

National Folk Organization  
2014 "Preserving Our Heritage Award"

NELDA G. DRURY

Presented by L. DeWayne Young  
National Folk Organization Co-founder  
March 14, 2014  
San Antonio, Texas

As Ron Houston of the Society of Folk Dance Historians exclaimed: "Preserving our heritage? Nelda IS our heritage!"

[Quote]: "Nelda was there! At the early exploration of Mexico by folk dance teachers; at the early folk dance camps in Maine and Texas and Mexico; she was there and knew...every one of the folk dance pioneers; she was there when Michael Herman needed Mexican dances and music; she was there when Texas needed a Mexican dance teacher, and brought Alura Flores to the US.

"Nelda has preserved cultural heritage and folk dance heritage. Her teaching is of the most widely traveled female folk dance teacher in the US - and around the world. Her exhibition group performed far and wide. Her hospitality, kindness and tolerance is well known and most appreciated. Standing in her living room feels a bit like standing in the middle of a square performing Grand Square." [End quote.]

Nelda Guerrero grew up in Texas within a distinguished family of teachers, college graduates and professionals, of federal judges, ministers, photographers, embassy workers and athletic trainers. At the age of five, Nelda gave her first dance performance during a celebration in Texas, and grew up learning a wide variety of Mexican dances. Serious study of dance began at the University of Mexico in Mexico City under the direction of the late Alura Flores de Angeles.

Nelda taught at Texas Southmost College in Brownsville, Texas, teaching in the PE Department and working for the Chamber of Commerce, doing a children's dance program for "Charro Days." She obtained her Bachelor of Science Degree from the University of Texas, Austin, and her MA degree in Health and Physical Education from Columbia University in New York City. She produced choreography to "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" for her Master's thesis.

She did post-graduate work at the University of Mexico in Mexico City; the University of Wisconsin in Madison; and the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. She has held Teaching Fellowships at Columbia University and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. After graduating from Columbia University, she accepted the position of supervisor of PE in Laredo, TX for the Webb County Schools. Throughout her years of teaching, she has mentored and assisted many teachers, performers, choreographers, and musicians, some of which have performed their works for the San Antonio Symphony, the performer "Charro" in Las Vegas, and the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico in Mexico City.

While teaching Mexican dance at Texas Folk Dance Camp, Jane Farwell invited Nelda to teach at the Mt. Horeb camp in Wisconsin. Invitations to other camps on the east and west coasts followed.

Earle Buckley had been with the YMCA in Japan, where he had introduced square dancing. Later, in New York's YMCA he met Mary Ann and Michael Herman and suggested a cultural trip to Japan. So, in 1956, Nelda was a participant in a cultural exchange program for the State Department to Japan that included the Hermans, Ralph Page, and Jane Farwell. The tour lasted from April 6-May 14, 1956.

\*\* In 1986, 30 years later, when Vyts and I were invited by Hiroyuki Ikema-san to be guests of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Japan Folk Dance Federation, and taught north to south, we were constantly asked "do you know Nelda Drury?" Of course we did! Harumi Kunimoto, a friend and student of Nelda's, was assigned as our hostess and translator for the month. Earle Buckley was also honored at the reception in Tokyo. (The record of Nelda's 1956 Japanese teaching tour is recorded in VILTIS magazine, January, March, May and June 1982 issues.)

\*\*In preparing this presentation, it has been of great interest to me to see photos of Nelda seated next to Prince Mikasa, just as Vyts and I were photographed years later. At a luncheon hosted by the Prince, he remarked "Young-san you do very well with chopsticks." To which I replied, without thinking (remember, I'm from Idaho) "Thank you, your Highness - otherwise I'd starve." I wonder I wasn't beheaded on the spot!

After the 1956 engagement, Nelda completed an around-the-world tour, studying dance and different cultures of the countries she visited.

In 1971, Nelda was a guest instructor for the All-Japan Dance Conference, and in 1976 was invited to take ten members of her performing group on a two-week teaching tour of Japan. In addition to the US and Japan, Nelda has been invited as a guest teacher for international folk dancing in Canada, Mexico, Holland, Germany, Switzerland and Lebanon.

In 1958, Nelda began teaching in the PE department at San Antonio College and started the Dance Department there. She was the Founder and Director of the San Antonio College performing folk dance group and was instrumental in getting sponsorship for the folk dance group to attend and perform at state fairs of New York, Texas, Oklahoma and Kentucky, as well as taking her group to university dance festivals at the University of Illinois, University of Texas, Texas A&M, Lamar University, University of Arizona and University of New Mexico.

Nelda has said she was so glad to have been teaching in the "old days." Back then she would pile her students into the car and drive to the performance site, in California or wherever. Nelda not only taught, but DID, not only with physical education and dance, but of life.

Nelda has been an instructor at Columbia University's Summer Graduate Seminar of Dance; an instructor at the University of Texas Graduate Seminar of Dance; a guest instructor at the universities of Wisconsin and Mexico, the American University in Beirut, and Texas Women's College in Denton, Texas.

She has been a guest instructor at folk dance camps: Maine Folk Dance Camp, which she was instrumental in founding; Folklore Village, Wisconsin; Oglebay Institute in Wheeling, West Virginia; Mendocino Folk Dance Camp; Idlewild Dance Camp, University of So. California in Santa Barbara, University of Pacific Folk Dance Camp in Stockton; Los Alamos New Mexico Institute; the National Folk Festivals in Washington, DC, New York and St. Louis; Lighted Lantern Festival in Denver; the Folk Arts Center and the New England Folk Festival, both in Boston.

**\*\*When I was collecting information for my publication of the memoirs of Vyts Beliajus, I found some full-page 'Washington Post' programs Vyts had given me of the National Folk Festivals, founded by Sarah Gertrude Knott. In all of them, whether of the festivals in St. Louis, New York or Washington, DC, were lists of groups including those of Vyts Beliajus, Morry Gelman, and Nelda Guerrero. At the 6<sup>th</sup> National, there were over 400 participants from 26 states! It must have taken**

extremely difficult endeavors in funding, training, travel and presentation in those early days, but Nelda always made it happen for her group. These old and fragile papers are now preserved in the Vyts Beliajus collection at the Brigham Young University Library of Music and Dance in Provo, Utah.

The list of dances Nelda has taught and introduced is far too long to enumerate, but you know and dance them at almost every event you attend. \*\*And you most certainly will at the San Antonio Folk Dance Festival this weekend.

In 1982, Nelda was named Professor Emeritus of San Antonio College. In 1983 she retired from SA College as head of the Dance Department, but has continued to encourage and support folk dancing, instructors and cultural groups from around the world.

In 1995 Nelda was honored by the Ford Salute to Education for her work in the performing arts, particularly international folk dance, which she taught for more than 40 years in San Antonio and around the world, and founded the annual folk dance festival at San Antonio College, now called the San Antonio Folk Dance Festival. \*\*You will see the continuation of her work at the festival tonight and especially at the concert tomorrow evening.

In 2001, Nelda was honored at the "Stars of Texas" Preservation Awards for her artistic, historical and civic contributions. That same year, in Cincinnati, she received the National Dance Association's highest award for her distinguished record of accomplishment. She was also awarded the Heritage Award from AAHPERD (American Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.) In 2008, Nelda received an award for "special recognition for her 50 years of dedicated work" for the San Antonio Folk Dance Festival. The National Folk Organization of the USA has also previously awarded Nelda for her accomplishments in the San Antonio College and Festival.

Nelda has written: "A bad left knee keeps me from hopping around like I used to do. I'm a professional volunteer now!" \*\*I might add, nearly full-time at that! Nelda is still constantly involved with school festivals and cultural events.

Nelda has done extensive research in Mexican, Central American and So. American dance. Her teaching has taken her throughout the US, Mexico, the Orient and

Europe, presenting seminars and workshops. She has a wealth of dance costumes that she has collected on her world travels.

Nelda has written "I am so blessed to have had the opportunity to be involved with folk dance since the late 1940s, early 1950s, [\*\*and continuing to today] and to have known, worked with, and learned from people such as Vyts Beliajus, Dick Crum, Jane Farwell, Alura Flores de Angeles, Madelynne Greene, Michael and Mary Ann Herman, 'Uncle Ralph Page,' Dave Rosenberg, and so many other wonderful folk dancers."

It is with a wonderful sense of pleasure and great appreciation to present Nelda G. Drury with the National Folk Organization's 2014 "Preserving Our Heritage Award."

\*\* indicate DeWayne Young's personal comments.