



## The Knuckleheads

The Knuckleheads are probably one of Jack Roach's finest contributions to square dancing in this region. The Knuckleheads weren't just an average square dance club but a group of people who were like minded, industrious and dedicated to an ideal. They came from all over Minnesota and the Lakehead region of Ontario. You didn't just join the Knuckleheads but were invited to become one. You didn't just become one but had to meet specified requirements to include proof of dancing ability. And when you did meet these requirements you had to go through an initiation ceremony.

The symbolism of the Knuckleheads was based on a Native American theme. There were four candles that represented Friendship, Faithfulness, Fleet-footedness and Fortitude.

**FRIENDSHIP:** Here I kindle Friendship's fire. May it burn brightly through the years. Ever let the flame remind you-Knuckleheads are the friendliest folks.

**FAITHFULNESS:** burns in this candle. May you ever faithful be first to self and then to friendships and to square dance activity.

**FLEET-FOOTEDNESS:** glows in this candle. When the record starts to turn, eyes will sparkle, feet start tapping. Hurry! Hurry! Don't be slow!

**FORTITUDE:** shines in this candle. Knuckleheads will ne'er give up. Not too old. Not too tired. Always try it one more time.

Braves and Squaws, we meet together  
Meet in solemn Knucklehead Council  
Here we gather round the campfire  
For a special, solemn ceremony.  
This the night when faithful dancers,  
Fleet of foot and brave of spirit,  
Dancers who have proven friendly  
Are invested with our symbol,  
Very special little symbol  
Of very special square dance people.  
Not all square dancers are chosen  
To become a Knucklehead.  
(opening of the Knucklehead Initiation Ceremony)

In 1957 Jack had the opportunity of running a square dance camp of his own at Mille Lacs Lake near Isle, Minnesota using the same dance hall and resorts used by the Woodward camp the year before. A history of the group was presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary gathering in 1981.

*“A knucklehead history can be written in one word- FRIENDSHIP! Little did the group of square dancers who struggled through the rounds and squares that summer in 1957 ever think they were establishing so great a tradition! Several of the couples had attended square dance camps conducted by Lynn Woodward, and when he took a summer calling job in a national park out west, Jack offered to camp and call with those who were interested. So, to Isle, Minnesota trekked fourteen couples and twenty-five children ranging in age from 2½ to 14 years old. They stayed in cabins at Hartwig’s and Wolfe’s resorts on Mille Lacs Lake and danced in a hall operated by “Dusty Lane” (in real life, Chester Gotch). It was truly a “family camp” with time scheduled for youngsters to fish, swim, hike, do handcrafts, and square dance with their parents! Jack carried out a Latin American theme, and “Ole!” often rang out when someone had mastered a waltz turn or the two-step! This is twenty-five long years ago and the dancers were not quite as accomplished as they are now, and there was often a flub and a frustration. One day when things were really going bad, Jack held his head and commiserated, “Oh, you knuckleheads!”---and the name stuck!! It was Cletus Roufs and Joe Bachman who came back with the little Indians which became the badge of the group. And so the tradition was begun twenty-five years ago”. There were no plans for twenty-five years to come. Everybody had a good time and wanted to come back the next summer in 1958. They had no idea about the significance of what they had started.*

A write-up in the November 1957 Roundup, the Minnesota Square Dance Federation magazine, pretty well sums up the hi-jinks that



was these early Knuckleheads. *“The Group above challenges the bunch reported in the September Roundup as the first Idiots in Minnesota. These relaxed dancers became Idiots on July 23 about 12:30am while on a square dance vacation at Mille Lacs Lake near Isle, Minn. under the supervision of John Roach of Glencoe. The group formulated plans last winter to take a family square dance vacation at Mille Lacs this summer and the picture at left above shows the vacationers the night of the pajama party including the Ralph Petersons, Pete Petersons, Al Lucas, John Muenzhubers, Dale Kunzes, Erwin Ottes, Walter Kokishs, Doug Skolds, Cliff Sommerfields, Joe Bachmans, Cletus Roufs, Wilfred Barils, Fred Burkes and John Roaches. John Roach dubbed this group the ‘Knuckleheads of the Third Water’, hence the emblem of the Knuckleheads is an Indian doll pin bearing the inscription ‘Wah-Nah-Dis’ which, according to Mille Lacs Indian talk, means Idiot. These same Knuckleheads held a reunion on Sunday September 15 at the Baril cottage on Lake Minnebelle near Litchfield with the Berkes as assisting hosts. They moved the*

*furniture out of the cottage and danced from 2 in the afternoon until 10:30 that night with a break for dinner. Each member of the group tape recorded his greeting to Fred Burke who was unable to attend. After the party, Ralph Peterson invited the Idiots into their little 20 foot trailer house for coffee. Of course the trailer overflowed with guests (14 couples) and of course there were not enough cups to go around so caller Roach (see photo) drank his from his boot- or at least went through the motions of pouring.”*



Mabel and Jack on stage at the Dusty Lane Ballroom Isle, 1957

The group of dancers that signed up for this camp had been gradually coming together for a couple of years. Initially they came from Jack’s Willmar and Le Sueur clubs in the U.S. and the following year, 1958, dancers from the Fort William/ Port Arthur, Ontario, Canada area. Some had attended previous Woodward camps. This unique group of people formed the beginnings of what ultimately became the Knuckleheads International.



Mabel and Jack and son Lonnie, age 7, at Bottineau, N. D. in 1954.

Jack’s relationship with the Canadian dancers began in 1954 while he was on the staff at the Woodward camp at Bottineau, North Dakota. It was at this camp that he met Canadian dancers from the Fort William/Port Arthur, Ontario area (now known as Thunder Bay). Two of these dancers were Bill Jacobson of Fort William and Cyd Prior of Port Arthur. Bill and his wife Dorothy had been at the Bottineau camp in 1955 and Cyd and his wife Lorette had been to both Bottineau and the Mille Lacs camp in 1956. Both were callers and leaders. They remained in

contact and through their influence Jack was invited to run a school for callers in Canada in November of 1956. This was not as easy as it sounds because

Canada has laws that prohibit foreigners from working there if there are Canadians available to do the work. After correspondence with the Ontario Department of Education and the Unemployment Insurance Commission it was determined that there was no one else in Canada that could do what Jack did and he was allowed to enter Canada and teach a callers class. In 1958 Canadian dancers were invited to attend camp and become Knuckleheads thus establishing an American tribe and a Canadian tribe.

Jack’s relationship with Canadian Lakehead square dancers continued in 1957 when he was invited to run a course for square dance leaders. The Fort William Daily Times-Journal of November 29, 1957 reported:

*“Square Dance Course Now in Session- Sponsored by the Lakehead and District Square and Folk Dance Association, in cooperation with the Community Programs Branch, Ontario Department of Education, a three-day leader training course for square dance club members got under way Thursday evening at the Selkirk Collegiate and Vocational Institute. It continues tonight and Saturday afternoon. Shown in the school*

*gymnasium, a group of dancers go through the intricate motions of the "Texas Star", called by John Roach, of Glencoe, Minnesota, course instructor. Attending the course are enthusiasts from Atikokan, Red Rock, Terrace Bay, Nipigon and Beardmord, as well as the lakehead. The workshop concludes Saturday evening with a square dance jamboree, to be held at the Exhibition Coliseum."*



Dancers at three day leader course at Selkirk Collegiate and Vocational Institute, Fort William, Ontario, November 1957.

In November of 1959 Jack was invited to present another square dance workshop for



With Lakehead Association officers in 1959 at Fort William-L to R front row: Norm Lourie, John Mintenko, Frank Olson. Back row: Jack and Mabel, George Ellard, Mrs. Ken Slater, and Bob Middleton.

dancers and leaders in the Lakehead area. The newspaper headline was **Square Dance Workshop Held.**

*"A square dance workshop featuring Jack and Mabel Roach of Glencoe, Minn., was held Thursday and Friday at Kingsway Park School, Fort William and concluded Saturday night with an open dance at Lakeview High School.*

*The workshop, under sponsorship of the Lakehead and District Square and Folk Dance*

*Association, was well received with more than 200 dancers from the Lakehead and district dancing to the calls of Jack Roach.*

*Accompanying the Roaches were their two children and Mr. and Mrs. Milt Matzke.*

*Dancers came from as far away as Geraldton, Red Rock, Beardmore, Atikokan, Neebling, as well as the Lakehead's seven square dance clubs.*

*MC's for the evening were Cyd Prior and Bill Jacobson with president George Ellard and past president John Mintenko addressing the gathering. Mrs. George Ellard presented Mrs. Roach with a rose corsage on behalf of the association.*

*Looking after arrangements for the workshop were John Mintenko, Frank Olson and Mrs. Ken Slater.*

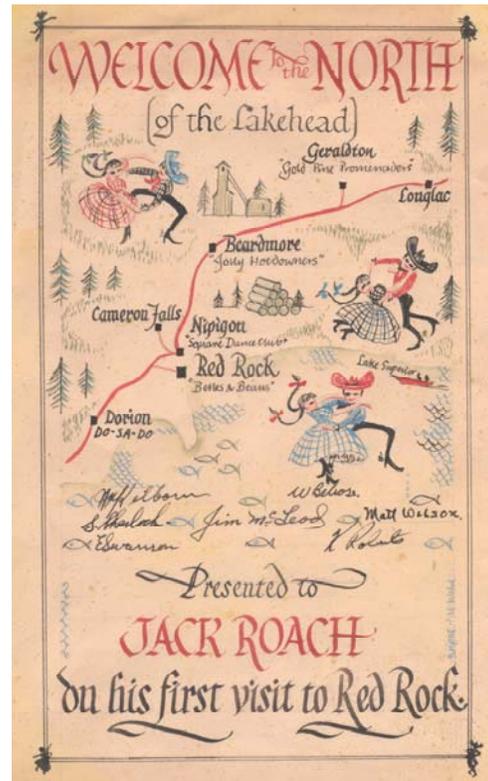
*Next venture for the association will be a square dance workshop in late January at Red Rock, for the benefit for North Shore clubs. Local instructors will be in charge."*

In promoting the workshop in the association's October newsletter, association president George Ellard said, "...to those who will be meeting Jack for the first time let me just say that he's real cool. Yeah man! He's hep!"

Jack called many times for the Lakehead area dancers whether for formal workshops or informally while on a fishing trip to the area. The following was presented to him on August 20, 1960 when he called for a dance at Red Rock. Several clubs were present and the dance was held on a tennis court. This dance was probably held in conjunction with a known fishing trip as Jack and Bill Jacobson had become the best of friends. Bill was a very accomplished sportsman and had all the equipment and knowledge to host the Roaches on fishing vacations. Of course, talk in the boat was not about fishing, but nonstop square dance talk. Jack and I got a chance to fish and Bill, also a caller, got a chance to pick Jack's brain. These kinds of dances were also sort of under the radar of the work permit system. Jack didn't get paid either.

Another informal dance was held in the woods at the cabin of Lindsey Stanfield, another of the Fort William callers. The Canadians would call this a "camp" rather than a "cabin". This getaway was deep in the forest north of Fort William and had just enough electricity to power the sound equipment and a couple of bare light bulbs hung on the trees. In fact the power might even have come from a generator at the camp. The dancers were almost dancing in the dark but they had a great time. It just shows to what lengths square dancers will go to get together.

A word about the type of country that was north of Fort William Port Arthur. In the 1960s this area was all forest and logging. When you went north toward Beardmore from Nipigon you faced a long drive of several hours with no towns or habitation between, only deep forest. The road itself was not in the best shape as it was more of a commercial road for logging and removing gold ore from the gold mine at Beardmore. In order to



drive this road you had to check in at a police checkpoint and report in when you arrived at the other end. If you didn't show up at the second checkpoint in a reasonable amount of time, the police would come looking for you assuming you were in trouble, either with your car or the wildlife.

In the 1960s the exchange rate between the U.S. and Canadian dollars made square dance equipment much more expensive for the Canadian callers. They could come to the states and purchase equipment but would have to pay a Canadian import duty on the way home as well as a higher price. More than once Jack just seemed to forget to load his amplifier or speakers into the car before heading home. It was all made up in Canadian hospitality and goodwill over the years and helped the Canadian callers improve their work.

As the number of Canadian Knucklehead Couples grew it became appropriate to distinguish between the American tribe and the Canadian tribe. Canadians began joining Knuckleheads in 1958. By the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1981 there were 43 American couples with six more added that year for 49, and 23 Canadian couples. The group became known as Knuckleheads International.

From the beginning in 1957 week-long Knucklehead camps were held at Mille Lacs Lake near Isle, Minnesota. In 1962 and 63 the Canadians hosted the camp at Chippewa Park, a Provincial Park just west of Fort William. The camp was held at the city park in Two Harbors, Minnesota, on the North Shore from 1964-66. In 1967 it was necessary to discontinue the weeklong camps and opt for a weekend gathering so they picked Lake Henderson in Spicer, Minnesota (convenient arrangements made by the Willmar dancers) for 1967 and 68. St. Anne's School and other public schools in Le Sueur, Minnesota (conveniently arranged by the LeSueur dancers) were the site of dancing with camping at Peaceful Valley Campground from 1969 on. Fall reunions were held at Duluth until expenses got too high and then moved to Two Harbors.

Regular reunions during the year were also a part of the fun. The accompanying photo is from the first reunion held on October 29, 1960 at the fire hall basement in West Duluth, Minnesota.



Jack and Mabel on left with Knuckleheads at their first reunion in the West Duluth Fire Hall basement October 29, 1960

How far will a square dancer travel for a good dance? The trip from Glencoe, Minnesota to Thunder Bay, Ontario is 8 hours by car. From Mankato or Le Sueur it's 9 hours. Thunder Bay to Mille Lacs Lake is a good 6 hours.



Chief Jack initiating new Knuckleheads at 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary gathering of the Knuckleheads at LeSueur, Minnesota in May of 1976



Mabel and Jack at Knucklehead Camp 1981, LeSueur, Minnesota.



Jack and Mabel flanked by the Timm's, newly initiated Knuckleheads, at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary gathering in Le Sueur in 1976.



Mabel and Jack after receiving a plaque, recognizing them for 25 years of leadership with the Knuckleheads, presented at their 25<sup>th</sup> annual gathering in Le Sueur in 1981.



IN APPRECIATION TO  
JACK & MABLE ROACH

FOR 25 YEARS LEADERSHIP OF THE  
KNUCKLEHEAD TRIBE  
TEACHING FRIENDLINESS, FAITHFULNESS,  
FLEET-FOOTEDNESS & FORTITUDE.



1957 ~ 1981



*Honoring  
Jack and Mabel Roach*