

Before the Centre: An Earlier 75th Anniversary

Even the most casual reader of this newsletter will not have missed the fact that we will soon be celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Boston and national branches of the Country Dance Society. It may, however, come as a surprise that the revival of English country, morris, and sword dancing was begun in the United States two years before the Boston Centre was founded. The story of how this happened and who was the driving force behind it is equally surprising.

The force behind bringing English country, morris, and sword dancing to Boston was George Pierce Baker, then a professor of Drama at Harvard University. Some 76 years ago, Professor Baker hit upon the idea of having the newly-rediscovered English dancing taught in America. Accordingly, he approached his English friend, Mr. Claud Wright, who was one of the six men on Cecil Sharp's original demonstration team. Mr. Wright thought that this was an exciting idea and agreed to come to Boston during the summer of 1913--interestingly, this arrangement was made without the involvement of the English Folk Dance Society.

In July of 1913, Mr. Wright sailed to America and taught dancing--probably at Mrs. Helen Storrow's house in Lexington, Massachusetts. Apparently, all concerned had a good time, since Mr. Wright was engaged by Mr. Baker to return in the summer of 1914. Indeed, in 1914 they planned a more ambitious program, having Mr. Wright teach for two weeks at Boulder Farm (Mr. Baker's farm in Chocorua, New Hampshire), four weeks in Peterboro and York, and two weeks at Mrs. Storrow's house.

Baker family recollections place the first dance of the summer of 1914 at their newly-made dance/drama clearing at Boulder Farm on July 28 of that year. The dancing was preceded by the performance of a play written for the occasion. Again this summer of dancing was successful, and plans were made for Mr. Wright to return the following year for an even more ambitious tour.

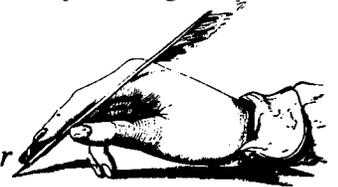
Unfortunately, World War I was to interfere with this strong beginning. Social pressures in England caused Claud Wright to enlist in the Royal Flying Corps and prevented him from

returning to America in 1915 as Cecil Sharp's "advance man." But when the USA Branch of the English Folk Dance Society was founded in March of 1915, Professor Baker was elected as its first President and Mrs. Storrow its first Secretary.

Much remains to be discovered about these early days--When and why did Professor Baker bow out of EFSD? Who were the people who attended dancing classes in those first years of 1913 and 1914?--but we do know enough to celebrate this beginning and those who were responsible for it. So, this summer there will be a celebration of those earliest days at Professor Baker's Boulder Farm in New Hampshire.

Finally, I include some excerpts from the letters of Claud Wright and the entire text of a note from Mrs. Storrow. All of the originals can be found at the Harvard University's Houghton Library.

*Excerpts from the letters
of Mr. Claud Wright to
Professor George P. Baker*



March 3, 1913 "...I should be so pleased if you could let me know within a little whether I am to come over in the summer..."

July 1, 1913 "I have arranged everything now, and can leave England any day after the 15th of this month, which means I shall just be able to receive final arrangements from you before embarking. The arrangements as we left them stood thus - that all expenses should be paid and that I should receive £50 clear above expenses as fee for teaching + demonstrating."

September 18, 1913 "...So far I have not heard anything of the magazine articles but in writing to Mrs. Storrow I mentioned that you made the initial move. I am afraid that the idea I was sent out by the Society has grown. I should be so happy if you could combat this as I prefer to be known as a free agent and your guest..."

(c/o Mrs. C.E. Clark, Lincoln, Mass.) "Tuesday morning...Isn't Mrs. Storrow's house just a wonder? I have (during the day) the whole 3rd story for my personal use..."

September 6, 1914 "...I enclose a list of the addresses I have and underlined those who asked for a centre."

*Card from Mrs. Helen Storrow to Professor
George P. Baker*