

## **The Founding of Pi Beta Phi Settlement School**

June 28, 1910 was an historic day for the Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women, as well as for the Southern Appalachian hamlet of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. For it was on that day that Pi Beta Phi alumnae Emma Harper Turner stood before her sisters gathered at the Alumnae Session of the fraternity's national convention and "outlined a plan for the establishment by Pi Beta Phi of a settlement school in the Appalachian Mountains in honor of the founders and the founding of Pi Beta Phi." Educated women that they were, the Pi Phi alumnae present that day were doubtless familiar with the Settlement House Movement and its various manifestations, particularly those efforts aimed at assisting the nation's urban immigrant poor, such as Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement in New York, or Jane Addams's and Ellen Gates Starr's Hull House in Chicago. They would also have been familiar with the popular travel literature of the day, which told readers of the impoverished lifestyle, lack of formal education, "peculiar" social customs, and clannish violence that were presumed (in some cases correctly) to be hallmarks of life in Southern Appalachia. It should come as no surprise, then, that the alumnae clubs, recognizing an opportunity to engage in a truly worthwhile venture, voted overwhelmingly to support the plan. The die had been cast; Pi Beta Phi would found a settlement school, making it the first Greek letter organization in America to sponsor a national philanthropic venture.

Pi Beta Phi's project may have set it apart from other Greek letter organizations, but in regard to the larger Southern Appalachian settlement school movement, the fraternity was a relative latecomer. In fact, by 1910, a veritable archipelago of settlement and vocational schools, many of which stressed native handicrafts production as a means of raising local economic standards, stretched from eastern Kentucky to northern Georgia. For example, as early as 1883, Berea College in Berea, Kentucky instituted a program to purchase and market native

handicrafts, dubbed the “Fireside Industries.” Seventeen years later, in 1900, the Mountain Workers Conference (an annual meeting of missionaries, settlement school teachers, and others working on behalf of the mountaineers) began meeting in Maryville, Tennessee. The year 1902 alone saw the founding of three vocational schools: the Hindman Settlement School in rural Knott County, Kentucky; the Berry School in the rugged country outside Rome, Georgia; and Allanstand Cottage Industries in Allanstand, North Carolina. And in 1901 (nine years prior to Emma Harper Turner’s proposal), the Georgia Federation of Women’s Clubs founded the Tallulah Falls Industrial School in the mountains of northeast Georgia.

Because of the proliferation of settlement schools in Southern Appalachia, the newly-created Pi Beta Phi Settlement School Committee faced an important decision: where to locate the proposed school. The region known as Southern Appalachia is, after all, quite large--roughly equivalent in size to the British Isles (excluding Ireland). As a means of narrowing its focus, the fraternity sent three emissaries--Turner, Dr. May Lansfield Keller, and Anna F. Pettit--to rural East Tennessee to visit communities that had been “designated by the U. S. Bureau of Education . . . as those most in need of education.” Why the special focus on East Tennessee? Because the state government was particularly receptive to benevolent organizations bent on assisting the state’s education department, regardless of said organizations’ political or religious affiliations. As Dr. Keller would later put it, “the state . . . was very anxious for improved educational conditions and so handicapped by the scarcity of tax payers in certain districts, that there had been a law passed allowing public schools to be run cooperatively with the sectarian schools. ‘Anything for the good of the people,’ was the watchword, everywhere.”

All told, the emissaries traveled to three different communities in East Tennessee: Madisonville and Tellico Plains, both of which were in Monroe County; and Sevierville, the

county seat of Sevier County. Of these trips, the Sevierville excursion proved most fruitful, for it provided the trio with an opportunity to meet with Sevier County teachers at their monthly planning meeting and solicit their opinions as to the feasibility and desirability of the proposed settlement school. One teacher in particular, Mabel Moore, took great pains to steer the emissaries toward the nearby hamlet of Gatlinburg, insisting that they at least visit the town “before making a decision relative to a site for a school.” And so, with Moore’s advice in mind, the committee decided to send Dr. Keller to Gatlinburg in order to study social and educational conditions before reporting back to the committee with her findings.

Keller’s trip was arduous, and impressed upon her Gatlinburg’s profound physical isolation. It took her two entire days to cover the forty-two miles from Knoxville to Gatlinburg (the trio had returned to Knoxville after the Sevierville meeting, so that Turner and Pettit might catch a return train to their homes), part of which was spent on an excruciatingly slow train known as the K. S. & E., and part of which was spent bumping over rock-infested mountain roads, hugging sheer cliffs, and fording axle-deep rivers in a light, horse-drawn carriage. The trip provided Keller with numerous opportunities to behold for herself the grinding poverty and lack of quality educational facilities so common to Southern Appalachia at that time. At various points along the route, she beheld numerous (often dilapidated) one-room schoolhouses, as well as a host of diminutive cabins filled to overflowing with barefoot children. Gatlinburg itself was attractive enough, standing as it did alongside the Little Pigeon River in a narrow, steep-sided valley; and the town’s “leading families” were quite enthusiastic about the proposed settlement school. But the town was exceedingly needy, so much so that, in Keller’s words, “we can find work to do anywhere we go.”

Still, Keller's visit to Gatlinburg was by no means the final word in the matter. As it happened, the Settlement School Committee considered numerous alternate plans before committing to Gatlinburg, among them the possibility of assuming control of an existing Presbyterian mission school, known as Wearwood, which was located in Wear's Valley, fifteen miles from Sevierville. And a series of "disheartening delays" occasioned by a sudden turnover in the Sevier County School Board--the new board, as yet unfamiliar with the project, was loath to commit to assisting the fraternity--very nearly derailed the settlement school project before it had been given a chance to begin. In the end, the committee decided to force the issue, hiring experienced mountain teacher Martha Hill, and sending her to Gatlinburg in January of 1912 with instructions to begin teaching school.

The first session of the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School convened two months later, at the end of the county's three month school term (the county school board could only afford to pay a teacher for three months). Classes met in an abandoned schoolhouse near the confluence of Baskins Creek and the Little Pigeon River, and between twelve and fourteen students attended (sources disagree as to the exact number). Following a summer respite, Hill and the regular district school teacher, Calvin Ogle, worked together to teach the county-funded school session in an abandoned Methodist church on Roaring Fork Creek. Hill then continued on alone, conducting school with Pi Beta Phi funding. Shortly thereafter, Sevier County School Superintendent J. S. Keeble offered to grant the district's educational budget to Pi Beta Phi, and to allow the settlement school staff to use county buildings. Pi Beta Phi gratefully accepted, and soon opened a spring session of the school in an abandoned county schoolhouse which stood atop a cliff overlooking Roaring Fork.

As the school grew in popularity, and more and more local families entrusted their children's education to "those wimmin," it became evident to everyone involved that Pi Beta Phi would need land and additional classroom space if it was to thrive. This led the Settlement School Committee issue an ultimatum to the "city fathers," insisting that they make good on their promise to purchase a tract of land for use by the settlement school, or else the staff would pack their belongings and move on to more hospitable climes.

What followed were two of the most dramatic days in Gatlinburg history.

As the warm, late-summer sun beat down, local men who favored the school, and who possessed influence enough to press their neighbors for money, hurried about town and up the nearby creeks, pleading with local families to donate a sum--any sum--towards the purchase of a tract of land (local storeowner E. E. Ogle, who favored the school project, was offering thirty-five acres to Pi Beta Phi for purchase at \$1800). Others, mostly women, took turns "calling on" the Pi Phis well into the evening, pleading with them to reconsider their ultimatum and worrying openly that the men, despite their best efforts, "perhaps . . . couldn't raise enough money." So distraught was Martha Whaley Huff, in fact, that her sleep that night was disturbed by a vivid nightmare--one which saw a sinister black cloud (which represented ignorance and isolation) rolling down the Little Pigeon River Valley and threatening to engulf her and her neighbors' children. Within moments of waking up, she sent for her husband, local entrepreneur Andy Huff, insisting that he return at once from his lumber camp and devote as much time and energy as necessary to the cause of saving the school.

The following morning, Gatlinburg residents looked on apprehensively as the Pi Phis hauled their trunks and other belongings down to the town's main thoroughfare, preparatory to leaving. The money needed for the land had yet to be raised, although Huff and his neighbors

“Uncle” Steve Whaley and Squire Isaac L. Maples refused to give up. Indeed, they assured everyone present that they would collect \$1200--the town’s share of the \$1800 purchase price-- before the hack (wagon) arrived from Sevierville to take the Pi Phis away. In the end (and to everyone’s great relief), the three men succeeded in their mission. E. E. Ogle signed over his thirty-five acres of land (fifteen cleared, twenty in timber) to Pi Beta Phi, and the fraternity pledged, in return, to “maintain a school for 10 years, to build a new school house, and to provide good teachers.”

Although no one could have known it at the time, Pi Beta Phi and Gatlinburg had in that instant forged a relationship that would persist into the present day. For more on the long-term relationship between the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School and Gatlinburg, see the essay titled “School and Community Growth.”