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The Salem School And Orphanage: White Missionaries, Black School

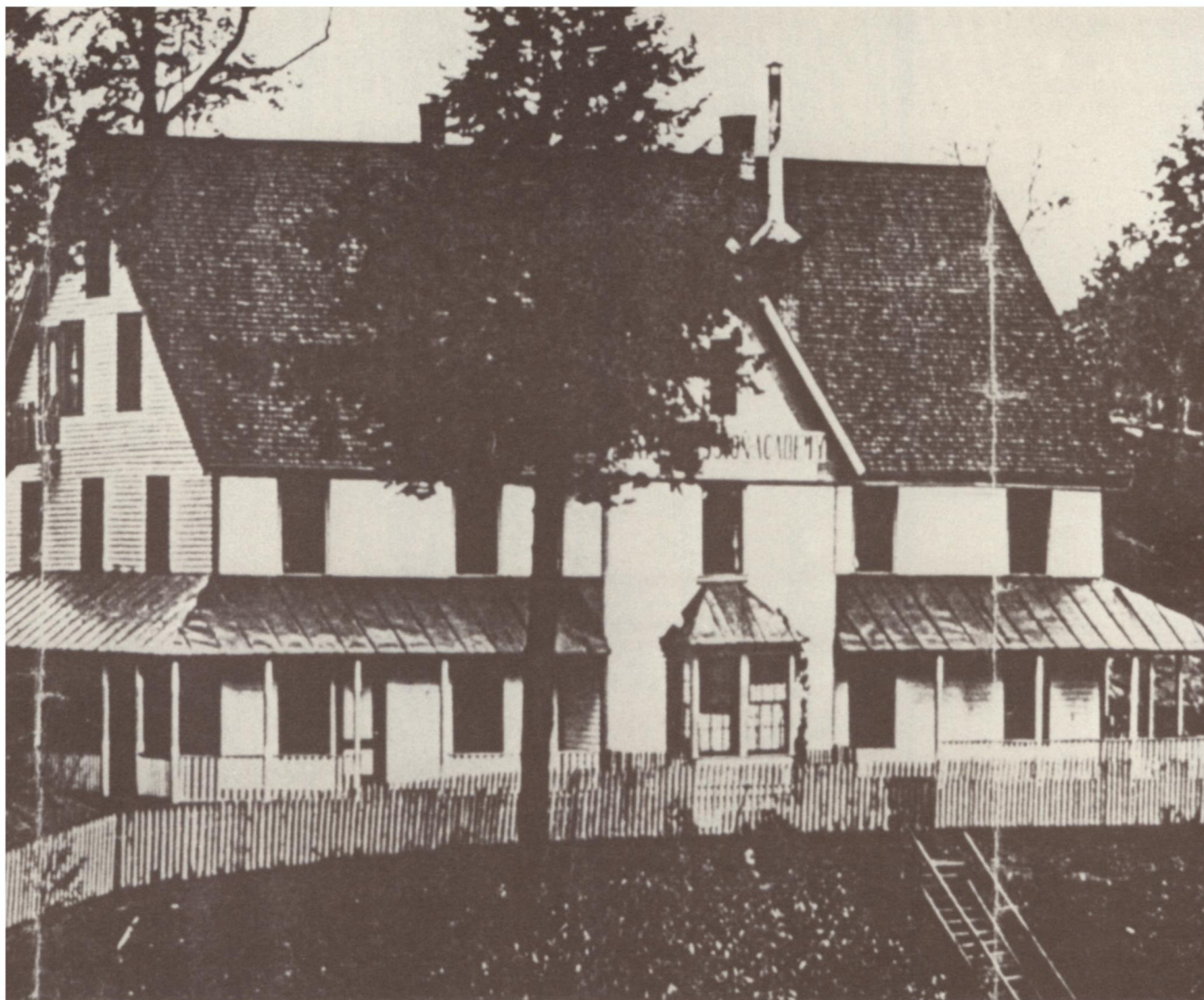
By: **Conrad Ostwalt** and **Phoebe Pollitt**

Abstract

The academic focus on multiculturalism in the late 20th century gives the impression that society was homogeneous until very recently. In particular, and despite the efforts of numerous scholars, the myth persists that the Appalachian region is a static and uniform society made up of poor white mountaineers. But the social and cultural make-up of the region is much more complicated than some are willing to admit, and its history is replete with examples of multicultural encounters and incidences of cooperation. One of the most ecumenical and complex of those was undertaken by the 19th-century religious and social reformers who established the Salem School and Orphanage in Elk Park, North Carolina. In this relatively isolated mountain community, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Mennonite missionaries identified and attempted to address the needs of an African-American community. The Salem School and Orphanage was an anomaly in the mountain reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mission work on behalf of blacks in Appalachia was rare because of entrenched racism, because of the relatively low percentage of African Americans in the region, but more importantly because of a general perception that the greater need was to uplift poverty-stricken mountain whites. James Klotter has argued that the poverty among white mountaineers "allowed some reformers to turn with clear conscience away from blacks" to aid an Appalachia that was characterized by its "whiteness." Klotter's thesis does not account for the Salem School and Orphanage. Its story is all but forgotten and provides a counterpoint to those dominant white-oriented missionary trends. The story of the Salem School can be best understood in the context of the broader missionary educational reform movements of the late 19th century and the unique contribution of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

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Essays



Elk Park Academy dormitory and school, built by Emily Prudden mid-1890s, one of the few missionary schools built for black Appalachian children. Photo courtesy of the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.

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The Salem School and Orphanage

White Missionaries, Black School

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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND MISSIONARY REFORM

In the late 19th century, many Protestant churches sent workers into the Appalachian mission field to establish churches and schools and more generally to work for the betterment of mountaineers through the establishment of church schools and institutions of religious education. Helping mountaineers realize "a more abundant life" describes the mission of a 1924 Lutheran Training School in Virginia⁴ and in general sums up the goal of religious education in Southern Appalachia. For the most part, this movement began with Northern Protestant churches wanting to educate Appalachia's poor white mountaineers and followed other paternalistic attitudes that in general grew out of the history of religious education in the South.

Although education has been a part of the religious enterprise since colonial America, the religious education movement that most affected Southern Appalachia is a product of 19th-century revivalism. During the 1790s and the early part of the 19th century revivals swept the country, including the Southern Mountains, and spawned what is commonly referred to as the Second Great Awakening. This revivalistic era produced many changes in American religion including an evangelistic interest in transforming society and Christianizing culture.⁵

Toward the end of the 18th century, Samuel Hopkins wrote that sin "consists in self love" while "holiness consists in disinterested benevolence."⁶ Hopkins reasoned that it is a Christian's duty to work for the happiness and self-fulfillment of others and that this selflessness would result in good works

directed toward his or her neighbors and toward society in general.⁷ From this philosophical stance issued a proliferation of religious reform, mission, and educational societies. Some of these, such as the American Education Society of 1816, were interdenominational while others, such as the Presbyterian United Domestic Missionary Society of 1826, had a vested denominational interest. Nevertheless, these societies sought to provide educational opportunities where none existed, and during the 19th century, they made great strides in providing such opportunities in the West and South.⁸ Of course, in practice this benevolent outreach was not as disinterested as it was in theory; however, the educational thrust did at least begin with the idea of providing a service where a need existed.

Organized education on a large scale was nonexistent in Appalachia in the early 19th century. Although by mid-century there were state-supported schools for white children, public funds came late to the mountains, and most early efforts at education were the products of missionary enterprises.⁹ Following the Civil War, some reform, which had originally focused on the problem of slavery,¹⁰ began to turn attention toward the problem of education in the Appalachian high country.¹¹ Specifically, reform-minded societies recognized the absence or scarcity of public funds for education in the mountain regions and turned their sights toward providing educational opportunities. Naturally, denominations viewed the mountains both as a needy place and as a foothold for the expansion of their churches. By 1880, the practice of founding church-related mission schools had begun in earnest, and 17 separate denominational mission schools existed in Southern Appalachia by 1920.¹²

Following the general theme of reform, these mission schools for the most part were dominated by their own paternalistic attitudes. Their goal was to educate and “save” the mountain children from illiteracy and ignorance. For example, the Konnarock Training School of Virginia was a 1920s project of the Woman’s Missionary Society of the United Lutheran Church. The school was organized to throw “light upon [the] great problem of rural education”¹³ and to help untutored mountain girls overcome their impoverished backgrounds. This same emphasis is clearly illustrated in a set of 1912 photographs taken at the Oneida Institute, an early 20th-century Baptist mission school in Kentucky. The first photograph pictured five young girls as “they enter school” poorly dressed, disheveled, and completely lacking in refinement. The second picture showed seven young ladies “after about a year at Oneida”; they are well dressed, properly groomed, and more refined.¹⁴ The implication was obvious. The mission schools were seeking to civilize what their founders perceived to be untutored natives of a backwoods area.

This civilization process always meant Christianization, for the missionaries who came to the mountains to found schools and churches viewed the area as brutal and heathenish, a place ripe for “God’s work.”¹⁵ For “disinterested benevolence” to succeed, Christianity had to be considered the solution to social ills, and so the job of educating children never completely su-

perseded the job of winning souls. In fact, the two tasks were seen as mutually dependent; educating children and pursuing other reform projects were merely the results of evangelism. This attitude was summed up by James Anderson Burns, the co-founder and president of the Oneida Institute:

Religious education solves our mountain problems as nothing else can do. As teachers we do not preach less than missionary pastors. We preach every Sunday and our teaching all the week is to the same effect ... our mission schools are missionary enterprises ... [and] are training schools for our churches and communities.¹⁶

Against this backdrop, the work of Emily Prudden in Elk Park might seem to fit this model of mission school development. After all, Prudden was a woman from the Northeast, the product of a liberal Protestant tradition who moved to the South to improve life or at the very least, in David Whisnant's terms, to intervene culturally in a seemingly alien society.¹⁷

Prudden was the daughter of a reform-minded family from Connecticut. She was nearly deaf for most of her adult life. As she approached her 50th birthday, she was left without family and was evidently growing restless. In 1882 an old friend asked her to help with educational mission work at the Brainard Institute in Chester, South Carolina. Brainard was established by the New School Presbyterian Church to educate former slaves. Prudden's experience at Brainard echoes the predominant paternalism Whisnant describes, yet Prudden's own assessment of her work lacks the hard edge found in the memories of some religious educators of that day:

The girls in this home were taught in the public school ... so for six hours daily I was free to visit the poor cabins, both colored and white [The children were] without advantage, no school, no church, no society ... I thought of my own school days, still a joy to remember and would say to myself, "You could build a home in some lovely place where every influence is pure and uplifting, and take fifteen girls and train them as your own, and send them out to live useful lives."¹⁸

Even though much of Prudden's experience resembles Whisnant's description of white liberal paternalism in Appalachia, her work differs from that pattern. Of the 15 schools Prudden established in rural North and South Carolina, seven were for African-American children at a time when schools were segregated by law and when most other missionary reformers, almost always white themselves, usually worked with white people, especially in Southern Appalachia, and built white institutions. And the subsequent evolution of Prudden's work at the Salem School under the influence of the Mennonites departed even further from the traditional pattern of paternalistic cultural intervention. The Mennonite Brethren made the Salem School a forum for cultural interaction, bringing the mountain African-American community, described as a "neglected minority within a neglected minority,"¹⁹

into contact with Kansas missionaries who were Russian emigres and who had memories of religious persecution.

THE SALEM EXPERIMENT

In the 1800s, Elk Park, nestled deep in the Blue Ridge mountains just a mile from the Tennessee border, was a very small rural settlement. Most families lived on small farms and hunted and fished in the surrounding mountains. There were no schools, newspapers, or central governing body. Public schools were plagued by inadequate facilities, ludicrous classroom conditions (a single teacher responsible for 40 pupils, who might range in age from six to 21), makeshift curricula that covered little more than the three Rs plus history and geography, teachers who were paid little and who were often hired on the basis of family and political connections rather than competence, and the absence of mandatory attendance laws.²⁰ Under such conditions the coming of the mission schools and educators like Emily Prudden seemed a godsend.

But before the arrival of Emily Prudden in Elk Park came the Reverend Robert Payne Pell, a white Presbyterian minister who was the first link in the chain of events leading to the founding of the Salem School and Orphanage. Pell arrived around 1890.²¹ His first task was to build a Presbyterian church. And given the dismal condition of education there, Pell and many of his new congregation soon decided to sponsor and build a school, following the typical settlement-school pattern of the time.²² Familiar with the work of Emily Prudden, Pell asked her to come to Elk Park and help with a school for white children. Prudden agreed, and soon over 300 white children were attending the Elk Park Academy, funded through the cooperative efforts of the Presbyterian and Congregational missionary movements.

Prudden was soon joined by five missionary workers from Cleveland, and the teachers worked diligently both at the school and also among the residents around Elk Park. For example, teachers held "Mothers' Meetings" to teach basic concepts of nutrition, child rearing, and sanitation; they also began a religious youth group, offering activities and fellowship to local teenagers; and they passed out or sold clothing and household items donated by Northern supporters. Prudden wrote that these activities alone were enough to keep five teachers busy. However, something else continued to nag at Prudden. She felt the need to heed the Bible's call to "do for the least of these," and she interpreted this call to mean help for the children of the small African-American community around Elk Park.²³

This decision was predictable given Prudden's exposure to Reconstruction experiments such as the Brainard Institute and her own work starting African-American schools such as the Lincoln Academy near Gastonia in 1886 and her possible exposure to African-American education at Berea College in 1878.²⁴ Nevertheless, her decision to educate mountain blacks is

remarkable for its Appalachian setting because it marks a departure from the normal settlement-school pattern of the region to provide "a more abundant life" for poor white mountaineers only. In fact, given the times and the context, Prudden's experiment seems no less than phenomenal.²⁵

In 1894, Prudden bought four acres of land and built a school in Elk Park for the African-American children of the surrounding area, which included Avery, Mitchell, and Watauga counties. Only one of the Cleveland missionaries who had been working with white mountain children chose to teach in the new school, and local attitudes soon made it difficult to attract teachers, as explained by the later writings of Mennonite missionaries:

When she [Prudden] bought the piece of land for the school for the colored people, no one knew for what purpose it was intended. Therefore she was able to select a lovely hillside which overlooked the whole town of Elk Park. The fine building and location for the colored people caused so much hatred and jealousy among the white people that they succeeded in frightening away the early occupants and Miss Prudden could no longer get teachers for the school.²⁶

There is no record of the abuses suffered by the early teachers, and Prudden, in her autobiographical sketch, glosses over this period, saying the suffering and distress in their work would appear in their "tear book," if it were ever written. Deeds recorded at the Mitchell County Courthouse show Prudden gave the land and school building to the American Missionary Association (AMA), the home mission branch of the Congregational Church, in 1897 and that the AMA deeded it back to Prudden in 1900.²⁷ Presumably, the local resistance to educating African-American children was so strong that the AMA could not recruit teachers (or chose not to). Committed to providing schooling for the African-American children around Elk Park, Prudden "sent a call westward" for Christian teachers who could be financially supported by their home churches to come and teach in her school.

Peter Wiebe, a Russian-born Mennonite missionary working in Flat Lick, Kentucky, heard about Prudden's plight, and he informed the Krimmer Mennonite leadership of the need for teachers in Elk Park. The Krimmer Mennonite Conference decided to expand their missionary program in the Southern Appalachians and asked for a married couple to teach and preach in the North Carolina mountains.²⁸ Peter Wiebe's son Henry and his wife Elizabeth Wiebe, both also born in Russia and both recent emigres to the Mennonite community in Kansas, had met and married there in 1898. They answered the call to work in the North Carolina mountains, and they set out for Elk Park in the spring of 1900. Unfortunately, by the time they arrived, the schoolhouse had been rented to a white family, and Prudden had to arrange for the Wiebes to teach summer school near Hudson in Caldwell County, about 40 miles away.²⁹

A former student at the Elk Park African-American school, the Reverend Rhonda (Rondo) Horton (deceased 1986), remembered the Wiebes:



Salem Mission after the Krimmer Mennonites took over the Elk Park Academy in 1900. African-American students, teachers, and Mennonite missionaries. The Tschetters and the Wiebes are in the back row.

They came first to a place near Hudson ... I don't remember how long they were there, but not very long They started a mission and they opened this little school down there. They opened the school and the [Mennonites], they never segregated black people And then they went over to [Elk Park] and started a school over there. There was a lady that had a school, a church school. I forgot her name. And the Krimmer Mennonites bought her school and started a school there for white and black children. And [white people] told them they couldn't run it, that it was against the law. The law wouldn't allow them to run the school that way, that they would have to take one group; they couldn't mix them. And they felt that the black children needed school worse and they took the black children and started this school.³⁰

The Wiebes returned to Elk Park in the fall of 1900, ready to start a new school term with the African-American children from the surrounding community. On the second morning of school a note was attached to Wiebe's door: "We the citizens of Elk Park will not allow for a white man to stoop so low as to teach the niggers, they have enough of their own color to teach them. Your time is up! After this day."³¹ But the Wiebes and their students persisted even as tension built; however, no serious episodes of violence occurred. After that first year of operation, the Wiebes returned to

Kansas planning to seek a new mission field. When a petition arrived from African-American citizens in Elk Park asking them to return and reopen the school, the Wiebes consented. The Krimmer Mennonites bought the school-house and eight acres of land, and the Wiebes and their students built out-buildings including a chicken house, granary, and barns; and together the Wiebes and their students started farming in addition to doing school work.³²

During the second year of the school, the Kansas missionaries faced a new challenge. Mrs. Wiebe recalled:

After we had been back for a few days a colored boy, twelve years of age came to our place and begged to stay with us. He was sick, poorly clad and homeless. We didn't know just what to do, but we couldn't turn him away, for judging from appearances he had not long to live Before long another homeless child arrived ... the homeless children kept coming.³³

After conferring with the mission board, the Wiebes started an orphanage that could care for 20 children. The Kansas Mennonites supported the work with food, grain, clothing, and household items, and the school and orphanage both expanded during that year. This expansion probably increased local hostility to the institution, for Mrs. Wiebe reported that during the second year "there still were some people who tried to scare us out by bombarding the place with giant firecrackers at night."³⁴ Still the missionaries and the children persisted.

The third year brought more changes to the Salem Mission when another Kansas Mennonite family, the Reverend Jacob Tschetter and his wife and children, joined the Wiebes in Elk Park. A large addition was made to the house to accommodate the Tschetters and the growing number of homeless children; a chapel was constructed; and two local African-American women, Alice Garnett and Gertrude Sapp, started teaching at the school. Despite the missionaries' work in improving relations with the local community, acceptance was rare. Mrs. Wiebe remembered:

During the third year one evening Brother Wiebe was asked to come outdoors, as there was someone to see him. We knew who he was and from his reputation we judged that he had no good intentions. I persuaded Brother Wiebe to stay in the house and felt that it had been the right thing, when in the morning we found the lower front steps loaded with fist size rocks. This was the place where the man stood and waited for Brother Wiebe the night before.³⁵

Sentiment ran high against Tschetter as well, evidenced in the musings of a white Mitchell County citizen: "We boys would often decide that we would run him [Tschetter] out of town, but you can't hurt a man who prayed like he did."³⁶

Eventually, the Wiebes left Elk Park in 1908, though the Tschetters stayed until around 1912. Nevertheless, the remote location and enduring local hostility took their toll, and the Salem Mission closed in 1912. After this closing, the Krimmer Mennonite Conference maintained a presence in the area but changed its focus to establishing Mennonite churches throughout the region.³⁷ Eventually several African-American Mennonite Churches were established in western North Carolina. Alice Garnett and Gertrude Sapp continued to teach the Salem children in a segregated public school, and the old school grounds, consisting of eight acres and several buildings, were sold to a white family and later became the first hospital in Elk Park. Today one original building, in very poor repair, remains standing on the site, and there are currently no African-American citizens in Elk Park.³⁸

The story of the Salem Mission inspires sadness. The links between a North Carolina Presbyterian minister, a Connecticut Congregationalist, and Russian immigrant Mennonites demonstrate a unique experiment in multicultural interaction and ecumenical cooperation. Courage and devotion described not only Emily Prudden, the Wiebes, and the Tschetters but also the children who attended the Salem School or who lived at the orphanage. In the end, racism played a role in ending the Salem Mission, but its short life demonstrates an important departure from the norm we have come to expect of missionary-inspired education efforts in the Appalachian mountains.

NOTES

1. A number of scholars have dealt with racial matters and multiculturalism in Appalachia. See Michael C. Cooke, "Race Relations in Montgomery County, Virginia, 1870-1990," in *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association*, 4 (1992), 94-104; John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict (1780-1980)* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987); Conrad Ostwalt, "Crossing of Cultures: The Mennonite Brethren of Boone, North Carolina," in *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association*, 4 (1992), 105-12; Robert P. Stuckert, "Black Populations of the Southern Appalachian Mountains," *Phylon*, 48:2 (Summer 1987), 141-51; Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); *Blacks in Appalachia*, ed. William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985); Margaret Ripley Wolfe, "The Appalachian Reality: Ethnic and Class Diversity," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, Nos. 52 & 53 (1980-81), pp. 40-60.
2. James C. Klotter, *The Journal of American History*, 66:4 (March 1980), 849.
3. Unfortunately, this reconstruction is based largely on sources from white missionaries and educators. With the exception of the Rhonda Horton interview, which is cited below, there is no direct testimony from African Americans concerning this episode.
4. See Catherine Cox Umbarger, "KONNAROCK—An Experiment in Education," *Mountain Life & Work*, 6 (April 1930), 6.
5. See Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), pp. 143-5.
6. Samuel Hopkins, "Disinterested Benevolence," in H. Shelton Smith, Robert T.

Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), Vol. I, p. 542. For the doctrine of "disinterested benevolence," see Samuel Hopkins, *The System of Doctrines Contained in Divine Revelation Explained and Defended*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1811), Vol. I, pp. 465-77.

7. See also Nathaniel W. Taylor in Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, *American Christianity*, II, pp. 28-36.

8. See Hudson, pp. 143-8.

9. See H.E. Everman, "The Early Educational Channels of Bourbon County," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 73 (1975), 136-49, and Neal O'Steen, "Pioneer Education in the Tennessee Country," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 35 (1976), 199-219. For the history of public funds and education in North Carolina (particularly the Literacy Fund), see Edgar W. Knight, *Public Education in North Carolina* (New York, 1916), pp. 140-4. See also the State Superintendent's Reports for 1840, 1850, 1853, and 1855 by Calvin Wiley, U.S. Bureau of Education, *Beginnings of the Common School System in the South* (Government Printing Office, 1888), pp. 1442-6.

10. Richard B. Drake, "The Mission School Era in Southern Appalachia: 1880-1940," *Appalachian Notes*, 6 (1978), 3.

11. See David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), p. 9 for explanation of this pattern. See also Klotter.

12. Drake, pp. 2-3. See also John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (New York, 1921), p. 271.

13. Catherine Cox Umbarger, "KONNAROCK," p. 3.

14. See Samuel W. Thomas, ed., *Dawn Comes to the Mountains* (Louisville: George Rogers Clark Press, Inc., 1981), pp. 44-5.

15. Drake, p. 4.

16. J.A. Burns, *The Baptist Argus* (23 June 1904), p. 2 as printed in Thomas, *Dawn Comes to the Mountains*, p. 37. See also E.V. Tadlock, "Church Problems in the Mountains," *Mountain Life & Work*, 6 (1930), 6ff.

17. Whisnant, p. 13. See also pp. 7-8 for the pattern of mission school settlement.

18. Emily C. Prudden, "An Autobiographical Sketch," *The American Missionary*, April 1914, pp. 737-43.

19. Edward J. Cabbell, "Black Invisibility and Racism in Appalachia: An Informal Survey," *Appalachian Journal*, 8:1 (Fall 1980), 48-54; *Blacks in Appalachia*, edited by Turner and Cabbell, p. 3.

20. See Daniel Whitener, *History of Watauga County* (Boone: Souvenir of the Watauga County Centennial). See also Robert Woodside, "The Educational Development of Avery County" (Masters Thesis, Appalachian State University, 1952).

21. Correspondence with Diana Ruby Sanderson, Assistant Research Historian, Presbyterian Study Center, Montreat, N.C., dated January 26, 1989.

22. Prudden, p. 739.

23. Prudden, p. 739.

24. Church records from the First Congregational Church of Milford, Conn., indicate that Emily Prudden and Jane Jeanette Colton, her niece, were dismissed to the Congregational Church in Berea, Kentucky, in 1878. Presumably they went to Berea to teach, although there are no records of the two either at Berea College or at the Congregational Church in Berea.

25. See John L. Bell, "Lawrence Augustus Oxley: The Beginnings of Social Work Among Blacks in North Carolina Counties," *Journal of the Appalachian Studies Association*, 3 (1991). Prudden also attempted to run an integrated school in Caldwell County circa 1895.

26. Elizabeth Pauls Wiebe, "The Founding and Pioneer Work of the K.M.B. Mountain Mission in N.C.," *The Christian Witness*, March 15, 1950, p. 5.

27. Deeds recorded in the Mitchell County Courthouse in Book 28 on pages 64 and 66.

28. See Katherine Siemens Richert, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Fresno, Calif.: Jet Print, 1984).
29. See Joel A. Wiebe, Raymond F. Wiebe, and Vernon R. Wiebe, *The Groening-Wiebe Family, 1768-1974* (Hillsboro, Kan.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1974).
30. Taped interview July 31, 1984, with the Reverend Rhonda Horton by Dr. Cheryl Claassen, available at the Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.
31. Wiebe, p. 6.
32. Correspondence with Raymond F. Wiebe dated August 12, 1991. See also Richert, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, p. 6.
33. Wiebe, p. 6.
34. Wiebe, p. 6.
35. Wiebe, pp. 6-7.
36. Woodside, "The Educational Development of Avery County," p. 53.
37. See Conrad Ostwalt, "The Junaluska Community of Boone," *Watauga County Times Past*, No. 26, June 1991.
38. 1990 Census of the United States.