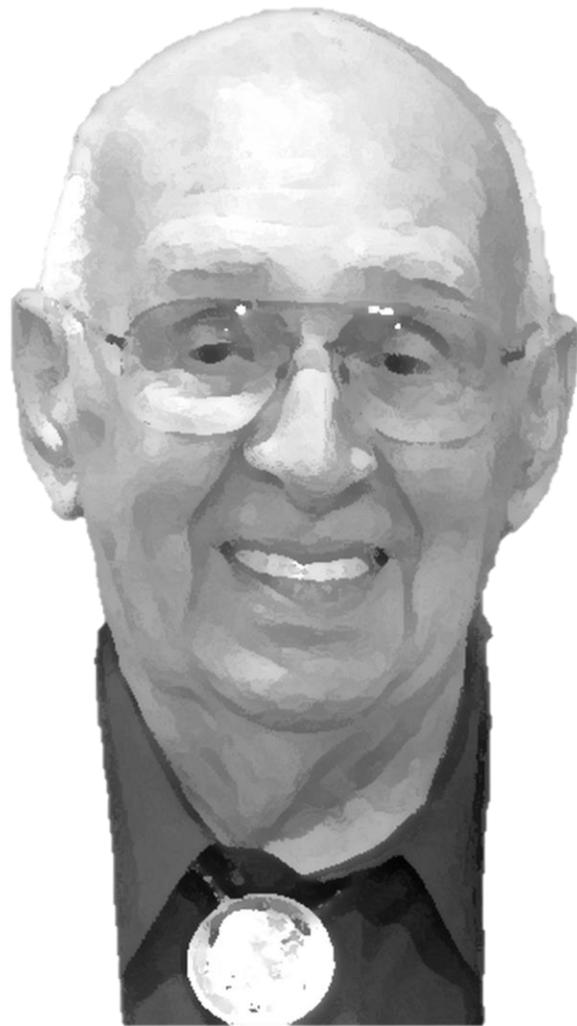


# *Dick Mackey*



*Weaves a Legacy*

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## *Weaves a Legacy*

*Dick Mackey made the tapestry of Wooster richer and more vibrant by serving as Club Caller for the Gnat Boxer Square Dancers for over half-a-century. Dick used an easy-going, gentle approach to stitch together lesson after lesson teaching hundreds of folks to do-si-do and weave the ring. The simple moves of hoe-down square dancing, a popular activity for the Wayne County Rural Youth, originated centuries ago and can be learned in a single afternoon. However, the roughness of the style is unappealing to Dick. He prefers Western-style square dancing because through a period of learning and dedication, one acquires a finesse and smoothness of moves producing a graceful fluidity set to music. Whether hoe-down or Western, square dancing offers countless health benefits while also keeping the mind engaged. In addition, the unique social aspect of square dancing allows folks to weave their lives with one another often creating lifelong friendships.*



*In 1959 Bill Alkire taught square dance lessons through the Wooster YMCA.*



*Inspired by the popularity of the class, two years later, he struck out on his own and formed the Gnat Boxer Western Square Dance Club named after a move known as "Box the Gnat." The club first danced in the high school cafeteria of what is now Cornerstone Elementary School. During the early '60s, friends Bob and Annabelle Ogden, persuaded Dick along with his wife, Nancy, to try square dancing. Pleasantly surprised by how much he enjoyed dancing, Dick agreed to take lessons. Nancy paid for the classes upfront knowing he would finish the course if money had been invested.*

*Intrigued with the calling aspect of square dancing, Dick began playing around with calling while still taking lessons. Then, in 1965 Dick officially launched his teaching career when the City Manager of Rittman encouraged him to form a club known as the Rittman Grand Squares. Dick felt painfully shy and extremely uncomfortable standing before the class to deliver oral reports during his high school years. To overcome this challenge, each week Dick wrote the lessons out on paper before class. Additionally, experienced dancers, known as Angels, traveled from Wooster to Rittman to partner with the students to bolster Dick's confidence. Because many of the members lived in Norton, the club eventually relocated and subsequently changed their name to the Norton Grand Squares.*

*In 1967 Dick replaced Bill Alkire as Club Caller for the Gnat Boxers and eventually moved the club to Valley College Grange. Under Dick's tutelage, the club grew rapidly. Dick recalls running speakers on both floors of the Grange because members danced in the basement as well as on the main floor. Quickly outgrowing the Grange, the Gnat Boxers made Triway Junior High their next home. From Triway, the club returned to the YMCA. However, when the YMCA converted the space used by the club into a weight training room, Dick moved the Gnat Boxers to Ida Sue School where they continue to this day.*



*The Ohio State Fair used to hold yearly square dance competitions for the youth. Each year, Wayne County sent six or seven teams to the competition. Over a span of 20 years, Dick and Nancy led the Wooster team. Local folks often referred to their home as, "The Dancing House" because they opened their basement, as*

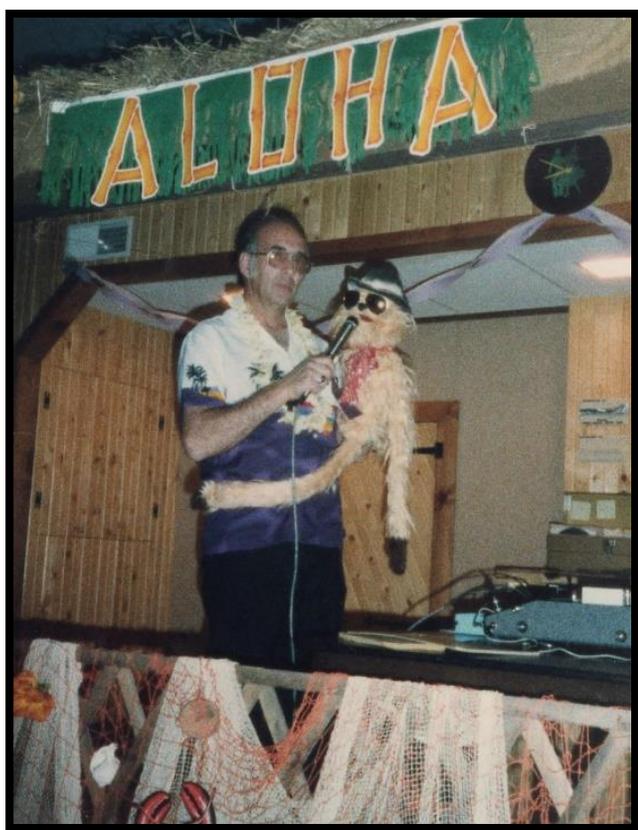
*well as their garage, and yard to the youth of Wayne County for over two decades. In good weather, folks parked their cars on the side of the road, pulled lawn chairs from their trunks, and watched the kids practicing outside on Dick and Nancy's lawn. One evening a photographer appeared and began snapping pictures in the garage. Nancy informed him; this is a garage, you do not need pictures of the garage, go outside, take pictures of the kids. Dick and Nancy maintained a friendly relationship with their adversaries which becomes apparent as Nancy tells the story of how one evening several ladies from rival teams arrived with sewing machines in tow determined to stitch together square dance outfits for their children. Envied by their opponents, the Wooster team became formidable foes winning many trophies over the years despite rigid rules, fierce competition, and synchronized moves. One year, the Wooster team even performed at the National Square Dance Convention. Although Dick and Nancy's oldest son, Dwight, did not*

enjoy square dancing, he loved to play bass guitar. Sadly, Dwight passed away at the tender age of 16. Their youngest son, Matt, called his first dance to "Old Time Rock 'n Roll" at the state competition just three days after his 8<sup>th</sup> birthday! Their daughter, Denise as well as her children have all danced competitively, at one time or another, at the State Fair. Additionally, both Denise and Matt periodically called with Dick. However, the fondest memory from those years, comes from a time when the dancing in the basement stopped long enough to make hardtack candy with the youth. Nancy reflects on how the kids, and even the cat, enjoyed the powdered sugar clouds floating in the air during this confectionary delight. Somehow, Dick and Nancy always managed to weave sweetness into everything they did.

Dick's largest class happened while the club danced at Triway. Ninety-five eager new students signed up for lessons. Dick patiently taught them all, young and old, the fine art of Western-style square dancing. At their height, the Gnat Boxers enjoyed a membership of over 300 which led the club to becoming a hometown favorite during the annual Wooster Parade. Back then, the parade began at Buckeye Mart (where Big Lots is now), proceeded down Beall Avenue to North Market, then continued to the fairgrounds. Dick recalls one year when he ran speakers forward and

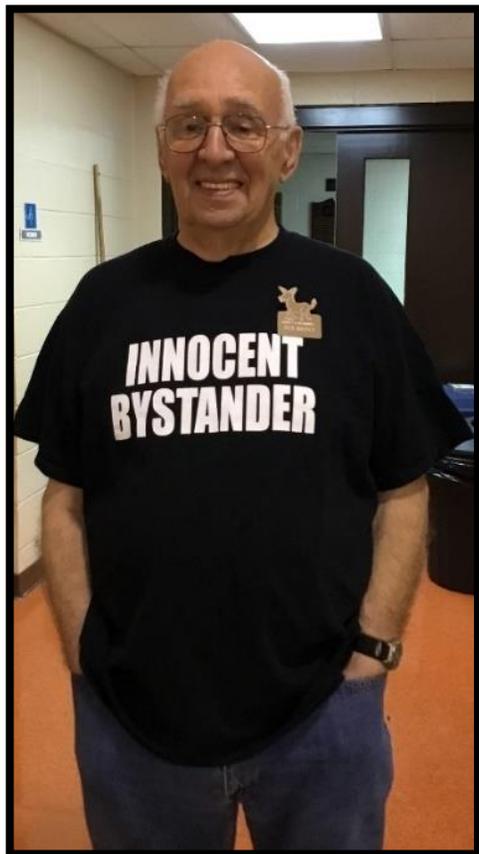


aft because dancers spanned more than a city block in front of the float, on the float, and even behind the float! The Gnat Boxers frequently won the Best of Parade trophy year after year.



Considered a Regional Caller, Dick called dances all over the state of Ohio, as well as in New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana, and Michigan. Additionally, Dick and Nancy traveled to Canada and all four of the main islands of Hawaii during his calling days. However, his favorite place to call remains at home with the Gnat Boxers. Endlessly eager to learn new songs, Dick amassed a collection of thousands of 45 RPM square dance records. Occasionally, he also acquired 45s from

other callers with, "East Bound and Down" by Jerry Reed and Dick Feller, his most recent acquisition. However, he usually purchased his songs through Palomino Records. Each month, Palomino Records mailed Dick a CD with tracks of new square dance songs being released. He would listen to the CD and purchase the songs he liked. Dick always carried his own equipment to the dances he called; an amplifier, speakers, record player, as well as a box containing 70 - 80 of his 45 RPM records.



Over the years, Dick and Nancy participated in several camping weekends with square dancers at Whispering Hills campground, Sunset Campground, as well as the May Romp held in Loudonville and Brokenstraw which was held at Geneva-on-the-Lake, just to name a few. They reminisce the time two local police officers joined the Gnat Boxers. One year during the May Romp weekend, with the campground sold out, the callers lodged at a local Bed and Breakfast. Dick and Nancy schemed and plotted with their newfound friends to "arrest" two of the other callers, Frank Catrell and Scotty Sharr. Dick and Nancy even warned the staff at the Bed and Breakfast not to panic when the police arrived with their lights on. When the uniformed police approached the building, Dick managed to quietly slip away from the scene moments before his friends, Frank and Scotty, were cuffed and "arrested" for impersonating a square dance caller. After the laughter settled and the good-natured fun died down, another caller, Tom Strickland, casually unlocked the handcuffs on

Frank and Scotty with keys pulled from his pocket. Dick often wondered why Tom's keyring carried a set of handcuff keys.

Dick and Nancy experienced many fun things over the years ... ornery things ... but fun things! In Marietta, Dick called a square dance tip to folks dancing in a bathtub, he called squares at the little jail cell in Shreve, he even holds the auspicious honor of calling a tip at 30,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean on a 747 jet. A favorite story Nancy likes to tell happened when a bunch of kids were at their house practicing for the state competition. A terrible thunderstorm kicked up; lightning struck a tree and lit it on fire. In fascination, the kids stopped dancing to watch the tree burn while Nancy rang the fire department. Dick, unphased by the whole affair, remained in the garage learning his newest dance song, "New York, New York", while the fire fighters put out the flames. Nothing could stop him from calling!

*Dick retired from calling at the end of 2020 with 55 years under his belt. Coming out of the pandemic, he looked forward to attending a Retirement Open House planned in his honor. Regrettably, he fell ill in the middle of June and quietly slipped away the morning of July 1<sup>st</sup>. At the time of this interview (June 2, 2021), Dick commented he thoroughly enjoyed his ride with square dancing from start to finish with no regrets because he mostly accomplished what he set out to accomplish. Ever humble, Dick shared he never considered himself a real sophisticated caller because he kept his patterns simple. However, Nancy remembers many nights when Dick returned home from a dance, he would ask her if she wanted to kiss a star! Like old scraps of fabric sewn together to create a patchwork quilt, Dick Mackey took time to weave a legacy of Western-style square dance through the very fabric of Wooster making his hometown richer and more vibrant.*

