

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS Colloquy

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Phyllis Higinbotham bandages the finger of a Pi Beta Phi Settlement School student.

“Neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring”

PHYLLIS HIGINBOTHAM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE PI BETA PHI SETTLEMENT SCHOOL'S RURAL HEALTH CARE PROGRAM

On an overcast late-spring morning in 1921, Phyllis Higinbotham, resident nurse of Pi Beta Phi Settlement School in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, walked up Pi Phi Lane in search of “Dan,” the school horse. Finding him in his usual home, a small shed next to the baseball field, she saddled him, tied her medical bags in place and, taking the reins firmly in hand, led him down the lane to the town’s main road. After treating the horse to a few pieces of leftover Christmas candy—“he very much appreciates them,” she wrote, “for he is always looking for more”—she shook the mud from her boots, swung into the saddle, and coaxed the stubborn animal into motion. With that, horse and rider were off to the “Sugar Lands,” an isolated mountain community six miles distant from the school.

Higinbotham’s mission that day was routine, at least by Gatlinburg standards. Knoxville physician Dr. John Massey, one of only two licensed physicians to hold regular office hours in the town, had requested that she visit a pneumonic boy who lived in the Sugarlands. If the boy’s condition had improved during the interim since Massey’s last visit, Higinbotham would advise his family on matters of treatment and disease prevention—as a public health nurse, she was prohibited

(continued on page 2)

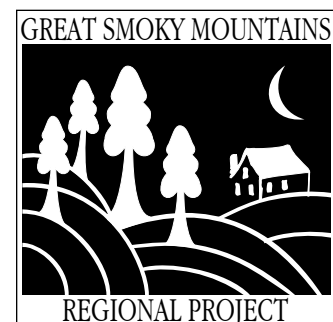


Phyllis Higinbotham, on her way to visit a mountain family.

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Phyllis Higinbotham and Pi Beta Phi Rural Health Care, continued

from prescribing specific treatments without a doctor's consent—and then return to her office in Gatlinburg. If not, Massey would undertake the arduous, forty-six mile trip from Knoxville to the Sugarlands and tend to matters himself.

Traveling from Gatlinburg to the Sugarlands was easier said than done. The road (if it may be called that) was scarcely more than a narrow trail, and varied in quality from poor to nonexistent. Those sections representing the former consisted of “dreadful, muddy clay,” and made a “squishy-squashy” sound beneath Dan's hooves as he struggled for footing. The latter were often knee-deep in water, or else obstructed by downed trees. Fording streams and detouring around deadfalls slowed Higinbotham's progress to a crawl, particularly when she was forced to dismount. Dan, a farm horse more accustomed to pulling the school's hack (carriage) than he was to carrying human passengers, made returning to the saddle an unpleasant experience. “When I'm trying to mount,” Higinbotham wrote of her equine companion, “[he] always stands at right angles to the stone I choose.”

After several frustrating hours, Higinbotham reached her destination: a diminutive, three-room cabin typical of the region. Wasting no time, she tied Dan to a fence, retrieved her medical bags, and hurried to make her presence known. The cabin's occupants—nine individuals in all, seven of whom were small children—greeted her in the typical mountaineer fashion: warm hellos all around, followed by a barrage of questions about the world beyond the Sugarlands. For a nurse as busy as Higinbotham, this Appalachian social ritual

could, at times, be frustrating. “The people weren't used to hurrying,” she wrote, adding that “it takes a long time of...waiting and general conversation to...get a history of the cases when making a visit.” But she endured it all patiently, knowing full-well that a successful visit depended, first and foremost, on winning the family's trust.

LEFT: Phyllis Higinbotham presides over a “well-baby” clinic at the Pi Beta Phi Settlement School.

RIGHT: Dr. John Massey, (second from the left), one of only two licensed doctors to hold regular office hours in Gatlinburg.



Her social obligations fulfilled, Higinbotham was at last permitted to examine her patient. Finding him “better and well on the road to recovery,” she did what she could to make him comfortable and then moved to take her leave. As she stood packing her bags, the boy's parents made a plaintive appeal that she spend the night at their home; visitors, after all, were as rare as wealth in the hardscrabble Sugarlands community, and something to be valued as among the finest things. Higinbotham, however, had to decline their generous offer. New patients, some of them in serious condition, would doubtless be awaiting her return to Gatlinburg. It was, therefore, of the utmost importance that she bid the family *adieu*, retrieve Dan from his makeshift hitching post, and begin the long ride home.

During her six-year tenure at the settlement school, Higinbotham made hundreds, if not thousands, of similar visits. Some of them, such as the one just discussed, were routine, while others brought her face-to-face with the grim realities of mountain life. On more than one occasion, Higinbotham stood vigil over a desperately ill infant, knowing full-well that the child's life depended on her skills as a medical professional. In such instances, she

LEFT: Gatlinburg's muddy main thoroughfare, the point from which Phyllis Higinbotham and Dan began their trek to the Sugarlands.

TOP RIGHT: “Dan,” the faithful Pi Phi steed, pulling a sled for settlement school handyman Harrison McCarter.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A typical Sugarlands home.





LEFT: Toothbrush drill

CENTER: "Granny Women" who attended the 1926 midwives' instructional clinic.

RIGHT: Higinbotham's efforts received a boost when, in 1922, the nursing program moved out of the Head Resident's office and into the Jennie Nichol Memorial Health Center.



had no choice but to discard the formal limitations of her position—particularly those that prohibited her acting without a doctor's orders—and attack the emergency head-on. Mostly, Higinbotham succeeded in saving her patients; but she did occasionally fail. There were, quite simply, too many patients, scattered over too-wide an area, for one nurse to handle alone.

Such work required extreme physical and mental fortitude, to say nothing of dedication to one's profession. Higinbotham possessed all of these qualities in abundance, making her an ideal candidate for the job. A Pi Beta Phi and native of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, Higinbotham was no stranger to hardship. In fact, her first practical nursing experience came during the First World War, when she served as an American military nurse in western France. During the year that she spent overseas, Higinbotham bore witness to one of the darkest chapters in human history; mangled soldiers and orphaned children greeted her at every turn, testing her mettle as a nurse and, at the same time, reinforcing her desire to help those in need. Imbued with a sense of duty, she returned to the United States, earned a masters degree in public nursing from Columbia University, and then traveled south to join her Pi Phi sisters in the valley of the Little Pigeon River.

And yet for all of her training and experience, it was Higinbotham's easygoing nature, and her willingness to work within the mountaineers' cultural context, that allowed her to succeed in Gatlinburg. At no point did she attempt to impose her will on her new neighbors, despite knowing that many of their practices—particularly their crowded living conditions, starch-heavy diets, and lack of pre- and post-natal care—were conducive to poor health. Instead, she "tried all along to let the people send for me," thereby allowing them to accept or refuse her services of their own free will.

There were, of course, mountaineers who resisted Higinbotham's efforts on their behalf. The aged, more so than the young, clung to traditional remedies, and

to them she was "neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring." Eventually, however, Higinbotham's "quiet, efficient way" swayed even her harshest critics, allowing her to win "the confidence of [the] people in every direction." Children lined up to receive checkups from "Miss Phyllis," and were "filled with importance" when she decorated their cuts and scrapes with shiny white bandages. New and expectant mothers, accustomed to seeking the advice of local "Granny Women" (midwives) on matters of child care, began attending "well-baby clinics" at the school. Given time, even the "Granny Women" came around. Following a 1926 midwives' instructional clinic, three attendees, all of them initially suspicious of Higinbotham and her motives, assured her that the clinic had been "well worth coming for."

As so often happens with talented, highly-motivated people, Higinbotham went on to bigger and better things. The State of Tennessee appointed her State Supervisor of Public Health Nurses in 1926, requiring her to leave Gatlinburg, her newfound friends, and her Pi Phi sisters behind. In the end, however, "Miss Phyllis's" legacy of friendship and faithful service lived on. Reminiscing in 2002 about her experiences as a settlement school pupil, ninety-three year-old Lucinda Oakley Ogle summed up her feelings about Higinbotham in one simple sentence: "Miss Phyllis...[was] a God-send for the mountain people."

Information for this article was borrowed from the March 1921, June 1922, and June 1923 editions of The Arrow of Pi Beta Phi, a quarterly publication of the Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women. This publication is part of the archive collection at Arroumont School of Arts and Crafts. Articles referenced here as well as many others are being digitized for inclusion in an online collection. Sample excerpts are available for viewing now at the project website: www.lib.utk.edu/arrowmont/.

New Staff for Arrowmont Project

Melanie Feltner-Reichert, Digital Coordinator, manages the digitization and cataloguing processes for the project, as well as the website. Melanie's education includes a B.A. in English, M.A. in Biblical Studies, and M.S. in Information Sciences. She is an active member of the Commission for Women at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and acts as a consultant in their planning and implementation of an organizational digital repository. Areas of professional interest include institutional repository development, open-access alternatives to traditional publishing, and cataloguing in the digital environment.

Research Coordinator **Steve Davis**, an M.A. student in United States History at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is in charge of selecting items for digitization, providing historical context for these items, and writing a series of essays aimed at telling the Pi Beta Phi to Arrowmont story. He is also working to complete a master's thesis, tentatively titled "This Cursed of All Countries': An Economic/Demographic History of Civil War-Era East Tennessee." When he is not working, Steve makes every effort to enjoy the scenic wonders of his adopted region. He is also an avid Civil War reenactor who regularly portrays a private soldier of the 7th Tennessee Cavalry.

Grant Funds Digitization of Archives

In the fall of 2004, the University of Tennessee Libraries in partnership with the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and the Pi Beta Phi Elementary School in Gatlinburg was awarded a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to digitize the archives at Arrowmont. The result of the two-year grant project will be a searchable Internet-based collection of digitized items accompanied by textual essays. Curriculum material for K-8 students will also be available via the website. Currently, Research Coordinator Steve Davis and Digital Coordinator Melanie Feltner-Reichert are hard at work selecting and digitizing items for the permanent collection. A sampling of these items, which includes scrapbooks, photographs, and copies of *The Arrow of Pi Beta Phi*, may be viewed online at www.lib.utk.edu/arrowmont/.

At the Ewing Gallery of Art & Architecture, June 17 - August 28

Trailblazers: Jim Thompson and Albert 'Dutch' Roth Photographs of the Early Years of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Preview Reception: 4-6 pm, Thursday, June 16

Gallery Hours: Tuesday-Friday: 11-4 Sunday: 1-4 (Closed July 3-10)

Directions & parking info: www.ewing-gallery.org



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