## building muscles and civics

## folk dancing, ethnic diversity and the playground association of america

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Ever since the achievement of independence, Americans have been concerned about the transformation of foreigners into American citizens. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, most Americans believed that the nation possessed an unlimited ability to absorb diverse groups and to make them part of a larger, all-embracing national whole. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many Americans felt that something more was needed to ensure that America would be a unified society. One particular group of Americans, concerned with the potentially disruptive effect of diversity in areas with large ethnic populations, searched for activities capable of forging unity out of diversity. For some involved in this search, the playground seemed to offer an excellent arena in which to begin the process of channeling diversity into constructive rather than divisive avenues. Between 1900 and World War I, these Americans championed a variety of recreational programs which they deemed appropriate for urban play areas in their quest for a unified America. And of these various activities, folk dancing seemed to offer an ideal way to combine wholesome physical activity and efforts to recreate the seemingly lost national whole-to build simultaneously muscles and civics.

Diversity, which appeared so threatening to late nineteenth-century Americans, was not a new feature of American society. The Revolutionary generation had recognized the cosmopolitan nature of the new nation and had celebrated the fact of ethnic diversity. The adoption of the motto "E pluribus unum" suggested a recognition of diversity. At the same time,

however, the motto implied unity. During the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century the possible contradiction that underlay an acceptance of both "the one and the many,"<sup>1</sup> did not concern most Americans. They appear to have believed in an inclusive nationality in which unity emerged from diversity as a matter of course. Although they simultaneously portrayed an America both diverse and homogeneous, Americans stressed the process of convergence—a process that led to the creation of a "homogeneous future from a heterogeneous past."<sup>2</sup> Although the dynamics of this transforming process remained vague, the discussion of convergence remarkably imprecise, and the nature of the eventual "new American" unclear, Americans accepted diversity as an ingredient in the process of nation-building and were not threatened by its existence. They believed that the nation possessed an unlimited ability to absorb diverse groups and fuse them into one.<sup>3</sup>

As long as Americans believed in the ability of the nation to absorb diverse groups effortlessly, the achievement of national unity—however abstractly defined—did not necessitate special measures to assimilate newcomers into America. This belief, however, that America—at once homogeneous and diverse—forged unity out of diversity, was shaken during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Between 1870 and 1890 immigration to the United States virtually doubled,<sup>4</sup> and to many Americans it appeared that instead of the expected amalgamated whole, American society resembled a collection of distinct ethnic enclaves that existed without "cultural endorsement or mutual understanding."<sup>5</sup> American culture appeared to be not unified but particularistic, and distance, rather than absorption, seemed to characterize society. The balance between the forces of the many and the one, it appeared, had tipped in favor of the many.

Reluctant, however, to relinquish their commitment to a holistic vision of America, concerned Americans confronted the fact of diversity and, in so doing, redefined unity or "wholeness" to mean not homogenity but rather group integration into a larger, smoothly functioning, composite whole that restored the balance between the "one and the many."6 Adopting the organic analogy popular in late nineteenth-century social thought, these Americans ceased portraying America as a homogeneous mass and began depicting it as a nation comprised of groups. While each of the groups exhibited differences, their argument ran, a symbiotic relationship existed between the groups and society as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Once these Americans adopted this interdependent description of society, diversity no longer appeared threatening or disruptive. But unlike those Americans before the Civil War who had not felt the need to devise special measures to guide diversity into the channels of convergence, late nineteenth-century Americans searched for strategies to help promote interaction between the various groups that comprised the larger society, and, in so doing, attempted to integrate and regulate diversity into a new, interdependent vision of American society.

One popular strategy used to facilitate this interdependent vision of

America was the encouragement of "folk" songs, crafts, dances, dramas and pageants through which "to capture the attention and win the allegiance of America's foreign born.<sup>1</sup><sup>8</sup> Many adherents to the organic view of society adopted an approach to assimilation based upon an "appreciation" of the immigrants' cultural heritage. These Americans believed that if immigrants felt that the host society appreciated immigrant culture, the newcomers would more readily accept the ways of life in their adopted country. It would be easier, according to this view, to gently but firmly guide immigrant groups into active participation in the larger society.<sup>9</sup> The immigrants would not be apart from America, but would be instead an ingredient in its composition. In this fashion, concerned Americans believed they had freed diversity from its disunity and thus had recreated the holistic vision of America. Needless to say, hegemonic intent does not result necessarily in practice. Clearly a gap can exist between the production of ideas and the internalization of these ideas by the particular group. Nonetheless, while it remains important to study the reactions of these target groups to the elite-designed programs that touched their lives, it is also useful to explore the web of beliefs that motivated the programs developed by elites.

A particularly appropriate arena—the playground—for the encouragement of "immigrant gifts" as a way to foster immigrant participation in American society grew out of the late nineteenth-century drive to direct leisure activities. Late nineteenth-century cities offered few formal play areas. Lacking such space, many city children played in the street or on abandoned lots. Others gravitated to poolrooms and dance halls for companionship and recreation. And still others banded together in street gangs. Although social reformers and educators deplored these types of activities, they recognized that gangs, streets and pool and dance halls fulfilled certain needs for children. As a result, police action failed to discourage these pastimes. Amelioration demanded the introduction of substitute activities capable of capturing the interest of the child, creating a wholesome environment of childhood amusements and dampening the drive toward unhealthy associations, for, as Jacob Riis indicated, "as we mold children in the city we shape the destiny of the nation."<sup>10</sup> Educators and social reformers focused on the playground as a viable substitute. They saw the playground as a healthy environment for childhood maturation, as a training ground for citizenship, and as a panacea for social cleavage.

Before 1885 few playgrounds existed in the United States. Sponsored by private charitable organizations primarily in Boston and New York City, these play areas fell far short of the needs ourban children. In 1887 the New York State Legislature passed the first playground legislation in the country which authorized the City of New York to spend \$1,000,000 annually for a series of small parks below 150th Street. In order to develop these areas, interested citizens organized the Society for Parks and Playgrounds in 1890. In 1899 the New York City Board of Education supplemented these public play areas with thirty-one playgrounds attached to the public schools.<sup>11</sup> Playground proponents saw these areas as arenas for the satisfaction of physical needs and for the installation of social values.

The mere incorporation of playgrounds, however, failed to satisfy educators and social reformers. Playgrounds needed more than space and equipment to develop children physically and civically. Unorganized, or undirected, play attracted "bad actors" and promoted anti-social activities. Organized play, on the other hand, fostered the development of conditions that allowed each child, according to playground activist Luther H. Gulick, to operate as a "unit in a large mutually responsible, mutually responsive whole."<sup>12</sup> Such play did not "rob play of its spontaneity, but instead regulated and controlled this spontaneity so as to result in the greatest possible freedom for all."<sup>13</sup> It coordinated activity on the playground in such a way as to integrate different playground events into a well-orchestrated whole—in effect, an epitome of society. In the eyes of Gulick and his supporters, organized play built the body, trained the intellect and cultivated the proper civic and cultural consciousness.

If organized play was to be an integral part of playgrounds, play leaders needed to be trained to oversee and direct playground activities. Accordingly, during the winter of 1905, Henry S. Curtis, then in charge of school playgrounds in New York City, called together a small group of men and women to discuss the organization of a training course for playground workers. This group, which included Gulick, School Superintendent Seth T. Stewart and Miss Jessie Bancroft, Superintendent of Physical Education, considered various aspects of playground leadership and organization. After several meetings, Curtis and Gulick felt that the situation demanded national rather than local guidelines. As a result, they decided to build a national play movement capable of offering direction for local groups, of providing them with common aims and training, and of fusing these groups into a well-coordinated national recreation program.<sup>14</sup>

After contacting and securing the support of President Theodore Roosevelt, Jacob Riis and the Russell Sage Foundation, Gulick and Curtis held the organizational meeting of the Playground Association of America (PAA) at the Washington, D.C., Y.M.C.A. on April 12, 1906. Those attending the meeting sketched out the purposes of the new organization, adopted a constitution and elected Gulick as President, Curtis as Secretary and Acting Treasurer, and Lee F. Hanmer, Secretary of the Public School Athletic League of New York City, as Field Secretary. As its first order of business, the PAA hoped to encourage large cities to take an inventory of all available sites for playground use, to investigate playground equipment and to commence the training of qualified playground personnel. With the publication of the PAA official journal, *The Playground*, in 1907, the PAA possessed an important vehicle for the promotion of organized play movements throughout the country.<sup>15</sup>

Although the PAA saw itself as a national organization, its earliest efforts were directed, not surprisingly, at New York City. During the early

years of PAA activities, recreational and social reformers in large cities drew a connection, sooner than their counterparts in smaller towns, between playgrounds and the prevention of social and political disruption caused, they believed, by urbanization and immigration.<sup>16</sup> New York City possessed, by far, the largest foreign born population in the country.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the headquarters of the PAA were located in New York City and all early officers of the organization were associated with the New York City play movement.

New York City, then, with its high concentration of immigrants, presented urban reformers with a perfect opportunity to devise activities capable of socializing the newcomers to American life and of creating a new American citizenry. The playground appeared to represent a "neutral" public space where immigrants could gather for fun while at the same time be exposed to the social and civic values of the host society. On the playground, in programs that involved muscles and civics, immigrants would come in contact with American life and traditions. Ideally, organized playground activities provided the "civic machinery" capable of achieving unity out of diversified groups possessing little common ground among them.<sup>18</sup>

But what programs would be best to effect the desired integration? As one of their pilot programs to achieve the desired combination of physical activity and educational and social mingling, the PAA adopted folk dancing. Folk dancing permitted a large number of children to be handled in a limited space, provided all-around physical exercise and encouraged friendly contact. At the same time, in a dance that appeared to celebrate a foreign heritage, children would be involved in an activity that subordinated the individual to the greater whole, promoted team play and stressed unity and interaction rather than division.

Folk dancing, defined as the dancing passed from generation to generation that provided an "overt expression of the activities and experiences of a nation's past,"<sup>19</sup> had gained popularity during the first decade of the twentieth century. Folk dances, as a source of gymnastic routines, were introduced in physical education programs in 1887 under the direction of William G. Anderson, a pioneer in the physical education movement. Luther H. Gulick took these routines and refocused interest on the dances themselves rather than on the dances as inspiration for other forms of physical activity. In his various teaching positions prior to assuming the directorship of New York City's physical education programs, Gulick had observed considerable friction among the various groups under his guidance. He saw folk dancing as a means of combating this friction while at the same time providing "rigorous exercise and joyous expression."<sup>20</sup> Folk dancing, he believed, combined important recreational values while yielding intercultural benefits in an ethnically diverse nation. Recent arrivals, according to Gulick, needed to experience a sense of belonging. Folk dancing, in his eyes, could foster such a sense of belonging for it suggested an appreciation of the immigrants' heritage.<sup>21</sup>

Following his decision to utilize folk dancing in New York City's

physical education programs, Gulick searched for qualified folk dance instructors. He contacted Louis Chalif, Director of the Russian School of Dance, who was interested in folk dancing as a ballet form, and obtained his help in training interested playground personnel. He also secured the services of Elizabeth Burchenal in 1905 as Assistant Secretary and Instructor for Gulick's newly established Public School Athletic League (PSAL). Burchenal, who became so closely identified with folk dance activity that she was hailed as the "creator of the folk dance movement,"22 had acquired as a young woman an interest in the lives, music and dances of America's foreign born inhabitants. While attending Melvin Ballou Gilbert's gynmasium for aesthetic calisthenics, she met C. Ward Crampton, another folk enthusiast. Together she and Crampton traveled throughout western Europe researching "native dances." Upon their return to the United States, Crampton concentrated on the production of folk dance manuals and Burchenal began to disseminate their research through active involvement in folk dance programs. She began this dissemination first through the PSAL in 1905 and then as Chairman of the Playground Associations's Committee on Folk Dancing.<sup>23</sup>

As Chairman of the PAA's Folk Dance Committee, Burchenal helped shape the course of the folk dance activity sponsored by the PAA. First of all, like many physical educators, Burchenal was a strong advocate of the physical values of folk dancing. The "vigorous dances" offered excellent physical training and experience in team play. In addition, she believed that folk dancing, because of its vigor, was not suggestive and left the participants too tired to "make mischief." In her view folk dancing offered wholesome physical exercise as an "antidote" to the dance hall and its evils.<sup>24</sup>

Burchenal also championed folk dancing as a way to "resurrect the picturesque dances rapidly forgotten by the immigrants" and to integrate these dances into the American culture. In Folk Dancing as a Popular Recreation, she argued that folk dancing expressed the spirit and character of the people of a country. Because it did so in such a "vivid, human and universally comprehensible" way, the dances possessed an "educative value for the general public whose knowledge of the [newcomers] was woefully meager." In this context, Burchenal stressed the importance of "immigrant gifts" to the nation. Of these various "gifts," Burchenal believed, folk dancing represented one of the greatest contributions of the immigrants to America. Americans, however, according to Burchenal, had been slow to recognize and then to integrate these dances into American life. Folk dancing provided an excellent opportunity, in Burchenal's eyes, to promote social intercourse and, for both Americans and immigrants, to expand their horizons by contact with people and activities of other cultures.<sup>25</sup> In such situations, diversity no longer was a challenge to American culture, but instead became part of it.

And finally, Burchenal stressed the importance of folk dancing as a "democratic socializing agent" and as an "agent of citizenship," which she saw as assets in welcoming diverse peoples to America and in making

them one. Due to the actual process of folk dancing, participation required total involvement. Partners shift frequently and unexpectedly, throwing strangers together, providing friendly contact and creating good fellowship. As a result, in places where there existed large foreign born populations, folk dancing provided a key to the working out of a new social order. According to Burchenal, it did not isolate the various heritages; rather the mingling fostered by the dances broadened the participants' education. Folk dancing allowed all—native and foreign born—to receive a more intimate knowledge of the thoughts, customs, traditions and histories of other people. The foreign born, in particular, in Burchenal's view, gained a great deal through this type of experience. They were able to enter the ''magic circle'' of real American life—as defined by the reformers—and, hence, experience a true sense of belonging.<sup>26</sup>

Like Gulick, Burchenal believed that folk dancing constituted a positive social force by "welding a unified whole out of a nation of diverse elements." The teamwork of the dances fostered a sense of interrelationship as group interests superseded individual interests and all parts became merged together into a social whole.<sup>27</sup> Participants and on-lookers alike experienced this sense of unity. Dorothy Bocker, a contributor to *The Playgound*, captured the spirit of the socializing and citizenship goals of Burchenal, Gulick and other proponents of folk dancing. Folk dancing, wrote Bocker, fostered unity.

When the excitable Italian sees his children dancing the Tarantella, the stolid Swede sees them doing the Klapdans, the lowering Russians sees them doing the Krakoviak, the maligned Hungarian sees them dancing the Csebogar, there arises an overflowing feeling of pride in this adopted country - the adopted country which recognizes worthwhile things from the mother country and incorporates them into the new.<sup>28</sup>

It was this apparent integration of diverse elements, folk dance proponents believed, that diffused diversity of its disruptiveness and promoted national unity.

Burchenal and Gulick publicized their views on folk dancing and demonstrated approved folk dance activities at the Playground Association's yearly playground congresses. Symbolizing the transition of play-ground activity from sporadic efforts in isolated American cities to an established national movement, the playground conventions provided opportunities for playground people to exchange information about the different playground programs offered throughout the country. At each congress, the Association sponsored a Festival of Play and Sport. These festivals, designed to serve as "epitomes of playground courses," offered spectators an "exhibition of the typical activities" that comprised an organized play program.<sup>29</sup>

The PAA held its first annual playground congress in Chicago in June of 1907. The Festival of Play and Sport, located at Ogden Park, opened with a grand march. Concurrently throughout the early part of the day, the PAA held various demonstrations of schoolyard games, folk games and gymnastic dancing. In the afternoon, the Chicago branch of the PAA sponsored exhibitions of folk dances, games, gymnastics and athletic events. Of all these activities, the dances attracted the most attention. According to Philippe Millet, American correspondent for the Paris journal *Figaro*, the dances seemed to revive the "souls of the oldest nations of Europe." He applauded the organizers' work not only because it helped educate the "artistic taste of all people," but also because he felt that the organizers helped the immigrants from the old world, who in his eyes lacked an understanding of their own pasts, to "understand the beauty of their own popular traditions."<sup>30</sup> In addition, according to other observers, the dances brought all nationalities together and promoted the "spirit of unity." In so doing, the dances illustrated the unity of all the different elements of the "world's most cosmopolitan nation."<sup>31</sup>

In September, 1908, the Playground Association held its second annual congress and *al fresco* demonstration at Van Cortland Park in New York City. As in 1907, a major attraction of the annual Festival of Play and Sport were the folk dances, organized by Burchenal, Chalif and Gulick. Over 500 children danced in the various selections before an estimated crowd of 8,000. The dances proved not only to be a spectacle, but also, according to Myra Emmons of *The Outlook*, a "laboratory in cultural history." The dances brought together all classes and nationalities and exposed them to cultural backgrounds other than their own.<sup>32</sup> Graham Romeyn Taylor, head of the Chicago settlement house Chicago Commons, believed that the dances represented the virtual "welding together of the national elements in America's democracy."<sup>33</sup>

During a session held after the al fresco demonstrations, discussion focused on the importance of folk dancing in American life. Gulick, in a speech describing the function of the playground and its centrality in American life, pointed to the dances as "social experiences of democracy." Mari Hofer, lecturer at Columbia University's Teachers College, stressed folk dancing's contribution to American life as a "community social solvent." She suggested that the various folk dances represented manifestations of the "experiences, spirit and passions" of a group of people. Participation in any such "life-sustaining" activity, Hofer contended, promoted group cohesion and helped to develop patriotism and pride in one's country. If immigrants felt that their adopted country appreciated their heritage, the newcomers would transfer their loyalty more quickly to their new homeland. In the interest of creating an integrated and smoothly functioning whole, Hofer urged Americans to accept immigrant heritages and to incorporate them into America's cultural tradition.<sup>34</sup> Ethnicity, according to the logic of this argument, would no longer be particularistic or disruptive. Instead, it would be a necessary component of the large American whole.

Playground congresses, with an emphasis on folk dance displays, continued into the early 1920s. Especially in cities with large foreign born populations, the PAA's folk dance demonstrations inspired numerous local folk dance programs. Throughout this period, folk dances continued to be

seen as an efficient way to combine physicial activity with opportunities for integrating America's newcomers into the larger American society.<sup>35</sup>

Although the process of immigrant integration was far from complete by the outbreak of World War I, folk dance proponents believed that they had solved the paradox of "the one and the many."<sup>36</sup> Faced with potentially disruptive diversity that needed to be guided into nonthreatening avenues, folk dance enthusiasts promoted participatory activity that utilitized "immigrant gifts." Folk dancing thus provided controlled situations in which differences were recognized while at the same time integrated into a smoothly running interdependent whole. As far as the folk dance proponents were concerned, as people danced together they grew less aware of their differences and more conscious of their similarities as individual efforts were subordinated to those of the group.<sup>37</sup> If the cooperative spirit of the dance was transferred from the playground to the daily round of life, America would regain harmony of interests and cultural wholeness. Although not necessarily homogeneous, American culture would be unified.

Based on the apparent appreciation of immigrant culture during the first two decades of the twentieth century, scholars have argued that programs which celebrated aspects of various folk cultures pointed to an acceptance of diversity in American life and to a respect for immigrant culture by the dominant culture.<sup>38</sup> The classic articulation of this view, which we now define as cultural pluralism, came, of course, as a result of Horace Kallen's attack on America's wartime Americanization programs and on the drive to ensure Anglo-conformity after 1916. Kallen argued that democracy involved not the "elimination of differences but rather the perfection and conservation of differences. It aimed, through union, not at conformity but at variety involving give and take, mutual respect and mutual cooperation based on mutual understanding."<sup>39</sup> Interpretors of Kallen's belief in cultural pluralism have located the preconditions for such a notion in the activities of social, educational and recreational reformers who were forced to accommodate their programs to the realities of immigrant life.<sup>40</sup> According to this argument, unlike integrationists who envisaged the absorption of immigrants into the prevailing American social and cultural structure, these "premature" pluralists recognized the fact of diversity, believed in the integrity of immigrant cultures, and worked towards their preservation.

Clearly after 1920, many Americans appear to have adopted the language of pluralism. But the adoption of the language of pluralism did not represent, necessarily, what Paul Boyer has characterized as an "appreciative view of human heterogeneity,"<sup>41</sup> nor did it signal a recognition of diversity in American life. Although groups like the folk dancers championed "immigrant gifts," none of these Americans took this idea very far. Always easier to talk about "immigrant gifts" than to define them precisely, the term remained vague. And, whenever examples of "immigrant gifts" were provided they were, on the whole, peripheral for Americans: dances, food, handicrafts. Appreciation of these gifts represented little challenge to the basic structure of American institutions or ideals.42

By celebrating diversity, folk dance proponents attempted to guide it into harmonious avenues and to diffuse it as a potentially disruptive force in American life. They did not discover diversity; from independence a preception existed that ethnic diversity represented a given in the American experience. But when it appeared difficult for the nation to absorb diversity in such a way as to create seemingly effortlessly a unified society, reformers such as the folk dance enthusiasts searched for new strategies to fashion more directly unity out of diversity. As folk cultures became legitimatized and part of an expanded sense of a holistic American culture. they lost their potential to serve as alternative cultures capable of disrupting the dominant structures of American social and cultural life. As Luther Gulick suggested in a 1908 article on folk and national dancing, folk dancing "constituted a positive moral force, a social agency . . . that is destined to have in the future a great function in welding together a unified whole from those whose conditions and occupations are exceedingly diverse."43

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## notes

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4. U.S. Bureau of the Census. Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial ed., I (Washington, D.C., 1975), 14. 5. Higham, Strangers, 20-39, 234; William Gaymon and John R. Garrett, "A Blueprint for a

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6. Henry D. Shapiro, Appalachia On Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920 (Chapel Hill, 1978), xi; Mann, One and Many, passim.

7. See Patricia Mooney Melvin, "Neighborhood in the Organic City: The Social Unit Plan and the First Community Organization Movement, 1900-1920" (Ph.D., University of Cincinnati, 1978), Introduction.

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16. Goodman, Choosing, 65; Goodman, "(Re)Creating," 2.

17. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistics, 106.

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