

## RUTH MARGARET RULING

June 1, 1919- May 10, 2007

*Written by Suzanne Rocca-Butler*

The folk dance world lost one of its MVP'S (most valuable players, to use a baseball term) with the passing of Ruth Ruling on May 10th, 2007.

To long-time folk dancers she and her writing were well known. She was famous to those of us who value written folk dance descriptions -- not just any dance descriptions, but the precise, exact and carefully crafted ones for which she was justly famous. For that reason, even newcomers to folk dance would likely have encountered her name or the dances she documented, although they might not have recalled meeting her or remembering her face.

Ruth was someone who could be referred to as an "unsung hero". She was not "high-profile" - at least not on the dance floor or at late night folk dance parties. Most of her days and nights were spent dedicated to writing, accurately and precisely, folk dances as they were taught by the original researcher/presenter. She was dedicated to folk dance - dedicated to the written word - and to preserving in a standardized manner the folk dances that we continue to do today as they were originally presented.

Bruce Mitchell, Director of Stockton Folk Dance Camp, stated that "Folk dancing in California is what it is today because of Ruth". He also wrote in an Email to me that "Ruth represented the 'old guard' that gave so much to the dance movement. The dancers today are not like that. Thank God we had the Ruths, Jacks, Bevs, and Veras to make both folk dancing and Folk Dance Camp what it is today." (Bruce was giving tribute also to Jack McKay, Bev Wilder and Vera Holleuffer.)

At the lovely memorial reception held for Ruth at the Norwegian Club in San Francisco on May 19th, Marcel Vinokur expressed admiring words for her talents saying that Ruth was the one who personally wrote Anatol Joukowsky's dance descriptions - Ajde Jano (FDC 1957), Bella Franca (FDC 1966) and Our Katia (FDC 1964), to name a few. Apparently Anatol did not write descriptions of his dances. Thus, without Ruth's writing and documenting them, his dances could easily have been lost.

Marcel went on to say that he considered Ruth to be "the most valuable person at Stockton Folk Dance Camp". Some, who consider the faculty more valuable, might disagree. But consider this: if Ruth hadn't made such an effort to present an accurate syllabus and errata, the dances the faculty presented each year at FDC might have morphed into something entirely different from what had been taught. Perhaps the dances would even have been forgotten. If either scenario had occurred, then those dances could have been a moment in time - disappearing and perhaps not living on as they do now. Marcel felt this was due to Ruth and her able staff. It was that partnership between the faculty and Ruth that enabled the dances to live on after Camp was over.

I knew Ruth through our working together for many years on the Folk Dance Federation of California's Dance Research Committee and on the University of the Pacific (Stockton) Folk Dance Camp Committee. In order to write her

memorial, however, I knew I would need much more information. Ruth's delightful husband, Carlos, gave me a great deal of background information, lovingly filling in her portrait.

Ruth and Carlos were married 62 years, and it was because of Ruth that he became involved in folk dance - one of her important "converts". Both native Californians (Ruth was born in Oakland, Carlos in San Francisco) they met at San Francisco State College in 1938 where Ruth was pursuing a degree in elementary education and mathematics. Ruth taught all subjects to grades one through six for thirty-two years within the San Francisco Unified School District. Carlos went on to become an elementary school administrator.

According to Carlos, Ruth's folk dancing career began in college, likely with Buzz Glass; and by 1941 or 1942 she was working with Ed Kremers in Oakland, helping him teach. Carlos, who was her usual teaching partner, was away at war at this time.

Aside from six months when they lived in Seaside, Oregon, while Carlos was still in the Navy, they lived all their married years in the house in San Francisco where Carlos had moved at age fifteen months. Their two children, Karl and Kathleen were born in San Francisco as well.

Ruth also taught at Changs International Folk Dancers in San Francisco. Larry Getchell's book History of the Folk Dance Movement in California states that Ruth began teaching there in 1949. (Carlos recalls Ruth began teaching there with Ruth Bittman and Vilma Lenshaw in 1947.) Additionally, as early as February 1956, Ruth taught at local Teaching Institutes.

Alternating with Lillian Cohen, Ruth began teaching at the Palomanians in Menlo Park (in 1958, according to Larry Getchell), after a four year period where the club had discontinued dancing due to low membership. (Carlos added that years prior to its being a club, the Palomanians had been a very good performing group.) Both Changs and the Palomanians are still active dance clubs today.

Ruth was a well-known teacher, but will always be remembered for her contribution in writing dance descriptions. They were published through the Folk Dance Federation of California's "Let's Dance Magazine", in the Dance Research Committee's Folk Dances from Near and Far books, and in the Stockton Folk Dance Camp Syllabus. Carlos indicated she began working on dance descriptions in the 1950s; and when I asked what had prompted her to start, he said she probably began because there was a need for it.

She was also encouraged by Lawton Harris, founder and original director of Stockton's Folk Dance Camp. He wanted the Stockton FDC syllabus to be accurate and reliable, and he knew Ruth was the person to make that happen. She was already co-chair of the Dance Research Committee and had been attending Stockton Folk Dance Camp for many years, along with Dorothy Tamburini who was the Chairperson of the Dance Research Committee.

Thus, by 1960, Ruth was editing the Stockton FDC syllabus and as Marcel told me while at Ruth's memorial, you could count on that syllabus and errata to be accurate and could trust the descriptions. Ruth raised the standard of folk dance annotation for California.

In 1962 Ruth joined the Stockton Folk Dance Camp Committee and became the official editor of the Folk Dance Camp Syllabus, being assisted over the years by a dedicated and able group of "researchers", among whom was the late Dorothy Daw. Ginny Wilder did the typing until her death in 1990 when Joyce Lissant-Uggla assumed that job. Upon Ruth's retirement from the Folk Dance Camp Committee, Joyce became editor.

Ruth and Carlos were lovers of all aspects of international folk dance, but they shared a special love of Scandinavian folk dance. A number of times they traveled with Gordon Tracie to the Nordlek Festivals which are held every three years in one of the Scandinavian countries. Four of those times they were joined by Elsa and the late Frank Bacher, other well known long-time international folk dancers.

There is a known aphorism that behind every great man there is a great woman. I think there is truth in that but it is also true of the great man behind the great woman. I am glad Ruth had Carlos in her life. And I am glad for him that he had her in his.

She will be missed but never forgotten. Her name and work are synonymous with integrity and accuracy in the folk dance world. Larry Getchell concludes his section on Ruth saying some might refer to her work as "pure genius". To me, she and her dance descriptions represent quality and excellence, and her body of work is a living legacy to a grand lady.

#### Bibliography

Two local and historically interesting books proved very useful in my writing this memorial.

1) A History of the Folk Dance Movement in California With Emphasis on the Early Years

Written by Larry Getchell.

Published by the Folk Dance Federation of California, Inc. 1995.

2) 50 Year History of the Stockton Folk Dance Camp of the University of the Pacific, Stockton, California 1948-1997.

Written by Vera Holleuffer, Jack McKay and June McKay

Edited by June McKay, 1997.

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## **Do you use E-mail?**

*From Joel Bruxvoort*

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