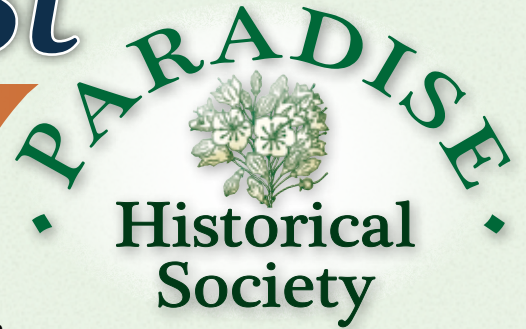


Paradise Past

THE NEWSLETTER
OF THE



VOLUME 36 • Fall 2024



PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Franklin Eccher spoke at our October 6, 2024, meeting about a subject that has fascinated many people in our area for generations: the Pocono People's College. It was located in Henryville, on land above Paradise Creek, which is today known as Hunter Farm.

This issue of the Society's newsletter is dedicated to sharing information from that program. Frank introduced his talk this way:

I came to this work from an experimental college, a folk-school kind of place, called Outer Coast, a new college in southeast Alaska. Outer Coast works to reimagine college for rural and indigenous populations. It echoes some of what is known about the Pocono People's College, a school that was intended to be of the people, and for the people, with all the complexities and contradictions of that idea.

Frank is working on a Ph.D. in history at UPenn, and was awarded the first Lillian Hamblin Nelson research grant by our Society. The complete text of his paper on the "rise, fall, and afterlife of the Pocono People's College" in Henryville is available online. Visit our home page at paradisichistorical.org, scroll down and click on the red PDF icon at the left labeled "Franklin Eccher Research Paper."

Please be sure to check the back page of this newsletter for details about the Society's Holiday Party at the Ace Store on Sunday, December 15th, 2024.

I hope you enjoy learning more about Pocono People's College! [PHS](#)

Jane Jane Niering, *President*

the People's College:

Franklin Eccher began his talk by saying he "stumbled across Pocono People's College by accident," in a journal essay about W.E.B. Du Bois. Born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and educated at Harvard, Du Bois was the leading Black intellectual of his era. When he planned a people's college in Atlanta in the 1940s, the person he consulted was Soren Mathiasen. Mathiasen had founded Pocono People's College near Henryville, Pennsylvania, in 1923, and directed the school until 1930.

Having founded a school very similar to this, and having recently moved to Philadelphia, Eccher was intrigued. Why was a well-known intellectual like Du Bois poking around Henryville? Chasing that lead took him to the Monroe County Historical Society, and eventually to John and Laura Layton.

He quickly learned that a haze of contested, fuzzy memories surrounded Pocono People's College in our area, especially focused on the apparently scandalous aspects.

Eccher says Pocono People's College operated from 1924 to 1929 as a folk school for adult learners, without reference to their prior

Folk Education and the Pedagogy of the Interwar Adult Education Movement

academic records. It was part of a larger progressive movement of projects which sought to create non-traditional education programs primarily for white rural folks in Appalachia and the Midwest.

These self-education folk schools were based on a specific set of principles, a mix of opposites: work-related learning and liberal arts, practical labor and classroom learning, blended together in a familial environment. A goal was to create authentic situations that mattered to the adult students, to help them understand their own position and opportunities in society and the economy, and to think about and discuss all that with staff and faculty.

Eccher is interested in a technique in the study of history called micro-history in which "you can shine a light through one

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COLLECTING, PRESERVING, AND DISSEMINATING PARADISE HISTORY

The People's College: Folk Education and the Pedagogy of the Interwar Adult Education Movement

Continued from Page 1 event, place, or person, which can illuminate understanding about wider ideas. The Pocono People's College is an opening to much more about the 20th century, progressivism, civil rights, rural values, and many other phenomena," he said.

Pocono People's College was located on land developed by Henry Hulbert, a prominent economic booster in Paradise Valley. He was enthusiastic about the college coming to Hulbert Hill, believing it would create interest among well-to-do people in the Northeast — which it did. (A "Johanna Mathisen" appears in the property tax records for Henryville before Soren moved there: the same name is listed as Soren's mother on his wedding certificate. It is possible Mathiasen chose the location because of this connection.)

For travelers arriving at Henryville train station, it was a short buggy ride up to the Pocono People's College, though the road was poor. A later project of the students was building the extension of the road that runs behind the Hunter Farm property.

The former college had been unoccupied and derelict for nearly two decades when William T. Hunter bought the property. Hunter Farm included the old college buildings where the extended family would gather and enjoy family square dances.

To find first-hand narratives about the College, Eccher said, he identified names of important faculty, found where their archives were located, and scoured those archives for material about their time at the College.

Information was found in public and university archives in Arizona, Michigan, Boston Public Library, the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations, and New York University, among others. On a road trip through Appalachia, he found evidence of many other projects like Pocono People's College. Was this an Appalachian story or a Pocono story?

Three pieces of evidence interested him:

1. An email from Al Hall, a resident of Barrett Township and professor at ESU, asking whether students or faculty had studied what happened at Pocono People's College. Responses included that it closed when (a) "the president ran off with a student," or (b) "the president ran off with his secretary." So this is about truth: were the founders of Pocono People's College snake oil salesmen? Or did they believe in what they were doing?
2. A news item describing Soren Mathiasen speaking with Olive Dame Campbell, at a folk education forum in 1930. The Pocono People's College no longer existed and Eccher never thought of the Poconos as part of the Appalachian mountains. So was this an "Appalachian project" basically?
3. A 1930 letter from W.E.B. Du Bois to Mathiasen expressing "tremendous" interest in the Pocono People's College, and saying "I'm not sure but what I might want to start an experiment of the sort here myself." So why would the leading Black intellectual of the time want to meet with Mathiasen to talk about this model of education?



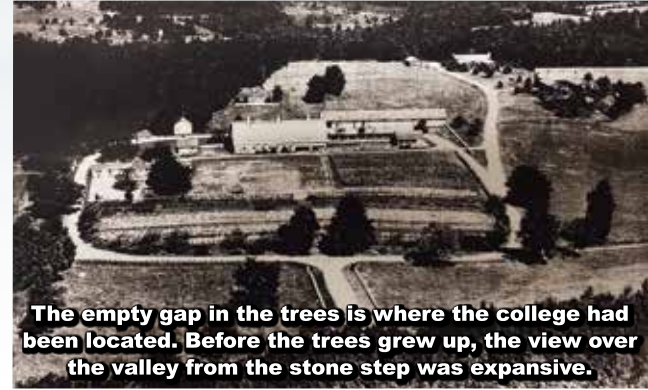
This brochure, in the collection of Monroe County Historical Association, describes in beautiful prose what students could expect at the college.

This kind of education dated to the 1800s in Denmark. The goal was to create ways rural people could educate themselves to live in the modern world without losing their own traditions. Progressive education leaders believed that, after the "gilded age" in the U.S., rural people were being left behind. Perhaps the Danish model could be used here.

Soren Mathiasen grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, and taught at the international people's college of Elsinore in Denmark. Just in his mid-20s, he brought these ideas back to the States, and through a connection with Henry Hulbert, decided to bring this school to the Poconos.

He assembled a committee of board members renowned in education, including John Dewey, Jane Addams, Gifford Pinchot, and other leading Northeasterners interested in education. Support came from well-known people of the day, such as Ada Pierce McCormick who wrote vividly about the college.

The early years were bumpy, with few faculty, bad housekeeping, and an accusation that the gym teacher played spin-the-bottle with students. The local population had been shrinking, driven away by



The empty gap in the trees is where the college had been located. Before the trees grew up, the view over the valley from the stone step was expansive.

long winters and lack of opportunity beyond tourist resort work, and at first students came mainly from the urban northeast.

But things turned around, thanks largely to Chester Graham, who had been at college with Mathiasen. He joined the staff in late 1925 as assistant director and ran the College while Mathiasen travelled the country raising money — perhaps a factor in the "snake oil salesman" image.

The College was successful under Graham's care, and the years 1927 - 1928 were good years — with full staff and full enrollment, including more students from the region.

Programs lasted three months. Local boys organized the Pocono Pioneers Fellowship Club to promote the interests of young people and Monroe County as a whole, including developing more opportunities for meaningful work. Students published a school newspaper, *The Poconian Propeller*. A theatrical group, the Pocono

Photo: Boston Public Library





Students gathered around the fireplace
Photo: Boston Public Library

Players, would write, rehearse and perform plays, traveling the area and entertaining at the resorts.

Folk and square dancing were both recreation and a statement of the value of local traditions. Instead of sitting in classrooms, people would gather around the fireplace to work and share freewheeling conversations about life, meaning, and labor with staff and teachers. It was a more democratic, familial form of education, and the two pillars of the school were the fireplace and the dance floor.

Things changed when Chester Graham left the Poconos for a position at a school in Appalachia. The last program on the campus was summer 1928. The stock market crash in 1929 coincided with a \$250,000 expansion plan at the College, seeking a cash infusion from local business people to bring in more students.

At the same time, Mathiasen left his wife Lucille and their three children, and “ran off” with Geneva Gregory, the secretary of the College’s board. Tax records show that by 1930 Mathiasen is listed as a non-resident and Lucille’s name has been crossed out entirely from ownership.

The College board proposal to save the College involved John Dewey and his colleagues: the idea being to incorporate multiple projects in a chain of People’s Colleges as one large financial entity. The scheme included a brand-new People’s College in West Virginia, a study-abroad program in Europe, and two “Negro colleges” whose locations were not specified.

The board was split on whether or not this was a good idea, and none of it ever came to pass.

Eccher found no information about what happened to Lucille and their three children. Mathiasen rode out this tumultuous period in the Tyrolean Alps of northern Italy with Geneva Gregory.

Eccher expressed his conflicting feelings about Mathiasen and Gregory — saying that the moment when they could have persevered, redoubled their efforts here in Paradise, that’s the moment they left, walking away from their ideals and what they had set out to do.

After two years in Europe, Mathiasen returned to the U.S. and started The American People’s School in the Bronx, basically on the same political, economic, and educational principles. It featured a communal life center in Van Cortland Park, complete with fireplace and folk dancing, in an urban setting.

This was Mathiasen’s most successful educational endeavor — hundreds of students took part, many of whom went on to live interesting and successful lives.

Eccher also discussed whether Pocono People’s College was part of the broader Appalachian pedagogical movement and how it related to other traditions of folk education across the region.

Geologically, Monroe County is part of the Appalachian Mountains, which stretch from Newfoundland south to Alabama. As a cultural

region, however, Appalachia is considered to extend from West Virginia southward. Monroe County was more likely chosen for the College because of its proximity to affluent northeastern donors.

The folk school idea in Appalachia is based on how philanthropists thought about the region, as modernization developed alongside prevalent manual work like logging and coal mining. “The ordeal of Appalachia” expressed a feeling that white people had lost the tools for their own self-determination. Many historians talk about Appalachia more as an idea than a place, with “ruthless change knocking at the door of every mountain cabin.”

Through the 1930s and the Great Depression, there was a flowering of experiments in uplifting rural America. What was originally a socialist movement to uplift people and raise class consciousness shifted into a preservation model: the goal became protecting folk craft, song, and culture rather than effecting any radical change to improve the lot of the people.

The effect was that, over time, folk schools split ideologically — one path is the folk culture/craft preservation model of the John C. Campbell School, the other is the more radical socialist models of education. An example was Highlander Folk School in east Tennessee, where Rosa Parks trained for two years before making history during the Montgomery bus boycott.

Her actions in Montgomery were not those of “a random nice old lady,” as Eccher said, but an outgrowth of the folk school movement, which played a role in the early Civil Rights movement and the future of adult education more broadly. The activism of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington included ideas — and questions — about education: were the aspirations of people better served by a highly-educated 10 percent? Or by broad-based vocational programs allied with a liberal education? Noted education leaders John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn debated the same questions.

The folk school movement was a way to resolve those tensions. Folk education works, according to Eccher, when it makes people more aware of the situations in which they live — and inspires them not just to work better within society, but to change society.

Folk pedagogy became known as a radical idea by helping people “imagine otherwise,” empowering leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr., and thousands of others. The thinking of folk schools, in other words, is “portable” and can be applied in other movements, with the potential to rethink how society is structured.

Pocono People’s College never had more than 20 or 30 students at a time. The building was small, and the College was short-lived. Yet as part of a larger, durable movement, it continues to inspire — and fascinate — us today. [PHS](#)



Soren Mathiasen, his wife Lucille and their three children.
Photo: Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan

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Members Celebrate THE HOLIDAYS AT THE ACE STORE

Thanks to the kindness of owners Susan and Pat Newman, we will be celebrating the joys of winter holidays at The Ace Store on Sunday, December 15th, 2024 from 2 - 4 p.m. This is a members-only event, but new members may join at the door (see the membership form below for details on membership options). Beverages will be provided — please bring a plate of sweet or savory finger-food to share. Looking forward to a joyful end-of year celebration! [PHS](#)

PHS WELCOMES THESE NEW MEMBERS:

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Fall 2024