

# *Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival*

**By Maya Trost and Mirdza Jaunzemis**

On April 27, 2012, three of us, members of OFDA, arrived at the ninth annual Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival in British Columbia. For Mirdza and Maya it was the first time at this festival, but Helen Griffin had attended two years earlier. Having only Ontario Folk Dance Camp and Mainwoods as comparisons, we found the festival quite different.

The festival is held at Fulford Hall, a community centre at Fulford Harbour. Festival registrants are responsible for booking their own accommodation at one of the many B&Bs, cottages or motels, depending on availability and their budget.

The founder and “CEO” is Rosemarie Keough (who danced at IFDC in Toronto from 1981 to 1984), a dynamic, professional woman (photographer and publisher), who organizes this event in her “spare time.” The 10th anniversary of the festival will be celebrated in 2013, and teachers Yves Moreau, France Bourque-Moreau and Iliana Bozhanova with accordionist Todor Yankov have been booked for April 26–28. Rosemarie is committed to managing the event in 2013 but wishes to pass the baton beyond that, and hopefully someone will step in.

Salt Spring Island does not have a folk dance group. Only four of the 95 dancers at the festival were residents of the island. All other participants came from off-island, with the majority from the mainland and Vancouver Island. When a count was taken in a previous year, participants included members from 22 different dance clubs, including Washington state, California, New Jersey and several Canadian provinces.

The festival is run by a community of people, and we cannot stress the word “community” enough. People on the island know each other. Even non-dancers pitch in to help. The following were sponsors of the event: Cusheon Lake Resort of Salt Spring, Chef Kelly Kelsick, and Freybe Gourmet Foods of Vancouver. Freybe Gourmet Foods donated lunches on Saturday

and Sunday. Chef Kelly Kelsick and his crew of five did all the cooking for the lunches and dinner on Saturday. Cusheon Lake resort made a monetary donation and offered discounts on cabin rentals. Rosemarie’s son and a friend took on the task of carting away and washing all the dishes and pots. Usually the spouses of those performing organizational tasks get involved in helping out as well. Local musician, singer and songwriter Harry Warner was invited to entertain us by singing one of his songs, “From Galway to Salt Spring.”

The dance teachers were Željko Jergan teaching Croatian dances, and Richard Schmidt teaching Polish dances. Live music was provided during the weekend by the Washington-based Kafana Republik band.

As a special surprise the Polish folk group the White Eagle Band of Victoria came over by ferry to entertain us during lunch on Saturday and stayed long enough to play a short set before dinner. The band consists of six instrumentalists and a nine-person choir. They played and sang some very lively Polish highland songs, and, of course, they were dressed in traditional Polish folk costumes to visually complement the traditional tunes. A very merry, friendly atmosphere was the result.

In addition, and another pleasant surprise, the Consul General of Poland in Vancouver, Krzysztof Czaplą, came over to partake of the meal with us.

One of the most interesting and impressive aspects of this event was the group of 13 dancers from central Japan who came just to learn the Polish and Croatian dances and to be part of this Canadian experience. (They had found out about the festival because one of the dancers has a son-in-law living on Salt Spring.) Two of the 13 were teachers, and the other 11 were their students. They were all very serious about international folk dancing; they caught on to new dances with ease (no, they were not younger

than we are) and danced them with great skill and grace. And they didn't speak any English!

During the Saturday evening entertainment, this Japanese group, called Akatombo ("Red Dragonfly"), performed some of their own cultural dances using traditional Japanese instruments, one of which was fascinating – a sasara. It is a percussion instrument in a horseshoe shape made of small wooden slats connected by a rope; it is used as a type of clapper. They also brought some souvenirs and snacks for us. A memorable experience.

The Bulgarian ensemble Kariatis from Victoria also entertained us with their dances, as did Richard Schmidt with Renata Jarko, a dancer with Montreal's White Eagle Polish Dance Academy and his assistant at this workshop.

On Sunday afternoon one of the festival attendees, Annie Caps, who is of Croatian descent, showed a great number of embroidered linens and garments that she had inherited. Her mother had planted and harvested the flax especially to make these items. Annie gave us an interesting and informative talk about the difficulty of weaving these fabrics, designs used, purposes for different items, etc.

At Salt Spring both culture corners were held back to back on the Friday afternoon, before any dancing took place. This was a bit different for us – it is fine if a person can get there on time, but it made the dancing sessions long without a break. Another difference was that all the dance music which was played during the entire camp, both by Kafana Republik and the pre-recorded music, was pre-determined. A program had been printed, which included all the dances which were to be played, in a set order, with no room for requests. Dancing was finished by 10:30 on Friday

night and 11 on Saturday; no "binge night." The reason for this, says Rosemarie, is so that participants are fresh and eager to dance, and arrive on time the following morning. (And possibly they don't have a Walter Zagorski, as in Waterloo, or a Patricia Williams, as at Mainewoods.)

One interesting aspect of attending a festival on an island is having to contend with ferry schedules, reservations and connections. The organizers of this festival were very aware that people needed to catch a certain ferry, and attempts were made to end the dancing at an opportune time. However, some people were going to Vancouver Island while others were going to the mainland – different ferries, leaving at different times, from different harbours. It was impossible to accommodate everyone's schedule, and some had to leave before the dance reviews, but DVDs were made.

We three had a great time: The food was superb, the instructors did an excellent job, the floor was great, the displays were colourful, the accommodation was good and, last but not least, the people were very friendly.

Although it is a fair distance from Ontario, it is a worthwhile experience, if the budget allows.



Photo by Pat Keough