

Transcript of Interview with Mary Garvin, 11/02/2021

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Jim Kiehne: Hey, it's Tuesday, November 2, 2021, another interview in Tapestry Folkdance Center's History Project. I'm Jim Kiehne, here with veteran dancer Mary Garvin. Hey Mary, welcome.

Mary Garvin: Thank you. Glad to be here.

JK: So talk a bit about your dance background before you got here.

MG: I started at the University of Oregon. I had seen a little bit of folk dancing on campus, while I was still in high school. So when I got there ... well, I fell in love with it! I got there, the first thing I did was seek it out and it was there. So, I've been dancing ever since.

I danced with a recreational group, and then we had a performing group as well, and I danced at Oregon until I graduated. Graduate school, I was in a place where they didn't have folk dancing. So I started up a little group. And then, I taught in Buffalo, started up a group there and was teaching folk dance, and other kinds of dance at Buffalo State.

Then I moved to the Big City to see what it was like. And I danced in New York, primarily at Columbia University, the Earl Hall Folk Dance Circle, which was a fairly large group; even larger, a few years before I got there. And I also danced at -- well, the name's changed but it was Martin Koenig's Ethnic Folk Arts, that sort of ended up being the best ... at their recreational meetings and various other things that popped up around the cities.

And from there, we move to Minnesota, and and started dancing at Tapestry.

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JK: It was in [19]91, you were saying?

MG: Yep, '91.

JK: Yeah, incredible, and we've never been [??]. What were your impressions of the group when you got here? How was it similar? How was it different?

MG: It's hard to say because every group is different and every group is the same in some ways. They had their little ways of doing things, which was fine, and so we just adapted to that and went along with it.

When we first -- I think when we first started here, after a little while we decided to join in on the teaching, and at that time they had a general session in the gym. And then two floors down below in the basement in a smaller room, we had advanced folk dancing during the teaching time, and then we'd all come together in the gym. That held for a while and then, as all folk dance groups do, they get together and they decide what's working, what's not, what can we do to bring more people in, and all that kind of thing.

So they ended up doing all teaching just in the gym, keep everybody together. So we started doing all levels in the gym as well.

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JK: Yeah. So, to clarify for people, this was at Sabathani, the Sabathani era. And you've persisted ever since on that course. Talk about Advanced International. You got that -- you and Dan got that going; and what a heck of a run!

MG: Yeah, [19]93, we started an advanced session. The reason for that was that Friday Night folk dancing is fun but it's an all-level sort of thing so you could only get in so many [of the] more advanced dances in an evening, and some of them who had learned some good dances and wanted to do more of them decided it would sure be nice to have a session where we could just just do advanced dances, as much as we wanted. So we started up in '93 and other than the Covid, it's been non stop.

JK: Fantastic. I mean, I would have said, Ahh, I dunno, was that gonna work? But Lordy, Lordy, it did, and still popular. Still popular.

MG: Yeah, no, it's not a large group, but we have such a good time. We're having a good time after this pandemic break, trying to remember dances.

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JK: That's right, wiped from memory! The uh, the memories that stand out for you. We were talking, for instance about the singing in the stairwell at Sabathani.

MG: That's great. We would start singing, usually leave the gym and there's this long hallway to get to the stairway. And then, then we go down this... it's like a double stairway, double-wide stairway going down a couple of flights to get to the ground floor, and the echoing was so great that, that our little, scrawny little group that was coming down the stairs singing would sound like a fabulous chorus.

JK: Yeah, it would; a Balkan chorus. Speaking of singing you've always promoted singing, you've, you've had your blue notebooks that you've maintained, and getting singing sessions going at SNOPA, at the workshops, and in the evenings before Covid.

MG: I wasn't really a leader in the singing so much as a carrier and carrier of the books, and an encourager.

JK: Yeah, an encourager, a facilitator. Because you love singing, clearly. And you think it's important for...

MG: I'm not that good.

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JK: Well, I don't know about that. But you think it's important for community, this kind of thing.

MG: Oh, absolutely. That's one of the best things about Tapestry is that I've got this whole community of people that I know and can relate to and enjoy their company and they're widely varied people. And yet, and yet we've got so much in common.

JK: Yes, indeed. Well other memories. Like we used to do what, silent auctions, haven't done that for a while, but what's your memory of all that kind of thing?

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MG: Yeah, that's one of the things I called fun events.

We used to do a yearly benefit, all the, all the groups at Tapestry would put it on. Often we would have this silent auction, and lots of things people would donate from Tapestry, but then also go out into the community and get other businesses in the area and whatever to donate something that could be bid on. My favorite things were the, the meals, where you could bid on a meal. Like a Bulgarian meal for eight, we would get together a group of people to bid on it, you know, and make sure we got it.

I remember that same year that we did that, there was another, it was a smaller one, a Turkish meal for six that nobody was bidding on. And I'm going, I can't have that. So I bid on it, won it, and then searched up the other five people to join me. It was fabulous, we had such a good time!

So, yeah so and oh, one year Julie Rasmussen, who had lived in Japan and actually I believe worked in a restaurant in Japan. She had a Japanese meal that she offered and so a bunch of us bid on that, and got that and that was quite an education and very good.

JK: Yes.

MG: So, um, yeah. So those are some of the things I like. One, one thing that came up.that was just coincidental, was that somebody was offering a henna design -- you know, you could draw a henna design on the hand or whatever.

And it was being offered and that was like, not that long before our SNOPA weekend where we, the theme was Hooray for Bollywood. So I bid on it, and won, and checked with the other people on the committee, SNOPA committee if they wanted to have henna done. Julie joined me and so we both had our hands, one hand each, painted with henna and beautiful designs.

And that was just one of the great little silent auction things that we found that just happened to work out perfectly for us.

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JK: Yeah, pretty, pretty amazing. I'd forgotten how much fun that was during those years. Yeah. Well, let's see...

MG: Oh, another thing that used to be done, was the Board, I guess they were like, Thank You dinners or something like that, but the Board would put on an evening dinner [for the members]. And they would make soups, they would all come in with crock pots full of soup, and they'd have salad and some kind of bread and dessert.

And there was no cost to people. You know, we just all came in and enjoyed each other's company and then they'd have some kind of small program. But that was abandoned a number of years ago. I'm not sure why. I suppose it's a lot of work for the Board members, but it was, it was a nice little enjoyable thing to have happen.

JK: Yeah. Indeed. Well, so much of this comes back to the idea of sharing food. You know, one thing that popped into my mind was those holiday open houses that you and Dan used to hold in the early days, I mean that that was amazing.

MG: [laughs]

JK: Hard on you, though.

MG: Yeah:

JK: Hard on you guys. [laughs]

MG: In the end it was hard on me. Um, yeah, those were, those were fun. That wasn't just Tapestry that... we invited our tapestry friends, work friends, our neighbors and what relatives we had in the area. And it was like, just... it wasn't quite an, it was, well it was an open house. But we sort of sent out little invitations to people to know that they can stop by anytime within certain hours and come in, into a groaning board full of food and wine and hot wine and and soda and coffee and um, spiced cider.

JK: Yeah. Yeah, it was pretty nice, pretty nice for us.

MG: Well I enjoyed it. Last one, afterwards we sat down and figured out, we'd had 130 guests in our house. The house had nice flow, but it wasn't really that big.

JK: Yeah. Yeah, it's true. It went on, other people picked up too, Terry and Nairy, Craig and Fiamma. A lot of bonding happened during these events, I think you'd agree?

MG: Oh yeah. Yeah.

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JK: Significant in our history. The, one of the biggest effects, I think you guys have had is, well, it's kind of related to the Fall Workshops really, which you've had a big hand in. Why don't you talk about the Fall Workshops for a bit?

MG: Yeah. Dan started them, way back, probably in the mid to late '90s. I can't remember if it was Ahmet Luleci or, or Mihai David, who is the first one that we had.

But it was a, it was a nice education for us, trying to organize that. But it turned out to be so great because we had, you know, we got to meet and spend time with these other teachers from around the country and even actually from around the world, and bring them in and share them with all the people who came in for that to Tapestry.

I know, I know one time we had Ada Dziwanowska from Milwaukee come up. She's an expert in, in, in Polish dance, I mean a real expert. And just a wonderful woman. And we figured well she's 80, we better get her here now. Well, she went strong for any number of years after that. She didn't slow down. I believe she's still alive and over 100 now.

But she was a real treat. She was a real treat.

JK: Yeah. There've been... go ahead.

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MG: Yeah. And there were Theodor & Lia Vasilescu, the Romanian teachers who came, we got to enjoy them even more because they had us on one weekend and it wasn't until the next weekend that they had to be someplace else. So they ended up staying with us the whole time. So we got to enjoy them.

Oh, talk about charming people. Oh, and so funny and so warm and so, you know, knowledgeable and interesting. It was, it was just great fun.

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JK: You know what, well, what I was getting at before was out of this and out of your travels to other groups like Door County Folk Festival and teaching, Appleton, wherever, is this outreach to other Midwestern groups.

And it got it started where they would come here for the Fall Workshops, and then was sort of building community exterior to just Tapestry, which has been extremely important, I think.

MG: I think you and Linda had kind of coerced us and talked us into trying Door County Folk Festival.

JK: Perhaps.

MG: So we ended up teaching there a number of years off and on. And so that was another good place to meet all these people, of course, Madison Folk Ball was another good place. Appleton was small, but excellent, excellent.

And once in a blue moon, Eau Claire would come up with one. One of the one that one I like best was the 20th anniversary of Eau Claire's group, and they brought in Yves Moreau.

And they've made arrangements, you know, for where people could stay and all that sort of thing. And they had to change their whole venue and everything, because almost right away there were like 125 people signed up. So, that was truly memorable. folk dance weekend, another chance to to mix with all the, the Midwest folk dancers.

JK: No, it seems to me the more mixing like this we do, the stronger we all are.

MG: Oh, absolutely.

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JK: Mm. Frustrations? I mean, aside from all the great things that Tapestry does, frustrations you can remember?

MG: Well, there's always the ones where, where the group sits down and decides that the usual thing... I've been going to these kinds of meetings longer than I care to admit, all across the country, wherever I was, I've been living, which is... well, we got to get more people interested. And so we have to change what we're doing and see if we can line it up and something's tried.

And maybe we garner a few new people. And maybe we don't. But it's like always these little changes that end up really not amounting to much.

So all these constant trade changes in like how you're going to teach, you know, what you're going to teach, that sort of thing, like having a session where the first half hour is beginning.

Well, I'm sorry but the beginners, seldom show up in the first half hour. So right there your whole purpose is defeated. So, all these little discussions on what we could do. I don't know that there is a combination that really works.

So, it gets tiresome after years of sitting through these sessions.

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JK: Fortunately you've got the circuit breaker of Advanced International to kind of blow off steam. Now, that seems to always work.

MG: Yeah, great because we get a chance to tackle some of those hard dances and kick up our heels on the ones we know, and learn some new ones. And in between there's favorites of every level.

JK: Right.

MG: You can't, you can't do Hot Shot dances constantly, you'd collapse.

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JK: Yes. Yes you would. Well, other thoughts that kind of spring to mind on your part?

I'm sorry I didn't catch what the first thing you said,

JK: I'm sorry. Other, any other thoughts that come up, that you can think of?

MG: Oh. Well one of the things that kind of annoys me is that, you know, we end up having to get a new executive director every so often, and we get new boards constantly.

And so we have the wheel being reinvented all the time and more little rules and and regulations and futzy things coming up.

And those of us in the international dance, we kind of let it just kind of go over, past our head, you know, and, and do things the way we always do, but, you know, it's not a big group; we don't need these extra people. We don't need greeters because we've got a lot of greeters within the group.

JK: True.

MG: A lot of things, it's sort of like, okay, you can make these rules for the other people, but let us do our thing because our thing works.

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JK: Sure, yeah. Well, we have had pretty good success with having people step up and do greeting with, you know, not necessarily volunteers, just do it.

MG: Oh yeah, yeah.

JK: You've, you've certainly had your share of volunteerism and you pitched in when the new building arrived as it were. You got involved in remodeling and everything. Just hard at it.

MG: Oh yeah, that was, that was fun. We would just show up on a weekend and find out from Tom what needed to be done and he put us to work.

And Dan said it best, one time when he was making an announcement to encourage people to, on a Friday night he was encouraging people to come on the weekend to help out and he was saying, you won't be asked to do anything you can't do. But you'll be surprised what you CAN do.

JK: Oh yeah, yeah,

MG: Yeah, I mudded and sanded and I don't know what all I did that I'd never done before. And I did it well enough. I didn't get to do the top. The top mudding, that was Tom's job, but I contributed.

JK: Yeah, exactly. Well, that's a good motto; you'll be surprised what you can do.

MG: Yeah.

JK: Well, thank you for your time, kiddo. You've really helped make Tapestry what it is today, I think, and you're all about bringing people together. Really appreciate it. So, we will see you dancing!

MG: Gotta dance!

JK: Gotta dance! Thanks for the interview, Mary.

MG: You're welcome.

JK: Bye.

MG: Bye bye.

Ends 00:22:49*****