The Impact of Arrowcraft on Gatlinburg

When Pi Beta Phi Settlement School teachers Lois Rogers and Harmo Taylor founded Arrowcraft in 1927, they viewed the shop as something of an experiment -- one designed to bring order to the informal, rather chaotic system by which the settlement school staff purchased and marketed handicraft items on behalf of local artisans. At the time, neither of them could have guessed that, by 1935, Arrowcraft would have grown to the point that it was “supporting the largest cottage weaving industry in the United States”; nor could they have imagined that the program’s meteoric rise would occur in the midst of the Great Depression, easily the longest, most severe economic crisis in American (and world) history. They might also have been surprised by the long-term social and economic impact that their “experiment” had on Gatlinburg; for not only did it provide artisans and their families with a profitable alternative to subsistence agriculture, it served to elevate the status of women.

Prior to the advent of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School and Arrowcraft, the vast majority of Gatlinburg residents relied on subsistence agriculture and home manufacture to meet their nutritional and material needs. That is, families raised, gathered, and made virtually everything that they needed on their farms -- a practice which ensured their survival, but produced little or nothing in the way of marketable surpluses. As a result, Gatlinburg families tended to be “cash poor,” and so were unable to afford labor saving machinery, household appliances, and other “luxury” items available to those in more prosperous regions of the country. Arrowcraft served to break this cycle -- at least to a small extent -- by providing Gatlinburg farm families with a means to earn cash during the normally inactive fall and winter months. Handicraft production did not replace subsistence agriculture as a way of life; and it by no means served to enrich anyone. But participating families were materially better off than they might otherwise have
been; and in a region renowned for abject poverty, even the smallest gains were extremely significant.

Arrowcraft profits were particularly important to Gatlinburg families during the difficult years of Great Depression. Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Clubs (the shop’s primary patrons) continued purchasing Arrowcraft items in spite of their own economic hardships, thereby ensuring that Gatlinburg artisans enjoyed access to a steady source of income at a time when many in more traditionally prosperous regions of the country were struggling to make ends meet. On one occasion in the 1930s, a Southern Highland Craft Guild official asked a Pi Beta Phi Settlement School representative how many of those employed by Arrowcraft were receiving, or were expecting to receive, relief checks from the federal government. The unnamed Pi Phi “indignantly declared that none of them were, which brought . . . forceful recognition of the value of Pi Beta Phi work in that area.”

But the benefits of Arrowcraft extended beyond mere economic gain; for the program also served to elevate the status of Gatlinburg women by providing them with heretofore unavailable social and creative outlets. In the days before Arrowcraft, most Gatlinburg women spent their days in the vicinity of their homes, performing a variety of domestic tasks on behalf of their families. Social opportunities were few and far between: a Gatlinburg woman might visit with neighbors once a week at church, or perhaps spend a few hours at her neighbor’s house when the day’s chores were completed; but the bulk of her life was spent in isolation, with her only appreciable social contact coming in the form of husbands, children, and elderly relatives. Opportunities for creative expression were equally scarce. Save for a handful of elderly women whose mothers and grandmothers had taught them how to weave elaborate coverlets, most Gatlinburg women were no more artistically inclined than their contemporaries in other regions
of the country. True they were very handy, and often made brooms and other implements for home use. But this was done out of necessity, rather than as a means to fulfill some inner creative urge.

Thus the social importance of Arrowcraft: participation in the program quite literally required Gatlinburg women to travel regularly; to interact with their peers; and to indulge their artistic tendencies. In order to do business with Arrowcraft, artisans (the vast majority of whom were female weavers) were expected to visit the Settlement School campus at least once every two weeks to pick up supplies and hand in finished work. This brought them into contact with friends and neighbors, and allowed them ample opportunity for social interaction. Additionally, the Arrowcraft staff encouraged weavers and other artisans to experiment with new patterns and techniques, and for the more skilled among them, to develop patterns and techniques of their own. On one occasion in 1949, Weaving Instructor Tina McMorran arranged a display of Arrowcraft work on the Settlement School campus. Afterward, Settlement School Director Ruth Dyer commented that “It is surprising that sometimes these weavers, living far away, see only the pattern on which they themselves weave. . . . The weavers truly appreciated this chance to see others work.”

An offshoot of Arrowcraft, the Gatlinburg Weavers’ Guild, served to elevate the status of Gatlinburg women further by providing them with additional social and recreational opportunities (many of which extended beyond the realm of handicrafts production). Led by Weaving Instructor Winogene Redding, guild members staged teas, parties, picnics, and educational gatherings, and on more than one occasion, wrote and staged plays at the Settlement School. The guild also encouraged women to engage in home improvement and beautification projects, and to organize roadside vegetable markets. In order to ensure that the Weavers’ Guild
fulfilled its potential as a source of good works, Redding insisted that membership be open to all Gatlinburg women, regardless of whether they participated in the Arrowcraft Weaving Program. Given the open invitation, guild meetings were typically crowded and boisterous; but this condition was viewed by the Settlement School staff as acceptable, for “a good time was always had by all.”

Over the years, with the coming of good roads and the Gatlinburg tourist industry, Arrowcraft saw its relevance gradually diminish. Hotel and restaurant jobs paid more than weaving, carving, and basketry, and the program witnessed a partial (although certainly not complete) loss of its workforce. Still, tourism was seasonal, and during the winter months, families often encountered considerable difficulty meeting their financial obligations. It was not uncommon, then, to find Gatlinburg families earning a significant portion of their income from weaving and other Arrowcraft handcrafts well into the 1970s and 1980s.

In recent years, following Pi Beta Phi’s decision to turn over its handcrafting interests to the Southern Highland Craft Guild, Arrowcraft has ceased serving Gatlinburg artisans exclusively. It has instead been given over to the task of marketing items on behalf of all guild members, regardless of where they live. But the shop’s legacy lives on, for it is easily one of the oldest, and certainly one of the most important, of Gatlinburg’s industries.