

One Hundred Years of Morris Dancing in America

by Rhett Krause

This new year may be used to mark an anniversary worth celebrating: the centenary of the morris dance in North America. A precise date of the beginning of a cultural event is often difficult or impossible to pin down and can be the subject of disagreement. Just try, for example, to find consensus on what year baseball or football began. And it is no different in this case.

Some will no doubt point to the 1589 voyage of Sir Humphrey Gilbert to Newfoundland, where he famously planned to bring morris dancing and hobby horses to “delight the savage people whom we intended to winne by all faire means possible.” If so, our celebration would be a tad late, as the centenary should instead have been before even the birth of George Washington’s father. But there is good reason to doubt morris occurred on that voyage (if for no other reason than no native peoples were encountered), and even if it did happen, it established no tradition and contributes nothing to the current situation.

The nineteenth century saw examples of what has been termed “theatrical morris” in which a company of actors includes something they call a “morris dance” as part of a play taking place in Tudor or Stuart England. These dances were of unknown provenance, though likely to be inaccurate creations of the company which simply came and went leaving no trace or influence behind. Thus they are not worthy of a meaningful anniversary celebration. (Of curious note, it was the use of dance and song in a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that first brought Cecil Sharp to America).

An additional odd reference is of a morris dance performed for May Day celebrations at the Manchester (New Hampshire) Universalist Church in 1898. It is impossible to know what this was, but again it does seem clear that it was not part of an ongoing tradition.

If it is thus very difficult to agree on what was the first morris event, or if an event were isolated, poorly documented, of doubtful accuracy, or of relatively small importance, then it is reasonable instead to try to decide what year is most *significant* for the start of a custom, even if it not include the first example of it.

In my opinion, three distinct events of 1910 combine to make it the year most worthy of celebration. I have little doubt that additional research will turn up even earlier occurrences, and indeed probable

dancing in 1908 and 1909 is mentioned below, but in the sense that 1492 remains the most meaningful year in the European Discovery of America, so I think 1910 is the most meaningful for American morris, no matter how many Leif Erickson equivalents in morris may subsequently be discovered.

Educators and Humanitarians

The first event was the growth of morris dancing in the public schools and elsewhere as part of an international folk dance component of physical education. This is a large part of the history of morris dance in America which remains little researched and underappreciated in its scope. For example, I suspect many would be shocked to think that what were probably the largest massed displays of morris ever anywhere were in Central Park early in the twentieth century by the students of the New York Public Schools.

The Progressive Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to address social woes of the era related in part to urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. A small offshoot of this philosophy was the benefit of physical exercise especially for the urban tenement dwellers and school children who may find little of it otherwise. This was not just for physical fitness, but for potential improvements in behavior. In 1910, Dr. C. Ward Crompton of the New York Public Schools, lectured that “Exercise diminishes crime” and that he believed that not only health but morals were helped by exercise (*New York Times*, May 15, 1910).

International folk dance as part of this exercise had two additional perceived benefits. First, a reconnection of immigrants with their own traditions. And second, that folk dance was a form of exercise considered suitable for girls of that time

Mary Wood Hinman of Chicago was one example of the remarkable Americans who were part of this process. She began teaching folk dance at Jane Addams Hull House in the 1890s, in agreement with Addams’ 1909 opinion that “recreation is stronger than vise and recreation alone can stifle the lust for vise.” She would collect Headington dancers from William Kimber in 1909, and by 1910 morris dancing by Chicago school children under her direction was well documented in the press, which noted “a series of graceful movements which Miss Hinman has been able to dig out of the rural districts of England and

bring to America.” (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 26, 1910; I am indebted to Andy Bullen for his research into Chicago dance.)

Elizabeth Burchenal would have a similar role in New York City after quitting her position as an instructor at the Teachers College of Columbia University to research and promote folk dance the rest of her life, holding several positions of importance in New York and founding the American Folk Dance Society. Much of the dancing in the New York schools in these early years is due to her and her opinions that “The city child is handicapped by restricted play,” and “girls get too much amusement and not enough play.” (*New York Times*, February 23, 1913)

Jim Brickwedde quite plausibly believes Burchenal may have taught morris in New York as early as 1908 and collected dances in England about the same time, but I have no proof of this at this time. This very early dancing in New York is supported by the first American publication of an individual morris dance, “Laudnum Bunches,” in C. Ward Crampton’s 1909 *The Folk Dance Book*.

A measure of the importance of these early physical educators and humanitarians can be glimpsed in the earliest records of the American branch of the English Folk Dance Society (later the Country Dance and Song Society). The meeting to first form the Society in 1915 was chaired by Crampton, and Burchenal was elected one of the four officers, with Hinman to join as Treasurer in 1916.

Brower’s Book

The second event is the publication of the first American morris book, Josephine Brower’s *The Morris Dance: Descriptions of Eleven Dances as Performed by the Morris-Men of England* (H.W. Gray Co., New York). The book gives instructions for eight Headington and three Bidford dances and beneath the Table of Contents, a note mentions that “These descriptions are taken by permission from the work of Messrs. Cecil Sharp and Herbert C. McIlwaine.” Indeed, the book is extremely similar to *The Morris Book (Part 1)* and covers precisely the same eleven dances.

The significance of this book is not that it offers any new knowledge (it does not), but that it is

intended for an American audience of morris dancers in 1910. Also, while it may have been used as a reference by school teachers, there is nothing in its text or style to suggest that it was meant primarily for use in schools.

Brower was an American-born midwesterner. Little is currently known about the extent of her involvement in the morris dance, although Andy Bullen has discovered an intriguing reference in the

Christian Science Monitor of June 15, 1914 to a lecture given by Brower in Chicago in which she is described as “the first woman to introduce morris dancing to America.” (Of course, this lecture was illustrated by the morris dancing of Florence Warren Brown; see below.)



Photo of Florence Warren with an unidentified member of her NYC morris team, taken between December 1910 and March 1911; courtesy the author.

Mary Neal and Florrie Warren

The third event was the Esperance trip to America which began with the arrival of Mary Neal and Florence Warren in New York City on December 12, 1910.

Much has been written about how Cecil Sharp and Neal’s Esperance Club had initially cooperated from the earliest days of the revival of morris in 1905, and how by 1908 they had become often bitter rivals. A simplification of the differences would be that Neal appreciated the benefits of the spirit of the dance and getting large numbers dancing, while Sharp wished to accurately record and teach the dance at a high standard.

In Neal’s admittedly biased words (the dances) “are not an entertainment given by a few highly trained exhibitors while the rest stand around and stare. The point is that the whole people join in. It is an eminently democratic thing and can live only as long as it preserves this spirit. The introduction of pedantry, of sophisticated art, would utterly kill the movement.” (*New York Times*, December 21, 1910). In turn, Sharp in 1909 privately considered the Esperance dancers as “rank Philistines and must so be regarded.”

The American trip would prove the high water mark of Esperance influence, and Neal’s position in England would soon rapidly decline until she ceased all involvement in morris with the beginning of the First World War in 1914. But in 1910, Neal’s prestige in the world of morris dancing was roughly similar to that of Sharp, and for her part, Florrie Warren was arguably the most experienced and renowned English

teacher of the morris dance.

Neal and Warren were shocked to find on their arrival that several planned events had been cancelled as Sharp had written ahead expressing doubts on Esperance standards and authenticity. Neal would write back to England on December 30, 1910 that "Cecil Sharp has done his best to poison people's minds over here. But we are here and he is not!... I do not think he will ever come now."

Despite this initial setback, Neal kept a steady schedule of lectures and Florrie taught in at least New York, Boston, New Haven, Hartford, and Albany. There would be much press coverage and the occasional high profile event such as Florrie leading a team of morris dancers at Carnegie Hall.

We know now that Americans such as Hinman, Burchenal, possibly Brower, and probably others had taught morris in America prior to Neal and Warren's December arrival, at least earlier within the year of 1910. It would seem that Neal did not know of this in advance but got some inkling shortly after her arrival. The *New York Tribune* on December 15, 1910 would note that "Miss Neal says that she does not see how the English peasant dances hitherto taught in America can be genuine, for she is sure that she is the first to dig them out from the byways of the mother country."

Whatever the degree of teaching by Americans to Americans before December 1910, the teaching by England's premiere instructor who had taught since 1905 and learned from traditional dancers was a different level of transmission and a worthy part of our centennial.

In one very indirect sense, Warren had *already* taught morris to Americans. For Sharp's hastily written first edition of *The Morris Book (Part One)*, the only edition available until 1912, he had noted some of the dances directly from Warren rather than the traditional dancers, and this had been copied into Brower's book, so Warren's dancing was reflected in these two resources used by Americans. Sharp would come to regret this and correct it in his second edition. In a more direct sense, at least two Americans had traveled to England to attend the summer school at Stratford-on-Avon in 1910 where Warren had been chief instructor and thus learned from her in England.

The American tour was to end in March 1911 when Neal and Warren boarded a ship for their return journey to England. But this trip was not to be for Florrie, as she was to play her role in that most romantic of all American morris stories. A young Yale law student named Arthur Brown had been entranced by Florrie at a New Haven performance and corresponded with her since. In the middle of a golf game in Connecticut he made a life altering decision, threw down his clubs, and raced by train to New

York to board the ship himself, instantly proposing to Florrie who accepted and came off the ship before it sailed. They would marry the next Valentine's Day and Florrie can be fairly claimed as special by both England and the U.S.

As a follow up note, Florrie and Arthur Brown's three American daughters would be special guests at the Marlboro Morris Ale about sixteen years ago, and two of them are alive and well today (Cicely Joslyn of Dekorah, Iowa and Vida Olinick of Edgewater, New Jersey). In February 2009, Mary Neal's descendents donated her papers to the English Folk Dance and Song Society at Cecil Sharp House in a great act of symbolic reconciliation at Mary Neal Day. I traveled there with Vida, where she was the honored guest of the EFDSS and a key speaker at the event.

Conclusion

I am not one to join in the bashing of Cecil Sharp which periodically comes into vogue. If his work has flaws, it is still a voluminous, outstanding, and most remarkable achievement that has affected English dance and song in America and Britain more than the work of anyone else. We owe so very much to him. Yet the time for his centennial in America has not yet come, and instead we should now honor the memory of those who preceded him in 1910 such as Warren, Neal, Brower, Hinman, and Burchenal—those whose contributions are too easily slipped under the rug and stories forgotten, accidentally or not, due to the later dominance of Sharp and his followers, and their institutional legacies of CDSS and EFDSS.

This year is just the start of a series of American morris centennials of note in the next few years. These will include the first arrival in America of one of Cecil Sharp's teachers, A. Claud Wright in 1913, the arrival of Sharp himself in 1914, and the founding of the American branch of the English Folk Dance Society in 1915.

Make note of this centennial and recall the earliest pioneers in American morris. Do think of ways you can use this once in a lifetime occasion for publicity for your own morris team and as reason for special events this year. It's a long time until we can do it again in 2110.

Rhett Krause wrote several articles about morris dancing in Country Dance and Song magazine, including, among others, "Morris Dancing and America Prior to 1913," Part 1 (CD&S, volume 21, 1991, pp 1-18,) and Part 2 (volume 22, 1992, pp 20-25). A former dancer with Marlboro Morris Men and Greenwich Guard, he is interested in American (wooden shoe) clog dancing.