

A Tribute to Master Artist Edna Mae Davis

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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by Lisa Higgins, Director
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It is with great sadness that I learned of the passing of Edna Mae Davis. Edna Mae was a master square/jig dancer and square dance caller in Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program in 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990.



Since my return to Missouri in 1999, I was honored to work with Edna Mae Davis and the Ava Dancers on a few occasions, like the Big Muddy Folk Festival, where they were featured in the Missouri Folk Arts Program's performances at Big Muddy in 2000 and 2001. I will never forget seeing three sets of the Ava Dancers come out onto stage *en force* at Thespian Hall one Saturday in April 2000. Judy Shields, of the Friends of Historic Boonville, quickly snuck around to the edge of the proscenium stage to make sure it would withhold all that lively dancing.

The next year, our Big Muddy program moved to the Fellowship Hall of the Presbyterian Church, just across the street. That setting was much more conducive to one of Edna Mae's favorite pastimes—encouraging audience members to learn a few dance figures and join in the fun. Every time I worked with Edna Mae or ran into her at events, like West Plains' Old Time Music & Heritage Festival, I could see how much she loved dancing and calling. As I have looked through old photos of her from the archives, Edna Mae is always smiling, sometimes even throwing her head back and laughing with joy.

In her applications for the TAAP, Edna Mae always recalled weekly house parties and square dances from the time she was a little girl of three, learning from family members and neighbors. As she grew older, she made certain to pass on the traditions to her own family. Edna Mae stated that dancing played an important role in her life because it is a "family oriented tradition . . . I get to dance with my kids and grandkids!" One of her daughters, Cathy, remembers learning to dance at the age of three, and Cathy's daughter, Jody, now ten, learned to dance at age three as well.

In the mid-seventies, Edna Mae rose to the occasion and began to regularly call square dances when a shortage of dance callers developed. Recognizing the importance and the fragility of the Ozark's unique old time dances, she also instituted a series of weekly classes, complete with live music, which started at 7 p.m. and ran for two hours. These classes were designed specifically for local children but also drew some adults as well. An open dance immediately followed the lessons around 9 p.m., and the children were joined by several sets of adults, all dancing until about 11 p.m. In her fieldnotes from Edna Mae's lessons on November 10, 1990, Dana Everts-Boehm, former Missouri Folk Arts Program director, ended with an observation: "It kept occurring to me all evening that, if I were hosting visitors from [another country] and wanted to show them something that was really great about the United States, an Ozark square dance in Ava would be the perfect place to take them."



I had to laugh when I looked through our old files and found a 1988 letter to Edna Mae from Patrick Janson, former coordinator of the TAAP. Patrick was writing to thank Edna Mae for showing him and Ray Brassieur a "terrific time in Ava!" After describing how much progress he could see in the young dancers and the mastery of the adult dancers, Patrick made a point to tell Edna Mae that there was one drawback to the evening—Edna Mae mentioned to Patrick

that she might "retire" after that year. Thankfully, she did not. Edna Mae Davis continued to host the lessons and dances in Ava at the Squires Fire House, perform in Missouri and beyond with both Rockhouse Holler and the Ava Dancers, and even judge the First Annual Bob Holt National Old Time Jig Dance Competition in 2002.

The daughter of Charles Schuler and Nancy (Hall) Schuler, Edna Mae was born Oct. 8, 1929 in Lamar, Colorado. On Oct. 16, 1948, she and Dean Davis were married in Mountain Home, Arkansas. Edna was a sales clerk, a beautician, farmer, and supervisor at the local flower shop. She attended Ava General Baptist Church. Edna was preceded in death by her parents; two brothers, Louis N. Shuler and Henry Schuler; and a son, Charles Dean Davis.

Survivors include her husband, Dean Davis of the home, Ava, MO; two sons, Donald Gene Davis and wife Carolyn, and Robert David Davis and wife Trish; two daughters, Cynthia Mae Davis, and Catherine Jo Davis, all of Ava, MO; six grandchildren, Amy, Lacey, Josh, Wes, Mark and Jody; one greatgrandchild, Ashton; one brother, Lawrence "Larry" Schuler, Donna, TX; two sisters, Evelyn Pruitt, Ava, MO, Elvina Richardson, Bettendorf, Iowa; and a host of other relatives and friends.