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Danish Folk Life Influence in the Appalachian region

by
Sune Frederiksen

Physical education instructor Oscar Gunkler of Berea College was perhaps the first person from Kentucky to travel to Denmark to study the unique Danish folk school model. In 1924, he travelled to Ollerup Gymnastikhøjskole to better understand this educational phenomenon and find ways to implement it in the curriculum at Berea College, which was the first college in the south to integrate black and white students back in 1853. The slogan of Berea College, which was at one time very provocative, is “God Has Made of One Blood All the Peoples of the Earth.” The college was founded by the abolitionist and pastor John G. Fee, who had to flee north with his ideas and students during the Civil War. I was lucky enough to meet Oscar Gunkler a few times in 1995 and 1996 before he passed away in his nineties. He remembered fondly how the Danish folk school and its philosophy had changed both his way of thinking and the way his PE classes at Berea College were conducted.

In 1908–09, John C. Campbell and his wife Olive traveled the southern Appalachian region. Both were hopeful that life in the region could and would improve through lifelong education. Like Gunkler, they were inspired by the Danish folk school that had been successful in rural Denmark. After John Campbell died in 1920, Olive and a friend named Marguerite Butler went to Denmark and Sweden to study folk schools. Energized, they returned to the Appalachian Mountains and the groundwork began. They soon realized that they could not impose their ideas on the mountain people. They needed a genuine collaboration. Finally, in 1925 the construction of John C. Campbell Folk School (JCCFS) began, with a focus on non-competitive, lifelong learning.

In 1926, Johannes Bidstrup, an Askov Højskole student, arrived in Brasstown. It was actually his brother who was supposed to come, but he changed his mind and sent Johannes instead. Johannes was a committed farmer and a leader in gymnastics and dance. It is fair to say

that he significantly influenced folk life at Berea College, Pine Mountain Settlement School, Hindman Settlement School, John C. Campbell Folk School, and many other similar schools. Even today, folk dance groups in this region have Danish and Swedish folk dances on their programs, and without knowing it they have all been influenced by the Danish philosopher, theologian, and educator N. F. S. Grundtvig. Johannes Bidstrup was the school's director from 1951 to 1967. During a visit to Ryslinge Højskole in 1998 with Berea College Country Dancers, I did a short presentation and mentioned Johannes Bidstrup. Afterwards two ladies approached me and told me that they were nieces of his. It was hard to believe that I had such luck. I was further enlightened by their stories.

Dr. John Ramsay held the reins at JCCFS until 1973, when he left for a recreational position at Berea College. He was profoundly inspired by the folk schools in Denmark, especially Askov and the cooperative movement. He took the initiative, with the support of Barbara Harding, a well-respected dance leader in Virginia, to begin the Danish American Exchange, a cultural network with connections at Berea College, The Folk Circle Association, Arthur Morgan School (Burnsville, North Carolina), JCCFS, and individuals in Michigan, West Virginia, Colorado and other places. No board was established, but the idea was to engage people in the folk life traditions in the US and Denmark, break down cultural barriers, and build friendships and connections. Other significant schools in this region that have been influenced by Danish immigrants are Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina.

From the 1970s on, several dance groups have crossed the Atlantic. For example, in 1991 I met John Ramsay for the first time at the Landsstævne in Svendborg, where his group performed for Queen Margrethe. This was not the last time I met John Ramsay. In 1993, The Danish Gymnastics and Youth Organization (DDGU) arranged a tour to the US. The theme was "Democracy in Religion, Sport and Education." John Ramsay was the main organizer on this side of the pond. This trip brought me to Berea College, John C. Campbell Folk School, Herndon, Virginia, and Arthur Morgan School for the first time. We ended up at a folk conference in Washington, DC. In 1995, DGI Vendsyssel asked me to arrange a two-week spring tour

for its folk dance program. With forty-five dancers of all ages, I went back to Berea and to Oceanport/Red Bank where my distant cousin Karen (Matson) Judkis and her husband Andy were our hosts. Karen's grandfather Rasmus Madsen, who became Raymond Matson, was my grandfather's brother. He had left Denmark in 1908 to pursue happiness in the US. Isn't it amazing how networks can be utilized?

While I was in Berea, John Ramsay approached me and asked if I could be interested in a position in the student labor and life department with a focus on non-competitive sports. After much consideration, I said yes to a ten-month commitment that included work at both the college and the Folk Circle Association. My college in Denmark, Aalborg Handelsskole, graciously accepted a sabbatical, and a local team handball club allowed me to break a semi-professional coaching contract I had with them. I will be forever grateful. In Kentucky, I met and fell in love with a local high school teacher and dancer. Aalborg Handelsskole provided me with yet another year off before the final decision about emigration was made. It was tough to leave a great tenured job, great friends, and loving parents behind, but sometimes you never know which way the wind will blow.

Since I moved to Berea, I have been involved in civic organizations from day one and believe that I have influenced the community in a positive way. In 1998, I led a large group of dancers to the Landsstævne in Silkeborg, Præstø, Vendsyssel, and Rebild. Over the years, we have with much pleasure hosted numerous Danes, individuals, and groups from across Denmark and from all walks of life. Since 2007, I have been much involved with the Danish American Friendship Association Rebild, which has allowed me to host the annual convention in both 2009 and 2017 in Berea. Those were big tasks that were worth all the blood, sweat, and tears. In 2017, I spearheaded a dance and cultural tour to the Landsstævne in Aalborg and the celebration of the US Independence Day in the Rebild Hills. We were sixty-five dancers, musicians, and chaperones.

In the past forty years it is fair to say that approximately four thousand individuals have crossed the Atlantic as a part of the Danish American Exchange or a spin-off, or a spin-off of a spin-off. Nor should we forget the numerous gymnastics teams, including the National Danish Performance Team, who have visited many times

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throughout this region. All of these exchanges confirm that networking and good intentions are outstanding factors when it comes to cultural exchanges, openness, and inspiration.

For more information about the individual organizations mentioned here, you can visit the following websites:

Berea College: www.berea.edu

John C. Campbell Folk School: www.folkschool.org

The Folk Circle Association: www.berea-folk-circle.org