The Founding of Arrowcraft

Although Pi Beta Phi’s primary goal in establishing its settlement school was to bring high quality education and health care to the people of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, the fraternity was also interested in providing residents with improved economic opportunities. Thus it was that during the 1914-1915 school year, Settlement School Head Resident Caroline McKnight Hughes began purchasing baskets, woven coverlets, and other handcrafted items from local families, and then selling these items to Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Clubs on their behalf. “In other localities in the Appalachian Mountains,” she noted in the March 1916 edition of *The Arrow of Pi Beta Phi*, “this work has been successful namely, Eastern Kentucky, and the western part of both North and South Carolina, and why not in Eastern Tennessee? In all four states one finds the same class of people, so what has succeeded in one should succeed in another.”

Her confidence notwithstanding, McKnight-Hughes soon learned that doing business in Southern Appalachia was a proposition fraught with difficulty. To begin with, mountain craftspeople had little experience with -- and little respect for -- credit, and so were apt to demand immediate payment for their wares, regardless of whether the settlement school staff possessed ready cash. For that matter, having had virtually no experience with organized, factory-style labor, many mountain craftspeople objected to the settlement school’s insistence that they focus their energy on producing one particular item, or that they adhere to strict production/shipment schedules. And finally, there were problems arising from the mountaineers’ predominantly agricultural way of life -- namely that, as subsistence farmers, they were forced to place family survival before profit, and hence agricultural labor before handcrafting. It was not uncommon during the early years of the Industrial Handicrafts program
for there to be a surge in crafts production following the fall harvest season, followed by a long dry spell as the spring and summer planting began.

McKnight Hughes’s successors inherited many of these problems, and because of them, struggled to keep the program afloat. Demand, it seems, was seldom a problem, for Pi Phis across the nation were eager to purchase authentic Southern Appalachian handicrafts. But the task of locating suitable craftspeople -- that is, craftspeople who were skilled enough to meet customers’ expectations, were willing to mass produce items, and were willing to deliver said items up for shipment in a timely fashion -- proved a constant source of bedevilment for the Settlement School Staff. At one point in 192?, Head Resident Evelyn Bishop went so far as to place an ad in Sevier County’s main newspaper, *The Montgomery Vindicator*, pleading with weavers, basket makers, and other craftspeople to make their presence known. In most cases, however, she resigned herself to purchasing whatever goods were available, regardless of their quality, and then filling orders as best she could.

Fortunately, during the summer of 1925, the Settlement School acquired the services of full-time Weaving Instructor Winogene Redding, a dynamic leader who took it upon herself to affect a top-down reorganization of the entire vocational handicrafts program. Her first move -- instituting weaving classes for high school girls and adult women -- had the desired effect of generating interest in weaving. By June of 1926 there were approximately thirty mountain families weaving for the school. Second, and more importantly, she instituted a set of firm rules that weavers (and other craftspeople, for that matter) would have to abide by if they wished to do business with Pi Beta Phi. Gone were the days of informality and “spot cash”; weavers would instead acquire materials from the Weaving Department, use these materials to complete woven articles in their own homes, and then return the items to the school on a pre-arranged day. If the
woven goods met Redding’s quality standards -- which were admittedly strenuous -- the department would accept the goods and the weaver would be paid in cash.

Redding’s attempt at standardization paid off; in two short years, the settlement school’s vocational handicrafts program had grown from an informal gathering of artisans into a bustling, highly-profitable cottage industry. So successful was the program that in 1927, teachers Harmo Taylor and Lois Rogers -- with Evelyn Bishop’s and Redding’s blessing -- opened a permanent handicrafts store on the settlement school campus. The store, named Arrowcraft in honor of Pi Beta Phi’s primary symbol, served as a showroom for the woven goods, chairs, baskets, and other handcrafted items produced by local artisans. It was, more importantly, a handicraft distribution center, from which point items were collected, boxed, and shipped to the program’s primary customers, the Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Clubs.

As it happened, less than two years after Arrowcraft came into being, the Stock Market crash of 1929 plunged the United States -- and much of the world -- into the mire of the Great Depression. Pi Beta Phi lost thousands of dollars as banks failed nationwide, forcing the Settlement School Committee to consider the possibility of suspending operations (including Arrowcraft) until such time as economic conditions improved. Fortunately for Gatlinburg residents, who had come to depend on Pi Beta Phi for education and health care, the committee found ways to reduce expenses while still keeping the school and medical program afloat. Arrowcraft persevered as well, primarily because Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Clubs continued, insofar as they were able, to purchase handcrafted items, but also because Arrowcraft director Ethel Weaver Snow refused to accept a salary for two years, thereby enabling the settlement school to continue paying the program’s craftspeople for their wares.
Still, it would be incorrect to assume that the Depression Era brought only hardship and heartache to the settlement school -- or by extension to the Arrowcraft Program. Quite the contrary was true. In 1929, the year of the great crash, representatives of eight Southern Appalachian Craft Schools -- the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School included -- met in Asheville, North Carolina to found the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild. Membership in this organization provided Arrowcraft artisans with increased market outlets, as well as a means to publicize their work via national and international exhibitions. Also, the 1935 advent of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park proved a tremendous boon to Arrowcraft -- and to local businesses in general -- for it served to bring thousands of tourists to the settlement school’s front door. Not only did these tourists prop up Arrowcraft by purchasing handmade textiles, brooms, chairs, and other items; their very presence served to spark a spree of hotel and restaurant development that would ultimately transform the town.

As the Depression at last began to lift in the 1940s, Arrowcraft boomed. The program was, according to the *Arrow of Pi Beta Phi*, the “the largest distributing center for native handicrafts in this country,” shipping textiles and other items to 141 Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Clubs, 15 active Pi Beta Phi Chapters, and four retail outlets owned and operated by the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild. Of course, the program did suffer a number of setbacks. During the Second World War, scores of Gatlinburg residents (and hence, potential Arrowcraft employees) migrated away from the town either to serve in the military, or to take up defense industry jobs. For that matter, the town’s tourist trade acted as a sort of “double-edged sword” during the 1950s and 1960s, bringing consumers who wished to purchase Southern Appalachian handicrafts directly to Arrowcraft’s front door, but also redirecting potential laborers into the growing restaurant and hotel industries. In the end, however, Arrowcraft served as an important source of
income for Gatlinburg families for the next two decades, easing their transition from a life of subsistence agriculture to a life of modern industrial/commercial labor. As late as 1972, The Arrow reported that “one . . . family, including the father, depended on weaving [for Arrowcraft] as its sole income.”

Today, Arrowcraft is owned by the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, which uses the store to market handcrafted items on behalf of all guild members. The current store, which was built in 1940, is located on the Gatlinburg Parkway, between the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and Pi Beta Phi Elementary School.