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# Dancing at the Canadian American Club

Jen Schoonover

The tone of her voice is rising. There is a pause, and a pointed look from her pale blue eyes, focusing directly at mine. “Jen, I don’t want my steps to die with me.”

I am talking with Judy McKenzie. We are both attending a dance at the Canadian American Club in Watertown, Massachusetts. Judy is a dancer known for her inventive “steps,” combinations that incorporate familiar, rudimentary motifs with unexpected twists and pauses. Her short, cropped hair contributes to her striking appearance, and reflects her forthright, direct personality. She loves dancing, but will only get up to dance when the music is energizing, or, in Cape Breton parlance, “drivin’ er.”



Jen Schoonover step dancing in the pub at the Canadian American Club in Watertown, Massachusetts. (Photo Credit: Maggie Holtzberg)

Judy is Canadian, but has lived in the United States for most of her life. She came to Massachusetts when very young, with her parents, who came for work. As a child, Judy studied tap dancing in Massachusetts, but remembers seeing “Scotch” dancing when she returned “back home” for summer visits. It would be off in a corner somewhere, and was the sort of thing people just picked up, not learned at a dancing school.

On Cape Breton Island, the catchphrase “the Boston States” is used to refer to the United States of America because Boston had been a common destination for many Cape Bretoners looking for work. Judy’s parents were not the only Canadians to come to the US; the Boston States was a common destination for many Maritime emigrants between the 1920s and the 1940s. Many found work on the MBTA and as domestic workers. The Canadian American Club was founded in the 1930s by a large community of immigrants from the Maritime Provinces of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. A few other institutions supported this community: the “Comunn Gailig Bhoston”/Boston Gaelic Club, formed in 1924; and the Gaelic-speaking Scotch Presbyterian Church, originally in the South End of Boston, but now in Needham, Massachusetts, and no longer offering services in the Gaelic language.



Judy McKenzie dancing at the Canadian American Club, Thanksgiving 2006. (Photo Credit: Victor Maurice Faubert)

Sometimes, immigrant communities hold on to home traditions even more closely than their original country does because the need to assert cultural identity isn’t urgent there. For Judy, this “Scotch” dancing form is an assertion of her cultural background. As an adult, Judy spent a full summer immersing herself in this style through one-on-one lessons with renowned dancer Harvey Beaton. Lessons took place in Harvey’s garage. Judy’s rhythmic foundation in this form was established here, and when, at the end of her lessons, Harvey’s mother gave her a pair of red leather shoes, Judy was honored. She wore these shoes every time she performed step dancing after that, but because it didn’t take very long to wear out shoes with all the shuffling, hopping, scraping, and stamping that this style requires, the shoes eventually fell apart.

The kind of dancing I am describing here is today called “Cape Breton step dancing.” This is something of a recent term, and is a classifying label placed on the dance form by outsiders, or onlookers. Before the early 1990s,

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this modality didn't really have a name, though the moves were sometimes described as "Scotch" steps. Steps were performed and shared informally at dances, Scotch Picnics, or house parties. This style of dancing is prevalent in areas where Gaelic is spoken in Cape Breton Island and Eastern Nova Scotia.

In the early 1990s, Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser began to bring Cape Breton fiddlers, dancers, and piano players on board to teach at summer festivals in Scotland. These percussive steps generated great interest, possibly buoyed by the popularity of the show *Riverdance*, featuring Irish step dancing. While the "Cape Breton" steps had come from Scottish Gaelic communities, there were no longer practitioners of this kind of dancing in Scotland. To differentiate the form from Irish dancing, it was labeled Cape Breton step dancing around that time.

### Four on the Floor

Judy McKenzie's passion for step dancing is matched in Mary MacGillivray, another dancer in the Boston area. Mary is taller than Judy and has short, dark, wavy hair. Mary usually dresses in a well-put-together, professional fashion, and her manner of dancing matches her elegant look as her long legs move easily in time to the rhythms of the music.

Mary was born in Massachusetts but her family roots are in an area of Cape Breton known informally as "Gillisdale," part of Upper Margaree in Inverness County, Cape Breton. This area held on to distinctive dance and music traditions brought from Scotland, and was a place where a number of longer, older dances endured, though in a different form than practiced in Scotland today.

Mary's grandmother's house was what is known in Gaelic culture as the "*taigh ceilidh*"/visiting house. In other words, it was the place where everyone would come together for parties. Her

grandmother, Sandy Sheumais Gillis, was a Gaelic singer, and a source for several songs recorded, transcribed, and notated by Helen Creighton and Calum MacLeod in their book reflecting some of the oral history of Gaelic speakers, *Gaelic Songs of Nova Scotia*. Often a person who lived in a *taigh ceilidh* would know a large repertoire of songs or tunes because of the frequent interaction with and repeated hearing of them. Mary observed dancers performing steps through her childhood and grew up amidst music. Mary's sister, Peggy Morrison, also a piano player, hosted the Gaelic Club/

creates routines, which help dancers catalog steps they know.

A different type of platform, a step dancing festival competition, was held for a brief span of years in Waltham at the French American Victory Club, a separate Canadian-heritage organization formed by French-speaking immigrants from the Maritimes and Quebec. Mary won first place one year; a well-known step dancer from Canada, Alexander MacDonnell, won in 1983. Competitions are relics of another aspect of the dance form's roots: competitive Highland Games dances, which look quite different today than

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I am learning that the work of carrying on a tradition is never done. It is work that requires generous sharing of everything you can share with others, and, if you are lucky, some of what you've shared may take root and carry on after you in others' dancing.

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*Comunn Ghàidhlig Bhooston* gatherings at the Canadian American Club every month for many years.

Mary and Judy together taught a group of four performing step dancers, named "Four on the Floor," for years. Mary taught the strathspey steps and Judy taught the reels. All of these young dancers had family ties to Cape Breton. One year, the group performed abroad at various venues in Scotland, and the dancers performed regularly in New England and in Canada. Performance is a good way to share the dance form and

older versions of the same dances that survived in Canada. In the early days of Highland Games in Canada, step dancing was an included category, but standardization of competitions in the mid-twentieth century saw that end.

Competition is no longer a primary platform for these steps. Improvisation is an aspect highly valued in today's step dancing, and spontaneity doesn't fit comfortably with standardized competition. More often, solo step dancing occurs during a break at a



Jen Schoonover dancing at the Boston Celtic Music Fest Nightcap concert in 2018, to music by Rachel Reeds and Jake Brillhart on fiddles and Janine Randall on piano. (Photo Credit: Courtesy of Boston Celtic Music Fest)

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social dance. Social dances are held in halls across Cape Breton, from Brook Village to Baddeck, from Christmas Island to Cheticamp, from Valley Mills to Sydney. The patterns of the social dances differ slightly from place to place. Often a “set” will consist of three “figures,” sequenced patterns for couples to dance in square formation, a structure derived from Quadrille dances. The catchphrase “Four on the Floor” comes from this tradition: four

couples will make a set, enough to get the dancing started. Square sets are usually prompted or called, with calls similar to American square dancing. Sets in Inverness County tend to follow a structure allowing as many couples as want to join in today, and are not called because sets of different sizes take longer or shorter times to finish.

There is also a performance dance for just four dancers, typically two men and two women, known as the Scotch

Four, which consists of a sequence of traveling along a circular pathway interspersed with dancing fancy steps on one spot. This dance was mentioned in a Gaelic song written to celebrate the Boston Gaelic Club titled *Oran do Comunn Ghàidhlig Bhoston*/Song to the Boston Gaelic Club:

*Far ’m bi piobaireachd is òrain,  
Dannsadh ceathrar air a’ chòmhnard;  
'S fìdhleirean ag cumail ceòl ruinn,  
Oganaich à Margaree.*

This verse can be translated as:

Where there will be piping  
and songs,

A foursome dancing on the floor;  
And fiddlers playing music  
with us,

Youth from Margaree.

Today, at some point during a social dance, when a fiddler feels the time is right, they will play a strathspey, a type of tune originating in Scotland. That tune will be the signal that it’s time for a solo dancer to come up and share a few steps. Any dancer who feels comfortable or confident enough to do so goes to the top of the hall near the music and begins dancing. After about two rounds of strathspey-time tunes, the fiddler will switch gears and begin playing reel-time tunes. A good step dancer listens for the moment this will happen and switches steps to fit the music. After the dancer has danced for a little while, they will stop or dance off, and then the floor is open for any other dancers who might want to come up. Solo dancing continues for as long as there are dancers who want to share some steps, and inclination of the fiddler to continue. After that brief performance, everyone grabs a drink, and launches into another social, couples dance, usually kicked off in jig-time.

The Boston Set is Massachusetts’s own expression of this culture. This square formation social dance took shape

in the dance halls of Roxbury in the 1930s and 40s, and migrated to both the Canadian American Club and the French American Victory Club. Popular through the 1990s, its practice has declined due to a lack of callers, and because many people who danced it regularly are no longer living. About ten years ago it was done steadily at the Club, but the popularity of the Inverness County style has crept into Boston and so, today, it's mostly Mabou Sets at local dances.

## Passing on a Tradition

In the face of a tradition declining, a custom fading away, what does one do? For me, it has been to learn as much as possible, participate as much as possible, and try to teach what I have learned to others. Without people and musicians in the room, dances won't happen. Sharing knowledge of these dance forms with others is the only way I can give back to a dance form that I love and enjoy. In these days, however, love is not enough. Hundreds of people used to pack the hall when a dance was on at the Club; now, we gauge a respectable turnout by having enough people to make one set. If we have enough for two, it's a big night!

I approached Mary and Judy about learning steps with each of them. They were graciously willing to work with me in depth on this. To support this, we reached out to the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and applied for a Traditional Arts Apprenticeship grant. We were awarded this grant, and I



*Mary MacGillivray step dancing at the Canadian American Club in 2011.  
(Photo Credit: Victor Maurice Faubert)*

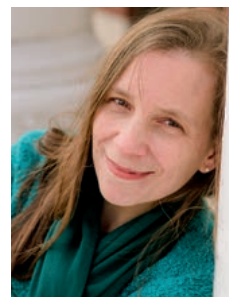
worked with each dancer separately and intensively over the course of one year.

It can be tricky working with two different teachers who sometimes can have very different opinions about how things should be done. However, Judy and Mary had a long history of working with each other, and were extremely respectful of differences that they have from each other. They had quite a shared repertoire of steps but went out of their way to make sure the routines they taught me didn't repeat steps. From my performer's perspective, it was a challenge to remember

and dance these long chains of steps that didn't repeat motifs. From an archival perspective, it was a great way to share and document lots of steps.

At the end of my apprenticeship with Mary and Judy in 2017, I performed their step routines as an opener for a dance at the Can-Am Club with Andrea and Betty Lou Beaton, a mother/daughter fiddle and piano lineup from Cape Breton. A young local fiddler, Elizabeth Kozachek, who completed a separate MCC Apprenticeship with fiddler Emerald Rae, played for one of the dance routines as well. Judy and Mary and I and five other dancers performed an "Eight-Hand Reel," and then the social dancing began.

During that evening, I also called a Boston Set. Just four couples got up to dance, and so we had "Four on the Floor." I called the figures while also dancing. Because I had not lined up someone to call the figures from the microphone, a number of more experienced dancers didn't get up to dance as I'd hoped they would. The old way was to have a caller. So my next goal is to offer to serve as a caller for a dance and hope to persuade more dancers to get up on the floor. I am learning that the work of carrying on a tradition is never done. It is work that requires generous sharing of everything you can share with others, and, if you are lucky, some of what you've shared may take root and carry on after you in others' dancing.



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