

# CDSS Lifetime Contribution Award ~ Helene Cornelius

by Robin Hayden

*Helene Cornelius, English country dance leader of CDS Boston Centre for nearly forty years and a perennial favorite at our dance weeks at Pinewoods and Buffalo Gap, has made an invaluable contribution to the English dance community as a teacher, an arbiter of taste, an inspiration to generations of dancers, and an incomparable builder of both historical and contemporary repertory. Accordingly, the CDSS Governing Board has selected her as the first recipient of its Lifetime Contribution Award, an honor established to recognize individuals whose life's work has had a profound and lasting influence on the dance and song community. English country dance caller (and CDSS Membership Secretary) Robin Hayden recently talked with Helene and her husband Arthur about their long involvement in country dancing.*

Helene came to work in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the Harvard Computation Lab in the early 1940s. The idea of folk dancing appealed to her greatly, and when colleagues at work told her about Ralph Page's dance, she eagerly went along and was soon a regular there. This led her to international folk dancing and then to Scottish, where she and a friend heard about a demonstration morris lesson. "We thought, 'Oh well, we might as well go there too' — we were doing everything else!"

And so it was that on a Wednesday in 1951 she went morris dancing at the Charles Street Meeting House. After the morris there was country dancing, and they stayed for that as well. Like many of us, Helene continued to dance many different traditions, becoming an accomplished, well-rounded folk dancer. But from the start she was particularly drawn to English country.

"In English country dancing, what we liked was the music," she told me. She explained that although the music was much more straightforward in those days — just a piano at first, and then for many years a single violinist — the beauty of the tunes came through and drew her in.

Helene began teaching at the Boston Centre in 1963, after Louise Chapin retired. By her own account, she was pretty much thrown into teaching without any training or support. "[After the country dancing] we'd stay for the morris, and then we'd go to the Midget and have our beers, and then we'd ride home and Arthur would tell me all the things that could have been better. And it was really very helpful. I'm sure I was just awful! Because you fall into all the pitfalls — or at least some of them." As the best teachers often are, she says she was grateful for this feedback. "Because I really respected what he said! And he was right — I mean I could see that. That's how I learned a lot."

Almost immediately she began to introduce new dances into the repertoire. "Arthur had borrowed from the Boston CDS library the Sharp books, and so I started

looking at them — and I was really surprised to see how many dances were in these books which we never did!" Asked why she had gone ahead and tried out new dances when others were sticking to a set repertoire, she said, "Well, I guess because I liked them. Some of them were such fun, and the tunes were so good." The tune is always the first thing she looks at when considering a new dance. She is also interested in things that are different in some way, "but not outlandish."

This sounds like common sense — good tune, novelty, neat construction — and of course it is; but Helene showed the way, ferreting out old dances that are now standard favorites and homing in on the winners from a steadily increasing stream of modern compositions. (She was English dance editor of the *CDSS News* from 1989-1998.)

Over the years, the music we dance to has changed as well. In Boston in the mid '70s the members of the band Bare Necessities began to develop their inventive, improvisational style, to Helene's delight and with her encouragement. Country dance musicians all over have followed their lead. Together, this flourishing of musical creativity and the enormous growth in repertory have contributed

immeasurably to the vitality of English country dancing today.

Helene's mastery as a teacher — her direct, succinct vocabulary and air of gentle but compelling authority — make her a favorite of dancers everywhere. Her legacy can be seen on the crowded dance floors from Berkeley to Boston, in the long wait lists at our dance weeks, and in the excitement of new, young dancers who will carry her love of dancing into the future.

The Lifetime Contribution Award will be formally presented by CDSS to Helene at Boston Centre's Fall Favorites dance on October 26 at Monument Hall in Concord, Massachusetts. All are invited.

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Helene at Pinewoods Camp, 2007; photo: David Green