

## Profiles of Original Lindy Hoppers: Elnora Dyson

by Robert P. Crease

Becoming a Lindy Hopper was a dream come true for Elnora Dyson, who was with the group off and on between 1938 and 1943. Born in 1920 in Beaufort, South Carolina, Dyson was taken by her aunt to Massachusetts at age two. Her aunt owned a ballroom named Roseland, in Hyanis, and Dyson soon began dancing.

"I was the best dancer around," Dyson says, "One time I entered a Charleston contest, and a girl came down from Boston who knew all the steps. I only knew two steps, but I had the rhythm and won the contest."

Dyson sometimes accompanied her aunt on trips to Boston, where one day she met a man named Willie Jones, who was performing in Knickerbocker Holiday, a show playing at Boston's Met Theatre in advance of its New York opening. Jones said that he was a member of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, a team that worked out of a New York ballroom called the Savoy.

"I was fascinated by his stories about the Savoy," Dyson says. "I told myself, 'As soon as I get to New York I'm going to the Savoy and see if I can become a Lindy Hopper!'"

A few months later, in the fall of 1938, she got her chance. The first evening at the Savoy she spotted Jones, who in turn introduced her to Herbert "Whitey" White, head of the Lindy Hoppers. "Swing her out," Whitey instructed. Jones did. Impressed, Whitey told her to show up for rehearsals.

Dyson says, "We got yellow and green jackets that said 'Whitey's Lindy Hopper' on the back in big, green letters. We were so proud to put those jackets on and walk down the street. People would say, 'There goes one of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers!'"

But Dyson was unable to perform full-time. "Many of Whitey's dancers were kids who lived with their parents or their mothers. But I had to support myself." She worked in a series



Elnora Dyson circa 1938.

of factories doing things like sewing shoulder pads on dresses and installing rhinestones on jackets. When work was slow, she collected unemployment and headed for the Savoy.

Her first engagement as a Lindy Hopper was at the Savoy Pavilion in the 1939-40 World's Fair; her partner was Sidney J. ("Jazz") Richardson. Later, she appeared at the Wayside Casino in Westport, Mass., the Roxy, the Apollo, and the Steel Pier in Atlantic City. Once, she performed with Ella Fitzgerald in Bayonne, New Jersey. The routine called for her and Oliver "Buckles" Washington to appear alongside one of Whitey's white couples, Jimmy Valentine, a one-legged dancer on crutches, and his partner Edith.

"The manager of the theatre didn't want a white and black couple to share the same stage, and told us to dance one after the other, with a curtain call separating us. When Whitey heard about it he was furious. He told us, 'Pack up your things!' The manager then changed his mind and we all

danced together."

As a hobby, Dyson wrote song lyrics, though none were ever published. One of her favorites was about the Savoy:

Come on up to the Savoy some night  
Feeling blue, but not so tight,  
And you'll find to your delight  
We'll teach you how to swing!

You can learn the Suzy Q  
The Lindy Hop, and Sabu, too.  
Anything you care to do  
That's got a little swing.

You can learn the Harlem Samba  
Done to the beat of the rhumba  
You'll forget about slumber  
When you learn to swing!

I'm sure you'll soon be comin' back  
To the Savoy, some call 'the Track.'  
You'll be a jitterbug, in fact  
'Cuz you'll have that certain swing!

By 1943, Whitey was in Oswego and his group was largely defunct due to the war. But producer Leonard Harper, wanting a Lindy act at the Roxy, contacted an ex-dancer, Francis "Mickey" Jones, who got together several of the old couples. For the first time in their lives, the ex-Lindy Hoppers were allowed to join the Union and Actor's Guild, were paid at the full Union rate, and were paid for rehearsals. When Whitey heard about it he was furious. He rushed down from Oswego to demand that the dancers kick back money to him or he'd see that the show closed. But they stood up to him, and the show continued.

That show, however, was Dyson's last professional engagement. Afterwards, she became a riveter at the defense plant in Linden, New Jersey; she was renowned for the distinctive rhythm with which she shot rivets. Later, she became a beautician, but retired in 1980 with her hands crippled by rheumatoid arthritis.

"Whitey didn't pay us right," Dyson says. "Everybody knew that. But I didn't care. For me, it was the greatest thrill in the world to be a Lindy Hopper."