



John C. Campbell Folk School: Diary of a Class--Tinsmithing

Folk school offers hundreds of week-long classes year-round on skills ranging from basketry and blacksmithing to gardening, tinsmithing and story telling.

By Karen Keb Acevedo

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Is there a yearning inside you to do meaningful work with your hands? As farmers, we can agree that this is a given.

Whether your desire leads you to the garden, the kitchen or the workshop, there is a folk school, nestled in the southern Appalachian mountains, that will inspire idle hands to do great things.

The John C. Campbell Folk School, situated on 300 acres in Brasstown, N.C., offers hundreds of week-long classes year-round on skills such as basketry, blacksmithing, cooking, dancing, dyeing, gardening, knitting, metalwork, music, quilting, soap making, sewing, spinning, storytelling, weaving, woodworking and so much more.

How the School Began

John C. Campbell, born in 1867 in Indiana, studied education and theology in New England, and eventually felt a calling toward humanitarian work.

In 1908, John and his wife, Olive Dame, undertook a study of the Appalachian mountains, which at the time were viewed as fertile ground for educational and social missions.

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John interviewed farmers about their agricultural methods and Olive collected traditional ballads and studied the handicrafts of the mountain people.

John and Olive hoped to improve the lives of the mountain people with education and, in turn, wanted to preserve their everyday crafts, techniques and tools by sharing them with the rest of the world.

John and Olive's vision manifested into the idea of recreating the Danish "folkehøjskole" (folk high school, or "schools for life") that had helped transform the Danish countryside into a vibrant, creative force. After John's sudden death in 1919, Olive and her friend, Marguerite Butler, traveled to Europe to observe these Danish schools. They returned with an enthusiastic determination to create a folk school in Appalachia.

With the help of an eager mountain community that embraced the idea of such a school in their area, the school took shape with donated land, labor and building materials. In 1925, the John C. Campbell Folk School opened its doors by offering a 6-month course for young farmers.

No Grades, Just Support and Learning

Over time, the curriculum evolved, but instruction at the Folk School has always been non-competitive.



There are no credits, grades or competitions. Discussion and conversation are emphasized, rather than reading and writing, and most instruction is hands-on. This teaching method is what the Danes called “The Living Word” and it’s an environment designed for communal learning, without judgment, destined to bring out the best in people.

Students of all ages who enroll at the Folk School come with an open mind, an attitude toward learning and a desire to embrace their inner creativity.

This supportive environment is designed to meet its goals, which are twofold: “inner growth as creative, thoughtful individuals and social development as tolerant, caring members of a community,” says Folk School director, Jan Davidson. Though lifestyles are much different than they were in 1925, the tradition of crafts, music, nature, cooking and dance are still meaningful to people today. These traditions are best learned and nurtured in a noncompetitive, supportive environment—the antithesis of much of our daily fast-paced, regimented lives.

The Folk School’s moniker is “Sing Behind the Plow,” which sums up beautifully its mission: to love what you do, whatever it may be.

A Week at the Folk School

Classes generally run from Sunday to Saturday. A typical week at the Folk School begins on Sunday afternoon when you register, find your room, meet your roommate(s) and attend a brief orientation. Supper is then served, family style, in the Olive Dame Campbell dining hall, followed by a short meeting with your class.

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Studio visits are always encouraged so students can get an idea of what other students are doing. On Monday morning, if you desire, you can rise early and enjoy a morning walk through the woods on the chip-bark trails, then help yourself to coffee, tea and the newspaper at Keith House. Morning Song, the Danish custom of singing, folklore and camaraderie, begins at 7:45 and is led by someone different each day. Breakfast is served at 8:15.

After breakfast, students walk to their respective studios and begin learning—by doing—at their own pace. Classes are kept small, usually no more than 12 students, so instructors have time to work with each individual. Lunch is served at 12:15.

Each day after class ends at 4:45, students are encouraged to explore local art and culture with organized visits to shops of area artisans, nature walks or craft demonstrations. Dinner is served at 6:15, followed by evening offerings of dance, singing or studio tours to view the works of other students.

The week culminates on Friday with the student exhibit. Gathering in the Keith House Community Room, students display the fruits of their week-long labor and view the creative work of new friends. Ironworks, quilts, baskets and woodturned bowls can be admired, often prompting students to identify the next class they wish to take! After supper, a celebratory concert of bluegrass or old-time music by local musicians is held at the Festival Barn.

The week closes with Saturday breakfast, where you’ll bid farewell to newfound friends and promise to keep in touch. What you’ll take away is both tangible and intangible ... “You’ve created your own work of art. You’ve experienced the tradition and history of the Appalachians and you’ll depart with an inspiration and renewal that can only be found in this special place,” says Davidson.

Diary of a Class

Class: Tinsmithing

Class description: “Use tools and methods of 19th century tinsmiths to reproduce household items of the period.”

Tinsmithing is a true artisan craft. Precise and technical, it requires focused concentration, knowledge of specialized tools and techniques learned over time, and a constant desire for improvement. Like blacksmithing, it’s a craft that must be practiced for many years before one can be considered a master or, for some, merely proficient.

According to Charles A. Hartwell in *Simple Gifts*, the first American tinsmiths worked in New England in the early part of the 18th century. In the 19th century, the role of tinware was the same as plastic plays today. Tinplate was a new, miracle material, popular because it was light, easy to clean and relatively inexpensive. It could be formed into plenty of useful shapes, including decorative household items such as sconces and lanterns, and utilitarian items for the kitchen, farm and



dairy, such as baking trays, cups and buckets.

The advent of modern materials such as aluminum, plastic and stainless steel has resulted in the near extinction of commercially produced tinware, but individual tinsmiths are keeping the craft alive.

Modern tinplate is made of a sheet of steel coated with tin; earlier tinplate used iron instead of steel. Tin by itself is a soft, fairly weak metal with a low melting point (about 450 degrees F), but steel provides strength, while the tin coating provides resistance to corrosion.

A working tinshop contains many tools and a mind-numbing array of equipment: machines for folding and turning edges (bar folder); for closing metal around wires (wiring machine); for beading and seaming; stakes for shaping the metal into various configurations; punches for making holes; mallets and hammers of many shapes and materials (metal, leather and wood); pliers; tin snips; wire cutters; rulers; calipers; scratch awls; soldering coppers; and many, many other items that help to turn out expertly crafted items.

I was intrigued by tinsmithing, having done metalwork in college, so I enrolled in the class, taught by Harry Kruppenbach. Class was held in the metalwork studio, replete with all of the tools and equipment mentioned previously. Here's a glimpse of my week as a beginning tinsmith.

Sunday

After supper, our class gathered with the instructors for the initial rundown of the week. Harry and his assistant, Clinton Pitts, Jr., introduced the eight tinsmithing students to the metalwork studio and to the tools and equipment we'd be using that week.

Harry brought a variety of hard-to-find books on the subject and plenty of finished samples of his work for class inspiration. We each selected a workstation and familiarized ourselves with the tinware and other items we'd need to begin our work. Tools and machines were assembled on a large center table that ran the length of the studio. Of the eight students, four had no experience with tin (including me); the other four had varying degrees of experience, some having taken Harry's class multiple times, claiming it to be addictive!

Monday

After breakfast, class began in earnest. Harry started with a series of demonstrations to get the newbies started on our first project—a petticoat (simple candleholder). We learned the proper way to cut tin, file and dull edges; how to shape pieces with a mallet over various stakes (blowhorn and candel mold); and how to use the bar folder and crimping tool. By the end of the day, I had fabricated pieces for three different projects.

As a matter of course, after supper, many students like to return to the studios to continue working on their projects. However, this is optional. I understand the nature of Folk School students to be that they love and enjoy their crafts; they have an accomplishment-driven nature; and they want to persevere into the night. The atmosphere in the studios gets a little more relaxed in the evenings as students wind down from the day. Quiet time begins at 10 p.m. so students can rest up and do it all over again the next day.

Tuesday

We all began the day by working quietly on the previous day's projects. Each student had a different item they had selected to make, based on the patterns and samples provided by Harry. If you wanted to make a sconce or a tray, you could select one from the patterns and go about snipping, filing and fabricating; Harry and Clinton were eager to assist and encouraged us to think big.

Tuesday afternoon was the long-awaited soldering demonstration, which at that point was the missing puzzle piece that would take our random pieces of tin and turn them into recognizable objects.

Soldering involves four things: heat, clean metal, flux and solder. Harry demonstrated the procedure of joining two pieces of tin together by heating the soldering copper, cleaning the pieces, fluxing the joints and finally touching the copper to solder and waiting for the heat to do its job.

Our soldering jobs came out with varying degrees of success—some fairly neat and shiny, others thick and bumpy. We learned that soldering is serious business; patience and practice is required to become skilled at it.

Wednesday

With soldering under my belt, I was able to complete several pieces, including the petticoat, a simple wall sconce and a



punts pot (an 18th century pot that held particles of quill ink). I loved the challenge of soldering and as it turned out, I wasn't too bad at it.

I began fabricating a bakers' tray—a piece that seemed simple enough. Ha! One solid piece of tin, snipped from a pattern, required swedging (the repetitive pounding of a swedging hammer machine) to elevate the sides to form the tray.

One spot had to be swedged one way and another had to be swedged in the opposite direction to form the end folds. Finally, to create strength, the edges had to be folded with the bar folder to accept a 14-gauge wire.

After many derailings with the wiring machine, I was able to tuck the wire into place and seal the seams. As a beginner, I needed a lot of help from Clinton and Harry, who gave it happily and patiently. All my projects were expertly guided by them and never did I feel lost or hopeless.

Thursday

I began work on a scalloped wall sconce, my most ambitious project yet.

After snipping and filing all the pieces, I discovered I had performed a critical step out of order. I had cut out the scalloped edge before creating a seam around the smooth face of the oval.

Harry declared I was “sunk” and informed me I should start over, but when I inquired with Clinton about approaching this problem unconventionally (attempting to seam the pattern freehand with the seaming machine), with a raised eyebrow, he encouraged me to try it. He set up the machine and we ran through a few practice pieces.

Convinced I could do this, I tentatively guided the scalloped edge around with the crank. After two semi-successful turns, it was finished. I had conquered the impossible! I then fabricated the wired arm, the candleholder and cup, and finished by soldering everything together. I felt a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment in this piece.

Friday

I wanted to turn out one final project before class ended, so I chose a simple angel form that required no soldering—just forming the shape of the angel's skirt and wings over the blowhorn stake. I added a few personal touches in the form of punched holes around the body of the skirt and crimped edges. I completed all the pieces by cleaning and polishing them with butcher's wax.

Throughout the week, my classmates freely complimented each other on jobs well done and I felt a real sense of camaraderie among the group. We admired each others' work, offered suggestions if we had learned a valuable tip from someone else and laughed when we produced a “humility piece” (something you're “not too proud of” as one experienced student explained).

The spirit of the Folk School lives in the studios, with artisans and craftspeople learning together supportively and free from the creativity-killing, dehumanizing competitiveness we often face in the world, particularly in the workplace. If more people and institutions adopted the principles of folkehøjskole, I have no doubt the world would be a more contented place.

About the Author

Karen Keb Acevedo is editor in chief of Hobby Farms and Hobby Farm Home magazines.

* In part two of this series, read the diary of a Folk School woodturning student in the Summer issue of HFH.

This article first appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of Hobby Farm Home. Buy a copy of the current issue online.