know about 100 singing calls - some of them knew them off by heart. He used these for dance arrangements. He'd do one round of a singing call then switch to one round of the next singing call and then the next. Often there were about six singing calls in the one bracket. This kept everyone on their toes - including the caller and the band - and created great variety and interest without requiring the introduction of more and more complicated steps and movements which made it hard for new beginners to join in.

Competition

The competitive element had been in square-dancing all the time but it had been ignored. Before, there was an endless variety of rules, and all of them said, *generally* you do so-and-so. But to Jim's mind there should be no *generally* about it. In a game of cricket you don't say, "If a batsman's caught, he's out" then next time you play, decide to count only those clean-bowled. Jim established a rigid set of rules, through which the dancers could pit their skill against the caller. For this he used impromptu calls - Jim called the steps, deliberately trying to trick the dancers. Sets making mistakes were eliminated, until the last set standing is declared the heat 'winner'. This form of dancing appealed strongly to the 'sports-mad' Australians.

This competition was developed into what was called 'The Sun Cup'. Jim says the reason it became so popular was because they gave square dancing the same format as pennant tennis or pennant golf, with sets at clubs playing matches against each other. The Sun Cup competition consisted of a dance off of the sets that had won one of the 32 weeks of competition heats. Each heat night, the crowd waited as executives conferred. The minutes dragged by, the tension rose, then they announced, "You're on next Saturday night" – sounds like today's tv game shows, like "Who Wants to be a Millionaire".

According to an article in The Sun News Pictorial headed "Want the Sun Cup Rules?"

"...briefly, here they [the rules] are:

- 1. The heats are decided on the ability of the sets to handle impromptu calls,*
- 2. Only basic square dance figures are called,*
- 3. The calling is aimed at eliminating sets by a tricky sequence of calls, rather than difficult steps, and*
- 4. Timing by a set – that is uniformity in making the steps – is a most important feature.*

Grace and style, dress, feeling for the dance and precision in following the caller will decide the final."

Jim developed the competitive angle in the impromptu dance (the other form is the singing dance which has a set tune and pattern). In the past the caller called, the band played and the dancers danced, all to their own time (In many cases this still happens). But it grated on Jim, until

he found a way to overcome it. He fitted his impromptu calls to several basic melodies and trained a band to improvise accompaniments that kept time with him and the sets.

In 1953, the first heat was held at Earl's Court on February 12. 7 months later, the first final was held on September 16, 1953 at the Melbourne Town Hall (pictured below).



The packed Melbourne Town Hall on Sun Cup night, which was organised under the auspices of the National Club of Australia, provided one of the most spectacular displays ever seen in Melbourne. In this picture, Caller Jim Vickers-William and Peter Surry, are at the microphone.

SUN CUP WAS "MAGNIFICENT SPECTACLE"

THE Sun Cup-Sun Belle final night in the Melbourne Town Hall on September 16, was undoubtedly the greatest night of square dancing ever seen in Australia.

The magnificent spectacle alone was well worth the trip into the city to see — if you were one of the lucky ones who were able to get tickets. Bookings were sold out in 12 minutes a week before.

The first main impression you had on arriving was the happy, exciting atmosphere. You could feel it. The second was the knowledge of the organisation which ensured

everything went to time and ran smoothly. There wasn't a hitch all night.

Earl's Court closed for the night and Mr. John Brennan donated his and his staff's services free. All proceeds from the night went to the Sun Toy Fund.

Calling for public dancing was in the hands of Ray Brennan, Kieran Egan and Joan Tarnie, with more supplied by two bands led by Freddie Thomas and Bill Puley.

The march on by the sets competing in the Sun Cup final was a magnificent spectacle. The dressing was outstanding and

the sets, ably assisted well trained, carried off their part excellently.

To the calling of Jim Vickers-William, the competing sets danced off in the first section of the final—the Grace and Style judging. The judges had a difficult task and announced: there was no clearest winner, but would continue judging during the second and final.

As the sets marched off, the audience applauded for several minutes one of the finest displays seen in the Melbourne Town Hall.

Then came the first semi-final.

Each set began confidently,

proving immediately they were experts. After about a minute's dancing the heat was on, and one by one they broke to Jim Vickers-William's impromptu calling, until there were two of the ten sets left.

The rules of the contest were that any set still on the floor intact after six minutes of impromptu calling were eligible for the grand final, otherwise it was the set which lasted the longest.

The second semi-final was a tougher proposition. Within less than a minute two sets went out, but after three minutes, six sets were still

dancing confidently.

Two more sets broke, but the remaining four danced superbly to last the six minutes and go on into the grand final.

In the first semi-final, eight sets competed.

Within one minute only three were left. Within another minute, these three all broke at the same time and had to be called back to decide which would compete in the grand final.

One broke, but the other two gathered themselves and made the grade.

The atmosphere for the final was like at the football grand final. The

seven competing sets took their places and the heat was on from the word "go".

Within half a minute two sets (No. 8 and 18) dropped out.

The tricky impromptu calling went on, and then set No. 29 broke; set No. 15 faltered, tried to gather itself, but got lost and left the floor. Three sets were left and the crowd was on its feet.

Set No. 16 broke, leaving two to fight it out.

Then, after another minute's dancing, set No. 12, the Royal Gazette broke, and No. 24 were the winners. The crowd went wild.

The winning set comprised Pam Wilson, Doreen Farrell, Loretta Oldfield, Nanette Morrison, Ted Albrecht, Peter Harrington, Tom Walker and Gordon Rapson.

The judges had previously decided that the Royal Stuarts had won the special award for Grace and Style.

The chairman for the night, the manager of the Sun News-Pictorial, Mr. H. Parnell, congratulated the winning sets and presented each with a handsome cup and a £10 cheque.

The other big event of the night, the Sun Square Dance Belle of Belle for 1953, was

well organised and made a delightful picture.

The competitors are shown elsewhere in this issue and the winner, lovely Lorraine Lawrence, a one-curve girl.

After Miss Dot Jones, the Sun Belle judge had announced the winner, Mr. Parnell presented Lorraine with a large silver cup, a silver watch, a cheque for £50, Lorraine was so excited she could hardly speak.

The Sun Belle judging and the grand final of the Sun Cup were broadcast from 3DB, with Peter Surry at the microphone.

Below is a photo of the winning set - The Sun Champion Square Dance Set.



This set has every reason to look happy — they won the Sun Square Dance Cup of 1953. From left to right: Ted Albrecht, Doreen Farrell, Peter Harrington, Pam Wilson, Tom Walker, Loretta Oldfield, Gordon Rapson and Nanette Morrison. All except Pam Wilson come from Port Melbourne. Pam, who is only 14, comes from Preston, and was the youngest competitor in the Sun Cup. Each received a cup and a £10 cheque.

Here are two articles that describe what the 1953 Sun Cup was about:

**NATIONAL SQUARE DANCER, Volume 1 Number 2,
SEPTEMBER 16, 1953. Page 3 titled:**

**“Earl's Court goes to the city to make
SUN CUP UNIQUE Event”:**

ON Wednesday, September 16, in the Melbourne Town Hall the finest square dance sets in Melbourne will battle it out to win the Sun Cup of 1953.

Earl's Court will be closed for the night.

This event, which is unique in square dancing history, has created enormous interest among square dancers and thousands of people who like to watch square dancing gracefully performed. Fittingly, our cover this issue features Australia's leading caller, Jim Vickers-Willis, who has the difficult task of pitting his knowledge of calling against some of the most experienced sets in Melbourne.

The Sun Cup final will be judged on (first judging) - grace, style, precision, showmanship, dress, spirit of the dance, and impromptu. The Grand Final judging of eight sets will be judged on "knockout" impromptu. Each member of the Sun Cup final winning set will receive a trophy and a £10 order.

More than 25,000 competitors from all Melbourne and near-country centres have taken part in the 32 heats of the Sun Cup. Thousands of people have visited Earl's Court on Wednesday nights just to watch the contest which has sometimes lasted for nearly half an hour.

When the booking for the Melbourne Town Hall Sun Cup night opened at Allan's, Collins Street, there was a queue waiting stretching for half a block. One enthusiast was determined to get a good seat. He arrived and camped outside Allan's at 1 a.m.!

All tickets were sold out in less than an hour, which gives a clear indication of the public's interest in the event.

Elaborate arrangements have been made by the organisers to make sure the big programme runs smoothly. All proceeds from the night go to the Sun Toy Fund.

There is also a lot of interest (and we suspect a few arguments) about who will be the Sun Square Dance Belle of 1953. Each night of the Sun Cup heat a girl was chosen as a Sun Belle.

From the 32 girls chosen, one will be selected during the evening as the Sun Belle of 1953. She will be awarded a cup and a £50 prize.

Pictured - The general manager of the Melbourne "Sun", Mr. H. Pacini, who has played a key role in making the "Sun Cup" a success.



SQUARE DANCING. Sun Cup Final Was Spectacle

By Jim Vickers-Willis (The Sun, Saturday September 19, 1953)

Square dancers made the Sun Cup final on Wednesday one of the finest spectacles ever seen at the Melbourne Town Hall.

The gaily-dressed dancers, with a spectacular contrast of colors, would have done justice to a film extravaganza as they 'grand-paraded' for the final. The final itself was a bitterly-fought contest in which the last eight sets "broke" one by one after a great display of brainy and beautifully-timed dancing.

Sportsmanship

Probably just as impressive to the packed audience was the fine display of sportsmanship by the losing sets.

The 32 Sun Cup final sets and Sun Belle finalists will be guests on Wednesday at Earl's Court for the opening round of the National Square Dance Championships of Australia.

The championship will be decided in two sections — one covering grace, style and precision dancing, and the other impromptu dancing. It is hoped to complete the championships in three months.

New Brighton, first to complete their fourth round match in A Division of the Sun Pennant, are leading the field with 18 points. In B Division the leading teams are: New Preston, Koonung Heights, Surrey Hills, Chadstone, St. Andrews (Gardenvale) and Castlefield (Hampton) all with 12 points. Two deciding ties are to be danced at Earl's Court on Wednesday — Caulfield Grammar v. Essendon 483; Thornbury v. C.O.R. (Malvern).

Other Dates

Tonight Malvern Club meets Camberwell Memorial Hall (caller Geoff Webb). On Tuesday St. Peter's (Toorak) meet Malvern at the Malvern Town Hall (Ken Stamway) and the return match will be at St. Peter's on Friday (Ian McGlaughlin). On Wednesday Ormiston visit St. Augustine's Mont Albert (Ken Rimington).

Bob Pattison will call a new weekly club opening at Canterbury Memorial Hall on Tuesday. The club caters for intermediate dancers.

Hear It Again

3DB will rebroadcast The Sun Square Dance Cup final at Melbourne Town Hall at 11 am tomorrow."





At each heat of The Sun Cup a second competition was held to decide **The Sun Square Dance Belle**. Winner of the 1993 final – The Sun Belle of Belles - was Lorraine Lavender (pictured left), a 21 year-old dress designer who made her own frock. This was front page news in The Sun News Pictorial which generated considerable free publicity.

In an article in the September 30 1953 edition of the National Square Dancer the judge, Miss Dot Jones, wrote:

“The Melbourne Town Hall balcony was packed and the floor cleared. Each belle came on stage from the backstage centre entrance and, as she walked towards the middle of the stage she was met by her escort, who came on from the side. Each belle bowed to her partner, twirled under his arm and was then escorted down the stairs from the stage to a position on the floor. Sets were formed and made a pretty picture doing The Sun Belle Dance.

Then the girls were escorted to the stage and formed a semi-circle, waiting for the judges’ decision.”

Jim’s Australian audiences also had great fun playing the game "nine-pins", in which there is one extra man or woman in each set, and a type of musical chairs occurs, with one person missing out and eventually being eliminated – this type of game-based activities were especially appealing to the sporting instincts of the Aussies.

Standards of Dress & Behaviour

He and promoter John Brennan also set about cutting out the hillbilly stuff. Earl’s Court announced that no square dancers would be admitted in jeans - previously the standard dress for men. They considered cowboy boots, jeans and flashy shirts frightened off more men than enough. Now men wore what they would during an evening at home - sports trousers, golf shoes and bright shirts and scarves if they wish. The women wear colorful skirts and blouses. Pseudo Yankee accents also went by the board. (He has almost an ‘English’ accent himself). The dancers must hear calls clearly.



This letter to a newspaper of the day (Listener IN Melbourne 1953, Reprinted in 'National Square Dancer', September 16, 1953) spotlights the generosity and hospitality of square dancing:

I am an elderly cripple, but follow the square dance broadcasts, which give me great enjoyment. In my young days I was very fond of dancing.

I do not wish to enter into the merits of individual callers, as I am not in a position to judge them, but if there is a nicer personality than that of Mr. Vickers-Willis I have not seen nor heard him. I was very kindly invited by the management of Earl's Court to attend a square dance as their guest.

I would like to express my thanks for the wonderful way I was treated. When I arrived I was carried upstairs to the ballroom and seated in a comfortable chair and during the night was given a cup of tea. Imagine my surprise when, on looking around, I saw there were others less fortunate than me being treated in the same way.

If this is square dancing I say with all the emphasis I have that God give it strength to continue, as I think it is the best type of dancing I have ever seen. As to the management of Earl's Court, they have an old lady's blessings for having given her a night she will always remember, and I am sure I am speaking on behalf of all the other unfortunate people who were also privileged to attend and enjoy this wonderful hospitality also.

Mrs. B. Shaw, Moorabbin

[This letter appeared in the Listener In, Melbourne, recently. Because of its sincerity and because it typifies the spirit of square dancing, we are reprinting it. Ed.]

Recognition

Jim received public recognition when he was voted by the readers of The Listener In magazine as the **Star Square Dance Caller** in July, 1953. The contest was conducted by the magazine over 4 weeks. Readers were asked to write on a coupon the names of their six favourite callers in order of preference – a list of 32 caller names was supplied.

- 1st Jim Vickers-Willis
- 2nd Eddie Carol
- 3rd Bob Hunt, and
- 4th Bill McGrath.



The award was a badge and was presented to Jim by the General Manager of The Sun News Pictorial, Mr. H. Pacini, at Earls' Court on 8th July 1953.

This award provided plenty more publicity for Jim and for square dancing (see pictures below) including a feature article in the popular People Magazine (July, 1953).

THE LISTENER IN, July 4-10, 1953—Page 3

Jim Vickers-Willis is voted Star Caller

Jim Vickers-Willis has been voted by readers as The Listener In's Star Square Dance Caller.

Eddie Carol was second and Bob Hunt third.

The six winning names were: Jim Vickers-Willis, Eddie Carol, Bob Hunt, Bill McGrath, Eddie Evans, Jimmy Dean.

The contest was conducted by The Listener In for four weeks and aroused considerable interest in both city and country square dancing circles.

Readers were asked to write on a coupon supplied the names of their six favorite callers in order of preference.

A list of 32 names was supplied.

The initial count did not indicate a clear-cut winner. But after the voting got into its stride, Jim Vickers-Willis and Eddie Carol went to the front and maintained their lead all through.

Bob Hunt just scrambled home in front of his former teacher, Bill McGrath.

Much of the popularity of Jim Vickers-Willis and Eddie Carol must be credited to their radio sessions apart from their own more personal following.

Jim Vickers-Willis became a star caller almost overnight, when the first broadcast was made from Earl's Court, where he now calls six nights a week.

Eddie Carol came in second, and Bob Hunt and Bill McGrath came in third.

The six winning callers are heard regularly on radio sessions.

Bob Hunt is an expert square dancer, who was trained in calling by veteran Bill McGrath.

Bob calls at Rosebud Football Club (Mondays), McKinnon Progress Hall (T u e s days), Southern Tennis Ground, Berwick (W e d nesday), Mentions Sea Rangers (Thursdays), Paradise Club (Fridays), Rippon Hill Club (Saturdays).

Busman's holiday

On Sundays, for a change, he goes square dancing at Bill McGrath's Club, Doric Hall, South Melbourne.

Bill McGrath is well known as a caller although much of his time these days is spent organizing his team of callers and clubs.

Eddie Evans calls at the Merrifield five nights a week, and Jimmy Dean is heard regularly at the Melbourne Town Hall and the Trocadero.

The Listener In's Star Caller badge, which will be presented to him by the General



Brunswick reader wins £100

A freelance radio artist has won the price of £100 in The Listener In's Star Caller Contest for readers.

She is Mrs J. Knight, 45 Union Street, Brunswick.

Mrs Knight (above) was the only contestant to name the six top callers. She is pictured smiling happily as she received the £100.

She plans to use part of her £100 prize to buy an electric sewing machine because she makes most of her own clothes.

Mrs Knight and her husband, Fred, a stenographer at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, are building their own home at Merivale.

She says that the rest of the money would come in

writers Guild

radio writers have

BIG BANKS NAMES LEAGUE FINAL FOUR - - - see page 6

Faithful Years - By the Service - 3 X S T O B P.S.7

Faithful Years - By the Service - 3 X S T O B P.S.7

41

41

Vol. 29, No. 27

THE LISTENER IN

JULY 4-JULY 10

28 pages Price 6d.

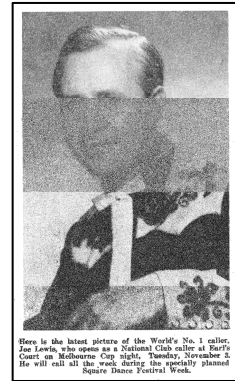



Square Dancing at Earl's Court (1953)

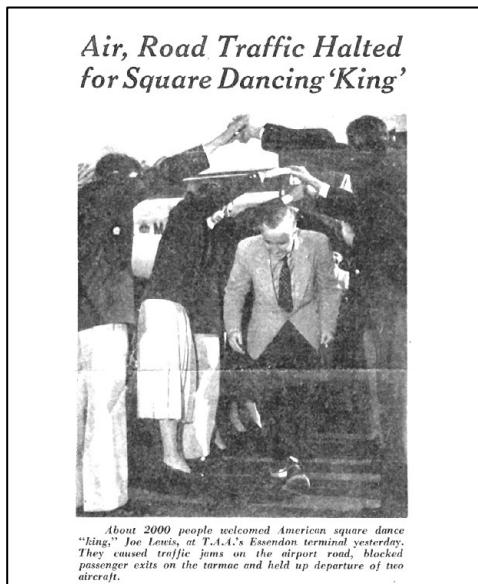
The Great Caller 'Joe Lewis' Returns

Joe Lewis, whom Jim knew as the world's top caller, was next on the promotion schedule. He was flown in from USA in November 1953 – he had not set foot in Australia for 3 years.

He was one of Jim's heroes and Jim had the extraordinary experience, at Joe's welcome ball, of hearing quite a lot of hisses and boos directed at Joe from some in the huge crowd - turning into cheers and clapping when Jim took the microphone.



Here is the latest picture of the World's No. 1 caller, Joe Lewis, who opens a National Club caller at Earl's Court on Melbourne Cup night, Tuesday, November 2. He will call all the week during the monthly planned Square Dance Festival Week.



Air, Road Traffic Halted for Square Dancing 'King'

About 2000 people welcomed American square dance "king," Joe Lewis, at T.A.A.'s Essendon terminal yesterday. They caused traffic jams on the airport road, blocked passenger exits on the tarmac and held up departure of two aircraft.

EARL'S COURT
ST. KILDA

— Welcomes The —

WORLD'S LEADING SQUARE DANCE CALLER

JOE LEWIS

In Conjunction With

Australia's Leading Square Dance Caller

JIM VICKERS-WILLIS

TOGETHER IN THE

**National Square Dance Festival
for One Week Only**

UNIT 1.—Cup Night (Nov. 3): Gala Anniversary Ball and Welcome to Joe Lewis, National Club members only. Dancing 8:30 till 1 a.m.

UNIT 2.—Wednesday (Nov. 4): General welcome to Joe Lewis, National Championship. Open night all Square Dancers.

UNIT 3.—Thursday (Nov. 5): Open night all Square Dancers.

UNIT 4.—Friday (Nov. 6): Open night National Club members and friends.

UNIT 5.—Saturday (Nov. 7): Radio Square Dance Party. Open night for intermediates and advanced. (In Main Ballroom)

Tickets can be had in advance from Glen's and Earl's Court for each separate night. Tickets limited. ADMISSION 7/-, plus tax.

Page 2 NATIONAL SQUARE DANCER OCTOBER 28, 1953

Square dancers are very loyal to the caller who taught them and obviously some thought this might be a Management move to replace Jim. The truth was Jim had helped to finance Joe's visit which taught them all a lot, especially Jim. The square dancers' loyalty, misplaced at the time, later became very important for them.

Joe Lewis played the squeeze box and sang pop songs as well as calling square dances. Soon he was being cheered to the echo at every performance.

He was amazed at the size of our crowds and intrigued about the way Jim had adapted square dancing to suit Australians, specifically the dress code and competition – but more on that in a moment.

The BOOM!

So, Jim was in the thick of it – ‘calling’ the dancing for crowds of from 1,000 to 4,000 nightly as well as doing five local radio programs a week. About a fifth of the adult population of Melbourne appeared to go square dancing - some dancing four and five nights a week. Some picture theatres closed for lack of patronage.

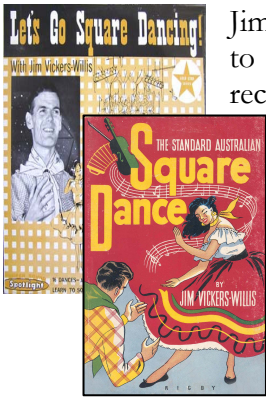
That's why today we rarely see any nostalgia pictures of the great square dance boom on television; the movie photographers (who provided most of the nostalgia pictures now shown on television) were forbidden to film square dancing. One movie photographer was a good friend of Jim's and even he had to say 'no' because the theatres was his livelihood.

The boom went on for 2 years and caused some picture theatres to close. There were scores of callers, and millions of pounds collected for such charities as The Sun Toy Fund, The United Nations Appeal for Children, Legacy, Aged Care Homes, the Animal Welfare League, The Victorian School for Deaf Children, etc.



Hall's Soft Drinks sponsored the first Outside Broadcast for an Adelaide t/v station -our square dance at the Palais.

Jim dominated the Australian Square Dance Boom! period. His calling was different, creating a popular style of square dancing that was unique to Australia. His popularity was unparalleled. He called to many thousands of dancers at one time, and his square dances were broadcast on radio and also on early Australian television. At one time, Jim's 1 hour "Lets Go Square Dancing" Program on ABC 2 TV, produced by John Petrie (photo at right taken on ABC2 set), held the channels #2 rating, behind "Sgt Bilko" - this program was also sold in the UK. Jim also did the first outside broadcast for Channel 7 Adelaide - a program televised from the Palais Ballroom in front of 1500 dancers. A few years later Jim appeared on Bert Newton's Tonight Show, on Channel 7 Melbourne.



Jim produced many quality square dancing resources - resources that helped beginners to learn whilst also challenging the more advanced dancers. Some of his original recordings and books are available for download from his web site at <http://www.vickers-willis.com/html/squaredancinghome.htm>. There are over 100 live and studio recorded square dances amongst these resources.

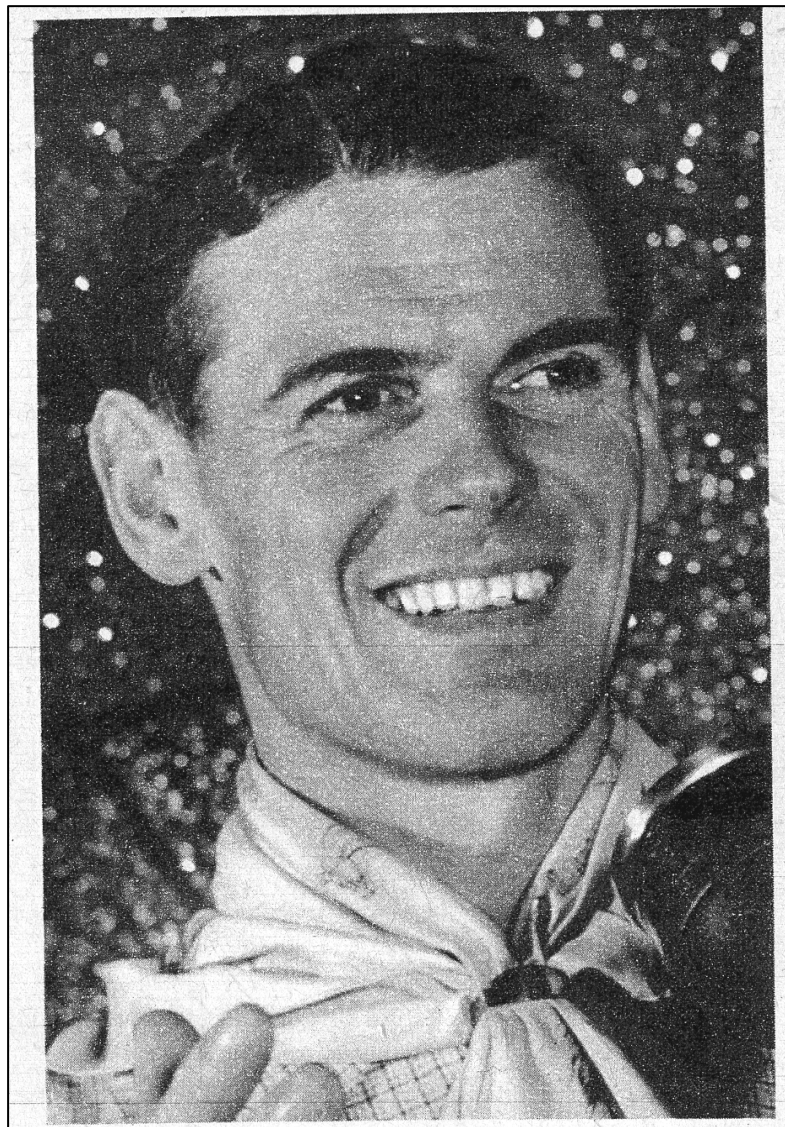
Although Jim loved square dancing, he found, after two years of 'calling' dances for thousands of square dancers five nights a week in Melbourne and one night a week in Adelaide, in the big public ballrooms, that he was under great pressure to keep going night after night and always put on a good show. And perhaps not surprising was the fact that he became ill.

And Jim's square dance calling career as one of Australia's highest paid entertainers came to a sudden and dramatic stop when he contracted polio in March 1954 and was placed into a life-supporting iron lung at Fairfield Hospital. His seven radio square dance programs were taken off the air in that week.

Despite a poor medical prognosis, Jim fought his way out of the iron-lung and has gone onto to lead a long and productive life – Jim's fight, to escape the iron lung and endure with post-polio paralysis, is one of Australia's most inspiring human interest stories. This included returning to square dance calling – that's Jim pictured at right calling from a wheelchair at his "Come Back" square dance – although by that time the Boom! had all but petered out.



For more information on the 1950's Australian Square Dancing Boom! And the inspiring life story of Jim Vickers-Willis you are invited to visit Jim's web site us at www.vickers-willis.com.



Jim Vickers-Willis - Square Dance Caller (1953)