

Virgil Morton Papers
San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum

INTRODUCTION

Provenance

The scrapbook in this collection was donated to the archives by a friend of Virgil Morton, Mr. Alex Soto, on May 14, 1981. The remainder of the collection was donated by Virgil Morton on an undetermined date.

Restrictions

Entire collection is open for research use.

Publication Rights

Vary with material.

Collection No.

Size

No. of boxes: 1 carton; 1 oversize box
Linear feet: 2

Processed by

Marianne Carden

Date completed

September 16, 1994

Related collections

Dance Companies Files
Dance Miscellaneous Files--Folk dance
Ethnic Dance Festival Records
Biographical Files

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BIOGRAPHY

Virgil Leroy Morton was born on January 24, 1913 in Sioux county, Nebraska to Priscilla and David Morton. He attended high school in Mitchell, Nebraska and graduated with honors in 1931. During the summers of 1930 and 1931, Morton received dancing instruction in ballroom, folk, and musical comedy at the Soderstrom School of Dance in Denver, Colorado. After his graduation, Morton worked as a chorus dancer with the Fanchon-Marco units at the Tabor Theatre in Denver and taught ballroom dance at Soderstrom School of Dance. Morton attended college briefly, from 1932-33, as a journalism major at the University of Nebraska. He then returned to performing and appeared in various minor dancing parts in motion pictures at MGM and Paramount Studios. He also appeared as a dancer in several of Theodore Kosloff's Hollywood Bowl productions.

In 1935, Morton moved to San Francisco, where he began teaching ballroom dancing at Albert Ludwig Studios and studying tap and acrobatic dancing at the Fanchon-Marco Studios. The following year, he began study of Spanish and Mexican dancing with Jose and Elisa Cansino. In late 1935 or early 1936, Morton also joined the Swedish Applied Arts Group, which met weekly to practice Scandinavian folk dances at the home of Valborg "Mama" Gravander. From this group, Song Chang, a Chinese greeting card artist, organized an international folk dancing group, International Folk Dancers (later called Chang's International Folk Dancers.) Initially, this group met at 15 Hotaling Pl. in San Francisco. After reorganization, Virgil Morton was selected to be its first official teacher in 1937. This group performed in the Estonian Village at the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939 and 1940. Morton himself appeared as a dancer and actor in the Calvacade of America pageant at the exposition. He also enhanced his professional training through study of dance and drama at the San Francisco Theatre Union and study of ballet at the San Francisco Opera Ballet School. Morton next studied at the George Pring Studio and appeared as a dancer in The Enchanted Well, a musical comedy held at the Tivoli Theatre in September 1940.

During the early forties, Morton divided his time between dancing and military service. From October-December 1940, he joined a dance quartet and toured night clubs in the Pacific

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Northwest. Morton also served as an instructor for several Bay Area folk dance groups, including Chang's International Folk Dancers, the Marin Folk Dance Society, and the Alpine Club Folk Dancers. In 1942, Morton appeared as a dancer in two San Francisco productions, The Devil and Daniel Webster and The Rose Masque.

Morton began his military service for World War II on August 18, 1942 at the United States Navy Recruiting Station in San Francisco. He then transferred to the U.S.S. Bosque and participated in naval operations in the Pacific. On December 16, 1945, Morton received an Honorable Discharge from the Navy. He immediately returned to study and teaching, working as a dancer for the San Francisco Russian Opera and Ballet Company from April 26-May 11, 1946 and attending the Holloway School of Theatre. After these engagements, Morton served as a lead dancer for the Savoy Light Opera Co. This group toured throughout the United States and Canada between August 1946 and July 1947, performing a repertory of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. From 1947-48, Morton performed in the ballet section of the Metropolitan Opera Co. and also took part in the International Folk Dance Festival at the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles.

In the late forties and early fifties, Morton continued to perform professionally, to teach, and to further his dance education. From February 1948-June 1949 and April-December 1951, Morton attended the American Theatre Wing School in New York and completed coursework in dance and drama. He also joined the Savoy Light Opera Co.'s tour of eastern Canada, Minneapolis, and Chicago from October 1948-February 1949. This production was followed by a tour of California with The Wayfarers, a trio consisting of Virgil Morton, Madelynne Greene, and folk singer David Allen. The Wayfarers eventually appeared on the KPIX T.V. program, Folk Fest, for a six month period in 1948 and 1949.

During the fifties and sixties, Morton devoted the majority of his time to teaching. From June 1951-55, he taught folk and ballroom dancing for various recreation programs around the Bay Area. In June 1953, Morton began teaching folk and ballroom dancing for the summer session at San Francisco State University. He continued to offer classes at SFSU until his resignation in 1971. Morton also gave private dance lessons at his studio at 97 Collingswood St. In addition, Morton assisted with the dance components of the Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival in Sonoma and the Mt. Tamalpais Mountain Play. Between 1954 and 1960, Morton also served as co-director of dance for the Sherry Players, a folk dance group which gave presentations on traditional folk

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dances at various cultural events. Along with all of these other activities, Morton published numerous articles on folk dancing and the teaching of dance in such journals as Let's Dance and VILTIS. He also authored three books: Folk Dance Treasures (1950); The Teaching of Popular Dance (1966); and This is Ballroom Dance (1974).

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS

The Virgil Morton Papers document Morton's professional dance and teaching activities and also provide a valuable source of information on the history of folk dance groups in the Bay Area. Morton's life is illustrated in photographs ranging from his early childhood to his later years as an instructor at San Francisco State University. Through resumes and chronologies, as well as newsclippings and correspondence, the course of Morton's career from the 1930s-1960s can be traced. The collection also contains a scrapbook documenting Morton's naval career during World War II and examples of his writings and dance class offerings.

Programs, newsletters, correspondence, and photos from various folk dance organizations and dance and theatre companies provide a chronicle of the men and women who pioneered the study and teaching of traditional folk dances. Among the groups included in the collection are the California Alpine Folk Dancers, Chang's International Folk Dancers, the Folk Dance Federation, Swedish Applied Arts, Menlo Amigos, the Savoy Light Opera, and the Sherry Players. Early performances of folk dances by Morton and Chang's International Folk Dancers at the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939 and 1940 are illustrated in photos and programs. Other individuals who helped to popularize folk dancing, particularly Morton's partners, Madelynne Greene and Grace Perryman, are also highlighted by the collection. Information on folk dancing techniques and steps is available in hand-outs and notes Morton compiled for his classes. A few miscellaneous examples of folk dance music are present in the form of musical scores and a tape recording.

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SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

SERIES I. BIOGRAPHICAL
12 folders, 1 scrapbook

Consists of photos, newsclippings, resumes, correspondence, scrapbooks, and programs chronicling the life of Virgil Morton and his involvement in a variety of performance groups and organizations in the Bay Area. Arranged by format and thereunder by date.

SERIES II. WRITINGS
2 folders

Includes articles, notes, and hand-outs prepared by Morton to give to his classes and to provide the dance community with information about the study and teaching of folk dance. Arranged by format and thereunder by date.

SERIES III. CLASSES
3 folders

Contains catalogues, class descriptions, correspondence, and photos which document Morton's teaching activities at San Francisco State University. Arranged by format and thereunder by date.

SERIES IV. ORGANIZATIONS
7 folders

Consists of programs, newsletters, histories, and correspondence which reveal the contributions of various organizations in the Bay Area to the study and teaching of folk dancing. Arranged alphabetically by name of organization and thereunder by format and/or date.

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SERIES V. COMPANIES

5 folders

Includes photos and programs from various productions performed by dance and theater companies Morton was affiliated with. Arranged alphabetically by name of company and thereunder by date.

SERIES VI. DANCE PARTNERS

2 folders

Contains programs, clippings, and photos relating to Morton's dance partners, Madelynne Greene and Grace Perryman. Arranged alphabetically by name of partner.

SERIES VII. MUSIC

1 folder, 1 tape

Consists of miscellaneous sheet music and a tape recording of folk dance music. Arranged alphabetically by title.

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CONTAINER LIST

SERIES I. BIOGRAPHICAL

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
1	1	Photos-childhood	1913-27
	2	" -portraits	1920s-1950s
	3	" -dance perf.	1930s-1960s
	4	" -Golden Gate	
		International Exposition	1939
	5	" -Navy	1940s
	6	" -friends	n.d.
	7	Resumes	1968;1976
	8	Newsclippings	1943-80
	9	Correspondence	1947-76
	10	Programs	1937-63
	11	American Theatre Wing	1951
12	Priscilla Morton	n.d.	
2	1-2	Scrapbook-navy years	1940s
	3	Oversize portraits of Morton and friend	n.d.

SERIES II. WRITINGS

1	13	Articles	n.d.
	14	Dance notes	n.d.

SERIES III. CLASSES

1	15	SFSU catalogues	1954-64
	16	SFSU correspondence	1961-72
	17	Class descriptions	1944-70
	18	Photos	n.d.

SERIES IV. ORGANIZATIONS

1	19	California Alpine Folk Dance Group	1941
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<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
1	20	Chang's International Folk Dancers	
		--History	
	21	--Programs	1939-64
	22	--Newsletters	1942;1951; 1960s-70s
	23	--Correspondence	1960s
	24	Folk Dance Federation	1950s
	25	Swedish Applied Arts	

SERIES V. COMPANIES

1	26	Menlo Amigos	1950s
	27	Savoy Light Opera-papers	1940s
	28	" " " -photos	1940s
	29	Sherry Players-papers	1950s
	30	" " -photos	1950s

SERIES VI. DANCE PARTNERS

1	31-32	Madelynne Greene	1940s
	33	Grace Perryman	1950s

SERIES VII. MUSIC

1	34	Misc. sheet music for folk dances	n.d.
	35	Tape recording of Mexican folk dances	n.d.