

Folk Dancers We Should Remember

Elmer Riba

by Larry Getchell

When selecting folk dancers for our Let's Dance column, FOLK DANCERS WE SHOULD REMEMBER, they have been mostly chosen from metropolitan areas. It's like the time a notorious robber was asked why he robbed banks. His reply was, "Because that is where the money is". For a similar reason that is where most folk dance activity takes place but not altogether. There are rural sections of California where folk dancing has continued down through the years. For this you can credit some very dedicated leaders. Two such leaders who have made their presence known in the folk dance world where they live are Elmer and Milli Riba. It is Elmer who we have chosen for this month's column. At the same time we should remember his lovely wife Milli. She has been his partner in events and dancing as well as his life.

This writer is very familiar with "Riba" country generally referred to as the Mother Lode, the gold country. I was born in the mining town of Sheep Ranch some 35 miles from Jackson but much closer as the crow flies. Being a visitor in my home town of San Andreas, Calaveras County for a high school reunion on Saturday June 13, I wasted little time accepting the Riba invitation to attend their "End of the year teaching party" the following day, Sunday June 14, over in Jackson. Jackson is one of the largest remaining—and certainly one of the most modern—of the Southern Mines towns that dot the Mother Lode along Highway 49. I can well remember when, during the early years of the 20th Century, Jackson was given the names "Sin City" as well as "Little Reno" and it deserved them both. For a city the size of today's Jackson it was a surprise to discover they support a very modern Senior Center with a sizeable recreation area and dance room which is available to the folk dancers free of charge.

However the June 14th gathering started not at the Senior Center in Jackson where folk dancers from anywhere and everywhere were invited to attend the "End of the year teaching party". It actually started at the hone of Elmer and Milli Riba where some 20 of us gathered to enjoy a delicious potluck dinner. Joining us for both the dinner and dance later was Federation Recording Secretary, Lila Messer and her husband Sidney.

While the Riba address is Pine Grove, a small community some eight miles from Jackson along Highway 88 leading to Tahoe, their actual home is nestled in the Sierra pines some two miles beyond Pine Grove on a road leading off Highway 88.

Elmer Riba has a hobby—no, we would regard it as a woodworking talent with a technique known as marquetry. Elmer has put his talent to use liberally in beautifying their home. On the entrance gate you

are greeted by the word, "Willkommen", that in the German tongue means "Welcome". On the inside of the gate one sees when leaving are the words, "Auf Wiederschen," or, "Hoping to see you again." Just above the doors of the adjacent garage in large letters are two proverbs reading:

COUNT YOUR LIFE IN SMILES, NOT TEARS
COUNT YOUR AGE BY FRIENDS, NOT YEARS

We could go on and on about the Riba home but must stop as the focus of this article is intended to be about the interesting life of Elmer Riba and his many contribution to the folk dance world.

Back in 1945 there was a war going on. Elmer Riba was serving in the Air Force while Milli was an army nurse. Circumstances brought them together and a marriage resulted. When the war was over they settled into a normal life and discovered—what else?—folk dancing. Their initial introduction came in 1962, dancing in the park at Sonoma. Soon after they took in the folk dancing program at the California State Fair in Sacramento. Here there was an invitation for beginners to meet at Clunie Club House in Sacramento. At the time they were living in Vacaville and had to drive 35 miles to class.

When Elmer retired in 1966 they moved to the Sierra Foothills and started teaching. They say that although their expertise was not all that great, there was a need and request for someone to teach and they were the best qualified. Now wasn't that lucky for the Sierra Foothill folk.

As time rolled on they not only made their presence known locally but Elmer took time out to first serve as Treasurer of the Federation, later its Vice President and the elected President of the Folk Dance Federation of California for two terms, 1970-1972. Since then Elmer has served on numerous committees, the most recent one being the bylaws committee.

During their teaching years the Ribas had the feeling dances such as the tango and waltz were being neglected by folk dancers. So, they put together a series of dances which they referred to as "Waltz-Tango Cotillion". For the past ten years they have held such a party in Jackson. This apparently influenced Max Horn and Elmer Riba to organize the "International President's Grand Ball," an elegant dress up affair that includes both elaborate folk and formal ballroom attire. It is now held semiannually.

While the Ribas do scale back their summer dance schedule they still manage to keep active. There is of course the annual Statewide which they usually attend. They dance once a month at three local rest homes and this year there is an exhibition at the Farmer's Market in Jackson.

Elmer and Milli's folk dance schedule has been a busy one the past four decades and the Good Lord willing they plan to be at it well into the next century.