

Recreation in the Pi Beta Phi Era

From almost the moment Pi Beta Phi established its settlement school on the banks of the Little Pigeon River, the fraternity made a conscientious effort to provide Gatlinburg residents -- both children and adults -- with physical education courses, organized athletic contests, and other recreational activities. Their reason for doing so was simple: like many of their contemporaries in urban, Progressive Era America, the Pi Phis were convinced that Southern Appalachian mountaineers lived dismal, uninteresting lives, marked only by tedium and unceasing toil. As we have seen in the essay "Recreation in Southern Appalachia" this perception was often exaggerated; the mountaineers, it turns out, were actually quite ingenious at amusing themselves, despite their meager material means. And yet, the fact remains that life in Southern Appalachia was difficult, and the opportunities for recreation scarce. Thus the recreational programs offered by Pi Beta Phi were not only welcomed but enthusiastically embraced, to the point that they became an important part of the local cultural fabric.

The settlement school's recreational program began rather informally, with individual teachers taking the initiative to lead students in songs, games, and other activities. In 1916, for example, teacher Bernice Goode encouraged her students to play pickup baseball games on the school's athletic field, perform jump-rope routines with a piece of wild grapevine, and organize makeshift choirs to sing hymns and patriotic songs. Two years later, in 1918, newly-appointed Head Resident (and skilled musician) Evelyn Bishop began offering piano and voice lessons to students who wished to expand their musical abilities, and whose parents were willing to pay a nominal fee. Unfortunately, not all of the teachers' efforts met with success, for among the families who patronized the school, agricultural needs often came before recreational needs. Following a failed attempt to form a "Girls' Club" in August 1919, teacher Ruth Sturley

lamented that “I do not believe at times that [the girls] need [the club] -- Perhaps later on when there is not so much farm work it may be different. Making molasses and picking beans have been the reasons lately for absences.”

As the settlement school’s funding and organizational abilities increased, however, so too did the complexity of its recreational program. By the mid-1920s, the school was regularly hosting organized, inter-scholastic basketball games in the loft of the “Red Barn,” and was also sending boys and girls teams to compete against neighboring schools in Sevierville, the Sugarlands, the Glades, Banner, Cartertown, and other nearby communities. On occasion, these games gave rise to humorous incidents, particularly when they were staged in isolated areas that were still adjusting to the novelty of sporting events. In February 1925, for example, the Pi Beta Phi boys’ team created “quite a stir” at an “away” game in the Sugarlands, simply by donning official basketball uniforms. Unaccustomed to the sight of boys wearing tank-tops and shorts, the overall-clad members of the Sugarlands team were, according to Evelyn Bishop, simultaneously “horrified by the sight of basketball suits” and “envious because they didn’t have anything better . . . to play in.” In the end, Bishop suspected that the latter emotion predominated among the Sugarlanders, for in the aftermath of the game, they adamantly refused to award Pi Beta Phi a “return game.”

All humor aside, however, basketball soon gained a vocal, intense following in Gatlinburg and the surrounding communities. It was not uncommon in the early 1930s to find the Red Barn loft packed with children and adults on a Saturday night, all of them cheering loudly in support of their favorite team. So crowded were the games, in fact, that by mid-decade, Pi Beta Phi decided to build a gymnasium on the settlement school campus. In 1947, the same year, incidentally, that the fraternity expanded the gymnasium’s seating area to accommodate an

even greater number of spectators, the girls' team won the settlement school's first county county-wide athletics trophy. According to one teacher, the only thing preventing the well-coached, enthusiastic Pi Beta Phi teams from establishing a basketball "dynasty," of sorts, was the fact that so many of the players performed exhausting manual labor during the week, either because their family required it of them, or because they needed to work off their tuition and dormitory fees.

Important as they were, however, organized sports and physical education represented only a small portion of the settlement school's recreational offerings. The fraternity also staged plays, choral shows, and holiday celebrations at the settlement school; hosted an annual school fair; and maintained a lending library so that students and their parents might have access to books. Still, there were two events that eclipsed all others in popularity: "Pi Beta Phi movie nights" and the Gatlinburg "Old Timers' Day" celebration.

The first motion picture to be screened in Gatlinburg took place on the evening of March 31, 1923, in the loft of the Red Barn. Those fortunate enough to attend gathered hay bales, chairs, and benches around a small projector donated to the school by the Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Club of Indiana, and then stared in amazement as the movie flickered and danced across a nearby wall. Needless to say, word of the event spread rapidly up and down the creeks, until it reached even the most isolated homesteads. When the settlement school screened the same films the following night, the loft was filled to capacity with curious onlookers. "I find that movies are going to mean a social time" wrote Head Resident Evelyn Bishop happily. "Aunt Lizzie [Reagan] had seen all the pictures Friday but Saturday night went again and came back with word she had visited folks she hadn't seen for years. Whole families walked anywhere from one to six miles that night." So popular were the Pi Beta Phi movie nights that the settlement school

began holding them twice a week, April through October. Until Squire Isaac L. Maples built a small theater on his property in the mid-1940s, the Red Barn was the only place in Gatlinburg where one could watch movies.

“Old Timers’ Day” was introduced to Gatlinburg by Settlement School Nurse Phyllis Higinbotham. Having grown up in the ranching country of western Canada, and having taken a special interest in preserving the unique culture of Southern Appalachia, Higinbotham proposed that the settlement school stage an annual heritage festival in Gatlinburg that copied the format and feel of the frontier “round-ups” that she had attended as a child. Evelyn Bishop heeded her advice, and in the summer of 1921, the tradition of “Old Timers’ Day” was born. Like the husking bees of old, and the basketball games and movie nights of the Pi Beta Phi era, Old Timers’ day succeeded not only because it was fun, but because it provided isolated mountain families with an opportunity to gather in one place and renew old friendships. More importantly, a series of contests such as rifle-shooting, quilt-making, vegetable canning, among others, allowed residents to pit their “mountaineer” skills against one another, thereby reinforcing traditional Southern Appalachian cultural norms.

Of course, to conclude this essay without mentioning Pi Beta Phi’s handicrafts programs would be remiss; for although the fraternity treated arts and crafts production as a business, everyone involved, from the instructors down to the craftspeople themselves, recognized the intense personal satisfaction and exceeding joy that arose from the simple process of working with one’s hands. For a detailed study of the settlement school’s handicrafts program -- one which explores both its recreational and economic value -- please see the essay titled “Arrowcraft.”