

MRS. CLARA DIMOND HOLLAND**For 50 years, she turned mavericks**

—Sunday Journal Photo by THOMAS D. STEVENS

BY JOHN HANLON

The pressing question before many a Rhode Island household is this:

With Mrs. Clara Dimond Holland no longer teaching young Rhode Islanders proper dancing and the proper graces that should go with it, who is there now to teach them precisely as she did?

For more than half a century . . . "joyous, happy times," she calls her 52 years of it . . . Mrs. Holland conducted dancing classes that stressed mainly the delights of the waltz and the foxtrot.

But, much more than that, they included strong emphasis on what she calls "social deportment, un-awares." It is this touch from another, more gentle day, that will be sorely missing.

This meant girls wearing their fanciest dresses and for the boys, dark suits, bow ties and white cotton gloves, or "mittens" as they got to be called by each succeeding wave of pupils.

It meant, as well, learning how to ask a partner to dance, and how to accept; how to enter the room. It stressed the form for meeting and introducing patronesses. It told how to hold a partner, how to serve a partner refreshments, how to say thank you with a bow and a curtsy.

Literally thousands learned their dancing and their dancing manners

from Mrs. Holland, coming from all ranks and stations over three generations. Her own son-in-law is a former pupil, as were his brother and sister. His father and mother, too, attended her classes.

But a few weeks ago, Mrs. Holland decided she had gone far enough with it and, to the dismay of many a parent if not all their offsprings, the familiar announcement that her various classes would soon be meeting did not arrive. She decided it was time to retire.

"There were a number of things involved," Mrs. Holland was saying the other day, talking of her decision. "But mostly I felt I was on the verge of the day when I would have to give it up. So I said to myself, 'Why wait?' I decided to do it now, while I can still enjoy my garden, my friends, my family, my grandchildren."

She sat there, in the living room of her trim home in Warwick, impeccably turned out, her grayish hair neatly coifed, looking at least 10 years younger than the coming birthday that will put her in her early 70s.

She has about her a proper, almost regal air, the hallmark of her generation and her long Rhode Island genealogy. It was this air that was so evident when she stood before her classes, wearing her long gown, car-



Photos courtesy of G. Fales Peirce of Rumford
MRS. HOLLAND greets her pupils as they arrive at Rumford Grange. "I never had time to take pictures," she said. This one and the other pictures with this article were taken sometime ago by one of the parents.

into little ladies and gentlemen

rying a castanet in her right hand (for clicking to attention any wandering pupil), and proceeded with the making of little ladies and gentlemen out of mavericks.

The regality is there, all right, but it is softened by a musical voice and one other thing that is distinctly unregal. When she tells of incidents that warmed or amused her during those joyous, happy times, there is a tendency for the mist to form quickly in her eyes.

"There are so many wonderful things," she said. "I'm almost afraid I'll lose them if I talk about them. Like little boys who didn't care to wear the gloves coming to me and saying, 'Oh, Mrs. Holland, I forgot my gloves,' and then I'd see a thumb of one of them sticking from his pocket.

"Then, during the war, a woman . . . I think she was a Wave . . . came to me once and said, 'I just want to look at your face.' Then she told me that she was at a dance with a boy and he met another boy who was one of my pupils. 'Most of the evening, the girl said, 'they just talked about you and your classes.'

"Another soldier told me the story of the time he was across, in the middle of things. At one point, he turned to the man next to him and said, 'If I were home tonight, I'd

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CHURCHILL HOUSE on Angell Street was the center for Friday and Saturday evening classes for nearly 40 years. Classes, such as this one of a few years ago, are well-remembered.



For Colds and Flu

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 2. Drink plenty of fluids.
 3. Take Aspirin
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MRS. HOLLAND continued

'I Never Miss Hullabaloo'

be at Mrs. Holland's dancing class.' And the other looked at him and said, 'So would I.' Until then they'd been perfect strangers.

"And once a pilot called me after some important thing and, in the course of it, he said, 'And when we have to get dressed in our fancy uniform, would you know that I'm the only one who doesn't mind wearing mittens?'"

Mrs. Holland started it all as a teacher of folk dancing in Providence playgrounds and as gym teacher for Miss Bronson's School, which used to be on Hope Street.

"There were two sisters, Caroline and Cornelia," Mrs. Holland said. "It was Caroline who encouraged me. She told me I had a natural ability to teach anything I wanted to. Then a group of women formed a class for their children and asked me to teach, and then another, and it went from there.

In due time, after her husband died while her two daughters were still quite young, she elected to forego her gym teaching and concentrate on her dancing classes.

For younger groups she traveled as far as Attleboro and Taunton as well as locally to give her instructions. The older groups centered on a series of meetings that, for nearly 40 years, were conducted Friday and Saturday nights at Churchill House, on Angell Street. It was at these that many polished their dancing skills and graces.

"I had Mrs. Elianne Wild with me at the piano for 23 years," Mrs. Holland said. "I think Churchill House is the one most of my pupils remember. Anyway, the boys do. Girls are inclined to be wishy-washy about it, but boys like the form of such things. I remember one mother saying that my classes were the only thing he'd ever voluntarily wash his neck for."

Did Mrs. Holland approve of the present-day form of the dance?

"Well, I'll say this — I never miss Hullabaloo, I find it fascinating," she said. "It's not my kind of dancing, but I watch. I don't think I have the right to approve or disapprove, because these dances belong to these

young people. And I do remember that in the 30s people objected because youngsters danced too close. Now they object because they dance three or four feet apart."

Whatever the changes in dancing style, Mrs. Holland said, she remained constant with her teachings of the old and honorable forms and its customs.

"Right up to last year I did the same things I did when I began," she said, "and it has lived. Even now I have older women who were with me come to me and say, talking about being at a dance, 'I can always tell one of your boys, Mrs. Holland.'"

"And every year for the last few, before starting, I'd say to myself, 'Oh, but who still wants this?' and every year they did. Even now, since the word got around that I was retiring, I've had phone calls and letters asking me to continue."

She thought about this momentarily and seemed pleased.

"It has lived," Mrs. Holland said, "so it must be something important." □



BOWING AND CURTSEYING were among the social graces Mrs. Holland emphasized. It was a 'touch from another, gentler day,' she explains.