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It's Hip to Be Square

By Josh Premako
Signal City Editor

The days of a live band replete with fiddle and double bass are gone, so the caller uses a CD player, calling out the moves with a microphone in hand.

Other than that, not much has changed about square dancing over the years. The women wear great, swooshy dresses; often with checked patterns, and often in bright colors.

The men generally wear Western-style shirts tucked into slim-fitting pants.

The evening usually starts with a "round" dance, which is exactly what it sounds like, then progresses to the dancers getting in formation and square dancing their hearts out.

On Friday, the Sierra Hillbillies marked 40 years of dancing in the Santa Clarita Valley, with a dance at the SCV Senior Center in Newhall.

The group has about 50 members, and about 85 people crowded into the Senior Center on Friday. In addition to the Hillbillies, dancers from clubs in the San Fernando Valley and Bakersfield turned out to mark the occasion.

As an observer, it's difficult at first to find the rhythm, but the dancers have no apparent problem, gliding across the wood flooring effortlessly, smiles on their faces.

"It's just good people. Square dancers are just friendly," said Jerry Toles, 89, who's been dancing for years, and said he still gets out on the dance floor occasionally.

Toles remarked that square dancing has seen a definite drop in interest. In the 1970s, he said, there were about 11,000 square dancers in the Los Angeles area.

There's about 5,000 now, he said.

There were few young faces in the crowd Friday night, but it wasn't a strictly senior affair.

"It's something to do," said Jamie Waters, 24, of Santa Clarita. "It's something different and it's fun."

Nearly everyone interviewed also remarked that square dancing is great physical activity.

Bob Kofnovec is vice president of the Sierra Hillbillies and has been with the group for the last 37 years.

Married for 58 years, he said square dancing "keeps us in shape."

"We just like the people. It's a community activity."

In addition to raffle prizes and a potluck dinner Friday night, Mayor Marsha McLean also turned out to present the Hillbillies with a certificate of recognition on behalf of the city, even taking to the dance floor for

a few songs.

McLean said she first danced with the group some 25 years ago.

"I dragged my husband screaming and yelling to the first class," she said. "He was sold on it, and so was I. It's just such good, clean fun."

For more information about the Sierra Hillbillies, call (661) 257-4801 or visit www.sierrahillbillies.org

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