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(Photos at foot of article)

Square Dancing As A Sport

A young man found a goldmine by giving a new twist to an age-old pastime. His name is Jim Vickers-Willis.

If ever an Australian film producer decides to turn out a colossal, scintillating, Technicolor, musical extravaganza of the struggling bright boy soars to fame variety, he has an ideal subject on tap, guaranteed to produce a tear in the eye, a pang of joy in the heart and rhythm in the feet – ace Melbourne square-dance caller Jim Vickers-Willis.

A year ago he was a worried young man with a very sick bank balance, Today, he wears a happy smile that isn't false anymore, drives a shiny luxury car, and collects a hefty weekly roll.

He had a hunch that paid off. Largely because of his imagination, initiative and drive, the craze for square dancing has swept through southern States at a whirlwind pace since the end of 1952. Now, there are tens of thousands of registered square dancers in Victoria alone and rapidly snowballing thousands of devotees in neighbouring South Australia. Vickers-Willis and his promoter John Brennan plan next to swoop on Brisbane and then the so-far-resisting Sydney.

For six nights a week, lean, likeable, sensitive-featured Vickers-Willis calls from the stage of Earl's Court, St. Kilda to crowds of 2000 and more, then drives to his suburban home in Dendy St., Brighton, anything up to £180 the richer. Ten thousand flock to the bayside dance hall every week crowding happily on to the four floors. Some nights the doors have been closed in the face of queues that have stretched six and eight deep along the footpath, over the road, into a nearby park. Before Vickers-Willis began to sing into the microphones that carry his calls across the main dance hall and to radio listeners, a few hundred enthusiasts danced one night a week in one section of the hall.

Today, more than 200 clubs are scattered throughout Melbourne, in several large ballrooms where the "big time" callers hold sway, in church and public halls where their dozens of trainees and lesser lights call to the accompaniment of phonograph records and in private homes where amateurs try their skill.

Vickers-Willis has faith in the future of the entertainment that has put him on top of the world. “Square-dancing has by no means reached its peak,” he told a friend recently. “I believe it will become five or even 10 times more popular than it is now. Its critics and even some callers themselves, say it’s a fad that will soon die. But why should it? There’s no fear of tennis or golf dying.”

Before the present boom, square-dancing was thought to be as dead as a dodo. It had been tried and it had failed, in several capital cities after introduction by American caller Joe Lewis a few years ago. It just didn’t catch on. Pockets of enthusiasts remained, but they were few and far between. Melbourne had one caller, Bill McGrath, who ran a small club in the upper-crust suburb of Toorak.

By chance, Vickers-Willis went to a local charity dance at Brighton where McGrath was calling, early last year. He was a journalist, a shipping reporter on the Melbourne *Sun*. During the war, as a RAAF pilot instructor in Canada, he had seen square dancing on its home ground when he took jaunts across the border into the USA. This night, at Brighton, he entered into the fun. He enjoyed himself and so did everyone else. The dancing was appealing, the music catchy and the costumes colorful.

He found where the faults lay.

As the evening progressed his mind started to work in analytical circles, the gift of which is part of his stock in trade. He thought, “There’s something in this. It appeals. It has possibilities. But something’s wrong. Why hasn’t it caught on?”

Months later Vickers-Willis was still thinking. He had become a square-dance fan. Gradually he found out where the faults lay. He decided what square-dancing had to offer, and what the Australian public wanted – then dovetailed the two together. He evolved a form of square-dancing unique in the world, which he has described as being as far in advance of the American hillbilly style as baseball is in advance of rounders. He turned it into a sport.

Vickers-Willis based “his” reforms on three points – competition, synchronisation of call, music and step; and dress.

“The competitive element has been in square-dancing all the time but it has been ignored,” he says. “Before, there was an endless variety of rules, and all of them said, *generally* you do so-and-so. But to my mind there should be no *generally* about it. In a game of cricket you don’t say, ‘If a batsman’s caught, he’s out’ and next time you play, decide to count only those clean-bowled. I have established a rigid set of rules, through which the dancers pit their skill against the caller. He calls the steps, deliberately trying to trick them. As the sets falter they are eliminated until the last is declared he winner. His form of dancing appeals strongly to the Australian sporting instinct.”

Vickers-Willis developed the competitive angle in the impromptu dance (The other form is the singing dance which has a set tune and pattern). In the past the caller called, the band played and the dancers danced, all to their own time (In many cases this still happens). But it grated on Vickers-Willis, until he found a way to overcome it. He fitted his impromptu calls to several basic melodies and trained a band to improvise accompaniments that kept time with him and the sets.

‘The John Brennan and I set about cutting out the hillbilly stuff,’ he says. ‘Earl’s Court announced that no square dancers would be admitted in jeans –previously the standard dress for men. We considered cowboy boots, jeans and flashy shirts frightened off more men than enough. Now men wear what they would during an evening at home – sports trousers, golf shoes and bright shirts and scarves if they wish. The women wear colorful skirts and blouses. Pseudo Yankee accents also went by the board. (He has almost an “English” accent himself). The dancers must hear calls clearly.’

By a stroke of fate, tragedy is responsible for making so many people happy. Few of the thousands who dance and laugh in the hall of Earl’s Court are aware that the tall, smiling young man who leads them through the intricate steps has been spurred on by unhappiness. His two bonny children, Suellen 4 ½, and Peter 2, were born with double hair lips and cleft palates. Medical science said that such an event was all but impossible. But the near-impossible happened.

Sensitive, loving Vickers-Willis was heartbroken, but he didn’t throw in the towel. He set to work to make money for plastic surgery operations that have cost him hundreds of pounds. He says, ‘I’d never have been in square-dancing if it hadn’t been for the kids, bless their hearts.’ His wife and he are overjoyed that the operations are working miracles.

Vickers-Willis was born in England 34 years ago and came to Melbourne with his parents as a child. After a grammar school education he became a reporter on the *Sun*. He joined the RAAF in 1940 and spent 6½ years in the service, most of that period in Canada and the Islands.

Vital, loose-limbed Vickers-Willis, who at a glance could be mistaken for an American, returned to Australia with a lot of money-making ideas he had picked up in the US. He resumed work as a reporter, but at the same time sank his deferred pay into a project to set up a chain of mobile canteens to cater for bathers at bayside resorts. He called them *Thirst Aid Posts*.

He laughs about the early experiment now. ‘The idea was good,’ he says, ‘But I was undercapitalised. I bought two caravans, an old truck to tow them and a mobile canteen. The truck was always breaking down. One night still sticks in my mind. It was straight from a Laurel and Hardy act. I was towing one of the caravans home when it became unhitched. Over my shoulder I saw it heading straight for a jeweller’s window but it hit the high gutter and stopped. Bottles, ice cream and sweets went everywhere. I reversed the truck, hitched up the caravan, jumped aboard, and slammed the door. Then the horn jammed and blew on top note. I hopped out, fiddled with it and it stopped. By this time quite a crowd had gathered. I dived into the cabin

and slammed the door so hard the other one flew open and the horn started blowing again. Was my face red by the time I got out of the mixup?"

When Suellen was born, Vickers-Willis got two years' absence from his paper and opened his Thirst Aid Posts on Port Melbourne's piers to cater for persons awaiting the arrival of overseas ships. He made the money necessary for his daughter's operations then went back to journalism.

"When Peter was born also with a double hair lip I knew I'd have to go through the hoops again and I was ready to go back to the business (he hates to be called a pie-stall proprietor) when by chance I went to a charity square-dance," he recalled recently. "Immediately I saw the possibilities." The months that followed convinced Vickers-Willis that he was on to something good. He began to tackle the calling. After small dances he held in local halls, a crowd of friends would return to his home and carry on until all hours of the morning. He was impressed by the fact that even those who were considered "good hard drinkers" would refuse an offered thirst quencher with, "No thanks, Jimmy. I'll have one later." (He says, "You need a clear head and concentration for square-dancing – drink is taboo, and seldom missed, in all clubs.")

When Vickers-Willis bought a microphone and pickup and began practicing calling far into the night, his attractive black-haired dark-eyed, young wife, Beth, muttered in despair, "You're going bats!" and went to bed. But his keen business mind had seen a way of earning money necessary for the doctor's bills yet to come. He set out to create public interest.

There is little doubt that he was behind the square-dance charity ball in July, last year, for which the benefiting charity workers and their children buttonholed 500 people into buying tickets. Vickers-Willis calls this the turning point in his life. "I know that the majority of the crowd weren't a scrap interested in square-dancing," he admitted later, "but once they had paid their money they were determined to get something for it. They all turned up.

"At first it looked like being a classic flop. The microphone went bung and most were beginners who didn't care whether they danced or not. In desperation I started the *Alabama Jubilee*, which was a popular record at the time, with my own variations. It caught on, and the crowd went mad. With the ball rolling, the night developed into a tremendous success. The *Alabama Jubilee* is now my theme song, and I'll wear the shirt and scarf I wore that night until they are threadbare. I believe they brought me luck."

The almost *hijacked* patrons of the charity ball fell under the spell of square-dancing and became the nucleus of the 464-strong Melbourne Square-dance Club which Vickers-Willis formed to consolidate his newly-won ground. He also followed up with feature newspaper articles which aroused attention, and snatched at every possible scrap of publicity offered.

Cinderella square-dancing began to shed her tattered clothes. Almost overnight clubs sprang up in Melbourne suburbs, some established by Vickers-Willis and others by Bill McGrath. The snowball had started rolling. Then the big chance came for Vickers-Willis. He got a telephone call from radio 3DB's manager, asking if he was

interested in calling for the broadcast dance at Earl's Court? He certainly was. He knew that the program that had been on the air for the previous few weeks had not hit the spot, and that he could give the crowd – and the sponsors – what they wanted.

The audition that followed no doubt would be the gripping climax of that proposed musical move. Vickers-Willis went along to Earl's Court that mid-week night with proprietor John Brennan and 3DB manager David Worrall and listened to the other hopeful contender for the contract call to imaginary sets, the monotonous chant echoing around the empty hall.

Then, as Vickers-Willis prepared to take the stage, scores of laughing, colorfully dressed dancers who had been waiting in the darkness of the foyer poured on to the floor and took their places in their sets of eight. His trained band formed behind him and as they struck up he called for his friends of the Melbourne Square-dance Club who had turned up in force to back him up in the break of a lifetime. The dances ended with bursts of applause and cheers – an atmosphere to gladden any promoter's heart.

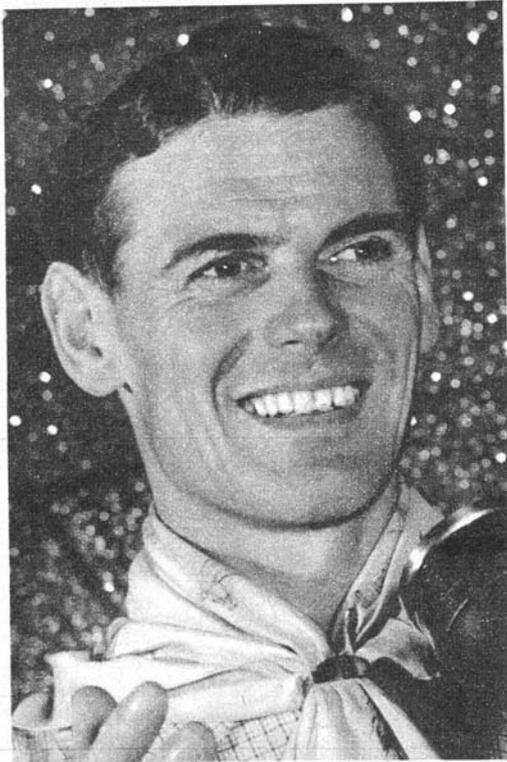
Later, the crowd waited as executives conferred. The minutes dragged by, then they announced, "You're on next Saturday night." Vickers-Willis immediately started beginners classes and 68 people turned up the first night, 150 the next, and within weeks square-dancing had taken over the four halls of Earl's Court.

Since then, the snowball has rolled down hill. In December, he formed the National Square-dance Club and the Square-dance Bureau which handles bookings for dozens of callers he has trained. In January, he left his journalist's job, finding his income from £100 to £180 a night, six nights a week, quite enough to live on. He has a radio program, writes a weekly newspaper column, is preparing what he claims will be *the* book on square-dancing (he has written five unpublished novels) and is managing-director of his two small *Thirst Aid* companies. His wife, long ago convinced that he wasn't "going bats" after all, works with him and is a member of his exhibition set.

Vickers-Willis, of course, is not the only ace caller in the field. There are others who claim to be a bigger noise than he. But he doesn't argue. As long as they are developing interest in square-dancing he is happy. He has a following of staunch supporters who like his work and admire him personally.

The square-dance enthusiasts are not all youngsters. People of all classes and ages have vaulted into the common melting pot. Doctors, lawyers, and other professional men are seen every night cavorting with a zest they haven't displayed since they left university or college. Teenager youths sashay around the middle aged partners and clasp 40in waists in swirls as enthusiastically as if they were 20. Some fans don their casual gay clothes to promenade and *do se do* two and three nights a week.

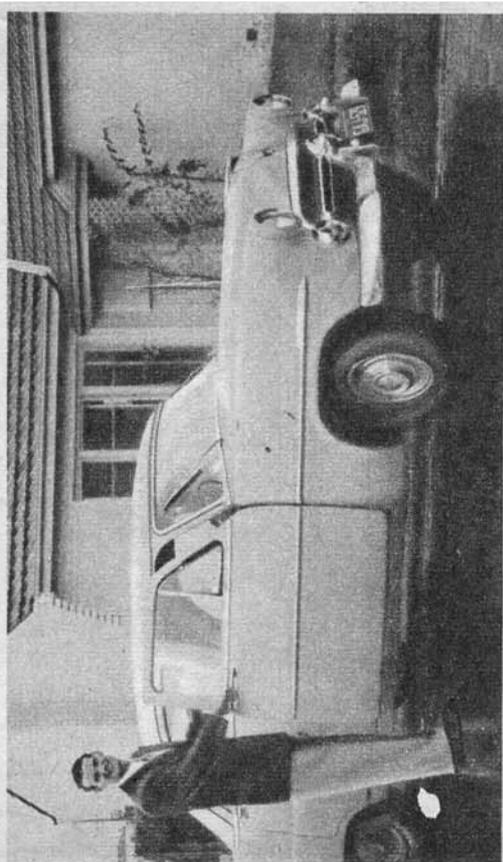
In the final scene of this motion picture that probably will never be, the camera would undoubtedly pan down on the smiling Jimmy, and then move back and fade on the family scene of the man who has made the grade, his wife and his children, leaving the audience to utter mentally that old blessing, "And they lived happily ever after".



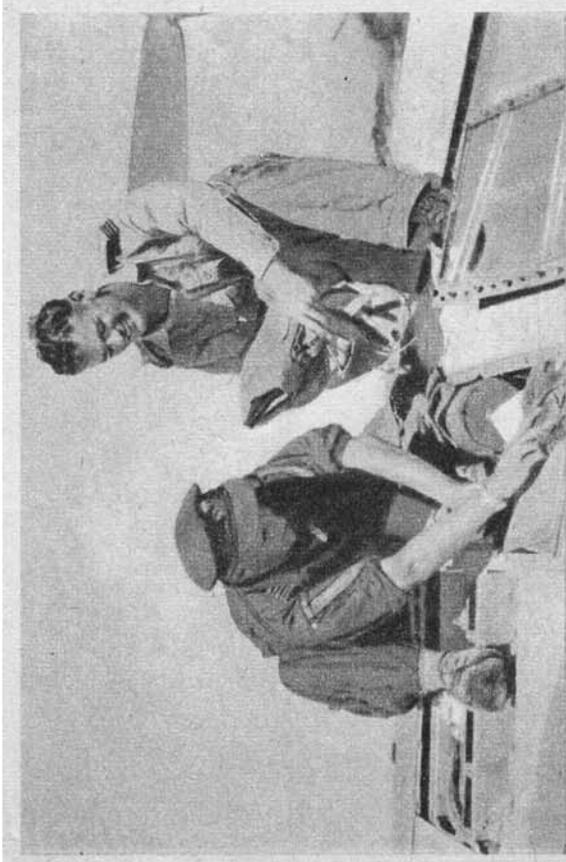
His exhibition set (Mrs. Vickers-Willis facing camera) shows patrons how it's done. People of all ages are fans.



Vickers-Willis had put his deferred pay into mobile "thirst aid" posts on Melbourne's beaches. He now uses them to cater for the dancers.



Fruits of Vickers-Willis' good fortune are a modern home, a late-model car and money to pay for successful operations on his children.



Lt. Vickers-Willis stowing personal gear in his Spitfire before flying it to Queensland from Labuan soon after the war had ended.



Jim signs his Earl's Court contract with proprietor, John Brennan. Standing: N. Spencer (Radio 3DB), Rex, Barry and Ian Brennan.

