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Sustaining the Movement: Community Care and Collaboration at the Highlander Nursery School, 1938-1953

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Abstract

The Highlander Nursery School, run by the Highlander Folk School from 1938 to 1953, provided no-cost early care and learning to the white working-class children of Summerfield, Tennessee. While Highlander is best known as a democratic education and movement-building hub that builds adults' capacity to shape labor and racial justice in their communities, it has also facilitated programs for young people, including a nursery school. The Highlander Nursery School functioned as a cooperative institution that relied on the material and conceptual support of local residents, serving as a depoliticized entry point for families who might otherwise have been antagonistic toward Highlander's pro-union and pro-civil rights agenda. This article aims to understand how the complexity of Highlander's political vision for grassroots leadership, cooperation, and radical social change was expressed in and through the nursery school, an institution that teachers, local children, and their families worked together to sustain.

Keywords: early childhood education; nursery schools; social movement education; Appalachia; community education

“How many times have you said, ‘If children could have the chance to learn the good things about union people, they wouldn’t grow up to be scabs?’”¹ So begins a fundraising letter to local union chapters by the Highlander Nursery School, which, between 1938 and 1953, provided no-cost care and learning for the young children of the white unemployed and working-class people in the small Appalachian community of Summerfield, Tennessee. The nursery was a project of the Highlander Folk School, a political education and movement-building hub that has organized thousands of workers, union leaders, and civil rights movement workers since its founding

¹Joanna Willmetz, Fundraising letter template for nursery school, 1951, Highlander Research and Education Center Records, 1917-2017 (hereafter HREC), box 65, folder 11, microfilm reel 31, frame 792, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter WHS), Madison, WI.

in 1932.² While provocative, the political thrust of this fundraising appeal was not common in how the Highlander Nursery School defined itself publicly. Unlike other child and youth programs throughout Highlander's ninety-two-year (and counting) history, the nursery school was positioned much more subtly. It functioned, in part, as a community- and capacity-building institution that enabled Highlander to do its other transformative, overtly political work. Highlander staff saw the nursery school as an opportunity to build trust with the surrounding community while helping children develop the collaborative spirit and way of being that would be useful for future changemaking.

During this article's period of study, 1938-1953, Highlander established itself as a household name in the southern labor movement and began broadening its education and advocacy to engage more communities across the South, refine a political analysis that centered both race and class, and support capacity-building for the burgeoning civil rights movement. An inaugural fundraising letter called for "the organization of a Southern Mountain School for the training of labor leaders in the southern industrial areas." The letter articulated a charge that would motivate Highlander's early work: to "train radical labor leaders who will understand the need of both political and union strategy" and "use education as one of the instruments for bringing about a new social order."³ By the time the nursery school opened in 1938, Highlander had organized local Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers into unions, supported striking coal miners in Tennessee through education and mutual aid, and organized the Cumberland Mountain Workers' League with woodcutters in Summerfield who were on strike over poor wages and lack of union recognition.⁴ By 1939, Highlander had served nearly seven thousand workers from across the South through extension, residential, and other special programs.⁵ Highlander also held interracial workshops and residence sessions for workers starting in the 1930s, albeit with varying degrees of consistency and success.⁶ By the early 1950s, Highlander had solidified its role and reputation as a key player in the growing civil rights movement. Highlander aimed not only to unionize and radicalize southern workers but also to facilitate

²Highlander was called the Highlander Folk School from 1932 to 1961, after which it drafted a new charter under the name Highlander Research and Education Center, which it retains today.

³Reinhold Niebuhr to potential donors, May 1932, box 15, folder 13, Myles Horton Papers, WHS.

⁴For more on Highlander's efforts to unionize and educate WPA workers in Grundy County, Tennessee, see John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 48–50, 59–63. For details on the miners' strike in Wilder, Tennessee, and how it shaped Highlander's labor education program, see Glen, *Highlander*, 29–32. For more on how the bugwood strike helped Highlander build trust and interest among local residents, see Glen, *Highlander*, 34–35; and Frank Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publishing, 1975), 37–38.

⁵Glen, *Highlander*, 71.

⁶Highlander established a non-discrimination policy in 1940 to enshrine its commitment to racially integrated education and movement-building. Nonetheless, in the early years, Highlander only accepted students sent by their unions, and most of these union members were white. For overview and analysis of Highlander's internal racial integration efforts in the 1930s and 1940s, critiques of Myles Horton's exposure approach to racial integration, and background on how labor unions resisted racial integration, see Glen, *Highlander*, 82, 113–14, 120–23, 154–55, 159; Kim Ruehl, *A Singing Army: Zilphia Horton and the Highlander Folk School* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), 124–25, 201–02; and Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 100–01.

racially integrated education and movement-building spaces that would incubate a broad-based political challenge to race and class hierarchies.

During a political moment characterized by economic precarity and declining industry in the post-Depression Appalachian South, widespread McCarthyism, Jim Crow segregation, and racist violence, Highlander's activities drew backlash from the state, owners of the means of production, and community members driven by white supremacy and anti-Communist fervor. Highlander faced probes by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and investigations by the FBI, while southern newspapers defamed Highlander, accusing it of affiliating with and endorsing Communism.⁷ Positioned in Grundy County, Tennessee, where, in 1938, 85 percent of the population was on federal relief and reliant on WPA road projects for work,⁸ and 99 percent of residents were white,⁹ Highlander struggled to foment a multiracial labor movement in the face of white working-class resistance. On the local level, Highlander dealt with coal company executives, white Southerners, and other anti-union and anti-integration forces that mobilized to obstruct Highlander's reach and impact.¹⁰ Highlander founders knew that "county residents would be suspicious of a school staffed by college-educated people with unconventional ideas," so from the start, Highlander prioritized relationship-building with the surrounding community.¹¹

Over the decades, Highlander has maintained a commitment to centering the lives and experiences of people directly targeted by racial and economic oppression, trusting in the power of collectivity to support folks in solving their own problems. In this formulation, solutions to community and social problems come not through one-way instruction and defined answers but through well-resourced spaces for people to come together to assess, strategize, and imagine. In addition to extension programs (through which Highlander staff traveled across the South to support union locals) and residential sessions (which entailed workers and labor leaders coming to Highlander for a communal experience in living, learning, and strategizing), Highlander ran a community program that aimed to build relationships and trust with Grundy County residents.¹² The small rural community of Summerfield, where Highlander was located, housed only a handful of institutions. Claudia Lewis, the founding nursery school teacher who worked at Highlander from 1938 to 1940, recalled, "The two-room elementary school out by the highway, three small wooden churches (Seventh Day Adventist, Methodist, and Church of Christ), and a comfortable-looking brown house

⁷For example, a 1937 article in the *Chattanooga News* asserted that Highlander was spreading Communism by "fomenting class consciousness and teaching strike techniques." Glen, *Highlander*, 53. For more on how the press, HUAC, and the FBI aimed to discredit Highlander in the 1930s and 1940s, see Glen, *Highlander*, 51-53, 71-80; and Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 106-07.

⁸Glen, *Highlander*, 60.

⁹US Census Bureau, "Census 1940 Tract, County, State and US," Grundy County, Tennessee, Total Population, Race, 1940, prepared by Social Explorer, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C1940CompDS/R13739095>, accessed Oct. 6, 2024.

¹⁰The Grundy County Crusaders, led by the secretary of the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company, are just one example of a coordinated effort to push Highlander out of Tennessee. See Glen, *Highlander*, 75-79.

¹¹Glen, *Highlander*, 24.

¹²Myles Horton, "The Highlander Folk School (1936)," in *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change*, ed. Dale Jacobs (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 74-75.

with a sign over the gate, ‘Highlander Folk School,’ are the only striking evidence of community life, aside from the homes themselves.”¹³ While this observation may indeed neglect to acknowledge how people build community with one another outside of formal institutions, it’s clear that the community program offered new opportunities for gathering and connection.

The Highlander Nursery School operated as part of the community program, on and off, between 1938 and 1953. The community program included dramatics and square-dancing classes, cooperatives, a well-stocked library, and the *Summerfield News*, which detailed community announcements and happenings.¹⁴ Residents were also invited to attend talks and classes during residential sessions, when Highlander hosted workers from across the region.¹⁵ To promote infrastructure for community advocacy and decision-making, Highlander helped develop the Community Council, which Claudia Lewis described as a “nonpolitical body composed of representatives chosen from each organization in the community (the church, the Parent-Teacher Association, the Union, the young people’s club)”;

it represented, according to Lewis, “an experiment in cooperation” whose purpose was to “find ways of improving community conditions.”¹⁶

The multipronged community program created opportunities for Summerfield residents to connect directly with Highlander, demystifying the day-to-day life of the organization and the principles that evoked suspicion from many community members.¹⁷ It also comprised part of a cultural organizing strategy spearheaded by Zilphia Horton, the cultural director at Highlander, that understood caring for, preserving the folk traditions of, and building relationships with local residents as necessary for movement-building.¹⁸ While some activities were short-lived and underfunded, and staff investment in the community program ebbed and flowed as organizational priorities shifted, the community program remained oriented toward integrating Summerfield residents into Highlander activities and targeting Highlander resources toward their needs and interests.¹⁹

As part of its commitment to “serv[ing] the ... total community,” Highlander has also coordinated several child- and youth-focused activities.²⁰ For example, in addition to the nursery school, Highlander ran junior union camps in the 1940s to educate union members’ children about labor movements.²¹ In the 1950s and 1960s, it hosted camps and workshops to foster interracial living and collaboration among children

¹³Claudia Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 59.

¹⁴For more on the community program, see Glen, *Highlander*, 40-41, 46-47, 63-64, 140-41; Horton, “The Highlander Folk School,” 74-75; Myles Horton, “The Community Folk School (1938),” in Jacobs, *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change*, 81-85; and Ruehl, *A Singing Army*, 58, 68-69.

¹⁵Horton, “The Highlander Folk School,” 74-75.

¹⁶Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, 73-74.

¹⁷Ruehl, *A Singing Army*, 176; Horton, “The Community Folk School,” 76-95.

¹⁸Ruehl, *A Singing Army*.

¹⁹Horton, “The Community Folk School,” 81-85.

²⁰Myles Horton and Claudia Lewis, “Highlander,” in *Roots of Open Education in America: Reminiscences and Reflections*, ed. Ruth Dropkin and Arthur Tobier (Knoxville, TN: Workshop Center for Open Education, 1976), 83.

²¹For an overview of Highlander’s junior union camps and the broader junior union movement by which they were influenced, see John M. Beck, “Highlander Folk School’s Junior Union Camps, 1940-1944,” *Labor’s Heritage* 5, no. 1 (1993), 28-40.

and youth.²² Today, Highlander runs the Children's Justice Camp and youth Seeds of Fire programs, which emphasize leadership development, intergenerational organizing, and liberatory analysis.²³ Each program, including the nursery school, can be situated within a broader national movement at the intersection of progressivism, political education, and social change. Yet, the nursery school, and Highlander's other efforts to engage children and youth, appear as mere footnotes in the historiography, with few detailed accounts of Highlander child- or youth-centered programs.²⁴ While Alexander Fink makes the case for how Highlander's educational approach has shaped contemporary youth work practice, the author still centers Highlander's work with adults to make the argument rather than elevating the explicit child- and youth-focused dimensions of Highlander programs.²⁵ Publications on Highlander's history, pedagogies, and impact also focus on the adults, from workers who came to Highlander for residential sessions to voters who attended Citizenship Schools to prepare for the literacy tests required of Black voters in the Jim Crow South.²⁶ Drawing from the secondary literature and from newsletters, reports, periodicals, letters, and diaries housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Tennessee Virtual Archive, this article looks to the Highlander Nursery School to trouble the prevailing historical framing of "adult education" at Highlander by illuminating how young children figured into and helped to sustain Highlander's movement-building.

²²For more on Highlander's camps for children and youth during the civil rights movement, see Nico Slate, "Between Utopia and Jim Crow: The Highlander Folk School, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Racial Borders of the Summer Camp, 1956-1961," *Journal of American History* 109, no. 3 (2022), 571-95.

²³Learn more about Children's Justice Camp on the Highlander website: <https://highlandercenter.org/our-impact/childrens-justice-camp/>. Learn more about Seeds of Fire on the Highlander website: <https://highlandercenter.org/our-impact/seeds-of-fire/>.

²⁴For detailed accounts of child- or youth-focused programs at Highlander, see Beck, "Highlander Folk School's Junior Union Camps"; Jessica Fei, "Building the Beloved Community: Intergenerational Organizing at the Highlander Research and Education Center," in *At Our Best: Building Youth-Adult Partnerships in Out-of-School Time Settings*, ed. Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Jessica Tseming Fei, and Deepa Sriya Vasudevan (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2020), 201-20; Horton and Lewis, "Highlander"; Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*; and Slate, "Between Utopia and Jim Crow." Also see Glen, *Highlander*, for brief mentions of child- and youth-focused programs at Highlander.

²⁵Alexander Fink, "We Don't Want a Teacher': Using the Past to Offer Fresh Eyes to Contemporary Practice," *Child & Youth Services* 36, no. 1 (2015), 56-78.

²⁶For more on Highlander's role in the civil rights movement, see David P. Levine, "The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom," *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004), 388-414; Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990); and Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). For organizational histories of Highlander, see Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*; Glen, *Highlander*; Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs, 1932-1961* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989); and Ruehl, *A Singing Army*. For background and analysis of Highlander's democratic educational approaches, see Stephen Preskill, *Education in Black and White: Myles Horton and the Highlander Center's Vision for Social Justice* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); Stephen A. Schneider, *You Can't Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932-1961* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014); Nico Slate, "'The Answers Come from the People': The Highlander Folk School and the Pedagogies of the Civil Rights Movement," *History of Education Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2022), 191-210; and Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, "An Exploration of Myles Horton's Democratic Praxis: Highlander Folk School," *Journal of Educational Foundations* 18, no. 2 (2004), 5-23.

More specifically, I examine the nursery school during its lifespan from 1938 to 1953 to make three contributions to the literature on Highlander, adult education, and twentieth-century nursery schools in the US. First, I shed light on how children were part of Highlander's early programming, offering a counter-story to prevailing notions that Highlander only served adults. By zooming in on Highlander's earliest sustained effort to engage children, the nursery school, this article builds on historian Nico Slate's assertion that, while "often presented as an exemplar of adult education, Highlander is better understood as a leader in cross-generational collaboration and a model of education that crossed the borders of both race and age."²⁷ Second, I explain how Highlander nurtured collaboration and sustained its subversive political work in the South, in part, by engaging children and local families through the community nursery school. The nursery school functioned as a cooperative institution that relied on the material and conceptual support of local residents, serving as a depoliticized entry point for families who might otherwise have been antagonistic toward Highlander's pro-union and pro-civil rights agenda. During the years the nursery school operated, Highlander faced concerted attacks from the southern media, state and federal governments, and owners of the means of production for its racially integrated activities and efforts to grow worker power. But by applying progressive educational approaches and providing no-cost early care and learning for the children of Summerfield, Tennessee's white working class, Highlander gained local community support and diminished backlash. Third, I show how both the paternalistic impulses evident in the nursery school movement and the theory-practice tensions confronting Highlander at other points in its history were reflected, in one key way, at the Highlander Nursery School, jeopardizing its alignment with Highlander's philosophical commitment to community capacity-building. Namely, the nursery school failed to incubate local leadership, relying on a rotation of teachers trained in progressive education, primarily from the Northeast, to run the school. In all, the complexity of Highlander's political vision for grassroots leadership, cooperation, and radical social change was expressed in and through the nursery school, an institution that teachers, local children, and their families worked together to sustain.

The Nursery School Movement

The nursery school that Highlander operated through the community program was part of a movement that aimed to apply progressive education and developmental psychology theories to early childhood. Nursery schools took off in the 1920s, initially serving primarily children from class-privileged families. They were a holistic and educationally rigorous version of the earlier day nurseries, which had been focused on meeting the hygienic and material needs of poor and working-class children. Many nursery school educators "saw ineffective parenting as a social problem"; thus, nursery schools tended to include a parental education component that provided class-privileged mothers with specialized support to nurture the social and emotional needs

²⁷Slate, "Between Utopia and Jim Crow," 594.

of their children.²⁸ Early twentieth-century nursery school architects stressed the role of the nursery school in fostering children's creative independent spirit and supporting parents in better child-rearing.²⁹

Nursery schools were supported by an extensive research and teacher-training infrastructure. Research and training initiatives at nursery schools and in programs connected to colleges and universities prepared prospective nursery educators in topics such as child psychology, play-based pedagogies, and parental education.³⁰ One pioneering institution in progressive education and child development research was the Bureau of Educational Experiments, later known as "Bank Street."³¹ Founded in 1916 in New York City, Bank Street operated a cooperative school for teachers and a nursery school. Co-founders Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Harriet Johnson—along with collaborator Caroline Pratt—believed that through providing "direct experiences" with the physical and social world and building curriculum around children's curiosities, children would develop as both individual and social beings. They believed in play and exploration as sensemaking approaches, and children at the Bureau-affiliated Harriet Johnson Nursery School were supported in engaging with their physical and social environments, often through field trips.³² Claudia Lewis, who taught at the Harriet Johnson Nursery School before becoming the Highlander Nursery School's first teacher, described the Harriet Johnson Nursery School as "a place where children may enlarge and clarify their experience of the real world of work and social contact."³³ Accordingly, at Bank Street's school for teachers, prospective educators studied and practiced progressive pedagogies that centered the whole child, the child's knowledge and experiences, and the child's relationships to other people and to the world.³⁴ Bureau architects also sought to cultivate a social awareness among student-teachers, initiating "long trips" to steel mills, mining towns, and other poor and working-class communities (including a trip to Appalachia, during which they visited Highlander).³⁵ Student-teachers were exposed to "unfamiliar cultures" as a method of consciousness-raising, an approach that Joan Cenedella problematized for its non-reciprocity with communities.³⁶ Teachers trained at Bank Street went on to teach at other experimental

²⁸ Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 151.

²⁹ Elizabeth Rose, *A Mother's Job: The History of Day Care, 1890-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 100, 104, 106-9; and Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 136-42, 150-56.

³⁰ V. Celia Lascarides and Blythe F. Hinitz, *History of Early Childhood Education* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 298-99, 335-36, 341-45.

³¹ The Bureau of Educational Experiments came to be known as the "Bank Street Schools," or simply "Bank Street," after it moved to Bank Street, New York City, in 1930, but it was not officially renamed Bank Street College of Education until 1950. See Joan Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments: A Study in Progressive Education" (EdD diss., Columbia University, 1996), 259.

³² Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments," 149-52, 199.

³³ Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, 4.

³⁴ Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments," 4-6.

³⁵ Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments," 199-205; and Edith Liselotte Oppenheimer Gordon, "Educating the Whole Child: Progressive Education and Bank Street College of Education, 1916-1966" (PhD diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 1988), 225-28.

³⁶ Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments," 204-05.

schools in New York City and nursery schools across the US, including, as this paper will show, the Highlander Nursery School.³⁷

The Great Depression and the New Deal ushered in an opportunity to experiment with nursery schools on a broader scale, and for many nursery school advocates who were aligned with the progressive education movement, this was a moment to push for universal, federally funded nursery schooling.³⁸ From 1933 to 1943, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and then the Works Progress Administration (WPA), operated public nursery schools to create jobs for teachers, health care workers, and cooks while supporting early childhood and parental education. Like the early staff at Highlander, WPA nursery school leaders understood nursery schools as vessels through which to instantiate a “new social order.”³⁹ Grace Langdon, the director of the WPA nursery school program, was active in a progressive circle of educational researchers, teachers, and national organizations such as the National Association for Nursery Education and the Progressive Education Association, which saw the WPA nursery schools as a portal into a more enticing political possibility: universal preschool, rooted in progressive education principles, as part of the public education system.

The WPA nursery school model applied many of the assumptions and commitments of the earlier nursery school movement to public nursery schooling for poor and working-class children. Educators who trained and taught at Bank Street helped to shape the program, and Bank Street’s influence was evident in the curriculum.⁴⁰ Like the private experimental nursery schools, the WPA curriculum emphasized group collaboration, indoor and outdoor play, and physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The WPA schools also sought to educate parents in the health and social needs of their children.⁴¹ Accordingly, nursery school teachers were trained in parent education, child psychology, the arts, storytelling, and music. They facilitated material-rich play and learning and supported young children in developing healthy habits of being with and relating to one another.⁴² Between 1933 and 1943, an average of 1,500 WPA

³⁷Bank Street student-teachers taught in experimental cooperating schools with which Bank Street maintained a relationship, including the Little Red School House in New York City and the Mount Kemble School in Morristown, New Jersey. For more on Bank Street’s cooperating schools and its early years in teacher education, see Cenedella, “The Bureau of Educational Experiments,” 177-229. For mentions of Bank Street-connected teachers who taught in or shaped WPA nursery schools, see Gordon, “Educating the Whole Child,” 170-79; and Sam F. Stack Jr., *The Arthurdale Community School: Education and Reform in Depression-Era Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 67-68. For more on the Bureau’s efforts to shift from engaging primarily with private experimental schools to public schools, see Cenedella, “The Bureau of Educational Experiments,” 215-29.

³⁸Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 183.

³⁹Molly Quest Arboleda, *Educating Young Children in WPA Nursery Schools: Federally Funded Early Childhood Education from 1933-1943* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 33.

⁴⁰Jessie Stanton, co-director of the Harriet Johnson Nursery School, supervised WPA nursery schools in New York City, and Harriet Johnson herself helped to organize the program during its inaugural year. For more on the relationship between Bank Street and the WPA nursery schools, see Gordon, “Educating the Whole Child,” 170-79; and Arboleda, *Educating Young Children*, 19, 15n35.

⁴¹Lascarides and Hinitz, *History of Early Childhood Education*, 386, 389-90; and Arboleda, *Educating Young Children*, 86-88.

⁴²Arboleda, *Educating Young Children*, 45-78.

nursery schools were open at any given point, each staffed with two teachers, a cook, and a nurse.⁴³ Some schools were racially integrated, and, according to reporting at the time by the National Council of Negro Women, the WPA supported 90 percent of the nurseries for the children of Black mothers who worked in agriculture and war industries.⁴⁴

As this article will show was true for the Highlander Nursery School, the WPA nursery schools largely relied on community support during times of inadequate funding and legislative and community-based backlash. Conservative legislators, frustrated by the presence of women in the workforce and the progressive contours of the nursery school curriculum, made drastic cuts to the WPA nursery school program.⁴⁵ Despite positive feedback from the parents of children in nursery schools, broader public opinion continued to reflect a skepticism about outsourcing the care of children under six. Nonetheless, as Molly Quest Arboleda's study of the WPA nursery schools shows, the schools relied on community support to survive. The WPA nursery school program provided funds for teacher and support staff salaries and meals, but teachers regularly had to solicit material and financial donations to stay open. Parents, community members, and WPA co-ops helped to furnish and repair toys for nursery school children. The National Youth Administration (NYA), a WPA program that paid young people to work in education and other settings, provided funding for assistants. Nursery school teachers fulfilled roles as community builders, conducting home visits and parent meetings as part of a philosophical commitment to whole-family engagement. When the nursery school program faced threats by anti-WPA legislators, parents often rallied behind it, testifying to its benefit and advocating for its continuation. While most parents with children in WPA nursery schools spoke favorably of the schools, the progressive vision for universal early childhood education went unrealized. Patriarchal notions of motherhood and work prevailed as the economic and wartime urgencies that provided legislative justification for the nursery schools waned.⁴⁶

The Nursery School at Highlander

It's in this historical moment that the Highlander Nursery School was established, partially overlapping with the WPA nursery schools and undoubtedly influenced by the progressive nursery school movement. In its inaugural year, founding nursery school teacher Claudia Lewis inquired about the possibility of the Highlander Nursery School becoming a WPA nursery school. However, her request was rejected on the grounds that she was not a WPA-trained teacher, nor had she lived in Tennessee long enough, having moved from New York City just a few months prior, to qualify for a WPA

⁴³ Arboleda, *Educating Young Children*, 69, 80.

⁴⁴ Geraldine Youcha, *Minding the Children: Child Care in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 310.

⁴⁵ Arboleda, *Educating Young Children*, 79-80.

⁴⁶ For more on community involvement in sustaining the WPA nursery schools, see Arboleda, "The WPA Nursery School and the Community," in *Educating Young Children*, 79-104. For an analysis of why the WPA nursery schools failed to instantiate a public nursery school system for all children, see Arboleda, "In Time of War," in *Educating Young Children*, 105-32; and Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 185.

job.⁴⁷ The nursery school was arguably the most consistent and large-scale component of Highlander's community program despite spurts of inactivity due to funding, space, and capacity constraints.⁴⁸ In 1949, it reported to have served an average of twelve community children per day between the ages of two and five at no cost to the unemployed and working-class white families in Summerfield, Tennessee.⁴⁹ In her comparative study about her time in Summerfield, Lewis described the school as "a focal point, something to fight for and stand together for" in a community struggling with the economic precarity wrought by the Great Depression, shuttered coal mines, and depleted forests that turned miners and loggers into WPA relief recipients.⁵⁰

The nursery school began as a short-term summer project for college students who came to Highlander in 1938 as part of an American Friends Service Committee work camp. The work camp movement sought to bring "educated young people into contact with basic social and economic problems" through manual labor projects across the US.⁵¹ When Highlander adopted the nursery school as a core project, it hired Claudia Lewis, who had studied at Bank Street's Cooperative School for Teachers and taught at the affiliated Harriet Johnson Nursery School, to launch it. Lewis ran the nursery school from 1938 to 1940 and was the first of four women with experience in progressive education who came from across the country (primarily the Northeast) to teach, for a subsistence stipend, at the modest nursery school in Summerfield. Lewis was followed by Joan Payne (1941), who was educated at Sarah Lawrence College in New York City; Eva Zhitlowsky (1942-1943), who studied at Black Mountain College in North Carolina; and Joanna (Joie) Creighton (later Willimetz) (1948-1953), who was trained at Bank Street and first came to Highlander as a student-teacher on a Bank Street-organized visit.⁵² The responsibilities of these professionally trained educators included activities such as shuttling students to and from school; coordinating and facilitating

⁴⁷Letters concerning Works Progress Administration support for the Highlander Nursery School, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 398-99, 401-04, HREC, WHS.

⁴⁸For example, the nursery school often closed for extended periods so teachers could take fundraising trips. See Joanna Creighton Willimetz, "How Come Me to Be Here?" 1947, box 52, folder 8, HREC, WHS; Joanna Creighton Willimetz, "Nursery School: 'Diaries,'" 1948-1953, box 65, folder 10, microfilm reel 31, frames 557, 561, HREC, WHS; and Joanna Willimetz, "Howdy from the Highlander Nursery School" letter, April 1951, box 65, folder 11, microfilm reel 31, frames 742-44, HREC, WHS.

⁴⁹Joanna Creighton, "Report on Highlander's Community Participation," Jan. 1949, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 513-14, HREC, WHS. For a list of occupations held by parents of nursery children in August 1950, including part-time railroad worker and assistant to a well-digger, see Joanna Willimetz, Fundraising letter to John Bulow Campbell Foundation, Aug. 10, 1950, box 65, folder 11, microfilm reel 31, frames 729-30, HREC, WHS.

⁵⁰Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, 56, 204.

⁵¹Frances W. Brown, "Volunteers Flock to Payless Jobs: Students Spend Their Summer at Hard Labor in Friends Service Committee Camps," *New York Times*, July 25, 1937. For more references to the work camp's role in launching the nursery school, see Claudia Lewis, "It Takes Courage and Ingenuity," *Progressive Education*, Oct. 1940, box 83, folder 5, microfilm reel 48, frames 651-54, HREC, WHS; and "Friends Work Camp Review," 1938, VI-D-6, box 15, folder 1, Highlander Folk School Manuscript Collection, 1932-1966, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Tennessee Virtual Archive (hereafter HFS, TSLA, TVA), <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/highlander/id/1752>, accessed February 29, 2024.

⁵²For Joanna Creighton's references to her visit to Highlander with Bank Street that preceded her time as nursery school teacher, see Joie Creighton, "Hahdy, as they say h'yar," letter, n.d., box 52, folder 8, HREC, WHS; Joanna Creighton, Letter of application for teaching job at Highlander Nursery School, April 7, 1948,



Figure 1. A group of Highlander Nursery School children making a train with wooden crates.
Source: "Children with train of crates," Image ID 53002, Highlander Research and Education Center records, 1917-2017, Wisconsin Historical Society.

daily nursery school activities; collecting material and financial donations to keep the school afloat; and conducting home visits to connect with families.⁵³ Written accounts from Lewis and extensive journal entries from Willimetz reveal the kinds of activities one might expect to encounter in the nursery school. Consistent with other nursery schools, these included children playing outside, block-building, clay modeling, reading books donated by libraries and supporters from across the country, visiting local places of interest, receiving inoculations from community doctors, and, as Claudia Lewis put it, "look[ing] for things to use" from the surrounding environment to learn about each other and the world (see Figure 1).⁵⁴

A Cooperative Institution

Like the WPA nursery schools and experimental "cooperative" nursery schools, the Highlander Nursery School relied on community support to survive.⁵⁵ While the school was always directed by women from outside the community with specialized training in early childhood education, staff engaged residents in other essential ways. Interviews, diaries, letters, and publications reveal that it was a cooperative institution,

box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 499-501, HREC, WHS; and Willimetz, "How Come Me to Be Here?"

⁵³See the daily plan outlined in Creighton, "Hahdy, as they say h'yar."

⁵⁴Claudia Lewis, "Equipped with an Oak Tree," 1940, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 428-29, HREC, WHS. For other accounts of nursery school schedule and activities, see Willimetz, "Diaries"; Creighton, "Hahdy, as they say h'yar"; and Joanna Willimetz, "Do We Need Country Nursery Schools for Preschool Children?," *The Union Farmer*, March 1949, box 52, folder 8, HREC, WHS.

⁵⁵Cooperative schools comprised a subsection of the experimental nursery school movement. Intending to build communal care structures and positive relationships with parents, they relied on parents to organize and help run the school. For more on cooperative nursery schools that promoted and relied on parent involvement, see Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 142-45, 161-66; and Lascarides and Hinitz, *History of Early Childhood Education*, 307-10.

supported in material and philosophical ways by parents and community members. A 1940 fundraising letter describes how an early iteration of the nursery school was supplied and maintained. It included the support of the NYA, which paid the wages of two community-based assistants, whom Lewis referred to as “mountain girls”; the Public Welfare Department, which donated various supplies; and “the community people” who generously shared their labor and resources.⁵⁶ This exemplifies the multilayered tapestry of support that sustained the nursery school throughout its lifetime, including national organizations, local institutions, and parents and community members who helped meet the material, care, and labor needs of the nursery school. From the start, nursery staff understood the school as a community school.⁵⁷

Nursery school teachers appealed to an extensive network of progressive organizations, churches, libraries, schools, foundations, and individual donors for material and financial donations, often using the power of the press to generate national interest. Through fundraising letters and articles in publications such as the *Union Farmer* and *Progressive Education*, the teachers raised money and received trunks of donated toys, books, and clothing for the school. Clothing and toys were often given to nursery children and their families directly, or, in the case of a surplus, sold at rummage sales to raise money for the school. Books were added to the Highlander library, which was open to community members and nursery children.⁵⁸

The Highlander Nursery School also relied on the time and generosity of local residents for labor and material support. Community members donated milk and coal, and Willimetz facilitated relationships with local grocers who provided at-cost ingredients so children could have a nutritious hot meal each day. Nursery teachers also prioritized children’s physical health, arranging for doctors to visit periodically to provide inoculations (see [Figure 2](#)). A co-op of mothers sewed toys; parents and community youth cleaned and built equipment for the classroom; and, for a time, eighty-two-year-old Reverend Summers shuttled children to and from school in his handmade oak wagon.⁵⁹ It was during Willimetz’s tenure as the nursery school teacher from 1948 to 1953 that family and community engagement was most extensive and coordinated. She wrote at length in both private journal entries and public reports about how community members helped to run the school, from the sewing cooperative that sold clothing and quilts at rummage sales to raise money, to parents and community members who took turns

⁵⁶“Give This Child the Chance for a Normal Life,” fundraising letter, 1940, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 489-93, HREC, WHS.

⁵⁷Lewis, “It Takes Courage and Ingenuity”; and Joanna Willimetz, “Nursery Schools - Why and How?,” *Southern Farm & Home*, Sept. 1951, box 52, folder 8, HREC, WHS.

⁵⁸For fundraising correspondence between nursery school teachers and organizations across the Northeast and Midwest, such as Larchmont Public Library, the Pioneer Youth of America, the Association of Childhood Education, Wellesley College, Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia College in Chicago, and the Sigmund Silberman Foundation, see box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 447, 448, 452, 463-64, 482, 485-86, 487, HREC, WHS; and “Nursery School: Publicity and Fundraising,” 1948-1953, 1957, box 65, folder 11, microfilm reel 31, frames 705-802, HREC, WHS.

⁵⁹“Give This Child the Chance for a Normal Life”; *Highlander Fling* 5, no. 2, June 1943, VI-D-1, box 12, folder 9, HFS, TSLA, TVA, <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/highlander/id/1069>; Lewis, “It Takes Courage and Ingenuity”; and Cathy Winston Male and Eve Zhitlowsky Milton interview, box 32, folder 23, HREC, WHS.



Figure 2. Claudia Lewis administering cod liver oil to nursery school children.

Source: "Feeding children cod liver oil," Image ID 53003, Highlander Research and Education Center records, 1917-2017, Wisconsin Historical Society.

providing food and washing the children's smocks after exciting days of painting.⁶⁰ She also extended the "Nursery School News" section of the *Summerfield News*. Willimetz's writings and illustrations for the "Nursery School News" demonstrated her collaborative, fun-loving approach to the nursery school. She used the paper to publicize a rotating schedule of parent assistants, invite families to events at the nursery school such as sewing club meetings and Christmas parties, introduce new nursery school children, and chronicle the day-to-day happenings of nursery school life.⁶¹ In fundraising letters, reports, and public-facing periodicals, Willimetz consistently highlighted the community-driven and cooperative contours of the nursery school and celebrated the contributions of the many residents who made the school possible, noting that the very existence of the school hinged on "complete cooperation of the school and families with young children."⁶² For a 1951 edition of *Southern Farm and Home*, she penned an article about the merits of early child education and the community-led structure of the Highlander Nursery School:

Our entire community—church, schoolteachers, parents, storekeepers, everyone—joined hands and minds and hearts to bring our school into being and make it a truly cooperative community project. The men worked together to provide a building and the simple furnishings to put in it. The women agreed to contribute fresh food and home canned vegetables and soups for the daily

⁶⁰Joanna Creighton, Report of the HFS Community Program, Jan-July 1949, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 517-19, HREC, WHS; Joanna Willimetz, "You Can Have a Nursery or Play School," n.d., box 52, folder 8, HREC, WHS; and Willimetz, "Do We Need Country Nursery Schools for Preschool Children?"

⁶¹For the "Nursery School News" section that Willimetz maintained, see, for example, *Summerfield News* 7, no. 18, Oct. 8, 1948, box 85, folder 6, HREC, WHS; and *Summerfield News* 7, no. 19, Oct. 25, 1948, box 85, folder 6, HREC, WHS.

⁶²Creighton, Report of the HFS Community Program, Jan-July 1949.

hot lunches. A sewing cooperative was started and now holds regular rummage sales, the proceeds of which provide extra funds for our other groceries (which, by the way, are sold to us at cost by the community store). And the parents themselves trade days off so that each can devote one day a week to being at the school.⁶³

In many ways, this cooperative model suggests a community enthusiasm for education among local parents that was common in Appalachia, despite the widespread myth that twentieth-century Appalachians were “not just unschooled but also actively opposed to schooling.”⁶⁴

In turn, teachers and Highlander staff supported the parents of nursery school children. Claudia Lewis recounted how Highlander staff took families to doctor’s visits and even helped build a log cabin for a family that had been living in a barn.⁶⁵ Willimetz recalled driving parents in the Highlander car to run errands and visit family members.⁶⁶ Heralding Highlander and the nursery school’s role in supporting local families, she described how “Highlander continually services the community in such emergencies as telephone calls, carrying people to the hospital, assisting in church repairs, miscellaneous errands and helping to capture runaway horses and wagons.”⁶⁷ While nursery school publications primarily touted the educational and relational benefits for children, the school was also positioned as an opportunity for mothers to socialize with other parents and have time to address responsibilities beyond parenting.⁶⁸ This conceptualization of the nursery school as a crucial site for child development and collaboration, and, to a lesser degree, as a time-saving measure for mothers, grounded the nursery school’s pedagogy and echoes the discourse of the broader nursery school movement.⁶⁹ Highlander received support from Summerfield families in running the community nursery school, and in turn, the parents socialized, saved time, and witnessed their children learning and playing well with others.

Nursery school teachers sustained this cooperative relationship with Summerfield parents and community members through routine home visits. Lewis described going door-to-door to recruit children for the nursery school and occasionally staying for dinner.⁷⁰ And between 1948 and 1949, Willimetz kept detailed notes about her visits to every house in Summerfield with nursery-school-age children.⁷¹ The home visits were a way to learn about and connect with community members, as well as to assess practical concerns about why a child might not be coming to school (reasons included

⁶³Willimetz, “Nursery Schools - Why and How?”

⁶⁴Samantha NeCamp, *Literacy in the Mountains: Community, Newspapers, and Writing in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020), 73.

⁶⁵Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, 68, 102.

⁶⁶Willimetz, “Diaries,” frames 629, 644-45, 671.

⁶⁷Creighton, “Report on Highlander’s Community Participation.”

⁶⁸*Summerfield News* 2, no. 24, Nov. 14, 1942, box 85, folder 3, HREC, WHS.

⁶⁹For other references to the Highlander Nursery School as a formative, preparatory experience, see, for example, Willimetz, “Do We Need Country Nursery Schools for Preschool Children?”; and Willimetz, “Nursery Schools - Why and How?”

⁷⁰Lewis, “It Takes Courage and Ingenuity”; and Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, 81, 124.

⁷¹Willimetz, “Diaries,” frames 544-70.

“sick,” busy “berry picking,” “no clean clothes,” and “stayed home to watch hog killing,” among others).⁷² In these visits, Willimetz alerted parents about upcoming events at Highlander, recruited parent assistants, and mobilized support for other Highlander-community collaborations such as the regular community meetings. Sometimes, the visits were for such seemingly quotidian purposes as quelling the concerns of parents whose children came home from nursery school covered in paint.⁷³ These regular touchpoints grew parent involvement and interest in the nursery school and provided concrete pathways for parents to participate in the decision-making and running of the school.

Teaching Assistants

The nursery school benefited from a rotating cohort of assistants, including local mothers, young women from across the country with formal training in nursery education, and college students placed at Highlander as part of their summer work camp experience. Bank Street functioned as a pipeline for the Highlander Nursery School, regularly sending students who were trained in progressive early childhood education and had experience teaching in other nursery schools to serve short periods as assistants. In a 1938 letter to Claudia Lewis, a Bank Street staff member even inquired as to the kind of relationship they might be able to formalize with the Highlander Nursery School. It read, “I know Highlander’s philosophy is to train southerners to lead their own people and I presume this would apply also to the nursery school. We, on the other hand, would like our students to have an experience such as you could give them there.”⁷⁴ It was a common sentiment among early Bank Street pioneers and other experimental nursery school advocates that children needed to be “liberated” from their parents, a stance decidedly at odds with sustaining the school as a parent-run institution.⁷⁵ This tension between the Highlander philosophy of grassroots capacity-building and the temptation to staff the nursery school with northern intellectuals trained in progressive education lingered throughout the Highlander Nursery School experiment. Students who trained at Bank Street, and other northern institutions such as Antioch College and Oberlin, served as nursery school assistants during the school’s lifetime.⁷⁶

⁷²Willimetz, “Diaries.”

⁷³Willimetz, “Diaries,” frame 605.

⁷⁴Bank Street Schools to Claudia Lewis, Dec. 10, 1938, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frame 406, HREC, WHS.

⁷⁵Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 136-42. It’s possible that nursery teachers were also influenced by child-saving discourses of the Progressive and Great Depression eras calling for education and child welfare infrastructure outside of the individual family to support (or, more problematically, save or assimilate) the children of poor and immigrant parents. For more on shifting conceptions of childhood, youth, and responsibility, see Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁷⁶For references to assistants who trained at Bank Street, see Willimetz, “Diaries,” frames 561, 689; Creighton, Report of the HFS Community Program, Jan-July 1949; Creighton, “Hahdy, as they say h’yar”; Barbara Myers, Letter to Claudia Lewis, May 15, 1940, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frame 453, HREC, WHS; and Claudia Lewis, Letter to Barbara Myers, Aug. 3, 1940, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 466-67, HREC, WHS.

Even after leaving Highlander in 1940, Claudia Lewis continued to give presentations about the Highlander Nursery School and recruit Bank Street students to support it.⁷⁷

Subsequent cohorts of work campers, beyond the inaugural group in 1938 who helped to launch the nursery school, came to Highlander to participate in discussions about contemporary social problems, lead building and farming projects, and assist at the nursery school. While the short lifespan of the nursery school meant that the initial work campers' vision for the "beginning of a permanent nursery school sponsored by Highlander for the community" was not fully realized, it nonetheless established itself as a fixture of community life in Summerfield, however temporary, and work campers continued to interact with nursery school children during subsequent stays at Highlander throughout the 1940s and 1950s.⁷⁸ These students camped on the hill just a short walk from the nursery school and often were visited by nursery children. Work campers began construction on the new nursery school building in 1947, and in the summers of 1948 and 1952, they came to Highlander and helped at the nursery school.⁷⁹ They supervised children and recorded their daily activities, which Willimetz regarded as an important exercise in "noting changes in the children's personalities and physical development and coordination during the year."⁸⁰

Local mothers and older siblings of nursery school children also assisted at the nursery school.⁸¹ Lewis employed at least two community assistants with the support of the NYA. Dorothy Thomas, a young local mother who sent her own child to the nursery school, was one of the assistants supported by the NYA during Lewis's tenure, and she continued to serve as an assistant to successors Joan Payne and Eva Zhitlowsky until at least 1943. It was during Willimetz's tenure, though, from 1948 to 1953, that the scope and infrastructure for volunteer parent assistants was most extensive. Willimetz's journal entries reflect how much she relied on parental support during the school day, and she described how the parents were "as essential to our daily operation as the children," helping to supervise nursery activities, raise money for a hot lunch program and other

⁷⁷During her teaching tenure, Claudia Lewis corresponded with Bank Street staff and students about the nursery school and continued to give presentations about it to education audiences after she left in 1940. See Claudia Lewis, Letter to Jim Dombrowski, February 7, 1941, box 18, folder 25, HREC, WHS; Claudia Lewis, Article on the Summerfield Nursery School, *Bank Street Alumni News*, May 1, 1939, box 83, folder 5, microfilm reel 48, frames 668-73, HREC, WHS; and *Summerfield News* 3, no. 3, Jan. 16, 1943, box 85, folder 3, HREC, WHS.

⁷⁸"Friends Work Camp Review."

⁷⁹Willimetz, "How Come Me to Be Here?"; Willimetz, "Diaries," frame 566; and Report from Highlander Nursery School teacher to the Director of the Unitarian Work Camp, Aug. 23, 1948, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 508-11, HREC, WHS.

⁸⁰Report from Highlander Nursery School teacher to the Director of the Unitarian Work Camp. Keeping detailed records and notes about children's development was a common practice in nursery schools (including the Harriet Johnson Nursery School) and in child development research centers. See references to record-keeping for sociological and psychological research, and for health and pedagogical purposes, in Beatty, *Preschool Education in America*, 136, 147, 155-56, 158; Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments," 153-58; and Lascarides and Hinitz, *History of Early Childhood Education*, 321, 328, 339.

⁸¹Before 1948, when Joanna Willimetz grew parent engagement by instituting a rotation of parent assistants, documents suggest that parents assisted with the day-to-day running of the school on a more limited basis. Community assistants included Dorothy Thomas, Bessie Eldridge, and Marvene Patterson. See *Highlander Fling* 5, no. 2; Cathy Winston Male and Eve Zhitlowsky Milton interview; and *Summerfield News* 1, no. 8, Nov. 14, 1938, box 85, folder 3, HREC, WHS.

expenses, cook or provide food, and fix broken toys.⁸² Through door-to-door home visits and notices in the *Summerfield News* in 1948 and 1949, Willimetz informed parents about upcoming nursery school meetings at Highlander and generated enough buy-in that parents mobilized to form the nursery school assistance program, through which community mothers and older siblings took turns volunteering at the school.⁸³ Willimetz coordinated and maintained an extensive network of local assistants, boasting twenty-two assistants from fifteen community families by 1949.⁸⁴ Between 1948 and 1953, over forty different assistants supported day-to-day activities at the nursery school, sometimes with their own older children or babies in tow.⁸⁵

Bridge to Highlander

The nursery school was also a bridge to Highlander, an accessible entry point for parents who were deriving a concrete benefit from the school to learn more about and warm up to Highlander's work. While a sizable cohort of parents provided crucial material and labor support to the nursery school, not all parents in Summerfield supported Highlander. Those who distrusted Highlander enough to refuse sending their children to the nursery school cited reasons such as the desire to care for their own children, their husband's refusal, fear of what the organization "teach[es] the kids," concern with maintaining business relationships that could be threatened by associating with Highlander, and a racist aversion to having their children attend what one parent described as a "n-love[r] school."⁸⁶ From reputational fear to blatant racism, many parents in Summerfield maintained their distance from Highlander despite staff's best efforts to reduce backlash through community-focused programming. For many families, though, the nursery school was a vehicle for bringing them into the organization's orbit, and, in turn, establishing Highlander as a community institution in Summerfield. Highlander founder Myles Horton and cultural director Zilphia Horton's own children attended the nursery school, and Zilphia regularly assisted in day-to-day nursery school affairs, deepening her connections to other parents and children in the community.⁸⁷ In a 1951 fundraising letter to Highlander sponsors and supporters, Willimetz noted how "families work with the school to help their children and thus become more familiar with the Folk School's other activities and this provides greater knowledge

⁸²Willimetz, "Do We Need Country Nursery Schools for Preschool Children?"; and Willimetz, "Diaries."

⁸³*Summerfield News* 7, no. 18; *Summerfield News* 7, no. 21, Nov. 19, 1948, box 85, folder 6, HREC, WHS; Willimetz, "Do We Need Country Nursery Schools for Preschool Children?"; Willimetz, "Diaries," frames 657-61; and Creighton, "Report on Highlander's Community Participation."

⁸⁴Creighton, Report of the HFS Community Program, Jan-July 1949.

⁸⁵Willimetz, "Diaries," frames 543-70.

⁸⁶Willimetz, "Diaries," frames 546, 586, 595, 692.

⁸⁷According to Eva Zhitlowsky, the nursery school teacher in 1942 and 1943, Zilphia Horton was not active in the nursery school. However, that changed during Joanna Willimetz's tenure beginning in 1948. Zilphia is listed as an assistant and frequently appears in Willimetz's attendance log and journal entries. Charis and Thorsten, Zilphia and Myles's children, are also listed in Willimetz's attendance log and referred to in her journal entries. For Zhitlowsky's recollections on the nursery school, see Cathy Winston Male and Eve Zhitlowsky Milton interview. For Willimetz's references to Zilphia's role in the day-to-day running of the nursery school, see Creighton, "Hahdy, as they say h'yar," and the attendance log and journal entries in Willimetz, "Diaries."

and acceptance of the Folk School's activities and its inter-racial program."⁸⁸ Willimetz also used the home visits as a way to recruit parents to attend community meetings at Highlander and to discuss projects such as the nursery school and library.⁸⁹ In effect, nursery school parents worked alongside Highlander staff to run the nursery school and thus glimpsed what Highlander's civil rights and pro-union education looked like in real time, discovering that it contrasted sharply with the libelous messages perpetuated by southern newspapers. In another fundraising letter, Willimetz claimed, "All of the families observe and sometimes participate in the programs and classes at the Folk School held for southern union students and representatives."⁹⁰ While parents didn't necessarily come to agree with Highlander's politics through this exposure, they saw a concrete benefit in the service the nursery school was providing, had opportunities to engage with other activities at Highlander, and overall thought of Highlander staff as "nice people."⁹¹ The documents I reviewed do not suggest that nursery school parents were active in Highlander's labor and civil rights campaigns, but Highlander staff nonetheless understood and spoke about the nursery school as a core site for the relationship-building that was essential to their movement work.

During the lifetime of the nursery school, the children, too, were exposed to Highlander and the broader community. Echoing the educational approach at Bank Street (to which both Claudia Lewis and Joanna Willimetz were connected), children at the Highlander Nursery School learned through "direct experiences" with the social world.⁹² Nursery children regularly strolled over to the Highlander lawn, where they colored, visited the library, or greeted work campers. Adults attending workshops or residence sessions at Highlander would also visit the nursery children. While it's not clear that these interactions were explicitly political in any formal sense, they demonstrate the permeability nursery school teachers attempted to foster between the nursery school and Highlander's other activities. In an attempt to combat the isolation that staff perceived nursery children were experiencing in Summerfield, teachers took nursery children on trips to nearby Tracy City and Monteagle, where they visited the grocery store, a local bakery, a railroad worksite, and a popular lookout spot called Million Dollar View. Defying the notion of Highlander as solely adult-focused, staff ensured that children were active parts of the cultural life at Highlander and in the community, participating in community plays and attending holiday gatherings, square dances, and community nights (See [Figure 3](#)).⁹³

⁸⁸Joanna Creighton, Fundraising letter to Executive Council Committee and Sponsors, 1951, box 65, folder 11, microfilm reel 31, frame 741, HREC, WHS.

⁸⁹Willimetz, "Diaries," frames 544-70.

⁹⁰Joanna Creighton, Fundraising letter to Mr. and Mrs. Hart, Sept. 7, 1951, box 65, folder 11, microfilm reel 31, frame 755, HREC, WHS.

⁹¹Interview with Joey Willimetz, June 1948-Jan. 1955, July 11, 1963, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frame 524, HREC, WHS.

⁹²Cenedella, "The Bureau of Educational Experiments," 199.

⁹³Willimetz, "Diaries"; and "Sept. 30-March 31, 1951: Nursery and Community Report," 1951, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frame 520, HREC, WHS. In addition to nursery children attending events at Highlander to which they were explicitly invited, Claudia Lewis explained how it was customary in Summerfield for parents to bring their children wherever they went. She wrote, "Children are always to be seen with their parents at burying, at P.T.A. meetings, at square dances. They are never left at home or



Figure 3. Two children on the porch of the nursery school, 1930s.

Source: Box 95, folder 5, Highlander Research and Education Center records, 1917-2017, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Sustaining the Movement?

The nursery school was a vehicle through which Highlander expressed its commitment to collaboration and social transformation. John Glen argued that the community program as a whole “helped maintain the culture of the southern mountains region and led to greater acceptance of the school in the Monteagle area.”⁹⁴ In addition to playing a core role in the daily running of the school, parents who sent their kids to the nursery school showed up in defense of Highlander during critical moments of existential threat and community backlash. For example, parents rallied in defense of the nursery school in 1938 when the Grundy County Board of Education threatened to expel it from the public school building after discovering that Highlander ran the school. In 1932, the board, hostile toward Highlander’s efforts to unionize local workers, banned the organization from using school buildings because “they [Highlander] taught ‘political matters’ that were ‘Red or communist in appearance.’”⁹⁵ In response to the board’s obstructionism, nursery school parents staged a protest at the board’s offices, and the PTA wrote letters to individual board members praising the nursery school’s contributions to the community and urging them to defend it.⁹⁶ This is especially noteworthy given that around that time, Highlander was enduring attacks by the southern media, visits from the FBI, backlash from WPA officials who were threatened by Highlander’s efforts to win political power for unionized WPA workers, and probes by the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁹⁷ The fact that some local parents mobilized to

put to bed early.” See Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, xv; and Lewis, “It Takes Courage and Ingenuity,” 654.

⁹⁴Glen, *Highlander*, 56.

⁹⁵Glen, *Highlander*, 51.

⁹⁶Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*, 103-04; and Letters from PTA President to school board members, June 6, 1939, box 65, folder 9, microfilm reel 31, frames 423-24, HREC, WHS.

⁹⁷Glen, *Highlander*, 59-62, 71-74.

defend Highlander despite the loud and well-resourced backlash suggests that they did, indeed, perceive a real value in the nursery school, at least enough to position themselves in resistance to anti-worker, anti-Communist forces and in alliance with a union-building organization.

Despite the myriad ways parents and community members supported and defended the nursery school, Highlander staff were not able to foment local leadership to sustain it beyond 1953, the same year that Highlander committed to intensifying its focus on civil rights organizing.⁹⁸ While secondary sources and archival materials suggest that the nursery school did, indeed, garner some community support for Highlander from folks who might otherwise have been antagonistic to the organization's aims, the nursery school didn't always embody the spirit of community capacity-building underlying Highlander's mission. All the nursery school teachers—Claudia Lewis, Joan Payne, Eva Zhitlowsky, and Joanna Willimetz—were college-educated women experienced in progressive education who came to Highlander from afar, usually the Northeast, and only temporarily. They recruited college students who assisted at the nursery school during the summer, gaining educational experience and stories to bring back home. Over the lifetime of the nursery school, a persistent tension existed between Highlander's community-based mission and the push to align the nursery school with the methodologies and pedagogies of a progressive education movement emerging largely out of universities and research centers. Highlander failed to foment local leadership despite having created mechanisms for Summerfield community members to contribute substantially to the running of the school. While nursery school teachers expressed their hope that one day, the school would lie in the hands of local mothers, I've found no evidence that a community parent ran the school independently at any point.⁹⁹

One mother in the community, Dorothy Thomas, was active with the nursery school for several years, and in a series of letters that Lewis and Zhitlowsky exchanged with each other, they contemplated Dorothy's possible fitness as a teacher in the school. Lewis expressed her hope that "eventually one of the mountain girls would become proficient enough and take over the job," and referred to a "training course" she once facilitated for community mothers who helped out at the school. She also suggested books Dorothy might read to better prepare her for the job.¹⁰⁰ In another letter to Zhitlowsky, predecessor Joan Payne wrote, "I always had it in mind that it would be wonderful if Dorothy could be in charge of the nursery school... I think Dorothy is really interested in the children and I know that she mentioned to me that she would

⁹⁸Willimetz's attendance and finance records suggest that the nursery school ceased operations around 1953, and a 1957 letter from a Highlander staff member described the nursery school as discontinued. See Willimetz, "Diaries," frames 570-71; Letter from Highlander staff mentioning discontinuation of nursery school, Dec. 9, 1957, box 65, folder 11, frame 824, HREC, WHS. For reference to the Highlander executive council's 1953 decision to emphasize civil rights movement-building, specifically the desegregation of public schools, see Glen, *Highlander*, 155.

⁹⁹For example, Claudia Lewis wrote, "Perhaps it is not too unrealistic to hope that some day one or two or three of these girls will develop into real teachers who can start other nursery schools in nearby communities. Mountain girls, who know this mountain and its children, should logically become its teachers." See "It Takes Courage and Ingenuity," 653. See also Joan Payne to Eva Zhitlowsky, 1942, box 22, folder 27, HREC, WHS.

¹⁰⁰Claudia Lewis to Eva Zhitlowsky, Aug. 5, 1942, box 18, folder 25, pp. 42-47, HREC, WHS.



Figure 4. Joie Willimetz with children playing with blocks inside the building where the Highlander Nursery School operated from 1948-1953.
Source: Photograph by Emil Willimetz, box 95, folder 5, Highlander Research and Education Center records, 1917-2017, Wisconsin Historical Society.

like to read more about what nursery schools tried to do, and what one did with children.”¹⁰¹ In 1943, Zhitlowsky struggled to find someone to take over the nursery school as she transitioned out of the role. While nursery school teachers had earlier entertained the possibility of Dorothy serving as head teacher, Dorothy was announced as an assistant to Celia Kraft Preece, a teacher who “studied at Peabody in Nashville and in New York.”¹⁰² However, when Preece backed out of the opportunity to direct the nursery school, neither Dorothy nor any other community parent directed the school for any amount of time. Instead, it closed until Willimetz arrived in 1948 (see Figure 4).¹⁰³

Highlander staff’s uncertainty about community members’ capacity to run the nursery school without specialized guidance is not entirely surprising, for three reasons. First, the broader nursery school movement hinged on an understanding of parents as needing professional support to maximize their effectiveness in aiding children’s development. The Highlander Nursery School framed itself, in part, as a mechanism to help parents raise healthier, more educated, and better socialized children.¹⁰⁴ Echoing a

¹⁰¹ Payne to Zhitlowsky, 1942.

¹⁰² *Summerfield News* 3, no. 1, May 1, 1943, box 85, folder 3, HREC, WHS.

¹⁰³ For the announcement about Celia Kraft Preece’s decision not to direct the nursery school, see *Summerfield News* 3, no. 21, June 12, 1943, box 85, folder 3, HREC, WHS. A review of issues of the *Summerfield News* suggests that the nursery school was not operational after Preece’s 1943 withdrawal until Joanna Willimetz (née Creighton) arrived in the summer of 1948. Issues from July and August of 1947 announce the construction of a new nursery school building (see vol. 5, issues 6-8), and issues from July 1948 announce the opening of the nursery school building, the arrival of Willimetz as nursery teacher, and the beginning of the nursery school term (see vol. 7, no. 12, and vol. 7, no. 13). For *Summerfield News* issues between 1938 and 1951, see box 85, folders 3-6, HREC, WHS.

¹⁰⁴ Willimetz, “You Can Have a Nursery or Play School,” frame 795.

stance common in nursery schools of the time, Highlander staff saw the nursery school as providing health and educational benefits that children were not receiving at home. Through arranging for doctors to come to the nursery school to inoculate children against diseases, providing children with hot lunches, and connecting children with peers and with other places across the community, the Highlander Nursery School provided to children what their parents, presumably, were not.

Second, nursery teachers were not immune from a one-dimensional discourse circulating about poor and working-class people in Appalachia that was likely influencing their views on the capacities and potentialities of the community.¹⁰⁵ While Lewis was writing her book comparing the Highlander Nursery School to the Harriet Johnson Nursery School in New York City, she exchanged letters with Highlander staff; in one of them, she expressed her desire to keep the manuscript private from the “Summerfield people,” because although “a good deal of it is complimentary to the people, some of it is not.”¹⁰⁶ And indeed, at times, the book portrays Summerfield as a barren, unskilled, and dilapidated community, echoing common sentiments about Appalachia in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷ The archival materials I reviewed do not suggest that this kind of epistemological gatekeeping and way of relating to the community defined Highlander teachers’ approach. Indeed, public and private writings suggest that nursery school teachers also had plenty of positive and humanizing things to say about community members, especially with regard to parents’ enthusiasm for their children’s education. Yet, instances where local community members are regarded as unfit, undereducated, and unentitled to the stories written about their own lives offer partial hints as to why the nursery school didn’t live on as a community-run institution. By relying on formally educated and class-privileged people from outside Appalachia to direct the nursery school, the Highlander Nursery School hinted at the same paternalism, or, as some scholars argue, *maternalism*, that shaped the early nursery, settlement house, and social welfare movements.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ For studies of the social, cultural, and economic conditions shaping twentieth-century Appalachia, as well as accounts of how Appalachian people have resisted monolithic, deficit-based framings and presented affirming counter-stories, see Karida L. Brown, *Gone Home: Race and Roots through Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Stephen L. Fisher, ed., *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Harry Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963); Steven Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2017); and Connie Park Rice and Marie Tedesco, eds., *Women of the Mountain South: Identity, Work, and Activism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁶ Claudia Lewis to Highlander staff, Sept. 8, 1942, box 18, folder 25, p. 50, HREC, WHS.

¹⁰⁷ See Lewis, *Children of the Cumberland*.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Rose, *A Mother’s Job*; Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 206; Eileen Boris, “The Power of Motherhood: Black and White Activist Women Redefine the ‘Political,’” in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 213-45; and Sonya Michel, “The Limits of Maternalism: Policies toward American Wage-Earning Mothers during the Progressive Era,” in *Mothers of a New World*, 277-320.

Finally, the shortcomings of the nursery school—defined by the tension between the school’s commitment to progressive education and its commitment to community capacity-building—can be understood as part of a larger legacy of struggles at Highlander to align democratic, inclusive, and community-centered theories with organizational practice. While women led the nursery school movement and the Highlander Nursery School itself, Highlander was founded by men. Secondary accounts and accounts from Highlander staff members suggest that Highlander cofounder Myles Horton was not always supportive of women or young people. Candie Carawan, who has been involved in Highlander’s civil rights, cultural, and education work since 1960, recalled that Horton saw young people as a “distraction” to its movement work.¹⁰⁹ Septima Clark, who ran the Citizenship Schools program beginning in 1957, detailed tensions with Horton wherein her leadership and autonomy were undermined.¹¹⁰ Stephen Preskill, citing an interview with former staff member Sue Thrasher, reported that “in the 1970s, many of the female leaders at Highlander who were of childbearing age asked for childcare facilities and better medical coverage for families.”¹¹¹ Preskill described how Myles Horton and then-director Mike Clark neglected to prioritize these requests, leaving them unfulfilled until much later. In his book on Highlander, Frank Adams also recalled, “Highlander was not a family school. No children were permitted in workshops, conferences, or classes. Their presence distracted the adults and impeded the learning process.”¹¹²

My research, however, reveals contrary evidence suggesting that women and children did figure into Highlander’s programming and movement-building approach, at least during the lifespan of the nursery school. Nonetheless, it’s useful to put the nursery school in conversation with tensions that Highlander confronted at other points in its history to show that such theory-practice contradictions and misalignments, indeed, were not isolated to the nursery school; they can be found elsewhere, both in Highlander’s organizational history and throughout the histories of liberatory social movements.

Conclusion

The Highlander Nursery School was a comparatively low-profile, modest institution at the Highlander Folk School. Existing among multi-state programs to educate and mobilize workers across the South, and amid loud backlash from the press, the state, and the owning class, the Highlander Nursery School played a more subtle role in the movement. It succeeded, for a time, in mobilizing local parents to provide the material support and labor necessary to facilitate the care and early education of young children in Summerfield, Tennessee, testifying to Highlander and local residents’ investment in community schooling. The nursery school was also crucial in assuaging local suspicion and even winning the support of some community members who may otherwise have resisted Highlander’s mission to transform race and labor relations. At the same

¹⁰⁹ Personal communication with author, May 1, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 266, 285–86, 294–97.

¹¹¹ Preskill, *Education in Black and White*, 253.

¹¹² Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 77.

time, the nursery school demonstrates the difficulty of aligning progressive educational theories—most of which were emerging out of elite institutions—with democratic, community-driven practice.

With all its complexities and shortcomings, the Highlander Nursery School functioned as part of the care infrastructure for local unemployed people and poor laborers working on farms and in roadways, coal mines, and lumber mills. It met the material and care needs of local families and took the education of young people seriously at a time when the education of children under age six was not widely embraced. In turn, community members dedicated resources, labor, and advocacy to maintaining the school. In the margins and footnotes of Highlander and other transformative social movement organizations, we can find women, care workers, and community members offering what they can to take care of each other, not only as a survival mechanism but as a political commitment. The Highlander Nursery School was both the expression of a community care methodology and a community-building institution through which parents and families mobilized, connected, and pooled their resources in support of children's health and education. It is provocative because it exemplifies the quieter, everyday work of relationship-building and social reproduction that helped Highlander overcome the coordinated assaults on its politics and its very being. The nursery school, and the subsequent efforts at Highlander to support the care and political education of young people that my ongoing research explores, contributes to a reframing of adult education and illuminates the role of children in one of the most enduring Left-aligned movement organizations in the United States. Finally, the experiment in community schooling at the Highlander Nursery School provides an invitation to query how care itself is political work, an experimentation in another way of living, relating, and world-building.

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