

## **‘Dancing People Are Happy People’: Square Dancing and Democracy in Occupied Japan**

Lane R. Earns

Of the many initiatives that grew out of American efforts to “democratize” Japan during the early stages of the Occupation Period following World War Two, one of the most innovative is attributed to Winfield P. Niblo, the Chief Education Officer of the Nagasaki Military Government Team from September 1946 to October 1948. It was Niblo, calling upon his personal involvement in square dancing, who determined that this American folk dance could serve as a popular vehicle for co-education and democracy in Japan.

It has been nearly half a century since Niblo arrived in Nagasaki to assume his duties as Civilian Education Officer for the N.M.G.T. with headquarters at Katafuchi-machi. Prior to the war he had served as a high school social studies teacher in Denver, Colorado. Upon entering the U.S. Army in 1942 at age thirty, he trained as first a Field Artillery Officer and later as a Special Agent in the Counter Intelligence Corps. By the time he arrived in Yokohama in December 1945 the war had ended. After serving less than a year with the C.I.C. in Tokyo, Kanagawa and Saitama, Niblo became eligible for discharge and accepted a civilian job with the Army as Provincial Education Officer in Nagasaki.

The self-proclaimed middle-class school teacher from Denver was extremely impressed by Japanese culture and the country’s high level of educational achievement. “I was young and energetic, and...the more I observed and experienced life in Nagasaki, the greater became my admiration and appreciation for its people.”

Niblo’s job as Provincial Education Officer in Nagasaki was primarily to ensure that directives from S.C.A.P. regarding Japanese education were carried out at the various local levels. The main concern of the directives was to eliminate “militaristic and feudalistic” tendencies in the educational system. According to Niblo, this was not a particularly difficult task, since most Japanese educational officials agreed with the ultimate objectives. Probably the most delicate issue was the U.S. demand for co-education, but even in this area Niblo found most educators to be cooperative.

In addition to being a high school teacher prior to the war, Niblo had been quite active in promoting recreational activities. He had been both a football coach and a teacher and caller of square dancing. It was his expertise in the latter that would prove helpful in Japan. Niblo not only appreciated square dancing’s recreational worth, but also recognized its value in encouraging healthy social relations between males and females.

It was quite by chance, however, that Niblo’s square dancing skills were put to practical use in Japan.

*One evening, shortly after I arrived in Nagasaki, I was invited to a dinner party at the home of Kaneko Sensei, the Chief of Physical Education of the Education Section of the Kencho. Also in attendance was a group of physical education teachers of the city schools. Following dinner, the teachers performed a number of beautiful Japanese dances. When they were finished, I asked if they would like to learn some American folk dances. They said they would like this very much, so I arranged them in two lines with couples facing one another and taught them the oldest American dance, the Virginia Reel. They enjoyed it very much and asked to learn more dances. So I taught them several simple square dances. They learned the dances unbelievably fast. Thus, the American*

*Square Dance was introduced to Japan. In a small sense, a little bit of history was made on that Autumn evening of 1946 in Nagasaki.*

Square dancing caught on rapidly with the residents of Nagasaki, spreading initially through the instruction of physical education teachers, who themselves underwent folk dance training beginning December 1. The teachers in turn taught groups of adults and children. From Nagasaki City it spread to the outer islands and other prefectures in Kyushu. Fujimoto Tojiro, Chief of the Nagasaki Prefectural Education Division, made funds available to send teaching teams of four couples each to neighboring prefectures to demonstrate and teach square dancing.

Niblo's secretary, Oishi Toshiko, years later recalled the introduction of square dancing in Nagasaki.

*At first most people had some reluctance as Japanese men and women were unaccustomed to dancing together. The whole idea was alien to us. However, after one or two sessions we became enthusiastic square dancers. The music was exciting and dancing became fun. There was little other recreation available at the time. The number of dancers increased rapidly. Square dancing broke the barrier between the military and civilians, the Americans and the Japanese.*

Both the domestic and international press quickly picked up on the story of square dancing. In late 1946, the New York Herald Tribune, Time, the Daily News Foreign Service, and United Press all ran stories on Niblo and square dancing in Nagasaki. Although interspersed with crude and insensitive asides ("To 23-year old Miwo Murakawa, the 'square American dance' was the biggest thing to hit Nagasaki since the atomic bomb—which missed Miwo by just a mile."), the accounts examined Niblo's rationale for initiating the dance.

*Niblo looks upon square dancing as a means of breaking down the traditional Japanese family taboo against social mixing between sexes. Overcoming this obstacle wasn't easy, for the average Japanese couple is mightily embarrassed by any contact in public places. However, Niblo has dozens of enthusiastic endorsements of square dancing from Japanese. They consider it not only fun but democratic.*

Another press release noted that Niblo became so closely associated with the dance that "in Nagasaki they don't call it square dancing...It's Niblo dancing."

The local Japanese press also contained numerous accounts on the square dancing rage in Nagasaki. The Nichinichi and Minyu ran a series of articles on the introduction of square dancing into the regular school curriculum. Most pieces commented on the initial awkwardness of boys and girls performing the dance, but how they learned to enjoy it after a while.

Also commenting on the initial impact of square dancing were the U.S. Occupational Authorities in their monthly report from December 1946. According to this report, not only teachers, but "Other groups such as the Police Department and the Railway Employees have also heard about this activity and have asked for an opportunity to learn the dances." It is apparent from some of the comments by lower ranking policemen and policewomen that the choice was not their own, but that orders had come down from above. Although initially embarrassed by the dance experience, some did come to enjoy it, as evidenced by their testimonials of support.

The December 1946 Military Occupation Report continued with the claim that square dancing offered much more than healthy exercise.

*This has proved to be a very interesting psychological and sociological experiment. It is very difficult for an American raised and educated in close relationship with the opposite sex to understand the feelings that exist in the minds of Japanese individuals regarding the opposite sex. In the square dance, after the initial shock of close contact with the opposite sex is over the participants are busy figuring out what to do next that they don't have time to worry about how Unjapanese like they are behaving. In a short time the inhibitions against social intercourse are completely relaxed and the dancers are busily engaged in the dance with no regard for the violation of traditional segregation. The degree of appreciation and enjoyment which the Nagasakians apparently derive from this activity leads to the conclusion that they have been starving for this type of inexpensive, wholesome, community recreation so much needed to enrich the cultural life of the average Japanese community.*

By early 1947 word of the success of square dancing in Nagasaki had reached Japan's Ministry of Education, and it sent observers to the city to investigate. According to the April 1947 Military Occupation Report,

*[These officials] visited several primary schools where square dancing is being taught as a physical education activity and observed several squares of teachers dancing. They were very much impressed with what they saw and are now making arrangements to have one square dance team (eight persons) taken to Tokyo to demonstrate there. They have requested the Ken Education Office to prepare a textbook on square dancing for use all over Japan.*

Niblo helped prepare the textbook, and in the introduction he wrote the following: "Dancing people are happy people, and America is happy that this bit of American culture can bring a portion of happiness to Japan."

By the summer of 1947 it was estimated that there were between 30,000 to 50,000 active square dancers in Nagasaki Prefecture alone. It was, therefore, time to spread it to the rest of Japan with the assistance of the Ministry of Education.

Niblo explains how this was done.

*[The Ministry of Education], in cooperation with the National University of Physical Education under the direction of President Kurimoto, a national athletic hero, and the National Recreation Association under Yanagita Sensei arranged to conduct a National Folk Dance Training Course at the National Gymnasium in Tokyo. Each of the forty-seven prefectures was invited to send a team of four couples to receive one week of training in the Square Dance and in a number of other Western style folk dances....The master plan provided for the forty-seven teams to return to their home prefectures following training and proceed to teach and promote the dances through the schools and through community recreation programs, youth programs, etc.*

While this approach may have, indeed, helped popularize square dancing throughout Japan, the square dancing boom in the country occurred because of the involvement of two very important people at the Folk Dance Training Course—Prince Mikasa, the emperor's younger brother, and his wife Princess Yuriko. The Prince had apparently participated in a square dance earlier in Sapporo and felt it was a worthwhile activity.

Prince Mikasa confided in Niblo that the reason why he insisted that Yuriko accompany him to square dances was so that he would be setting a good example for Japanese husbands to include their

wives in social functions. Niblo personally witnessed several “Welcome Square Dance Parties” for the Prince as he and the Princess traveled around Japan.

*At the close of each one, the participants would form a large circle around the gymnasium or playground and Prince Mikasa and Princess Yuriko would go completely around the circle to greet and shake hands with everyone present. It was a great honor to have such a personal contact with a member of the Royal Family.*

With the help of the Prince and Princess, the success of square dancing across Japan was assured.

Late in 1948 Winfield Niblo was transferred to Hokkaido as Regional Education Officer, where he stayed for twenty months. At that time he was sent to the newly established Youth Specialist Program within the Civil Affairs Section of S.C.A.P. in Tokyo. When the program was terminated in June 1951, he briefly returned home to Denver before joining the U.S. Foreign Service. In this capacity, he served in fifteen countries over the next twenty five years.

Following Niblo’s retirement from the Foreign Service, he was invited back to Japan in 1981 to participate in the twenty-fifth anniversary ceremony of the founding of the Japanese National Folk Dance Federation. In connection with this visit, he received the Order of the Sacred Treasure by the order of the Emperor for his contributions to Japan. After the ceremony, he accompanied Prince Mikasa to Sapporo, and later revisited Nagasaki to see friends there. Back in Nagasaki, where it all began, he was honored for his dedicated efforts on behalf of the residents of the city.

Today Winfield P. Niblo, at the age of eighty-one, leads an active life with his wife and son at the same address in Denver which he left more than fifty years ago to train for duty that eventually took him to Japan. The years have not, however, dimmed his fond memories of Nagasaki or diminished his energy. In closing he comments that “In many ways, I consider the period [in Nagasaki] to be the best two years of my life—so far.”

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