

University of North Carolina at Asheville

An Experiment in Rural Living:
The John C. Campbell Folk School, 1927-2009

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By
Stephanie Leiderman

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What really has happened at the John C. Campbell Folk School has been a continuing experience in the creative arts—the art of living, art of learning, art of farm and wood work, art of whittling, art of jewelry, art of singing and dancing, art of growing old graciously and contentedly—and, above all, the art of creative usefulness within, preventing the aloneness of [modern life]. –Fred Brownlee, 1963¹

Founded in 1927 by Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler, among others, in Brasstown, North Carolina, the John C. Campbell Folk School was intended as a new and experimental institution in rural Southern Appalachia. The school took its inspiration from a variety of sources, including the Danish Folk School system, the American incarnation of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the related Craft Revival, and the methodology and goals of the Progressives, who began working extensively in the Appalachian region at the start of the 20th century. The initial mission was to create a community school that would promote the improvement of rural life through a grade-less, cooperative teaching model. Students were generally young adults, past school age but not yet settled into their own families and farms. Early courses emphasized practical skills, such as agriculture and craftwork, as well as homemaking practices for young girls. The school underwent a series of gradual but major changes in mission and focus from the late 1940s through the 1960s, shifting its focus to the cultural promotion of the region, primarily to outsiders. John C. Campbell continues to operate today, but teaches a primarily non-local student body in courses in craftwork, music, storytelling and dance.

While recent scholarly works have reasonably criticized the John C. Campbell Folk School for abandoning its initial educational mission and primary student base in the Southern Appalachian region, these critiques have neglected to address the school's effectiveness in

¹ Fred Brownlee, "Experience in Creative Arts at John C. Campbell," 1963 [unpublished notes]. Publications Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

preserving and promoting traditional craft techniques and artifacts. In the area of craft education and history, the school has been a major contributor to the burgeoning field of study on Southern Highlands handwork. The changes that the Folk School underwent were also less the result of a failure of its initial mission than of the changing circumstances of the region itself, most notably the tremendous impacts of World War II and the ongoing industrialization of the Southern Appalachian region.

There has not been a great deal of historical research on the Folk School specifically. Those historians who have discussed the school in any detail tend to do so as part of a larger mission, attempting to understand the actions of northern-educated Progressives in the southern mountains, in the early to mid 20th century. This period was one of rapid change for the region, of course, and no small part of this change was a deliberate effort to bring reform. Charitable forces entered the area in large numbers, attempting to institute a wide variety of programs with an eye towards educating, modernizing, and raising the living standards of the populace. Much of the historical discourse centers on ideas of “otherness,” and the intersection between these progressives and their intended benefactors. The authors attempt to evaluate carefully whether such outsider movements were a greater source of harm or of help, and how and when misunderstandings occurred between the two groups.

Historian Henry Shapiro, for instance, describes a “Local-Color” movement, wherein visitors to the region isolated and, in some instances, marketed only a few appealing facets of the culture—outsiders devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to music, dance and storytelling, disregarding less romantic realities like poverty and poor public health and education systems. Shapiro pinpoints the start of this movement as 1869, with the publication of an Appalachian travelogue by William Harney in *Lippincot’s Magazine*. Rather than attempting

to present an unbiased account of the area, Shapiro says, Harney's "object was to entertain rather than inform, by describing a region which seemed interesting because it was so different from the familiar world in which the author and his readers lived."² This was the start of Appalachia's new place in the general American popular imagination. Up to this point, the area had been widely ignored and unknown, and from now on it would be a place of deep interest, and often, profound mystery. This, according to Shapiro, was the background that influenced even the most well-meaning of the reformers. A romanticism of the Southern Highlands had become ingrained.

Building on Shapiro's interpretations, David Whisnat described, in his 1983 book *All That is Native and Fine*, how the changes in the Southern Highlands from the early 1900s lend themselves to a discussion of the "politics of culture." The intrusion of the outside world into the mountains took many forms, from the economic and industrial (mining, milling, expansion of railroad lines), to the social (the founding of a myriad of schools, from Berea College in Kentucky to the Arrowmont Settlement School in Gatlinburg Tennessee).³ The influx of so many outsiders, with so many different designs on the land and its people, led to "a manipulation of culture [that] inevitably reflects value and ideological differences as well as the inequalities inherent in class."⁴

It is from this perspective that Whisnat critiques the Folk School, with the observation that its founders, from their position as upper-class, well-educated Northerners, would not only

² Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 4-5.

³ David E. Whisnat, *All that is Native and Fine: the Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 4. Note that the title of this book comes from a quote by Olive Dame, who was describing that which she felt must be preserved in the Southern Highlands.

⁴ Whisnat, 8.

fail to fully understand the people they intended to help, but also brought their own assumptions to the enterprise to such a degree that the image of Appalachian life they attempted to preserve was an altered, adulterated version. The influence of their backgrounds was a contaminating force. For instance, Whisnat cites a letter Olive Dame wrote to her sister, requesting furniture designs that might be copied by students for local use—that the traditional patterns and designs were often mixed with outside ones suggests, for Whisnat, a sense of superiority on Campbell's part.⁵ Whisnat also critiques the craftwork created and marketed by the Southern Highland Guild in similar fashion: the aesthetics favored were not necessarily those of the local tradition, but were instead highly influenced by the tastes of the school's leaders; in classes, the teachers pointed students towards salability over tradition, often prescribing their own designs.⁶

Whisnat cites another problem of this type: the Folk School model itself. It was a foreign idea with no roots in local culture. The hybrid this created was not only inauthentic, but in Whisnat's view, was also a main cause of the school's failure to sufficiently embed and ingratiate itself into the community. Danish and English folk songs and dances lacked regional ties, and the school's insistence on promoting and teaching them was a foolish misstep.⁷ The school's change in enrollment and focus, begun in the early 1950s, was inevitable because its connection to the people it served was limited by these outside additions. And yet, despite these criticisms, Whisnat rates the Folk School fairly well by the standards of its own time and place. If the school never developed a clear progressive political ideology, and if it promoted unrealistic and occasionally inaccurate ideas, Campbell and her followers nonetheless had a more practical and reasoned view than many of their contemporaries, and he praises the school's work with the

⁵ Whisnat, 169.

⁶ Whisnat, 160-162.

⁷ Whisnat, 154-6

dairy collective, the Mountain Valley Cooperative, for example, as showing a deeper understanding of the economic needs of the population than did many comparable institutions.⁸

Jane S. Becker continues with many of the themes Whisnat introduced, and in fact he was a personal mentor to her in her research. Her *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of American Folk* focuses far more intently on craftwork than does Whisnat. A chapter on the Southern Highland Guild recounts its history and influences, and like Whisnat, Becker sees adulteration of the ideas of “tradition” and “local.” Those that marketed these handmade objects presented them as authentic, and this formed the basis of their appeal for wealthy outsiders, but they were not so, in reality.⁹ The Folk School itself is discussed only briefly, and largely in reference to these other ideas. Becker’s argument, in line with her thesis and many of Whisnat’s ideas, is that the school failed to achieve its mission in large part because, from the start, that mission was “essentially transformative.” She continues, writing that, “Defining mountain culture as ‘folk’ served benevolent workers’ needs to explain the strangeness and uniqueness of their mountain neighbors in a positive fashion.”¹⁰ To Becker, this is reminiscent of the Local Color movement as described by Shapiro, and it is both diluting and condescending.

While Whisnat and Becker offer valuable insights on the influences that informed the Folk School and other contemporary ventures, there are aspects of their more general arguments that are in line more with their own theses than with the Folk School’s specific story. The essential problems with the historical criticisms of Whisnat and Becker are that, in both cases, they overestimate the importance of political goals and motivations in the minds of the Folk

⁸ Whisnat, 175.

⁹ Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930 to 1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 85-92.

¹⁰ Becker, 58-9.

School's founders, and, at the same time, underemphasize the other cultural impacts they intended to make. For these historians, a damning fact for the Folk School is that, in its current incarnation, it no longer serves a local enrollment, and has therefore failed to enact meaningful social and political changes in the Southern Highlands.

There is a certain amount of validity to these ideas and, as will be discussed later, the students served by the Campbell school are no longer, for the most part, from the local area. In addition, the school's educational offerings from the mid 1950s to the present day are quite different than they were at the time of the school's founding. While practical skills and hands-on educational methods are still the focus, the original intent of "keeping young people on the farm" is no longer the driving force behind the curriculum.¹¹ Instead, the courses center on craft, music, storytelling and other cultural elements with ties to local society. But the areas least discussed in these studies are the actual events and forces that caused the school to change, and this seems an oversight. True, the Folk School altered its mission, but the reasons that change occurred are fascinating and complex: not so much failings of the initial mission, but new events in the history and development of the region, ones that Campbell and her contemporaries feared, perhaps, but couldn't stave off. World War II, which the United States entered only twelve years after the school held its first series of courses, hastened and entrenched these changes. The shift in Cherokee and Clay counties away from agriculture meant that, in order to survive, the Folk School had to change too. The process was far from simple or orderly, and there were many setbacks. But from an early stage the school showed willingness—if occasionally with deep reluctance—to alter in order to continue.

¹¹ "The Folk School Prepares for A New Season," with text written by Olive Dame Campbell, 1932 [pamphlet]. Articles by and about Olive Dame Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY, 3.

John C. Campbell had a solid background of living and working in rural Appalachia. He had taught in local schools, thereby gaining an appreciation of the special challenges rural education could present. Olive Dame Campbell first came to the Southern Highland region in 1908, accompanying her husband on a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation.¹² John's task, along with ballad expert Cecil Sharp, was to gather records of local song and dance traditions. As a part of this process, Olive and John became, like others of their time and background, fascinated with the area and its people. The eventual result of their trips was a body of writing about Appalachian folkways; Sharp, with Olive Dame's assistance, compiled an influential ballad collection¹³, and John began work on *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, which was ultimately considered a major text in the study of the region.¹⁴

John Campbell was, at the same time, developing an interest in the Danish Folk School movement, and was considering whether that model might successfully be imported into an American rural context. Centered in Denmark's sparsely populated agricultural regions, these schools used no grades, taught vocational and practical skills, and created community centers for the small communities that surrounded them.¹⁵ After John's death in 1919, Olive Dame took it upon herself to finish her husband's work. With friend and fellow progressive Marguerite Butler, who herself had been working the Pine Mountain Settlement School in Kentucky for the previous eight years, Olive received a grant to visit Denmark to study the Folk Schools in

¹² "The Folk School Prepares for A New Season," 2-3.

¹³ Cecil James Sharpe and Olive Dame Campbell, *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* (Glacier Springs, Montana: Kessinger Publications, 1917), 3-5.

¹⁴ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2008 [orig. pub. 1921]), introduction. It should be noted that Olive Dame is likely responsible for much of the text in this book; some sources indicate that John died after finishing only the introduction and a few chapters.

¹⁵ Robert Barham, "Appalachian Folk Schools and Their Scandinavian Precedents," (MA Thesis, Appalachian State University, 1996), 3-5.

action.¹⁶ Upon returning to the United States, she was enthusiastic in searching out a home for what she deemed “an experimental demonstration” which would, “disregarding grades and credits, and facing realities, [seek] first to give a new vision of what mountain life might be, [and] to set in motion the energy and will of that mission.”¹⁷ The Folk School was founded in Brasstown, near the Georgia border in far-western North Carolina, in 1927. Olive Dame named the school in memory of her husband, and the first courses were held in 1929.

It is important to understand the various ideological sources from which the Folk School drew its philosophies. The Danish Folk School model may indeed have provided the immediate inspiration, with the earliest incarnation of the school in particular taking on a great deal of its influence, but the Progressives of the early 20th century were also a deeply important source of ideas and methodology. Olive Dame and the founders of the school were, from the beginning, involved in the intellectual discussions on these issues, as they were growing in popularity through the 1910s and 1920s. The Crafts Revival movement, an offshoot of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, had at its heart some idealistic concepts about not only the intrinsic value of handmade goods, but also about the value the creation of such objects provided for the worker. This philosophy was rooted in skepticism about the changes being brought about by large-scale industrialization.¹⁸ The influence of these ideas is a key reason why the Folk School embraced more of a cultural agenda than a political one, which in turn allowed the organization to remain vital when some of its other programs saw decline in later years.

¹⁶ Erik G. Lovik, “John C. and Olive Dame,” *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 1528-1529.

¹⁷ “Folk School History and Mission” 1935 [pamphlet], Publications Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

¹⁸ Timothy Lloyd, “Whole Work, Whole People: Folklore and Social Therapeutics in 1920s and 1930s America,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 110, no. 437 (1997), 2-5.

Allen Eaton's 1937 publication *The Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* is an illuminating text, both as statement of purpose for this movement, and as on-going influence in its progression. The book was published by the ever-influential Russell Sage Foundation, which had also helped fund Olive Dame and John Campbell's early ventures into the region. In an October 1937 article in *Mountain Life and Work*, Olive Dame wrote a glowing review of Eaton's book. She stated that, "One is glad to have Mr. Eaton's clear, simple definitions of what handicrafts are, their relations to art and to adult education, and their part in the making of a happier, more healthful, richer life."¹⁹ Both before and after *Handicraft's* publication, Allen Eaton made the promotion of handicrafts a major focus in his own life. He staged his first exhibition of craftwork at the St. Louis National Folk Festival in the spring of 1934, and would later help prepare traveling shows to further the promotion of Appalachian crafts.²⁰

Eaton's purpose in *Handicrafts* was, in part, to illustrate and detail the lives of Appalachian craftspeople; this he did in following the methods and lifestyles of particular individuals—a weaver, a woodworker, a potter. Each person and each craft was documented with photographs by Doris Ulmann, who herself had a special interest in the lives of Southern Highland peoples, and had also captured many images of Folk School students and teachers.²¹

¹⁹ Olive Dame Campbell, "Sustaining Social Hunger," *Mountain Life and Work* 13 (1937): 29-30.

²⁰ Lloyd, 2-3.

²¹ Philip Walker Jacobs, *The Life and Photography of Doris Ulmann* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 33-35. Ulmann worked in the region through the early 1930s, and her photographs are, in themselves, valuable historical documents of the era. She had a particular interest in images of makers in the act of creating, and her photos of such people as of Hayden Hasley, a well-known Folk School student and carver, or of teacher/weaver Virginia Howard, were widely distributed in the school's promotional materials. It should be noted, however, that later historians would criticize some of these images as at least partly staged and/or intended as period recreations (Whisnat, 151).

But beyond that, he had a practical and ideological agenda, well stated in his introduction to the text, where his purpose was:

first, to make available information which it is believed will be helpful to the Highland people in solving their handicraft problem and the placing of their work on a better and permanent basis; second, to acquaint those outside the region with this great reservoir of handiwork...to encourage the wider use of these products; and third, to present the findings of the study that they may contribute to the development of the handicraft movement²²

We can easily see from this excerpt the way in which the well being of craftspeople was intertwined in the reformers' minds with the promotion (cultural as well as economic) of the crafts they produced. This belief in the "social-therapeutic" value of handwork rather than industrial manufacture was informed by even earlier texts of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, with such influential intellectuals/artisans as John Ruskin and William Morris. Ruskin, for example, romanticized a medieval past where a maker, free of the assembly line and the factory, was allowed to be a more complete person. However, Ruskin often went to rather extreme degrees in this glowing vision of history, as in his 1853 *The Stones of Venice*, where he wrote that we must:

Go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptures...but do not mock them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being.²³

So we can see that, for the northern-educated reformers who worked to bring the Folk School and similar institutions into being, the production of craft was loaded with meaning and significance. Allowing craftspeople to continue their work, and receive compensation and recognition for it, was a primary goal of the movement. And behind this goal was the idea that,

²² Allen H. Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973; orig. pub. 1937), 3.

²³ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Books, 2003; orig. pub. 1853), 34.

in these simpler, more complete and nourishing tasks, craftspeople escaped the de-humanizing effect of industrial life.

The shift from an agricultural focus to a crafts-centered one was gradual, occurring over a relatively long period of time, but it represented a major turning point for the Folk School. It was in part, and most immediately, due simply to the popularity of craft classes among the early local students; craftwork seemed to hold an appeal from early on in the school's existence.²⁴ But this appeal was on a number of levels, both for the school's teachers and promoters, and for its students. The preservation (and, in some cases, construction) of authenticity was always important, and craft's simplicity and immediacy seemed to draw attention from that level. Then, too, there was interest in self-sustaining economic practices. Outlining her general mission early on, Olive Dame wrote that "our task is to open new horizons, to stimulate creative and cooperative activity, to start the growing that will never stop."²⁵

The marketing of locally produced crafts was an important aspect of the Folk School's agenda from fairly early on, and grew with time. Its transition to prominence took many forms. One of the most obvious was the embracing of woodcarving, first taught mostly as a type of recreation, and then later used as a way to help students gain income independent from agriculture. The school's earliest courses were gender-segregated, which meant that men did much of the actual carving and women did the finishing work.²⁶ Whatever the equity of this situation, the division of labor meant that families could, in theory, work on different aspects of

²⁴ Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976; orig. pub. 1913), 55.

²⁵ "Remembering Olive Dame Campbell, 1954," *Mountain Life and Work* 17 (1955): 2-5. Articles by and about Olive Dame Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

²⁶ Annie Fariello, "The Brasstown Carvers." *Western Carolina University's Craft Revival Project and Archive*, <http://www.wcu.edu/craftrevival/story/brasstowncarvers.html>

the process during their downtime. Carving was a major Folk School pastime, and many of the school's teachers and officials also learned the skill; Olive Dame herself was an avid carver.²⁷

The eventual economic function of woodcarving, however, was two-fold: carvers had a type of independent employment, and their pieces could be sold to benefit both the school itself and the workers. The school has lauded the individual success of this particular initiative, and with some justification. There is real evidence that many men employed in carving found it an enjoyable and dependable source of additional income, as well as a creative outlet. A letter written by Ben Hall in 1947 informs a school organizer "ten years ago when I began to learn to carve, jobs were hard to get and money just could not be had...but soon I was making from 15 to 20 dollars each week at mostly spare time. Carving has put me in a very reasonably financial position."²⁸ The Brasstown Carvers, an organization formed as a type of guild for the workers, oversaw production, wages, and sales. Dues were approximately fifty cents a year, and in exchange artisans received advice, lessons, and perhaps most importantly, assistance with sales.²⁹ By these means, carving evolved from an encouraged leisure activity into a legitimate business, with work sold through the school's own store, and through the marketing department, in shops in the rest of the country.³⁰

Another key aspect of the change in focus to crafts occurred in the development and growth of the Southern Highland Guild. The guild was formed in part by Campbell, who took

²⁷ Wilson, 44.

²⁸ Ben Hill to Muriel Martin, December 8, 1957. Craft Revival Archive, Hunter Library Digital Collection, Western Carolina University, Sylva, NC.
http://wcudigitalcollection.cdmhost.com/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p4008coll2&CISOPTR=3046&CISOBX=1&REC=1

²⁹ Fariello.

³⁰ Bill Biggers, *The Brasstown Carvers: John C. Campbell Folk School* (Brasstown, NC: John C. Campbell Folk School, 1990), 5-9.

inspiration from Danish versions of the idea she had seen on her trips. Other important figures in the movement were also involved, including Lucy Penland, founder of the Penland Craft School, about 150 miles away from the Folk School. The guild's primary functions were in sales and promotion; these goals they achieved through exhibitions, sales at the school itself, as well as sales throughout the rest of the country. As with other craft-promotion programs of the time, and influenced by them, the goals were both economic and cultural: 1) to raise funds for workers and encourage self-sufficiency of a kind not often available, and 2) to spread awareness and create prestige for handmade goods.³¹

Another major reason that the Folk School altered its function, and this is well documented in archival sources, is the changing realities of Cherokee and Clay counties in which it was located. The external forces at play were many. Already by the early 1940s, just over a decade after the first short-courses were held in 1929, there was evidence of the shifts that would impact the region and the school for the rest of its existence. Eleanor Lambert Wilson, a recent Vassar graduate, came to work at John C. Campbell in 1941. Her record of that experience, in her memoir *My Journey to Appalachia: A Year at the Folk School*, provides important insight into how the school was already seeing the need to alter itself, that early on in its history.³²

Wilson worked in various capacities during her tenure at the school, shipping students' woodcarvings off to be sold in shops, helping with administrative tasks, and, in the process, getting a well-rounded vision of where the school was then, and where it was going. It becomes clear that there was a range of activities going on; Wilson described, for instance, the work of the Mountain Valley Cooperative in teaching students methods and skills for dairy farming. She

³¹ Whisnat, 151-2.

³² Eleanor Lambert Wilson, *My Journey to Appalachia: A Year at the Folk School* (Fairview, NC: Bright Mountain Books, 2004).

also commented at length on the Brasstown Carvers, and about the school's courses in weaving and dying fabric. The school's weaving room, for example, was full of students "readying products to be sold to benefit the school through sales 'up north.'"³³ Wilson shows an evident hopefulness about these practices in particular, influenced by the energy and drive of Olive Dame, Marguerite Butler, and the other leaders of the school, but also by the apparent enthusiasms of the students she encounters.

It is not at all surprising to find, through Wilson's records, the influence of industrialization and war already at work in Brasstown in 1940 and 1941. References to the lack of interest and availability of young men are scattered throughout her book, as when she is encouraged to help take on additional responsibilities helping with the school's model farm. The man who will eventually direct the school, Georg Bidstrup, uses what Wilson calls his "heavy Danish accent" to tell her that, "with so many men signing up for the service or going to verk in the factories, ve need someone to feed the hens and gather the eggs."³⁴ Even before Pearl Harbor and the United States' subsequent entry into World War II—both events that occur during Wilson's tenure at John C. Campbell—young men were being drawn away from farm-work to take employment in the factories so recently taking root in the area. These are points of much discussion recounted in the text, among the students whose every-day lives and relationships are impacted, and among the leadership of the school, who worried for what these changes will mean.

The War's impact on the region was profound, and felt not only in personal terms for those who left or were left behind, but also economically. The manufacture of arms and other needed goods opened the region as it had never been before. The beginning of the twentieth

³³ Wilson, 39.

³⁴ Wilson, 42.

century had put the infrastructure in place, but now sawmills and coalmines were put to tremendous use.³⁵ This fact led to more and more migration of workers from individual farms and small towns, to larger centers where better paying employment might be found. The Tennessee Valley Authority, started during the depression, aided this change by providing electrification projects in areas that had not yet seen them. In Hiawassee, Georgia, construction of a major dam was completed in 1946. This project was responsible for electrification in remoter parts of the Folk School's immediate surroundings in Clay and Cherokee counties.³⁶ If the early 1900s had started the process of Southern Highland industrialization (and had gotten the Progressives worried about irreparable harm to the traditional lifestyle of mountain residents), wartime manufacturing sped that process up considerably.

Later, when WWII began sending soldiers home, wounded or otherwise in need of re-orientation and readjustment to civilian life, the Folk School attempted to meet these needs by offering vocational training aimed specifically at veterans. The Folk School applied for and received permission to host such men under the G.I. Bill, a decision that would ultimately do much to alter the make-up of the school's community. A 1947 pamphlet describes in detail some of the effects of the war, both in the programs offered and on the daily life of the school.³⁷ There is also evidence of changes in attitude and focus, with the promotional language already describing the institution as a "rural community center" and emphasizing the need for "recreation," suggesting the new priorities in the niche it would soon fill. The war's impact on the school's day to day activity is also described here, suggesting that, despite changes and

³⁵ Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 12-14.

³⁶ Eller, 17.

³⁷ "Changes to our Folk School Community" October 1947 [pamphlet]. Publications Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

difficulties, the Folk School and its community could persevere: “During the war, the carving went on with older men and a larger number of women in the coves and valleys of the mountains.”³⁸

On the topic of the veteran’s program, the pamphlet acknowledges the need for practical skills among returned soldiers; carpentry and blacksmithing were the main occupations taught in these courses, with the intent of providing men skills with which they might make a living in their post-war lives. At the same time, however, there is evidence of strain this brought to the original mission, in part caused by these new students, but also by the influences of war and industrialization that made the programs necessary in the first place. On this topic, the publication states, “Some [of the veterans] were interested only in woodwork or the forge, so that our Danish idea of a home center of young people growing in cooperative understanding has been difficult to attain. Nor with the irregular introduction of new veterans could we carry on consecutively any of our usual courses.”³⁹

The trend away from the school’s intended local enrollment, then, began to take its major effect in the years immediately surrounding World War II. Changes that may indeed have been necessitated by war soon became entrenched, and eventually, permanent. The migration away from the farm, which had been noted with concern by John C. Campbell and Olive Dame back in the early 1920s, was a fact that could no longer be ignored. The war sped the pace and permanence of this change, and the Folk School scrambled to blend its ideals and its realities.⁴⁰ In an October 1953 letter he wrote after assuming the directorship of the school, Georg Bidstrup confessed that, “We find that our program has of necessity become more and more flexible. Out

³⁸ “Changes to our Folk School Community,” 3.

³⁹ “Changes to our Folk School Community,” 4.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Southern Highlander*, 5.

of a student body of 118 this past year some attended only for a ten-day course and some come for as long as nine months. They come for different reasons: the veterans to obtain skill in cabinet making and iron work, others for some creative and paying hobby.” Nevertheless, he goes on to reaffirm the cultural and social value of such programming; simply put: “Everyone gained values in living.”⁴¹

This last point of Bidstrup’s was to be the thread tying the old Folk School to the new, with the move away from directly economic programs and the soon-total embrace of the value of the cultural. Outsiders to the region could see the value of living in the style the Folk School promoted: practical skills, handmade objects, and the beauty of the mountains were to be the draw. In a 1955 promotional pamphlet, entitled “The Folk School Faces the Future,” the school’s marketers attempted to attract outsiders and hobbyists, and insisted that this change did not diminish the School’s original mission. The short-courses (one to two-weeks in length) were growing in popularity. The pamphlet concedes the benefits that the school might offer to its new enrollment: retirees could enhance their free time with Folk School-learned crafts, and “the natural beauty of the countryside, the warm family atmosphere and the opportunity to share in creative work” would surely be a draw for “those who must live and work in the midst of the pressures and nervous tension of the our complex urban society.”⁴²

By this time, in the early 1950s, catering to those outsiders with an interest in the area outweighed the imperative to instruct locals. For the Folk School to continue to exist in any

⁴¹ Georg Bidstrup, “Letter from the Director of the John C. Campbell Folk School,” October 1953, Director’s Correspondence Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

⁴² “The Folk School Faces the Future, 1955” [pamphlet], Publications Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY

form, it needed a financial and student base wider than it had previously sought. This is a change, certainly, but it also reflects many of the original cultural intentions of the school. If we consider the exhibitions of Allen Eaton and the Southern Highland Guild as a link in this chain, it becomes clear that cultural promotion was not a new angle for the Folk School's ideology to embrace; instead, this new emphasis merely brought outsiders into more direct connection than had earlier efforts.

The Folk School's original mission was, as we have seen, a blend of the cultural and the charitable. This blend shifted towards the former following the increasing difficulty in drawing a local population of students into its core programs—a challenge directly caused by the economic and social changes to the region brought about by World War II. For the next several decades, however, there would be several instances where the school's leadership attempted to incorporate programs that would directly benefit the local community, while at the same time they continued to reach out to a larger audience for what the Folk School had to offer in craft and practical education. It was not always an easy balance to achieve, and work among the disadvantaged in the community soon fell away as a focus of the school's workers. Given that this hybrid approach was never, in fact, a part of the original mission, this eventuality is not terribly surprising.

Evidence of this conflict is visible in the letters exchanged between Folk School director John Ramsey and the members of various branches of the Sigma Phi Gamma Sorority. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, the sorority sent yearly checks to the school, interested apparently in sponsoring a children's cause in the still impoverished Southern Appalachian region. The archive contains both the sorority's gift letters and Ramsey's responses, and it is interesting to see how the director tries to explain the realities of the Folk School's needs and purpose in the

face of the misconceptions the sorority members seem to hold, while still encouraging them to continue the funding. One sorority letter, for instance, specifically states that the gift is to be used “to aid in health work for children,” an area not particularly well aligned with the mission of the Folk School, either in 1966 or prior.⁴³ In response to this, Ramsey thanks the representative of the Orange, California branch, while also carefully pointing out that the Folk School’s focus is not on children’s causes, but on adult education—but they will be sure to take advantage of their new “Little Folk School” activities and their connections with local families to “uncover needs among these local children” and seek to address them with the Sigma Phi monies.⁴⁴ Echoing sentiments from promotional materials of this time, Ramsey goes on to highlight the ongoing cultural and social import of the work the Folk School does:

Even though economic conditions have improved with the opening of several new manufacturing plants, incomes are very low. A new sense of values is needed to replace those which have been challenged by a greater dependence on a job off the mountain farm.⁴⁵

These exchanges suggest that the more charitable arm of Folk School activity was not integrated into the school’s general workings. Fundraising was, for the most part, about improving the school’s facilities and operations. Now that the student base served was not typically among the needy, justifying charitable donations became a challenge. As Ramsey points out in another letter with Sigma Phi, these gifts “for helping needy children are not a part of the school’s general operating budget”; this was said by way of requesting additional,

⁴³ Mozelle Wells to John Ramsey, October 1, 1966, Director’s Letter’s Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

⁴⁴ John Ramsey to Gail Barus, October 3, 1966, Director’s Letter’s Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

⁴⁵ John Ramsey to Gail Barus, 1966.

operational funds.⁴⁶ When individual gifts were received, special accommodation could be made—but this was neither a primary focus nor a well-coordinated system. And the way Ramsey responded to these charitable donations is telling as well. He shows how the school’s leadership saw its main responsibility not in individual acts of benevolence, but in a larger social project for the region.

Another example of the Folk School’s later efforts to engage with the needs of its local neighbors is the failed adult literacy initiative it helped to operate. The Reading Program ran roughly from 1957 to 1960. A system of volunteer teachers was established, whose curriculum came from lessons broadcast on television via the local station WBTV. Some courses were planned to take place at the Folk School itself, though it is unclear if that ever actually happened. Mayes Berhman was appointed to head the program.⁴⁷ According to one promotional letter, by 1958 the program had 150 volunteers, teaching between 100 and 200 broadcast lessons each year.⁴⁸ What caused the initiative to unravel appears to be less a lack of need than an inability on the part of the Folk School to commit to funding such an enterprise long-term. In 1960, the board of the Folk School requested that Berhman continue the program separately, despite the coordinator’s claims that should John C. Campbell drop out, “it would confuse the public and injure the cause of literacy.”⁴⁹ The archives do not contain the Folk School’s perspective on the

⁴⁶ John Ramsey to PF Ayers, May 31, 1966, Director’s Letter’s Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

⁴⁷ Mayes Berhman to the Folk School Board, July 25, 1960. Other Programs Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

⁴⁸ Jefferson Standard Broadcasting Company, Literacy Volunteer Solicitation Letter, September 25, 1958. Other Programs Folder, in John C. Campbell Papers, Appalachian Schools and Community Centers Collection, Special Collections, Hutchkins Library, Berea College, Berea KY.

⁴⁹ Behrman letter, 1.

dissolution of the program, but given the school's limited resources and changing focus during the late 50s and early 60s, it is easy to imagine why they might balk at as ambitious a program as Behrman describes: classes held at the school would teach "adult non-readers from a beginning level through the sixth grade."⁵⁰ It seems clear that this failed outreach attempt is another step in the Folk School's transition; whatever the specific reasons for the Reading Program's end, it was a sign of how the school's operations would continue to shift.

For about a decade, beginning in the early 1970s, the Folk School seemed especially adrift. The veterans programs no longer had a consistent audience, and that focus had compromised their other offerings. In a 2007 program produced for the local public station UNCTV, *Sing Behind the Plow: The John C. Campbell Folk School*, the school's current director, Jan Davidson, describes how the Folk School struggled in the late 1970s.⁵¹ He relates a story told to him by longtime area-residents. When new directors, the married couple Gus and Maggie Masters, took over operations in 1974, the facilities of the school were in a deep state of disrepair. Keith House, which was one of the first buildings on the campus and a major center of early activities, was completely boarded up and the Masters needed to break into it, through the basement, to gain access.⁵²

In fact, the Masters' tenure at John C. Campbell did much to shape the then-struggling institution into what it is today. Maggie Masters was an enamellist, with a background in handmade production pieces; she had taught enameling at the school before being asked to help

⁵⁰ Behrman letter, 2.

⁵¹ The name for this documentary comes from the motto for the school, which goes along with often-employed emblem of a silhouetted plow and worker. It is meant to evoke the spirit of enriching and fulfilling work.

⁵² *Sing Behind the Plow: John C. Campbell Folk School*. Produced by UNCTV. 57 minutes. Folkways Series, 2007.

direct it. She taught her first course there in 1963.⁵³ Though Gus and Maggie only headed the school for two and half years, from 1974 to 1976, they were responsible for placing a new emphasis on craft courses, and made a concentrated effort to expand and publicize the school's craft offerings. They added new classes in pottery, enameling, blacksmithing, and cabinet making.⁵⁴ This new set of courses did much to return the Folk School to a strong financial footing. The school's enameling studio today is named for the Masters.

A 1984 Folk School newsletter contained an article, written by Chris Spicer, which offered new explanations about how the Folk School was to be in the future, contrasting new goals with its origins. Entitled "*Folkehojskole: Refocusing on a Concept*," the piece sought to illustrate to John C. Campbell's followers, as earlier pieces in the 1950s through the 1970s had, that the same spirit would continue even if the methods employed were different.⁵⁵ The school implemented a number of new policies in 1983 and 1984, many of which were intended to strengthen and encourage the original sense of cooperation and community imported from the Scandinavian Folk School ideal. These included the practice of "Morning Song," described here as "a 15 minute gathering before breakfast for a special reading, story, or song that will set the tone of the class as a group," as well as Work Study sessions, where, as in the early days of the school, students could receive reduced or free tuition in exchange for labor on the school's grounds.⁵⁶ They also introduced the Elderhostel program, which provided courses specifically

⁵³ Maggie Masters. Interviewed by Sylvia Robin on May 16, 2005. Voices of Asheville Oral History Collection in Special Collections, Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina, Asheville.

⁵⁴ Maggie Masters Interview.

⁵⁵ Chris Spicer, "Folkehojskole: Refocusing on a Concept." *Letter from Brasstown*, 59, no. 2 (summer 1984). Hunter Library Digital Collection, Western Carolina University, Sylva, NC, 4-5. <http://wcudigitalcollection.cdmhost.com/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p4008coll2&CISOPTR=346&REC=1>

⁵⁶ Spicer, 5.

