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DANCING GIRL

By Peggy Dahlberg Jensen



Red-haired Helen Joann Olson excelled as a performer and a teacher of dance. A Rockford native, her active career spanned more than half a century beginning in 1932, the year she graduated from Rockford High School

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Generations of Rockford children learned the fine art of dancing in the studio of Helen Joanne Olson. Her career as a professional dancer and later as a dance instructor spanned nearly 60 years. She had a great influence on her many students that continues to this day.

Helen grew up in Rockford and returned here after spending eighteen years in New York as a professional dancer. Many of her students sent their own children to Helen's dance studio. Some of them became professional dancers themselves. Helen is now 88 and stays in contact with many of her former students.

This article was written by Peggy Dahlberg Jensen. Peggy is a freelance writer and has contributed articles to many publications including the ***Nuggets of History***. She was also the former Editor of the ***Nuggets*** and was a Contributing Editor to ***Rockford Magazine***. She and her husband Stan are both former board members of the Rockford Historical Society.

WE NEED YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS!

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 885-1740.

Thomas Powers, Editor

DANCING GIRL

By

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New York World's Fair, 1939-40. Dancing girls arrayed in all-white costumes performed tap, soft shoe and cancan routines in a George Jessel show. The girls were required not only to dance but also to sing. On one occasion, Jessel assigned each dancer to perform near a particular celebrity table. A five-foot-eight-inch red haired dancer—who admitted “I’m not a singer,”—nonetheless had to try. One patron shouted, “Hey Red, stick to dancing.” And Freddie Cantor yelled, “Hey, what’s with the Red Head?”

Rockfordian Helen Joann Olson, that red-haired dancer, had arrived in New York City, 1939, to study at the School of American Ballet. She had intended to spend only one year, but stayed for eighteen. During those years, she and a friend, Doris Melander, danced in choruses at night clubs in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut. They performed mostly ballet, but also tap and specialty toe dances. Photos submitted by agents assisted in securing contracts. (See next page).

Engagements as a chorus dancer at The Nut Club in Greenwich Village changed the course of Helen’s life. She would meet and marry her life’s partner, trumpeter Freddie Masters. His orchestra played at The Nut Club. They married in New York in 1942 on the eve of his departure for World War II training with the Merchant Marines.

After Basis Training, Freddie headed to Long Island for overseas duty. Meeting Glenn Miller, however, changed those plans. Miller requisitioned Freddie to arrange music for Army Air Corp. bands. That meant an assignment at Truax Field, Madison, Wisconsin. Helen followed him there and then found dancing assignments in Chicago and Milwaukee. But it also allowed her to return to Rockford for brief visits with her parents.



New York agents used photos such as this glamour shot and the one on the cover to obtain bookings for Helen Joann Olson during her 18 years in New York. Note: Helen's mother Anna designed and sewed these costumes.

One memorable occasion for Freddie and Helen occurred in New York Harbor. Freddie's band and Helen's dance troupe both entertained sailors on a makeshift stage aboard the aircraft carrier, USS Forrestal.



Trumpeter Freddie Masters, leader of the Freddie Masters Band, met Helen, his wife-to-be, when she performed with the band at The Nut Club in Greenwich Village in the early 1940s.

After the war, Freddie organized a new band to play on Broadway. But when the owner/promoter changed the name from Freddie Masters Orchestra to Freddie Chambers Orchestra, it caused friction and Freddie quit. Soon, however, he re-connected with the Air Force and for the next three years, the Masters Orchestra (and Helen) entertained personnel at Air Force, Navy and Army bases.

On a three-week assignment, for instance, at Thule, Greenland, the band opened with a comedian; then a girl singer; followed by Helen dancing fox trots, waltzes and tangos. Songs by the band included favorites of the 1940s/50s: "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "Elmer's Tune," "Up a Lazy River," and "Moon River" among others. Other appearances included locales such as Puerto Rico, the Panama Canal, California and Newfoundland.

Born in Rockford September 1, 1914, Helen Joann Olson was the only child of Anna and Elmer Olson. When the Olsons lived on Revell Avenue, Helen attended Jackson School on Summit Street. Next, she attended Wight School, 1358 Forth Avenue, when the family lived at 222 Seventh Street—an apartment above the present Nicholson Gift Shop. Her father, a barber, worked in the State & Madison building: McCarthy & Olson. And her mother, Anna, could in Helen's words, "Do everything." She designed and made many of Helen's costumes, including the glamorous ones seen in the photos on page 2 and on the cover.

Supportive parents, Elmer and Anna arranged for both ballet and violin lessons for their daughter. She began ballet lessons at age eleven; her parents were hopeful such skills would improve a flat-foot condition. Teachers included a Mrs. Blinn, Miss Semloh and tap dancer Myrtle Evans. Often Helen would be asked to perform during assemblies at Lincoln Junior High School. (She was among the first students to attend the "new" school.) At Rockford Central High School, Helen played in the first violin section.

Upon graduation in 1932, at age seventeen, Helen enrolled in a dance teacher's course in Chicago with Myrtle Evans. "Somehow, we shared the \$50 per person fee," chuckles Helen. Then in partnership, they opened the Evans/Olson School of Dance, located over the Orpheum Theater, on N. Main St. When Evans married, Helen took over until 1939 when she left for New York.

Meanwhile, she not only taught dancing but she continued to study, especially summers with the Pavley-Oukransky School of Dance in Chicago. She also performed at state fairs and at the 1932 Chicago World's Fair. There a seventeen-year old Helen danced at Soldier Field in the slave chorus of *Aida* with a performing group from Texas. "We (chorus dancers) had to wear gold paint to "bronze" our skin. It took days to remove it," says Helen.

In 1957, Helen and Freddie returned to live in Rockford at her parents' near east-side home. Her father had died and then her mother, in ill health, needed a daughter's care.

Finding it difficult to assemble another orchestra, Freddie instead established a metal plating company, Masters Plating, at the Broadway/15th Avenue location now occupied by Odling Construction Company. And Helen opened the Helen Joann Olson School of Dancing, located for ten years on Broadway; then ten years on Kishwaukee Street; followed by a studio at 509 East State Street.

Thousands of young people—boys and girls alike—flocked to Helen's dance studios. Her reputation as performer and teacher included qualifying for "Dance Masters of America," an extensive testing of skills in ballet, tap and acrobatics.

During a fifty-year career as a teacher of dance, Helen established herself as a mentor for aspiring young people. Included among her students were Olympic figure skaters, Janet Lynn, Kath Malmberg, and Sandy Lenz; plus Rockettes, Darla Bradle and Kathy Nelson.

Kathy Nelson relates how Helen took her and Darla to New York for two weeks during summer vacations for extra lessons. "Then later, we'd meet at the hotel evenings for dinner and then sometimes we'd have tickets in the "nosebleed" section of a Broadway Theatre. "We saw Carol Channing and the Andrew Sisters among others." Successful Radio City Rockette tryouts landed both Kathy and Darla positions. Kathy, then a college student, danced summers: 1970, 1971 and 1972. Darla danced as a Rockette for three complete years.

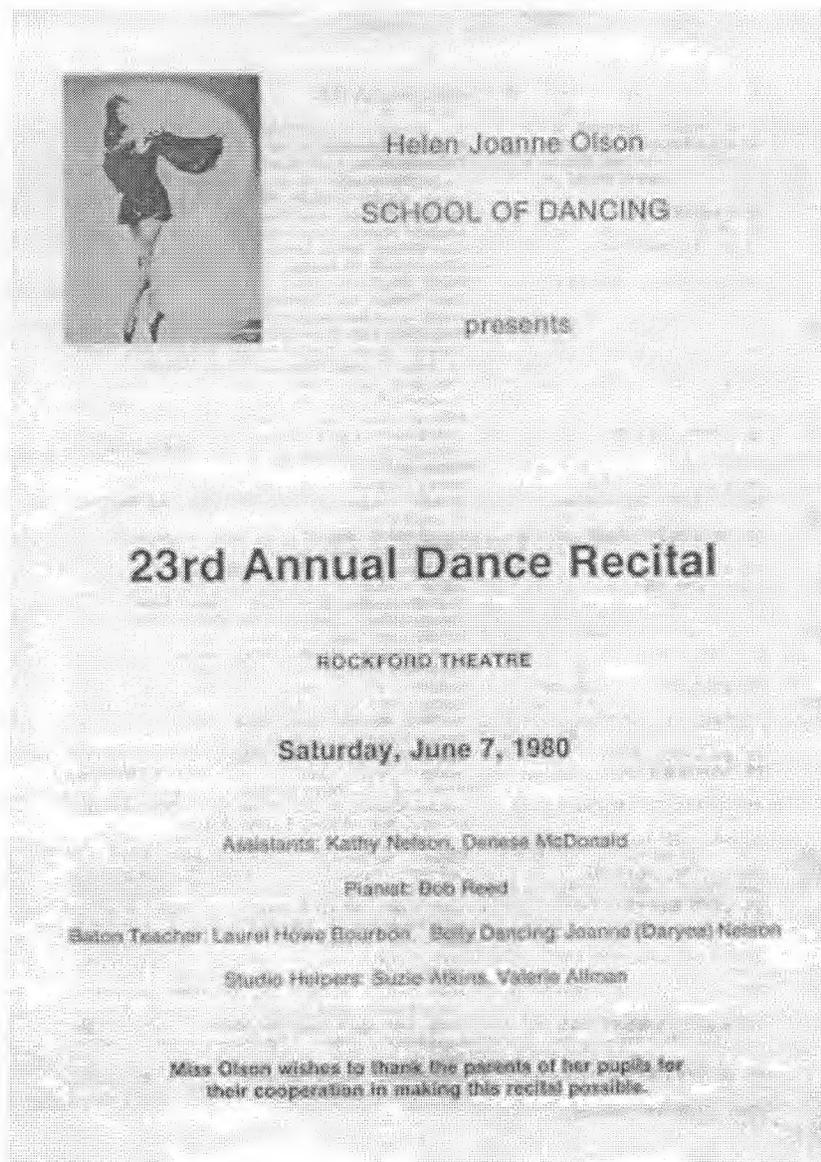
Helen's June dance recitals, 1958-1990, occupied two evenings at The Rockford Theater in order to accommodate all the students. Assisting Helen

would be pianists Myrtle Kline, Margaret Lofgren, and Bob Reed plus baton teacher Laurel Howe Bourbon, belly dancer Joanne (Daryea) Nelson, Kathy Nelson, Denese McDonald and others.



Each Olson School of Dancing recital featured a chorus line. One-time Radio City Rockettes, Kathy Nelson and Darla Bradel, stand at the center.

Then, too, costumed dancers and baton twirlers from Helen's studio marched/ performed in local parades. They added color and grace during Rockford's Memorial Day, Forth of July and Labor Day parades as well as at "Beattie Is" festivals.



The front of a program from one of the Olson School of Dance Recitals. The inside listed 61 individual dance routines with an intermission.

In answer to “How would you like to be remembered?” Helen said, “That I did some good in this life for dancers as a teacher and performer, but also as a Christian.”

As proof of Helen’s influence in the life of her students, Kathy Nelson, who succeeded Helen when she retired, says, “Helen was like a second mother to me.” Now a dance teacher in her own studio at 915 ½ East State Street, Kathy numbers among her students, second and third generation Olson students.

Another Olson dancer, Kim Nelson—now a Rockford pre-school special education teacher and a Golden Apple Award recipient—began lessons at age four. She studied ballet, toe and tap. As a teenager she assisted Helen by playing the piano on Saturday mornings for the youngest dancers. Kim credits her dancing for extra expertise and skill that qualified her to compete in a California competition as a member of the Winnebago High School Drill Team. Kim also has taught pre-school dance at our local YMCA. Dancing continues for this young mother. She not only helps Kathy Nelson by teaching three and four-year olds, but her own children—Kelsey, 11 and Lucas, 13—perform as a sister/brother dancing team. And on Wednesday evenings, Kim meets Darla Bradle at Kathy’s studio for personal dance sessions.

Other former students, such as Paula Docker Wright now of Alpharetta, Georgia, and Susan Docker Morse of Council Bluffs, Iowa, keep in touch with Helen. The girls’ mother, Polly, says, “Helen instilled compassion and respect, but not favoritism, in her students. Dancing helped to develop my daughters’ confidence.” Now Helen not only receives photos of Paula and Susan’s children involved in dance activities, but also Lions Club roses and Christmas cards.

In June 2003, Helen, now 88 years old, reflects upon a life filled with opportunities and satisfaction in both her professional and personal life. Her marriage to Freddie lasted 57 years, ending with his death in March 1999. She still lives in Rockford in the home she returned to in 1957. But instead of “Helen Joann Olson,” she now prefers “Helen Olson Motzer.” No, she

didn't re-marry. "Masters" was Freddie's professional name; "Motzer," his legal name.

Memories of a nine-year-old in her first ballet shoes—a gift from a friend—mingle with Helen's lifetime achievements. Her memory bank is filled with images of appearances in state and world's fairs, in night clubs, and at military bases. A 50-year career as a teacher of dance and an encourager to young aspiring performers caps a satisfying life.

END

SOURCES:

Interviews with Helen Joann Olson (Motzer)
Interviews with Kathy Nelson
Interviews with Kim Nelson
Interviews with Polly Docker

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