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Sarah Stopenhagen Broomfield
sarah.stopenhagen.broomfield@gmail.com

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Weaving Social Change: Berea College Fireside Industries and Reform in Appalachia

Sarah Stopenhagen Broomfield
sarah.stopenhagen.broomfield@gmail.com

The Appalachian subculture of America is well known for its tradition of handcrafts, and Berea College, Berea, Kentucky, played a seminal role in promoting that tradition throughout its 150-year history. This study looks at the first five decades of Berea College's renowned handweaving program, the beginning of what is known today as the Student Crafts program. It explores the connection between Berea alumnae and the settlement school movement that promoted social change in the Appalachian region, specifically the contribution of Berea College's Appalachian Crafts Revival to reform in Appalachia.

The historical record is full of references to Berea College students who passed through student craft industries in their labor assignments, prepared to return to their Appalachian communities to work in the settlement schools and to do their part in the struggle for justice in the face of industrialization and rapid change in the mountains. While details on individuals are scarce, there are numerous comments in the annual reports of the Superintendents of Fireside Industries from the early 1900s through the 1940s, to indicate that their student workers returned to the mountains to be active in the settlement schools. Education, cultural appreciation, dignified labor, and economic justice were common themes shared by the settlement schools throughout the mountains. Settlement schools students who went on to higher education returned to become teachers, business people, husbands and wives, and professionals in healthcare and social work.¹

Berea College's third president William G. Frost began marketing mountain woven coverlets to college donors outside the region around 1893, which according to Allen Eaton was the beginning of the Berea College initiated Appalachian Crafts Revival.² Frost recognized the possibilities for employment of mountain craftspeople at a time when industrialization had diminished the production of crafts in the large urban centers of the country, and consumerism had found its way into the Appalachian Mountains, ending what had been a survival skill of the 18th century. Consumerism entered mountain communities through country stores and the arrival of the Sears Roebuck mail order catalog,³ and gave mountain women freedom from the labor of producing textiles for the family on their own looms. By the late 19th century when Frost made his first field trip into the mountain communities, many mountain looms were sitting idle. Craft production was primarily the work of the elder generation of women in the communities; those who had learned to weave from their own mothers were keeping the textile traditions alive. In 1896 and 1897, Frost's annual reports to the college trustees articulated his desire to establish some industry that would allow students to earn towards their education at Berea College. The popularity of mountain textiles among New England donor circles inspired him to make crafts one of those industries for Berea's needy students, and also for weavers in the southern mountains.

1 Jess Stoddart, *Challenge and Change in Appalachia: The Story of Hindman Settlement School* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 230.

2 Philis Alvic, *Weaving of the Southern Highlands* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 35.

3 Richard Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 188.

In 1901 this small enterprise was referred to as the Homespun Industries, and by 1903 had been renamed Fireside Industries. This name (Fireside Industries) was common in the Appalachian area for marketing ventures that sold handmade crafts that had previously been created as part of a subsistence barter economy, but were transitioning into a cash economy. Fireside Industries at Berea College began by marketing locally produced coverlets, homespun yardage, baskets and quilts, and grew into a larger enterprise for the college, with special attention paid to educating younger women to continue the textile traditions. The college initiated a craft fair held in conjunction with its commencement in 1902 to promote the traditional crafts of the mountains,⁴ and called this the Homespun Fair. When the quality of the items brought to the Homespun Fair were thought to be below the quality of craftsmanship of earlier generations, competitions were initiated to promote higher quality work and to encourage younger women to take up the textile arts of their grandmothers to keep the traditions alive.

Kate Putnam, Instructor in Home Science in Berea's Normal and Academy Departments reported to President Frost in her 1909 annual report on the Homespun Fair that all the prizes were going to older women, and she proposed that premiums be given to women under 30 years. "This would encourage the younger women to cultivate the art of spinning and weaving and it would not become a lost art."⁵ In this same year, Jennie Lester Hill, superintendent of Fireside Industries reported, "We are having a great increase of interest in weaving among the girls because of the calls we have had for demonstrators and teachers of weaving. I hope my successor in this department will herself be a weaver who can teach a half dozen of our girls this art." Hill also proposed that Berea College buy looms and resell them to local weavers to increase the pool of working weavers from whom to purchase quality coverlets. Berea College's era of a works project of marketing Appalachian textiles had begun.⁶

The thread of training weavers to go back into the mountain schools remained strong throughout the next decades of Fireside Industries and across administrations. In 1910, Jennie Lester Hill reported to President Frost on the greatest need for Fireside Industries: "a head who is herself a skilled and practical weaver. There is a growing demand among settlement and charitable organizations for teachers of weaving."⁷ This skilled weaver arrived at Berea College in 1911 in the person of Anna Ernberg, who remained Superintendent of Fireside Industries for the next 25 years. In her first report to President Frost as Superintendent of Fireside Industries in 1913, Ernberg commented on the work of providing income opportunities for mountain women through Fireside Industries, and also shared her vision of increased production by bringing in more looms. "I have added one large and six small looms imported from Sweden. And now, as the work grows we can add more looms made at our woodwork department, after my model."⁸ This became another way in which Berea College influenced the mountain weaving centers for decades, by selling looms to them, or blueprints for the looms so that local woodworkers could build them to exact blueprints.

4 Flyer: *Berea Fair For Fireside Industries*, 1903. Special Collections, Berea College.

5 Kate Putnam, "Report on Homespun Fair," 1909. Special Collections, Berea College.

6 Jennie Lester Hill, "Report on Fireside Industries," 1909. Special Collections, Berea College.

7 Jennie Lester Hill, "Report on Fireside Industries," 1910. Special Collections, Berea College.

8 Anna Ernberg, Annual Report, 1913. Special Collections, Berea College.

In 1919, Anna Ernberg commented to President Frost that the Academy (high school) Weaving Department started the previous year was a success, and she asserted that teaching weaving should focus on those who will carry it back home where economic conditions are neediest. In her 1928 annual report to President William J. Hutchins she stated, "A number of girls of college rank have taken the course, although they receive no 'credit' for so doing, because of the value of the art, and because of the multiplying opportunities to teach weaving in mountain schools."⁹ The administration of William J. Hutchins supported the economic development aspect of Fireside Industries, having inherited an academic institution on sound financial footing in part due to income generated by the enterprise of Fireside Industries. Again the next year Ernberg reported to President Hutchins that, "One of the delightful features of the work, to which we are giving increasing emphasis, is educational weaving in classes, in which women are prepared to be instructors in other schools in mountain settlements."¹⁰

Berea College continued to purchase textiles, baskets, and quilts from mountain weavers and sewers until 1931, when they turned their commitment to student labor for all the textile production. Post depression economics resulted in slow sales in the Log House Gift Shop, and made it impossible to continue to buy the textiles from mountain women. At its peak around mid-1920s, Fireside Industries hired 250 student workers, while 170 mountain families produced handwoven coverlets, quilts, handspun yarn, and provided knotting, netting, and sewing for the department.¹¹ When there was not enough work at Fireside Industries for both the students required to work in the student labor program to earn their tuition and the outside workers, the decision to supply students with the work of the department brought to an end the works project era of Berea College's Fireside Industries.

In 1922, Churchill Weavers had opened another handweaving center in Berea, Kentucky. Churchill Weavers hired women from the surrounding communities and produced handwoven articles on flyshuttle looms. This competition prompted some institutional changes in the Fireside Industries at Berea College. In 1926 work began on a flyshuttle weaving enterprise to expand labor opportunities for male students, and by 1928 the Mountain Weaver Boys of Berea College were producing woolen yardage on the flyshuttle looms made from local handspun wool.¹² There is not the same historical data from the Mountain Weaver Boys student industry, which lasted around twenty years, on men trained in production handweaving going on to teach or work in that field, but the mention of women pursuing work in that field continues.

The introduction of local competition from Churchill Weavers in the Berea handweaving market inspired some changes in the marketing of crafts by the college. Not only did the college develop its own flyshuttle weaving business, it looked closely at the marketing of all its crafts and sought to bring a unified name and logo to this enterprise. In the Annual Report for the Boone Tavern Gift Shop in 1928, there is the first mention of the Berea College Student Industries, which included all the craft production centers, and was the result of marketing strategies of trustees William H. Danforth and William B. Belknap.

By 1940, Bess Ledford, superintendent of Fireside Industries wrote in her annual report to President Francis Hutchins that she "gets requests from recent grads who are hired to run

9 Anna Ernberg, Annual Report, 1928. Special Collections, Berea College.

10 Anna Ernberg, Annual Report, 1929. Special Collections, Berea College.

11 Alvic, *Weaving of Southern Highlands*, 48.

12 *Ibid.*, 50.

weaving programs but have not received the depth of training to run a business.” She proposed a change in weaving instruction so that each student in the new course would leave with a notebook of design ideas and strong grounding in fundamentals of weaving.¹³ Ledford had graduated from Berea College, and had worked as a weaver under Anna Ernberg, she was using her education and training to continue the legacy of service to mountain youth in her return to Berea College. In 1940, Ledford was in the unique position to be managing both the Fireside Industries, the fulfillment of a personal goal, and also managing the Mountain Weaver Boys. She reported to President Hutchins on the year for the Mountain Weaver Boys by stating, “The craftsmen all over the country look to Berea for the fine and lovely work, new ideas, the solutions to many problems. As the supervisor of the Weaving Departments, my greatest hope is to keep Berea the home of the beautiful, the Mecca for the craftsmen and a place where quality products can be secured.”¹⁴

In 1943, another Berea alumna, Harriett Howard, had returned to Berea College to teach weaving in the Home Economics Department. She reported to the president that she had received calls “for weaving teachers for Summer Camps, State Institutions, and Occupational Therapy so next year there will be a special unit added to the advanced weaving course for students interested in qualifying for positions of this type.”¹⁵

With this record of Berea College weavers and looms being sent to settlement schools across the Appalachian region over half a century, we see the strong commitment to supporting the work of these settlement schools. What was the philosophy of the settlement schools that made them so attractive to Berea alumnae, and what were their accomplishments? Recent scholarship on the progressive era reformers who started two of the best-known Appalachian settlement schools, Hindman Settlement School and Pine Mountain Settlement School gives us some insights into the reformers, their philosophy, their contemporaries, and their accomplishments.

It is important to place the reforms of the Appalachian region into the national context of reforms of the progressive era of the 1890s to the 1930s. Historian Howard Zinn states that the name “Progressive” came from the laws that were passed under the Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson administrations. Some of the progressive laws of this era included regulation of the meat packing industry, railroad and pipeline regulation, the Pure Food and Drug Act, regulating the telegraph and telephone system under the Interstate Commerce Commission, introduction of the Federal Trade Commission to control growth of monopolies, and the regulation of the country’s money system under the Federal Reserve. Zinn further states “Also at this time, a number of states passed laws regulating wages and hours, providing for safety inspection of factories and compensation for injured workmen.”¹⁶ While these were big scale reforms, Zinn states that it was clear to blacks, feminists, and labor organizers that they could not count on the national government for inclusion in reforms, as it was an era of quieting the popular risings, but not making fundamental changes.¹⁷

The work of scholars Jess Stoddard, Karen Tice, Deborah Blackwell and others suggests that the founders of Hindman and Pine Mountain Settlement schools were engaged in partnership

13 Bess Ledford, Annual Report, 1940. Special Collections, Berea College.

14 Bess Ledford, Annual Report on Mountain Weaver Boys, 1940. Special Collections, Berea College.

15 Harriett Howard, Annual Report on Home Economics Department, 1943. Special Collections, Berea College.

16 Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States 1492- Present* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1995), 341.

17 *Ibid.*, 341.

relationships with the mountain communities they served, where they developed educational opportunities for children, extension services in health, education, and agriculture for adults, and promoted economic development in the region. Early historical assessments of the motives and contributions of settlement workers and the institutions they established criticize that movement as quasi colonial imposition of culture and an arrogant assault on traditional craft activity. There are elements of both exploitation and positive change in this part of Appalachia's history. The development of improved public education and provision of healthcare and social services in rural centers were local initiatives that survive to this day in the Appalachian region as a testament to the needs that these initiatives met in the mountain communities.

Both Hindman Settlement School and Pine Mountain Settlement School were created as rural models of the urban settlement houses that were originally developed to serve immigrant communities in urban industrial centers in the late 1800s and into the early 1900s. The philosophy of the settlement movement was part of the social thought of the progressive movement in American culture. A major assumption of this philosophy was that the social environment rather than the individual was the critical starting point for change.¹⁸ The settlement houses taught children, but also taught adults to become informed citizens, and social activism was encouraged to strengthen communities.¹⁹ Settlement houses emerged at a time in American history when women were moving away from gender roles that were strictly domestic and private in nature, into active roles in the public sphere, which had up to that time exclusively been the domain of men.²⁰ The prevailing ideology of women leaders of this transitional generation was one of maternalism, the belief that women possessed a unique feminine value system based on care and nurturing. It was thought that women could unite across class and race boundaries by their shared capacity for motherhood and thus take on responsibility for all children of the nation.

The reformers who came to the Appalachian Mountains were creating a new version of the settlement houses, with modifications to fit an agrarian context. According to Stoddart, the reformers were full of charisma, energy, competence, business acumen, organizational skills, the willingness to break from prescribed roles, and the ability to get along with diverse groups of people.²¹ The founders of Hindman and Pine Mountain spent two summers doing field research in summer camps in mountain communities before attempting to open their school, embracing the method of Jane Addams, a founding mother of the settlement house movement- research, residence, and reform.²² The educational initiatives of this generation of reformers resulted in tremendous changes in the mountain educational systems. Stoddard asserts that in 1902, the Southern progressives were embarking on an educational awakening that was the focal point of the social justice movement. During this period, southern states established universal public education, increased funding for education, increased teacher's salaries and requirements, lengthened school terms, introduced compulsory attendance, and brought the public schools up to the standards of the northern states. According to Eloise H. Jurgens, the rural settlement

18 Jess Stoddart, *The Quare Women's Journals: May Stone and Katherine Pettit's Summers in the Kentucky Mountains and the founding of Hindman Settlement School* (Ashland: J. Stuart Foundation, 1997), 49.

19 Eloise Hollyfield Jurgens, *Southern Appalachian Settlement Schools as Early Initiators of Integrated Services* (Tennessee: E. Tennessee University Thesis, 1996), 4.

20 Jess Stoddart, *Challenge and Change in Appalachia*, 228.

21 *Ibid.*, 10.

22. *Ibid.*, 16.

school movement was directed towards enabling those served to help themselves, to create conditions within the community that would improve the lives of the people.²³

The progressives who lived and worked at the Appalachian settlement schools adopted the educational philosophy of John Dewey for whom learning by doing was at the core of the educational experience. For Dewey, knowledge was not an external reality or an inner truth, rather knowledge was the result of interactions between the mind and the environment.²⁴ Training in the manual arts of weaving, woodworking, pottery and basket making were ways settlement schools fostered Dewey's belief in the need for education that reflected the realities of life.²⁵ Settlement schools established their own "Fireside Industries," inspired by the English Arts and Crafts revival of William Morris and John Ruskin, and by Berea College; programs in which the products of local craftspeople were marketed to buyers outside the Appalachian region.²⁶

Progressives came into the mountains to teach, and became both enamored of the weaving and other mountain crafts, and concerned that these traditions were dying out with the influx of modern culture into early 20th century Appalachia. Weaving traditions of the southern Appalachians were distinguished by complex and ancient patterned coverlets, dyed with local barks, berries, and roots from surrounding vegetation. Settlement workers saw that this art was disappearing.²⁷ They founded marketing centers for mountain crafts promoting home-based work as acceptable for women within the mountain framework of gender roles.²⁸ This home-based work was less disruptive than work in the coal or timber camps that had begun to industrialize communities across Appalachia.²⁹ These Fireside initiatives also let the reformers make judgments about what was good and worth preserving in Appalachian culture, and missing in the lives of the rest of American culture. This sentiment was fed by nostalgia for the simpler days before industrialization, and anxiety about modern 20th century society.

Scholars disagree on whether the "discovery" of the Appalachian region by this first generation of reform workers was a continuation of colonialism and exploitation or a force of positive change in the mountains. For some like Appalachian native David Whisnant, the move to market mountain crafts altered forever the traditional crafts to cater to the tastes of middle-class America. Whisnant called the weavings that emerged a hybrid style, "a combination of some traditional colors, processes and designs blended with alien (Swedish, for example) design features and materials, the whole applied to new products rarely if ever seen in mountain homes, such as cloth napkins, table runners, and place mats."³⁰ Whisnant asserts that the intervener in a region's culture has tremendous power in legitimizing and defining that culture to the larger

23 Eloise Hollyfield Jurgens, *Southern Appalachian Settlement Schools*, 139.

24 Walter Powell Oldendorf, "Pine Mountain Boarding High School: A Unique Educational Community," unpublished paper, (Melon Foundation Appalachian Study Project, 1982), 5

25 Deborah Blackwell, *The Ability to do Much Larger Work: Gender and Reform in Appalachia, 1890-1935* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Dissertation, 1998), 45.

26. Philis Alvic, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), 36.

27 Jurgens, *Southern Appalachian Settlement Schools as Early Initiators*, 42.

28 Alvic, *Weaving of the Southern Highlands*, 79.

29 *Ibid.*, 82.

30 David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine, The Politics of Culture in an American Region*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 67.

society. He states that “The ‘culture’ that is perceived by the intervener (even before the act of intervention) is rarely congruent with the culture that is already there. It is a *selection*, and *arrangement*, an *accommodation* to preconceptions... Thus the culture that is “preserved” or “revived” is a hybrid at best...”³¹ To others, this modification of the traditional was a way for crafts to take on a new role in economic development in the form of works programs that benefited local economies by selling handcrafted items to consumers outside the region.

According to anthropologist Allen Batteau, capitalistic societies create a poverty population, romanticize them as “folk,” and then co-opt the “folk” qualities into its own symbolic production, while at the same time commercialism is destroying the few genuine vestiges of remaining folkways.³² Batteau asserts that a distinct Appalachian culture is a product of and “did not exist before exploitative relationship between Appalachia and metropolitan society.”³³ To Batteau Appalachian culture is a social construct that was a result of interactions between local values and external confrontations, which occurred with the multi-faceted exploitation of the mountain region, the result of the expansion of capitalist society and a product of the colonization of the region and its resources.³⁴ Batteau further asserts that by dwelling on the cultural distinctiveness of Appalachia, we limit a political consciousness of the similarity between domination of Appalachia and other structural oppressions in American society.³⁵

Scholar Jean Haskell Speer suggests that Allen Eaton, a friend of President Frost and Berea College Sociologist Helen Dingman, proposed that Appalachian culture was an example of the cultural pluralism of America. Through its craft traditions, Eaton felt he could promote tolerance and pluralism in America through art, especially in the folk arts of denigrated and persecuted groups.³⁶ Eaton’s political philosophy valued artistic expression for its ability to “communicate the plight of the poor and disaffected and to increase public awareness of a destructive political system that keeps power in the hands of a few.”³⁷

Eaton followed Berea College’s handcraft revival with continued promotion of mountain handcrafts for the newly founded Council of Southern Mountain Workers, an organization whose efforts in organizing eventually led to formation of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, among other initiatives. Eaton included many handcrafts from Berea College in his national exhibits in which he promoted his political philosophy of mountain folklife being worthy of attention and appreciation, economically and politically valuable, and pivotal in realizing the ideal of cultural pluralism in American democracy.³⁸ Eaton countered the notion that culture was

31 *Ibid.*, 260.

32 Allen Batteau, “Appalachia and the Concept of Culture: A Theory of Shared Misunderstandings,” *Appalachian Journal* VII, (Autumn/Winter 1979-1980): 28.

33 Batteau, “Appalachia and the Concept of Culture”, 29.

34 *Ibid.*, 27.

35 *Ibid.*, 29.

36 Jean Haskell Speer, “Woodpiles and Haystacks: Alan Eaton’s Vision of Southern Highland Handicrafts” *Southern Folklore* XLVI, (1989),226.

37 Speer, “Woodpiles and Haystacks”, 227.

38 *Ibid.*, 260.

something to be brought to the mountains rather than understood and appreciated in the mountains.³⁹

Stoddart asserts that the settlement schools with their works projects and their educational reforms were successful ventures because the close work between mountain women and the settlement workers softened class lines and allowed for a cultural exchange in which both sides taught and learned.⁴⁰ Karen Tice's scholarship leads her to assert that reformers motives were a complex mix of social control and benevolent impulses, full of gradations, negotiations, accommodations; they were not easily classified as a case of either exploitative control or classless sisterhood.⁴¹ Berea College president William G. Frost and his partner Eleanor Frost were members of this first generation of progressives in the mountains, and part of the network of educators dedicated to social service in the region. This network included the progressive women who founded many long-lived institutions including Hindman Settlement School, Pine Mountain Settlement School, and Frontier Nursing Service, all of which still exist today.

This historical record demonstrates that for the first half century of the Berea College Student Industries, there was an acute awareness of how handcrafts produced primarily by women could be marketed in a manner that would aid local economies in mountain communities, as well as the institution of Berea College. Berea supported the progressive work of the Settlement schools by supplying teachers in crafts production and looms to schools throughout the region. Students left Berea trained in the tradition of labor, learning, and service, and took these tools back into the settlement schools and communities of the Southern Highlands to participate in their larger programs of community building. The excitement of creating new systems of community involvement in education in this era would have been an engaging environment for the Berea College graduate. In the next decades craft production moved into the era of organized craft guilds, which took over the marketing of crafts in their own shops and in craft shows.

Berea College has been involved in crafting social change in the Appalachian Mountains through the education of young minds and in the promotion of traditional arts and crafts. The first legacy of social change began with the dream to educate black and white, women and men together as new leaders for a just society. The college's mission evolved in response to temporary political roadblocks to an emphasis on educating mountain youth to be leaders of change in their communities, whether by efforts in education, traditional arts, or local business and politics. The first generation of reform workers in the settlement schools of Appalachia had a steady stream of Berea College trained women who dedicated their services to the social change initiatives of that movement for economic and social justice.

Today the mission of training new generations of culturally sensitive and globally literate citizen leaders continues, and the Student Crafts Program is still a vital part of the labor program of Berea College. The College's Student Craft Program shares a place in history with today's Fair Trade movement for marketing traditional indigenous world crafts in ways that bring economic justice to communities in need around the globe. A Director of Home Economics Extension work from the Philippines visited Berea College in 1952. She was very interested in using native sustainable fibers for textile production and interested in seeing Berea's famed

39 *Ibid.*, 262.

40 Stoddart, *Challenge and Change in Appalachia*, 18.

41 Tice, "School-Work and Mother-Work", 3.

weaving program. In her work to improve nutrition in her country, she acknowledged the need to improve her people's economic status before they could afford better nutrition. Weaving was one way to economic development as she noted, "improve the looms, designs and make salable articles then we can improve nutrition."⁴² The crafting of social change happened in Appalachia at the hands of those involved in the preservation and promotion of an evolving craft tradition and is happening today around the globe. Berea College can be proud of its work in weaving reform into the fabric of life.

Acknowledgments

A special note of thanks to Dr. Gordon McKinney, former Director of Berea College's Appalachian Center for his guidance in this research.

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42 Home Economics Department report, Foreign Visitors 1951-1952, Special Collections, Berea College.