
FOLK DANCE PROFILES

by Miriam Lidster



WALTER GROTHE

Walter is a veteran folk dancer. He has seen the beginning of the Folk Dance Federation of California, and very important in his life, he has seen Folk Dance Camp at the University of the Pacific grow and flourish through two directors - Lawton Harris and Jack McKay - and into the present with Bruce Mitchell.

Walter began his lifetime of dance by learning the Viennese Waltz in Vienna. During his vacations as a student at the Munich University, he began his travels by visiting Yugoslavia, Romania, and other Balkan countries. In 1923, a group of five friends decided to go barnstorming by air. They travelled to Serbia and other Balkan countries in two-seater planes of World War I vintage. When Walter returned to Munich, he studied German philology and received a doctorate in philology. Walter had planned on going into publishing. He needed a doctorate in order to work in the publishing field, but it was an inflationary time, and his family could not afford to support him. So he got a job in an import-export house in Hamburg.

During this time, Walter met Margaret Krebs from Chile at an artist party. She was a director of an art institute in Hamburg. Upon learning that she was planning to return to Chile, Walter expressed interest in going with her. A few weeks later, in 1924, they went to Chile. They travelled by steamer to Rio de Janeiro, where her father was a director of a bank. They continued on to Buenos Aires, finally returning to Chile and settling there, where Margaret's brother was director of an import-export house. Walter worked there, lived in a boarding house, and learned Spanish. After Walter spent three years in Chile, ten male friends decided to go to San Francisco. They sailed up the

coast on a Japanese freighter, stopping at every little port.

Arriving in San Francisco in 1927, Walter got his first glimpse of America. He went to import-export houses looking for a job. Finally he found a job at a place where they needed someone fluent in German who also knew shorthand. Walter stayed at that job for six months and then suddenly had a desire to return to Germany. He took a steamer to Hawaii, visiting the Red Sea, Egypt, Italy, and San Moritz, where the first Winter Olympic Games were held. Walter returned to Dusseldorf, where he again got a job in an import-export house.

After six months, Walter became restless and went to Canada by steamer, crossing Canada by railroad, and he eventually returned to San Francisco. He returned to his old job and eventually married a relative of the manager. On their honeymoon, they went to Europe to meet Walter's parents and visit Munich. They also travelled to Paris and Italy.

In 1933, they travelled on the Graf Zeppelin from Munich to Berlin, then to Copenhagen and back to Berlin. Upon his return to San Francisco, Walter decided to make San Francisco his home. Walter started an import-export business (Grothe, Schmidt and Co.) which did business with Germany. World War II brought an end to this business.

Walter's interest in folk dance resulted when he attended a recreational group under the direction of Lucile Czarnowski. Walter became Vice President of Changs, a popular folk dance group. He then began going to a different group every evening. This interest led him to begin teaching folk dance. He taught different groups, teaching five nights a week. Every weekend he went to a different city and asked the mayor if his dancers could perform on their lawn. He also went to the mayor to have a Folk Dance Festival in San Francisco. It was the only time that he ever called a square.

Millie von Konsky was teaching at the I House in Berkeley, and she asked Walter to teach a class when she went to Europe. When she came back, the I House asked Walter to take over the class. Walter met Jack McKay at the Berkeley Folk Dance Group.

Walter was the 5th President of the Folk Dance Federation of California (1946-48). He also met Lawton Harris at Folk Dance Festivals. At that time they talked about a possible Folk Dance Camp at the University of the Pacific. Lawton started out, and Walter was on the Camp Committee.

I interviewed Walter at the Stockton Folk Dance Camp in 1991, where he was visiting and celebrating his birthday. It was an interesting few days for me, recalling past events and interviewing friends like Walter. Walter and I discussed the "Frog Jumping Contests" at Calaveras and other interesting trips that were planned between the first and second weeks of the early camps. I don't believe that Walter missed a camp since the first session in 1949.