

Way We Were  
March 30, 2016  
Devoted to Dancing  
Mahala Ruddell, Research coordinator

Though her time in Park City was short, the final piece in our Women's History Month series looks at the life and career of Joan Woodbury, accomplished modern dancer and faculty emeritus at the University of Utah.

A native of Utah, Joan studied in Germany as the first Fulbright scholar in dance under the tutelage of Mary Wigman. Wigman has long been considered one of the most influential choreographers of modern dance and remains extremely important in dance history. By 1951, Woodbury was serving on the faculty of the University of Utah dance program and was making waves in the dance world herself. As the *Park Record* noted in 1958, she was "devoted to the art of dancing" and greatly enjoyed teaching it.

In 1964, Joan and her colleague Shirley Ririe began hosting summer dance workshops here in Park City in the building colloquially referred to by Parkites as the "Blue Church." Charles Woodbury, Joan's husband and principal of Park City High School in the 1950s and early 1960s, had purchased the closed and de-commissioned LDS church at 424 Park Avenue. The couple renovated the building for use as a dance studio.

Woodbury and Ririe were influential in getting world-renowned choreographer Alwin Nikolais as guest artist at the workshops. Nikolais was famous for his "manipula[tion] of electronic sound, sensuous imagery, and play on light," experimentations that earned him "praise by audiences and critics in Rome, London, Paris, New York, and Canada." Woodbury and Nikolais had met when Woodbury was 21 years old. He had a "profound influence on her philosophy and aesthetic." Over the years, she taught with and for him both here in the United States and abroad.

Under Woodbury's and Ririe's direction, the workshops attracted students of all levels and, as Woodbury herself put it, "filled the city with the energy of over 150 dancers and made for very exciting times in the small town." In celebration of Park City's history and the beautiful mountain location, workshops also included evening seminars, picnics, melodramas, gondola rides, hiking, and horseback riding.

Joan and Charles Woodbury moved back to Salt Lake City and discontinued the summer workshops in Park City after four years. The church was later sold. Joan's career continued to flourish. She later won a "Distinguished Woman Award" presented by the Women's Resource Center at the University of Utah. The award "honors a Utah woman whose efforts have advanced the lot of Utah women either through directly benefitting them or through providing Utah women with a role model." She taught at the University of Utah for 47 years and received an Honorary Doctorate from the University. She has choreographed over 100 dances and continues to assist and support the dance company she co-founded with Shirley Ririe, the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company in Salt Lake City.



Image ID: Digi.53.6

Credit: Park City Historical Society and Museum, Joan Woodbury Collection

Caption: Joan and Charles Woodbury laid two dance floors, refreshed the exterior paint job, installed clear glass windows, and refurbished the kitchen and bathroom at the Blue Church in order to host dance workshops and classes like the one pictured here, ca.1964.

Sources:

*Iron County Record*, January 19, 1867

*Park Record*, May 1, 1958; April 15, 1965; July 27, 1978

*Utah Daily Chronicle*, May 25, 1955

<http://www.ririewoodbury.com/about>, accessed January 2016

Correspondence between the author and Joan Woodbury, October 2015 – January 2016