

# The Mr. and Mrs. of Irish Dancing



How Sean and Una O'Farrell became the West's leading exponents of the dances of their homeland

By MIRIAM LIDSTER



**M**ARCH BEING THE MONTH of the Irish and Una and Sean O'Farrell being my favorite among the Irish I wanted to know more about them. When dancing one rarely has the opportunity to say, "where did you learn to dance", or "do the Irish today dance the dances of their forefathers, or have they gone international in their dance"? So, I wrote a list of some ten questions to the O'Farrells and now I would like to share part of the seven pages of delightful answers with all of you who read Let's Dance.

Many of us met Una as Una Kennedy for the first time at a folk dance institute at Mills College, Oakland, in 1951. Many more of us danced with Una in her classes of Irish dance at the College of the Pacific Folk Dance Camp later in 1951 and again in 1954. Una also taught Irish dance in the Northwest and held institutes in Modesto and Los Angeles.

The twinkling dancing feet of Una began their career at about the age of six in a step dancing class held first in her cousin's home and later in her own. "TEN CENTS A DANCE"—this was the remarkable fee charged by their much-loved teacher, Tim Whelan, a member of the Irish Dance Teachers Association. Whelan is now a grand old Dublin man of about 70, "with the neatest, liveliest feet you ever saw". Whelan held large classes all over Dublin and at that time the children's classes were held in the late afternoon and on Saturdays and Ceili dancing classes for adults were held each evening. Like all teachers of Irish step dancing, Whelan's background was purely in Irish dance. He was an "active Irishman"—a strong supporter of the Irish language movement and active in the struggle for freedom in Dublin in 1916.

Sean said that his interest in dance did not begin or ripen at the age of six although he attended two dancing classes with his sister at this young age. However, during his activity in the Irish language movement he learned the Irish dance and eventually taught a Ceili dancing class and "MC-ed" many a Ceili for the local branch of the Gaelic League.

All of the Kennedy family danced. In fact, they all had a step dance lesson when the children arrived home from school. They then had supper and after supper friends and neighbors would arrive for Ceili (group) dances and singing. From one nearby family came a boy, his two sisters and their father who played the fiddle, and from another family came two boys and their

sister. The grocer and his wife with many other friends attended these dances. Una's father and mother danced. Her mother also played the piano and her father sang.

The dancing was Irish only. However, they did ballroom dancing at a local hall and at friends' houses. Now her family combines Irish dancing, international folk dancing, square dancing and a little ballroom. One of Una's young brothers, Declan, runs the group. Mildred Buhler, a California square dance leader now living in London, gave Declan some help in "calling" when she visited the Kennedys. Una taught Declan the dances she had learned at Folk Dance Camp when she returned to Ireland in 1952. She also left all the folk dance records Lawton Harris had given her. Una said the most popular dances from Folk Dance Camp were Neapolitan Tarantella, At The Inn, Zillertaller Landler, Marklander, Korobushka—anything energetic—and squares.

When Una's family moved in 1945 to Dalkey, the town where Sean lived, they had dancing every Friday night in a big room of their house. An average of 20 to 30 persons always attended and they were again taught by Whelan. This continued from 1945 to the time Una left for Mills College in 1950. Music for these dances was provided at the piano by Una's mother or by Sean or another member of the group. Sean also played a flute or tin whistle and various other members of the group took turns at the piano, fiddle and tin whistles "as the humor took them".

Dancing classes were given at school as an "extra" after school activity, but Una said Whelan was their best teacher. Una danced only once in competition—just to please Whelan. The competitions in Irish dancing are held many times during the year and a certain group participates in all of them and collects the medals and cups.

Una said many people in Ireland dance but the Irish dancing is seldom mixed with ballroom dancing. It is danced in the same town halls and hotel halls throughout the country but on different nights. At a Ceili there are people of all ages, but mostly young people. Between dances there are always solo selections from members of the band, and step dances and songs from the people present. The local festivals and competitions are often held outdoors on Sunday afternoons. These festivals are sometimes held in conjunction with pipe band competitions or Gaelic football matches and are called aeriocets.

Prior to Una's departure for Mills College she taught a children's class in Dalkey as an assistant

to Whelan. After her return to Ireland she taught a Gaelic League class in Dublin. This class was made up primarily of teen-agers. Sean played the piano and usually they had a fiddler and sometimes a flute or drum. They taught dances they later taught at Folk Dance Camp—and some that had a longer sequence.

Some of you will remember our "tin whistle orchestra" that presented several selections at the 1954 Folk Dance Camp. Una said Sean never took lessons on the tin whistle or in fact any other instrument—he just went to Ceilis and was active

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**HOODED CLOAK**—This fine old lady from County Cork is wearing the hooded cloak which is the traditional feminine attire in certain districts in southwestern Ireland. These cloaks, elaborately woven, are regarded as family heirlooms and handed down from mother to daughter for generations.

*—Irish Tourist Association photo.*



# Sean and Una O'Farrell

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in groups formed to revive the Irish language. There was always a piano and fiddle in his home and he taught himself to play those. He can't even remember when he bought his first tin whistle. He did mention that he took lessons in flute for awhile, and played bagpipes for a while, too.

Una and Sean first met ten years ago when she moved to Dalkey and Sean came to their house to ask Una's brother to take part in an Irish play. Una also participated in some of the plays. However, she said that it wasn't until her return from Mills that she really got to know Sean.

While at Mills Una majored in Child Development, which was her major interest, but fortunately for many of us she did not let her dance interest die and through the efforts of Henry "Buzz" Glass she was presented in a folk dance institute.

After Una had returned to Ireland for almost a year Sean came to the United States in '53 and lived with Mr. and Mrs. George Murton of Redwood City. Early in the spring of 1954 Sean went to Stockton to work and it wasn't long before "rumors were flying." Una came "bag and baggage" and they were married in Stockton on April 19, 1954. To Una and Sean we say "many, many years of happy dancing."

**LET'S DANCE**