

Cecil Sharp in Saint Louis

“As You Like It” was performed in Forest Park in 1916. The cast of a thousand from St. Louis was to be headed by the renowned actress, Miss Margaret Anglin, and a small group of professional actors. “This festival is the city’s offering to the Tercentenary Celebration of Shakespeare’s death, which is to be observed all over the country. It will be given in Forest Park on the evenings of the week of June 4-11th in a beautiful natural auditorium which will accommodate ten thousand spectators. Every modern resource in staging and lighting will be employed to make of this the most unique and splendid presentation of the play ever given¹ .” In preparation for the production, Mr. Cecil Sharp, “the world’s greatest authority on English Folk dances,²” was brought to St. Louis to train one hundred and thirty leaders who would in turn train hundreds more St. Louisans to provide an Elizabethan atmosphere before and after the show.

In 1916, St. Louis was still fired up by the success of the 1904 World’s Fair. A series of summer outdoor pageants had been given successfully on Art Hill following the Fair. The leadership of these productions formed The Saint Louis Pageant Drama Association and began looking for a permanent location for summer theater in the Park. They selected a natural amphitheater looking down on two large trees. It is reported that Miss Anglin, when standing on the stage between the trees and speaking scarcely above the tone she used for an indoor theatre, was easily heard by the audience. Although the production was rained out the first night, it was a huge success the following nights. Plans immediately began for construction of a permanent facility was enthusiastically built at that site in only 90 days. It was ready for the 1917 season and the MUNY was incorporated in 1918.

It is key that the Association leadership chose the superlative in planning “to make of this the most unique and splendid presentation of the play ever given.” Not all of the leaders were convinced at first. On January 10, 1916, Mr. Percival Chubb, Leader of the Ethical Society of Saint Louis, wrote to Mr. John H. Gundlach, President of the Saint Louis Pageant Drama Association, “I have just had a talk with Mrs. Kroeger and she is as surprised as I that the Pageant-Drama Board should not employ Mr. Cecil

¹ *ibid.* p. 1.

² The Saint Louis Pageant Drama Association, notice. St. Louis Pageant and Masque papers, Misc. 1916, Missouri Historical Society Archives, St. Louis.

Sharp. It is a great mistake. We did not hesitate last time to get the best men for our work...our chance goes by. We fail to set the highest standard and do the unique thing³.” The Association quickly agreed.

The second key is the involvement of community. R. M. Milligan, Commissioner of School Buildings granted the “use of the Auditorium at the Central High School...for...a lecture and demonstration in Elizabethan Folk Dancing, by Mrs. [sic] Cecil J. Sharp.” The “entertaining recital” was repeated the following night at Grover Cleveland High School. The public was invited to attend; invitations went out to all sorts of institutions and individuals⁴ . Citizens wishing to participate in the cast were invited to sign up for six hour-long training sessions. Participants promised to “undertake to attend regularly all the rehearsals, especially the six lessons to be given by Mr. Sharp...⁵” All but the principals provided their own costumes.

Can you picture it? Two hundred courtiers and foresters were needed for the play itself. Four to six hundred “Elizabethans” were needed for the prologue and epilogue. First came a procession of “villagers,” fifty men paired with fifty women all dressed in their holiday clothes and led by four pipers. Immediately from the left came the may-pole procession with two Jack-O’Greens; groups of plough boys with plough, sowers, reapers; a wagon carrying the tree, milkmaids; and guilds representing blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, butchers, shepherds, shoemakers, and master-sweeps, each with his boy. Each of these guilds sang their guild song. A jolly, romping kind of May-queen was chosen and kissed; she boxed the ears of her suitors. The pole was erected and the group danced Sellenger’s Round, Gathering Peascods, and the Black Nag, all revived by Mr. Sharp taken from John Playford’s English Country Dancing Master which was published in 1651. There were ceremonial morris and sword dancers to add merriment and excitement to the spectacle⁶ .

³ Chubb, Percival, letter on Ethical Society of Saint Louis stationary dated 10 Jan, 1916. St. Louis Pageant and Masque papers, Misc. 1916, Missouri Historical Society Archives, St. Louis.

⁴ Mulligan, R. M., Letter to J. H. Gundlach, March 16, 1916. St. Louis Pageant and Masque papers, Misc. 1916, Missouri Historical Society Archives, St. Louis.

⁵ Application To Participate...St. Louis Pageant and Masque papers, Misc. 1916, Missouri Historical Society Archives, St. Louis.

⁶ Sharp, Cecil. Proposals for the prologue to “As You Like It” pp.1-4. St. Louis Pageant and Masque papers, Misc. 1916, Missouri Historical Society Archives, St. Louis.

St. Louis has a remarkable folk dance history. Dance Discovery continues the legacy pioneered by Mr. Sharp. The performing troupe is just completing dance programs featuring country dances from the Lewis and Clark era at the beginning of the 19th century. In May, it presented selected country dances from the middle of the 19th century at the dedication of the Lincoln Library in Springfield, Illinois. It has researched the popular country dances of the World's Fair era at the beginning of the 20th century and trained local citizens to present them.

Now, in preparation for future events, Dance Discovery has invited Bruce Hamilton, America's "greatest authority on English Folk dances" to give a weekend workshop in St. Louis October 21-23 at the Monday Club in Webster Groves (see www.dancediscovery.org). Those interested in learning or improving country dance skills are invited to register. Dance Discovery is always looking for new talent in this community and to "set the highest standard and do the unique thing."

Dr. John M. Ramsay learned English country dance beginning in 1947 at Berea College in Kentucky. His teachers included: Frank Smith, an Englishman employed to promote cooperative recreation for Berea College and the Appalachian region; May Gadd, one of Cecil Sharp's team of dancers and first director of the Country Dance and Song Society of America (www.cdss.org); and Marguerite Butler Bidstrup who was on the staff at Pine Mountain Settlement School in eastern Kentucky in August 1917 when Cecil Sharp collected and notated Kentucky Set Running (see Sharp, Cecil J. The Country Dance Book Part V, Novello, London, London, 1918), a very early form of country dance. Dr. Ramsay retired to St. Louis in 1995 where he and his wife, B. Meyer, have taught thousands of homeschool families English country dances including those Sharp taught in St. Louis back in 1916.