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MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS

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This is not presented as an exhaustive study of May Day celebrations, but rather as suggestions to those interested in organizing festivals of this kind. Only such dates and references have been used as are necessary to give the historical setting of May Day and to indicate sources of information for those who desire to go further into the subject.

May Day Celebrations

BY ELIZABETH BURCHENAL

The celebration of May Day may be traced back to the Romans, whose Floralia or Floral Games began on the 28th of April and lasted several days; and the fact that from that time until to-day many nations have celebrated this season, shows that there is something fundamental in this expression of joy and well-being at the time when the warm days and first flowers of spring appear.

I firmly believe that, even in large cities, if the children could go into the country at this time enough to realize what spring is, and to see the young green things sprouting, it would come very natural to them to express their happiness in much the same way that many people of many nations have done. Therefore in making recommendations for a celebration of May Day, the first and most important thing should be pilgrimages to the woods and bringing back flowers and green things to the city.

Before giving a list of definite events for a May Day festival, let me first quote some of the English writers who have described the custom observed in Old England on May Day.

"On the Calends, or the first of May, commonly called May Day, the young people were wont to rise early in the morning and walk to some neighboring wood, accompanied with music and blowing of horns, where they broke down branches from the trees and adorned themselves with nose-gays and crowns of flowers. When this is done, they return with their booty homewards and make their doors and windows to triumph with their flowery spoils, and the after part of the day is chiefly spent in dancing around a tall pole, which is called a Maypole, and being placed in a convenient part of the village, stands there, as it were, consecrated to the Goddess of Flowers, without the least violation being offered to it the whole circle of the year."*

* From Brand's "Popular Antiquities."

"In England, it is necessary to go back several generations to find the observances of May Day in fullest development. In the sixteenth century it was still the custom for middle and lower classes to go forth for flowers and hawthorne branches at an early hour, which they brought home about sunrise with music of horns and tabor and all possible signs of joy and merriment. With these spoils they would decorate every door and window in the village. By a natural transmission of ideas, they gave to the hawthorne bloom the name of May, they called this ceremony the bringing home of the May and they spoke of the expedition to the woods as 'Going a-Maying.' The fairest maid of the village was crowned with flowers as the Queen of the May. The lads and lasses met, danced and sang together with the freedom of simplicity. . . . In a somewhat earlier age, ladies and gentlemen were accustomed to join in these Maying festivities, even the King and Queen condescended to mingle with their subjects. In the reign of Henry VIII, the heads of the corporations of London went out into the high grounds of Kent to gather the May. Not content with garlanding their houses, doors and windows, these people of old days had in every town, or considerable district of the town, and in every village a fixed pole as high as the mast of a vessel, on which each May morning, they suspended wreaths of flowers and round which they danced in rings nearly the whole day. This Maypole had its place equally with the Parish Church or Parish Stocks, or if one was wanting, the people selected a suitable tree, fashioned it and erected it in the proper place, there to remain from year to year. . . .

. . . The custom of having a May Queen looks like a relic of the heathen celebration of the day. This flower-crowned maid appears as a living representative of the Goddess of Flora, whom the Romans worshipped on this day. The May Queen did not join in the revelries. She was placed on a sort of bower or arbour near the Maypole, there to sit in state, the object of admiration for the whole village. . . .

. . . In our country the enthroning of the May Queen has been longer obsolete than the Maypole, but it will be found that the custom still survives in France."*

"In the month of May (May games were not always

* From Chambers's "Book of Days," pages 571-574.

celebrated on the first day of the month) the citizens of London of all estates, generally in all parishes, and in some instances two or three parishes joining together, had their several Mayings and did fetch their Maypole with divers warlike Shews, with good archers, Morrice dancers and other devices for pastimes all day, and towards evening they had stage plays and bonfires in the streets. These great Mayings and May games were made by the governors and masters of the City, together with the triumphant setting up of the great shaft or principal Maypole in Cornhill before the Parish Church of St. Andrew."*

"It seems to have been a constant custom at the celebration of the May games to elect a Lord and Lady of the May, who probably presided over the sports. On the 30th of May, in the fourth year of Queen Mary, 1557, was a goodly May games in Fenchurch Street with drums and guns and pikes and with the nine worthies who rode and each of them made his speech. There was also a Morrice Dance and elephant and castle and the Lord and Lady of the May, appearing to make up the show. We also read that the Lord of the May, and doubtless his Lady also, was decorated with scarfs, ribbands and other fineries. . . . Later in the sixteenth century, Robin Hood tales were popular, and it became customary to impersonate this famous outlaw with several of his associates, and add them to the pageantry of the May games, who presided as Lord of the May and a female called the Maid Marian, was Lady of the May. His companions were also equipped in appropriate dresses and distinguished by the title of Robin Hood's men."†

"In the month of May, says one cheerful old writer, namely on May Day, in the morning, every man, except impediment, would walk into the sweet meadows and green woods, there to rejoice their spirits with the beauty and savour of sweet flowers and with the harmony of birds praying God in their kind, and for example hereof, Edward Hall hath noted that King Henry the VIII, namely in the seventh year of his reign, accompanied with many Lords and Ladies rode a-Maying to the high ground of Shooters Hill, where as they passed by the way, they espied a com-

* From Warren's "The Holidays," page 137.

† From Strutt's "Book of Sports and Pastimes," page 353.

pany of tall yeomen, clothed all in green, with green hoods and with bows and arrows to the number of two hundred. One being their chieftain was called Robin Hood, who required of the King and his company to stay and see his men shoot, whereunto the King granting, Robin Hood whistled and all the two hundred archers shot off, loosing all at once, and when he whistled again they likewise shot again. Their arrows whistled by craft of the head so that the noise was strange and loud, which greatly delighted the King, Queen and their company."*

"At this time, we see the brisk young wenches in the country parishes dancing round the Maypole, also milkmaids with a cow with gilded horns and nearly covered with ribbands of various colors, formed into bows, roses and interspersed with the green oaken leaves and bunches of flowers. May games of Robin Hood seem to have been principally instituted, for the encouragement of archery, and were generally accompanied by Morrice Dancers; there were besides May games of a more simple nature, being merely dances around the Maypole by the lads and lasses of the village, the undoubted remains of the Roman Floralia."†

Even to-day, there is some slight observance of May Day in England and France, and doubtless other countries, and here in America the tradition exists to a greater extent than most of us realize. In New York City there are the May parties of school children in Central Park, and, from personal experience, I know that in some of the eastern states, and out in the big territory of the middle west, there exists some sort of traditions among the children concerning the celebration of May Day.

The following is a quotation from a letter written by a young woman who was born in Indiana and spent her early childhood there:

"I do not know where we children learned those May customs. They were passed along to us by that secret wireless method that children have. On the earliest Saturday in May, we used to beg for a picnic in the woods. One of our number was selected as the Queen and attended this picnic

* From Warren's "Holidays," pages 136-137.

† From Strutt's "Book of Sports and Pastimes," page 357.

clad in her proudest array. We had games of all kinds in the woods and gathered a large number of wild flowers and green branches. When we returned home in the afternoon, we wove paper May-baskets and filled them with the flowers that we had gathered, and at night we went stealthily to the houses of various friends, especially old people of whom we were fond, and hung a basket on the door-knob, ringing the bell and running away to hide behind some tree and witness, if possible, the surprise and pleasure of the finder."

I have given these quotations because I consider them most significant of the simple and natural way in which children might under favorable conditions celebrate the day. I think if one reads them over, it will be seen that nearly all of the old customs could be carried out under present conditions, and I herewith submit an outline, reduced to terms of the present day.

PROGRAM

Morning.

- I. Expedition to the nearest woods or country for flowers and green leaves and branches.
- II. The making of green garlands to be used later for decorating the Maypole and as prizes.
- III. The making of bows and arrows and a large wreath to be used later as a target.
- IV. The making of whistles from green wood.
- V. Lunches in the woods.

Afternoon.

- I. The return home.
- II. Decoration of houses, door-ways and windows.
- III. The setting up and decorating of the Maypole in the playground, the street or the park, wherever the games are to be held.
- IV. Meeting together and crowning the May Lord and Lady
- V. Procession through the streets:
 1. Musicians.
 2. Lord and Lady of the May with attendants.
 3. Country girls.
 4. Milk maids leading a cow.
 5. Groups of dancers and singers, and others who are to take part in the games.

(All of these should be decorated with and carry as many flowers and greens as possible.)

VI. Arrival at the place where the Maypole is and where the May games are to take place.

VII. May Games.

1. Songs, which are tuneful, joyous and appropriate to the season.
2. Speeches.
3. Dances of all the countries represented among the people taking part or among the spectators.
4. Games especially appropriate to the season.
5. Winding the Maypole.
6. Awarding the garlands to the best dancers.
7. Running games.
8. Archery, with wreath as target.
9. Awarding of garlands to all winners.

(For description of these events, see Appendix.)

Evening.

- I. Hanging of May-baskets.
- II. Dramatics.
- III. Music.

This order of events for the day has for its purpose:

First—The imbuing of the children with wholesome delight in the feeling that spring has come, by giving them the opportunity of themselves gathering flowers and greens to bring back to the city.

Second—For the children to walk through the streets and show the flowers and greens to as many people as possible, thus bringing the breath of spring with them into the city.

Third—Providing a definite form for the celebration of the day and the expression of joy at the coming of spring.

The preparation for such festival could be made a happy task for schools, settlements and various institutions. The May-baskets would have to be made beforehand, and any preparation of costumes, songs, dances and plays could be done during the winter. Flower missions could be called upon for help in securing the necessary wealth of flowers for such a celebration.

It will be seen that such a program could be carried out by a town or city as a whole, as well as by individual schools, institutions, settlements or playgrounds.

The vital point, to my mind, is not so much to imitate what people of the olden days have done, as to inspire the feeling from which this celebration sprang.

APPENDIX

Songs:

Begone, Dull Care.....	}	Songs of the British Islands.
The Spring is Coming.....		
Under the Greenwood Tree .		
Come Lads and Lasses.....		
The Maypole.....		
Now is the Month of May...	}	National Part Songs, No. 19.
In the Pleasant Month of May.....		
Robin Hood and Little John.		
Joan to the Maypole, Away		
Let Us On.....		
To Carry the Milking Pail...	}	National Part Songs, No. 13.
Songs of the Countries		
represented among those		
taking part or the specta-	}	Characteristic Songs and
tors.....		
		Dances of All Nations.

Dances:

Maypole Dance.....	}	The Guild of Play Book of Festival and Dance.
Spring Flower Dance.....		
Morris Dance.....		
Morris Dances.....	}	The Morris Book.
To-day's the First of May. .		
	}	Folk Dances and Singing Games.
Carousel.....		
Dances of other countries:	}	See Report of the Committee on Folk Dancing of the Playground Association of America.
Russian, Hungarian, Ital-		
ian, Bohemian, Irish,		
English, Swedish and		
Danish.....		

Speeches:

The following speeches are given in full as they are taken from old books which are difficult to secure.

First Speech:

"London, to thee I do present the merry month of May;
Let each true subject be content to hear me what I say:
For from the top of conduit-head, as plainly may appear,
I will both tell my name to you and wherefore I came here,
My name is Ralph, by due descent though not ignoble I
Yet far inferior to the stock of gracious grocery;
And by the common counsel of my fellows in the Strand,
With gilded staff and crossed scarf, the May-lord here I stand.

Rejoice, Oh English hearts rejoice! rejoice Oh lovers dear!
Rejoice, Oh city, town and country! rejoice, eke every shere!

For now the fragrant flowers do spring and sprout in seemly sort,

The little birds do sit and sing, the lambs do make fine sport;

And be like them, Oh, you, I say, of this same noble town,
And lift aloft your velvet heads, and slipping off your gown,

With bells on legs and napkins clean unto your shoulders tied,

With scarfs and garters as you please, and 'Hey for our town' I cried.

March out and show your willing minds, by twenty and by twenty,

To Hogsdon or to Newington, where ale and cakes are plenty;

And let it ne'er be said for shame, that we the youths of London

Lay thrumming of our caps at home, and left our custom undone.

Up, then, I say, both young and old, both man and maid a-Maying,

With drums and guns that bounce aloud and merry tabor playing.

Which to prolong, God save our King, and send his Country peace,

And root out treason from the land! and so, my friends, I cease."*

* From Beaumont and Fletcher's "Knight of the Burning Pestle."

Second Speech:

"Is not this the merry month of May
 When lads all masken in fresh array?
 How falls it then, we no merrier been
 Like as other girt in gaudie green?
 Our blonket liveries been all too sad
 For thilke same season, when all is clad
 With pleasance, the ground with grass,
 The wood with green leaves, the bushes with blossoming
 buds.

Youths folke now flogen in everywhere,
 To gather May-baskets and smelling breere,
 And home they hasten the posts to dight,
 And all the kirk pillars, ere daylight
 With Hawthorne buds and sweet eglantine
 And girlands of roses and sops in wine
 Such merrymake holy saints doth qeume
 But we here sitten as drowned in a dream.

"Siker this morning, no longer ago
 I saw a shole of sheppards out go,
 With singing and shooting and jolly cheere
 Before them yode a lust tabrere,
 That to the meynie, a horn pipe plaid
 Whereto they dauncen, each one with his maid.
 To see these folks make such jovisuanee,
 Made my heart after the pipe to daunce;
 Tho to the greenwood they speeden them all
 To fetchen home May with their musicall.
 And home they bringen in a royal throne
 Crowned as King and his Queen atone
 Was Lady Flora, on whom did attend
 A fair flock of faeries and a fresh bend
 Of lovely nymphs (Oh, that I were there
 To helpen the ladies their May bush bear)
 Ah, Piers! been my teeth on edge to think
 How great sport they gaynen with little swinke."*

* From Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar."

Games:

Archery.

Running Races: Hand Book of the Girls' Branch of Public
 Schools Athletic League of New York City. One
 Hundred and Fifty Gymnastic Games.

Traditional Games of Children: Children's Games. Games
 for the Playground, Home, School and Gymnasium.

BOOKS

1. SONGS OF THE BRITISH ISLANDS. By W. H. Hadow, M. D.
 Published by J. Curwen & Sons, 24 Berners St., W., London.
 Price, 2s. 6d.
 2. NATIONAL PART SONGS, No. 19. Published by J. Curwen
 & Sons, 24 Berners St., W., London. Price, 1½d.
 3. NATIONAL PART SONGS, No. 13. Published by J. Curwen
 & Sons, 24 Berners St., W., London. Price, 1½d.
 4. THE GUILD OF PLAY BOOK OF FESTIVAL AND DANCE, Part
 I. By G. T. Kimmins. Published by J. Curwen & Sons,
 24 Berners St., W., London. Price, 5s.
 5. THE GUILD OF PLAY BOOK OF FESTIVAL AND DANCE, Part
 II. By G. T. Kimmins. Published by J. Curwen & Sons,
 24 Berners St., W., London. Price, 5s.
 6. CHARACTERISTIC SONGS AND DANCES OF ALL NATIONS. By
 Brown and Moffatt. Published by Bayley & Ferguson,
 2 Gt. Marlborough St., London. Price \$2.25.
 7. FOLK DANCES AND SINGING GAMES. By Elizabeth Burch-
 enal. Published by G. Schirmer, 35 Union Sq., New York.
 Price, \$2.00.
- (All of the above books can be obtained from G. Schirmer,
 35 Union Sq., New York.)
8. THE MORRIS BOOK. By Cecil Sharp and H. C. MacIlwaine.
 Published by Novello & Co., 21 E. 17th St., New York.
 Price, \$1.25.
 9. MORRIS DANCE TUNES. (Sets 1 and 2.) By Cecil Sharp and
 H. C. MacIlwaine. Published by Novello & Co., 21 E.
 17th St., New York. Price, \$1.00 each.
 10. SONG PLAYS. By Jacob Bolin. Published by the author,
 645 Madison Ave., New York. Price, 75 cents.
 11. REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOLK DANCING. Published

by the Playground Association of America, 1 Madison Ave., New York.

12. ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY GYMNAS TIC GAMES. Published by The Boston Normal School of Gymnastics. Price, \$1.25.
13. HANDBOOK OF THE GIRLS' BRANCH OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS ATHLETIC LEAGUE. Published by the American Sports Publishing Co., 21 Warren St., New York. Price, 10 cents.
14. TRADITIONAL GAMES OF ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND. (2 vols.) By Alice B. Gomme. Published by David Nutt, 57 Long Acre, London. Price, about \$8.00.
15. CHILDREN'S GAMES. By Alice B. Gomme. Published by David Nutt, 57 Long Acre, W. C., London. Price 3s. 6d.
16. GAMES FOR THE PLAYGROUND, HOME, SCHOOL AND GYMNASIUM. By Jessie H. Bancroft. Published by the Macmillan Company, 64 Fifth Ave., New York. Price, \$1.50.

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10. THE PLAYGROUND AS A PHASE OF SOCIAL REFORM. Mrs. Harriet H. Heller.
20. THE BUSINESS OF PLAY. Lee F. Hanmer.
32. BIBLIOGRAPHY ON PLAY, George E. Johnson, and STORIES FOR CHILDREN, Miss Maud Summers.
34. WHY TEACH A CHILD TO PLAY? George E. Johnson.

Athletics

16. PUBLIC SCHOOLS ATHLETIC LEAGUE OF NEW YORK CITY. Luther H. Gulick, M.D.
17. (GIRLS' BRANCH) PUBLIC SCHOOLS ATHLETIC LEAGUE OF NEW YORK CITY. Luther H. Gulick, M.D.
36. ATHLETICS FOR BOYS. (Committee Report.) A. K. Aldinger, M.D., Chairman.
37. ATHLETICS FOR GIRLS. Mrs. Frank M. Roessing and Miss Elizabeth Burchenal.
47. P. S. A. L. OF NEW YORK CITY, PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS (1909).
50. INTER HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS. Earl Cline.

Folk Dancing

28. FOLK AND NATIONAL DANCES. Luther H. Gulick, M.D.
35. REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOLK DANCING. Miss Elizabeth Burchenal, Chairman.

Festivals and Celebrations

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RECENT NATIONAL FESTIVALS IN CHICAGO. Miss Amalie Hofer.
24. THE FIELD DAY AND PLAY PICNIC FOR COUNTRY CHILDREN. Dr. Myron T. Scudder. (Booklet, 10 cents.)
31. A SAFER, SANER FOURTH OF JULY.
53. MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS. Miss Elizabeth Burchenal.
55. OUR BARBAROUS FOURTH. Mrs. Isaac L. Rice.