

Folk Dancers We Should Remember

by Larry Getchell

Lawton Harris

In this issue of Let's Dance, the "Folk Dancer We Should Remember" focuses on the late Lawton Harris. He is most deserving of the honor, considering that he is someone most folk dancers either knew or had heard about, but up until now we were unable to obtain sufficient accurate information about him.. Now, thanks to research done by the authors of the recently published Stockton Folk Dance Camp 50-Year History, we have sufficient material regarding his professional career to do justice to Lawton and to his many contributions to the folk dance movement.

Lawton Harris was born in a small Missouri town but his family soon moved to San Diego and later Oakland. While attending the College of the Pacific in San Jose he met Sally Metzger who he married upon graduation. College of the Pacific, a Methodist-affiliated school (and the current University of the Pacific), shaped his early career, working in the broad area of community/religious education and recreation. He trained leaders in church and community recreation, including leaders in the Scouts, the YMCA, YWCA and the church. In time he became nationally known in the field of community recreation. One part of this recreational activity centered around what we know today as folk dancing. Among other things, Lawton's success as a recreation leader resulted in part time teaching at COP in Stockton, commuting from Oakland.

In 1949 Lawton was offered a full time teaching position at COP in Stockton where the family then moved. In Stockton he organized a folk dance group at the YMCA, the Polk-y-Dots. This writer well remembers a folk dance exhibition night held at the Oakland Auditorium during the 1940s where the Polk-y-Dots exhibited a very fast and lively jig dance. Lawton and, I believe, Sally performed with the group. Lawton himself showed a nifty bit of footwork.

Lawton Harris founded the Stockton Folk Dance Camp at College of the Pacific in 1948. The founding, according to my understanding, happened during one of Walter Grothe's terms as President of the Folk Dance Federation of California. Both he and Lawton attended an outdoor festival at the University of California. During an intermission Walter and Lawton were waiting in line for refreshments. Walter mentioned to Lawton something about a folk dance camp held yearly in the East at some wooded retreat. He wondered why a similar camp would not prove a success here in California. It started Lawton thinking and at the next business meeting of the Federation presented a plan for a camp at COP. His plan met with their approval, resulting with the initial 1948 Folk Dance Camp at COP in Stockton. Here, until death suddenly took him in 1967, Lawton was Camp Director just six weeks short of the 20th camp opening. During those years Stockton Folk Dance Camp became known nationally. This writer attended the first 22 years during which time some of the world's better known instructors were invited.

Despite his folk dance camp and other duties at COP, Lawton took time to come to the rescue of the Folk Dance Federation in 1951 when they were without an editor for Let's Dance magazine. Lawton volunteered for the job and handled it very proficiently.

Lawton's unexpected death in 1967 could have meant disaster for the folk dance camp but Jack McKay stepped in as the new director and despite the many difficulties, the 20th camp was another success. Jack continued as director for 20 years. The present director, Bruce Mitchell, is ably following him.

Folk dancing could use many other leaders such as Lawton Harris.