

North Carolina's John C. Campbell Folk School: *Passing on the Traditional Arts*

By Bob Buckingham

There are special places on this earth; the lucky ones among us have one. What makes them special is the ambience — the aura that is part and parcel to the place. A place where you can go when it all becomes too much or you want to do some private digging into your life and take stock. Sometimes it is a quiet glen or a favorite stretch of beach. There are some places where you can come to yourself amidst a group of like-minded people. John C. Campbell Folk School is one of those places. Resting in the southern Appalachian mountains in the village of Brasstown, North Carolina, JCCFS is the reason that village full of artisan shops is still there. Without the folk school, that small town would have most likely disappeared many years ago. There are no interstate highways near the school. There is little industry and what there is is small. This is a part of America that has not changed much as the world went about becoming larger and more centralized. It is a place like some folks will remember a lot of places once were.

Fiddling takes place quite often in Brasstown. Bob Dalsemer, the director of things musical there, is a fine fiddler. He is also a dance caller. There are contra dances and concerts nearly every weekend there. Some of the big names in the folk and contra circles pass through the folk school on their way to bigger cities or as they alight for a week of instruction.

The folk school was founded in 1925 by a pair of progressive educators, Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler, in collaboration with the people of Brasstown. Named for Mrs. Campbell's late husband, they created a unique institution that seeks to bring out the best in folks. It is a spiritual place. As director Jan Davidson says, "As in the beginning, the Folk School seeks to bring people toward two kinds of development: inner growth as creative, thoughtful individuals, and social development as tolerant, caring members of a community. Throughout its history, the folk school has worked toward these goals through performing arts, agriculture, and crafts rooted in the traditions of Southern Appalachia and other cultures of the world."

It is a unique place. The food, in season, often comes from the extensive vegetable gardens on the campus. The menus, regular and vegetarian, are exceptional and served family-style in the cafeteria. Housing is scattered around in several buildings, most loaded with the charm that only comes with time. The facilities are high-



Folk School founders Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler

ly functional with a touch of rustic charm. There is a gift shop where crafts, books, and music can be found, produced by the teachers and resident craftspersons.

The classes range from blacksmithing, metal working, woodworking and turning, cooking, gardening, natural history, history of the Native Americans, bead working, quilting, jewelry, book arts, writing, and, of course, music. As you can see, this is folk art heaven.

The teachers are some of the most innovative, creative, and approachable experts in their fields of endeavor. Most have years of experience and the gift of giving. All have a great deal to offer and the ability to make it fun. After all, that is the point: learn more about your favorite hobby while having fun

and meeting like-minded folks.

For the musician, there is a wide variety of classes on fiddle, old time banjo, mandolin, guitar, playing music in a group, and various other instruments. There is opportunity to jam with local musicians and splendid opportunity for personal growth.

The classes come in three lengths. There are five-night weeks, six-night weeks, and weekend classes. There is a short contra dance on Tuesday evenings, a concert by some folk-oriented band or personality most Fridays, and a contra dance on most Saturday evenings. The classes are six hours long each day — three hours in the morning and three in the afternoon — and are intense immersions into the subject matter. Many of the classrooms/workshops are open in the evenings as well to afford students more time with their projects.

A recent beginning fiddle class went from fiddle triage on Sunday evening, to get all of the instruments playable, to that same class performing a fiddle tune at the showcase on Friday morning. They learned three scales and four tunes by ear in four days. While not accomplished fiddlers, most of the class had learned something about who they were and what they needed to go forward. At the end of the class, they were in position to keep going on the fiddle. In this case the instructor was able to help some of the class in networking to find a teacher near them so they could continue on their fiddle journey. The intensity of the classes is balanced by a recognition of the class members' uniqueness and their varying abilities.

Here is an excerpt from the website about how the Folk School, as regulars and locals are apt to call it, came to be:

John C. Campbell, born in Indiana in 1867, and raised in Wisconsin, studied education and theology in New England. Like many other idealistic young people of his generation, he felt a calling to humanitarian work.

At the turn of the century, the Southern Appalachian region was

“...This is folk art heaven.”

viewed as a fertile field for educational and social missions. With his new bride, Olive Dame of Massachusetts, John undertook a fact-finding survey of social conditions in the mountains in 1908-1909. The Campbells outfitted a wagon as a traveling home and studied mountain life from Georgia to West Virginia.

While John interviewed farmers about their agricultural practices, Olive collected ancient Appalachian ballads and studied the handicrafts of the mountain people. Both were hopeful that the quality of life could be improved by education, and in turn, wanted to preserve and share with the rest of the world the wonderful crafts, techniques and tools that mountain people used in everyday life.

The folkehojskole (folk school) had long been a force in the rural life of Denmark. These schools for life helped transform the Danish countryside into a vibrant, creative force. The Campbells talked of establishing such a school in the rural southern United States as an alternative to the higher-education facilities that drew young people away from the family farm.

After John died in 1919, Olive and her friend Marguerite Butler traveled to Europe and studied folk schools in Denmark, Sweden, and other countries. They returned to the U.S. full of purposeful energy and a determination to start such a school in Appalachia. They realized, more than many reformers of the day, that they could not impose their ideas on the mountain people. They would need to develop a genuine collaboration.

Several locations were under consideration for the experimental school. On an exploratory trip, Miss Butler discussed the idea with Fred O. Scroggs, Brasstown's local storekeeper, saying that she would be back in a few weeks to determine if area residents had any interest in the idea. When she returned, it was to a meeting of over 200 people at the local church. The people of far west North Carolina enthusiastically pledged labor, building materials, and other support.

In 1925, the Folk School began its work. Instruction at the Folk School has always been noncompetitive; there are no credits and no grades. Today, the Folk School offers a unique combination of rich history, beautiful mountain surroundings, and an atmosphere of living and learning together.

You can learn more about the Folk School by pointing your web browser to www.folkschool.org/ or by calling (800) FOLK-SCH.

[Bob Buckingham fiddles, teaches, and writes in the Upstate of South Carolina.]

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