

MEET MARGE BRONSON
... By Virginia Wilder



A quarter of a century of continuing interest, research, teaching and performing in the folk dances of the Pacific Islands is a record that will be realized this year by our featured personality.

Mrs. Joseph C. Bronson - Marge to hundreds of

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followers - has been involved in dances of the Pacific Islands since her first trip to Hawaii in 1939 when her engineer husband was sent there by his company. Her natural curiosity about the culture of the island peoples led her to join a class in hula. She feels she was most fortunate because her teacher was Kekuahooulu Davis, an old-timer in the Islands and one most anxious to preserve the ancient hula traditions through her students. Mrs. Bronson literally "fell in love" with the Island dance form, and has continued to study and practice and present the hula in authentic style wherever she has lived during the past twenty-five years. Her teacher, Mrs. Davis, now lives at Half Moon Bay, and Marge makes periodic trips to her home for further study.

From her extensive reaching and research in the field, Mrs. Bronson related that the hula dates back to 1200, when the Tahitians came to Hawaii. They told stories of their gods and goddesses through the hula. The dancing was restricted to highly trained, religious, dancers who performed in special temples. The early Hawaiian people had no written language, and they told their stories and legends through the dance, passing their history from one generation to another in this way. These ancient hulas bear little resemblance to the usual nightclub routine which is what most of us know as the hula. The ancient hulas are simple stories, told by graceful gestures of the hands and arms set to a steady rhythm of swaying hips.

When the Christian missionaries arrived on the islands in 1829, they banned the hula because of its pagan history, and for 50 years these stories in motion were lost. Many of them have never been recalled, but those that have survived are now being preserved on tape and film at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, which is a repository for the preservation of the culture of the Polynesian peoples.

The Bronsons returned to the States just prior to Pearl Harbor, settled in Walnut Creek, and soon Marge was teaching friends the beautiful dances that she had learned in the islands. The Kapolani Dancers, a group of these original students, is still actively engaged

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in the study and presentation of the hula. Virginia Hatfield, one of Mrs. Bronson's first students, is now their director. Mr. Bronson's active duty with the Navy took the family to the East Coast, and at each base Marge always found friends who were eager to learn the hula and its fascinating background. Her children, 5 in number (and 4 grandchildren), and her husband, all aided and abetted her efforts and took part in many programs she presented. Mr. Bronson frequently serves as narrator for the programs, but has also danced in many a presentation. The hula, and in fact, all of the island dances, are done by both men and women.

When the family came back to Walnut Creek to live, Marge again resumed her private classes for friends. About six years ago she began teaching for the Walnut Creek Recreation Department, and had one class. Today there are 4 classes for children and 8 classes for adults each week. Her teaching program now includes dances from Tahiti, Samoa, Korea, the Philippines, and New Zealand, where she has found the Maori dances to be most interesting. Her success in this field was evidenced by the splendid reception given her group that performed a suite of Maori dances at the October Festival in Fresno.

During the summer of 1963 Mrs. Bronson studied in Tahiti and was there on Bastille Day, when there were dance competitions by groups that had come from many of the Pacific Islands. She was fortunate to be able to film many of the dances and to record the native music. She has returned to Hawaii to study with the leading hula teachers and instrumentalists several times, and she takes advantage of the opportunity for study and consultation with leaders of all Pacific Island groups when they come through San Francisco.

Her collection of native instruments - drums, Uli-uli (gourd rattle), puili (bamboo rattle), ili-ili (stones used somewhat like castanets) is extensive, and dances using all of these are taught to her classes. Costuming for dance presentations has led Mrs. Bronson to study and research in this field also. The missionaries clothed the island natives and instilled in them a far-

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reaching sense of modesty. Their traditional dress is a tube-like garment reaching from shoulders to ankles. Only since the tourist influence has made itself known have the dancers of the Hawaiian Islands appeared in bare midriff costumes.

Each spring the Dancers of the Pacific Group, local people interested in the ethnic dance of the Pacific Islands, produces a full length concert which is presented in Walnut Creek and in several neighboring communities. All of Mrs. Bronson's classes are represented in the show -- from the smallest toddler to the grandmothers who are keeping up with their teacher.

We in the Walnut Creek area are fortunate to have a folklorist of Mrs. Bronson's calibre among us. In her quiet, yet determined insistance on presenting to her classes and to the public, the authentic and beautiful dances of the Pacific Islands, she has elevated the standards by which we judge this form of dance as it is presented by professional performers.

A whole new field of folk dance has been opened to those of us lucky enough to have Marge Bronson for a teacher, neighbor and friend, and we are enriched by this association.

Perhaps some day our international folk dance movement will include the dances of the Polnesian peoples for all of us to enjoy.

