NEWS LETTER
APPALACHIAN CENTER
BEREA COLLEGE

Loyal Jones – Thomas Parrish, Co-Editors Vol. 20 No. 4 Fall 1991

Looking Forward

January 7, 14, 21 and 28: Would you believe it? In just four evening classes, the John C. Campbell Folk School will teach you to be a jitterbug. These evening sessions will feature big-band music and early rock 'n' roll; 1940s and '50s dance styles, says the school are "enjoying a revival of popularity around the country." The school's address is Brasstown, N.C. 28902.

January 26-February 15: New Opportunity School for Women, Berea College. This popular program is now appearing in a winter as well as a summer version; successful applicants spend three weeks learning about jobs and how to get them. For information about future sessions, contact Jane Stephenson, C.P.O. Box 2276, Berea, Ky. 40404; phone, 606/986-9341, ext. 6676.

March 1-6: Workshops in blacksmithing, enameling, Indian-twine basketry, knitting, quilting, woodcarving and woodworking; John C. Campbell Folk School.

March 20-22: Appalachian Studies Association annual conference, Asheville, N.C. This year's theme: "Diversity in Appalachia: Images and Realities." The deadline for submission of papers has passed, except that students have until January 31. For information about any aspect of the conference, get in touch with Tyler Blethen, Mountain Heritage Center, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, N.C. 28723; phone, 704/227-7397.

April 9-11: New River Symposium, sponsored by the New River Gorge National River and the West Virginia Department of Culture and History, with discussions of all kinds of subjects having to do with this unique river and its valley–natural history, folklore, archaeology, geography and so forth. But the timing is tentative; for up-to-date information, call park headquarters–304/465-0508. If the meeting takes place as scheduled, it will be held at the Beckley (W.Va.) Hilton.

British Owners: F

Do British owners care what happens to American coal miners?

Apparently not. Last year British Petroleum (best known for its "BP" gas stations) had the worst safety record among the top U.S. 25 underground coal producers, with 10.2 miners out of every 100 suffering injury–a figure 2.5 times the national average. BP operates mines in West Virginia, Indiana and Illinois.

Second place was held by another British company, the Costain Group, which posted an accident rate of 7.6, almost twice the national average. Still another British firm, doing business as Peabody Coal Co., ranked seventh.

The trend is particularly disturbing since these three are the only British-based companies among the top 25. Is anybody in London listening? Apparently not. But "with assets of nearly $20 billion," says J. Davitt McAteer of the Occupational Safety and Health Law Center in Washing-

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Berea College Public Relations

CELEBRATION OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC: Whitey and Hogan and the Briarhoppers (from Charlotte, N.C.) were among the stars appearing in the 1991 Celebration, held in Berea in October

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ton, "BP could afford to spend more on protecting its miners than it has in the past. This company would not be allowed to operate with such disregard for its employees' safety at home in England."

Interestingly, the 25 leading companies produced about 57 percent of all the underground coal mined last year but accounted for only 22 percent of the fatal accidents (10 of 45). The best record overall was posted by American Electric Power, with no fatalities and a 1.5 accident rate.

Water, Air: Toxic

Tennesseeans are still reeling from the impact of an environmental report published by the Institute for Southern Studies. Among the undesirable distinctions detailed by the study:

Tennessee ranks first in the nation in the amount of toxic chemicals released into ground and surface water.

The state ranks second with respect to industrial toxic chemicals pumped into the air.

It ranks fourth in general water pollution.

The overall report card puts Tennessee 45th for environmental quality and policies.

Besides all this, Appalachian Tennessee, like Eastern Kentucky and other mountain areas, seems specially inviting to entrepreneurs of solid-waste landfills and hazardous-waste dumps. As you might expect, local people have banded together to resist these pressures. A group you may wish to know about is Save Our Cumberland Mountains, P.O. Box 457, Jacksboro, Tenn. 37757.

Higher Education–Then and Now

In 1960, Southern Appalachia had only 74 institutions of higher education–50 four-year colleges, 24 two-year colleges. Only 4.5 percent of the adult population could claim any education beyond high school; the median educational level for all adults was only 7.2 years.

By 1974 the number of postsecondary institutions had increased to 161; the percentage of the adult population with some college education had increased to 5.1 percent.

By 1989, largely as the result of the boom in community colleges, the number of postsecondary institutions in Southern Appalachia had grown to 276, with commensurate increases in enrollments. Data from the 1990 census (not yet available) should reflect growth at every educational level.

–Figures from remarks by Ronald D Eller, director of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center, at the November conference on higher education in Appalachia

Low Skills, Low Wages

Along with the rest of the United States, Appalachia currently faces a basic economic choice: high skills or low wages? A recent report of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce suggests ways to confront the problem.

The central difficulty, says the report, is that the U.S. has attempted to compete internationally on the basis of low skills and low wages whereas foreign competitors have tended to go the opposite way–to build economies based on high skills and high wages. (No names, please.) These countries start workers off with sound fundamental training and then continue to upgrade skills. American firms, on the other hand, have been slow to train their workers initially and to put money into continuing training.

What to do? The commission's recommendations cannot be called modest. We should 1) create a new standard of educational performance equal to the highest in the world; 2) create new learning environments that will attract (or "recover") virtually all dropouts; 3) "professionalize" noncollege occupations through comprehensive training and certification programs; 4) give employers incentives to invest in continuing training and to make use of the skills produced by the training; 5) create local employment and training boards to integrate this new system.

The complete report, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* is available from the above-named commission at the National Center on Education and the Economy, 39 State Street, Suite 500, Rochester, N.Y. 14614.

Price Hill Wish List

Cincinnati's Lower Price Hill Community School, the locally based educational center of an extended mountain migrant neighborhood (see APPALACHIAN CENTER NEWSLETTER, Spring 1991), is now well into its 20th year of service. But the school still has a wish list of items that could help make its work more effective.

The list includes, notably, people (volunteers to teach, to counsel with students and to produce a newsletter); furniture (tables, chairs, lamp); a vacuum cleaner; magazines (either subscriptions or your used copies); wooden blocks and children's books for the baby room (a feature of the school that enables mothers to attend); and, of course, money–for textbooks, for bus cards and for food and coffee. As the school says, "Having coffee available to welcome students is important." So, we might add, is the work of the school itself. We think you would have to look hard to find a better cause.

"My son had enrolled in the school to finish his education," said one woman. "So in late winter, I enrolled in the same school." A cashier by trade, she somehow "knew there was more to life than that." Now, with her GED in hand, she intends to get a college degree. The Lower Price Hill staff, she says, is made up of the "most caring, helpful and friendly people I know."

The address: Lower Price Hill Community School, Inc., 2104 St. Michael St., Cincinnati, Ohio 45204.

Bert T. Combs

1911-1991

Berea College Public Relations

At a meeting earlier this fall, Bert Combs (l.) talked with Berea President John B. Stephenson

It has long been said that in Kentucky there's nothing more "ex" than an ex-governor. Constitutionally forbidden to run for immediate reelection, governors have with rare exceptions failed ever to return to the executive mansion in Frankfort. Bert Combs, whose term as governor ended almost three decades ago, was among those who tried to make it back and didn't succeed, but, remarkably, he exerted as much influence over life in the Commonwealth in recent years as he did while in office. That was because he crafted the lawsuit that in 1989 led to the overthrow of Kentucky's public school system and in the following year to the passage of the revolutionary Kentucky Education Reform Act, based on the idea that the state owes all children, rich and poor, Bluegrass and mountain, the same chance for a good education. "It was," said one observer, "the kind of bold maneuver that marked his political career."

Combs took on the case of 66 "property-poor" school districts in 1985 and, associates said, devoted hundreds of hours to it while asking for no compensation. "So many people, after they have served in public office and have been widely praised, just sort of rest on their laurels and enjoy life without making much of a contribution," said an official who served during Combs's gubernatorial administration. "Bert was not like that."

So it was with shock and grief that on December 4 Kentuckians across the state learned of the former governor's death. Combs, who divided his time between a Lexington town house and a cabin in Eastern Kentucky, was on his way to his mountain home when his car was caught in the swirling waters of the flooding Red River, which swept the car downstream. Combs managed to get out but was overpowered by the current.

"He didn't seem concerned about getting home or about how high the water was," one friend reported. A neighbor said that even though crews post signs when the road is flooded, Combs would "always want to cross it anyway." Thus his death, though utterly unexpected, was in some ways in character. He was not known for giving in to opponents of any kind.

The only governor from Appalachian Kentucky in the past 60 years, Combs died almost in the shadow of the Mountain Parkway, the superhighway, built during his administration, which opened up much of Eastern Kentucky. One of Combs's mountain neighbors said that the former governor "done more for Eastern Kentucky than any man in history when he opened up the Mountain Parkway."

But, playing no favorites, Combs also pushed through a parkway for the flatlands in the western part of the state. Actually, roads constituted only a small part of his legacy to his fellow Kentuckians. Taking office in 1959 as a small-town, Trumanesque figure from whom little was expected, Combs presided over the adoption of a sales tax that produced hundreds of millions of dollars for education–a life-long passion inspired by his school-teacher mother and by the inadequacies he found in his own education in the mountains. The money went for teachers' salaries, for classrooms, for community colleges and vocational schools, and for enlarging what became the state's university system.

"Restrained Revolution"

Combs took a strong lead in other areas as well, promoting economic development, enlarging the state park system, establishing a human-rights commission and pushing through a law creating Kentucky's first merit system for state employees. He warred against highway billboards and junk-car graveyards. After he had been in office for just a year, a Louisville reporter marveled at the "restrained revolution" wrought by the low-key, seemingly ill-prepared man from the mountains. In later years Combs was often spoken of as the person "most responsible for bringing Kentucky into the 20th century."

He had special meaning for Appalachian Kentucky,

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because of the leadership he had exerted in the formation of the Appalachian Regional Commission and also because of the personal example he set of an Appalachian political figure who could make government work. "He continued to be a symbolic leader in Eastern Kentucky," said Ron Eller, director of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center. "Younger political leaders in the region very much are patterning themselves after Governor Combs."

Combs's death evoked tributes of unusual strength and impressive sincerity from a variety of Kentuckians. But the governor himself had once summed up his career with definitive and characteristic simplicity when he said that holding public office means that "you can do interesting things and help people at the same time." Years earlier he had said, "I would like to leave some footprints, so that people will know I was here."

He did, and we do.

EYE on Publications

Shades of Gray, by John Egerton (Louisiana State University Press). In 1974 the people of Charleston, W.Va., and its surrounding county became involved in an emotional–and sometimes violent–struggle over an issue that many outside observers found trivial and even laughable: What kind of material should public school textbooks contain? What kind of material ought to be ruled out?

Stereotypers in the media and on the sidelines saw this battle of the books as a conflict between book-burners and defenders of academic freedom, fundamentalists and atheists, hillbillies and city slickers, since those who objected to some of the material in a group of "language arts" books complained that these books offered the students material that was disrespectful of authority and religion, destructive of social and cultural values, unpatriotic and obscene.

Writing in 1975, John Egerton rejected any simplistic view of this battle in Kanawha County. It was not, he said, a "civil Super Bowl" that would produce a clear-cut victor but something different and much more important–a class, cultural and religious war with power and authority as the prizes, sundering a "peaceful community into rigid and fearful factions."

You don't have to read very far in this collection of Egerton's writings from the past 20-odd years to realize that you're in good and honest hands; you'll be given as clear a view as possible of the situation under discussion; truth will not be twisted to fit into ideologically predetermined categories. In the Kanawha County article (one of 13 long pieces making up the book), the author looks at the ideas and emotions of all the parties in the conflict and certainly sees the plight of the public schools. "Lacking any coherent theory of what they should be doing or how it should be done," he says, the schools "have been unable to resist the steadily increasing demands made on them." In the process, they have "spread themselves too thin and invited the wrath of those they are unable to serve effectively."

But, Egerton concludes, education is indeed too important to be left to the educators. Though something of a truce was patched up in Charleston, the cleavage there and everywhere else remains between experts and bureaucrats, on the one hand, and, on the other, "multitudes of culturally diverse and pluralistic people."

Overall, Egerton sees his subject, an evolving South, as a story to be told not in bold black and white but in subtle shades of gray. Besides his Kanawha County essay, Appalachian readers will probably find the "King Coal Good Times Blues" of special interest. But you certainly wouldn't want to stop reading there.

Published by
Appalachian Center/Berea College
C.P.O. Box 2336
Berea, Ky. 40404

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Berea, Ky. 40404
Permit No. 19