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Eighty Years since Ashland: The Untold Story of the Transition from the Ashland Folk School to Circle Pines Center, 1928-1951

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by
Christyl Burnett

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> Loyal supporters of Ashland tried still to continue, but when the fire marshal in 1938 condemned the building, the program of the school was moved to Chief Noonday Camp under the sponsorship of the Central States Cooperative League. Later, that project grew into Circle Pines Center, near Hastings, Michigan, which is still active in 1977.
>
> -Enok Mortensen, *Schools for Life: The Grundtvigian Folk Schools in America*[1]

> The purpose for which this organization is formed is to create, establish, and maintain a center of co-operative culture in the Central United States for the purpose of carrying on co-operative education, and to advocate and teach, through demonstration and otherwise, the superior advantages of co-operation as a way of life, and to aid in establishing a system of production and distribution for use instead of for profit, through the development and expansion of Rochdale Consumer Co-operation. The aim is to help build co-operative economic democracy in America.
>
> -Article II, Section 2, Constitution and By-laws of Circle Pines Center[2]

This is a brief record of my journey to research the transition from the Ashland Folk School in Grant, Michigan to the Circle Pines Center in Delton, Michigan. This journey began as I became increasingly involved with the programming at Circle Pines, and more specifically the folk school portion of Circle Pines' annual music festival, the Buttermilk Jamboree. I have been a neighbor to Circle Pines since 2001,

so close that I can ride my bike there. Proximity has afforded me the opportunity to be involved with many aspects of life at Circle Pines. In 2018 Circle Pines celebrated eighty years; I had the pleasure of working with a handful of others in planning the eightieth reunion that saw over 170 folks returning to celebrate the long life of Circle Pines. In the spring of 2018 I was elected to the board where I am a part of several committees. I am fortunate to be particularly well-situated to conduct this research and I have a passion for microhistories. With my education and experience I enjoy archival appraisal and curation and find it enjoyable to discern why stories are told the way they are.

Circle Pines' annual Buttermilk Jamboree music festival offers a weekend of folk educational opportunities that include hands-on workshops and discussion circles about everything from homestead farming to concerns about nuclear capacities, home schooling, and advanced ukulele. As a coordinator of the weekend's folk school, I am frequently asked, "What is a folk school?" I knew what we were trying to do at Buttermilk and I knew Circle Pines' lore said that Circle Pines grew out of the Danish folk school movement, but I didn't really know more about it than that. I didn't even know what the Danish folk school movement was. I got the sense, though, that it had to be more than something like the church basement canning workshops of the 1970s, but what?

This is one of the oldest existing photographs of the Circle Pines Center Civil War-era farmhouse. *Photo courtesy of Grant Library.*

The History of Circle Pines

Circle Pines Center was founded in 1938 as a non-profit cooperative recreation and education center. It operates as a center for cooperation with a membership base of around 160 members. Circle Pines has semi-annual membership meetings at which the staff and board members report on the state and activities of the organization and new board members are voted upon as vacancies arise. In recent years, Circle Pines adopted four pillars on which it builds its programming: peace, social justice, environmental stewardship, and cooperation.

The membership is diverse in terms of age, race, ethnicity, religion, education, and economic class, with commonality most often found in support for progressive social, political, economic, and environmental causes. The membership is also geographically rather far flung, with most residing in the Midwest but some as far away as California and Maine, and even a few outside the United States. There are many active legacy families, a handful of whom go back to the very beginnings of Circle Pines. Circle Pines has operated an annual youth summer camp from its early years and has consistently held year-round programming since the 1970s, with annual events like maple syrup weekends and apple cider weekends. In more recent years Circle Pines has hosted a January cabin fever weekend, a semi-annual Spanish immersion weekend, and has revived a Thanksgiving dinner. Most recently the annual Buttermilk Jamboree has brought a few thousand people to the property each June. Circle Pines also frequently offers programming that meets the description of "a vacation with a purpose," such as the People's Institute week of participant-driven discussions about pressing societal and world problems. Likewise, outside groups with similar missions often rent the space for annual meetings and retreats, such as the semi-annual Equitable Pioneers co-op retreat.

Circle Pines Center and the Danish Folk School Movement

Where did the lore that Circle Pines grew out of the Danish folk school movement come from? As an active member with an interest in appraisal of non-material culture, I came to wonder how this came to be a Circle Pines origin story. The more I talked with Circle Piners, though, the more I realized that most of those who might have

known the answer were, sadly, beyond my reach because of death or advanced age. In a conversation with the then-current director I learned that Circle Pines was specifically connected to the Ashland Folk School in Grant, Michigan. I was excited to have something more concrete to look for and I quickly confirmed the name Ashland by digging into the Circle Pines archive. Having lived in West Michigan my whole life, I knew the tiny town of Grant as one of the charmingly quiet gateway towns to our treasured lands, rivers and lakes in northern Michigan. When I searched the web in 2014 for information about Ashland, one of the few leads to come up was a Wikipedia entry for Kristian Ostergaard, who had emigrated from Denmark in 1878, taught at a Danish folk high school in Elkhorn, Iowa, and helped to establish the Ashland Folk School in Grant in 1882. I was glad to have learned how old Ashland might have been and potentially confirm its link to the mysterious Danish folk school movement but the Wikipedia entry was thin, both on the Danish folk school movement and on Ashland. I needed to know more about what went on at Ashland that could have given birth to Circle Pines Center.

From a mention in the Circle Pines archive I learned that Enok Mortensen had written about Ashland in his 1977 *Schools for Life: The Grundtvigian Folk Schools in America*. He reported that Ashland was created by a small group of Danish immigrants in the 1880s according to Grundtvigian ideals.[3] Through reading Mortensen's book and articles in *The Bridge*, I quickly discovered that the folk school was no small educational/cultural institution in Denmark's past or present. My impression is that all Danes, old and young, know who N. F. S. Grundtvig was and have felt the impact of his work. Mortensen provides a thorough historical overview of Danish American folk schools in *Schools for Life*, including a chapter on Ashland that describes Ashland as quite progressive in its last decade. He mentions that after Ashland closed, some of the folks involved went on to start a project called Circle Pines Center, but that is all he wrote about it. He draws a clear line between Ashland and the Circle Pines project, then closes the chapter. Indeed, nowhere in any of the literature on Danish American folk schools have I found any discussion of Ashland's afterlife in Circle Pines Center. Mortensen's book is the only place in all the litera-

ture I have read to date concerning the Danish American folk school movement where I have found Circle Pines mentioned at all.

From the historical literature, it appeared as if Circle Pines had little in common with Danish and Danish American folk schools in general, or the Ashland Folk School in particular. Could Circle Pines legitimately consider itself an outgrowth, the offspring, of the Danish folk school movement, and more specifically the Ashland Folk School? Clearly, I had found a hole in the literature. But was it a hole worth considering? From reading Mortensen's account of Ashland, I immediately got a hopeful sense that the late progressive years at Ashland might be, indeed, where the seeds for Circle Pines came from because I knew something of Circle Pines and I knew that a characterization as progressive was one that fit.

A Decided Shift at Ashland: John E. Kirkpatrick

The Ashland Folk School waxed and waned from its beginnings in 1882 until its last stint of programming from 1928-38. During a time of high anti-immigrant sentiment after World War I, with low participation and interest, Ashland closed for a number of years.[4] After the war, a shift took place in the thinking around Ashland, as well as in other Danish American folk schools. By the 1920s, progressive American educators were starting to recognize the potential of the folk school idea and were spreading the word through their writings and people's school initiatives. In 1927, those with interests in Ashland went looking for a non-Dane to make a go of things at Ashland and the use of Danish at Ashland came to an end. When it reopened in 1928, it was with a decided difference in leadership, and participation from then on would be much less culturally homogenous. The common bond among participants would no longer be chiefly ties to life in the old country, but rather, in life as Americans.

The school was reinvigorated under the leadership of two successive directors, Dr. John E. Kirkpatrick and Chester A. Graham. I went in search of information that could tell me about who these two men were and what was going on at this renewed Ashland. Through email correspondence with Howard L. Nicholson, co-author of the 2015 publication *Danes and Icelanders in Michigan*,[5] I learned that the Grant Area District Library held some information on Ashland. Find-

ing the Grant Area District Library's Ashland collection is what led me to apply to the DAHS for a Bodtker Grant to allow me to pursue my research and tell this story. Intrigued by what I might be able to add to the scholarship on the impact of the Danish American folk school, I was delighted to be awarded the research grant in June 2017.

Progressive ideas in American education, society and politics flowed into the school under Kirkpatrick's, and later Graham's, leadership.[6] In their 2011 article, "John Ervin Kirkpatrick and the Rulers of American Colleges," Timothy Reese Cain and Steven E. Gump describe Kirkpatrick's struggle to ensure academic freedom for college faculty, in particular his continual fight "against what he saw as the ultimate enemy of higher education: external boards of control."[7] Kirkpatrick was fired from Washburn College in Topeka for criticizing the governance of the institution, and was later dismissed from Olivet College for publishing scholarly works on the subject.[8] In between he held a few temporary appointments at Harvard and the University of Michigan.[9] In 1926, during his time at Olivet, he published one of the first studies of the history of college and university governance in America, *The American College and its Rulers*. Through his study of academic governance Kirkpatrick concluded that external, nonresident boards of control tended to be motivated by a priority for raising money.[10] Ultimately, Cain and Gump portray Kirkpatrick as a frustrated educator who condemned the governing bodies of America's colleges and universities for usurping academic freedom and denying academic self-governance. The task of re-centering faculty in academic governance was central to Kirkpatrick's career.

Kirkpatrick had his own ideas for how to accomplish this task. While at Harvard and the University of Michigan, he was involved in planning a public college in Kansas City that would operate without an external board of trustees; instead its governing board would include members of the academic faculty, community members, students and alumni. He collected endorsements from David Starr Jordon, president emeritus of Stanford University; Edward S. Parson, president of Marietta College; John Dewey, at Columbia University; Harry A. Garfield, president of Williams College; Alexander Meiklejohn, president of Amherst College; and Charles F. Thwing, president of Western Reserve University, but this project ultimately fell

through.[11] Later, as Ashland's 1928 promotional brochure reveals, some of the same people who endorsed his Kansas City project also supported Kirkpatrick's Ashland project.[12] In the article, "In Danish Shoes," which appeared in *Survey Graphic* in June 1928, Kirkpatrick described himself and the group of educators he had assembled as "a group of 'new' or 'progressive' school people who have discovered the kinship between the Grundtvigian principles of education … and their own pedagogical theories."[13]

Kirkpatrick stressed that the program he was proposing at Ashland would be different than that found at other American schools and would only appeal to a select group of students and teachers. He viewed this exclusivity as an asset, noting, "The American college standard of measurement—thousands of students—was as useless here as the yardstick in an art shop," implying that mere numbers of students enrolled was an inadequate measure of a good school. Using the Danish folk school as a model, Kirkpatrick's Ashland College would not be open to students under eighteen years of age. In describing the kind of student his project was looking for, Kirkpatrick seems to have been winking when he declared that his school would deny enrollment to "the usual run of children just out of high school or college, even though they be six feet tall, twenty-two years of age and hold a bachelor's or master's degree. Newly fledged doctors of philosophy will be wholly ineligible, while dissatisfied and 'radical' undergraduates will be given careful consideration."[14] Ashland would be looking for students interested more in self-education than traditional academics. Kirkpatrick explained, "The academic or scholastic curriculum has been wholly abandoned in the Ashland School program. This, perhaps, is the most radical of its several departures from the standard American school. Life interests, not scholarly subjects, make up the curriculum. There will be no pretense of making or of improving scholars in the several 'departments' of the usual college curriculum."[15] Indeed, the life interests to which Kirkpatrick referred are described in the 1928 brochure as including sex, marriage, home, occupation, community, leisure, and education.[16]

Kirkpatrick's goal was to offer a liberating education. He criticized teachers of the day as predominately "machine-made," questioned whether "scholarship is possible until mind and spirit are

freed," and declared that the "first and supreme service of the school is to give freedom and initiative to its students."[17] Speaking about the relationship between students and teachers at the school, Kirkpatrick speculated that, "With a mature group of students and teachers, with teachers interested first in their own education and students familiar with life problems, the distinction between teacher and student may all but disappear. Those who are listed as students may prove in certain fields the most understanding and enlightening members of the group."[18]

To account for why folk school education no longer appealed to most Danish Americans Kirkpatrick explained, referring to the post-war "100 Percent American" movement, that second- and third-generation Danish Americans were anxious to be "'American,' if not 'hundred percenters.'"[19] Further, he recognized that most Danish Americans preferred the public education opportunities offered in America to those of the folk schools. While Kirkpatrick described this new school as an experimental "free laboratory," he ultimately felt his renewed Ashland would not be "departing from the aim or spirit of its Danish predecessors" but "merely adapting" it to his "most progressive of the progressive" educational initiatives.[20]

Ashland under Chester A. Graham

Soon after carrying out a successful summer of programming in 1928, Kirkpatrick, who died in 1931, became very ill and was unable to continue the work of directing Ashland College. With his standard for local and participatory governance, Kirkpatrick was loath to try running Ashland from afar. In late 1928, he asked Chester A. Graham, associate director at the Pocono People's College in Henryville, Pennsylvania, to come on as director at Ashland. In his autobiography, Graham explains that Dr. Eduard C. Lindeman and Joseph K. Hart had influenced Soren Mathiasen's decision to build the Pocono People's College in the early 1920s.[21] Mathiasen, who had been a close friend of Graham's in college at Oberlin, had spent a session, together with his wife Lucile, at the International People's College in Elsinore, Denmark under the leadership of Peter Manniche. Graham and his wife Margaret worked at Pocono from June 1926 to August 1927, where he had been made aware of the opportunity to build something new at

Ashland even before Kirkpatrick. Graham tells of receiving a letter at Pocono, in May 1927, from folks at Ashland in search of a non-Danish organization to revive the school. He had passed the opportunity onto Kirkpatrick, who was visiting Pocono at the time, but he was thus prepared to take over for him the following year.[22]

The new Ashland's progressive ideology aligned with Graham's political and religious views. In his autobiography, Graham defined himself as a Democratic Socialist who believed that "the 'consumer' not the 'worker' hold[s] the key to our economic future."[23] "Emphatically opposed to all forms of dictatorship including the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,'" Graham favored a drastic reduction of "federal bureaucracy in the socialization of our economy, with emphasis on consumer cooperatives, cooperative factories and farms, municipal ownership, and enterprises similar to The Tennessee Valley Authority." [24] Having served in World War I, Graham believed that "love of country and loyal citizenship" were "created and nurtured by home and community, not because of experience in military service, but in fact, in spite of the wasteful, authoritarian and immoral impact of military experience." He explained that he had had to set aside his longing to enter the missionary field after his military service because "church denominations were still calling for God's blessing on militarism and war." Recognizing the opposition his convictions would arouse for the rest of his life, he stated, "My clear spiritual commitment that militarism and war were a negation of the teachings of Jesus would make me a constant source of friction and trouble." In a 1969 article on Graham, journalist Donna Hasleiet related that Graham "rediscovered religion" through "required instruction in the Bible" while at Oberlin College. When Graham's college education left him feeling like he could no longer relate to his mother, he realized "that college often trains people away from their home communities," the insight upon which he would later base a new kind of higher education.[25] Graham felt that the teachings of Jesus were a clear path to the Kingdom of Heaven on earth for human society.

After college and military service, Graham began working for the YMCA and the public schools in Akron, Ohio on immigration and Americanization, an experience that deepened his appreciation for the inherent worth and dignity of all people. He was opposed to the immigration quota systems of the time which he saw as favoring some

people as superior, while denying others as essentially inferior; for his part, he believed that the "key to true Americanization was the discovery [on] the part of the immigrant that we understand and appreciate his or her good qualities and cultural heritage," explaining, "We call out the best in the person through our appreciation."[26] Similarly, he felt that "Hull House in Chicago, the International Institutes, some Public School Americanization Programs, and other similar programs made good US citizens by revealing to the individual immigrants our regard for their poets, musicians, and great teachers, thereby giving them the desire to be a part of our life and culture."[27]

Graham felt that his time at Ashland was his finest work. He used Jane Addam's Hull House as a model, with no separation between town and gown, stating that "our aim was to make every family in the area feel at home in the school."[28] According to Hasleiet, "the frame of reference was the community from which each individual came. If John Smith came from a coal-mining town which desperately needed recreational activities for its young, John would be trained to return home to fill that void. And when the school was not in session, a staff member would follow John to Coal City to see how he was doing."[29] In many ways Graham continued with programming similar to Kirkpatrick's, as he wrote in his autobiography:

> The entire first two days of the session were spent formulating the curriculum, with students and staff members having equal voice, with definite understanding that on Monday of the fifth week, in an eight-week session, the entire curriculum would be reconsidered in light of experience during the first four weeks. Year after year no two curricula were identical because no two groups of people are identical. Previous school experience varies widely. Some had not finished elementary school, some had graduated from high school and quite rarely the students attended college. With few exception students had previous work experience. We were not interested to have winners and losers. Each student was encouraged to do her or his best.[30]

With regard to his curriculum Graham explained, "Emphasis was given to the study of contemporary national and international move-

ments such as world government, human rights, elimination of poverty and hunger, totalitarianism, international peace, the labor movement, the cooperative movement, Mahatma Ghandi and Non-Violence, Public Ownership and Civil Liberties. …The school library tried to keep abreast on all important contemporary developments."[31] Graham's Ashland placed a strong emphasis on the creative arts such as creative writing, crafts and folk recreation in the form of singing and dancing.

To give us a feel for what Ashland must have been like under Graham's leadership, Hasleiet notes, "Because of the reform-mindedness of Chester Graham, the Grant school also became a microcosm of the efforts for change in this country in the thirties."[32] Many organizations used the Ashland facilities and staff for their seminars, retreats, and conferences, including Michigan State Grange, the Lower Michigan Federation of Consumer Cooperatives (formed at Ashland), the Central States Cooperative League, credit unions, the Michigan Farmers Union, the League for Independent Political Action, the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party USA, proponents of Henry George's Single Tax, the Reuther brothers, and other industrial unions.[33] One group in particular would change the course of things at Ashland, namely the Central States Cooperative League. The League began holding its educational institutes at Ashland starting in 1935 with students coming from co-ops in large cities across the Midwest, such as Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago.[34] Ashland seemed like a perfect fit for the League's institutes with its Danish history of cooperative economics and Graham's like-mindedness.[35]

At its annual meeting on September 4, 1937, the Ashland Folk School adopted a set of by-laws, which articulate the school's progressive, inclusive goals, namely:

> 1) To awaken and conserve the finer values of a new American symphony of culture through an integration of the different cultural heritages of the American People, and
>
> 2) To seek a better understanding of human behavior and of the social process, and
>
> 3) To help to build a better social order. For the accomplishment of this purpose the school shall endeavor:

a) To awaken the minds of students rather than merely to fill them;

b) To enliven as well as to enlighten;

c) To lead youth and adults into a process of continuous self-education;

d) To discover the gifts which native and immigrant groups have brought to us and to create an appreciation for these gifts;

e) To lead the way in cooperative and creative living and learning;

f) To serve as a center of local community life.[36]

Article II, section 14 of these by-laws, which stipulates that each voting member must "own at least one share of stock but shall have one vote regardless of the number of shares held," illustrates that Graham and his board were trying to develop something very similar to a cooperative society with an uncompromising commitment to democratic member control wherein one person has but one vote, much like what would later be included in the by-laws for Circle Pines Center.

Finding a New Space

In the space of one year, everything changed. By 1937 the summer school had begun to outgrow the Ashland facility and needed to find a new home, which it did at the soon-to-be-completed Civilian Conservation Corps' Chief Noonday Camp in Barry County (about sixty miles away, an hour and fifteen minutes south of Grant on modern highways). According to Mortensen the school moved to Chief Noonday because the state fire marshal condemned the Ashland building in the spring of 1938, a belief that has persisted in Circle Pines lore. However, the records contradict this narrative, confirming that the decision to move had already been made based on space requirements. The decision to condemn the building was due in part to discomfort that some people felt regarding the progressive activities taking place at Ashland. Graham reflected that closing the facility "pleased local and state-wide interests and persons who were displeased by the identification of the Folk School with the Cooperative Movement, the farmers' union, and the League for Independent Political Action. We

were visited frequently by a State Fire Inspector who warned me each time that he would arrest me if he ever found any person above the first floor of the building."[37] Graham and others tried to save Ashland by selling shares to raise the money needed for repairs or perhaps erect a new building but, as Graham explained, the national board of the Danish Lutheran Church preferred not to sell the property to a non-Danish organization.

When friends of Ashland learned in late 1937 that Chief Noonday would soon be ready to rent to groups, Ashland's board of directors decided to move the summer school there in 1938. The board called a meeting in April 1938 at which "final action would be taken and the rental contract signed and a cash deposit made."[38] At that meeting, Graham lost control of his folk school altogether; he later recalled, "When our committee met in April 1938 to sign the lease for Chief Noonday Camp for our Summer School, members of the committee had been canvassed previously, I was outvoted and the Central States Cooperative League took over the rental and the directing of the Summer School."[39] Upon moving to Chief Noonday, Ashland Summer School changed its name to Circle Pines Center.

During their time at Ashland the Grahams had received no salary but volunteered their time out of conviction, supporting their family primarily by conducting recreation programs across the country.[40] Since his work on immigration and Americanization, Graham had become increasingly involved with recreation education in the form of folk dances and games, while his wife, Margaret, was a skilled and passionate proponent of folk recreation.[41] Prior to a visit to Kirkpatrick's Ashland, in the summer of 1928, the Grahams had been exposed to group singing and folk dancing while on a tour of Danish communities in the west, as well as while visiting Nysted Folk School. This experience, Graham wrote, "only deepened our interest in folk recreation."[42] Almost as a foretelling of his future leadership at Ashland, during a visit at the close of Kirkpatrick's 1928 summer season, Graham saved the night when he was able to step in as caller for a community folk dance hosted by the college.[43] The Grahams had a deep understanding of the power of folk recreation to open people's minds to one another and they employed it as a technique in all of their work. When questioned many decades later in an interview with folks from Circle Pines as to the origins and meaning of Circle Pines'

commitment to recreation, education, and cooperation, Graham simply stated, "The best way to get a cooperative state of mind was out of an hour of folk dancing."[44]

Despite losing the directorship, Graham and his family continued to be involved with Circle Pines, leading the recreational institutes that took place each summer in those early years.[45] After Margaret Graham died unexpectedly a few years later, Graham married Viola Jo Kreiner, who had been actively involved in both Ashland and Circle Pines.[46] Throughout the 1940s the Graham children were involved with youth programming at Circle Pines. In the decades that followed Graham continued to stay in touch and would occasionally attend membership meetings and reunions. Likewise, Graham continued much of the same work he had been doing at Ashland, organizing farmers and cooperatives and volunteering in numerous capacities for the many social causes he felt passionate about, such as serving on the boards of groups like the Illinois Committee to Abolish Capital Punishment, many committees of the American Friends Service Committee, local chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Advisory Committee of the Fellowship for Reconciliation, to name just a few.[47]

Circle Pines Center and Dr. David E. Sonquist

Under the leadership of the Central States Cooperative League the former Ashland Summer School gained a new director in Dr. David E. Sonquist. A former professor steeped in the cooperative movement, Sonquist served as president of the League. As a sociologist and author of several books and other publications on cooperation, Sonquist championed "the superior advantage of cooperation as a way of life."[48] Under Sonquist's leadership the newly created Circle Pines Center rented the Chief Noonday facilities for the summer programming of the 1938, 1939, 1940, and 1941 seasons. Each summer saw weekly programming on cooperation, similar to that which had been offered at Ashland, that explored various aspects of the cooperative movement, such as recreation, medicine, education, finance, housing, and the relationship between managers and employees, as well as the relationship between producers and consumers.[49]

Chief Noonday was not a permanent solution for Circle Pines, however. In his 1947 diary Sonquist recalled that he and the organizers of the 1939 Circle Pines summer season were frustrated with the slow pace of the government's response to their rental application: "The League Board faced the possibility now or in the future of discontinuing Circle Pines Center unless steps were taken ultimately to secure our own camp site."[50] Regarding the drawbacks of Chief Noonday, Sonquist explained, "Everything was finished; … there was no opportunity to build anything or grow anything. Even the maintenance was provided. Jokingly we said 'We could not even drive a nail in the wall without first getting permission from Congress.'"[51] Recalling the difficult decision of what to do next, he wrote in his diary, "How could we hope to provide anything even remotely to compare with the government camp? But there were those who knew that the old maxim, 'That those who own, control' was true and we would live to rue the day if we did not act accordingly."[52] Fundraising for the purchase of the nearby 283-acre Stewart farm began in 1939, albeit without the support of the Central States Cooperative League, although Sonquist would continue to serve as director for many years.[53] In 1940 and 1941, summer programming was conducted at both locations. Regular cooperative and recreational education programming took place at Chief Noonday, while at the Stewart farm site folks worked hard to make the rundown Civil War era farm and buildings livable and useable again. The contract for renting Chief Noonday was not renewed in 1942. From then on, all programming took place solely at the new farm and a new venture in cooperative ownership had begun.

In 1944 Circle Pines Center published *First Fruits: A Collection of Creative Works by Members and Friends of Circle Pines Center, Anthology-1944.* The foreword describes the impetus for the creation of the anthology, giving us a glimpse of the optimism of the time. Referencing site plans for the center created by Frank Lloyd Wright that, while never executed, were extensive and impressive, and have been a longstanding point of pride for many, editor Lois Runeman enthused,

> It is fitting that such superb plans, representing the best of today's architecture, should be made for Circle Pines Center, a consumer cooperative society dedicated to educational, cultural and recreational pursuits; for in consumer

cooperation are embodied the best principles of democracy in operation today.

During this year, 1944, cooperators the world over have celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the consumer cooperative movement in Rochdale, England. As part of the centennial celebration, Circle Pines Center offers this little anthology, "first fruits" of the creative expression of its members and friends inspired during sojourns at the Center. The writings and illustrated works represent the authors' own concepts and spontaneous expression, and are therefore examples of genuine folk culture. Much of the material included in this collection interprets what the people are striving for at Circle Pines, what Circle Pines means to them.

May this humble effort inspire many others to express their latent talents, and even more important, to create and build a better Circle Pines and a stronger cooperative democracy.[54]

In this photograph, Dr David Sonquist holds a drawing from the original Frank Lloyd Wright plans for Circle Pines Center. When Wright asked brusquely if he was expected to design the site as free contribution, Sonquist responded that he and the others did not want a hand-out but hoped Wright would join them as a member in building this new cooperative. *Photo courtesy of Circle Pines Center.*

As an example of the inclusivity that these builders of a "stronger co-operative democracy" were working toward, the anthology contains the following poem by Dr. Sonquist:

> With Skeptic's Eyes
> *A word picture based on the experience of the late Dr. Williams, eminent Negro surgeon from Chicago, when he visited Circle Pines Center in the summer of 1939.*
>
> With skeptic eyes I came amongst you
> To probe beneath your pretensions,
> To see whether you practice what you preach.
> "Here is a place," my friends said,
> "Where there is no line on color or creed,
> Where they all live together, work together,
> Yea, even play and eat together."
> "Where is such a place?" I asked.
> "It is a Cooperative Family Camp," they replied.
> Quietly I entered your midst
> You did not know who I was,
> You did not know that I had been probing for years and found wanting:
> The churches that preached brotherhood
> And built negro churches,
> The lodges who sang of fraternity
> And organized separate lodges,
> Many unions who called us "brothers"
> And turned us out of their locals.
> Unknown to you I probed.
> I accidently touched you while shaving in the bathhouse,
> To see if you would wince and pull away;
> I purposely rubbed your arm when you passed me the potatoes,
> To see if you would politely excuse yourself
> And withdraw.
> I danced your folk dances,
> And you looked beneath and saw me as I really was…
> A living human being.

You smiled at me and welcomed me.
And I came,
    And I was ashamed for having doubted you.
It was true:
Here was a place where all could live together,
And in living, forget the color of skin;
The line of creed; the difference in position and wealth.
Cooperators all,
Bound together by the same needs,
The same basic interests and wishes,
And growing together by sharing with each other
The many problems
In building a new brotherhood of man
Right here in America.
You were weighed in the scales
And you were not found wanting.[55]

Sonquist's vision for Circle Pines took more prosaic form as well, as his recently rediscovered Folk School Prospectus illustrates. Packaged neatly, and titled separately, in three black, paper folders, the prospectus, written in late 1944 and early 1945, describes the twenty-seven-hundred-mile study tour of people's school initiatives in Indiana, Ohio, and the Southern Highlands (southern Appalachian mountains) that Sonquist and his wife Dorothy undertook in November 1944.[56] During this tour the Sonquists visited numerous people's schools which represented a variety of methodologies and purposes. For each one, the Sonquists detailed the origins of the school, its financial set-up, its organizational framework, its constituency, the school's relationship to its community, the type of students or people using the school's facilities, the school's educational policy and program, the staff and personnel, the outreach of institution, the effect of war on the school, and the school's future hopes and prospects. The purpose of this tour was to gain a clearer plan for a cooperative folk school at Circle Pines. In the section, "Our Next Step," Sonquist explained:

> With this sketch we have seen how naturally Circle Pines has been growing towards its purpose as expressed in its By-Laws. "The purpose for which this organization is

> formed is to create, establish, and maintain a center of cooperative culture in the Central United States for the purpose of carrying on cooperative education, and to advocate and teach, through demonstration and otherwise, the superior advantages of cooperation as a way of life, and to aid in establishing a system of production and distribution for use instead of profit, through the development and expansion of Rochdale Consumer Cooperation. The aim is to help build cooperative economic democracy in America."[57]

However it appears that Circle Pines was in dire financial straits by 1946. While some, including Sonquist, wanted to push forward with an expansion in programming, others did not.

The *Pine Needles* newsletters from 1946-49 document a very messy upheaval in the mid-1940s, marked by many discussions and much conflict amongst the membership and the leadership about the direction that Circle Pines should take. It is clear that Sonquist and his supporters wanted the expansion to include year-round programming for adults in the form of a folk school. As a Circle Pines folk school had yet to materialize by November 1948, Sonquist attempted to galvanize the membership by praising those donors who "backed their interest [in Circle Pines] with their money," declaring,

> This interest was based on the conviction that Circle Pines Center, in its own home, should, can, and must become more than merely a ten weeks' vacation spot; that it should become an institution for the creation of cooperative culture, the development of cooperative leadership and of cooperative techniques. Such an institution can render valuable aid to the several local societies in the Central States and even in the nation. It could have somewhat the same function as the research laboratories equipped by large corporations for the development of new methods and techniques of doing business.[58]

The conflict over the fundamental nature of Circle Pines seems to reflect differing ideas regarding the focus of the organization from its inception, as a letter from member Fred G. Lehman and his family,

published in the January 1949 *Pine Needles* newsletter illustrates. Lehman argues,

> Organizations have a habit of growing but often during the process they deviate from their original course. The early edition[s] of PINE NEEDLES state a purpose that appealed to us on becoming members; namely that CPC would provide an inexpensive vacation spot for cooperative families…. We have watched with dismay and concern the difficulties attending the growth of CPC. To us it seemed that these difficulties were unnecessary had the original purpose been remembered. Perhaps the greatest cause for unrest is the continued and planned attempt to force upon the society the idea of a school. It should be known to all cooperators that people band together in order to provide themselves with a wanted service of some sort or other. But in our case (the school idea) it has been the other way around—a few people in control of administration and publicity have hammered away relentlessly for a school.[59]

In fairness, I should note that it can clearly be seen in the promotional literature of the time that Circle Pines was advertising itself as both a cooperative education center with training institutes and a cooperative vacation spot. Reading this promotional literature today it comes as little surprise that some might fall on one side more than another. A 1939 brochure declared, "Regardless of whether one is interested in attending one of the training schools or institutes or merely desires a place where a delightful vacation and outing can be enjoyed at a reasonable cost among congenial people, the Circle Pines Center offers the ideal solution to the vacation problem for the co-operators of the Central States League district."[60]

This ongoing disagreement may explain why Sonquist's contract was not renewed in September 1951, when he was replaced as director by Jane Reed.[61] By this time, Sonquist may have understood that he was never going to be able to implement the kind of cooperative folk school plans he had in mind at Circle Pines Center. Like Graham, Sonquist continued to be involved in the cooperative movement. He occasionally attended Circle Pines reunions and stayed in touch with

many of the members.[62] A sociologist to the core, in later years he studied and wrote about the attainment of life fulfillment in older adults.

The Circle Pines farmhouse front porch has been the backdrop to many shared moments such as many group photos from the Quaker work camps of the 1940s and concerts by Big Bill Broonzy (then on staff as the camp cook) and Pete Seeger in the late 1950s. The original farmhouse of the old Stewart farm is still in active daily use today. *Photo courtesy of Circle Pines Center.*

Circle Pines Then and Now

Today the Circle Pines by-laws read a bit differently than they did in Sonquist's time. Today the stated purpose they contain is simply: "The object for which this society is formed is to create, establish and maintain a center of cooperative culture and education in the United States, including a camp for the purpose of teaching through education, demonstration and otherwise, the superior advantages of cooperation as a way of life. The educational program shall be in accordance with the Rochdale Principles of consumer cooperation."[63] In comparison with the 1940 version, the aim of helping to "build cooperative economic democracy in America" has been omitted. Looking at the by-laws today offers little insight into the exciting, turbulent history behind them that my research has uncovered.

Starting with the Danish folk school movement in America, in my search for the lineage of Circle Pines Center, I found in Dr. John E. Kirkpatrick a disaffected, progressive educator looking for more than the tight confines he found in American academia. In his successor, Chester A. Graham, I found a compassionate, progressive Christian working toward a better society by inspiring young adults with, as the by-laws state, "the enlivenment and enlightenment they needed to strengthen their communities." Later, at Circle Pines, in Dr. David E. Sonquist, I found a tireless social scientist and champion of cooperative economics as a superior way of life. All three of these radical reformers, along with their wives and families, helped to build Circle Pines and the ideas they were so passionate about have continued for eighty years to draw folks to Circle Pines for like-minded fellowship.

While young adult participation was critical in Danish and Danish American folk schools, the youth camp has been the most significant driver of adult participation at Circle Pines since the early 1940s. This model was established at Ashland, as Graham reported: "A few young people attended our summer school each year but attendance was mainly adults with special emphasis on family participation."[64] At Circle Pines, this family camp concept allowed adults to experience both Circle Pines' cooperative educational and recreational programming, while their children were given similar opportunities at a level more appropriate to their understanding. In his prospectus Sonquist agreed with Grundtvig's conviction that the folk school experience was best for those over eighteen. Still, he acknowledged the need for youth programming at Circle Pines as a source of students for his young adult folk school, noting:

> This does not mean that the Summer Youth Institutes or Youth Work Camps should be discontinued. They should be strengthened because they are the logical training ground from which the more mature and prospective students will come for the Winter School. The Youth Work Camps will be influenced positively by the pattern set by the older students. They will have something more tangible to look up to.[65]

Circle Pines youth programming grew steadily throughout the 1940s, with less and less cooperative education programming being offered for adults. Still, the 1950s and 1960s saw many families camping onsite while their children were campers in the youth summer camp. Work projects, art making, folk dancing, and folk singing brought different age groups together at various times throughout the summer season. Family legacies at Circle Pines most often begin with a youth summer camp experience. This has afforded lifelong participation in the life and governance of Circle Pines, which is largely responsible for the communication and transmission of progressive values within the organization. At the same time, diversity and the idea of respect for the authentic experience of the individual is paramount at Circle Pines, serving the organization as an effective check on nationalism and xenophobia, sexism, racism, genderism, and other negative trends. Circle Pines has retained a culture of commitment to making space for all voices, but, as it most certainly was in the early years, it is admittedly very difficult and often messy to allow such space when a particular voice appears to some as speaking the language of the above-mentioned negative-isms.

It is well documented that prior to establishing the Highlander Folk School in the 1930s, Miles Horton traveled to Denmark for a personal study of its folk schools. Graham fondly remembered Miles Horton's visit to Ashland just before he left for Denmark.[66] It is perplexing to me, however, that, at least to the best of my knowledge, Horton never publicly credited Graham's Ashland as an influence upon his work. To me it appears that Graham's Ashland should have had a profound effect upon Horton, and in my reading of several of Graham's accounts of Horton's visit, it seems as if Graham might have felt the same way. Needless to say, I would love to be proven wrong and someday find that Horton did indeed acknowledge Graham's Ashland as an influence. It is impossible for me to count how many times I have seen Circle Pines compared to Highlander Folk School, with Circle Pines, for one reason or another, coming up short every time. After all these years of involvement, these many months of deep consideration of the organization, and a good deal of reading about the Danish folk school, I have arrived at the question of whether perhaps Circle Pines could, in some ways, more closely resemble the

Danish folk school experience than others of the more-or-less Danish inspired, non-Danish folk schools in America. My research has led me to believe that Circle Pines Center should at least be allowed a place within the discussion.

When I presented some of this research at the Circle Pines Center's eightieth reunion, many of the people in the audience were inspired by it. Very few in the audience knew of Chester A. Graham or the Ashland Folk School, and none about John E. Kirkpatrick and his plans for Ashland. So eager were they for this information that the presentation managed to capture a spirit of goodwill and joy, just what one hopes to have at a reunion. Indeed, I certainly could judge, by their responses to the original letters, newsletters, photographs, and promotional materials I presented that the audience felt a sense of awe and confirmation in the direct link from the late years at Ashland to the progressive ideas that the Circle Pines membership and programming have always embodied. I mentioned above that Circle Pines enjoys many legacy families in its membership, several of whom go back to the early days of Circle Pines. In recent years, Circle Pines has been joined by a family that links us all the way back to the very first days of Kirkpatrick's leadership at Ashland through his acting secretary for Ashland, Eugene Sutherland.[67] Until my research uncovered it, the Sutherland family knew virtually nothing of this history, nor did anyone else currently active with Circle Pines.

A lack of institutional memory plagues many nonprofit organizations, both old and relatively young ones. Micro histories such as this are important because, by encouraging a sense of purpose and place, they can rekindle and strengthen individual and collective identity. This small account of the transition from the late progressive years of the Ashland Folk School to the early years of the recreation and education cooperative of Circle Pines Center provides an inspiring genealogy which can be rightfully claimed to aid in strengthening the identity of Circle Pines. Much has been retained of its inherited passion and drive, but much has been obscured over the decades with ever-present financial worries and conflicting ideas of purpose. As from its beginnings, the multiplicities of purpose represented in the membership and the community of Circle Pines are often at odds with each other, and both with simply making ends meet. I cannot help

but think of Grundtvig's educational model as curative. If the ills of lacking a memory and collective identity as a people were in any way what Grundtvig envisioned his folk school to cure, Circle Pines is certainly in need of that tonic now. Understanding where Circle Pines should go in the future will be aided by a better understanding of where it has been.

Endnotes

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[7] Timothy Reese Cain and Steven E. Gump, "John Ervin Kirkpatrick and the Rulers of American Colleges," *American Association of University Professors Journal of Academic Freedom* 2 (2011): 3. https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Cain.pdf

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[9] Cain and Gump, 21.

[10] Cain and Gump, 23.

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[13] John Ervin Kirkpatrick, "In Danish Shoes," *Survey Graphic* (June 1928): 277.

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[16] *Ashland School for Adult Education.*

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[19] Kirkpatrick, 277.

[20] Kirkpatrick, 278, 310.

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[28] Graham, 88.
[29] Hasleiet.
[30] Graham, 92-93.
[31] Graham, 94.
[32] Hasleiet.
[33] Graham, 91.
[34] David E. Sonquist, "Diary, 1947" (unpublished manuscript, 1947), 2, Circle Pines Archives, Delton, Michigan.
[35] *Circle Pines Center,* 1942 (brochure found within "Sonquist Diary, 1947"), Circle Pines Archives, Delton, Michigan.
[36] *By-laws of Ashland Folk School, Grant, Michigan: September 4, 1937*, Ashland Folk School files, Grant Area District Library, Grant, Michigan.
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[38] Graham, 110.
[39] Graham, 110.
[40] Graham, 89.
[41] Graham, 102-03.
[42] Graham, 103.
[43] Graham, 87.
[44] Interview with Chester and Jo Graham, by Circle Pines Center co-directors Barbara Hofer and Don Shall, Muskegon, Michigan, October 14, 1981, transcript, Circle Pines Archives, Delton, Michigan.
[45] *Circle Pines Center 1938 Scrapbook,* Circle Pines Archives, Delton, Michigan.
[46] Graham,139; Lois G. Runeman, ed., statement introducing Viola Jo Kreiner, in *First Fruits: A Collection of Creative Works by Members and Friends of Circle Pines Center, Anthology-1944,* ed. Lois G. Runeman (Cloverdale, Michigan: Circle Pines Center, 1944), 35.
[47] *Voluntary Service Activities, Chester A. Graham* (stapled to letter to historical researcher Paul A. Elliott of Grant Public Library from Chester A. Graham, April 1, 1978), Ashland Folk School files, Grant Area District Library, Grant, Michigan.
[48] David E. Sonquist, "A Prospectus for School of Cooperation or a Cooperative Work School," (unpublished manuscript, 1944), 28, Circle Pines Archives, Delton, Michigan; *Constitution and By-laws of Circle Pines Center.*
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[51] Sonquist, "Diary," 13.

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[56] David E. Sonquist, introduction to "Sonquist Folk School Prospectus: People's Education" (unpublished manuscript, 1944), 1, Circle Pines Archives, Delton, Michigan.
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[65] Sonquist, "A Prospectus for School of Cooperation or a Cooperative Work School," 56.
[66] Graham, 111; interview with Chester and Jo Graham; letter to historical researcher Paul A. Elliott of Grant Public Library from Chester A. Graham, April 1, 1978. Ashland Folk School files, Grant Area District Library, Grant, Michigan.
[67] *Ashland School for Adult Education: July 30th to September 8th, 1928*.