

Heartland Squares: From Swingin' Singles to a Modern Square Dance Revival

By Mike Shedor, Club Member

Square dancing's boom in the 1970s and 80s shaped countless clubs across America — and in Kansas City, one club stood out. Founded in May 1966, the Swingin' Singles grew rapidly during the revival era, becoming one of the most prominent singles-only square dance clubs in the region. For decades, it thrived as the last remaining singles club in Kansas City, carrying forward the energy, independence, and social excitement that defined the era.

But as times changed, the club faced a challenge: the "Swingin' Singles" name no longer reflected who they were — or who they hoped to welcome. Families and couples hesitated to join, and newcomers often arrived expecting a social singles group rather than a square dance club. By 2020, with 110 members and the distinction of being the largest club in Missouri and Kansas, leadership recognized the need for transformation.

A full re-examination of the by-laws began. For the first time in 50 years, married couples were allowed to hold office. The club embraced a new identity and a new name — Heartland Squares — chosen to reflect square dancing, community, and regional pride.

Then COVID hit. Dancing stopped for a year, but the work continued. The club rebuilt its structure, modernized its operations, and became USDA's first 501(c)(3) chartered club. When dancing finally resumed, the club faced a new struggle: nearly half the membership was gone. Confidence, interest, and comfort with a high-touch activity had faded. But Heartland Squares had something powerful — strong leadership, creativity, and a willingness to try anything.

The club launched its most ambitious recruitment effort ever: flyers, posters, newspaper ads, door strikes, social media pushes, and relentless word-of-mouth. The result was extraordinary — over 100 new dancers started lessons, and more than 60 graduated.

Heartland Squares also confronted the unintended consequences of its new inclusive branding. Some longtime singles felt displaced.

The club responded with a simple, powerful commitment: every dance, every tip, singles

first. Anyone could step into a square without a partner, and someone — single or married — would join them. To increase flexibility, dancers learned both roles, and lessons began incorporating alternative-position training.

The club doubled down on growth, offering beginner lessons twice a year for three consecutive years. They intentionally sought younger dancers, lowering the average age and infusing the club with fresh energy. Today, Heartland Squares is nearly back to its pre-COVID membership — vibrant, welcoming, and forward-looking. From the excitement of the 1970s boom to the challenges of modern rebuilding, Heartland Squares stands as a living example of what square dancing has always been: adaptable, joyful, and rooted in community. The revival isn't just happening nationally — it's happening right here in the Heartland.

Yellow Rocks, Mike Shedor