

Folk Dancing with the Corvallis Hoolyehs: The Early Years

Jane McCauley Thomas

I was in the third grade when I started folk dancing with Irene Butts' children's group in 1959. We met every Saturday morning in the cafeteria at Garfield School in Corvallis, just a few blocks from our house on 12th Street. Irene was a short woman with a crown of silver braids. She wore a long skirt, and when she danced, it was hard to tell that an adult was on the floor. The group was for children through sixth grade, but a few old-timers stayed on into junior high.

Mike Onstad was in fifth or sixth grade then. He had curly black hair and a silver tooth that made him look like a pirate, and all the girls wanted to dance with him. Howdy Booster was a year below me in school. He once told me I was his "second best girlfriend"—the first was Karen McDonald, the girl all the boys wanted to dance with. Usually, Irene would walk us through the dances and then put on the music. Records were kept in heavy cases which the big kids would carry out to Irene's car at the end of the dancing. Each morning ended with Clap and Turn Polka, and this time, no concessions were made for beginners. "Get off the floor, you're going to be killed!" Irene would shout, and the old-timers were free to spin as fast as they could go.



Mary, Jane, and Tom McCauley,
1962 or 1963

I don't know when the children's group first began. My mother, Betty McCauley, tells me that Hildred Rice promoted a Valentine's Day dance at Roosevelt School as early as the mid-1950s—she remembers dancing there a few months before my sister Mary was born. (She and my dad also danced Salty Dog Rag before that, when she was pregnant with me.) By the time I started dancing, Irene had probably finished her English teaching career at Oregon State University—a job that

didn't include retirement benefits. Our family spent my fourth-grade year in Montana; my mom remembers Irene appearing at the house:

I don't know how Irene managed, but she collected newspapers from all her friends and took them to recycling, which paid in those days. She was one gutsy lady. She learned to drive when she was over 40—it was awful to ride with her!—and traveled across the country to see her kids. She slept in her car and brought sandwiches to save money. In Bozeman, we once came home to find her sleeping on our couch—the neighbors had a key and had let her in.

When we returned to Corvallis, we bought a house on

29th Street, and once again, we started dancing. In an old diary, I wrote that Irene would be picking me up each Saturday morning, along with my brother and sister: "Mary has gone a few times before, and I have gone lots of times, but Tommy has never gone except to watch. What worries me is how he is going to find any little girls smaller than he is." There weren't many girls shorter than a kindergartner, but we found another solution: "In the dance called Crested Hen, you usually have one boy in the center and two smaller girls on the outside. But I had to be inside with two boys, one of them Tommy, and neither of them able to dance."

I stayed with the children's group well into junior high, by which time I'd been an "old-timer" for several years. The first performance I remember was probably during my first year of dancing. We danced at a festival at the old Roosevelt School, which later burned down; we did Shibolet Basedeh, the Israeli "open-the-gate and shut-the-gate" dance.

Later, pictures show a group of costumed children at the tiny roadside park between Monroe and Junction City, a traditional stopping place when we drove to the Eugene festivals. I'm wearing my great-great-aunt's Norwegian dress, with a beaded panel tucked into a red wool bodice. Mary wears a flowered cap and an orange dress from Sweden, the same dress my mother used to wear—and the same dress my daughters Rhiannon and Emily wore many years later. Tom wears a Swedish costume with a round cap; sometimes he'd wear German lederhosen, instead.

At one of those early Eugene festivals, a white-haired man asked if I danced the hambo. Of course I did, I told him—I'd danced it with my grandpa at Swedish Midsummer parties. But as it turned out, I didn't know it at all. Francis took me out into the hallway and showed me the steps—left, touch, right, left, touch, right—and from then on, I knew.

We also danced at the Junction City Scandinavian Festival, back when it was a big event and visitors packed the streets buying Swedish pancakes and Danish apple pastries. We'd perform Scandinavian dances such as

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Gustav's Skol and Little Man in a Fix, where the two boys on the inside would swing the girls off their feet as they turned. I also remember Man in the Hay, where the girls were tossed high in the air at just the right moment. Dancers in those days included various Varsevelds and McKimmys, Ellen Burgess, Susan Terierre, Glenn Weber, my friend Terri Bennett, and many others.

We danced with the children's group through most of junior high, right up until Hildred Rice started a teen group that met Thursday evenings in the new Garfield gym—the Hoolyehs, as we became known. This must have been when I was in ninth grade, around 1965. Hildred, another OSU English instructor, was tall and stately, with tight grey curls. Student dancers helped with the teaching—Mike, Howdy, Lloyd McCaffrey, Karen, Glenn, and various others. Among the seventh and eighth graders were Jeanette Leach, Kathy Bucy, Ruth Phinney, Debbie and Pam Hanus, Scott Rohde, and Jeannie Olleman. My sister Mary was still too young to join, but she remembers watching the dancing from Doris Tilles's house across the street, where she had a Thursday babysitting job. Within a couple years, Dave Bucy had joined his sister in the dance group, "to look for girls," as Mary jokes now. It must have worked—she and Dave have been married for thirty years—but Dave also went on to lead the Hoolyeh performance group, and even now, he choreographs dances for local theater productions.



*Bekki Levenspiel
Levien in 1970 (left)*

Within the group, some dances "belonged" to particular people. Howdy, with his clean-cut good looks, always led Macedonka, sometimes swirling a white handkerchief. Occasionally, I got the chance to lead Miserlou, "mirroring" the second person in line—doing the dance backwards, essentially. On Sjetna, we'd pull an unsuspecting guest into the line on the slow part, only to laugh as the rhythm suddenly shifted to double-time.

The Thursday night group was so much a part of my life that I rarely wrote about it. Looking back, I find occasional references to "At dancing this week," but I tended to write about the people more than the dances themselves. Still, it's clear that we frequently attended festivals at Reed College or Woodburn or Eugene, sometimes staying the whole weekend. By the group's second and third year, more people were active—Barb Schemm, Jerry Zavitkovski, Mary Van Holde, Susie Van Dyke, and many others. One fall, Terri and Lloyd and Mike and I danced Serbian Medley for the Centurions' "Evening of Folklore" in Corvallis.

Since dancing only on Thursdays wasn't enough, some of us started going to OSU's folk dance sessions as well—in fact, Terri later joined Julie Reed's exhibition group. It was also through the OSU group that Terri, then just sixteen, met an OSU engineering student named John Hardin. He was way too old, her parents thought—practically twenty. Since they weren't allowed to date, they danced; John soon joined the Thursday group, as well. Terri and

John now have four kids and several grandchildren; they've been married more than thirty-five years.

There were festivals in Enumclaw, and others in Portland. Once, a whole group of us slept on the floor at John Hardin's parents' house in Troutdale. People had regular dance partners they met only at festivals—Bud Brabham in Eugene, or Mary Eichstadt in Woodburn. Often Hildred would drive, or sometimes my parents or someone from OSU would take a carload of dancers. Hildred hated left turns—she'd route us in complicated directions to avoid them. But on the open road, she moved. "I rode home with Mrs. Rice," I wrote after one festival. "She didn't go over 90 mph—I think she averaged 80."

By late high school, I'd become less involved with folk dancing, and it's hard to remember whether the group itself was active. It wasn't until after I left for Reed College (where we'd often danced) that Glenn and Howdy rejuvenated the group by teaching classes during Corvallis High School's alternative education week. "We regularly had 140 kids dancing at Garfield School," Mary remembers, and the Hoolyehs staged a big performance every year. By that time I'd moved on to other things, but years later, I moved back to Corvallis and watched my own two girls dance with Dana Poling's children's group.

We didn't realize it at the time, but folk-dancing expanded our world. We recognized towns in countries our non-dancing friends had never heard of. We hummed tunes in seven-four time. We knew the difference between Serbian and Macedonian opanci. My sister had cats named Čiček and Bačko. Later, in Scottish pubs and Greek tavernas, I found the soundtrack already familiar. In Yugoslavia, I bought Mary a traditional costume, and as its owner and I worked out the price, we also discussed politics: "Tito, dobro" (good). "Kennedy, dobro." "Nixon, no dobro."

It's been nearly fifty years since I started folk dancing at Garfield School. These days, I rarely dance, though I do hike and ski. (And like Irene Butts, I teach college English and do long solo trips in my car.) Still, at my mother's eightieth birthday party last year, my feet remembered the steps. But my strongest memory is still of Irene shouting "Get off the floor, you're going to be killed!" as Clap and Turn Polka went onto the turntable and the old-timers spun out across the gym.

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