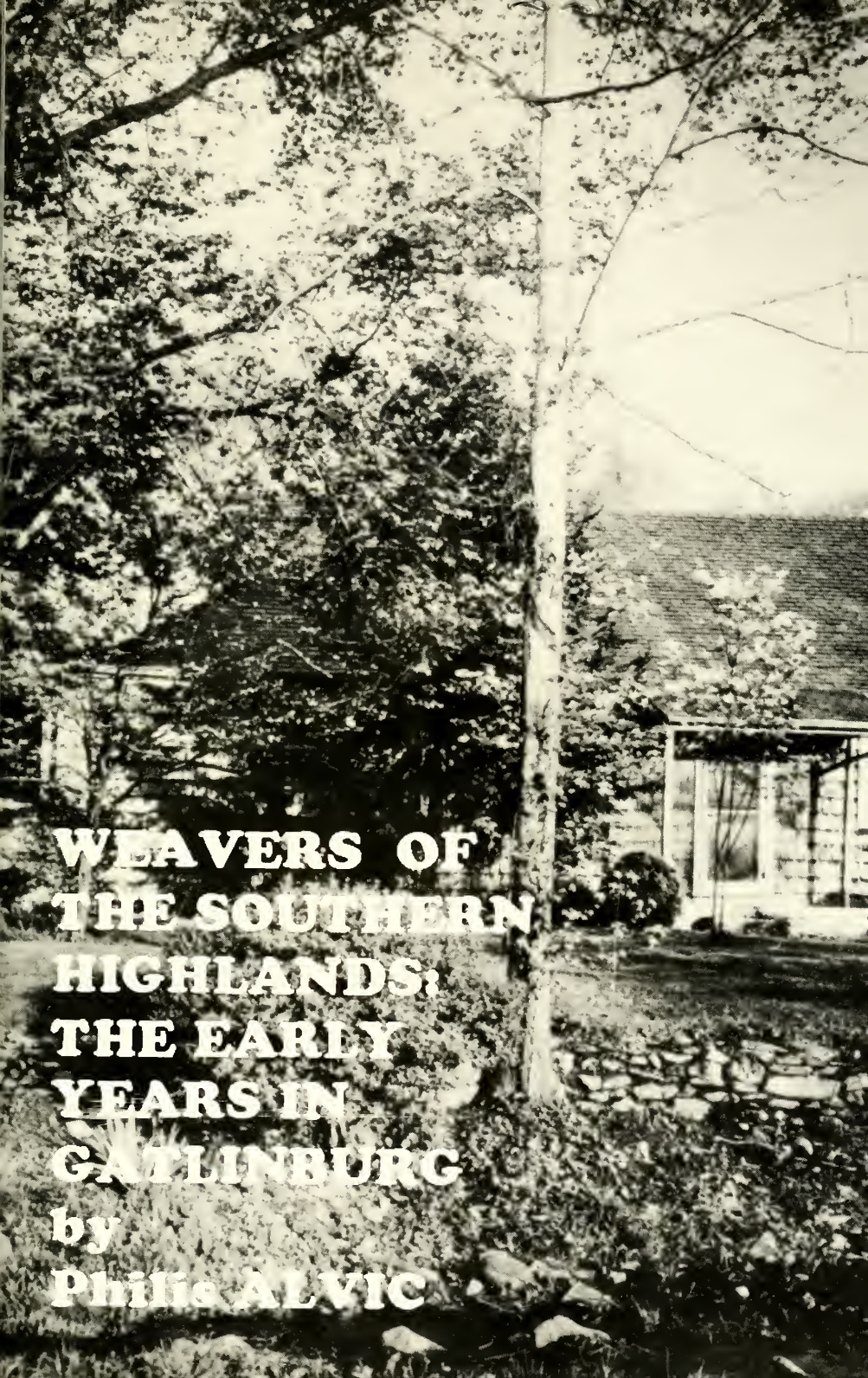

WEAVERS OF THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS: THE EARLY YEARS IN GATLINBURG

by

Phillis ALVIC

Weavers of the Southern Highlands: Early Years in Gatlinburg

- slide/tape presentation
- brochure
- display
- weaving demonstration

by Philis ALVIC
Artist/Writer

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The story of weaving in Gatlinburg in the early part of the 1900's has two major strands and is joined by a third thread toward the middle of the century. Weaving was a part of Pi Beta Phi Settlement school. And weaving was the major cottage industry promoted by the Arrowcraft Shop which was started by the school. Later, weaving was a significant part of the Summer Craft Workshop that grew into the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts .

The March, 1916, Arrow, the Pi Beta Phi newsletter, in an article about Gatlinburg observed, "in the 'yesteryears' this country was a community of weavers, but after the war, 'store cloth' was cheap so that one woman after another put the old loom aside." The passing of weaving skills from one generation to the next had not continued within families. The revival of handweaving came about because there was again a reason to weave. Household fabric needs could be met other ways and people were willing to pay for the products of the loom.

THE PI BETA PHI SCHOOL

In 1912 a school convened near the confluence of Baskins Creek and the Little Pigeon River in the small village of Gatlinburg, TN. The women of the Pi Beta Phi Fraternity had decided at their 1910 Convention in Swarthmore, PA, on an educational philanthropic project among 'mountain whites.' (Arrow, 1910) The Washington Alumnae Club had submitted a proposition that the school be initiated, and dedicated on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the fraternity in honor of their founders. The Pi Phis by starting a school joined the larger settlement school movement active in the southern Appalachian mountains. By 1920, religious denominations had established most of the over 150 social settlement schools within the highlands of eight southern

states.

In the summer of 1910 a committee of three women, Emma Turner, May Keller, and Anna Pettit, investigated sites for the school. The Grand President, May Lansfield Keller, went on alone to Gatlinburg, after the three had visited several eastern Tennessee communities. She reported back to the membership that this was the ideal situation. "Illiteracy is perhaps not so bad as represented, but the advantages for higher work are nil, and household economies, scientific farming, etc. are unknown quantities." (Arrow, January, 1911)

During this trip to the mountains, Anna Pettit stopped at Allanstand Cottage Industries near Asheville, NC. She was "amazed at the skill shown in weaving and basket work among the work for sale by the 'mountaineers.'" (Arrow, November, 1910) The seed was sown very early for wider work that might be done by the Pi Phis.

The objectives of the school, as stated by the settlement school committee, in a report to the greater Pi Beta Phi membership, were--

> "What we wish to do is to join in the effort to show them how to use their own resources, to develop industries suitable to their environment, and to lead more happy, healthful lives. We want to help, insofar as we can, to educate mountain boys and girls back to their homes instead of away from them. (Arrow, April, 1912)

Early on it was realized that helping the children also meant helping their families. Health needs and methods for families to earn a cash supplement to their subsistence farming became some of the major concerns. Within the first year of the school's operation, a part-time

nurse joined the staff. This service soon expanded into a full health clinic.

The economic problem did not present such a direct solution. In 1915 the head teacher Mary O. Pollard observed that "Many of the women make exquisite patchwork quilts, and some still make the hand woven coverlets and blankets. If a sale could be found for these articles, many might undertake the work." (Arrow, March, 1915) Within the year Caroline McKnight Hughes came to engage in 'business and industrial work.' She was typical of the teachers in that she was a Pi Phi and had received degrees from northern schools -- the University of Minnesota, Cooper-Union in New York City and teacher training from Prang Normal School.

Notice appeared in the Arrow of the first loom appearing at the school during 1915, with the prospect of three more looms to be donated by the Springfield, MO, Pi Phis. A 1916 profile of Hughes said she was "instrumental in reviving among the older women that almost forgotten art of spinning and weaving." (Arrow, March, 1916) To encourage interest in the craft, she organized a Spinning Bee with prizes.

A financial report of the time explained unanticipated expenses as the need to pay weavers and other 'industrial' workers for their products. The workers did not understand the concept of the school acting as an agent and consigning goods for later sale. Because they demanded immediate pay for work, the school, in fact, became their employer.

By the early twenties the school had grown from 14 pupils to over 130, with five teachers in attendance. The teachers were Pi Phis from all over the country who lived in the Teachers' Cottage on the school grounds. Some of the students also boarded at the school, in dormitories.

Caroline Hughes only supervised weaving for a couple of years. Other teachers also taught for short periods of time , with Mr. and Mrs. Norman Pickett

assuming 'industrial' duties for the longest stretch. By 1924 a former student, Allie Ownby, headed the weaving.

The Pi Phi Annual Report for 1924 contained the information that the Fireside Industries was paying for itself and suggested that new designs were needed for the weaving. Baskets were the most abundant and best sellers of the products offered, with chairs and stools also produced. The term "Fireside Industries" was a very popular term referring to several craft makers producing items in their own homes for cooperative sale.

The Pi Phis educated the children of the Gatlinburg area, with increasing state and county financial aid being infused, until the school system was entirely transferred to local control in 1966. At that time, the new elementary school was named the Pi Beta Phi School in appreciation of the work of the fraternity.

Even though the major thread of this tale will now pick up, it is important to remember that weaving did continue at the school. Upper elementary grades and some high school students took weaving. Sometimes Arrowcraft weaving supervisors taught the classes, but more frequently the responsibility was given to another teacher, often a former student.

ARROWCRAFT

Weaving in the Gatlinburg area entered a new phase in 1925 with the arrival of Winogene Redding from Wollaston, Massachusetts. Gene later described her first interview with Miss Evelyn Bishop, the school director.

> "She said I was to teach weaving. My next question was 'how and to whom,' and she left me to my own devices when she said I was to find my job and make it." (Arrow, September, 1945)

And, she did 'make it.' She rounded up about a dozen weavers almost immediately, and had them weaving her designs or new color combinations of patterns they had known. In less than a year, Redding had recruited 30 women to weave, had rejuvenated the school weaving program and had even inspired most of the teachers to take up weaving after their classroom duties were finished.

The Arrow Craft Shop became a separate entity in 1926, with its own space in Stuart Cottage on the school grounds. The name was drawn from the Pi Beta Phi arrow symbol. Previously, sales of items took place from the basement of one of the school buildings, while the storage and shipping happened in any available place. In the new shop, the furniture, baskets and woven goods were attractively displayed around a stone fireplace, or on an historic bed, or in other decorative arrangements. In May, the first month of operation, sales reached almost $1,000.00, about three times the amount recorded for the same month the previous year.

Winogene Redding established a way of working with weavers that has persisted with only slight revisions through the years and other supervisors. After she designed an item, the weaver learned it in her own home under Gene's direction. The first year of operation, Gene walked from one weaver's home to another, but she switched to horseback as more distant weavers became involved with the program. The school supplied materials that were later charged against the finished products. Furnishing good yarns was one of the methods of quality control. On the average, twice a month a weaver presented completed items to the supervisor to be checked for craftsmanship.

Handweaving is a slow process. Weaving is the interlacing of two elements; the warp, or vertical yarns are crossed at right angles by the weft or filler. Before the actual weaving can begin, the loom must be set up. The

Ainer Maples at the loom, while
Mary L. Ownby and Winogene Redding watch

first step in dressing the loom is to measure warp threads so they are all of equal length. At Arrowcraft this was done by winding the yarn around widely spaced pegs. Family members commonly helped each other wind warps. On the loom the yarn passes through a reed that spaces the yarn at a set number of threads per inch. The yarn then proceeds through a heddle on a pattern harness. When this mechanism is raised during the weaving process by different foot pedal or treadling sequences, different patterns are created. The warp is stored around a back beam on the loom and brought forward when needed. Since loom dressing is always a time consuming process, the Arrowcraft weavers put on very long warps of 80 to 120 yards. The preparation time was thus spread over many finished items. The weaver also usually did the hemming, knotting fringe or other construction required to make a finished article.

From its inception, the Arrow Craft Shop did not supply items for local consumption. Tourists were the walk-in purchasers. Pi Phi sales have also always been substantial. Fraternity members bought an array of products offered in the Arrow newsletter. And, Convention sales and organized sales events sponsored by Alumnae Clubs accounted for a significant volume. Also, in the mid-1930's, a catalog began to offer items to mail order customers. Because of this diverse clientele, many goods were woven that never would have appeared in a mountain cabin, such as place mats, or decorative guest towels. The designer attempted to supply items that would be attractive and useful to the women who purchased them.

For the most part, there was no need for a specific marketing strategy, because the items were well designed, of good quality materials, and carefully crafted. Products were not represented as authentic mountain crafts, but as produced by mountain people. Implied with a sale was the good a buyer was doing. As Gene Redding wrote, "We want those who buy our weaving to realize that they are not buying just an article, but that they are supplying some woman with contentment and perhaps food; they are helping us to work out an economic problem of widespread influence for progress; they are helping to keep the Arrow Craft Shop and the Weaving Department in the community..." (Arrow, May, 1928) This approach especially appealed to the Pi Phis who always felt great ownership for 'their' school.

By 1929, the shop found it necessary to operate year-round, and it moved into the original school cottage located near the intersection of Baskins Creek with the main road through town. The site proved an excellent location, and successive shop expansions have replaced the early building.

Big changes were in store for Gatlinburg when the idea of Great Smoky Mountains National Park became a

reality. By the late twenties a highway connected Gatlinburg to Knoxville. Land was bought and people were moved out of the Park area. A branch of the Pi Beta Phi School at Sugarlands (now the site of a National Park Visitor's Center) was forced to close. In the early Depression years, local men worked on a rotating basis, developing roads and trails within the Park. The town was hardly ready for the thousands and eventually millions of tourists that stopped in Gatlinburg on their way to the Smoky Mountains National Park. After many years of development, the Park was dedicated by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944.

The Mountain View Hotel received a new addition in preparation for the expected visitors, which included a branch of the Arrowcraft Shop. Like the Baskins Creek shop, this location also had a loom in the display area. Since most people have only scant knowledge of how cloth is made, the loom served as an educational tool. Besides satisfying the curious, the description of the complex process of setting up the loom and weaving the fabric helped to explain the higher cost of the hand produced work.

Who were the weavers of Arrowcraft? Looking down earnings lists, they are women with the names of Clabo, Carver, Husky, Maples, McCarter, Ogle, Ownby, Reagan, and Watson -- Gatlinburg names. Less common names appear, too. But, since most of these would have been married names, exact family lines cannot be drawn. Gene Redding is reported to have said that she couldn't say anything about anybody, because everyone was kin.

A summary in 1945 showed 242 different women weaving for Arrowcraft within the ten previous years. The Bureau of the Census listed the population of Gatlinburg at 75 in 1930, with growth to 1300 by 1940. The relocation of families out of the National Park area caused the rapid increase. The 1950 census data shows only one person added, to make 1301.

Winogene Redding picking up finished work from weavers, Mary L. Ownby and Cora Morton

Even given that many of the weavers lived outside the boundaries of the town, this was still a remarkable number of women weaving within a small area. With the increase in tourists brought by the Park, other establishments in Gatlinburg also sold handweaving. Allen Eaton, in his 1937 book Handicrafts of The Southern Highlands, remarks on the other concerns in the area. "Among these outlets for weaving in Gatlinburg at this time are Mary F. Ogle, Wiley's Shop, Smoky Mountain Handicrafts, M & O Tea Room, Bearskin Craft Shop, Mrs. Amos Trentham, and the LeConte Craft Shop." Almost all of these other weavers can be assumed to have received training from Arrowcraft or the Pi Phi school.

During those years from 1935 to 1945, 104 babies were born to Arrowcraft weavers. In a ledger denoting wages from that time, often "baby" was written as explanation for a low yearly gross. A rule restricted women from weaving within two months of the birth and extending to two months after. During the first 20 years of Arrowcraft, mothers with children at home formed most of the workforce. As Arrowcraft grew older, so did the average age of their weavers. Two and sometimes even three generations of the same family wove for Arrowcraft.

When queried about their reason for weaving, the women always answered that it was a way for them to make money. A 1928 article by Redding reported on how some of those extra funds were put to use...

> "We have noticed in the past two years that the children from these homes come to school better dressed; the homes are gradually becoming better furnished, especially in the matter of Victrolas; the women themselves wear winter coats instead of their sweaters; they have more pleasure than ever before because they now

have money for an occasional trip to Sevierville and Knoxville. " (Arrow, May, 1928)

During those major years of production, 1935-1945, there never were less than 90 weavers on the rolls. The total earnings indicate rather modest yearly totals for each weaver. In all of those years, half of the weavers made below $150.00, with only a relatively small few getting above $300.00 a year. Of course, it should be remembered that this was a part-time job, and a part-of-the-year activity for almost all of them. Roughly half of the weavers worked six months or less with only very few getting a check in all of the 12 months.

In the mid forties, the federal government requested Arrowcraft to prove compliance with hourly minimum wage laws. In 1946 and 1947, a major study recorded warp preparation, actual weaving time and finishing, in order to calculate an hourly figure. Most weavers in the sample group of 40 were found to earn between 45 and 50 cents an hour. At this time, the minimum hourly wage was 40 cents an hour. Of course, the speed of the individual weaver was the principle factor. Cora Morton made 42 cents an hour producing the Whig Rose mats, while her daughter Jane could produce them at a rate of 46 cents.

Another advantage of weaving was that women could stay at home with their children. They enjoyed the flexibility of deciding their own work schedule. And, among those that have continued on with it, they say that they would not like the idea of having a boss. They do not want someone standing directly over them telling them what to do.

What were all those weavers weaving? In 1945 Gene Redding wrote that she had "designed 246 different woven articles in hundreds of colors" within the past ten years. (Arrow, September, 1945) Not all of these items

were available at one time. New articles were constantly being added, while the less popular ones were dropped.

In production were aprons, bags, bibs, baby blankets, bed jackets, bath mats, neckties, pillows, place mats (most with matching napkins), pot holders, scarves, shawls, and guest towels. Within each item category many separate designs and color variations appeared. In the nine years from 1936 to 1944, five different baby bibs were woven while place mats were offered in 17 choices. During those nine years, 13,580 baby bibs were produced. For the same time period, the number of place mats woven in the ever popular Whig Rose pattern came to 16,332. In contrast to the staggering production numbers for small items were the 207 coverlets. Considering that coverlets resided at the high end in time, materials and final cost, this number, too, was substantial.

A pricing sheet from 1946 gives the sales price of the fringed Whig Rose Mat as $1.25. The materials costs were $.18 and the weaver received $.38. At this time, a bib sold for $.75, with the weaver getting $.35 and using only $.05 worth of yarn. A coverlet which brought $40.00 at final sale, used $10.25 in materials, with $12.00 going to the weaver. Most of the prices listed were about double the sum of materials and labor costs. This at first seems standard, and would be if only shop overhead and profit came out of the remaining half of the retail price. Actually, the budget for the designer, her staff and their expenses should have been calculated in as part of the production costs, before that number was doubled to determine the sales figure.

By the fall of 1932 monthly weavers' meetings became officially organized under the name of the Gatlinburg Weavers Guild. Besides the central programs, meetings were very social get-togethers, with shaped-note singing and refreshments. Speakers presented programs on gardening, household management, subjects relating to the growth of the area, and, of course, weaving-related

topics. A major incentive to attend the meetings was that the weavers received checks for their month's work. The Weavers Guild and the school P.T.A. were the only two organized groups in town. "Civic improvements will be a big issue locally in the next few years, and here are two groups of women beginning to realize that they can do things," Redding observed. (Arrow, May, 1933)

In 1937 the Weavers Guild started the Garden Club. Also, by the late thirties the women were writing and producing plays for the summer tourists. The play "Store Britches" had a 17 performance season in 1941. Lula Mae Ogle wrote this story of life in the mountains. As an Arrowcraft coverlet weaver, she carried on the tradition of her mother, which probably went back many generations. The weavers used the profits from these ventures to maintain an emergency fund and to finance trips for the group.

Over the years a total of seven weaving supervisors have worked for Arrowcraft. The most important in establishing an identity and charting a course for the weaving department was Winogene Redding. She spent over 20 years in the position, in three stints. Meta Shattschneider took over in the mid 40's and stayed for three years in the highest production period. Tina McMoran arrived in Gatlinburg in the fall of 1948 and presided over a time of decreased activity for the next 10 years. Winogene returned for her final tenure of 4 years and was followed by two other supervisors that stayed only a year each. In the mid 60's Nella Hill assumed the head of the weaving department. A graduate of the Pi Beta Phi School in Gatlinburg, she worked for Arrowcraft in several capacities before taking over as designer. Nella's mother was an Arrowcraft weaver, and five of her seven sisters have also worked for Arrowcraft.

Definite downsizing of the weaving department began under Tina McMorran. Her annual report for 1949-50 states: "Following instructions from Committee, after the last annual meeting, our department has operated on a

Winogene Redding, the Arrowcraft weaving supervisor for 20 years

greatly reduced budget, which I hope is showing the desired results." The cost control measures she employed included decreasing the number of weavers, lowering inventory and designing items that consumed yarns already on hand. Sales could not keep pace with production capacity.

During her last residence, Gene Redding increased both the numbers of weavers and articles woven. The next two supervisors also had problems resulting from low sales and decreased budgets. In her only year end report in 1965, Bess L. Mottern observed "Arrowcraft has not kept up with the times. Your survival depends on immediate change, as the craft business is a highly competitive business." She complained of a lack of freedom in designing and also questioned the wisdom of producing small inexpensive items rather than expanding into the higher end market.

Arrowcraft has maintained integrity as a shop selling fine handcrafted work when almost all of downtown Gatlinburg has descended to offering mediocre tourist fare. A wide variety of crafts from throughout the Southeast graces the display area alongside the weaving. Under the direction of Nella Hill, the weaving continues as the only production actually supervised by Arrowcraft. Baby bibs, pot holders, pillows, bags, aprons, afghans, stoles, scarves, guest towels, napkins and place mats still persist as the weaving staples. Designs, patterns and colors continue to change, but remain within the quality craftsmanship standards that have made Arrowcraft's name.

In the early part of the century other settlement schools in the mountains developed crafts for the same reasons as the Pi Phis. As their operations grew, they felt the need to cooperate. Arrowcraft signed on as a charter member of the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild at its organizational meeting in December of 1929. This federation of craft co-operatives (plus a few individual

craft producers) joined together to address common problems, seek broader markets, and exhibit crafts. With this affiliation, wholesale marketing became a new venture for Arrowcraft through the Allanstand Guild shop. In 1932, Miss Frances Goodrich transferred ownership of the Allanstand Cottage Industries at Asheville to the Guild. In 1935, under the sponsorship of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the formation of another organization took place, with the very similar name of Southern Highlanders, Inc. (Eventually these two organizations merged.) Arrowcraft bought shares in this new corporation, which entitled it to place products in their sales outlets. The construction site of the Norris Dam in Tennessee became the location of their first shop. A short-lived venture near Chattanooga and a more successful shop in Rockerfeller Center in New York City followed.

On July 26, 1948 the Southern Highland Guild opened the first Craftsman's Fair. The event took place in tents erected on the grounds of the Pi Beta Phi School. Gatlinburg became a regular site for the fair, which later moved to an inside space.

ARROWMONT

In 1945 the University of Tennessee offered the Summer Craft Workshop in Gatlinburg with the co-operation of the Pi Beta Phi School. The workshops took place in the school's facilities, with most of the craft equipment transported from the University of Tennessee campus in Knoxville.

Weaving occupied a major place in the course lists during the early years of the Summer Craft Workshop. The schedule offered several weaving classes divided among two instructors. Besides weaving, Textile Decoration, Recreational Crafts and Metals were among

the earliest classes available, with Craft Design, Pottery, Enameling and Art Related to the Home added slightly later. The summer school invited faculty from all over the country to teach in Gatlinburg. Among those who taught weaving was Berta Frey, well known for her articles

The weaving class at the first Summer Craft Workshop in 1945

and books on pattern weaving. Allen Eaton, who worked for the Russell Sage Foundation and wrote "Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands" was an instructor during the summers of 1947 through 1950. His course description read:

> Craft Design -- Analysis of the craft field; historic background; social and economic implications; present day factors influencing design, techniques and productivity.

Enrollment hovered around 75 students during the late 40's and the 50's. Usually about half of the students took classes for graduate credit. This tends to confirm reports that the majority of students were teachers. These students came from at least 25 states with one or two other countries represented. In the 60's the pupil population increased to near 100. In the '70's the class format changed to one and two week sessions, with the total student enrollment figures starting in the 300's and growing to the mid 600's. The new facilities, no doubt, also accounted for the dramatic increase. The school continued to attract students from a wide geographic area.

By the early 1960's Sevier County had almost taken over complete responsibility for elementary and high school education, and the Pi Phis were seeking a new mission for their facilities at Gatlinburg. Because of the success of the Summer Craft Workshop under the direction of University of Tennessee professor Marian Heard and the real need for quality instruction in crafts, the Fraternity decided on expansion of the craft program.

The Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts really took on its individual character after Pi Beta Phi headed a successful campaign to provide a major studio building. In designing the structure the architect, Hubert Bebb took into consideration the specific needs and usage of the space. The functional and tasteful building includes customized art studios, an auditorium, a central art gallery, a book and supply store, and the administrative offices. The library resource center has been named to honor Marian Heard, who served as director through the major development years. The Arrowmont program has continued to grow under the leadership of Sandra Blain. She moved from the position of Assistant Director to Director in 1979.

Although Arrowmont and Arrowcraft operate under separate Boards and are managed by separate directors, the profits of the shop benefit the school

program. Throughout the history of the school, the Pi Beta Phi Fraternity has provided concerned guidance in meeting the needs that they perceived. The central organization has given generous support, while individually Pi Phis contributed to their Fraternity's philanthropy by buying from Arrowcraft.

The early Pi Phis came to the mountains of eastern Tennessee as teachers. Even though their principle mission was to the children, they recognized the needs of the family. Arrowcraft provided the women with a way to make money. Weaving allowed them to earn while still leaving them in control of their own schedules and permitting them to stay in their own homes while doing it. When the Summer Craft Workshop grew into Arrowmont, weaving continued as a major program component. Arrowcraft and Arrowmont both carry on the tradition of weaving in Gatlinburg.

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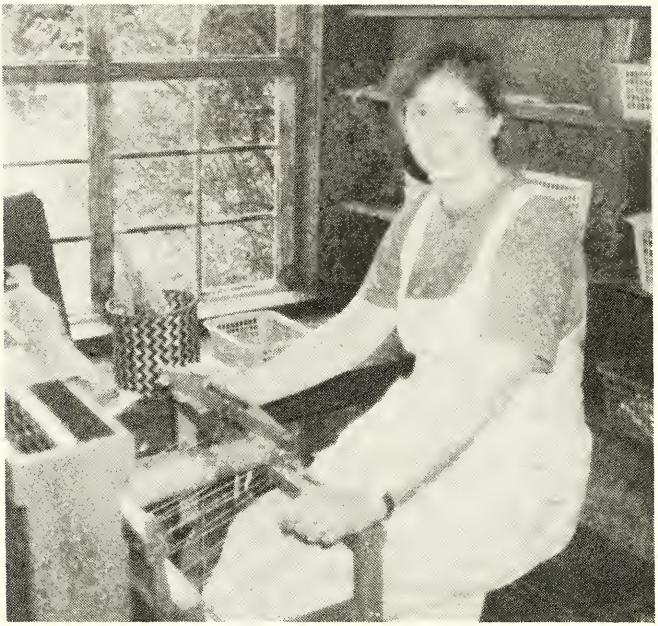

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Philis Alvic is an artist/weaver and writer who maintains a studio in Murray, KY. Her loom-controlled, brightly colored textiles have been shown in juried, invitational and solo exhibitions throughout the country. She shares her skills and artistic perspective through workshops and magazine articles. Her degree in Art Education was conferred by The School of The Art Institute of Chicago and she has earned the Certificate of Excellence from the Hand-weavers Guild of America.

With the development of the program "Mary Hambidge: Weaver of Rabun" in 1989 she began the production of a series of programs and materials documenting weaving in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

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