

Cloggers stay fit, have fun on stage

By Anthony Todd Carlisle, Post Gazette

Pat Loehr, dressed in red and white with a Santa hat, urged the crowd to shake, clap, sing and dance with the Mon Valley Cloggers as they entertained shoppers at a West Mifflin Mall near their Pennsylvania hometown.

"Come down and sing with us," Mrs. Loehr urged shoppers on the second floor of the mall who looked down on the group as they performed on the stage in front of Macy's.

Mrs. Loehr's husband, Cliff Loehr, director of the cloggers, said singing is not this American folk dance group's forte, but this year, members decided to include vocals in their Christmas performance. In the group's rendition of "Up on the Rooftop," Mr. Loehr provided the "ho, ho, ho."

"We are more dancers than singers, but we manage," Mr. Loehr said of the clogger group he and his wife formed in 1992.

About 10 hoofers danced to several Christmas songs such as "Christmas Time's A Coming" and "Jazzy Jingle Bells." Mr. Loehr said the well received Christmas performances at the mall are used to educate people about the art of clogging and to attract new members to the club.

Starting in January, the Loehrs offer free beginner clogging at a studio at their home in Elizabeth. Those who decide to continue will be able to take 10 weeks of lessons.

Since the dance group's founding, Mr. and Mrs. Loehr have trained more than 150 dancers and performed in more than 670 shows, including county fairs, school festivals and

Photo: The Mon Valley Cloggers performing a Holiday number during their Christmas shows.

senior living facilities.

Mr. Loehr, who describes clogging as "mountain style tap dancing," said the dance started in England and made its way to America's Appalachian region. Clogging, in which shoes with taps are worn, is marked by the general up and down motion of the body in rhythm with the beat of the music.

Mr. Loehr and his wife have been clogging since the 1980's when they were members of Norm's Mavericks and Keith's Grasshoppers, two Ohio-based groups. Then Mr. Loehr's employer, PPG Industries, transferred him to Pittsburgh. Unable to find suitable clubs, the couple started their own.

"The reason I got this group together is because I love to show off, and I think everyone in my group likes to show off," Mr. Loehr said.

The Mon Valley Cloggers has about fifteen members. The oldest dancer is 89 and the youngest is 11. Most are in their 50's and 60's.

Clogger Peggy Rattay, 68, of Monessen, said she and her mother, Margaret Poprosky, 89, have been dancing with the Mon Valley group since 1993 after they saw the group perform in a

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Mon Valley Cloggers

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festival in West Newton.

“My mom said we ought to take lessons, and we did and we loved it,” Ms. Rattay said. “It’s addicting, and it’s just fun. We get to make people happy. Also, this group gets to be like a second family.”

Mr. Loehr, a retired chemical engineer, said it’s been difficult to recruit new members, especially men. In the early 1990’s, his group had 30 members, allowing them to do more shows. For example in 1994, the group did 74 shows in one year as compared to the 20 shows they did this year.

“Recruiting new members is the biggest problem,” Mr. Loehr said. “Here, in the Pittsburgh area, men just don’t think it’s macho to dance. In the surrounding states, you will oftentimes find more men on the dance floor than there are women. Over the last 18 years, I’ve only had seven dancers -- and that counts me -- who are men.”

Mr. Loehr said that other states, such as Ohio,

West Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky, have a huge clogging following. Mr. Loehr said this traditional dance has seen an increase in popularity nationally because of cloggers performing on television shows such as “America’s Got Talent.” Still, Mr. Loehr is not sure if Pittsburgh will one day become as crazy for clogging as it is for its professional sports teams.

Mr. Loehr said the group often pays homage to those iconic Pittsburgh sports teams by dressing in gold and black. .

But for their holiday shows, members were in red with Santa hats as they clogged to Christmas songs. Angela Cross of Pleasant Hills watched the show with her daughter Caitlyn, 5, and son Ian, 2, who rang bells handed out by the cloggers.

“I thought they were a lot of fun,” Ms. Cross said. “The kids love it. This is great unplanned entertainment.”

Near the stage, Mike McDonald, 3, of Clairton also danced along. His parents, Dan and Lynn McDonald, were so impressed with the show that they joined.

“I’ve never seen this type of dancing before ... this is real nice,” Mr. McDonald said.

