

Henry "Buzz" Glass—

# The Birth of the Folk Dance Federation

*This article is the result of a series of mail, phone and email interviews, questions and responses between Laila Messer and Henry "Buzz" Glass, wife Frances and daughter, Linelle Glass. The writing is theirs, the arrangement and removal of actual questions is Laila's. We thank all concerned for this glimpse into the life of one of folk dancing's premier people.*  
—Editor

## How did the Folk Dance Federation of California get started?

Whose idea was it?

Where was it started and when?

The answers to those questions have to do with Henry "Buzz" Glass and his wife, Frances. The two met when Buzz hitchhiked from San Francisco to Lodi to interview for a teaching position in the Lodi School District. Frances was the secretary to the Assistant Superintendent who interviewed Buzz. "My office was next door to his office. The partition between the two rooms did not go to the top," she explained. "I could hear everything. I just knew he'd get the job."

And he did. He was assigned to teach the 5th grade at Needham Elementary School. His salary was \$1300; the year was 1939.

Henry, the youngest of seven children, was born September 7, 1915 in San Francisco. The arranged marriage of his parents did not work well and his father left. It was not easy to survive without the safety nets available today. Life was a struggle. Hard work was no stranger to the Glass family. Nevertheless, education and reading were always prized.

He is always called Buzz. That's how he likes it. "I can't remember a time when anyone called me Henry," he said. As a kid, he was called Buster. One of his idols was Buzz Arlett, (he can't remember the spelling) who was a great hitter for the Oakland Oaks. "I liked the name so much I put it on my T shirt. It made a hit with the customers on my paper route." The change from Buster to Buzz was an easy slide.

As a youngster, Buzz had a lot of jobs. He boxed groceries, worked at the zoo and delivered newspapers. At age 19 he shipped out on a Grace line ship as wiper in the engine room. The ship made a summer-long trip through the Panama Canal to New York City and back again.

After that he went to college, first to San Francisco State and then to UC Berkeley. He decided to become a teacher and returned to San Francisco to get his college degree and teaching credential from SF State (now SF State University).

He started folk dancing in 1937 when his older sister, Marge, invited him to go with her to a dance sponsored by the San Francisco Recreation Department. The dance was held in a portable building; the music was played on a phonograph and the records were 78s. The group was led by a lady from the Croatian community. The dances were simple group dances so all could join in without instruction. Buzz enjoyed the evening very much. He was impressed by the camaraderie, the sharing and sense of belonging.



Henry "Buzz" Glass

—Ace Smith photo, on loan from Bruce Mitchell

He soon after he saw a flyer for a folk dance to be held on Columbus Avenue. Because of the warmth and sense of community he had experienced at his first folk dance, Buzz anticipated another pleasant evening. He told everyone he didn't know any dances, but they all were welcoming and encouraging. Soon after, that group became *Changs International Folk Dancers*. Buzz became a charter member. The club still exists! (It is now the oldest folk dance club in the United States.) After a night of dancing, the dancers would go down to one of the ethnic restaurants for food and more folk dancing at other spots. More than anything, it was the welcoming spirit and encouragement that prompted Buzz to pursue and get involved in folk dancing.

One night, Vasha Kuratov, a member of the Russian community came to the club and invited Buzz to learn Russian dancing. Buzz took Russian dance lessons and became very proficient. He danced at a café with a Russian singer, a four-piece orchestra and émigrés from Russia. He learned some Scottish dancing from a member of *Changs*. He attended picnics put on by different ethnic groups picking up knowledge of ethnic dance whenever and wherever he could. He later studied modern dance with Jose Limon and dances of the West Indies with Katherine Dunham.

He performed with some *Changs* dancers at the Estonian Village, part of the 1939 International Exposition on Treasure

## Henry "Buzz" Glass cont.

Island. In the 1940s he attended a Polish dance group in San Francisco.

In Lodi, Buzz started a social dance class which quickly turned into the *Lodi Folk Dancers*. He introduced the group to square dancing and taught international folk dances. Frances became a member of the group. Sometimes she joined Buzz and others to drive down from Lodi to dance at *Changs*. Carloads would travel to the Bay Area to dance when they could. Except for the *Lodi Folk Dancers*, folk dancing was most prolific in the Bay Area.

Buzz had very much enjoyed attending folk dance events in various parts of Northern California. The opportunity to meet other individuals and share dances was, to him, very inspiring. However, there was no organization to link the groups and what they danced. He was motivated to organize some kind of association.

On May 3, 1942, folk dance groups gathered at Lodi Lake Park in Lodi, for a dance festival organized by Buzz. Afterwards dancers sat in a circle on the lawn and Buzz presented the idea of forming a folk dance association. These were among the groups that attended. It wasn't easy due to World War II and the rationing of gasoline, tires, etc.

*Berkeley Folk Dancers*

*Palo Alto Folk Dancers,*

*Changs International Folk Dancers*

*Vallejo Folk Dancers*

*Norwegian Folk dancers*

Miss Winifred Van Hage, State Department of Education

*Co-op Fun club San Francisco YMCA*

*Lodi Folk Dancers*

At the meeting it was decided:

"1. That a Folk Dance Association of Northern California should be formed

2. That the various representatives were to meet in San Francisco at Wardell Hall, 43rd Avenue and Judah Street on May 16, 1942, to discuss aims and objectives of the proposed association.

3. That all interested organizations were to be notified of this meeting and asked to be present."

The minutes were taken by Norah Porter, Temporary Secretary and typed by Frances Farnell. \*

Two weeks later, at the May 16 meeting in San Francisco, representatives from "over nine folk dance groups of the State" were present to discuss promoting folk dancing in Northern California. All were anxious to belong to a folk dance association. A *Berkeley Folk Dancer* suggested "that the success of the present groups of folk dancers had been due to general spontaneity and the lack of excess parliamentary procedure." Mr. Soong Chang "stated that the original motive for their group was to spread folk dancing as far as possible through city and state." A Recreation Center spokesman suggested a group "to present folk dancing through the U.S.O. to the armed forces." Another attendee thought folk dancing among civilians would serve as a means of entertainment and morale building.

Buzz felt the association needed to represent certain values. He suggested a research committee be formed for the purpose of authenticating dances of different nations. He also

suggested the possibility of embracing educational institutions. (from Getchell History)

After much discussion it was decided to elect officers. Henry Glass was nominated Temporary President. Norah Porter regretfully declined to be secretary at which point "Mr. Glass then suggested the name of Miss Frances Farnell" who also served as the temporary treasurer.

One month later *Changs* hosted a festival in Golden Gate Park. It was at that meeting that Buzz Glass officially took over the office of President of the Folk Dance Federation of California and Frances Farnell was elected Secretary-Treasurer.

Six months later, on December 26, 1942, Buzz and Frances were married in Lodi at a private home. An accordionist provided music and there was folk dancing, of course. Frances, like Buzz, comes from a background of hard work. She was born in Livermore on October 28, 1917, the oldest of two. Her mother passed away when she was eight-years-old. Life was a struggle as her father moved Frances and her brother around the west seeking gold and picking fruit. She helped support her family starting in high school.

As a high school student, she won first place in a Northern California typing competition. Her typing skills were to come in very handy later with many years of accurately typing dance instructions and notations for Buzz.

In 1943 the couple moved to Oakland where Buzz took a job teaching in a junior high school. However, the primary purpose for the move was to continue to pursue dance of all kinds. Dancing was always at the center of their activities. They danced two to three times a week. It was difficult as they did not have a car and relied on public transportation at first. They attended all the folk dance festivals they could.

Frances had been the financial secretary of the Lodi Union High School District. In the Oakland Unified School District she worked in the research office and was the music supervisor's secretary. She worked in many secretarial positions as a floater. She was a stay-at-home Mom until daughter, Linelle, was 12 when she became the principal's secretary at John Swett Elementary School, a school both her children had attended.

The *Castle Promenaders* was the first group Buzz and Frances formed in the Bay Area. It met at Castlemont High School in Oakland. During the '40s Buzz and Frances were members of the *Berkeley Folk Dancers*. They traveled by street car and bus to attend their dances. They were also long-time members of the *Gateswingers*, a group that met at the Golden Gate YMCA in San Francisco. It had existed before the Federation was formed. The club continued to be active throughout the 60s, 70s and beyond with the children of the *Gateswingers* learning to enjoy folk dancing also.

It was at *Gateswingers* and *Folk Dance Camp* where their two children learned to dance. Son Terry was born in 1946; daughter Linelle in 1949. They grew up in the house where Buzz and Frances still reside in Oakland. Both have been active in many aspects of folk dancing and folk music.

Buzz and Frances helped many others, such as Millie von Kinsky, start their own folk dance groups and introduced generations to the joys of folk dancing. This increased enthusiasm for folk dancing as more and more people joined various folk dance groups.

Buzz was on the staff at *Stockton Folk Dance Camp* many times including the first year of the camp. He taught international dance and, later on, Mexican dance and workshops for teachers.

Buzz earned a Ford Foundation Fellowship to study Mexican dance and culture in Mexico. The Glass family lived in Mexico City in 1954-55 while Buzz studied dance at Mexico City College and the National University of Mexico.

He became proficient in Spanish and later taught Spanish at Bret Harte Junior High School, the school where he taught physical education and pioneered special education teaching. He had a student dance team, ran social dances for the students and worked with them on popular dance styles.

Buzz has enjoyed both learning and teaching dance. He's taught and participated in folk dancing from all regions, square dancing, round dancing and social dance. Re the latter, he taught for the Arthur Murray Studios in the 1950s.

He picked up knowledge of ethnic dance whenever and wherever he could. He studied with many renowned teachers. He learned Irish set dancing from Una Kennedy O'Farrell, who was a student at Mills College in Oakland in the 1940s. A special memory is meeting Dvora Lapson, who came to teach at Stockton Folk Dance Camp in the 1940s. Learning folk dances from Israel was an inspiration.

And he loved teaching. Thousands of teachers learned from Buzz at his dance classes and workshops conducted throughout the U.S. For 17 years, he, along with two Oakland physical education colleagues, had a successful summer workshop for teachers at Mills College. He taught at UC Santa Barbara and UC Berkeley. At a UC Extension folk dance class in S.F., he had expected a maximum of 35 students; over 75 people attended. Buzz taught folkdance, social dance, square dance and the theory of recreation at a USC summer session—a highlight in his career.

Buzz was, and still is, a prolific choreographer. It was from the professional Russian dancer he met at *Changs* that he learned steps and styles which formed the basis of the *Hopak*, a very popular folk dance. Other folk dances he choreographed include *Blue Pacific Waltz*, *Numero Cinco*, and *Beautiful Ohio Waltz*. He choreographed many recreational dances and round dances. The Windsor Record Company produced 78 rpm records of round dance and square dance tunes to accompany Buzz's choreography.

In addition to his own dances, Buzz and Frances were in on the ground floor when such dances as *Erev Ba*, choreographed by Rivka Sturman, were introduced. During the '40s, Avis Landis was a teacher and a dancer working in Oakland with Mexican Nationals. Buzz attended a dance session where the roots of what would become the popular folk dance, *Corrido*, were established.

He used dance notation terms to write down the dances. Lucille Czarnowski, a dance professor at UC Berkeley, knew a great deal about the development of folk dance. (She was the fourth president of the Federation.) A research committee was formed to notate dances using a standard format. Buzz was part of that research committee. The result was a book called *Folk Dances from Near and Far*, published by the Federation. Buzz and Frances were involved in helping notate and produce the first five volumes. For years Frances was his partner in notating dances in written form. Being the ace secretary she



Buzz in costume to teach Mexican dances  
—Ace Smith photo, on loan from Bruce Mitchell

was, she typed with great attention to detail, many of the dance directions for dances Buzz choreographed.

Buzz received his Supervisor's Credential from Cal State Hayward and was offered the position of Supervisor of Elementary Physical Education in the Oakland Unified School District in the 1960s. He was a hands-on supervisor visiting all 70 elementary schools. Many do not know about his career as a physical educator and dance pioneer in children's movement education (including language, reading, mathematics, poetry, dance, rhythms and game activities for children.)

While teaching at a State P.E. Convention, the Educational Activities Company approached Buzz to make record albums in the dance/movement field. Buzz made about 33 various albums, (most now available on CD). The first album, *Singing Games*, came out in 1965. The last was recorded in the 1990s. He created the material and worked collaboratively with Dr. Rosemary Hallum, an excellent teacher and musician, and physical educator, Jack Capon, on some of the albums.

Buzz retired as the Supervisor of Physical Elementary Education (Oakland Unified School District) specializing in dance and games in 1976. He continued to teach workshops all over the U.S. until the late 1990's. This was a second career. Frances had also retired in 1976. He and Frances square danced for quite a few years after which Buzz returned to folk dancing. He danced until he was about 85.

In 1992, fifty years after the Folk Dance Federation was formed, Buzz was honored at the Statewide Folk Dance Festival in Dublin, CA with a wonderful commemorative plaque. Millie von Kinsky was the chairperson of that Statewide Festival.

## **Henry "Buzz" Glass cont.**

The couple still live in the Oakland house to where they moved from Lodi. Buzz was an avid gardener. The whole family liked travel and made many trips-- across the U.S., to Canada, to Europe, Spain and Israel. They liked to hike and fish in the Sierras. The Oakland A's, Raiders and Warriors are his favorite sports teams. He loves languages and converses in French and Spanish whenever he has the opportunity. He enjoys good food and conversation.

Frances loves to travel and read and they both are kept busy by their cats. They tend to fourteen of them! The word 'family' reminds Buzz: "Family comes first," he says. "I could not have pursued my career in dance without the support of Frances, her help and good typing skills!"

In the summer of 2002, Buzz, Frances, and their two children went back to the park in Lodi where the organizational dance/meeting took place to form the Federation in 1942 and to celebrate their 60th anniversary year. Their children had a chance to see places in Lodi associated with their meeting, their work and early marriage.

A final word from Buzz: "Dance, in its various manifestations, is completely absorbing for our own nation and internationally. Through the ages, people have developed a rhythmic and musical history of their culture and we have a chance to share in that. To all who continue the work of the Federation and who have worked on various tasks in the folk dance community, thank you!"

A final word from Frances: "The primary memory of folk and square dancing is the joy of movement and having a chance to socialize with many, many interesting people. The important thing about dance is that it brings people together who share an activity and a love of culture."

A final word from daughter, Linelle Glass: "My brother, Terry, and I have extraordinary parents. They have accomplished so much and our love of folk culture is attributable to the folk dance groups, festivals, concerts and camps we were privileged to attend. It is a family hobby as most cousins and some aunts and uncles have folk danced at one time or another. Cousin, Peter D'Angelo, is a past president of the *Berkeley Folk Dancers* and he and his wife, Lynne, along with cousin Bob D'Angelo, have kept up the folk dancing tradition. My father has touched the lives of so many in the dance world and in education. The *Folk Dance Federation*, dance camps and other activities are a testament to the importance and legacy of the early years of the folk dance movement in California."

Buzz and Frances would enjoy hearing from those who know them or who have been influenced by their lives in dance. 3732 Buell Street, Oakland, CA 94619