Curriculum

At the time Pi Beta Phi established its settlement school in Gatlinburg, Tennessee in February 1912, few among the town’s residents possessed more than a fifth grade education, and most possessed considerably less. Local schools were simply too small, too geographically scattered, too poorly funded, and the teachers who staffed them too poorly educated in their own right to provide students with anything beyond the “Three R’s” (reading, writing, and arithmetic). And yet, the problem was infinitely more profound; for with a few notable exceptions, Gatlinburg residents placed little or no value on formal education, and so were disinclined to expect more from those who taught their children.

Then again, they had little practical reason to do so. Most Gatlinburg residents were subsistence farmers, and as such had little use for formal education. Simply put, a boy whose life would be spent hoeing corn, plowing fields, and cutting firewood, and who wished to do well for himself and his family, need not devote his energy to a study of Greek and Roman political traditions to be successful. For that matter, a girl whose adult life would be spent mending clothing, canning vegetables, and caring for small children need not be conversant in French to excel in her duties. Disagreeable a notion as it may have been to the Pi Beta Phis, a mountain boy or girl could learn most everything he or she needed to know, whether it be the safest way to fell a tree or the simplest way to darn a sock, from members of his or her extended family. One might learn to count, write a few words, and struggle through a few lines of reading at the local schoolhouse, but these skills were by no means required of those destined to become productive members of Southern Appalachian society.

In the early days of the settlement school, the Settlement School Committee and members of the teaching staff struggled with this issue – that is, they disagreed with one another about the
content of the school’s curriculum, with some arguing that courses should be designed around
the Southern Appalachian lifestyle, and others arguing that it should. Principal Helen Chew, for
example, wished to emphasize the practical, rather than the intellectual, arguing that advanced
mathematics, world history, and other strictly “academic” courses were “too college preparatory”
for Southern Appalachian students. Given the choice, she would have preferred devoting the
settlement school’s limited energy and resources to agriculture and home economics classes, for
these were the vocations most likely to be adopted by the majority of graduates. Settlement
school pioneer Dr. May Lansfield Keller, however, insisted that a well-rounded curriculum, even
one that included “impractical” courses such as literature and foreign languages, was critical to
the intellectual development of all students, regardless of their economic background or
vocational interests. “I wouldn’t make a plumber study the classics,” she once insisted, “but he’d
enjoy life more if he did -- there’s more to life than pipes.”

In the end, the Settlement School Committee and Staff opted to steer as neutral a course
as possible between the two extremes. Students were given a heavy dose of agricultural and
home economics training, but were also provided with ample opportunity to study languages,
history, mathematics, and other “less practical” subjects. Of course, as the settlement school
staff would learn, developing a curriculum and then arousing enthusiasm among students and
their parents for that curriculum were two different things. But the staff overcame local
resistance, primarily by visiting students’ homes and inviting parents to attend adult education
classes and school-sponsored social events.

Of all the programs instituted by the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School, none aroused more
resistance than did vocational agriculture. Southern Appalachian farmers were, as a rule,
hesitant to adopt any technique perceived as “book farming,” preferring instead to rely on
traditional techniques shaped by generations of practical experience. Still, Pi Beta Phi insisted that if Gatlinburg boys intended to spend their lives farming (and most of them did), they should be the most well-trained, scientifically-minded farmers that they could be. Thus it was that in 1922, the Settlement School Committee requested and received federal agricultural education subsidies under the Smith-Hughes Act, allowing it to hire the school’s first, full-time vocational agriculture teacher, Chattanooga native and University of Tennessee graduate Otto J. Mattil (more commonly known as O. J. Mattil).

From the moment Mattil first set foot in Gatlinburg, he worked diligently to overcome local opposition to agricultural education and ingratiate himself into the local farming community. Thus, while his efforts centered primarily on directing high school boys in a number of projects, such as feeding and caring for school-owned livestock (dairy cattle and poultry), planting and tending food crops (corn, wheat, potatoes), cultivating pasture grasses (hay), constructing “hot houses” (small greenhouses) for winter, and repairing farm machinery, he made every effort possible to work with adult men (farmers) in Gatlinburg and the surrounding communities. Given time, these men came to trust Mattil’s expertise and developed a genuine interest in his lessons. Saturday night poultry classes were particularly popular, drawing attendees to the settlement school from miles around and sparking the formation of a community poultry marketing club.

The Settlement School Staff based its home economics curriculum on a similar philosophy -- that is, that most Gatlinburg girls would end up homemakers, thus making it desirable to give them “proper” training in the domestic arts. As was the case with vocational agriculture, the home economics curriculum aroused a certain degree of resentment and resistance among Gatlinburg women and their daughters. As teacher Anna Dowell put it in
1923, “there is one thing these people are loath to do and that is to take anything out when it is not done right. . . . The habit of ‘any way’ll do’ and ‘what difference will it make’ practiced by mother and grandmother for generations is not easily broken. . . . [The girls] tend to say “‘Can’t see no sense in bein’ so particular about things, no how’.” And yet, in time, girls and women grew to value the program, just as boys and men had grown to value vocational agriculture. Home economics students learned, among other things, to sew, cook, care for small children, and keep a clean house. They also received instruction in interior and exterior home decorating, for it had long been Pi Beta Phi’s desire to replace the cluttered darkness of the mountain cabin with the aesthetic beauty of the “modern” home.

In 1943, thirty-one years after Pi Beta Phi first settled in the Little Pigeon River Valley, Sevier County pledged to assume financial responsibility for primary and secondary education in Gatlinburg. This move was, admittedly, more symbolic than substantive; and yet it freed the fraternity to cultivate what it termed “a finer type of scholarship.”

Given Pi Beta Phi’s heavy involvement in the Southern Appalachian Handicrafts Revival, it should come as no surprise that this “finer type of scholarship” entailed the advent of high school art and handicrafts classes. For not only did the Settlement School Committee and staff see artistic expression as a valuable facet of learning; they saw arts and crafts classes as a sort of apprenticeship program -- one that stood to provide Arrowcraft with a stable base of employees in the coming decades. But the settlement school also invested time and money promoting physical education, music, and the fine arts. In 1945, teacher Lon Moneyhan became the school’s first physical education teacher, and teacher McWilliams Young took up the job of settlement school music teacher. Teacher Lois Fenn, taking a cue from the successful John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, attempted to introduce Gatlinburg
schoolchildren to Danish and Swedish folk dances, but with limited success. Many Gatlinburg
parents opposed dancing on religious grounds, and so refused to let their children participate. It
was not until Fenn reinstituted the courses under the guise of physical education that the parents
relented and allowed the classes to continue.

Since 1965, Sevier County has taken full responsibility for funding and developing
curriculum for the Gatlinburg school system. Vocational agriculture and home economics
classes are now located at the county’s numerous middle and high schools, such as Gatlinburg-
Pittman and Sevier County High School; otherwise, one would find little appreciable difference
between the original settlement school curriculum and that offered to students at the modern-day
Pi Beta Phi Elementary School.