

Jane Made Merriment

Folklore Village's founder shared frolic and fun through ethnic music and dance.

By Gretchen Kumlien, Columbus, Ohio

I MET Jane Farwell in the summer of 1972 while attending the Badger Girls State conference in Madison. I remember little from that event except for one momentous evening.

Jane led 300 energetic teens in a recreational folk dance. A small group of us was positively smitten with what we'd experienced and rushed up to her afterward with questions: Where could we get this music? How could we do more of this?

She kindly handed us a discography that encompassed ethnic music from such nationalities as German and Scandinavian along with instructions for some dances like polkas and the two-step.

Even better, Jane invited us out to Folklore Village, as she lovingly called her Dodgeville farm, which would become the breeding ground for folk-dance live music. Saturday night potlucks and dances were held in an old schoolhouse down the road.

It took some finagling on my part, but I was determined to go. I was 16, an inexperienced driver and lived 50 miles away.

I remember as she left us that evening, she'd said, "I'd love to stay longer, girls, but the strawberries are ripe back at the farm and I have to be up early to pick."

For me, the "farmer wannabe", I thought how lovely it must be to have to go home to pick strawberries. Now, as an avid gardener, I can't pick berries without thinking of Jane.

Pitched in to Help

Luckily, my parents loaned me the family car, and later that summer, I made my way on the backroads that wound through the unglaciated hills of southwestern Wisconsin to Folklore Village for an unforgettable visit.

I entered the schoolhouse to find a group of university types from Madison and a neighboring farmer or two scrubbing carrots around a big old washtub. I introduced myself and explained that

HERE TO STAY. Farwell Hall (below) at Folklore Village was named after Jane. She was born in 1916 on her family's farm, which is now known as Folklore Village. Her grandpa built their farmhouse in the late 1800s.



LEAVING HER MARK. Jane Farwell's legacy lives on today at Folklore Village with concerts, classes, dances and more. Left: Jane played accordion music for others to dance to while at Antioch College in Ohio in the 1930s.



Jane had invited me to come and dance. She'd be back soon, they said. In the meantime, would I like to help scrub carrots? I pulled up a stool and lent a hand.

I glanced around as we chatted and scrubbed.

Scandinavian rosemaling seemingly was everywhere. The wainscoting, blackboard, light fixtures and fine wooden floor remained from the building's earliest days. It spoke of an authenticity I'd soon see carried over to its present purpose of providing warmth and hospitality on Saturday nights.

This lovely space turned positively magical when we sat down for supper, each table illuminated by a wrought-iron candelabra sitting on a red-and-white checkered tablecloth. Then came good food, stories, music and the folk dancing.

Simply put, Jane made merriment. As midnight approached, the electric lights were abandoned and wall-mounted candles were lit. As I drove home, I knew I'd shared in something special.

A Homecoming to Remember

I finally convinced a handful of my friends that this Folklore Village place was worth checking out. Though no one ever quite caught the fever as I had, there were times I made the trip in a packed car with a jolly crew.

Jane is credited with being one of the founders of the modern folk dance movement. She passed away in 1993 and today, her legacy lives on at Folklore Village with cultural music and dance weekends, hoedowns, concerts, folk school classes and more. This year will mark the 76th annual Festival of Christmas and Midwinter Traditions, which Jane originated.

I'm grateful for the riches Jane bestowed upon me as a teenager. I've tried to show my thanks by passing on this gift to others.

My family and I returned to Folklore Village, some years ago now, along with a few friends from Ohio who also had ties to Jane and her extraordinary place. This homecoming brought me great joy...same as I'd felt here so long ago.

"Thank you, Jane," I whispered as we entered the old schoolhouse. In my mind, I was scrubbing carrots around the old washtub...soaking it all in.

For more on Folklore Village, check out folklorevillage.org.



Photos courtesy Terri Van Orman, Folklore Village