

Larry Miller—

The Quiet Contributor

By Loui Tucker

The name Larry Miller may not mean a lot to those who recently joined our dance groups. When he died in the spring of 2015 at the age of 91, he had not danced for over a decade, and was content to get his exercise gardening. He'd lost contact with most of the people with whom he associated in the folk dance community.

Larry was not a teacher, and he was not the kind of man you would see leading a line of dancers. He didn't pose for photos with visiting master teachers, he didn't wear flashy costumes, he didn't serve as a Federation officer, and he was not one to make speeches. He worked and danced quietly and behind the scenes and he made several lasting contributions to folk dancing in California.

When Bruce Mitchell was contacted for his thoughts on Larry Miller, Bruce offered the following observation:

I'll never forget from my earliest years at Camp how Larry would sit at the Lawn Parties and other events and carve on wooden plates. The tray we use for the Candle Lighting Ceremony was made by Larry from old hardwoods found on campus. This really should be put out where people can get a look at it. We also have two the carved plates in our library made by Larry. One plate has the earliest Committee names on it.

It was Stockton Folk Dance Camp's 50th year when Larry and Ruth Miller donated \$50,000 to the University of the Pacific for an endowment, with the yearly interest going to help operate Stockton Folk Dance Camp. Over \$80,000 in interest has been earned by the endowment over the past 20 years. Larry and Ruth supported Camp all the 50 years they were involved. We seldom see that love of Camp reflected very often.

Another major contribution to the world of folk dance was mentioned by Bill and Louise Lidicker when they were contacted after Larry died. This contribution was Larry's "Folk Dance Database."

This remarkable document was last published in May 1997. It compiles data on folk dances taught in California at various institutes, workshops, and camps starting in 1947. Over this 50-year interval around 8000 dances (8697 entries) are documented. Data include dance name, often the pronunciation for English speakers, the ethnic region of the dance's origin, the teacher, the kind of dance (couple, line, set, etc.), original music source, dates of published descriptions, events at which it was taught, and comments. The comments often noted alternative names for the dance, cross-references to variants, and unusual features. Many dances have multiple entries because they were taught by different teachers.

Larry's efforts and dedication to this project are very much appreciated, especially by those who own a copy. It is even more remarkable an accomplishment when one realizes that the document was begun a very long time before the computer era!

[Note: Larry's database is available via a link on the Folk Dance Federation's website's Dance Notations webpage under the Research tab.]

Suzanne Rocca-Butler worked for years on the Federation Research Committee with both Larry and Ruth Miller. Suzanne commented that Larry's attention to detail and patterns helped him excel at writing Scottish and English dance descriptions especially, and that we owe the longevity of many of these dances to his/their efforts.

Denise Heenan remembered that Larry and Ruth were among those who were so welcoming to her when she was new to Folk Dance Camp. She especially remembered how encouraging Ruth was the year Denise had surgery to remove a malignant melanoma. She related that Larry had a bout with the same disease when they were a newly married couple, and reminded Denise that his battle with the disease had been more than 30 years prior, and he was still thriving. Denise remembered both Ruth and Larry as kind, approachable, and loving to each other, Larry especially so during Ruth's later illness.

Marilyn Smith remembered Larry's energy and enthusiasm. In 1990 at Stockton Folk Dance Camp Marilyn taught a very complicated dance called Congo de Captieux. Larry came to the class, learned the dance, and then prepared brilliant diagrams of the dance. [Larry's diagrams of the dance are on pages 100a and 100b of the 1990 Stockton Folk Dance Camp syllabus.] She said he did all of this with enthusiasm and presented it to her with his well-known radiant smile.

People like Larry often give so much of themselves, and are often only recognized for their contributions after they are gone. Such people are hard to come by in any community, and we were fortunate to have Larry as part of our folk dance family for so many years.



Larry and Ruth in the early 1990s