

## Stephanie SMITH

# SETTING THE SCENE: CECIL SHARP'S "RUNNING SET" AND ITS LEGACY 100 YEARS LATER

### Abstract

This paper sketches the background to the Appalachian collecting trips of Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, focusing on the so-called *running set* in three Kentucky locations in 1917, the first at Pine Mountain Settlement School. Sharp was looking for survivals of English songs in the Appalachians. When he encountered the *running set*, he theorized that it was an older form of English country dance, without considering other possible origins or cultural influences. The paper examines the Anglicization of an American dance by Sharp and his American followers, and their joint creation of a romanticized, politicized, and inaccurate, persistent legacy.

**Keywords:** Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, running set, American square dance, English country dance, Appalachia

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### Origins of the panel

In 2017 at the ICTM Biennial Conference in Limerick, I took part in the roundtable on Maud Karpeles, talking about the role of Karpeles working with Cecil Sharp in America between 1915 and 1918, including their experiences seeing and noting what they called "The Running Set," more commonly known as "set running." For the ICTM presentation, I drew much inspiration from Phil Jamison's book on Appalachian dance, which helped me more fully understand how deeply ingrained Sharp's incorrect conclusions are, even now. In early October 2017, the panelists all attended a weekend at Pine Mountain Settlement School in Pineville, Kentucky celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sharp's visit to Pine Mountain and his first sight of the "running set" on August 31, 1917.

Deborah Thompson helped organize a series of presentations on Sharp and Karpeles at the weekend, many of which were celebratory and non-critical. I spoke about Maud Karpeles' importance in the Appalachian song and dance collecting endeavor with Sharp. Phil presented an analysis of the figures of set running and the traditions from which they derive, while noting Sharp's



**Figure 1.** A historical marker at the Pine Mountain Settlement School. Photograph by Stephanie Smith.

Anglocentric orientation in his collecting, as well as what would now be viewed as *racist* remarks in his diaries.

The presentations were followed by a discussion period moderated by Deborah in which a couple of audience members voiced their dismay and even anger with some of the criticism levied on Sharp's methodology, conclusions about the origins of the *running set*, and his racism. Some wanted to see Sharp in the context of his time and felt he should not be criticized. In the later afternoon and evening there were participatory dance sessions for all, and presentational dance sessions by the Berea College Country Dancers led by Deborah. After the evening dancing, Deborah, Phil, and I discussed our perceptions of the presentations and discussion. I said, "We need to do a panel on this for the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology Symposium next summer," so after many email and phone conversations, we produced our abstracts and submitted our panel and individual proposals.

My own introduction to Appalachian square dancing, as I first heard it called, was at the 1975 Berea College Christmas Country Dance School, an event held the week between Christmas and New Year's Day. The Appalachian square dancing class was taught by the late Pat Napier, and the dance was done both in square sets and what was called *big sets*, a large circular set of a couple facing another couple like a Sicilian circle formation. All participants at that time were required to take an English dance class. At the time, I did not fully understand why.

### **The Appalachian region and settlement schools**

The Appalachian Region consists of designated counties in multiple states, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, containing portions of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York. Appalachia has long been the subject of romance and lauded for its cultural richness, as well as being abundant in stereotypes of isolation, hillbillies, moonshine, and poverty. The discipline of Appalachian Studies which emerged in the 1970s employs many different models with which to analyze and explain the characteristics of the region's history, economics, and culture. In this presentation I rely on some of the well-known *early* scholars in the field such as David E. Whisnant, author of *All That is Native and Fine*, and Henry D. Shapiro, author of *Appalachia on Our Mind*, for their early critical perspectives. New scholars focusing on Appalachian dance and music have emerged and refined and extended the work of their predecessors, including Deborah Thompson, Phil Jamison, and Susan Spalding, Deborah's predecessor as Director of the Berea College (Kentucky) Country Dancers.

It is essential here to touch briefly on the history of the settlement schools in Appalachia. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of settlement houses in urban areas of the US, patterned on the English example of Toynbee Hall in the East End of London, founded in 1884. The Toynbee Hall website explains: "The radical vision was to create a place for future leaders to live and work as volunteers in London's East End, bringing them face to face with poverty, and giving them the opportunity to develop practical solutions that they could take with them into national life" [Toynbee Hall ≤ 2018]. American social reformers visited Toynbee Hall and founded urban social settlements, the most well-known being Hull House in Chicago, founded in 1889 to educate and provide social

services to immigrant communities, and the Henry Street Settlement in New York City founded in 1893 to serve children, families, and the poor. Other American settlement house efforts followed.

In the late 1890s onward, some well-educated American women joined a progressive movement of educators and social reformers working in Appalachia. The educational reform movement was also linked with Christian values, the growing importance of recreation and physical education, and also with the temperance movement. The first beginnings of a settlement school in Kentucky were in Hindman, where Katherine Pettit and May Stone founded Hindman Settlement School in 1902, following summer schools they ran in previous years. Other schools followed, notably Pine Mountain Settlement School which was founded in 1913 by Katherine Pettit and Ethel DeLong Zande.

Pettit and Stone taught the students temperance songs at the Hindman Settlement School, but noted that

[...] every Saturday night all the 'bad uns' around here 'hev a gathering' where they pick the banjo, dance, drink moonshine, swear and fight. They stay all night and go home Sunday morning drunk and shooting down the road [cited in Spalding 2014:127].

The leaders then strategized to offer the students positive alternatives to drinking.

This Hindman experience was crucial in terms of how the Pine Mountain leaders handled dancing which was often connected with drinking. Dance became a very useful activity in the settlement house movement overall, seen as one which was civilizing, promoted good manners and self-confidence, and was, above all, healthful recreation. As Spalding comments:

Although the settlement workers in the Eastern Kentucky mountains were horrified by the drinking and violence that so often seemed to accompany local dancing and music making, they came to see an alternative approach to the problem. In addition to offering singing and parlor games as they had during their summer sessions, Pettit and deLong discovered that they could create a controlled dance environment at Pine Mountain, demanding that no alcohol or firearms be present on the premises, and requiring appropriate social behavior [Spalding 2014:135].

Therefore, whereas in early days, Pettit and DeLong may have viewed the *set running* and hoedowns (clogging) as too boisterous, by divorcing dance from alcohol and firearms, they were able to see the value of working with set running as a way to achieve their educational and socializing goals for the students. As Spalding notes, the leaders additionally

[...] saw dance as a way to maintain local culture while providing a means to help with adaptation to modernization. Set running was welcome as a local custom, and by providing controlled settings, it was used to teach manners and to allow appropriate socializing. Later, English folk dance was used to connect with a theoretical ethnic heritage and to offset and mediate with contemporary dance and music trends [Spalding 2014:132].

Given the religious beliefs in the neighboring communities, they also employed terms for dance such as *play parties* and *games* that would not upset local religious families.

### **Sharp, Karpeles, Appalachian collecting, and the documentation of the “running set”**

The original intent of Sharp’s travel to the United States in December 1914 was to assist Granville Barker with the choreography for a New York production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He also hoped, spurred by the catastrophic implications of WWI, to earn some money in the US with lectures and teaching engagements that could be sent home to his family.

In early 1915, he met Mrs. Helen Storrow of Boston, who was to become the main benefactor for his collecting trips in Appalachia, and who was also a keen dancer. Sharp, Karpeles, and Sharp’s student Lily Roberts all enjoyed her hospitality and patronage. Sharp’s able assistant Maud Karpeles first came to the United States in early June 1915, to assist Sharp with teaching.

In June 1915, while he was at the Storrow residence recovering from lumbago, Sharp was visited by Olive Dame Campbell who had done some song collecting in the North Carolina mountains near Asheville and brought her work for him to see. Campbell’s work, about which she was extremely modest, provided the inspiration and impetus for the collecting trips made by Sharp and Karpeles in Appalachia. Campbell’s husband John had conducted an important survey of social conditions in southern Appalachian counties for the Russell Sage Foundation between 1908 and 1912. Mrs. Campbell traveled with him and became interested in the traditional songs. Both the Campbells supported and advised Sharp and Karpeles on their initial trips to collect songs in Appalachia.

Sharp and Karpeles made song collecting trips in the Southern Appalachians in 1916, 1917, and 1918. Their diary entries supply details of their visit to Pine Mountain in August 1917. They arrived at Pine Mountain on August 28<sup>th</sup> after a long journey, and Karpeles describes it as “a very delightful place. Far superior to any other mountain school we have been to” [Karpeles 1917].

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, Karpeles writes:

After supper went to Miss DeLong’s house. Saw some set running – most interesting. Has great possibilities [1917].

Sharp writes expansively on the same date:

After breakfast Miss de Long and I have a long talk. I should dearly like to help them here with folk songs & dances as I am greatly enamoured with the way in which things are conducted here. I expected to find Miss de Long a very precious, Arty & Crafty sort of person but she really isn’t, while Miss Pettit is a really capable, energetic person of wide vision just the sort of person for this job. They pay considerable attention to the aesthetic side of things. The houses are well & picturesquely planned, flowers are everywhere and the children dressed very simply but quite nicely & prettily. It is a lovely spot, this valley and there is no doubt but that a great work is being done here, well & nicely too. In the evening we go to Miss de Longs and see a Running Set. This must

be carefully noted some day. It is a fine dance and may serve to throw light on some of the older 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> cent[ury] dances" [1917].

Because the *running set* was performed by the light of a single lantern and the moon, and they were not prepared in advance, Sharp and Karpeles were not able to take notes. They felt that they might have to return to Pine Mountain to note it properly after traveling to other destinations in Kentucky.

They went on to Hindman Settlement School and the town of Hyden where they saw additional examples of set running. On September 18<sup>th</sup> in Hindman, Karpeles writes:

After supper we went to a dance which Mr. Bradley had arranged for us. Had to walk 1 ½ miles in dark along very muddy road. Mr. Sharp tumbled into mud hole and lost shoe. Dance was an interesting experience but actual dancing was no good. The girls did not know the dance and took little interest. The men were too fuddled with whisky to be much good, and there was no one to call. In addition, this small room was filled with onlookers. I danced and had to pull my partner around, as his head was swimming [1917].

Later in Hyden, Kentucky, they saw a 4-couple version of set running arranged for them at a house, allowing them to note the dance figures, and a local man also reviewed the figures with them.

Sharp writes on October 8, in Hyden:

In the afternoon I dictate the rest of the dance to her [Maud] from my note book. This is a great relief to me to know that the dance is at last on paper. This dance is as valuable a piece of work as anything that I have done in the mountains. I may get some more figures to add but I do not think there is anything else to learn about it [1917].

From the perspective of 21<sup>st</sup> century ethnochoreology, Sharp's last statement can be seen as rather presumptuous!

It was not until December 1917 that Sharp and Karpeles wrote down their full impression of seeing the *running set* at Pine Mountain:

It was danced one evening after dark on the porch of one of the largest houses of the Pine Mountain School with only one dim lantern to light up the scene. But the moon streamed fitfully in lighting up the mountain peaks in the background and, casting its mysterious light over the proceedings, seemed to exaggerate the wildness and the break-neck speed of the dancers as they whirled through the mazes of the dance. There was no music, only the stamping and clapping of the onlookers, but when one of the emotional crises of the dance was reached...the air seemed literally to pulsate with the rhythm of the 'patters' and the tramp of the dancers' feet, while, over and above it all, penetrating through the din, floated the even, falsetto tones of the Caller, calmly and unexcitedly reciting his directions [Sharp 1985:14-15].

The stone porch where the “running set” was danced is still in existence at Pine Mountain Settlement School, adjacent to a newer house that replaced the older one there when Sharp and Karpeles visited.



**Figure 2.** The stone terrace at Pine Mountain Settlement School where Sharp and Karpeles saw the “running set.” Photograph by Stephanie Smith.

One can get a good idea of the movement of the “running set” as described by Sharp and Karpeles in a 1974 interpretive performance of the Berea College Country Dancers [Ramsay 2011]. No music is used, just clapping and patting, based on Sharp’s description above.

In the introduction to *The Country Dance Book Part 5*, Sharp discusses the characteristics and main figures of the running set, noting the “forceful, emotional character of the dance” [Sharp 1985:10]. He comments:

From these considerations we are led to infer that the Running Set represents a stage in the development of the Country-dance earlier than that of the dances in *The English Dancing Master* – at any rate in the form in which they are there recorded [1985:10].

From my perspective as a researcher of English country dance, this conclusion seems utterly unsupported in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to anyone who has knowledge of the repertoire published by John Playford. However, the publication of the “Running Set” in *The Country Dance Book* meant that the dance as notated was taught in England

and is still done there. Both American and UK examples of the dance can be found on YouTube by searching *running set*.

### **Sharp's ideas 100 years later**

Susan Spalding's insightful chapter on Pine Mountain Settlement School lead me to conclude that while Sharp and Karpeles were looking for English survivals and framed much of what they saw with that lens, they were not fully responsible for all the cultural consequences of their actions. Sharp presented the Pine Mountain leaders with a vision of the children's ancestry as being English. Spalding states that Pine Mountain Settlement School was

[...] an important promoter of folk dance during its long existence as a school  
[...] It also provided a link to the heritage, both real and imagined, of the people they served, providing a way to draw on the past to prepare students for the future [2014:123].

In the May 1919 *Notes from the Pine Mountain Settlement School*, the unnamed writer, most probably Evelyn Kendrick Wells, wrote:

The pedigree of our ancient, beautiful songs we knew, but of the origin of our dances we were not sure. We believed them to be old, but that they were older than any country dances collected in out-of-the-way hamlets in Mother England we did not dream, until Mr. Cecil Sharp visited us and by chance saw our young people dancing [Pine Mountain Settlement School Collection 1919].

Sharp could not have anticipated how his views of the origin of set running, more broadly square dance, would be perpetuated in the work of many dance leaders and practitioners fifty to one hundred years after he visited Pine Mountain. Phil Jamison points out in his critical analysis of Sharp's legacy:

Because of Sharp's reputation as an authority on English folk dance, his explanation of these southern Appalachian square dances was accepted as fact. No one questioned his Anglocentric bias and his self-admitted nationalistic agenda to promote English music and dance. As a result, Sharp's interpretation of the dances was cited in many of the subsequent dance instruction books that were written in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s [Jamison 2015:77].

Spalding notes, referring to Pine Mountain:

The dance repertoire established there continued in the repertoire of the Berea College Country Dancers and in the regional Mountain Folk Festival, both founded in the 1930s and active in the twenty-first century [2014:123–124].

This repertoire as we know included Appalachian square dance and also English country dance. It is known that several leaders of the Berea College Country Dancers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed Sharp's interpretation of the origin of set running.

I view Sharp's and Karpeles' collection of the *running set* in 1917 as a collision of cultural actors, outsiders and insiders, opportunistic agendas, and historical circumstances that have resulted in a legacy that needs critical re-examination some one hundred years later, as well as having obscured the origins of set running.

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