

So, Why Are They Called Chestnuts?

by David Millstone

It started simply enough, with a question posted from Baltimore to rec.folk-dancing, an Internet discussion group:

I know a “chestnut” is a traditional contra dance, typically associated with a particular tune- but it seems no one in Baltimore really knows why “chestnuts” are called chestnuts. I did come up with some wise-crack explanations, but none that have any credibility. So, dear readers, I ask: Why are “chestnuts” called chestnuts?

Several people replied, some citing dictionary definitions and some web pages showing the origin of the phrase “an old chestnut,” but no one knew for certain how the term came to be applied to those older contras. David Smukler opined, correctly, that the term was somehow connected to the seminal albums of *New England Chestnuts* by Rodney and Randy Miller, but he, too, wasn't sure how the term gained its contra dance sense.

I live in New Hampshire and I've been part of the dance scene here as dancer and caller for about thirty years, so I thought I'd quickly find an answer. I skimmed through the various Ralph Page books and writings on my shelf. Nothing. Roland Goodbody at the UNH Dimond Library, which houses the Ralph Page Collection, confirmed that the index to nearly 40 years of Ralph's *Northern Junket* magazine made no mention of chestnuts, “not even in the cooking section.” I sent off several e-mails to long-time members of the New England dance community, and received swift replies. Many of these also involved a dictionary, which includes among its definitions for “chestnut” a meaning that fits.

Tony Parkes co-authored the liner notes for the first *New England Chestnuts* album but commented, “It's funny -- I have a pretty good memory for dance trivia, but I can't for the life of me remember where ‘chestnuts’ came from. I do get the feeling that people were calling the standard contras ‘chestnuts’ before Rodney & company used the name.”

Tony continued, “Regardless of who first used the word to refer to contra dances, there's no question that it was an extension of a well-established usage. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1970) defines ‘chestnut’ (sense 8) as ‘(a) an old, stale joke or phrase; cliché (b) a very familiar story, piece of music, etc. that is too often repeated.’ The dictionary further labels the sense as colloquial and an Americanism.”

Mary DesRosiers grew up dancing to Duke Miller's calling, but didn't remember that well-known caller using the term. Instead, she cited an *Oxford English Dictionary*: “I suspected the use of ‘chestnut’ predated by a long shot any talk of Chorus Jig, or Money Musk. I was right, sort of. The *OED* lists its first use as something-other-than- what-falls-off the tree, in 1816; and defines it as ‘a story that has been told before; hence anything trite or overused.’ Next question?”

Andy Tannenbaum, writing in reply to the original posting, offered several Internet links

which explain how the term came into common usage. One site, "The Straight Dope," offers this explanation:

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable traces the origin to *The Broken Sword*, a forgotten melodrama by William Dimond (1816) in which one of the characters, Captain Xavier, is forever telling the same jokes, over and over, with slight variations. As he repeats a certain joke involving a tree, this time making it about a cork tree, Xavier is corrected by Pablo, who says, "A chestnut. I have heard you tell the joke twenty-seven times, and I am sure it was a chestnut."

<<http://www.straightdope.com/mailbag/mchestnut.html>>

Andy's other link, an Australian website, adds to the story, citing *The Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins* by Linda and Roger Flavell:

Although its origins are in an English melodrama, it was an American actor who coined its usage...The actor, William Warren, who played the part of Pablo in the melodrama, was at a dinner one evening when a fellow guest started to recount a well-worn and rather elderly anecdote, whereupon Warren murmured, "A chestnut. I have heard you tell the tale these twenty-seven times." The rest of the company was delighted with Warren's very appropriate quoting from the play and it was not long before news of the incident had spread amongst their acquaintances and beyond.

<<http://www.abc.net.au/canberra/stories/s476720.htm>>

So far, so good... We know that "chestnut" can be applied to something old and very familiar, but how did that usage creep into our contra dance context?

At a wedding gig that weekend, I asked Bob McQuillen. He paused, "Wait, wait, wait..." thought for some time, and then suggested it might have been something that Dudley Laufman started.

Dudley refuted the McQuillen hypothesis: "I really do not know how the term 'chestnuts' originated unless it comes from the comfortable feeling one gets sitting by an open fire roasting chestnuts.... something old and comfortable?"

Deanna Stiles was a member of Dudley's Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra and is now a member of Old New England, McQuillen's current band. She heard us talking at that gig and guessed that "chestnuts" might have originated in Nelson, New Hampshire, something started by one of the Tolmans. (Nelson, a tiny town in the Monadnock region of southwestern New Hampshire, is one of a few towns with a centuries-long tradition of contra dancing. Newt Tolman, a flute player and writer, was an important figure in the contra dance revival spearheaded by Dudley in the 1960s and early 1970s. Many contra dance musicians are familiar with the Nelson collection of dance tunes, some of which now occupy a central place in the contra repertoire.) Dudley nixed this theory, stating that he cannot remember any of the Tolmans ever using that term.

Via e-mail, Rodney Miller joined the discussion, and we started getting closer to an

answer. Rodney on fiddle and his brother Randy on piano were the featured musicians who created the *New England Chestnuts* albums, along with Sandy Bradley (guitar), George Wilson (bass, banjo, fiddle), Steve Woodruff (button accordion) and Laurie Andres (piano accordion.) Volume I was released in 1980 and Volume II appeared a year later.

Rodney wrote, "I have a letter from Joan Pelton dated Jan. 9, 1980 that asks us to do the first NE Chestnut lp. Here is a part of it:

Dear Roddy and Randy,

I have spoken with Randy at length about a proposed record of New England "chestnuts" (meaning the dances that are still danced in N.E. that have become traditional. Whatever traditional means)...

Aha! A phone call to Randy Miller confirmed that the credit for applying "chestnuts" to traditional contras may well belong to Joan Pelton. Jim Morrison, president of Country Dance and Song Society at the time, offers support for this: "My discussions with Joan Pelton about the first Chestnuts LP were the first time I heard the term applied to these dances."

Joan Pelton was involved with the folk scene in upstate New York starting in the late 1960s, including the Pickin' and Singin' Gathering at the Cafe Lena and the Fox Hollow folk festival. She appears as the piano player on the first hammered dulcimer album of Fennig's All-Star String Band. She moved to Vermont and worked at Philo Records, an independent record label. She then started a her own distribution company that focused on small independents, especially in the folk genre. She was a fixture at many festivals, selling first from her truck and then from a booth at the Hudson River Revival, Old Songs, and Falcon Ridge. In 1977, Joan Pelton started Alcazar Records.

Alcazar (pronounced Al CAY zar) was a small label with a mission. The liner notes on the Alcazar Dance Series recordings stated that goal clearly:

Alcazar as a corporation is dedicated to the working musicians and callers of the world. The intent of the corporation is to research, record, and publish traditional dance music, and make it available to interested individuals everywhere. We believe that good dance music of all types can also be good listening music, and that making good dance records available will foster the tradition of using live music for dancing.

The first album released on Alcazar was Yankee Ingenuity's *Kitchen Junket*. The company's second album, *Potluck & Dance Tonite*, featured square dances called by Seattle Sandy Bradley. Alcazar's third and fourth releases were the two volumes of *New England Chestnuts*, brought into being by the letter Joan sent the Miller brothers. (The albums have been re-released as a two CD set by Great Meadow Music #GMM 2005, available directly from the company or through such organizations as CDSS.)

In the 1970s, Joan Pelton's son Jesse started dancing with the Green Mountain Volunteers, a performing troupe from northern Vermont. Joan started playing again for dances, which is where she met Randy Miller. Randy commented, "She'd lean over while a dance was being taught and she'd say, 'Boy, that's an old chestnut!' in that inimitable style she had."

Thanks to: Ralph Barthine (who started it all with his question), Sarah Bauhan, Ben Bergstein, Mary DesRosiers, Roland Goodbody, Dudley Laufman, Walter Lenk, Bob McQuillen, Randy Miller, Rodney Miller, Jim Morrison, Richard Nevell, Ann Pearce, Jesse Pelton, Jack Perron, Tony Parkes, Bill Schubart, David Smukler, Andy Spence, Deanna Stiles, Andy Tannenbaum, Marianne Taylor, and Ernie Spence.