



an interview with

GLENN BANNERMAN

by Jovana

GLENN BANNERMAN, born in Hopewell, Virginia, has a degree in Municipal Recreation and a Masters Degree in Christian Education. He has been Professor of Recreation and Outdoor Education at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, for the past 15 years and is currently on sabbatical in Montreat, North Carolina, doing research on the Big Circle Dance. Glenn and his wife, Evelyn, direct a 225 member international folk dance group when they are in Richmond & a "Left Bank" coffee house for summer students in Montreat.

Glenn & Evelyn taught at Stockton Folk Dance Camp in 1972 and again in 1973, when they brought their three children and the Larry Wilson family, veteran cloggers from Montreat.

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF BIG CIRCLE DANCE?

First, I think it is pretty much accepted that the Big Circle Dance came to us through the English, Scot, European circle dances, and that the mountain music dictated the type of rhythm. Generally, the footwork was a regular traveling step, a walking or shuffle step. The Clog step, *per se*, was not used in the Big Circle dancing until many, many years later. Generally, folks standing on the sideline would do what was called a jig step, hoe-down jig, buck step, flat foot or clog step, and it was the influence of all of the other country's (mentioned above) footwork that helped develop what we now call a Clog Step. Of course, here again, the music told the Clogger what to do with his feet.

In the early thirties, some folks remember people doing a little Clog Step while they did Big Circle Dance, but it wasn't until Mr. Sam Queen of western North Carolina put together an actual Big Circle Square and Clog dance team (Soco Gap Team) that we began to get the influx of the Clog Step being used in the Big Circle Square Dancing. A program I have in my possession lists all of the Smooth dance teams (that is, Big Circle dance teams not using Clog steps) that have participated in the Asheville Mountain Dance and Folk Festival from 1938 until 1957. The competition in Big Circle Dancing was strictly Smooth dance teams. In 1958, the Mountain Festival set up two categories, one for smooth dance teams and one for Clog dance teams, & so it has been since that time in this part of the country. (This particular part of history is related to the Asheville, North Carolina, area only.)

HOW DID SQUARE DANCING BECOME DIFFERENT FROM BIG CIRCLE IF THEY BOTH CAME FROM ENGLISH TRADITIONAL DANCING?

I think that it developed partly because of how people got together. If there were four couples, you danced four couples; if there were six couples, you danced six couples. The Big Circle hasn't developed like Square Dancing; Big Circle still uses the same old figures. This is the reason I say it's more of a social dance, where folks don't care a whole lot about hearing the caller or about fancy figures. They just come to dance to music, and this is the reason they clog to it. Big Circle dancing is simple enough that you can do the Clog and still do the figures. In Western Square Dancing today you'd never make it, with all the fast movement of the figures.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BIG CIRCLE DANCE AND KENTUCKY RUNNING SETS?

Cecil Sharp, in his book, "Highland Country Dancing", has a section about Kentucky Running Sets. He says people would be on a porch and someone would say, "Let's run a set.", which would mean, 'Let's dance.' This makes sense to me, because the fact that they were dancing on porches would restrict the number that could dance. Now a lot of places they use the term 'Running Sets' synonymously with what I call Big Circle Square Dancing. But Kentucky Running Sets could not be done with, say, 50 people in a circle, whereas Big Circle Square Dancing can.

HOW DID CLOG DANCE DEVELOP?

This is purely theory on my part. People with an English, Irish, Scottish background, standing around as the fiddle tunes were playing, would do their native dance step and then improvise from that. The improvisation, then, became known as the Clog Dance or the Buck and Wing. We showed an old-timey (Clogging) film the other night, and Sean and Una O'Farrell (Irish dance teachers) said one fellow was doing what they call the Irish Thump, or Irish Step Dancing. His arms were straight, his back was straight, and he was on his toes. In the same film there's another fellow, he's on his toes, but he's throwing his arms around, and he gets back on his heels, and so forth.

DO YOU FEEL CLOGGING IS CORRUPTED WHEN CHOREOGRAPHED?

I don't think so. My only problem with that is, wherein does the individual have the opportunity for self expression? When I think of Clogging and Big Circle I think of the dance of the people, not as a show dance, with room only for perfection. Unless there is a freedom within it, & everybody understands that freedom, how can you really communicate to an audience what this dance is all about? Some of the people in our part train dancers for 'perfection', and they end up with robots. If I take the same group of performing dancers and say, "OK, we're doing a street dance. Go out and get a partner," they can't even dance. And you call the figures, and they don't know what you're talking about.

We have no quarrel with choreographing the Clog and Big Circle if you stick with what is traditional, that you can go back and verify. Now recreationally, I see no problem with using a modern figure within the Big Circle (framework), but when it comes to groups doing exhibition, calling it Big Circle Dancing, I would like for them to use whatever is traditional.

WHAT KIND OF INSTRUMENTS ARE USED FOR BIG CIRCLE DANCING?

The basic instruments are the fiddle and the five-string banjo and a guitar and a bass. All string instruments. A mandolin helps an awful lot. There are a lot of people in the mountain area that can play the piano to supplement. Accordians have been used. They use spoons, two tablespoons; some of them are hooked together, but the majority of them are not. Then there's the gut bucket, but none of that's what I would call traditional.

WHY ARE BIG CIRCLE AND CLOG DANCING SO LITTLE KNOWN IN AMERICA?

I think that Big Circle dancing died out right after World War II. So much of it was done in a regular dance hall, on Friday or Saturday night, and people got a little bit rowdy. Alcoholic beverage played a large part in folks' entertainment along with the dance, and people just got disgusted. Also, there was no one going around and calling. Same thing with international folk dancing. In our neck of the woods, we're loaded with ethnic communities, and they still dance. In their own churches, their own



The Bannerman and Wilson Families

weddings, funerals, they celebrate their own stuff. And it was never thought of that you'd share this with anybody else. You just kept to yourself. So until folks like Atanas (Kolorovsky) and Dick Crum started traveling, it couldn't catch on country-wide. And so there just hasn't been anybody traveling to teach (Big Circle. This is the first time that we have really pushed Clogging the way we have on this tour (Summer 1973).

I'm having trouble now, with all the Clog steps, the variety of steps that we're doing. I've never tried to put the calls to any beat or musical measure; we just do whatever the music tells us to do. But the problem here at Stockton, there are some people that can't get it to feel right because they're so oriented to the printed instructions and seeing how the music fits. They have to intellectually comprehend it before they can do it.