

WOODEN SHOE DANCE

by Bill Nichols



During the 1960's Americans became more conscious of the unique heritage that binds the many different backgrounds of the American people. Still, multitudes are in search of the things they can identify with their past. Certainly one of the things that contributed to this search for their past was the renewed popularity of American folk music. In the late 1950's and 60's folk groups, like the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary, created an awareness of a great heritage through music. With this renewed interest in folk music it was only natural that the folk dance would also enjoy a new surge of popularity.

People attending folk festivals in the Appalachian region became aware of a folk dance that is native to that area - CLOGGING -. From the Appalachians, CLOGGING has now spread across America, and has become a dance in search of a history. A true folk dance or folk song is a dance or song that is passed from generation to generation, from person to person, by word of mouth or demonstration without ever being put into written form.

The very name, CLOGGING, gives a clue to the origin of the dance. A CLOG is a wooden shoe. This suggests that the original dance was performed while wearing wooden shoes, thus, the dance retained the name of the shoe. This also suggests that the original dance was performed by Dutch and German ancestors (who are known to have worn wooden clogs).

What happened to the original dance? Why, when, and what changes have been made to it? These are questions that require a look at America and her people from a slightly different point of view. America is a mixture of the peoples of the world. As the people began to mix, so did the music and dances. This mixing process is what makes the history of clogging so hard to understand. I cannot, nor can anyone I have talked with, say for sure from where the original clog dance came or what the original style of performance was like. To the best of my research the following description is most satisfying: „A dance bearing the name of a wooden shoe, probably brought to America by German ancestors.“

The original dance was mixed or influenced by dances of Scotch-Irish ancestry. These three influences can be readily identified by people who have studied folk dancing. However, some of the influences involved English, Polish, Cherokee and African, and cannot be readily identified because of the close similarities to the others. In other words, the dance would vary from community to community depending on which influence was the strongest. This gave the dancer a great range of freedom which contributed to the variety of steps he could perform.

Limited only by the dancer's imagination, CLOGGING became an expression of freedom and zest for life. For many, many years, CLOGGING remained under the influence of the Appalachian folk dancer without outside influence. So the people of Appalachia still dance the dance of generations past, handing it down from generation to generation, from person to person, preserving a part of the American heritage in a living transfer of past to present, and present to future.