"SPLENDID STUFF FOR . . . THE BOYS"

(This is a copy of a copy of a letter, found in our files, which was written during the First World World War by Miss Daking, EFDSS's "representative behind the lines in France", and sent to Cecil Sharp, then Director of the English Folk Dance Society. We thought you would enjoy reading it.)

September 25, 1917

Dear Mr. Sharp.

(I) write you a report of my last four months in France.

I was asked by the Y.M.C.A. to go out to one of the Bases and see if the men would care for Folk Dancing, so I was attached to the Lena Ashwell Concerts to the Front Staff and went at the end of May. It was very difficult at first, because the entertainments and fun consisted of comic songs and rag—time and gramophones, and no one knew anything of folk—dancing. I couldn't show it with no one to demonstrate, and people refused to learn till they had seen it.

I used to go round to our huts in the different camps with a set of rappers under my arm, and talk to little bunches of men just where I happened to find interest. wouldn't learn, because, of course, all classes had to be held in the concert huts, and there were always dozens there watching and that made people shy. Then I got a central classroom from the Y.M.C.A, and picked a man here and a man there, and we began - and then I roped in some of the Y.M.C.A. girls who do clerical work and have their evenings off and they went crazy over Country Dances. Then as my few men began to be good, they didn't mind dancing at camp classes, so I could start a class with two men and gradually the watchers would come in.

We gave our first Demonstration at the end of two months. Miss Tuckett of Bristol (holds the Advanced Certificate) is a motor driver to the Y.M.C.A., so she and I did Morris Jigs. We had no Morris side, but quite good Playford dances, and we did the Kirby, though I had to take a sword myself because I then had only five men who knew it.

Since then we have given twelve Demonstrations to average audience of 500. Never less than 300, and often up to 700. I talk a little history and they like that very much. The men are frightfully keen. They cheer the roof off and run with our car all through the camps when we leave afterwards. The men wear flannels for Shows, and the girls blue and white striped under-frocks with plain blue tabards back and front. We all have braid rosettes of different colours.

... I am now the official Folk Dancing

Department of the Y.M.C.A. I have been allowed eight military passes for assistants, and am told by the Y.M.C.A that I may engage whom I choose and place them in other Bases. Of course, I don't want six others all at once. because I think it better to get their Bases ready for them, instead of pitching them into it like I was at first, with no popular opinion for backing and no pupils ready to learn. It is such waste of time. My eight passes include myself and my secretary. secured Miss Tuttiett to come out after Christmas, and I am trying to persuade Miss Girdlestone to leave Canteen work and join us - she is already in France. (Miss Tuttiett and Miss Girdlestone both hold Advanced Certificates.) Miss Tuckett won't leave motor driving but is a little help, especially in demonstrations, and she is taking two of my weekly classes while I am away. I am able to offer all living and travelling expenses and a salary of 1.1.c (i.e. \$5.25) per week. We are not allowed to be in France for a period of less than four months.

I don't see any chance of making many first rate dancers in the way of Morris, though some of the Country Dances are really worth seeing. The men are sometimes with me for two months, and then off to the Line, or some other Base. But I teach what Morris they do very slowly and carefully, so that what we do show is good. The Sword Dances are tremendously popular. Then in some of the camp classes I only give the men one lesson and then never see them again. That means a bit of a sword dance, and the "Butterfly" and "Gathering Peascods", perhaps. So one only counts those classes as just a bit of fun for them. I get perhaps twenty or thirty dancing and two hundred watching. The row is terrific. But I am always told by some one afterward that it's the happiest hour he's had since he left home. I've come across several elementary teachers who have taught a little in England.

I've formed a Y.M.C.A. Branch of the E.F.D.S. I thought it well to make ourselves as official as possible. Members are Y.M.C.A. workers and lecturers, and military people who are really interested and keen. My idea is that they will join their home Branches of

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(Splendid Stuff..., continued from page 5) E.F.D.S. when they return to England. I have a lot of clergymen in it and all kinds of folk. Martin Harvey joined because it was really good art and genuine; and Gibsy Smith joined because he said it was splendid stuff for keeping the boys out of mischief.

I have a really good class of regular army gym instructors. Six of them, mostly Sergeant Majors. They, of course, are permanent men and in charge of the training camps. I'll be able to make rather fine dancers of them, and they are tremendously keen. They want to put it into the Army Gyms along with other games. They all mean to come to Stratford after the war.

I find that swords are fearfully scarce in England, but I think I can get them made in France, which will very much simplify matters.

I send you a photograph of our original Sword Dance. Behind are three Corporals from Belfast and the little man is from Sheffield, and the other a boiler-maker in Paisley – he means to come over to Stratford and take a certificate when the war is over.

If one of your American dancers come over, please tell them to look out for us.

Yours sincerely.

D.K. Daking

Editor's note: We don't have the photograph of Miss Daking's sword team and don't know where the original letter is. I wondered if Maud Karpeles mentioned Miss Daking in her biography of Sharp. She did:

"Folk dancing was introduced into the army in May 1917 by Lena Ashwell's concert-parties and the Y.M.C.A. The moving spirit was Miss D.C. Daking.

"...a paper and comb provided music, then a fiddle, then a piano... The dance was put on parade with squads of men and the band playing. By Christmas there were twelve teachers with every minute occupied in promoting the most popular sideshow in France. The work was continued in convalescent camps in England and with the army on the Rhine after the war was over." (Sharp's daughter, Joan, was one of the teachers.)

"Not many of the men actually joined the Society after they had been demobilized, but the introduction of folk dancing into the army contributed to its general acceptance as a normal activity by helping to dispel the idea that it was merely a pastime for cranks."

(<u>Cecil Sharp</u>, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, page 173)



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