

Talking Feet: The History of Clogging

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Double-toe step, heel, ball. Double-toe step, brush kick.

These words may not make much sense to you, but to a clogger they translate into the written steps of a clog dance. Clogging is a folk dance—a dance that began with the “regular people” of a country or region—in which the performers use their feet as instruments. Clog dancers wear shoes with taps. They strike the toes, balls, and heels of their feet to the ground in rhythm to the music. Clogging has a rich heritage that is closely tied to the history of the Tar Heel State.

Clogging is a truly American dance. It began in the Appalachian Mountains more than two hundred years ago. Irish, Scottish, English, and Dutch-German immigrants settled in Appalachia starting in the mid-1700s. Each group had its own dances and musical traditions. Eventually, the different dances combined into a unique style of step dancing usually performed to fiddle music. This style reflected the creativity of the people living in the region. Over time, the new folk dance—which also included elements of traditional Cherokee dance and African rhythmic steps—became clog dancing as we know it today.

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, clogging was performed by individuals. Each person created his or her own steps and shared them with other dancers. Then, in the early 1900s, many cloggers began to add their steps to the square dances that had been enjoyed in their communities for many years. Some dancers formed teams and began to compete against one another.

Although generations of people in Appalachia had been clogging, it took a handful of North Carolinians to introduce the dance to the entire country. Bascom Lamar Lunsford helped clogging become more popular when he added a team dancing competition to the annual Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville. In 1928 a group called the Soco Gap Dancers, from Haywood County, won this prestigious competition. When the group performed for Queen Mary of England, her majesty reportedly noted that the dancers’ footwork resembled the *clogging* performed in her country. At that time, the American dance style had various regional names—such as flat footing, buckdancing, and jigging. The queen’s name stuck, and the step dancing performed throughout Appalachia became widely known as clog dancing.

Modern clogging is more complicated than the simple rhythmic dance begun by our ancestors. Since clogging is a *living* folk dance, it reflects the time in which the dancers live. As with other forms of personal expression, each generation adds its own creativity to the art form. New inspirations creep into the dance because of popular culture. Tap dancing, street dancing, and even hip-hop influence the style of steps and dances performed by today’s cloggers. Performing

teams wearing brightly colored costumes, calico, or sequins have sprung up everywhere, entertaining with impressive precision (or exact) footwork.

As for the shoes, many old clogging shoes had no taps. Some shoes were made of leather and velvet. Their soles were either wooden or hard leather. Modern clogging shoes usually have double taps or “jingle taps.” There are four taps on each of these shoes—two on the toe, and two on the heel. One tap of each pair is securely fastened to the shoe. The other tap is more loosely fastened, hitting both the floor and the fastened tap during dancing.

Clogging competitions across the country bring together teams from East and West to vie for trophies, honors, and cash prizes. Some teams, such as the Wolfpack Clogging Team from North Carolina State University, perform traditional steps, while groups like the Pride of Carolina Cloggers from High Point participate in both precision and traditional clogging competitions. They may dance to fiddle tunes or rap music.

Many of the nation’s best cloggers flock to Maggie Valley, in Haywood County, to show off their talents. Often called the Clogging Capitol of the World, this town in the western part of North Carolina has hosted major dance competitions for many years.

Considering clogging’s long history in the Tar Heel State, is it any wonder that it is the official state dance?

**At the time of this article’s publication, Michelle L. Carr was the curator of internal programs within the Education Section of the North Carolina Museum of History. She is a former clogger.*