

Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



John C. Campbell Folk School

There probably are few woodturners (or other types of craftspeople for that matter) who haven't heard of the John C. Campbell Folk School. Commonly called the "Folk School," it is one of the more unique places to learn or to expand your skills at any particular craft. It is situated on 300 acres in a scenic part of the mountains in North Carolina and almost equidistant from Atlanta, Chattanooga, Asheville, and Knoxville—being about two hours away from each. It was founded in 1925 by John C. Campbell's widow, Olive Dame Campbell, and a friend of hers, Marguerite Butler.

Before John's passing, he and Olive spent years traveling from Georgia to West Virginia. John documented the agricultural practices, and Olive collected the music and studied the handicrafts of the people in the region. After John's death, Olive and Marguerite traveled to Europe, studying the implementation of folk schools there. They returned to Appalachia to start a school along the same vein, teaching the traditions of the cultures. With a donation of seventy-five acres of land from the Scroggs family, the John C. Campbell Folk School began in 1925 in Brasstown, North Carolina.

The John C. Campbell Folk School has an exhaustive list of class topics with classes running year-round, save for short breaks during the holidays. The school typically runs 850 classes a year for between 5,500 to 6,000 students. The topics include Basketry and Gourds, Beads, Blacksmithing, Book Arts, Broom Making, Calligraphy, Chair Seats, Clay, Cooking, Dance, Dolls, Drawing, Dyeing, Enameling, Felt Making, Folklore, Gardening, Genealogy, Glass, Jewelry, Kaleidoscopes, Knitting, Lace, Leather, Marbling, Metalwork, Mixed Media, Music, Nature Studies, Needlework, Painting, Paper Art, Photography, Printmaking, Quilting, Rugs, Sewing, Soap Making, Spinning, Stone Sculpture, Story Telling, Surface Design, Weaving, Woodcarving, Woodturning, Woodworking, and Writing. If you can't find something of interest in that comprehensive list, they also have occasional special topics that can range from making longbows to the art and science of fly-fishing.

The Sunday to Friday class week starts on Sunday afternoon with a welcome, orientation, meal, and then the first class. Classes end on Friday at noon, and then there is an entire campus gathering for a project review and a farewell lunch. Weekend classes, when held,

commence on Friday afternoon and end on Sunday after lunch. The Sunday through Saturday class week (when there aren't weekend classes) ends on Saturday morning rather than Friday afternoon. One of the key premises is that the process is more important than production. Both students and instructors are encouraged to focus on learning and practicing the process to gather those skills. Making things, though a good way to learn and practice, is of secondary importance. Completing the class with less "stuff" and more skills and knowledge is promoted throughout all the classes.

The entire John C. Campbell experience is just that, an experience. Though there are superb studios outfitted with the tools and equipment necessary for the classes in each subject, the tone is relaxed. There aren't televisions anywhere on campus. All the computers are behind the scenes for staff use and running the business. Even cell coverage is spotty throughout the campus. These aren't bad things; the quiet, peaceful campus is intended to be a relaxing environment where you can get away from the hustle and bustle to enjoy the scenery, food, learning environment, and new friends. The only noise that can be heard is the three chimes of the dinner bell announcing that the dining hall is available to be entered. For those who can't be away from their e-mail for whatever reason, there is a hot spot in the Keith House where Wi-Fi and good cell coverage can be found.

There are additional activities that add to the experience of the Folk School. Each day, there is a morning walk for those wishing to hike the property and get a bit of exercise. Following that is Morningsong where a musical artist and folk loraist will entertain those attending until time has come for breakfast. The Keith House is the center of activities, with registration being housed there along with the meeting hall. Morningsong is held in the meeting hall as are the after-dinner concerts and dances. The Folk School is a gathering spot for many of the local residents along with the students to enjoy regional and national acts of old time, bluegrass, folk, gospel, and Celtic music. Community dances are held every other Saturday. Rand McNally selected the Folk School as one of the top thirty destinations in the United States.

With all the activities in the studios, meeting hall, and on the grounds, it is easy to overlook some of the

other treasures. In addition to the sixteen studios and fourteen housing buildings, there is a history center with information and artifacts of the area and school. The craft shop, located below the dining hall, is a founding member of the Southern Highlands Craft Guild. The craft shop features work from 300 local and regional artists who are juried in. The works range from ironwork to books. There are also special events held on campus at various times of the year. These include the Fall Festival, Blacksmith and Fine Craft Auction, Fireside Sale, and the Annual Gala and Benefit Auction.

Whether you have an interest in learning a new craft, expanding your skills in an existing craft, or just getting away for some peace and quiet in a stunningly beautiful part of North Carolina, I'm certain that the John C. Campbell Folk School should be a place for you to consider. You can find more information about the school and the current programs at www.folkschool.org.



Fig. 1. No longer allowed to hold their New Year's Eve possum drop, Clay's Corner is not only an indicator of the turn onto the John C. Campbell property, but it is also the closest place off-property to get an emergency ice cream cone.



Fig. 2. The John C. Campbell Folk School is situated on 300 acres in a beautiful part of the North Carolina mountains. Though walkable, the extreme ends of the campus are a bit far.



Fig. 3. The hub of everything revolves around the Keith House. It serves as the home for registration, some housing, some studio space, and the meeting hall. Open to all, it has a Wi-Fi hot spot, as well as the best location for some of the spotty coverage for cell phones.



Fig. 4. The meeting hall is used several times a day for Morningsong, group meetings, class graduations, and entertainment. Equipped with a stage, sound system, and folding chairs, it comfortably seats the student, teacher, and staff populations.



Fig. 5. The Willard C. Baxter Woodturning Studio is equipped with workstations for ten students plus the instructor. The equipment includes eleven Powermatics, eleven mini-Jets on stands, and all the shop support equipment from drill presses to bandsaws and grinders.



Fig. 6. Many of the studios are in rustic buildings that convey the character of the area and inhabitants from times gone by. The studios are located in different parts of the campus with their own parking areas for those who drive.



Fig. 9. Among the special classes held at the Folk School is fly-fishing. Not only do the students learn the fundamentals of the equipment and techniques, but they also get fishing licenses and make fishing trips to the local streams.



Fig. 7. The rustic outside of the various studios bely the modern equipment and facilities contained inside. All are outfitted with the equipment to support the programs, along with modern dust collection and air conditioning.



Fig. 10. Scattered around the campus are a variety of buildings that are part of the Folk School's infrastructure. The catalog creation and advertising are done from this scenic building at one end of the campus.



Fig. 8. Many of the class sessions are held outside. The students in the classes for hiking, fishing, painting, and more enjoy the rolling hills and valleys of the local terrain. Here, folks from the painting class are painting the classic red barn located farther down the hill.



Fig. 11. On "graduation" day, the students from all the various classes gather in the meeting hall to display projects from their class. The students gather to visit the displays from all the groups before the final closing ceremonies.



Fig. 12. Whether from the weeklong or weekend classes, the works from the various disciplines are inspiring. Some of the works from the weekend woodcarving class are shown with each student's interpretation of the same subject.



Fig. 13. One of the great aspects of the school is the socialization, including Morningsong, intermixing of class visits, and the concerts and dances. Saturday night dances are gatherings for the students and locals. Don't know how to square dance? They'll teach you.



Fig. 14. Another part of the experience is the family-style dining. The school can provide for special needs, as well as providing for the group. Each meal begins with a blessing, followed by an excellent meal (with plenty to go around). Mixing of classes is encouraged.



Fig. 15. The property has buildings that range from vintage to modern. These include the studios, support buildings, and student accommodations. The school is extremely environmentally friendly—from conservation to recycling to being self-supporting with many foods.



Fig. 16. The blacksmithing studio has just finished a modernization with the old section remaining in the front, and a huge timber frame building is in the back with updated equipment and facilities. Warm by nature, it is one of the places that usually has all the doors wide open during use.



Fig. 17. The craft shop is one of the founding members of the Southern Highlands Craft Guild. It features work from over 300 local and regional artists. Paintings, jewelry, ironwork, glass, books, and more can be found here.