My Seven Years at the John C. Campbell Folk School
by John M. Ramsay

I lived at the John C. Campbell Folk School, starting in May,1966, a year as Associate Director and then six years as Director ending on May 23, 1973. This is the story of how I got there and how I left.

I had met Georg and Marguerite Bidstrup at the Mountain Folk Festivals at Berea College when I was a student member of the Berea College Country Dancers from 1947-52. Marguerite Butler had been cofounder of the John C. Campbell Folk School in 1925 and Georg Bidstrup came as a young man from Denmark to be farm manager of the School in 1926. They later married and became instrumental in establishing the "cooperative recreation movement" of which the Festival was a part. The Bidstrups led many of the dances at the Festival; Georg usually began the morning dance sessions with a Danish "singing game." He was calm, friendly and upbeat, and, being a Dane, was authentic. Marguerite who had learned English country dancing from Cecil Sharp was particular about certain qualities of good dancing. "Keep you feet close to the floor, you shouldn't be able to put a dime underfoot," she would say. I loved the dancing and didn't miss a single dance during the 16 hours on the floor during the long Festival weekend which began Thursday night and went through Saturday night. A skilled musician, Ruth White, provided wonderful music for the dances and singing, all sixteen hours, on a piano.

My dance teacher at Berea College was Frank (Francis Hartley) Smith, an Englishman who had met Marguerite Butler and Olive Dame Campbell at the International Peoples College in Helsinør, Denmark in 1923. These two ladies helped Frank and Leila Smith come to the United States a few years later. Frank spent some time at a new folk school in the Poconos, some time at the McCormick Academy in Burnsville, North Carolina, and a year in cooperative recreation work at the Campbell Folk School before coming to Berea. The Campbells, Bidstrups, and Smiths were active in the Council of Southern Mountain Workers, an organization started by John C Campbell to help strengthen the economic, social, and cultural life in the Southern Highlands. Cooperative recreation was seen as a vital element in this effort. In January, 1939, Olive Campbell wrote to President William J Hutchins of Berea College, "…a good hearty laugh together, playing together, creating together often accomplish comparatively easily what is almost impossible to accomplish through intellectual conviction." As the son of a labor leader, I could appreciate and dedicate myself to such a method of improving life.

I grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania during the Great Depression. My father worked for Bethlehem Steel for 16 years and knew the sterling character of working people. He also knew their plight in trying to provide for their families. Much of my dedication to improving life here on earth came from my father's example and is relevant to explaining how I got to the John C Campbell Folk School. Another dose of commitment also came from my mother's side; both she and her father were born at mission stations on the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua. They were Moravians and dedicated their lives to enhancing life for natives of that region. I fully expected to do my part when I grew up.

The strikes, soup lines, mounted police and their billy clubs, and the strife in the industrial city turned me toward rural life as experienced at Hidden Paradise, the farm near Macungie, Pennsylvania to which the ravages of malaria and tuberculosis had forced my maternal grandparents to retire. I majored in agriculture at Berea College and intended to become a teacher or agricultural missionary. The nutrient qualities and ecological advantages of producing milk satisfied my desire to serve in the betterment of human conditions.

Uncle Sam forced me to face some difficult issues before I was mature enough to understand them. But by the time I graduated from Berea College, I was certain that I could never be a part of military solutions to world problems. I spent eight years trying to convince my draft board of my sincerity in insisting on being classified as a conscientious objector to war. I was arrested for refusing induction into the armed services and, even though I took a semester of courses in the Kennedy School of Missions at Hartford Seminary Foundation, was not permitted to take an assignment overseas with the Methodist Church. I took a job as Dairy Manager and Agriculture Instructor at Warren Wilson Junior College in Swannanoa, North Carolina under the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. What a joy it was to find that Clothilde Deschamps Guisasola and her husband Julio led the students in English Country Dancing and took troupes to the Mountain Folk Festivals in Berea! Again, I found that dance played an important role in a vibrant community.

I married Winona Lotz while at Warren Wilson; we had met at Hartford Seminary. The life of a dairy manager at Warren Wilson was quite demanding. I was up to the challenge and so were the students on my dairy crew. The College was not so ready and when the Health Department was going to require us to build a new milkhouse, I could see that the dairy's days were numbered. Winona and I were learning that life does not always measure up to its potential and that people have differing points of view. She learned, from Barbara Geouge, a Warren Wilson student, about Celo Community, Incorporated, a utopian community where Barbara' family were members an hour's drive from Warren Wilson. Winona and I went up the mountain to the South Toe River Valley to meet Barbara's family. It seemed like the ideal place to raise a family.

We moved to Celo in 1955 and started a dairy farm. I took a job as the Dairy Herd Improvement Association Supervisor for most of the counties in western North Carolina to give us some income. When the travel costs in the mountains proved too much, I took a job as a teacher at Micaville School and and Winona worked as a bookkeeper. I taught public school for the next three years until the dairy was able to support us. Martin and Loren were born during this time. I was too busy to be active in causes beyond the Incorporated Community. Then, an early freeze killed my silage crop. TVA, for which I was a Demonstration Farmer, helped me out by finding smoke damaged citrus pulp as a supplement to my silage during the winter, but it was time to move on. We sold the herd and equipment and spent the summer free from daily farm chores for the first time in five years. We travelled the country looking at eleven universities where I could learn more about breeding superior dairy cows. I was offered an assistantship in dairy cattle breeding at Iowa State University. After one more year of teaching, this time at Swannanoa Elementary School, to assemble some cash we moved to Ames, Iowa the summer of 1961.

I was at Iowa State during the Viet Nam war, the Civil Rights movement, and other challenges to social systems. I took part in protests to the war, peace vigils, civil rights demonstrations, and marches to call attention to injustice and to the missile silos installed near Omaha, as well as pursuing what was known about breeding even better dairy cows. I was amazed to find an active and delightful country dance group on the Iowa State campus. I worked measuring and analyzing an experimental herd of twins, became the leader of the dance group, and the President of the Student Peace Union.

For several years, I had been invited to be on the staff of the Christmas Country Dance School in Berea. It was at Christmas School 1965 that Georg Bidstrup came to me and offered me the position of Dairy Manager at the John C Campbell Folk School. I was expecting to finish my Ph.D. in the spring and was looking for a job. I had visited the Folk School in 1956 to test the dairy herd. Production and barn conditions were miserably out of date. My experiences at Warren Wilson and Celo and the never-ending responsibilities of such a position did not interest me because I knew that other interests would be forced to take a back seat. Marguerite came to me the next morning and said, "Georg didn't explain our interest in you. We would like to consider you for Director of the Folk School. Come for a trial year as Associate Director." That was a different matter entirely! I would be able to combine my knowledge and experience in farming, my experience and love of country dancing, my belief in cooperative forms of recreation, and living with my dedication to enlightened educational programs.

I knew enough about rural people and Appalachia to know that my days as an "agitator," or activist would be replaced by a different sort of work. Rather than take on the whole world, I would focus on the local community and working with my neighbors. My experiences at Celo had prepared me for the kind of give and take required to slowly build something that all could support. Having fun and creating together, as Mrs. Campbell had written, were very important in this process.

I had a lot to learn from Georg and Marguerite that first year. I knew very little about Denmark, Grundtvig, or folk schools. But I learned to respect the School's history and influence in the region and then began the slow process of revisiting that past and revitalizing it. Change is exhilarating, but it is also resisted. For the most part, the staff gave generously of their experience, their energy, and their love. Everyone seemed to agree that our priority should be a winter folk school for young people, "like we had before the war."

My attempts to fund such a program or even the bare bones School budget met with disappointment. I spent time and money visiting potential sources in New York and Washington and finally zeroed in on the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation right there in North Carolina. Bill Archie, Executive Director of the Foundation, and I had a mutual friend, Michael Hoffman. After much urging, Archie finally made a flying visit to Brasstown, giving us only a few hours notice that he was coming. We quickly organized a program for him. He brought his wife and son. They were reluctant participants in the evening program, retired early and intended to leave right after breakfast—we had to have Alice come in to prepare breakfast and then rely on the goodness of neighbors to come in to talk about the School and its place in their lives. The School had nothing going on most of the year in those early days so it was quite an imposition in

the lives of everyone to accommodate the Archies. Archie was disinterested, insulted us and our neighbor Lynn Gault who was also a Board member, and left. I determined to stop running after grants and to stay on campus with my staff and earn our funds in other ways. We started slowly with a January program and gradually found ways to grow into a full program.

By 1966 we had succeeded in developing a boarding program for young people year round. Loren Kramer, hired as our Principal of the Winter School, I, and our students were excited about our experience together and were eager to report to the Board at their annual meeting on May 23, 1973.

Before we get into how I left the School, I need to pick up a different thread. When I came to the Folk School as Associate Director, the School provided my housing and a minimal salary with a promise to raise it. Money was tight. Each year, I gave the Board a balanced Budget; it did not include a raise because there wasn't any money. The Board expressed the opinion, each year, that I shouldn't spend my time as a fund raiser—that should be the Board's job. A few Board members made special contributions, but there was no fund raising campaign. My budgets were usually approved and I was given a pat on the back.

But one year I was told to buy a new tractor. Yes, we needed one— but where was the money to come from? My budget was unbalanced (this can be checked out by looking at the minutes, I'm sure).

Then, Ed Davis observed that I had served for 4-5 years without the promised pay raise and the Board, in executive session, voted to raise my salary. My budget was unbalanced again!

I was urged to modernize the dairy facility. I studied all sorts of low-cost ways to do this but they all required taking out a loan. I was not willing to do this. I didn't think that we should endanger the entire school by taking out a loan to build a dairy barn. Then I found that we could get a loan from the Production Credit Association using the CATTLE as collateral! If the dairy industry went into a slump, some disease wiped out our herd, or soy milk replaced cows' milk, the School would not be at risk and we would only lose the dairy herd. I presented this plan to the Board and they agreed. My plan factored in borrowing $60,000, an interest rate of 8%, and paying the loan off in five years. By 1973, net dairy income was ahead of schedule in paying off the loan and was actually contributing to general school revenues (these claims can also be substantiated by looking at the books).

I do not have copies of the minutes nor of the books and am unable to give dates when these events took place but the Board minutes and books will give the details. We did have cash flow problems and Blanche Smith, bookkeeper, had the unpleasant task of trying to pay some bills and hold off on others until anticipated funds came in. The endowment funds were mostly in stocks and bonds. This required periodic clipping of coupons and mailing them in for dividends. Marguerite kept a pair of tiny manicure scissors in the safe for this purpose.

Velma Beam Moore's stepson had taken a job as salesman for IDS, a mutual Fund. As President of the Folk School Board, Velma suggested that the School cash in its investments and put them

in a manage mutual fund. Funds had a history of realizing about 12% a year. The Board agreed to make the shift into mutual funds with opposition from Percy Ferebee, the local banker on the Board (he died soon after and did not leave anything of his $13 million estate to the John C Campbell Folk School). The plan was to divide the expected 12% interest, taking out 6% of the mutual funds for School operating expenses (instead of clipping coupons), and reinvesting the remaining 6% to increase the principal. Most of the endowment was put into the Puritan Fund and a smaller amount into IDS.

The following year the bottom fell out of the stock market. The Puritan Fund realized only 6% which we withdrew for operating expenses; but this left nothing for reinvesting. IDS realized 0%. Our 6% withdrawal from that Fund was eating up the capital! I met with the Executive Committee of the Board to discuss this situation. The Executive Committee: Wayne Holland, Hobart McKeever, and Blanche Smith, was given the responsibility for actions between Board meetings which were held only one day a year. The Executive Committee decided to use the IDS Funds to pay off the dairy loan on which we were paying 8% interest and to rely on the dairy to pay the School instead of PCA. These facts can be documented by the minutes if they have been carefully kept.

Rumors that the School endowment was used to pay for the new dairy barn ARE NOT TRUE. In fact, within another year or two the loan would have been paid off and the dairy would be making substantial contributions to School income.

In fact, the dairy was making its contribution to employing Blanche Smith as bookkeeper. The School had been given enough money by a local inventor/industrialist (can't recall his name but he invented a pipe bender) to hire a bookkeeper for the School (the amount was something like $5,000). We don't ordinarily pay salaries in advance so I invested the money by buying six cows from Berea College when it dispersed its herd. Stan Kramer, my dairy manager at the time, and I carefully computed how much we could pay for each cow and be certain of getting our money back with interest (after costs of feed, labor, and overhead) by the end of one year. Again, the dairy fulfilled its obligations. We were able to pay our bookkeeper each month with money from the milk sold from the Berea cows. And at the end of the year we still had the cows (plus their calves) and were able to hire the bookkeeper for each subsequent year.

It was a big shock to be called into the bookkeeper's office the morning of May 23, 1973 and to have the Executive Committee ask for my resignation! Hobart McKeever had typed out a letter of resignation . My last name was misspelled. He explained that there had been a caucus at Wayne Holland's house the night before. No reason for the resignation was offered. I objected and declared that they did not know what they were doing. The folk school students were completing their spring term, summer short courses were staffed and enrolled, many expectations were dependent upon my personal participation. The request for my immediate resignation was not withdrawn. I asked who would put the cows up when they got out over the weekend. The Committee said that they would be responsible for everything and still wanted my immediate resignation. I certainly did not want to be fired nor did I want to work for someone who did not want me. I signed the paper and went home stunned. I did not have a chance to meet with the

Board. Looking back, I realize that I should have insisted on meeting the entire Board, but instead I was in a state of shock!

It was a difficult weekend at home. Here we were living in School housing and were to be evicted. On Sunday, Lois Bacon, Olive Campbell's niece and a Board member came to our house and told us that we would have two months to vacate the house. There was no severance payment. Resignation had also been obtained from Loren Kramer. Our work at the School was summarily ended. There was no contact from other Board members and I do not know to this day what was behind the Board action.

My boys and I spent the next few days fiber-glassing a kayak/duckboat I had inherited. We dubbed it 23rd of May. Berea College quickly snapped me up and we moved to Berea to begin working for the College on August 1.

That is how I left the John C Campbell Folk School. Why I left is still unknown. I've heard rumors that I was sent packing because of my political views and that the School was "run by a bunch of hippies." I am not, was not, nor did I use my position as Director of the School to promote a hippy agenda. Of course, when we brought in youth they brought their 1960's concerns about "the establishment" with them. Lee Chaffee, a Dartmouth intern, told McKeever when McKeever quizzed him, during the 1972 Board meeting, what he thought about the Vietnam protests going on just then at Dartmouth that he felt he should be up there supporting the objections to the war. McKeever, a member of the Air Force Reserve and American Legion obviously did not like that answer. It should not have been a reflection on me. In fact, I was often in the position, as Director of the School, to give voice to establishment concerns as I counseled our students. I had to ask Jim Morrison, one of our first Dartmouth interns, to shave his beard and wear a tie to Murphy high school (he complied but not wholeheartedly, kept a mustache, and did not button the top button of his shirt under the tie). He did have sense enough to ask what I thought about discussing the movie <u>The Graduate</u> in his English class. I asked why <u>The Graduate</u>? He said most of the high students had already seen it. I advised caution and insisted that he get permission from the Principal if he decided to go ahead. He did get permission but it spawned raised eyebrows for the next year.

Another of our radical Dartmouth students, doing his practice teaching at the high school in Murphy, wanted to take on the Cherokee County School Board and schedule a debate about Vietnam in the high school. He was certain that the war was wrong. I asked him how he could be so certain; how did he know that there was no Communist threat, no domino theory. It was quite a surprise to him to hear me take such a position (and I was surprised at myself).

In upholding community mores, I had also asked one of our local students to tuck his shirttail in at the Saturday night community dance—but that is another story. We had two Jewish lads from Manhattan come to visit the School. They had black beards and New York accents. When they asked at a gas station in Andrews for directions to the Folk School, a rumor was fueled that the Folk School was attracting a bunch of Communists. I had the formidable job of guiding the School as it faced changing times. Perhaps I and Loren had to become the sacrificial lambs in the process.

Or did the Board not understand its own culpability in adding to the financial pinch? The winter boarding program was on the verge of paying its way. A bigger problem was the Board unbalancing my budgets during the last couple of years. Certainly, it was not right to blame the dairy for the financial problems.

I was left in the dark. Other people, also, could not understand the Board's precipitous action. We all try to shed light on the situation. But in making our guesses, it is important to get the facts, as far as we know them, straight. This paper is my attempt to put some light on that part of history.