

# The Blethers

Dave Neuffer, Chair

September 2008  
<http://rscds-chicago.org>

Carlyn Bromann, Editor

**2008 Semi-Annual General Meeting:** This is official notice, pursuant to the Constitution and by-laws of the Chicago Branch of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, that the Semi-Annual General Meeting will be held on Sunday, November 16, 2008. The meeting will be held in the parish hall at Bethany United Church of Christ Hall, 4250 North Paulina, Chicago, Illinois, starting at 6:00 p.m. You must be a member of the Chicago Branch to vote at the meeting, but anyone interested in the Branch is invited to attend.

**Classes:** It's a hoot and a holler out at Fermi Lab. Along with dancing enjoyed each Tuesday at Silk and Thistle, this summer saw the reintroduction of a pair of state-endangered barn owls into the 1,000 acres of restored prairie that surrounds Fermi. Not to be outdone by the ecology folks, Fermilab scientists announced their discovery of the "Omega-sub-b," a very tiny particle that breaks into even lighter particles faster than you can say Usain Bolt....

September marked the resumption of dancing at Loch Mich. After a summer of weather highs and lows, the air is cooler, the colors are crisper, and a few leaves are beginning to fall. It's a great month to "Loch" into dancing downtown.

**Trumpet Fanfare:** Congratulations to Noel Chavez who recently became a fully certified RSCDS instructor. Bravo, Noel, for this exciting and superior accomplishment!

**Important Note from the CoM:** The new Committee of Management of the Chicago Branch consists of Chair David Neuffer, Treasurer Marsha Spurlock, Secretary Mady Newfield and members at large Noel Chavez, Gwen Leyffer, and Corinne McArdle. They have met twice this summer and have set their next meeting for Monday evening, Oct. 6, 7 p.m., at Fermilab's Users' Center, and the Branch's Semi Annual General Meeting for Sunday, Nov. 16, 6 p.m. at Bethany UCC in Chicago. All meetings are open.

The CoM has been concerned with the news of the budget deficit of RSCDS Headquarters in Scotland. While by latest reports it seems plans are in place to rectify this, the effect on finances is that the amount the Branch must pay per member to Headquarters has increased, as of this year, from £10 to £15. With the exchange rate as it is, this now accounts the entire portion of each member's dues, leaving nothing for our local expenses. The CoM is writing a letter to express our concern with the substantial rise in dues, and has also decided for this year NOT to pass the rise in cost onto local Branch members, in hopes that membership will not decrease further. On the contrary, the CoM hopes to encourage more local dancers to become members, and to encourage all those who can to make an additional charitable contribution beyond their membership dues toward Branch local expenses. You will see this option highlighted on this year's membership form. Please send in your renewal promptly.

While it may seem fiscally questionable to run at a loss for a year, the CoM is concerned that if membership gets too low, the stability of the Branch itself may suffer. It is crucial to increase efforts to attract - and keep - more dancers and potential new Branch members. Hence they have also suggested that Loch Mich should be run on a donation basis, to make it more competitive with the variety of free dance options Chicago affords, so

that newcomers will not be put off by price. For Loch Michigan regulars, this means that, rather than a subscription, there is a suggested donation towards the cost of the classes and the rental of the space. The hope is that this revision will encourage largesse from those who can afford it, without discouraging newcomers who would just like to try it out.

The rising costs of events, brought on by increases in travel costs for musicians, are having its impact on our plans for the New Year's Ball. The Ukrainian Center is becoming more costly, so in order to continue the formal Ball tradition, the CoM has decided to engage the newfound local talent of Carol Cook and her band and have an appetizer and dessert buffet instead of the full sit down meal the event has had in the past. Having heard Carol's excellent playing along with Laura and Nick at last year's brunch dance and again at the Highland Games, the CoM is very much looking forward to this new local music source (and thankful for the lack of travel expense!)

The CoM has also decided that the Branch needs to scale back on the Weekend Workshop, at least for this year. They still want to have a workshop, most likely the second weekend in June, but are considering a non-residential local event. For the time being CoM members are heading up the efforts on these special events, but additional workers are needed to be able to carry out the Branch's events. Money is one issue in event planning, but burnout and lack of volunteers to work on events is an equal problem.

It may be a time of financial austerity (and overbooked schedules), but it is still a time to celebrate and enjoy our Scottish dancing traditions as often and as energetically as we can. All the members of the CoM hope that you who are reading this will offer your input of ideas, and contribute whatever funds and energy and skills you can, to help keep Scottish dancing alive and well in Chicago!

**Branch Demo Team:** The Demo Team welcomes Fiona Kopeny to the group. Fiona has already endured sodden turf at the Highland Games and a rained-out Celtic Fest... With any luck, conditions will be improved for two upcoming demonstrations: September 27, at the annual Midlothian Scottish Fair, and December 6, at the Museum of Science and Industry's Christmas Around the World and Holiday of Lights.

**For the Love of Piping, I:** According to a recent article in Scottish Life, "declassified documents have revealed that a principled stand [taken] by a Scottish bagpiper elevated the post of Queen's Piper from a somewhat menial post to one of the most coveted jobs in the British Army. The duties of the Queen's Piper, a post established in 1843 by Queen Victoria, included serenading the monarch each morning, waiting on dinner guests, lighting fires and helping with the gardening.

However, papers made public last February show that Pip Major John Roe of the Scots Guards declined the post in 1965 because it paid so little (just \$1,175 annually, or about \$15,000 today) and required what he considered 'menial tasks.' Since then, the Queen's Piper has kept his army status and pay while becoming a member of the Royal household at Buckingham Palace. His duties include performing outside the Queen's window for 15 minutes every morning and accompanying her to events such as stage functions, investitures and receptions."

**For the Love of Piping, II:** This side of the Atlantic (and a little closer to home), we are lucky to enjoy the piping of fellow dancer Mike Fitak. Though Mike seemed surprised when he learned that we wanted to feature a story highlighting his piping, he kindly described how it all happened:

"I actually started piping and SCD dancing within a few weeks of each other. I believe it was the summer of '94 and I started dancing at Oak Park, which was supposed to be for advanced dancers at the time, but either I amused them, or they took pity on me, or something, and I was encouraged to return.

What really started [piping] out was the massed bands at the Oakbrook games. At that point I knew I wanted to play, but (believe it or not) I really was too shy to approach anybody. After all, I am not actually Scottish, and I was still under the impression that that was a requirement. About a week after the games, I was having lunch at a fast food restaurant in Wheaton and was showing the pictures of the games to my Aunt. A complete stranger approached me and asked if he could see the pictures. That was his first year in the massed band, and he wanted to see himself and his band. We started talking and he strongly encouraged me to attend a practice of "Tunes of Glory Pipes and Drums." I still waited a bit, but ended up attending the rehearsal before the fourth of July. They were a bit short staffed, so I was strongly encouraged to help out as support for the parade, and ended up walking the parade route with the band. The following week I was admitted to the color guard and preceded to parade in

front of the band for about a year or so, working up to color guard commander, before I developed the skill to join the band as a piper. So, I was actually a parading member of the band before I had a chanter or bagpipe.

My first instructor was a gentleman named Bob Copland, a member of Tunes who helped out with teaching. He was very helpful, but wasn't actually that far above me. A fellow Tunes member had joined a second band, The University of Chicago, and I was encouraged to attend practices. I was mid grade 5, and they were winning grade 3 at the time. To put it mildly, I was hopelessly outclassed. [Note: grade 1 is the highest level, grade 2 the next highest, etc.] But between the PM's (Pipe Majors) of both Tunes and the U of C, I was never discouraged, but I was asked to sit out a lot. I started private lessons with Jake Watson, [pipe major of a grade 1 band by age 17 and now instructor of the band Penetangore], and I discovered a number of things I had been taught incorrectly. But I was also able to hear what it sounded like inside the playing circle of a GOOD band.

I play solo when asked [thank you, Mike!], but I am completely a band player at heart. I tend to practice in the evenings before bed, and I would say that in general I enjoy playing in the evening, when it is cooler. [Unfortunately] St. Pats is often so cold, your fingers go numb, and the 4th of July tends to be way too hot. [But]... to be honest, the crowd makes or breaks a parade. When they beg you to play as soon as you stop and are really into it, it is great, pretty much no matter the weather. The bane of most pipers' existences is massed bands. It can rank fairly low for enjoyment, but I still remember just how amazing it was when I first rested my hand on the ground during massed bands and felt the power of all the pipes.

I am a grade 3 piper. The band I played with this year [Panetangore, Ontario] was grade 4 and won 'Champion Supreme' for their grade and the North American Championships, Grade 4. Working with Jake, and playing in Canada is making it fun. I really don't enjoy the competitions, themselves -too much stress for 5 minutes, and I am deathly afraid that something I do will hurt the band's score. But the competitions are what make you work hard enough as a band to really sound good. My absolute favorite playing is the last practice before the competitions late in the season. The pipes and drums are in near perfect unison, and the sound is beautiful. If someone does mess up, you groan, and then are told to 'Play it again' and it is back to being music.

Competitive piping has always been very structured. The trend for a few years now has been trying to relax some of the rules to allow for a better variety of music. The band that I root for the most is the 78<sup>th</sup> Frasers. Between going to piping schools and having instructors flown down to work with my band, I have been personally taught by 6 of their members. These same people, who have all won the Worlds at some time, often many times, will come up and chat with me after a games, and I have never been made to feel beneath them."

**Stellar Reels:** Scottish scientist Dana Mackenzie, writes that "mathematicians have proved that three stars can chase each other forever in a figure-eight pattern, with each one passing between the other two in turn -and that this orbit is stable. Moreover, the theorists found that the three stars do not have to have equal masses, as had been assumed, meaning that the configuration could be conceivably observed in the universe."

No word yet about whether you have to be able to dance a reel for 3 in order to adopt your own reeling stars...

#### **Upcoming Events:**

Midlothian Scottish Fair, 10 am -9 pm, Saturday, September 27

CoM Meeting at Fermi Lab, 7 pm, Monday, October 6

Milwaukee Hallowe'en Dance, 2 pm, Saturday, October 25

Chicago Branch SAGM, 6 pm, Sunday, November 16

Chicago New Year's Ball, Saturday, January 17

Committee of Management: Dave Neuffer, Honorary Chairman; Mady Newfield, Honorary Secretary; Marsha Spurlock, Honorary Treasurer; Corrine McArdle, Gwen Leyffer, and Noel Chavez, Members at Large

Newsletter articles and photos may be sent to Carlyn Bromann at [carlyn.bromann@gmail.com](mailto:carlyn.bromann@gmail.com)