

Memories of Past Lyrids Festivals

By Bev Neilson, a Lyrids Festival committee member

My experience of festivals started with the Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festival, run by Rosemarie Keough. It was exciting to take the ferry from Vancouver to Salt Spring Island, drive through forests and farmlands, and eventually arrive at Fulford Community Hall, an old, wooden building steeped in years of island festivities. Then more excitement: connecting with other eager dancers as we anticipated what was in store for us during the weekend.

Before making the commitment to attend the festival, I had to be convinced: My thoughts, at the time were, "Why attend a dance festival, when you could stay home for the weekend and then, in your weekly folk dance group, be taught the dances brought back from the festival by others?" I imagine every festival-goer has had to make that leap. And for me, it took several discussions with others to convince me that learning is best from an original teacher, who either was born and raised in the country or had actually been to the country in question, spending time researching and learning about the dances, traditions, and styling of each dance. And to my delight, I realized how much more rewarding it would be to attend an in-person folk dance festival, than learning the dances, secondhand.

Lori Larson's comments, then and now, helped convince me: "International folk dance festivals not only showcase cultural diversity, but also act as a window into the history, culture, and folklore.



International folk dance festivals attract people from all parts of the world and allow people to share their love of the dances and connect with other friends and meet new acquaintances, sharing their joy of dancing together. For me, being at a folk dance festival is somewhat like what I imagine it would be like in the villages where the dances are from, dancing, connecting, laughing, chatting until all hours of the evening and learning from teachers who understand what folk dancing in the villages was like." And at the Salt Spring Island Folk Dance Festivals, that became so clear!

After running the festival for ten years, 2004–2013, Rosemarie Keough was ready to pass the torch and asked the Burnaby International Folk Dancers group to take over and run the festival. That was the beginning of the Lyrids Folk Dance Festival, in April 2014, and annually since then, although during COVID-19 we cancelled 2020 and collaborated with Kyklos of Portland in 2021 to run the festival on Zoom. The following year, we ran it on Zoom and then returned to in-person festivals in 2023. To our very lovely and pleasant surprise, there were numerous folks attending whom we met and danced with on Zoom, online.

Although running the festival from the Vancouver area would be different, we still wanted to continue the essence of what it was like at the Salt Spring festivals.

Being responsible for putting on a wonderful event is quite a 180-degree turn from attending one. There are a

lot of details to pay attention to and monitor. Seeing all the details fall into place is exciting!

One of the major "details" is the location! The exceptional sprung floor we danced on in Burnaby for the first three festivals was a treat. When we had the whole hall doing the same dance, the double doors that lead to the kitchen were actually moving in and out to the rhythm of the dancers' movements. We lost that location to real estate development. The philanthropic group that owned the building wanted to "cash in." So, we tackled the location detail anew.

We spent a lot of time and energy searching for another location with a comparable floor and dancing space: two feet per person near the perimeter of the dance hall to give dancers enough space to learn. We searched the whole lower mainland up the Fraser Valley and beyond, as far as Manning Park. Dale Adamson had an app on her phone that could read the "bounce" of the floor when placed in the middle while we jumped around it. We found two suitable halls and opted for the one in Vancouver where we held the next three in-person festivals. It was a bit smaller than we had hoped, but the big plus was access to the airport, the ferry terminal, and the Sky Train. After three years there, difficulty in renting it for an entire weekend became impossible to overcome. So, we opted for the second good location discovered in our search. It is farther from Vancouver but connects with the commuter train and major highways. Pitt Meadows Heritage Hall is in a country setting, with a near-by hotel.

These, and many other details are nothing compared to the people who come to dance, learn, and socialize at our festival. We see those we know from Salt Spring, from Zoom dancing, and some wonderful new additions to our roster. It's a precious international community that has developed around the dances that we love.

Seeing dancing friends return each year is a highlight of attending festivals. As hosts, we are seeking every chance to make each festival special, so our friends want to return again to dance with us.

Check out our website for all the details of this year's Festival, May 9–11 (<https://lyridsfolkdancefestival.org/>).



The festival committee



2024 Lyrids festival attendees