



The Square Dance Career of John S. (Jack) Roach

Observations from 1949 to 1958

In the fall of 1948 Jack attended a workshop in Duluth. At the time Jack was teaching Physical Education, grades 7-10, at Glencoe High School as well as coaching. As I understood it the workshop was about alternative activities for the majority of youth in the school who weren't playing football, basketball, baseball or track. Today they might be called lifetime activities or sports.

One of the activities presented was square dancing, which would involve both boys and girls. My assumption is that sometime during the winter months of 1949 when they couldn't go outside for physical education activities he taught square dancing to his students. Word got back to the parents through the kids about the fun they were having. The late 40's were a time of interest in things western. Some of the great western movies were being made at this time. Western was popular. By the fall parents had contacted Jack and told him that if he could teach the kids to square dance and have so much fun he could teach them.

In December of 1949 I don't think Jack had any idea what this would turn into. Demand mushroomed to six clubs in neighboring towns in 1950. However, it took a couple of months for the momentum to develop. The first introductory square dance was held at 8pm November 30, 1949. The event was run through the city's recreation program, of which Jack was director. They used the Glencoe Community Building, which had a large gymnasium floor for basketball. Jack rented sound equipment from Howard Gould Appliance. The hour was late in order to give farmers a chance to finish milking. Publicity for the event amounted to a small front page article in the November 24th Glencoe Enterprise. They had no idea what to expect. As it turned out, the floor was packed with dancers and response so good that a second event had to be scheduled for December 28th. According to Mabel's records, two more sessions were held in January of 1950. In February there were single events in Glencoe, Green Isle and Brownton and nothing in March, probably because of Lent. In April there were two dances in Glencoe and one each in Green Isle and Brownton. In May dances are added in Hutchinson and Belle Plaine and a regular schedule begins to develop.

Among Jack and Mabel's square dance memorabilia were three types of calendars: the wallet size monthly calendar that Jack would carry with him so he would always know his commitments and the wall size full year calendar. Both of these were created by Mabel and from the handwriting, were kept by her. The years 1950, 51, and 52 were kept by Mabel on note cards as a list, one for each month, as a record of income.

The wallet size cards that Jack carried with him started in 1953 and had one month on each side and were made from thin poster board. They were probably necessary so that he wouldn't unknowingly double book himself. Club officers would often come up to him at dances and discuss arrangements for a festival or other activity where they wanted his

services. The cards also contained some of his school coaching responsibilities. The cards that remain only represent a couple of months for 1953 and 54. There is one undated card that would represent a year after 1954 and one card from 1958. None the less, they provide a good idea of the location of clubs and the trend toward where he would go. Unfortunately, the names of the clubs do not appear on the cards, only the city.

Over the time period 1949 to 1958 Jack served as a regular caller for 32 clubs and that included six clubs in Glencoe alone for the year 1952.

1949: 2 introductory dances: November 30 and December 28.
1950: 6 clubs
1951: 11 clubs
1952: 15 clubs (with 6 Glencoe clubs)
1953: 14 clubs (with 1 Glencoe club)
1954: 10 clubs
Undated: 9 clubs
1958: 7 clubs

Jack received compensation for each dance beginning in February of 1950 that was typically between ten and twenty dollars. This level of compensation remained the same for several years. His total income from square dancing in 1950 was \$653.00. Records for the year show that he traveled 1008 miles. Some time during that year he purchased the sound equipment he had been renting from Howard Gould and set himself up to be a square dance caller. During this year he had a professional portrait taken of him self dressed in western style square dance clothes.

Square dance expenses for 1950 show that he paid \$246.00 for his sound equipment, to include a double 78 turntable in a suitcase, amplifier, four large speakers and a microphone. Two hundred feet of speaker wire cost \$12.00. He purchased 197 records at @90 cents each for a total of \$177.30. He costumed himself with three western shirts (2 for \$15 and one for \$12), one pair of western pants for \$18.50, one pair of decorated cowboy boots for \$15.00 and one western belt for \$3.00 for a total clothing expenditure of \$78.50. He purchased a book on square dancing for \$20.00 and subscribed to five dance magazines for a total of \$8.50. Total square dance expenses were \$542.30. A teacher and coach in Glencoe in 1950



received \$3,775.00 from the school district and he received \$600 from the City of Glencoe as Recreation Director.

The picture at right was taken in June of 1951 and shows Jack dressed in one of his three western shirts and his equipment behind him. The event was a barn dance held in the newly constructed barn on the Ed Lustman farm south of Plato, Minnesota. The dance was in the hayloft before it was filled with hay. The picture below is also from the same dance at Lustman's barn



Jack Roach calling at Ed Lustman's new barn south of Plato

In 1951 the number of clubs went from six to eleven and the miles traveled jumped from 1008 to 3,710. His square dance income rose to \$1,581.00. In



Jack Roach at Lustman's barn, Plato

1952 with 15 clubs, he traveled 8,739 miles and made \$3,354.50.

The year 1952 appears to be the peak year of popular cultural interest in square dancing with fifteen clubs and six in Glencoe alone. Half of the clubs started in 1950 folded that year with eight more clubs starting in 1951. Three of these clubs did not continue into 1952. In 1952 three more clubs were added plus Glencoe developed into six groups.

The six Glencoe groups of 1952 were, for the most part, small and reflected the popular social grouping of the business and social elite of Glencoe, judging from the names of organizers and the homes in which the dances were held as announced in the newspaper.

Jack's main club in Glencoe was the Glencoe Squares. The additional groups were called the Fidelity Squares, Birdies and Crows, Do Si Do, Addition, and Promenaders. Jack related that he felt that the primary purpose of some of these groups was not to take a serious interest and actually learn to square dance, but that square dancing was a faddish excuse to get together and drink. He refused to call for these groups because of the drinking and they ultimately moved on to something else. Square dancing in Glencoe with the main group, the Glencoe Squares, only continued through 1953 and wasn't revived again until 1966.

In 1953 two clubs plus the five excess Glencoe clubs disappear from the calendar and four new clubs were added. In 1954 five clubs dropped but three were added. The undated card shows six clubs dropping and in 1958 three more dropped. Most of the

clubs that remained were clubs that continued into the 60s and demonstrated where the serious interest in square dancing existed. It shows that square dancing was a fad that moved like a wave through the culture of the early 1950s. Clubs would start with enthusiasm but then discover that square dancing required intelligence, the ability to listen, think and react, and a regular commitment of time in order to get past the very basics. It became the rule among callers that alcohol would not be a part of square dancing as it impairs the dancers thinking and ability to control themselves. The loss of clubs may also be attributable to other area callers taking them over.

Of these thirty-two clubs, it is not known how many Jack actually started or whether some were already operating but later engaged Jack as their caller. He was probably responsible for all of the clubs for the first couple of years until word of his ability spread.

In the early years Jack seemed to go where he was needed and called regularly for clubs as far away as Granite Falls (70 miles) and Owatonna (95 miles), Minnesota. These communities were from an hour and a half to two hours driving time each way. He did this from 1952 to 1955. After this period the distances settled down to driving times of up to one hour each way.

The period from 1952 to 55 is also interesting from the standpoint of the pressure it put on him. Square dancing was a nighttime activity. School teaching and coaching were his bread and butter. The relationship between the day job and the night job always exists for a square dance caller, but these years were particularly stressful. In 1952 Jack coached football in the fall. During the winter season he simultaneously coached B-squad basketball, wrestling (a sport that he started that year) and gymnastics. In the spring he coached track and field. His coaching duties, with after school practices, games and meets, in addition to a full day of school as a physical education instructor, were already a full time job. Then he would have to jump in the car and drive for two hours to a place like Owatonna, call a two or three hour dance and drive another two hours home putting him in the driveway somewhere around 1 or 2am. Then, get up at 7am and do it all over again. It is clear why the clubs he would ultimately call for regularly would be within a one hour drive. Occasionally he would make a long trip during the week. He called a couple of times a year at Sheldon, Iowa, which is about a four hour drive each way.

Some of the major events from the very early years would have to include the barn dance at Lustman's new barn, mentioned previously. Dancers from Glencoe, along with Jack as their caller, danced on two Minneapolis television stations in 1951. In April they danced on KSTP-TV, Channel 5 at the new Television City Studios in St. Paul. In June they appeared on the Whoopee John program live from the Marigold Ballroom on South Nicollet Ave. in Minneapolis dancing to the band. Whoopee John was a well known and beloved figure in "old time" music from New Ulm, Minnesota. The program appeared on WCCO-TV, Channel 4 at 9:30pm.

The dancing continued in school as a yearly unit in the physical education program. In November of 1950 Jack took some of his dancers from school and put on a demonstration at the Annual meeting of the Minnesota Education Association in Minneapolis. The headline from the November 4, 1950 edition of the Minneapolis Morning Tribune read: "MEA Exhibits Vary From Dancing To Art" with the following picture of the student dancers with their instructor Jack Roach crouching behind them.



In the 1950s Phys. Ed. demonstrations at school were still a popular event in the community. They generally happened in the spring and involved all of the physical education classes, boys and girls, grades 7-10 demonstrating some of the things they do in their classes. Square dancing remained a regular part of the curriculum at Glencoe as long as Jack was teaching the classes. The shot below is from the late 1940s.

Patricia Meyer and James Gavin dance while instructor John Roach crouches behind at MEA in 1950



Square dancing at a late 1940s Physical Education Demonstration Night at Glencoe High School

Clubs Served as Regular Caller 1950-1958

This chart represents all of the square dance clubs that Jack Roach served as a regular caller from 1950 to 1958 based on the note card and wallet sized calendar cards that remain from those years. The towns appear on the chart in the order that they first appear on the calendars.

	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	Undated	1958
1) <u>Glencoe</u>	X	X	*X	X			
2) <u>Brownton</u>	X						
3) <u>Green Isle</u>	X					X	X
4) <u>Hutchinson</u>	X	X		X	X		
5) <u>Norwood</u>	X						
6) <u>Belle Plaine</u>	X	X					
7) <u>Renville</u>		X					
8) <u>Granite Falls</u>		X	X	X			
9) <u>Plato</u>		X	X	X	X	X	X
10) <u>Stewart</u>		X	X	X			
11) <u>Owatanna</u>		X	X	X	X		
12) <u>Buffalo Lake</u>		X	X	X	X		
13) <u>Lester Prairie</u>		X	X	X	X		
14) <u>Minneapolis</u>		X	X				
15) <u>Silver Lake</u>			X	X			
16) <u>Winsted</u>			X	X			
17) <u>Sleepy Eye</u>			X				
18) <u>Swing Masters</u>				X			
19) <u>Olivia</u>				X	X	X	
20) <u>Hector</u>				X	X		
21) <u>Mankato</u>				X	X	X	X
22) <u>Cosmos</u>					X		
23) <u>Le Suer</u>					X	X	X
24) <u>Bird Island</u>						X	X
25) <u>Willmar</u>						X	X
26) <u>Lake Crystal</u>						X	
27) <u>New Ulm</u>						X	X

(*) In 1952 there were six clubs in Glencoe, five of which left the calendar by 1953, making a total of 32 clubs.

Because the calendar cards only represented a few months for each year it is not possible to list all of the communities with festivals that he called for on the weekends, usually Sunday afternoons.