



Helen McMahan 1996

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I first saw the Shag danced at a supper club in Greenville, SC, at about age 11. My parents had taken me along with some of their friends to see my brother's band perform. The dancer I remember from that night was Donnie Powell. I watched him all night, and toward the end of the evening when he took me out onto the floor, I fell madly in love - with Donnie and with the Shag.

At that time, my family was living in rural NC, so I didn't really have an opportunity to learn anything about the dance until we moved back to Greenville when I started Junior High School. My best friend, June McMahan, learned the basic, the turn and pivot from her older sister and taught me. We started going to the Teen Canteen in Cleveland Park on Friday and Saturday nights and spent a lot of time just watching, afraid to participate. I met Butch Scott there, and he was the first guy I danced with in public. I learned a lot from him, from Brenda Sims and Marilyn Smith, and some of the other people who hung out there. Later, in High School, there was a place across the street - "Betty's" - where everyone congregated before and after school. We had great music on the jukebox there - The Drifters' "White Christmas" stayed on it year-round. Many afternoons, dancers who had long since been students anywhere came there to dance. Betty's is where I first met both Domer Reeves and Sleepy Timmerman. During those years, the circle of great dancers I came to know in Greenville expanded to include Richard and David Michael, Jack Cahill, Beaver Greenway, David Smith, JoJo Putnam . . . Rufus Wactor, Barbara and Beverly Cross and Tuffy Taylor all moved to Greenville during that time and we became good friends. Summers in Greenville, we spent Saturday and Sunday afternoons at Pine Grove Lake, where I first met Beaver, Don Edwards, Mike Perry, Toby Long and Fred Collins.

I took my first trip to the beach the summer between 9th and 10th grades and returned every summer thereafter until the mid-60's. Sonny's at Cherry Grove and The Pad were the places to go then and, late at night, Fun Fair. The first time I saw Bill Wingate dance was at Fun Fair. No one else would get on the floor with him. One summer, I wore out all my shoes dancing at those places with Mike Osborne and thought I had really arrived when he painted my name on the wall at The Pad: "Helen McMahan - Best Dancer, Summer of '60." Right after that, Domer bought me a bus ticket and put me on a bus home, barefoot. I made many friends from other places during those trips to the beach - Maurice Treadway, Janice Lawing, Junior Jordan, Carole Maddox. Between marriages in the late 70's and early 80's, I got reinvolved with the Shag and the beach and judged a couple of contests. During those years, I had the opportunity to meet and dance with some other greats - Bill Waldrep, Shad Alberty, Cadillac Jack Smith, Buzz Sawyer, David Jordan, and Ronnie Joyce.

A few years ago at a reunion, Cleveland Jordan said to me, "Don't you think we grew up in the greatest time in history?" I don't THINK we did; I KNOW we did. I wouldn't trade our time for any other time in history or any time in the future. I wouldn't have missed it for anything - growing up in the Fifties, growing up in South Carolina, being a Shagger. Some of my best friends today are people I met because of dancing. The relationships that we formed in that setting are lasting and meaningful because we share the mystique of belonging to that time, that place and that dance. Like Beaver Greenway said in his address at the closing of The Pad, "If I have to explain it to you, you wouldn't understand anyway." Those of us who shared it understand each other. In fact, in many ways we are transcending time; distance; wars; political, spiritual, religious and socio-economic differences; prison terms; even death. For who of us will ever forget the likes of Sonny Small, Sleepy Timmerman, Freddy Only, Shad Alberty?

I'm thrilled to be named to the Hall of Fame and consider it a real honor to be remembered and to be included in this special group of people.