

## SCANDINAVIAN DANCERS OF VANCOUVER

### The First Twenty Years: 1970-1990

#### Background

The first wave of Scandinavian immigrants to British Columbia came around the turn of the century. It was, however, the second wave, arriving in the 1930's and after World War II, that established many of the clubs and support organizations within the Scandinavian community in the Vancouver area: social clubs, churches, health benefit associations, credit unions, etc. This was also the time when the Scandinavian communities began their individual folk dance clubs. Instruction was usually in the language of the club and few non-Scandinavians participated. There was generally little contact among the Scandinavian dance groups, except for the annual Scandinavian Midsummer Festival held at the now defunct Swedish Park in North Vancouver and the less important Scandinavian Midwinter Festival.

#### Formation of the New Club

By the late 1960's, the flow of Scandinavian immigrants became a trickle and assimilation caused a membership decline in the Scandinavian clubs, including the dance groups.

Ib Nielsen was at that time president of the Danish Canadian Folk Dance Group, which danced in the basement of the Danish Church on Prince Albert Street. Dwindling membership threatened the survival of the club, and Ib was mandated to contact the Swedish dance group with a proposal to amalgamate and create a Scandinavian dance club "like the one in Seattle" (a reference to Skandia).

Leif and Irja Svensson were the driving forces behind the Swedish Folk Dance Club, Lekstugen, which danced at the Swedish Hall on Hastings Street. They were experiencing the same membership problems and agreed to try a Scandinavian dance club.

The group began dancing in the Danish Church in the fall of 1971. Leif was to teach Swedish dances and Tage Pedersen was to teach Danish dances. Instruction was to be in English. The first public performance was at a trade fair at the PNE in the spring of 1972. The second performance was at Ambleside Park in West Vancouver that same spring (see photos in scrap book). The dancers included Leif and Irja, Alice Simand, Olof Sanders, Tage Pedersen, Margaret-Ann Jones, and Anna Eriksson. Music was by Sven Aage Olsen and Ib Nielsen.

Leif felt that the group would benefit by moving to Burnaby, and for one year they danced at the Burnaby Arts Centre. The Burnaby municipality had just acquired this property and the group danced for free upstairs in the Mather House. However, as the premises were renovated, there followed a substantial increase in the rent and the group moved back to the Danish Church basement in Vancouver.

### The Club Evolves

Tage Pedersen moved out of town and Leif was not able to continue as instructor because of other commitments. Anna Eriksson (later Anna Segas), who had just arrived from Sweden to work for the Swedish Trade Commission, was an avid dancer and took over the instruction.

During that period, dancing and teaching were done exclusively to live music. The dance leader generally decided what was danced during the evening. There was no "request hour" and little general generic dancing. There was little formal structure to the club, and even the name Scandinavian Dancers of Vancouver is more a product of coincidental evolution than of any deliberate and formal group decision. Most of the members at that time were ethnics, mainly from the Swedish and Danish communities. There were a few Norwegians, and for awhile the club enjoyed a "Finnish phase" with several members from the Finnish community.

The 1970's saw in Sweden a shift away from pattern dances and towards generic dances. Gordon Tracie, the founder of Skandia in Seattle, led this revival movement on the West Coast. Anna was so impressed with Gordon's teaching that she arranged for him to come to Vancouver to give a polska workshop.

### The "Ruus Era"

Laine Ruus took over as instructress in 1973, and the club entered a new era. More non-Scandinavians joined, although initially no attempts were made at promotion outside the Scandinavian community. The club began using taped music, except for performances (Roland Wik was the first "tape librarian"), and there was a gradual shift --as in Seattle's Skandia--away from set and pattern dances and towards bygdedances.

In the early 1980's, non-Scandinavian musicians too began to take an interest in the club--another trend with parallels in Seattle. Eventually there evolved three dance bands (Pickled Herring, Gammel Dansk, and a loose-knit jam session known as the "Allspel"), all of which played for occasional regular dance sessions as well as for performances and parties.

For approximately 16 years, Laine's name was synonymous with Scandinavian dancing in Vancouver. Although the club did have an elected executive, it was in reality Laine who took on the lion's share of the work. She planned the teaching, did the teaching, directed the performance group, arranged parties (and cooked for them), and looked after costumes. When she left, first to live in Sweden for a year, and later to take a new job in Toronto, many wondered if the club would survive.

### Entering Our Third Decade ...

The club did survive, and entered a new phase with responsibilities spread among many members. Various dancers took turns teaching. The numerous tasks which had once devolved upon the dance leader (such as performance director, archivist, tape librarian) were documented in a set of guidelines for running the club, so that these tasks could be more readily shared among elected and appointed officers.

The group started actively seeking new members in the larger community, and in the fall of 1988 president Bob Redlich and Lynda Burrough started a Friday night group, initially intended for "teens and twenties", at Sunrise Hall.

Club officers also grappled with the difficult question of "where to dance". When the Danish Church was sold to a Chinese congregation in 1984, the club moved to Douglas Park Community Centre. This facility was able to provide two rooms for dancing, so that Laine's idea of separate instruction for beginners could at last be formalized, with basic steps being taught in the additional room from 8:00 to 9:00 pm, followed by coffee and request dancing with the main group. When Douglas Park began remodelling the building and restructuring their programmes and fees, the group decided to seek another location. The 1989-90 season began in Sunrise Hall and finished in Moberly Park Community Centre on Prince Albert--not an ideal location for all members, but one which provided a separate room for beginner instruction, an affordable rent, and a flexible closing time for dance evenings.

In 1987 the club held its first Spring Equinox Ball and thus began an annual tradition. The initial purpose was to make this event an occasion for the Vancouver group to get together with the Norvidda Leikarer of Bellingham and other local Scandinavian groups, and so it was held at the conveniently-located East Delta Hall. Though the event has evolved beyond its original aim, it has continued to be held in more "countryfied" halls outside Vancouver.