Wild Bill guarantees his fun square dances

By Kathy Brainard Cook
Staff correspondent

"Git yore little sage hens ready! Trot 'em out upon the floor; Line up thar — you couples, steady! Lively now, one couple more..."

When that call was heard out West in the 1800s, it usually signaled the start of the annual dance festival. Men would ride in for the four- or five-day event from as far away as 200 or 300 miles to kick up their heels and perhaps, if they were lucky, to find a bride. Women were a rare commodity in the Old West, but one sure place to find them was at a dance.

At those events, the dance steps and instructions from the caller had to be simple and easy to learn. People were on the move across the West and, as old friends and new-comers from other areas mingled together, it was the caller's job to lead them in dances that could be learned on the spot.

The fun of these easy-to-follow, traditional Western dances will be brought back to life this Saturday at the Woman's Club (Ninth and Walnut) in Spokane. Sponsored by the Spokane Folklore Society, the dance will feature live music, half-hour instruction session, and the authentic Western calling of "Wild" Bill Reagan.

Now a resident of Cheney, Reagan is well-known throughout the Northwest for his skill as a caller of old Western dances. He began learning his craft back in 1935 while attending high school in Denver. He and a group of friends, known as the Rebel Rangers, sought out the old callers and music of Colorado and the surrounding Western states. They learned and performed the old square dances and couple dances, helping to kick off a revival of interest in them that soon spread across the country.

According to Reagan, this revival of traditional square dancing died out during World War II, with what we know as "modern square dancing" emerging around 1947. "The shape of the dance remained," explains Reagan, "but the figures and the music had changed."

Reagan, however, did not abandon the old-time ways. Stationed in Japan during the war, he kept the tradition alive by calling at the regular weekly dances at three military bases. Throughout his career in the Air Force, Wild Bill kept toes tapping wherever he went, calling out the dance steps of the American West in 47 foreign countries.

"In as much as I am only 68 years young, and aiming for 104," chuckles Reagan, "I plan to 'call' in many more foreign countries."

Reagan says that dances at rodeos, wedding receptions, fly-ins, conventions and universities keep him as busy as he chooses to be. He is currently in the process of building his own high-performance airplane to get him to his "gigs" quickly and in comfort.

The dance this Saturday begins at 6 p.m., with the instruction session starting at 7:30. Dave Smith of the Spokane Folklore Society's Dance Committee stresses, however, that no experience is necessary in order to take part in and enjoy this weekend's dance.

"The main difference between the old Western dancing and modern square dancing," explained Smith, "is that the old dances are not part of an organized program with an elaborate system of codes.

"In modern square dancing, dancers attend classes to learn what specific code phrases — such as 'round the elephant,' for example — mean. Your old-time caller, on the other hand, will tell you exactly what to do as you go."

"Wild" Bill Reagan vows that he will remain "pure" and will never "pollute" his dance programs with any dances other than those of the Old West.

"I guarantee you will be doing the figures within 10 minutes," claims Reagan. "No experience needed!"

Smith also pointed out that you do not need to bring a partner. As in the 1800s, Western dances are still a good place to meet people.

General admission to the dance is $5. Admission for members of the Spokane Folklore Society is $4, and there is free admission for those 18 years old and younger. For more information, contact Dave Smith or Wende Rogers at 534-0254.