

ALLEN PELTON
SOUTHERN SECTION'S FIRST PRESIDENT

By Liesl Barnett

Not long ago the West Valley Folk Dancers had a big party honoring Allen Pelton's 25 years in folk dancing. But this, by no means, is the whole story. Allen is also known as the first Southern Section Federation President, having been instrumental in establishing the Federation in Southern California. We, here in Southern California, feel it is high time that the rest of the Federation should become acquainted with Allen Pelton.

When Allen first started folk dancing he did not realize that that was what he was doing. He was at a faculty party of Union College, in Schenectady, N.Y., where he taught physics in 1938, when someone asked him to join in a "contra". Allen thought "A WHAT???" He was soon informed that the group enjoyed New England dances: squares, contras, rounds, etc. These dances had what seemed to the stranger to be a fascinating array of outlandish names for dances: *Gathering Peapods*, *Sheepshead Hey*, *Bridge of Athlone*, *Dashing White Sergeant*, and the like. Within two years Allen had joined a cooperative boarding house group, named "Dennishawn House", after its co-founders, the legendary dancers, Ruth St. Dennis and Ted Shawn. The first time Allen went to Dennishawn House he was asked if he was a folk dancer. "Am I a Wha..?" "Oh, well, come on, we'll show you." Not a flashy beginning, that. His first dance was a Varsouvienne, and Allen was hooked for life. It was as simple as that. In 1938 no folk dance records were available and public address systems were virtually unknown. Dances were learned and done to live music, usually piano or accordion, and were taught by instructors with apparently leather lungs and iron constitutions. Allen learned quickly and was soon a member of nine weekly folk dance sessions, dancing every evening, as well as Saturday and Sunday afternoons. One of his pet memories is of a hambo party where he did something like 32 hambos all in one night! This must seem like some-



Byrdie and
Allen Pelton
and a friend



thing of an endurance record, even to seasoned dancers. Another pleasant memory is of a special New Year's Eve bash where each one of 28 members was obliged to prepare some special and potent drink for the other members. Oh, boy - Hic!

From Schenectady Allen went on to Chicago. Like any folk dance the first thing to look for in a new town is a place to go folk dancing; so - Allen went looking. Having danced and exhibited at the International House in N.Y.C., Allen knew of the "I'House" at Chicago University. When he went there on his first night in the Windy City he was told that there was no dancing except on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Returning on the designated night he found that the dancing was under the direction of a strange man with an unusual name, Vyts Beliajus. Vyts completely charmed Allen, as he does almost everyone with whom he comes in contact. Soon they were fast friends, and Allen Pelton credits Vyts with having taught him most of what he knows of style and technique.

Allen Pelton (Continued)

In 1941 Allen moved to Los Angeles and found locating a folk dance group tough going. It took him nearly six weeks to locate the Pasadena Co-op, which had been organized about three months earlier. He soon became one of the group's most enthusiastic, active and vociferous members, holding almost every office at one time or another. At that time the Hora was the great favorite. Danced to piano music, the tempo was continually accelerated until finally all dancers had dropped out, but one. Almost without exception that one remaining dancer was Allen Pelton. Allen is one of the most cooperative men alive.

One evening in 1946 Allen attended a meeting which had been sparked by the Westwood Co-op. Interest ran high in an organization such as had proved popular and useful in San Francisco - a group dedicated to sponsor festivals with participation from all clubs; to promote better dancing through standardized instruction and literature; to the issuance of recordings for folk dancers; to research into dances, costumes and customs, and so on. The possibilities of such an organization were virtually limitless and excited Allen's imagination. Everyone at that meeting in 1946 was agreed that such a Federation would be wonderful. The problem was to find someone to get it off the ground and head it through its growing pains. This "plum" fell into Allen Pelton's lap, and thus, in 1946, Allen Pelton became the first president of the Folk Dance Federation, South. He was also at that time president of the Pasadena Co-op, and when the group volunteered to host a festival just then, he - glutton for work - volunteered to head the committee for that bash.

Some time later Allen moved to Glendale and became instructor of the Glendale Folk Dancers until family duties required his resignation to everyone's regret.

Ultimately Allen and his wife, Byrdie, moved to Canoga Park, making the San Fernando Valley their - - oh, you know

For several years they drove 25 miles to dance with their favorite Glendale Group. Then one day, a former Pasadena Co-oper, Gene Zwick, threw a big party attended by folk dancers from miles around. The Peltons, too, were there. The thought came to Allen that it would be

Allen Pelton (Concluded)

fun to have a group nearby. One might say that the West Valley Folk Dancers were conceived and born at that party in 1958. Three couples pooled their talents and their families - the Peltons, Zwicks and Mintons, held their first dance soon after that party, at the Canoga Park Elementary School. As the years roll on, Allen calculates that he has averaged 2 hambos weekly over the past 25 years. That's 2500 hambos, and that ain't hay! His favorite is the Viennese Waltz (making Allen my favorite, just for saying so). Other strong contenders for the place of favorite dances are *Gypsy Wine*, *In My Garden*, *Ranchera* and others.

You may have noticed the man with the twinkle in his eye and love of folk dancing evident in all he says and does. You may also notice his ramrod-erect posture. He finds this position less painful - - - a recent medical diagnosis informed Allen that he suffers from spinal arthritis. Pain or no pain - there are some dances Allen Pelton simply cannot and will not resist, although he is taking chances by indulging himself in dancing them. But seeing the enjoyment of and love for folk dancing in his smile, the world and all those who know and/or see him, smile back and are confident that it is indeed a pleasure and a privilege to know Allen Pelton, the Southern Section's first and immensely popular President.