

# Tracing the Historical Threads from an Old Maypole Photo

by David Roodman, Washington, DC

Back in March, while the editor of this newsletter, Lynn Nichols, was down in Washington, DC, for work, she posted a [photo](#) she spied at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. It's a black-and-white of white girls in white clothes dancing the maypole in front of the White House. Here's the original, which is dated to the Hoover administration:



Photo: Everett Collection Historical / Alamy Stock Photo

When I saw Lynn's post on the [CDSS Facebook page](#), I thought there must be a story behind that picture. Those girls must have been invited, and organized, and whoever did the inviting and organizing was inspired by someone else, who maybe was inspired by someone else. And if I traced those influences, I might find that they led back to the Country Dance and Song Society — or, as it was then, the Federation of American Branches of the English Folk Dance Society.

So I got to Googling. I quickly found a [Washington Post article](#) on the history of the White House Easter Egg Roll. It turns out that in 1929, Herbert Hoover's first year in office, the egg roll was an established tradition, already half a century old. But like most traditions, it evolved (and [continues to!](#)). The Post article opens with the photo Lynn found, and goes on to explain how the new First Lady, [Lou Henry Hoover](#), reshaped the celebration:

*In the past, the main event of the day was rolling dyed, hard-boiled eggs across the grass to see whose egg would*

*go the farthest before cracking. Egg toss-and-catch and egg croquet also were popular games, but after a few days, the strong odor of all the broken eggs could be smelled miles away.*

*First lady Lou Hoover hoped to end the horrible smell in 1929 when she introduced folk dancing as an alternate activity. That idea took hold until first lady Pat Nixon in 1973 added an Easter egg hunt using real eggs, and the smell of the rotten, undiscovered eggs reminded people why Hoover had preferred folk dancing.*

Aha! Lou Henry Hoover was the inviter and organizer, and the precise day those girls pranced around the pole was Easter, March 31, 1929.

Further searching surfaced what looks like a [video of the same event](#), but might not be, for now the dancers are grown women and the video is dated to May 1929. I'd guess that the First Lady brought back the maypole for May Day, which was, as I write, 90 years ago today.

Next, [via Wikipedia](#), I found a bridge to CDSS, specifically, a [list of officers](#) of the Girl Scouts, Inc., in 1920:

Officers 1920  
Founder  
MRS. JULIETTE LOW  
Honorary President  
MRS. WOODROW WILSON  
President  
MRS. ARTHUR O. CHOATE  
First Vice-President      Second Vice-President  
MRS. JAMES J. STORROW      MRS. HERBERT HOOVER  
Treasurer      Chairman, Executive Board  
MRS. NICHOLAS E. BRADY      MRS. V. EVERIT MACY

All women. And all, other than the founder, identified by the names of their wealthy and/or powerful husbands. (But I see no [direct familial link](#) between the treasurer and a [later U.S. Treasury Secretary](#) who carried the same name.) Just above Lou Henry Hoover appears New York socialite [Anne Hyde Choate](#); she would serve as an officer of CDSS. To Hoover's left is the Bostonian Helen Storrow, who was by then a major supporter of



enacted tight immigration limits in 1924. The new rules would trip up May Gadd. But Gay, as she was called, had friends in high places. Mrs. Arthur O. Choate wrote in 1928 to her Girl Scout comrade-in-arms Lou Henry Hoover, whose husband was by then a presidential prospect. Choate pleaded:

*There is no one else free and able to give the time necessary to carry out the festival but May Gadd, and if she has to leave, it will have to be abandoned, and the consequent employment of musicians, photographers, caterers, and other assistants cancelled - as well as an afternoon of rare beauty, tradition and wholesome pleasure to many hundreds of people...*

- Mrs. Hoover soon contacted the relevant officials. In a letter that I infer passed from Mrs. Hoover to her husband's confidant [Edgar Rickard](#), Hoover revealed how she conceived of her cultural crusade:

*... the vital thing about it all is that Folk Dancing provides a leisure-time occupation and relaxation of true cultural and artistic value, together with the greatest health giving factors, which will aid tremendously in balancing the effects of the too much jazz dancing and indiscriminated [sic] moving picture attendance whose demoralizing influences now threaten our whole civilization during that same leisure time.*

- The commissioner general of immigration carved a tiny adjustment in the application of U.S. immigration law: teachers of English dance would be deemed "professors," thus exempt from certain quota restrictions.
- Two days before Herbert Hoover would be elected president, May Gadd sent a handwritten thank you note to Mrs. Hoover. Gadd passed on the hopeful rumor that Mrs. Hoover would send "your Secretary to one of our Vacation Schools." Someone — probably Hoover or her secretary — doodled an exclamation point in the margin, hinting at the falsity of the rumor. Just in case, it appears, Gadd included [a brochure](#) for a "Christmas Vacation School" teaching morris, folk song, country dancing, and sword dancing, and running December 26-29 in New York City. We could say that CDSS once

ran a winter camp. That quite surprised me, as an enthusiastic regular at a [non-CDSS winter camp](#).

- Gadd also enclosed a [two-pager](#) on the English Folk Dance Society. It states that the Society's object was "to lay the foundations for the continuance of folk dance and folk song as a living form of art in accordance with the genuine tradition and in conformity with a high standard." Means to that end included the training and certifying teachers, and a Board of Artistic Control. Reads rather differently than [CDSS's current mission statement](#), no?

It is easy, and appropriate, to shake our heads in chagrin at the elitism, even the [racism](#), of our founding mothers and fathers. We ought to appreciate where we come from and ponder how it shapes us now.

But I think it would be a mistake to stop there. One constant in the history of folk traditions is that each generation, and each social group, has projected its own meaning onto them—from the hippies of the 1960s, to the American and Canadian square dancers of the 1950s, to the [Nazis of the 1930s](#), to the partisans of England's great political convulsions in the 1680s. The wonder is that the traditions persist, even as we keep changing our stories about what they mean. And that tells me that beneath the cultural overlays, the songs and the dances nurture things more universal in human nature.



*David Roodman started showing up with his family at Pinewoods in 1976, with his mom at morris practice in 1986, and by himself at sword practice in 2006. In 1990, he washed dishes for a summer on Pinewoods camp crew. In 2009, he won Best New Entrant at the morris jig competition at Sidmouth Folkweek, and would have won Best Over 40 had the judges believed he was over 40. These days he, his wife, and two boys are regulars at CDSS's Cascade of Music & Dance adult and family week, and he is a proud member of the Cutting Edge sword team. David is currently serving a three-year term on the CDSS Governing Board. David supports his dance habit by practicing economics without a license, serving as a senior advisor to a young San Francisco-based charity, the Open Philanthropy Project. He has written two books and many academic articles, statistical programs, and blog posts.*