

Ontario Old-time Step-dancing: Piecing Together a History Through Ethnography

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While the step-dancing style currently performed at Ontario fiddle and step-dancing contests, and now called Ottawa Valley step-dancing, is the most well-known style in Ontario, when I started step-dancing in 1974 in southwestern Ontario, I learned a very different style, now called the Ontario old-time style. Little is known about this style, and indeed, it is rarely performed today. This article is the first of two I will write that attempt to dig into the roots of the Ontario old-time style. In it, I describe the interaction between the Ontario old-time and Ottawa Valley styles that has resulted in the Ottawa Valley style becoming the more prolific within the province. In an upcoming article I will use movement and rhythmic analysis to make some preliminary observations about the possible history of the Ontario old-time style, and particularly regarding connections between it and its probable antecedent(s) in England. In this article, I use interviews with older dancers to provide some of the details of the period during which this shift from Ontario old-time to Ottawa Valley occurred, as well as their understandings of the historical roots of the old-time style.

Interactions Between Ontario Old-time and Ottawa Valley Step-dancing

Until the 1970s, dancers in neither southwestern Ontario nor eastern Ontario were familiar with step-dancing at the opposite end of the province, and so we all just called what we did “Canadian step-dancing”. Because I was so young at the time, I recently asked older dancers from both southwestern Ontario and the Ottawa Valley to help me unravel how these two discrete styles met, mixed, and ended up with one having all but disappeared. Buster Brown (1950-2014) and Debbie (McWatty) Reid (b. 1955), not insignificantly both from the eastern part of the province, believe that dancers from southwestern Ontario invented the label of “Ottawa Valley” to distinguish the different style that they saw coming out of the Ottawa Valley region. For example, Debbie told me,

Well, you know, when that started, it was because I’ve always called my dance troupe the Ottawa Valley dancers because this is the Ottawa Valley, not because of anything about being that style of dancing, but all of a sudden from your end they

call it, “Oh well do the Ottawa Valley style.” I remember at dance camp, I said, “What is Ottawa Valley style?” “Well, Debbie, you don’t know what Ottawa Valley style is?” “Well, no, what do you guys call Ottawa Valley style?” Well, it was our style of basics or starting. Like the shuffles¹ or hopping, you know, the hop shuffle, hop shuffle, step, those kind of things. And that was Ottawa Valley style, I guess because this is really where a lot of it originated, it was right here in the Valley, so I guess that’s why they say Ottawa Valley style.... We never used to call it [Ottawa Valley step-dancing]. We just called it step-dancing. To us there wasn’t any other style; we were just doing the only thing there was. But as we’ve seen from Stratford and that, there were other styles of it. We had never seen anything else. As far as we knew, there was Gilles Roy, Donnie Gilchrist,² and Buster Brown, and that was it. (Reid 2003)

Buster Brown believed that by the turn of the 20th century there was good reason for Ottawa Valley step-dancing to simply be called “Canadian” step-dancing because it had spread across the country:

Whether it’s in Stratford or whether it’s in Arnprior or Ottawa Valley, it’s Canadian step-dancing, you know. Now I see influences of our Canadian step-dancing in dancing [from the east coast] in some parts of it. Some of the dancers that are [at] the competitions, not the traditional ones that dance down in Cape Breton, because they’re locked into their little thing and they don’t change it, which is fine, but for some of the dancers that I’ve seen from down there now are dancing. They’re not a joke anymore, they’re dancers. So hey, more power to them, they put the effort in, and so when I think of it now, I think of it as Canadian, you know, because it’s not just isolated to one area, it is all over. And I remember Richard Wood [from PEI], watching him dance and I knew right away, you know, he has been influenced by our Canadian step-dancing because there’s no dancers dance like that down there. So he didn’t get it down there, but he was connected with the contests and all that kind of stuff, so naturally he was going to be exposed to it. And if you’re going to be exposed to it, you either get in

and take part or you step back and say, “No, that’s not for me,” you know.... I know dancers that I’ve taught, and I’m sure probably Judy³ and other teachers as well, that have moved out west, for example. Now, I know dancers that have taught out west, I know dancers that have went out east and taught dancing out east. So now you can call it Canadian step-dancing because it has spread to that point. Even if it had started isolated with one man, Donnie Gilchrist, kind of thing, and evolved to where it’s at today. (Brown 2001)

While it is true that the Ottawa Valley style has gained some national and international recognition as a result of some dancers traveling and performing with such internationally renowned musicians as The Chieftains, Natalie MacMaster, John Allan Cameron, and John McDermott, and Ottawa Valley step-dancing teachers are traveling across Canada (and internationally) teaching the style at camps and workshops, I think the regional designation, “Ottawa Valley”, reflecting the style’s place of origin and centre of performance, is most appropriate. Also, it doesn’t marginalize other Canadian styles of step-dancing, some of which you will read about in this volume.

There was little awareness of or contact between

the old-time and Ottawa Valley styles until the dancers started attending contests in other parts of the province in the 1970s. Judy Waymouth describes her first exposure to Ottawa Valley step-dancing after five years of dancing the old-time style:

And then when we went to Dundalk⁴ at that time. After we had gone a couple of times, the Leahys⁵ started coming up, the Leahy family now.... We were just in awe and that was our first exposure to the Ottawa Valley reel. It was like, “Oh my goodness! Whatever they’re doing we want to learn that, that was so cool.” (Waymouth 2003)

I myself don’t remember seeing Ottawa Valley step-dancing for the first time, but knowing the differences between the two, I can imagine just how exciting it would have been.

The Ottawa Valley style has more complex footwork than old-time, with a different basic, which begins with a pick-up to the beat, as opposed to the old-time basic, which begins *on* the beat. (See Figures 1 and 2 for notated rhythms and [Video Clip 1](#) and [Video Clip 2](#) for danced examples of the two basics. For a more detailed explanation of the difference between the two basics, see [Video Clip 3](#).)



Figure 1: Two Ontario Old-time Basics.

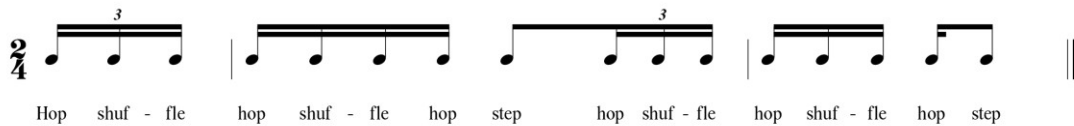


Figure 2: Two Ottawa Valley Basics.

Also, Ottawa Valley step-dancing is performed primarily to three different tune types – clogs (4/4),⁶ jigs (6/8), and reels (2/4) – performed together as a medley,⁷ while the old-time style is danced only to reels. The Ottawa Valley style was more impressive to watch and listen to, even in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it quickly became apparent that it was the style needed to win in competitions where both styles were being performed. For those of us from southwestern Ontario, it was also fun and challenging to

learn something so different from what we were used to. Because it is now performed primarily in the context of competitions, the Ottawa Valley style has continued to develop in complexity at a dizzying pace. The Ottawa Valley step-dancing of today is almost unrecognizable as the same style of 30 years ago.

In the mid-1970s and into the early 1980s, there was a flurry of activity around the province as the southwestern Ontario dancers tried to catch up to their Ottawa Valley counterparts (Yorke-Slader

2002). Ottawa Valley dancers such as Debbie Reid and Cathy-Lynn (MacIntosh) York-Slader (1963-2006) were teaching for periods of time in the London and Stratford areas. For example, in 1976, at age 20, Debbie Reid was brought down to southwestern Ontario by the Greenwood family from Mitchell to teach local step-dancing students, as well as their teachers. She taught in Stratford, London, and Simcoe for a month at a time, and then returned to her students in the Valley the alternate months. While she was teaching “down south”, her sister took over her students at home, and the teachers and older students in southwestern Ontario continued lessons for her there when she was home.

The short time span and inconsistency of these lessons drove some of the key southwestern Ontario dancers to travel up to the Valley for lessons. They then came back and taught what they had learned to the local dancers. Because she has such a large step-dancing school, Judy Waymouth has probably been responsible for teaching more step dancers in southwestern Ontario than any other. She is one who traveled to the Valley to take lessons from Buster Brown. Buster recalls:

I was judging [at Bobcaygeon] and Judy Nieberlein was there. Debbie McWatty was dancing and Judy Nieberlein and there was a few of them dancing there. I think Gladys Hopper⁸ had been teaching some of the dancers down there, and from what I understood, she was a tap dancer years before. I mean, the poor kids were so far behind the dancers up here, but I seen the ability of some of these kids, you know, and as a judge I felt it my responsibility to go and kind of find them after and explain to them why [they hadn't placed]. Step-wise, you know; it wasn't ability-wise and that kind of stuff. Debbie was at her peak at that time though, so in my mind, there was a wide gap there, but I did see that it could be closed, you know. So I went and I explained to Judy, her mom and dad was there, and so I said, “You have the ability, you're athletic, you put 110% effort. All you need is some steps, you know, and it's just that we've been at it longer up in the Ottawa Valley, and it's a shame that you don't have it down there.” The next thing they started coming up, so they'd come up and we'd work three hours at a time. They'd stay two and three days at a time, and the rest is history. Judy went back down and she was going to university, I think, at that time. The next I'd heard she had quit university and opened up her dance studio. (Brown 2001)

There has been some reciprocation, on a much

smaller scale, of Ottawa Valley dancers learning the old-time style, mostly to dance together with others in the fiddle park; however, it is not a part of the early development of dancers in the Valley the way it still is for many southwestern Ontario step dancers who learned the old-time style initially. For example, for all but my youngest 3-year-old dancers, the first routine I teach is in the old-time style because of its repetitious nature. Many other teachers who originally learned their dancing in southwestern Ontario, and thus learned the old-time reel as one of their first dances, also teach the old-time reel to their beginning dancers.

Calling it “the” old-time reel is somewhat misleading. There is not one set routine that is called “the old-time reel”. Instead, like Ottawa Valley step-dancing of today, there are many different old-time reel steps that teachers put together to create routines, and new steps were continually created by both teachers and students. According to Grace Carter,

There are only two steps⁹ in your traditional step-dancing, and those are your first step¹⁰ and your back shuffle. And you put variations to them. And that's all there is. In one sense, if you get somebody that's real musical and if they can get past those two basic steps, you'll make a good stepper. (Carter 1999)

I learned old-time reels for my first several years of step-dancing lessons, each year combining some new, more difficult, steps with some of the older steps I'd learned the year before. Even by my third or fourth year, however, my steps never reached the level of complexity of the Ottawa Valley steps of the time.

Historical Knowledge of Ontario Old-time Step-dancing

Because of the emphasis in Ottawa Valley step-dancing on growth and development, fueled by contests, most current dancers on the circuit know little about the old-time style, except perhaps a few steps. Furthermore, the lack of any formal history of step-dancing in the province means that misconceptions and partial truths abound. There are few formal “complete” histories of any of the styles of vernacular step-dancing currently performed in Canada; however, there is published historical work on most of the other styles (see the bibliography for the Introduction in this issue). Even Buster Brown, who is arguably one of the three most influential Ottawa Valley step dancers, and can describe much of the history of Ottawa Valley dancing from his own experience, has little knowledge of a coherent history of the other main style of step-dancing being performed in Ontar-

io until the late-1970s:

[Old-time] meaning Gladys Hopper and her sister. Old-time referring to a background in tap dancing that Gladys and them had, and I guess if you call it old-time they were doing that same shuffle hop step to the back. Charlie Chamberlain in the East Coast and Don Messer show, he used to end Don Messer's show doing that, and Charlie certainly wasn't exposed to Gladys Hopper and them at that time. And it wasn't tap dancing, but then Gladys and them had had it. It did have some influence in more of, I guess, the traditional local dancers because the man up in Campbell's Bay, Tommy Larneau, whenever I did get to see him dance, I remember I was very young, and he was doing that same kind of stuff. It strikes me that it's very similar to the old Scottish step-dancing.¹¹ That's where it came from. Definitely that's the background where they all came from. So it just came over and had that influence.¹² (Brown 2001)

Although Buster is not familiar with the history of the old-time style, he was able to make some inferences based on how the dancing *looked* in comparison to other styles he knew. Although I can't comment on his observations about Tommy Larneau of Campbell's Bay in the Ottawa Valley, his comments about Charlie Chamberlain (of New Brunswick) and Scottish (or probably more accurately, Cape Breton) step-dancing seem accurate to me. On the several video clips I have of Chamberlain dancing on the Don Messer show, I've only ever seen him dancing one basic step, which is very similar to the Ontario old-time basic as well as the Cape Breton basic.¹³

In fact, discovering the origins of the old-time style has been one of my research goals since I read a perfect description of one of the first old-time steps I had ever learned (see [Video Clip 4](#)) in a book about step-dancing in England 15 or more years ago. While I can't remember how the author notated it,¹⁴ I remember the pang of recognition as I read the words and felt an immediate response from my body. My body *knew* that step. I continued reading, but none of the other steps resonated the way that first one had.¹⁵ Because of this reference, I had long imagined finding some direct links from the Ontario old-time style to step-dancing in England, the same way that step dancers in Cape Breton can trace their style to step-dancing in Scotland, and dancing in Newfoundland and the Ottawa Valley is linked to older styles in Ireland.¹⁶ The reality, not surprisingly, is much more complex, and has been much more difficult to discover.

Unfortunately, by the time I started my fieldwork with older dancers from southwestern Ontario, there

were few of them left to interview. I did get a chance to talk with Grace Carter, my first step-dancing teacher. She and her twin sister, Gladys, took dance lessons – tap dancing and Highland dancing – as children in London, Ontario. Grace told me that she hadn't even seen step-dancing until she got married and moved to the small village of Donegal (in Perth County) in the 1940s. There she learned to step dance by standing behind others at the old-time dances, and trying to imitate what they did. She believed that step-dancing originated from Ireland, perhaps because the community in which she learned to step dance, Donegal, has strong Irish roots. She was insistent that "real" step-dancing is done only to reels, performed with the body and arms straight, not too fast, and without any of the "fancy stuff"¹⁷ that dancers were performing at the time of our interview (1999).



Figure 3: Grace and Gladys Holloway posing in the "Dutch costumes" in which they performed the waltz clog, ca. 1930s, in southwestern Ontario (Photo provided by Gladys' daughter, Shelley McLean).

So, while Buster recognizes some Scottish influence, and Grace has located its origins in Ireland, why am I so intent on looking for an English connec-

tion? First, because of the passage I read that was an exact description of the Ontario old-time reel that I had learned. I am not surprised that there are similarities to Scottish and Irish step-dancing, given the close proximity of the three cultures, but the idea that someone could write out the exact steps that I was doing, in a way that I so easily understood, is compelling. Second, some of the other novelty dances that my family learned from Grace are reminiscent of some of the “fancy dances” described by the Fletts, among others. In particular, we learned to do a waltz clog while skipping rope, which is likely related to the Skipping Rope Dance documented by the Fletts in England (Flett & Flett 1979 : 9), as well as elsewhere, and a song and waltz clog dance wearing wooden clog shoes and stereotypical Dutch costumes (Pilling 1967: 160-61) (See Figure 3 for a picture of Grace and Gladys in costume to do this dance in southwestern Ontario, ca. 1930s). I don’t have a picture of my brother and I doing this dance in the 1970s.) Unfortunately, I never thought to ask Grace where or from whom she had learned these dances. Step dancers in Ontario and Quebec perform a waltz clog to music in $\frac{3}{4}$ metre. The same dance is called a “clog waltz” in England.

Finding a direct link between Ontario old-time step-dancing and the step-dancing of a particular region in England – my original goal – has been particularly difficult, and as I learn more about step-dancing in the British Isles, I realize it is likely impossible. At the same time, there are some fascinating connections between the two that bear further investigation using rhythmic and movement analysis, and in collaboration with British colleagues. In fact, a comparative study of all known styles of percussive dance in Canada as well as their British and Irish antecedents, using both rhythmic and movement analysis, as well as tracking immigration patterns and locating archival sources, would be a logical extension of this work. Putting together this issue of the magazine is one baby step in that direction.

Glossary

Back shuffle: a “step, shuffle, hop, step” (crossed behind) as demonstrated in [Video 3](#).

Basic: a series of footwork, equaling one bar of music, that is repeated often throughout the dance. Some people believe that without the basic, or a variation of it, present in a dance, the dance cannot claim to be of a particular style; for example, if the dance doesn’t have any Ontario old-time basics, it’s not in the Ontario old-time style.

Fiddle park: a campground adjacent to the venue for fiddle and step-dancing contests in Ontario. The majority of contestants and their families and fans camp there, playing music and dancing throughout the weekend. For many fiddlers and step dancers, it is the highlight of any contest weekend (see Johnson 2006 for more).

Haymaker: a move introduced into Ottawa Valley step-dancing from American clogging where one foot traces complete circles behind the other leg, sounding a beat as it passes the floor.

Pullback: starting with both feet flat on the floor, jump backwards, landing on the balls of both feet, one after the other, and make two very quick beats with the balls of each foot as you move backwards. The order of sounds will be: right ball, left ball, right landing, left landing.

Shuffle: a component of several kinds of percussive dance, where you make two sounds by brushing your foot forward and back, hitting the floor each time. In some cases (e.g., Ontario old-time and Ottawa Valley styles), both sounds are made by hitting the floor with the ball of the foot, and in other styles (e.g., sometimes in Cape Breton), the first sound is made by the heel of the foot, while the second is made by the ball.

Step: “Steps” are usually either 8 or 16 bars long and made up of both basics and other kinds of footwork. In an old-time reel, steps are 16 bars long (8 bars starting on one foot repeated by the same 8 bars starting on the opposite foot). Traditionally in an Ottawa Valley reel steps can be either 16 bars, as above, or 8 bars long (4 bars starting on one foot repeated by the same 4 bars starting on the opposite foot).

Interviews and Personal Communication

Brown, Buster. 2001. Recorded interview with author. Arnprior, ON. 30 August.

Carter, Grace. 1999. Recorded interview with author. Milverton, ON. 28 June.

Reid, Debbie. 2003. Recorded interview with author. Arnprior, ON. 24 May.

Waymouth, Judy. 2003. Recorded interview with author. Stratford, ON. 18 June.

Yorke-Slader, Cathy-Lynn. 2002. Recorded interview with author. Stittsville, ON. 25 November.

References

Flett, Joan, and Tom Flett. 1979. *Traditional Step-Dancing in Lakeland*. London: English Folk Dance and Song Society.

Johnson, Sherry. 2006. *Negotiating Tradition in Ontario Fiddle Contests*. PhD dissertation, York University.

Pilling, Julian. 1967. The Lancashire Clog Dance. *Folk Music Journal* 1/3: 158-179.

List of Video Clips

1. Old-time basic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8X9jLkD0do>

2. Ottawa Valley basic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QksOfcOu1nI>

3. Back shuffle.

<https://vimeo.com/184537779>

4. 8-bar old-time basic step (6 basics and a break), repeated twice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOdRZULrMk>

Notes

¹ For explanations of technical dance terminology, please see the glossary.

² Donnie Gilchrist (1925-1984) is often considered to be the “grandfather” of today’s Ottawa Valley step-dancing. Gilles Roy (b. 1946) and Buster Brown were his most prominent students. Buster taught step-dancing in the Arnprior, Ontario area until shortly before his death. Gilles is still teaching in Carleton Place, ON, and performing.

³ Judy (Nieberlein) Waymouth (b. 1963) has been teaching step-dancing in Stratford, ON, since the mid-1980s. She became my teacher when I wanted to switch from the Ontario old-time style to the Ottawa Valley style in the early 1980s.

⁴ The small village of Dundalk, ON, has hosted the Canadian Step-dancing Championships since 1957 (www.dundalkdance.com, accessed Sept. 11, 2015).

⁵ The Leahys are a family of 11 siblings, originally from Lakefield, ON, all of who step dance and play multiple instruments. Before they became an internationally recognized performing band (www.leahymusic.com, accessed Sept. 11, 2015), they competed at fiddle and step-dancing contests in Ontario. Some of the next generation Leahys are now regular competitors on the Ontario fiddle and step-dancing competition circuit.

⁶ In the Ottawa Valley style, a clog is performed to a slow, dotted hornpipe or a schottische.

⁷ The only other style of step-dancing in Canada that is performed to a medley of tunes that changes tune types and metres is the Cape Breton style. Dancers typically perform a strathspey (4/4) followed by several reels (2/4).

⁸ Gladys (Holloway) Hopper (1927-2001) and her twin sister Grace (Holloway) Hymers-Carter (1927-2014) were two of the prominent step-dancing teachers in southwestern Ontario in the 1970s. I will discuss their contributions in more detail below.

⁹ Here, Grace is using “step” to mean a smaller part of the 8-bar and 16-bar steps described in the glossary.

¹⁰ Here, Grace is using “first step” to refer to the basic.

¹¹ It’s hard to know what Buster meant by “old Scottish step-dancing”, and unfortunately I never got a chance to ask him. Had he ever seen step-dancing in Scotland or by Scottish step dancers in Canada? Did he mean contemporary Cape Breton step-dancing? Was he inferring some older style of dancing, presumably from Scotland, based on contemporary Cape Breton step-dancing?

¹² Ironically, Grace Carter describes Buster Brown’s early dancing, for example on the Don Messer Show, as tap dancing. “He did tap-dancing at step-dancing speed.... He’s learned more stepping these last few years” (Carter 1999). While I’m sure Buster would have disagreed with Grace’s assessment, Buster’s teacher, Donnie Gilchrist, was both an accomplished step dancer and tap dancer. So it is not inconceivable that Grace, who had learned tap dancing herself as a child, was able to identify some tap influence in Buster’s dancing.

¹³ The relationship between the Ontario and Cape Breton basics is beyond the scope of this article and will be examined in future publications.

¹⁴ Using my own system for writing steps that I developed to help me remember steps and routines in teaching, I have “written down” the step in Appendix One. There is no standardized system for writing out or notating and transcribing steps in Canadian percussive dance traditions. Teachers or dancers who find notation useful develop their own unique systems, often borrowing from those systems used by colleagues or their own teachers. Given the ubiquity of video recorders today, there appears to be less of a need for notation than in the past.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, I have been unable to find that reference again.

¹⁶ Links between these Canadian styles and their British and Irish antecedents is based both on our knowledge of migration patterns as well as stylistic features of the dances. These links are discussed further in articles by Sparling, Melin, and Harris Walsh in this volume.

¹⁷ By “fancy stuff” I think Grace was referring to some of the elements borrowed from tap (e.g., pull-backs) and other styles of dance (e.g., the haymaker from American clogging), as well as the tendency to make dances very full by cramming as many foot sounds as possible into each bar of music.