

People Worth Knowing

by Mary Spring

As people worth knowing, James Cavagnaro, immediate past president of the Fresno Folk Dance Council, and his wife, Gwyneth, make admirable subjects for folk dancers. For twelve years they have been actively connected with the International Institute and have always demonstrated a genuine understanding of the many aspects of folklore in diverse peoples, together with an enthusiastic drive to perpetuate its survival. Folk dancing plays such an important role in folklore that it goes without saying that they are active participants in this field and have been dancing for over ten years in Fresno.

Gwyneth — whose melodic name reveals her Welsh ancestry — was born in England, in the small town of Thrapston, County of Northamptonshire, famous for the manufacture of fine footwear. Thrapston should be of special interest to all Americans since it was the origin of a branch of George Washington's family, and the spread eagle, which was the family coat-of-arms and later became the symbol of the infant U. S. Republic, is prominently displayed in the chancel of the parish church there. As a girl, Gwyneth was taught the English country dances and went to the festivals, where she enjoyed watching the Morris dances. She also became acquainted with such ballroom type favorites as St. Bernard's Waltz, Maxina and Veleta Waltz.

Jim was born in Ridgewood, New Jersey, of Italian and German ancestry. Early in life he became acquainted with folk dancing through the ethnic groups which formed part of the population where he lived. He danced with the Poles at their annual Kosciusko Festival and with the foreign students at International House in New York City. He is a graduate of Fordham University in New York, where he became a member of the Glee Club. His love of music matured so that he became a serious student of the piano. He is an accomplished pianist, one of the teachers under whom he studied being Pietro Yon, former organist at the Vatican. He has given recitals of his own, one of them being in Carnegie Hall.

World War II was the agent which brought Jim and Gwyn together in May, 1944, on the eve of the invasion of the continent. Gwyneth was an ambulance driver during the war and was also doing Red Cross work at Lilford Hall, four miles from her home. This was a venerable mansion which had been converted into a station hos-



James and Gwyneth Cavagnaro in Danish Costumes,
with Mayor C. "Cal" Evans, Mayor of Fresno

pital and which now, just before the Allied offensive, was full of wounded men, many of them American paratroopers injured in training. One of the patients who immediately attracted her attention was a young American Air Force sergeant, who by a subtle move of Fate had been taken to the hospital suffering with rather serious injuries resulting from a bicycle accident! The romance between Jim and Gwyn was on, and the following year they were married. After being stationed in France, Trinidad, and Porto Rico, Jim came home and was followed a little later by his wife. They came to California, where he was discharged, and settled in Fresno.

As a young war bride from England, Gwyn immediately joined the International Institute and the long association between that agency and the Cavagnaros began. For those who may not be conversant with the work of the Institute, its objectives are the integration of immigrant peoples into American life, at the same time enriching it by the contribution of their own cultural backgrounds. The Institute also strives, through the representatives of different nationalities who come under its scope, to encourage the preservation of the folklore of these nationalities. The Cavagnaros have been enthusiastic and hardworking in pursuing these aims. Both have been active members of the board of directors for many years; Jim served as the treasurer and president, Gwyn as secretary. She also served as president of two groups within the agency, the War Brides and the International Women's Club.

It was at the Institute that they were introduced to folk dancing in 1947 and have been devotees ever since. They have been members of the Vista Square Eight Club, which belongs to the Council and which belies its name by enjoying both folk and square dancing. Jim is the immediate past president of the Fresno Folk Dance Council, having served in 1956-57. He is the present chairman of the Council Workshop Committee, which governs the affairs of this Council-sponsored class in advanced folk dancing. Both have beautiful costumes of different nationalities, which they have made in connection with the exhibitions presented by the Workshop regularly.

Jim and Gwyn have three boys, Nicky 9, David 8, and Timmy 3. Jim is an accountant for the Sun Maid Raisin Co. and also teaches in the Fresno Adult Education Department.

We nominate the Cavagnaros as people worth knowing because their love of folk dancing transcends the recreational. They dance not only for fun but because they have an appreciation and love for folklore values and are doing their share to help preserve them in an ever changing world which threatens them with extinction.