

WHO WAS GERALDINE WASHBURN AND WHY IS SHE ON THE COVER OF *LET'S DANCE!* MAGAZINE?

By Loui Tucker

It all started with a letter dated June 7, 2018, from St. Brendan School in San Francisco and addressed to Federation Treasurer Alicia LaFetra. The letter enclosed a check for \$627 sent “in loving memory of Miss Jerry Washburn,” plus two additional checks from individuals for \$100 each. Take a minute and read the letter reprinted on the next page. I’ll wait....

I did some on-line research about this woman. She was 88 years old when she died and, as it says in the letter, she taught up until a few days before she died. She taught for 63 years, which means she started teaching in 1955, in her 20s. She must have started folk dancing when the Federation was being formed, when Changs and Berkeley Folk Dancers and Stockton Folk Dance Camp had their beginnings as well.

I read scores of comments on Facebook pages dedicated to her, most of them from her students.

- Miss Washburn’s Tuesday classes were a highlight of my week.
- RIP Ms. Washburn! Heaven is lined up doing the Hustle!
- St. Brendan’s 70s and 80s, every Wednesday. I always loved her crinolines and her cute little shoes!
- God blesses us through special people in our lives.
- She made a huge impact on me and my 6 sibs in the late 60s thru the mid-80s at St Brendan’s.
- I remember her from St Monica’s. Learned to cha-cha!
- Learned the highland fling for one of the dance productions.
- Only now do we realize how unlimited was her kindness and patience.
- I remember she had the smallest waist of any woman I’d ever seen. And, in spite of putting up with six-eight classes of 50 kids, she was nearly always cheerful.
- The dancing sure kept her going.
- God bless our most darling dance teacher, Miss Washburn, at St. Brendan’s later 50s and 60s. We will never forget you.



On one of the webpages, I found this photo of Ms. Washburn where she is clearly still teaching with 45 rpm records!

I can’t find a record of her ever attending Stockton Folk Dance Camp or any other California camp. Berkeley Folk Dancers has not been able to find her name on any rosters. She appears to have learned folk dancing somewhere. She enjoyed it enough to want to spend the rest of her life passing it along to generations of elementary school children attending parochial schools in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I am utterly gob-smacked! I keep coming back to the same questions in my mind: How did this wonderful woman manage to escape our attention all these years? How did WE escape hers? Do you suppose there are other folk dance teachers out there like Ms. Washburn, whom we know nothing about, who go about their day-to-day teaching without colleagues, support, or community?

Finally: do you suppose any of her former students, now all grown up, are wondering what happened to folk dancing, whether it is still being taught and enjoyed? As it turned out, Alicia LaFetra, the Federation Membership Chair, the person who received that letter from St. Brendan School, was one of Ms. Washburn’s students in the 8th grade, although at a school in El Cerrito. If Alicia is now dancing with us, it would be wonderful to contact others like her, students who were taught by Geraldine Washburn, who loved her and loved what she did for them, and see if they would like to join our circles.

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St. Brendan School

June 7, 2018

Alicia Le Fetra
Folk Dance Federation of California
1614 Peacock Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94087

Dear Ms. Le Fetra,

We would like to make the enclosed donations totaling \$827.00 to your Folk Dance Federation in loving memory of Miss Jerry Washburn.

Miss Washburn taught folk dancing at our school for an incredible sixty-three years, from 1955 (shortly after our school opened) until she passed away in May of this year. She taught her full schedule of classes on the Wednesday before she died.

We are all devastated by her loss, and alumni from all the decades she taught have contacted the school to say how much they appreciate the lessons she taught them. She was a true gift to our school, and will be missed.

Two of our school families made their own contributions to your organization in Miss Washburn's name (their checks are enclosed). The remaining school check is the result of a fundraiser we had in her honor.

I apologize if you are not the correct person to receive this donation, but yours is the only address we saw on the Federation's website. I hope it is not an inconvenience to you to send our donation on to the correct person.

Best wishes,

Dianne Lakatta
Principal

enclosures



Geraldine "Jerry" Washburn (left) at Stockton Folk Dance Camp in 1963.

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GERRY (JERRY) WASHBURN – Take Two

by Loui Tucker

Several readers contacted me regarding the article about Gerry Washburn (September 2018). I am now better informed.

First, Dwight Fine, who attended Stockton for several years in the 1960 and 70s, informed me that Jerry did, in fact, attend Stockton Folk Dance Camp. (I came to realize that when I reviewed the Stockton attendance cards, I found a Jerry Washburn, but thought it was a man. It didn't occur to me that she might have spelled her name with a "J"). Jerry attended Stockton Camp six times between 1958 and 1969. Former Camp Director Bruce Mitchell remembers her being "an excellent dancer." Cookie Brakebill also remembers Jerry being at Stockton Camp, that she had a tiny 18-inch waist and wore her hair in a ponytail.

Teddy Wolterbeek called to tell me they were both in Millie Von Konsky's performing group (which Bruce remembered as well), and that Jerry idolized Millie to the extent that the other girls were reluctant to say anything negative about Millie in Jerry's presence for fear of her becoming upset.

Jane Tripi wrote to tell me that Jerry taught a dance class every Thursday evening at the Montclair Rec Center (where Jane has her own class) until very recently.

Margaret Harrison said her husband danced with Jerry many years ago, and he thought he remembered Jerry being in charge of the costumes for Millie Von Konsky's Dance Arts performing group. Margaret's five nephews attended St. Brendan's School and probably took classes from Miss Washburn.