

# Folk Dancing in California

By Vi Dexheimer

Checking back into the early issues of LET'S DANCE revealed a most interesting history of folk dancing in California, of which many of our new folk dancers are not aware.

According to notes compiled by Virgil Morton, and an early article written by him in LET'S DANCE, Scandinavian folk dancing was introduced in the early 1930s by Valborg "Mama" Gravander, in San Francisco Pacific Heights District. Her house was always open to friends who were interested in her Swedish folklore and applied arts.

Among the visitors to "Mama" Gravander's home was Song Chang, a Chinese-American artist, who became interested in folk dancing in 1931, while touring Europe. Feeling the warmth and the friendship surrounding him during these visits, he wondered why there weren't more organizations devoted to this form of recreation. (Song Chang recently passed away. Refer to an article in the November 1974 issue of LET'S DANCE.)

Folk Dancing was extremely limited, even among most ethnic groups. It was taught in some schools to a limited degree. Most of the classes or clubs were closed to the general public, preference being limited to persons of national origin. Outside of the William Tell Hotel, where folk dancing was open to the public, there were very few places where individuals could learn dances of other countries.

In 1938 with the aid of members of "Mama" Gravander's group, Song Chang developed a group open to everyone, where dances of all nations could be taught. He learned and taught Norwegian, Swedish and German dances. The members of this group decided to give the club a name, and this club became CHANGS FOLK DANCERS. The group performed the First International Folk Dance Exhibition at the San Francisco World's Fair, on Treasure Island, in 1939-40. At that time the group met at 2226 Fillmore Street. In 1942 the club moved to 1630 Stockton Street, in San Francisco, added the word "International" to its name and established itself as the center of California folk dance activity, with an active membership of over 200. It attracted the best teaching talent to be found in the West.

Folk dancing by this time extended from one end of California to the other. Other folk dancers decided to form groups, and by the middle of 1942 there were ten groups active in San Francisco.

## *THE FOLK DANCE FEDERATION WAS BORN*

Leaders and dancers realized that with concerted effort a unified folk dance program could be developed. At a meeting in Lodi, on May 3, 1942, Henry Glass proposed the formation of the

ly be compiled into additional volumes. It also features invaluable costume information and sketches to enable folkdancers to make their own costumes to be worn at festivals.

#### *THE SOUTHERN SECTION OF CALIFORNIA FORMS A FEDERATION*

As early as 1941 groups in Pasadena were merging into co-operatives, and folk dancing was being taught in Los Angeles and Hollywood. The full strength of the Statewide organization was realized when the Southern Section, later to become the Folk Dance Federation of California, South, was formed in April 1946, with Allen Pelton as its first president. By 1947 there were 65 groups actively engaged in folk and square dancing, in addition to 17 ethnic groups. The by-laws of the North were adopted after an explanation of their purpose by Walter Grothe. Although the North and South are two separate organizations, each with its own officers, it was the intention of the founders of the Southern Section that they act as two sections of one organization. Because of the distance from the northern part of California to the southern part, the creation of two working sections of the Folk Dance Federation of California made it easier to reach folk dancers throughout the state of California by a concentrated effort on the part of leaders in each area to promote the folk dance activity. The cooperation between the two has proved very successful and the two organizations act as one whenever a joint effort is needed.

Southern club membership extends from Santa Maria to San Diego and surrounding areas; northern club membership extends from Ukiah to Bakersfield. Once a year folk dancers gather together from all over California to meet old and new friends at a two or three-day Statewide Festival - -, one year at a southern location and the next year at a northern city, where hundreds of folk dances, squares and kolos are enjoyed by hundreds of folk dancers in their colorful costumes.

#### *TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS AND SCHOLARSHIPS*

Both Federations sponsor Teacher Training Programs, arranged in various areas under the supervision of professional persons, for the purpose of training interested persons to become competent dance teachers under Federation leadership.

To foster the growth of folk dance activities through attendance at California Folk Dance Camps, the Federation sponsors scholarships to these camps. Scholarships are available to California folk dancers, and application may be requested by contacting the Folk Dance Federation of California, Inc.

#### *MEMBERSHIP IN THE FEDERATION*

Membership to the Folk Dance Federation of California, Inc., may be through a Club or as an Associate Member. Club Membership dues are \$10.00 per year; the dues for an Associate Member are \$6.00 per year, and includes a subscription to LET'S DANCE

Federation, a thing he, and others, had been working on for a period of time. At that meeting Henry was appointed "temporary chairman of the committee" to solidify the proposed plan. Several meetings followed, but it was not until a meeting on June 14, 1942, that Henry was elected President, and the Federation officially came into being. This meeting was held in Golden Gate Park, near the Conservatory. This was a part of a series of folk dance festivals which had been taking place at regular intervals for about a year prior to that time. These were sponsored by the many dance clubs in existence at that time.

In the early days of folk dancing, because of the handicap of wartime gasoline and tire rationing, the planning of festivals in various areas proceeded with difficulty. Nevertheless, interest in folk dancing continued to grow in California; festivals were planned in advance; the staff of officers and standing committees in the Federation increased.

#### *DANCE DESCRIPTIONS WERE MADE AVAILABLE*

A group of members from "Chang International Folk Dancers" wrote the first descriptions of the then popular folk dances to aid teachers of the other rapidly growing groups. These were far from the sophisticated style the Federation has since established, but the entire Volume I of *DANCES FROM NEAR AND FAR* was later made from their original notes.

Originally organized as a short term project to publish descriptions of the Federation dances, the Research Committee became, in 1946, a permanent appendage under the chairmanship of Lucile Czarnowski, followed by Mildred Buhler. Today, with Dorothy Tamburini as Co-ordinator, it researches dances brought to Stockton Folk Dance Camp by teachers representing their native countries, standardizes the descriptions so they may be interpreted by local teachers and dancers, and submits them to *LET'S DANCE*, the official publication of the Folk Dance Federation of California, Inc., for printing in easy to read form. Through the efforts of this committee, the Federation publishes these dances in volume form, under the title of *FOLK DANCES FROM NEAR AND FAR, INTERNATIONAL SERIES*.

The first meeting of a Teachers' Institute was held on January 26, 1947 at the Mission Community Center in San Francisco. Since that first institute, hundreds of dances have been taught and reviewed at well-attended institutes planned by a committee that works closely with the Research committee.

#### *THE BIRTH OF LET'S DANCE MAGAZINE*

*LET'S DANCE* originated as a two-page mimeographed "paper", in 1944, with Ed Kremers as its editor. It grew to a six page bulletin, then a twelve page brochure, and at the present time, is a 40-page magazine, circulated throughout the United States, Canada, Alsaska, Hawaii, Mexico, Europe and Japan. This official publication includes dance descriptions that will eventual-

Magazine. For information regarding membership to the Folk Dance Federation of California, South, Inc., write to Elsa Miller, 3455 Loma Lada Drive, Los Angeles, California 90065.

### *IN GENERAL*

Folk dancing in California has had its ups and downs since its inception. Although many enthusiasts go folk dancing, either to a class or a party, or a festival, five or six times a week, outside interests have taken their toll in attendance. Television keeps many people at home. Bowling and similar activities interfere with folk dancing. Young people who enter into the activity soon think of marriage and raising a family, which slows down their folk dance activity. However, folk dancing in California is here to stay.

For further information on folk dance activity in the northern part of California, contact the Folk Dance Federation of California, Inc., 1095 Market Street, Rm. 213, San Francisco, California 94103. For activity in the south, contact The Folk Dance Federation of California, South, c/o the Folk Dance Scene, (the official publication of Federation, South), 13250 Ida Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90066.