

Mary Shoolbraid Brandon

Mary Shoolbraid was born into a dancing family. Three generations of her family before her taught dancing in Fife, on the east coast of Scotland. In particular, Mary was inspired by her mother, Mamie, describing her as "that rarity, a gifted dancer and teacher who could make anyone dance." Appropriately, Mary's dance written for her mother, "Mamie's Jig," is a favourite of beginners everywhere.

Mary came to Vancouver in the early 1960s, fresh from taking her Teacher's Certificate in St. Andrews. She found Scottish country dancing well established under the leadership of Mrs. Bingham, but no official Branch of the RSCDS existed in Vancouver. Mary immediately became an active member of the Provincial Society committee (an umbrella group representing the local SCD clubs). Seeing the importance of attracting young people to dancing, in February 1963 she promoted the idea of an SCD festival for children, and met with the Superintendent of Schools in Vancouver to discuss the idea. Subsequently she became Chairman of the Festival Committee, and organized a number of successful festivals which must have introduced hundreds of Vancouver schoolchildren to SCD.

In 1963 Mary was the main organizer of Miss Milligan's visit to Vancouver. Miss Milligan made a strong impression, and strongly encouraged the Vancouver dancers to form a Branch of the RSCDS. Afterwards, Mary wrote to Miss Milligan, "We benefited tremendously, and the help and encouragement we received will, I trust, have far-reaching results." Mary carried on the liaison with Edinburgh, and a year later the Branch was formed, with Mary a member of the first Branch committee and also the teacher of the Basic Class.

Over the next two years Mary was a leader in almost every aspect of the Branch's work. In August 1964 she organized a major performance at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in honour of Mrs. MacNab. She started the first Demonstration Team classes in January 1965; under her leadership, the Demonstration Team traveled as far as Seattle to perform. She organized children's classes at seven Community Centres in Vancouver. Also in 1965, she taught a teacher candidate class, with all seven candidates successful. In July 1965, Mary was appointed as Senior Instructor for the Branch, and in that capacity she looked after all the day-to-day running of classes, parties, and balls.

The Branch Chairman had this to say about Mary at the AGM of 1966: "Thanks are given finally to Miss Mary Shoolbraid, Senior Instructor, on whose shoulders so much of the responsibility for so many of the Branch's activities rest - the planning and selection of the Branch classes, the Children's Festival, the Community Centre classes for children, the demonstration group and the teachers' classes." In all her work, Mary was particularly concerned with upholding RSCDS standards, standards which she herself exemplified beautifully in her dancing and teaching.

Mary left Vancouver in late 1966 for her marriage to David Brandon and new life in Los Angeles. She and David became leaders in the Los Angeles Branch, which David had helped to found. Later, after moving to Hawaii, they founded the Hawaii Branch. After David's retirement, they returned to Los Angeles and continued their active dancing and teaching. Mary tutored many teacher candidate classes and traveled several times to Japan to instruct candidates there. In 1987, Mary received the RSCDS Scroll of Honour for her major achievements in Vancouver, Los Angeles, and Hawaii. Subsequently she was appointed as one of the first RSCDS examiners in North America.

Mary has published two books of unusual and popular dances, *Memories of Fife* and *Dances with a Difference*, including dances with original tunes by her musician brother Murray of Salt Spring Island. Several of her dances, for example "Mamie's Jig," "Sandy Butterly," and "The Balgeddie Reel," often appear on programs. Mary is still living near Los Angeles and although she no longer takes an active part in dancing or teaching, she is still passionately interested in Scottish country dancing.

Rosemary Coupe
Branch Archivist



Miss Milligan with Vancouver teacher candidates, 1965. Mary Shoolbraid (later Brandon) is seated to left of Miss Milligan with her brother Murray in front.

*Miss Milligan with teacher candidates
Clockwise from left: Murray and Mary Shoolbraid,
Nina Thurston, Margaret Zadworny, Harvey Barnes,
Barbara McPhail, Beryl MacMillan, Sheena Ellis,
Sheila Cairns*



Sketch by Kirstie Shoolbraid of Leslie Braes seen from the Shoolbraid family home in Leslie, Fife