

History of the Berkeley Folk Dancers

One July evening in 1941, eighteen charter members found their way through the labyrinth of winding and/or dead-end streets guarding the location of Berkeley Recreation Department's John Hinkel Clubhouse to attend the first dance session of the Berkeley Folk Dancers.

Passing years have changed these Berkeley backstreets to one of the major "highways to folk dancing." Within three months of its inception, B. F. D. found it necessary to meet twice a week. Present schedules find three nights a week (plus an "alternate week" Exhibition Group meeting) inadequate, to put it mildly.

To chronicle the growth and history of B. F. D. presents a problem worthy of a professional historian. "The Berkeley Folk Dancers," a monthly publication of the group, began enthusiastically and completely to recount the story of "doings" and personalities in November 1941. To cull the story of B. F. D. from a box-full of back issues (from a minimum of four pages to a maximum of ten) is the task. Not to draw on such a body of memorabilia would be a crime; and so, from this point on we will let the B. F. D. monthly tell the story.

IN THE BEGINNING

"It all began when the Educational Committee of the Consumer's Co-operative of Berkeley asked Carl Wilkin to organize a folk dancing class. Helping Carl . . . Carolyn and Bob Williams, Alice Clarke, Elizabeth Zane, Clare Melbin, Barbara Hirshfeld Stevenson, Harmer Davis, Ruth Ruby, Phyllis Adams, Connie Moncharsh, etc."

Dick Banwell, writing on the occasion of B. F. D.'s third birthday, casts much light on one reason for continued growth and success: "Did you know that at the meeting when the Second Birthday Party was established, a motion was passed prohibiting anyone who had worked on party committees before from helping with this one? Such a motion was passed, and the entire responsibility was thrown upon the "new blood" . . . Their

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voices (new members) are as loud at business meetings as the hoariest patriarch; and they can run the club as well as the charter members."

FEDERATION HISTORY TOLD

"As we go to press, we're looking forward with a great deal of anticipation to the Dance Festival being held in Lodi Sunday, May 3rd. Our group is one of sixteen that will participate . . .

And in the following month's issue: "A Federation composed of all folk dancing groups in northern California is in the process of being formed. George Moncharsh was appointed as our representative to attend the first meeting in San Francisco. Henry Glass was elected temporary chairman."

B. F. D. describes . . . "The Federation picnic held in Golden Gate Park on the 14th (June 1942) was a very colorful affair. A large crowd of probably three hundred. . ."

AND OF "LET'S DANCE"

And of "Let's Dance:" "The Federation is planning to sponsor a paper to be sent out once a month. The Berkeley Folk Dancers were asked to edit this sheet, and we have agreed to take over this job." (And history attests that Let's Dance was for a long and successful span of its history to be in the capable hands of such B. F. D. people Henry Koopman, Cheryl Kleinhammer, Trudy Somerville, etc.

Concluding his term, one president wrote: "Besides being an honor, it was fun being your president. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I can recommend to everyone of you to run for president of the Berkeley Folk Dancers . . . Walter Grothe."

Anticipating our present "Teacher's Institute," Berkeley, under the chairmanship of David Boyce, was in the field as early as 1944 with a Berkeley Folk Dance Conference—attended by 75 BFD's and 28 guests from other Federation clubs. The Conference idea was repeated in September 1946 by Berkeley, with an attendance at Berkeley Veterans' Memorial Building and court representing a large percentage of Federation groups.

EXHIBITION ACCLAIM

Recalling Berkeley's claim to epic fame at the April 1944 festival hosted by the Castle Promenaders: "For the first time in the history of the Folk Dance Federation of California, a demonstration group

has attempted the presentation of a single dance (The Beseda) lasting through five record-slides, a narrator, and approximately 25 minutes." The Beseda was directed by Alice Jameyson; the narration (translated from the Czech by Helen Dulik) was done by Elgin Juri.

B.F.D. TRADITION

Started during the war, was a series of exhibitions which continue as a B.F.D. tradition. Writing of this monthly event in 1946. "As most of you know, ten or twelve dancers have been going out to Oak Knoll (Naval) Hospital to dance for the boys in the wards for the past year and a half. At the present time the dancing is done along the lines of an informal exhibition for fellows who for the most part are bedridden. At one time there was dancing with the patients."

When B. F. D. turns to the roster of Federation officers and committees since its inception, they claim the following (past or present members) as their own: Henry Glass, Frances (Farnell) Glass, Ed Kremers, Clarice (Dechent) Wills, Bret Van Kriedt, Beatrice Cooke, Henry Koopman, David Boyce, Ginni (deLong) Merrill, David and Betty Young, and Walter Grothe.

To round out, if only partially, the picture of the Berkeley Folk Dancers, have a look at the following "montage" of headlines: Halloween Party, Circus Party, May Day Kid's Party, Birthday Party, at the Brazilian Room, Skiing Expedition, Canadian Legion Exhibit, Hinkel Schoolhouse Party, Carnival, Museum Show, Stern Grove, April Fool's Carnival, Woodminster, etc., etc.

Their secret of success and longevity. Obvious — BFD has fun.

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