

# Johnson Rags Dance Club

## Arden Johnson Starts Group Dance Lessons

In the mid-1970's "Saturday Night Fever" called attention to the latest national dance craze: Disco. Here in West Lafayette, the role of "John Travolta" was played by Arden Johnson (1923-1988). While the popular dance music was "Stayin' Alive" and "Night Fever" Arden decided the time was right for more complete adult dance education in greater Lafayette.

Arden was a member of the faculty of Purdue's Department of Physical Education, Health & Recreation Sciences. In 1976 he started ballroom lessons at Morton School in West Lafayette with a small group of adult students. Arden was both an accomplished dancer and a skilled teacher. He was masterful with groups, getting people moving and building enthusiasm in a comfortable, fun environment.

## JRDC Meets Educational and Social Needs

Keeping the increasingly popular classes going wasn't enough for Arden. To keep people learning and dancing and to build momentum and enthusiasm for ballroom dance, he knew that the continuing educational and social aspects had to be addressed. Arden knew that to maintain and build interest, enthusiasm and skills social dance students must have a comfortable place to practice what they are learning; a place where others share their interest in ballroom dancing and encourage their development as dancers. This is why he founded *Johnson Rags Dance Club*.

In 1976, *JRDC* started out with 37 charter members:

### JRDC Charter Members

Arthur, Sarah	Johnson, Jeff
Bartlett, Dick and Mary Ann	Lerzak, Jules and Grace
Butler, Frank	Lerzak, Tim and Mary
Butler, Larry and Mary	Livelsberger, Dallas and Peggy
Casson, Eric and Peggy	Lundstrom, Bob and Anne
Cornwell, Frank and Juanita	MacKellar, Warren
Dilling, Ray and Eileen	Meyer, Robert
Ervin, Jerry and Edith	Snellenbarger, Ellen
Hartman, Jim and Cindy	Speaker, Ben and Charlene
Hinds, Bob and Anne	Spencer, Rick and Teresa
Johnson, Arden and Trula	Sutherland, Roz

Arden was so committed to continuing education and social needs of his students that he personally provided much of the necessary financial support for the club for the first three years. Thanks to Arden's teaching talents and to some timely coverage in the *Journal & Courier*, enrollment in Morton School classes soared to 400 people by 1978. The growing classes provided an increasing base of dance students from which the club could recruit new members. Arden continued to teach the classes through 1982-83 when he left Purdue to return to his native Minnesota.



## JRDC Comes of Age

Under Arden's guidance and financial support, the club continued to develop through the 1979-80 dance season. The 1979-80 club newsletter, the earliest newsletter we have been able to find, provides this picture of JRDC at the time:

<u>Five Dance Season</u>		
Thunder Black	Merou Grotto	September 29, 1979
Record Dance	Blessed Sacrament	November 3, 1979
Starlighters	Merou Grotto	February 2, 1980
Record Dance	Blessed Sacrament	March 29, 1980
Robin Wolf	Merou Grotto	April 26 1980

Officers: Mary Butler, President; Peggy Casson, Vice President; Ellen Snellenbarger, Secretary/Treasurer; Olive Rainey Member-at-Large.

Records show that by 1979-80, club officer roles and duties had been pretty well defined, and a constitution had been drafted. At the dance on November 3, 1979, the membership ratified the constitution. Club membership fee for the five dance season was \$25.00 per couple, \$12.50 per person. Membership was up from the original 37 members to 114. JRDC was "coming of age."

By the 1980-81 dance season, Arden decided that the club had matured to the point that it was ready stand on it's own financially. He reached a final financial agreement with the officers and like a child come of age, JRDC went forward, bound to make it without the promise of Arden's parental bail-out. At the same time Ellen Snellenbarger was ready to turn the Secretary / Treasurer duties over to Rita Manis who served in that capacity for three years. All of the 1980-81 dances were held at the Merou Grotto starting a long relationship with the Grotto that we continue to enjoy today.

## JRDC Meets Financial Challenges

The club struggled for the next three years. There were not enough members to provide annual membership fee income to cover the expenses for each dance. Financially, the club had always operated on a dance-by-dance basis, counting heavily on guest admission fees "at the door" to break even at each dance. However, this proved to be considerably harder to do without Arden there to cover any dance that lost money.

In 1983 President Doris Graefnitz, Vice President Irene Seders, Secretary/Treasurer Rita Manis, and Member at Large Larry Swartz with the assistance of Ellen Snellenbarger developed and implemented the annual membership fee basis which put the club on sound financial footing and which has kept us there ever since. These folks did their homework! They knew the Grotto would comfortably handle approximately 120 members (60 dancing couples). They knew they would need \$3,000 to cover the five planned dances. The membership fee for 1983-84 was set at \$25 a person, \$50 per couple. They composed a letter making the "dire need" known and challenging anyone interested or involved to step forward and commit to fill the membership goal. They made it clear that if we fell short, the club could not continue.

The thirteen lucky years that have passed since this group of leaders took on the risks of reorganization are proof of their vision and wisdom! In 1988-89 the JRDC dance schedule was expanded to our current seven dance season. While we owe credit for our club's beginning to Arden Johnson twenty years ago, we owe its survival through its toughest times to this group of leaders and to the members who answered their challenge in 1983.



## JRDC Looks To The Future

Looking back 20 years later, this is how we got here and why we are still here. Our club was saddened when our founder died in November, 1988, in St. Paul, Minnesota. But Arden Johnson left a legacy here in greater Lafayette. This anniversary celebration is about remembering our beginnings and about carrying that legacy into the future. Our club constitution reminds us that we are here for "fun, fellowship and ballroom dance opportunities." Arden was a devoted practitioner and promoter of each of these.

# Happy 20th Anniversary!

And here's to many more opportunities to learn, opportunities share, opportunities to encourage others, and opportunities to promote ballroom dance.

## JRDC Band History Quiz

Here are parts of band names found in the club's historical band contract file. Can you fill in the blanks to complete the band names?

- |                         |                            |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Paul _____ Orchestra | 10. Sun - _____            |
| 2. The _____ of Us      | 11. Misty & _____          |
| 3. _____ Black          | 12. _____ Morgan           |
| 4. Robin _____          | 13. Jack _____ Orchestra   |
| 5. _____ Inc.           | 14. Ed _____ Trio          |
| 6. Jim _____ Band       | 15. Ray Gretencord & _____ |
| 7. _____ - lighters     | 16. _____ Burgess Trio     |
| 8. Blue _____           | 17. Starry _____ Big Band  |
| 9. _____ & Co           | 18. _____ Experience       |

## JRDC Dance Trivia

A letter from VP Olive L. Rainey to bands (1980?) requests music for these dances that are still familiar:

**Cha-Cha, Swing, Waltz, Foxtrot, Polka, Rumba, Tango and Samba.**

**But**, do you remember these dances that are also mentioned?

Disco and American Heritage:

**Bus Stop** (any disco tune), **Amos Moses**, **Alley Cat** (Cab Driver is alternate tune),

**Blackhawk Waltz** (Lucille is alternate tune), **Moon Walk**, **Continental** (Little Black Book is one tune).



**Were you in these Classes?**

[Journal & Courier clipping announcing Arden Johnson's Ballroom Dance Lessons, fall of 1982]

**Ballroom dancing classes to be offered**

Ballroom dance classes that focus on the basics of foxtrot, waltz, swing, polka, rumba, tango and cha-cha will be offered by the West Lafayette Parks Department starting in September at Morton School.

Beginning and intermediate classes start Tuesday, Sept. 7, and will be conducted by Arden Johnson over a period of 10 weeks with each session running 90 minutes. The first two sessions are free for beginners.

Beginners classes will be from 7 to 8:30 p.m. on Tuesdays starting Sept. 7; intermediates 7 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesdays starting Sept. 8. Course fee for both is \$12.50.

Classes for advanced dancers will be held at the Family Inn starting Monday, Sept. 6. The 10-week series of classes costs \$14. Each session runs two and a half hours.

For further information call 477-7342.

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**Acknowledgments:**

Thanks to Ellen Snellenbarger and Larry Swartz for their recollections of Arden Johnson, the Morton School classes and J&C history. Thanks to Ellen for her archive of J&C documents and files, not to mention her seventeen years as Secretary/Treasurer!

Thanks also to Joe Gerrety for helping to search Journal & Courier records. We are still looking for a J&C feature article on Arden and the Morton School Classes we think was published between 1976 and 1980. The J&C reporter was probably Jan Fitzpatrick. The challenge is to find this article before our 25th Anniversary. That gives us five years! Were you in Arden's classes these years? Do you have the article or remember anything about it? Any recollections you have would be welcome.

Harry Smith  
1996 President

**Answers to Band History Quiz:**

- |            |                   |
|------------|-------------------|
| 1. Kenney  | 10. down          |
| 2. Four    | 11. Lucky         |
| 3. Thunder | 12. Ruth          |
| 4. Wolf    | 13. Brink         |
| 5. Pops    | 14. Howell        |
| 6. Alkire  | 15. Cosmopolitans |
| 7. Star    | 16. Harry         |
| 8. Notes   | 17. Knights       |
| 9. Bev     | 18. Sound         |