

Crafting Antipoverty Policy:
WAMY Community Action, Inc., Mountain Crafts, and Maximum Feasible
Participation Unrealized

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Big Ideas

The post-war economic boom of the 1950s taught Americans to believe that they could do anything. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the prospect of putting a man on the moon suddenly became more than a stargazer's pipedream, and the possibility of curing America's social ills seemed so real, so promising—all because American ingenuity would inevitably persevere. For those who believed in this rationale, this was a time of optimism, ideals, and new ideas. Many of these believers found themselves behind the scenes in various levels of government working to develop innovative policies and investigate problems in ways they hadn't been examined before. Regardless of how tangled and complicated the problems were, these people sensed that their ideas would lead to viable solutions.

In the mid-1960s the idea that Americans could remedy the poverty problem by using the precision and reality of statistics and mathematical models of social science became the cause célèbre among many of the idealistic leaders of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and other government agencies given the task of fighting Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. These social scientists and economic analysts had hope for a methodology for fighting poverty that would “remove judgment from the process and, in essence, permit the public authorities to settle society's problems by computation.”¹ At the same time, the promise of community action, which would work toward maximum feasible participation of the poor in solving their own problems, ripened. Indeed, the Johnson administration hoped that the community action programs (CAPs) funded by OEO would serve as battalions on the various rural and urban fronts of the War on

Poverty by providing analytical data and technical assistance and creating programs that helped the poor help themselves.

Despite those goals, the actions of many CAP staff members made it apparent that divorcing personal perceptions from the process of making and implementing policy was not as easy as theorists had hoped. And, indeed, in many respects this was a good outcome—within less than a decade, even those who had most strongly championed social science as a panacea for the poverty problem had to admit that the process of making good decisions involved more than mathematics.² On the other hand, many CAP programs demonstrated the power of often erroneous middle-class perceptions in shaping antipoverty policy. These programs spoke to the need for methods of analyzing problems objectively—if not to directly help the poor, at least to help policymakers look past stereotypes in order to better understand the poor. A crafts development program started by WAMY Community Action, Inc., in western North Carolina illustrates the tension arising from middle-class perceptions of the Appalachian poor and some of the consequences that result from fundamental misunderstandings about the character of a group of people.

NC Fund Overview and the Creation of WAMY Community Action, Inc.

Governor Terry Sanford created the North Carolina Fund, a statewide antipoverty organization, in July, 1963, a year before Johnson declared his War on Poverty. Leaders of the Fund sought “new ways to enable the poor to become productive citizens, to encourage self-reliance, and to foster institutional, political, economic, and social change designed to strengthen the functioning of democratic society.”³ Thanks to the vision of John Ehle and Sanford’s political skills, the Fund received an initial seven million dollars

from the Ford Foundation as well as substantial contributions from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, and the United States government. In its five-year lifespan, the Fund spent over ten million dollars on programs ranging from the North Carolina Volunteers, which recruited college students to work in antipoverty agencies in the state, to the Manpower Development Corporation, which worked to train North Carolinians to be technically suited for better jobs. At the heart of the Fund, however, were its education and community action programs.⁴

When word spread about the availability of potential money to start a community action program, stakeholders in communities varying from large cities to four-county, predominately rural regions banded together to create funding proposals. One such group of stakeholders hailed from Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey counties, four mountainous counties on the Tennessee border. The four-county steering committee included representatives from the counties' Department of Welfare, medical doctors, supervisors and superintendents of the county schools, and one mayor.⁵ Dr. William Plemmons, the president of Appalachian State Teachers College, served as chairman of the committee.

The statistics used by the steering committee to paint a picture of the region's need for a community action program indicated real problems.⁶ In the four counties, the median years of schooling among adults twenty-five and older ranged from 7.7 to 8.4 years.⁷ From 1950 to 1960 Watauga County saw the lowest out-migration in the region (nineteen percent), while Yancey County lost an astounding twenty-eight percent of its inhabitants.⁸ County economic summaries compiled by Wachovia Bank in 1963 offered other troubling statistics: in Mitchell County, 41.1 percent of families had incomes of less

than \$2500, and this was the lowest percentage in the region. 44.1 percent, 44.8 percent, and 45.5 percent of the families in Avery, Watauga, and Yancey Counties respectively were living on less than \$2500 a year.⁹ Detailed analyses of communities in the four-county region compiled shortly after the steering committee submitted the initial proposal provided more shocking information. In the unincorporated community of Colberts Creek in Yancey County, for example, the primary source of income among residents was the seldom-profitable task of harvesting galax leaves in the wild to sell for use in floral arrangements.¹⁰ And in the community of Carey's Flat, thirty-six families shared one telephone.¹¹

The proposal created by the steering committee to ameliorate these conditions laid out plans for better education through development of preschools, creation of a remedial reading program, encouragement of team teaching, and improvement of counseling and guidance services. The committee also made plans to target particular problem areas among the school-aged population. School attendance seemed to drop off among ten- to twelve-year-olds. Consequently, members of the steering committee requested money so that eighty students with poor school attendance records in that age-range could be "identified and located, taken from their environment, and brought to a boarding school to participate in an especially designed educational program in which their deficiencies will be remedied."¹² Less extreme proposals for students whose needs were not well served by the current educational system included the creation of vocational schools and special language arts laboratories.¹³ Improved education received the majority of the steering committee's attention, as evidenced by the fact that the proposal devoted more space to education than to any other area, and the plans for improved education were

much more specific and detailed. However, the proposal also mentioned in less detail the need for improvement in the realms of public health, the regional library system, birth control education, rural social life, recreational opportunities, and technical and professional assistance.

Committee members' decision to apply for funding to create a crafts program represented an attempt to offer an antipoverty program appropriate for people of the southern Appalachian region specifically. The steering committee listed sewing, weaving, quilting, woodcarving, furniture making, furniture repairing, and ironwork as skills common to the region and worthy of being preserved. People in the four-county region deft in one of those areas could apply for free studio space, equipment, and aid in marketing. In return for use of these free services, craftspeople would receive a percentage of the profit from the marketing outlets found by WAMY employees. Free crafts classes would be offered, guest speakers would be invited to encourage crafts development throughout the region, and new crafts schools would be formed. The Penland School of Crafts, located in Mitchell County and well known for the work of its artists and artisans, would provide scholarships to locals who had potential.¹⁴

Of the programs proposed by the steering committee, the mountain crafts program was the fruit of the committee's genuine effort to tailor a program to fit the skills of poor people from the four counties. Despite their attempt to capitalize on the interests and talents of people in the region, the members of the steering committee were middle- and upper-class and had their own misconceptions about the people whom they wanted to help. The product of class differences as well as notions of Appalachian culture

constructed primarily by people from outside of the region, the lasting impact of these misconceptions proved unfortunate.

Appalachia for Whom?

Appalachians had a long history of being asked by reformers from outside the region to walk a thin line between modernity and tradition. Economically, Appalachians were supposed to modernize and industrialize, while, culturally, they were asked “to be responsive to the needs of a nation seeking stability and cultural identity in the midst of dislocating and pervasive change.”¹⁵ Perhaps nowhere can this dynamic be better seen than through the relationship between reform movements and crafts.

For many reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, craftwork represented an antidote to the ills of modern, industrial society. Economic progress in such a society emphasized the use of machines whenever possible and the reorganization of labor so that workers no longer created finished products.¹⁶ Jane Addams implemented a crafts program at Hull House in an attempt to restore some of the dignity that she thought lower-class workers lost from factory work.

Reformers, many of whom were from the northeast, entered the southern Appalachian Mountains familiar with the concept of settlement houses in urban areas, and they often used a similar model on their quests to help Appalachians. The leaders of these settlement houses viewed crafts as a means of economic and social mobility that would prevent the problems of modern, industrial society from further taking root.¹⁷ After all, with the expansion of railroads in Appalachia in the late nineteenth century, the same trains that brought the reformers also brought the prospect of an industrial economy. Having seen what they viewed as the degrading conditions of workers in the

factory system who became like parts of machines, they wanted to preserve the dignity of work that took time and skill to make.

The reformers entered the southern Appalachian Mountains after the region had developed a mystique and mythology centered on ideas of the quaint, simple life of the mountaineer. Popular literature propagated this mythology so that the conditions outsiders found when they entered the mountains were starkly different from what they expected. One man reported in the *American Journal of Sociology*: “We had heard so many stories of the ignorance of the mountaineers that we were somewhat disappointed by their familiarity with a good many things we had not expected them to know.”¹⁸ Whether the mountain folk encountered by these newcomers were less ignorant than anticipated or not, reformers saw room for growth. Reform would start through education and religious teachings and spread to all facets of mountain life, or so settlement workers hoped.¹⁹

According to this plan, cultural education would become more than a preventive measure to ward off the demons of industrial society: settlement workers used cultural activities to improve the social atmosphere of the region, which they considered stunted at best.²⁰ They encouraged the continuation or revitalization of cultural traditions that their middle-class upbringing taught them to deem valuable while combating what they perceived to be the region’s economic and social woes. “After all,” they told each other and the rest of America, “these mountaineers are the closest link we have to our Anglo-Saxon pioneer ancestors.”

While it is clear that the ability to make crafts well was a source of pride for many mountaineers, according to Jane Becker, whose book *Selling Tradition* chronicles crafts

programs in Appalachia in the early twentieth century, “[C]ultural programs that focused on archaic survivals rather than on the current and constantly evolving vernacular forms of a changing mountain world supported the perception of southern mountaineers as living artifacts.”²¹ Moreover, taking pride in the creation of an item did not necessarily translate into a desire to make that item when one could buy it instead. For example, despite popular notions of people of the southern mountains wanting to cling to their traditions, mountain girls had wanted to buy the newest clothes in the general store from as early as the beginning of the twentieth century.²²

Indeed, the popularity of craft production often increased not because people of southern Appalachia wanted to preserve remnants of their culture, but rather because they wanted money to buy modern goods. In 1920 Lucy Morgan, the sister of the founder of the Penland School of Crafts, introduced weaving techniques to women from the Penland area.²³ Morgan taught weaving classes in a log cabin on Penland’s campus. This building recalled images of a traditional mountain home, although, in reality, the frame house—and not the log cabin—had become the most popular home style in the area by the time the Penland facility was built. Given the rustic setting, one might expect to have found women in homemade dresses and bonnets learning to weave. But most of the women who participated in the classes were young and wanted to keep up with the trends of the time; for them, learning how to weave meant the opportunity to sell their wares and use the money to buy modern items.²⁴

Reformers of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century conveyed messages about the nature of the culture of Appalachia simply by coining the terms that were used to describe the products Appalachians were producing. These reformers

helped perpetuate the idea that Appalachian culture was a traditional, folk culture; and, according to Becker, “[B]ecause modern ideology of progress fosters evolutionary assumptions about culture, equating ‘traditional’ with ‘backward’ and ‘modern’ with ‘advanced’ or ‘wealthy’ or ‘rational’, the traditional-versus-modernity paradigm engenders value-laden conclusions.”²⁵ Regardless of the value they saw in the crafts they encouraged, the association of these crafts with traditional folk culture suggested that Appalachia was a place where progress stood still—at least until outsiders came in to help.

Even the decision made by reformers to use the words “craft” and “handicraft” to describe the products of mountaineers had implications. In other words, what differentiated the weaving of a coverlet (such weaving would be marketed as a craft) from the weaving of a tapestry (such weaving would be marketed as art)? Craft continues to have associations of “the folk” and tradition; therefore, the choice of the word reemphasized the reformers’ desire to keep certain parts of Appalachian culture rooted in the past.

By the 1930s as a result of these efforts to introduce and revitalize crafts in Appalachia, crafts had been tailored to the likes and dislikes of the predominately urban, middle-class reformers. By making these crafts appeal to peoples’ visions of the simple mountaineer’s life, the reformers allowed the rest of America to incorporate these visions into their daily lives in the form of handmade baskets, quilts, and carvings, among other things. As the Great Depression caused some to question the fundamental tenets of capitalism, Americans used these visions of Appalachia to remind them of what they perceived as the simpler times before industry had revolutionized economic existence.²⁶

These perceptions of Appalachian culture were so pervasive that they became the perceptions held even by Appalachians themselves, particularly those of the middle and upper classes who had separated themselves from “the folk.” WAMY’s steering committee, the body that initially laid out the proposal for a mountain crafts program, hailed from the Appalachian middle and upper classes. Much as the reformers from decades earlier had, they planned to cultivate certain components of what they thought was the culture of the poor, while asking the poor to change at the same time. Although members of the steering committee, like many of the reformers, had the best of intentions, WAMY’s crafts program further distorted outsiders’ perceptions of Appalachian culture and allowed the Appalachian middle and upper classes along with the market to dictate which traditions were worthy of preservation.

The Outsiders Come In

Not only did the WAMY steering committee have poorly-based conceptions of the people whom they were trying to help, but N.C. Fund employees, WAMY staff members, and volunteers from outside committed at least isolated incidents of cultural insensitivity and stereotyping. For example, a report written by an N.C. Fund worker who was responsible for analyzing WAMY’s progress bemoaned the apparent lack of foresight common among mountaineers. The report read: “As a mountain man, H.C. is good with specifics but weak on projecting abstractly and planning.”²⁷ The same Fund employee included a description of a conversation between a professor and a local man on one of her WAMY visits. The professor was “relatively urbane and sardonic,” while the other man represented the “home folks.”²⁸ She concluded that “the clash was obvious and uncomfortable.”²⁹

WAMY's first director, Ernest Eppley, also had ideas about what the typical mountain man was like—or at least the typical mountain man with one exception. He summarized the character of one of the poor representatives on WAMY's board in the following manner: "Walter Hicks is a typical mountain person. He's not a wealthy man. He has a small farm, and he has all of the attitudes that mountain people are supposed to have. *But* [emphasis mine] he has a social conscience too about what needs to happen."³⁰ Eppley, however, admitted that many of the beliefs he and his staff had about the poor in the region were unfounded. While discussing the role one WAMY staff member had played, Eppley said:

Ed exploded several myths which we had believed: the poor do not consider themselves poor and cannot talk about their situation with others and that the poor people are hostile to outsiders. Ed had shown the staff that poor people can overcome the dependency on agencies and workers and that the middle class people, not the poor were the ones who resented Ed's work.³¹

A report from VISTA volunteers further reflects patronizing attitudes towards the poor. These volunteers compiled a set of case studies to delineate the conditions of the poor in the area. The reports included notes about visits to the families participating in the study. The description of one visit to a family with ten children ranging from nineteen-months-old to twenty-years-old contained the following commentary: "I visited the family again today. SURPRISE!! The house was in much better condition. Curtains were at the windows (Hallelujah!)."³²

Much as the reformers of the early twentieth century had, WAMY staff members asked the poor of the region to walk a fine line—to preserve some things while abandoning others. A farewell letter from a WAMY staff member published in WAMY's newsletter concluded:

Now you have to live as citizens of the world and people with a future....And you don't want to cut off your roots from other parts of your past. The old music, old songs, old customs, and old ways of saying things, old skills and recreation—these can give the salt and savor to life and a future you can enjoy.³³

The majority of WAMY employees came from outside of the region and had little experience with the Appalachian poor.³⁴ Like Eppley, many hailed from other locations in North Carolina, while others came from as far away as California.³⁵ Most had ample policy-making and community development experience.³⁶ However, they came with ill-conceived notions of mountain culture and definite ideas about which parts of that culture should be preserved. They also came poorly prepared to refute ideas from the steering committee about the wants, needs, and talents of the mountain poor.

It Looked Good on Paper

Many WAMY staff members demonstrated a striking lack of hope for the economic future of Appalachia. Early on, some groups of the Appalachian poor were viewed as beyond help. One report states: “Many are so uneducated and unqualified they will never change.”³⁷ Another report concluded that the following were reasonable and probable expectations for the WAMY region over the next few decades: the movement away from agriculture; further out-migration to areas with employment opportunities; further out-migration of people with college educations; a continued shift to tourist-oriented, seasonal work; and the nearly complete depopulation of remote areas, not to mention the establishment of the mountains as an area primarily for summer homes, camps, tourists, and institutions of higher learning.³⁸ Granted many of these predictions have been accurate, the sense of inevitability conveyed in these documents makes one question why one would attempt to keep people in the region when such an attempt would be destined to fail.

Less pessimistic reports came from sources such as the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), but the options offered by ARC were neither appropriate nor applicable for much of the Appalachian region. Even though the authors of the report cited over reliance on extraction and harvesting of timber, coal, and other minerals as reasons for Appalachia's economic woes, one of the report's first solutions was the reinvigoration of the coal industry.³⁹ ARC's report also suggested the growth of the cattle industry to meet the nation's increasing desire for beef and asserted that the only way the region would see an increase in venture capital was through urbanization.⁴⁰ Despite providing few viable solutions or plans for implementation, ARC reassured Appalachians with the following logic: Italy and Japan had had economic success with few profitable natural resources, so Appalachia could, too.⁴¹

In light of the lack of good suggestions from experienced policymakers, the steering committee's proposal for a mountain crafts program seemed to offer some hope where others saw little. The program alone would not solve the region's problems, but it would be part of a package to help people stay in the mountains. The drafters of the plan believed that "the native stock" had skills that only needed to be marketed to make this component of the package work. According to the proposal, these skills resulted from the conditions the early settlers faced. The proposal read, "Many of these skills have developed through necessity. The relative inaccessibility to the area and isolation created by geography compelled the early settlers to be almost entirely self-supporting. The land, the forests, and the streams were made to yield almost all necessities of life."⁴² "The loss of [these skills] would be irreparable," the proposal concluded.⁴³ According to the steering committee, these skills still thrived (or had the potential to thrive) among the

populace, despite the fact that the majority of families surveyed in the 1960s in the WAMY region did not live in isolation: they had vehicles, televisions, and radios.⁴⁴

The creators of the proposal hoped that the fruit of these skills could be coupled with the purchasing power of the ample number of tourists flocking to the region. After all, tourists had already demonstrated that they were “interested in obtaining reasonably priced handmade articles from natives who had produced them from native materials.”⁴⁵ And since work in the tourist industry was often seasonal, the crafts development program would give those left unemployed in the off-season something to do on their “usually empty winter days.”⁴⁶ As one woman explained, even though she only got three dollars for the two days it took to make a rag doll, “if it wasn’t for the crafts program, we wouldn’t have any income in the winter.”⁴⁷

The growing popularity of folk culture in the 1960s could further help the market for the crafts program expand. By 1963 the folk music revival was booming. The organizers at the Newport Folk Festival asked people from Appalachia, such as Mother Maybelle Carter, to perform, and crowds loved what they heard. This newfound interest in mountain music led to interest in other components of mountain folk life as well. In fact, by the late 1960s, crafts created by participants of WAMY’s program were sold at the Newport Folk Festival.⁴⁸

The crafts development program could also reverse the flow of money and goods that had characterized the exploitation of Appalachia’s resources. With the help of WAMY crafts coordinators, craftspeople formed a cooperative called Blue Ridge Hearthside Crafts, Inc. in 1966. The co-op bought raw materials in bulk from people in the region for members to use to make their products.⁴⁹ Since those primarily buying the

products were from other places, the money for raw materials as well as finished products stayed in the region.

The founders hoped that the establishment of a co-op would eventually make the crafts program self-sustaining. Although WAMY employees still conducted craft-making classes and increased awareness about the program, only two WAMY employees were needed to run the co-op.⁵⁰ If the co-op could generate enough income to pay two employees, direct WAMY involvement in it would not be necessary. The fact that the co-op helped craftspeople avoid the red tape involved with sales taxes and inventory control offered another bonus.⁵¹

Perhaps most important, the crafts program would offer a way to target groups whose needs weren't met by antipoverty policy centered around job development or improvements in the education system.⁵² Since crafts coordinators in each of the four counties could visit participants and orchestrate means of getting craftwork to markets; mothers with young children and the elderly—or anyone who had a difficult time leaving his or her home, for that matter—could participate. Visits made by crafts coordinators would also provide a way to expose hard-to-reach groups to the services of WAMY and the social services of the region.⁵³

On Paper Versus in Practice

Initially, the region's poor had little interest in the crafts program.⁵⁴ When people did demonstrate interest, it stemmed from the desire for supplemental income—not from a desire to prevent the “irreparable loss” of traditions that the steering committee wanted to preserve. The program grew mainly because participants, with good reason, were interested in making money in whatever ways possible—even in ways that would provide

as little supplemental money as the crafts program. Of the 204 craftspeople who participated in 1967, only forty-two received public assistance even though 140 were classified below the poverty line based on an annual income of \$3000 for a family of four.⁵⁵

Statistics indicated that these craftspeople averaged nine dollars a month, which could translate into a meaningful, although modest, yearly increase for a family living on less than \$3000 a year.⁵⁶ In reality, the small number of people who achieved great success through selling crafts inflated the average. At least ten people averaged more than \$100 per month, and two of these people averaged greater than \$200.⁵⁷ Assuming that these ten people made a combined minimum of \$1200 a month, all of the other craftspeople would have averaged only \$3.16 a month. WAMY staff members did not expect returns from the program alone to lift people out of poverty with good reason: seldom had those marginalized groups (from Native Americans to Eastern European immigrants to southern mountaineers) trained as craft workers seen changes in their economic statuses as a result of their work.⁵⁸ However, such scanty returns were hardly enough to help break the cycle of poverty.

Since craft skills were not as alive among the poor as planners and WAMY employees had expected, leadership in the crafts program did not come from the poor community. When asked about involvement of the poor in leadership roles in the crafts program, Eppley responded, “We actually had one little person that worked as the county crafts coordinator. She was a poor person from Mitchell County. She was definitely a poor person and did a good job.”⁵⁹ Despite the idea of maximum feasible participation, this structure was reminiscent of the structure used earlier by reformers at mountain

settlement houses as they introduced or reintroduced craft skills to groups of people, many of whom no longer used these skills in their everyday lives.

The limited crafts skills also meant that crafts coordinators spent more time per month engaged in training than doing anything else. Each crafts coordinator devoted an average of forty-four hours a month conducting craft training and an additional twenty hours a month “retraining craftsmen in the production of items of greater marketing potential and training crafts instructors.”⁶⁰ Moreover, crafts coordinators had to provide instruction about how to make items that required little time to learn how to make. In other words, to allow people with few crafts skills to participate, training in crafts that took years to develop (weaving, sewing, quilting, furniture-making—skills included in the initial proposal as those the early mountain settlers had developed out of necessity) had to be traded for training that would allow people to learn how to make items proficiently but quickly and had little to do with mountain life. As a result, items such as hillbilly dolls, hillbilly flyswatters, and paper towel holders started appearing on “mountain-made” product lists along with quilts and woven rugs.⁶¹ These items and other similar ones proved to be the most popular among the tourist contingent.⁶² The fact that many tourists would consider such souvenirs worthy and appropriate reflections of their trips to Appalachia spoke to the power of the misconceptions about Appalachia—television, movies, the news media, and popular literature taught tourists to believe that these misconceptions were what Appalachia was about.

Unfortunately, the easy-to-make crafts items not only perpetuated erroneous and insensitive images about “hillbilly” culture, but they also provided their makers the least profit. A marketing list of seventy-four crafts items produced by WAMY craftspeople

included only fourteen items that had wholesale values over five dollars and thirty-four with wholesale values of two dollars or less.⁶³ Since the craftsman did not earn the wholesale value of the product, the actual income for an item could be substantially less. For example, the maker of a rag doll that sold for five dollars only received three dollars in profit.⁶⁴ Given the time it took to produce items such as quilts, craftspeople often received modest wages even when tourists purchased the more expensive items.⁶⁵

The very hope that the crafts development program would have a symbiotic relationship with the tourism industry needed to be questioned. While tourism created work, the seasonal service jobs tourism provided rarely paved the way for the economic advancement of individuals.⁶⁶ Even if members of the steering committee hadn't been aware of the pitfalls of tourism, a study done by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) in 1966 should have given WAMY staff members an opportunity to learn of the problems that reliance on tourism created. Along with the facts that jobs in the tourism industry were low-paying and required low-level skills, the report concluded that few of these jobs provided a living wage; and rarely did these sources of employment allow employees to engage in collective bargaining.⁶⁷ In fact, the only reason those who conducted the study cited for continued development of tourism was that tourism could "raise the aspirations of local residents whose horizons are broadened by contact with outsiders."⁶⁸

Even if one could depend upon tourism to provide a market for the products of the crafts program, intense interest in folk culture seldom holds constant. Eppley himself admitted that, even with tourists in the area to buy products, he hadn't seen the value of the crafts program until "it sort of suddenly began to blossom. Suddenly, there were

outlets for crafts items all over the east coast.”⁶⁹ The program capitalized on interest in folk culture in the 1960s; but, as this interest died, the program’s already minor impact dwindled.

Maximum Feasible Participation Starts at the Beginning

Neither the WAMY steering committee nor WAMY staff members expected the crafts program to be a panacea; the program was one component of a larger plan, a plan that attempted to give people the opportunity to stay in the mountains.⁷⁰ Moreover, WAMY staff members earnestly thought they were tapping into something the poor community wanted.⁷¹ And the large number of participants indicates more than a need to make money any way possible: some people enjoyed the work regardless of the meager financial returns.⁷²

Nevertheless, the crafts program indicated that images of Jed Clampett and Ma and Pa Kettle could influence policy as much as the opinions of the poor. Convinced they knew what Appalachian culture was and what the needs of the poor in the WAMY area were, the steering committee created a proposal to help the poor make money through crafts. Ill-prepared to contradict the steering committee, the WAMY and Fund staffs entered, hopeful and willing to help but with their own preconceived notions of the people of the region. Tourists, eager to buy hillbilly knickknacks, flocked to the area, bought cheap, handmade items, and encouraged the marketing of items that turned mountaineers into caricatures. But it is difficult to fault the steering committee, the WAMY and Fund staffers, or the tourists for having stereotypes about poor mountaineers—by the 1960s, these stereotypes had been part of the fabric of popular culture for decades.

The fundamental flaw, therefore, lay in the fact that maximum feasible participation of the poor was not sought in the initial stages of the creation of WAMY. As Fund director George Esser explained, the War on Poverty made people aware of “[the] middle-class failure to understand the poor of all races, and the resulting failure of [the] middle-class oriented social institutions to make an impact on poverty.”⁷³ The plans of the predominately middle- and upper-class WAMY steering committee undoubtedly speak to this failure. Granted many members of the steering committee worked with the problems of poverty on a daily basis, their socioeconomic statuses and perceptions of people in the region detached them from the reality of poverty. The input of the poor could have complemented committee members’ experiences working with the problems of poverty in order to create a more accurate picture of the needs and potential of the region.

Of course, WAMY planners did not make this mistake alone: the development of CAPs nationwide warranted similar criticism. As Daniel Moynihan points out in his book *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, the groups of people who were supposed to reap the benefits of CAPs seldom had influential roles in their creation.⁷⁴ The idea of CAPs sponsored by the federal government developed out of a need to bypass the power structures, particularly in the South, that kept Blacks from having equal opportunities. Maximum feasible participation became the tool to ensure that communities that wanted funding would have to seek the input of the poorest, even if the poorest were of a different skin color.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, it was middle-class whites who sat on steering committees and drafted proposals.⁷⁶

Under Eppley's leadership, some stereotypes were deconstructed (including ones that Eppley himself had held when he entered the job), and WAMY eventually became one of the CAPs in the state that encouraged the principles of maximum feasible participation the most.⁷⁷ However, since the poor were not involved from the beginning and since WAMY staff members did not stray far from the programs slated by the steering committee, damage had already been done. The selling of hillbilly dolls and hillbilly flyswatters in the area outlived the North Carolina Fund and the War on Poverty.

¹ As quoted in Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 189.

² O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 181.

³ NC Fund director George Esser as quoted from www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/n/North_Carolina_Fund/hist.htm

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *A Proposal to the North Carolina Fund: Some Causes and Effects of Poverty in Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey Counties, North Carolina, and Some Proposed Remedial Actions* (1964), vii-viii.

⁶ Incidentally, these statistics were compiled in a Ford Foundation study of Appalachia.

⁷ *A Proposal to the North Carolina Fund: Some Causes and Effects of Poverty in Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey Counties, North Carolina, and Some Proposed Remedial Actions*, 6.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ "Economic Life Questionnaire," Folder 3569, Subseries 4.2, North Carolina Fund Papers, Southern Historical Collection at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (herein after called NCF Papers).

¹⁰ "Description of Community: Colberts Creek," 1, Folder 3740, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

¹¹ "Carey's Flat," 1, Folder 3744, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

¹² *A Proposal to the North Carolina Fund: Some Causes and Effects of Poverty in Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey Counties, North Carolina, and Some Proposed Remedial Actions*, 7.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁵ Jane Becker, *Selling Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 42.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ As quoted in David Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 17.

¹⁹ One wonders if the reformers who entered western North Carolina in particular knew that one reason the education system was so behind was because the region was being punished economically by the state government for all of the “backward” people in the mountains who had pro-Union sentiments during the Civil War.

²⁰ Becker, *Selling Tradition*, 58.

²¹ Ibid., 59.

²² Ibid., 51.

²³ The fact that the Penland School of Crafts is in the WAMY region was one of the selling points used by the steering committee in order to secure funding for the mountain handicrafts program.

²⁴ Charles Watkins, “Weaving Day at Penland: A Photographic Analysis,” *NWSA Journal*, Fall 1999, 18-21.

²⁵ Becker, *Selling Tradition*, 21.

²⁶ Ibid., 70.

²⁷ “Background Paper on WAMY Community Action, Inc.,” 4, Folder 3623, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

²⁸ “Conference of WAMY and AS Extension,” 1, Folder 7037, Subseries 6.7, NCF Papers.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Redburn-Rhodarmer Interview with Ernie Eppley,” 23, Folder 7270, Subseries 6.10, NCF Papers.

³¹ “Field Report March 2-4, 1967,” 3, Folder 7036, Subseries 6.7, NCF Papers.

³² “Case Studies (Additional Background Information),” 6, Folder 3660, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

³³ “Watauga Community Action Newsletter,” 3, Folder 3623, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

³⁴ “Interview with Rachel Rivers,” 1, Folder 7038, Subseries 6.7, NCF Papers.

³⁵ Lauren Williams’ interview with Ernest Eppley, October 13, 2002.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Community Support Strategies in WAMY,” 2, Folder 3526, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

³⁸ “WAMY History by Ramos-Bernholz,” 1-2, Folder 7386, Subseries 6.10, NCF Papers.

³⁹ “President’s Appalachian Regional Commission Recommendations,” 1-3, Folder 1054, Subseries 1.10, NCF Papers.

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- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 7
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 1.
- ⁴² *A Proposal to the North Carolina Fund: Some Causes and Effects of Poverty in Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey Counties, North Carolina, and Some Proposed Remedial Actions*, 33.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ *Profile of Community Problems: Watauga, Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey Counties* (1964), 51, The North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina.
- ⁴⁵ *A Proposal to the North Carolina Fund: Some Causes and Effects of Poverty in Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey Counties, North Carolina, and Some Proposed Remedial Actions*, 33.
- ⁴⁶ "Application for Community Action Program: CAP 7-9, 7.1.2 Work Program," 1, Folder 3660, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁴⁷ "WAMY Crafts," 3, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 2.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ "Crafts Co-Operative," 2, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁵² Letter to Sandra Meyer from Victor Wuamett, July 11, 1967, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁵³ "Additional Information," 3, Folder 3660, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁵⁴ "Application for Community Action Program: CAP 7-9, 7.1.2 Work Program," 1, Folder 3660, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁵⁵ "WAMY Crafts," 3, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Letter to Sandra Meyer from Victor Wuamett, July 11, 1967, 1, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁵⁸ Becker, *Selling Tradition*, 18.
- ⁵⁹ "Redburn-Rhodarmer Interview with Ernie Eppley," 36, Folder 7270, Subseries 6.10, NCF Papers.
- ⁶⁰ "Quarter Report: Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, 1967, Component No. 713-5," Folder 3619, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁶¹ "WAMY Crafts Items," Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁶² "WAMY Crafts," 2, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁶³ "WAMY Crafts Items," Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.
- ⁶⁴ "WAMY Crafts," 3, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Davis Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 167.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁸ As quoted in Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer*, 168.

⁶⁹ “Redburn-Rhodarmer Interview with Ernie Eppley,” 35, Folder 7270, Subseries 6.10, NCF Papers.

⁷⁰ Letter to Sandra Meyer from Victor Wuamett, July 11, 1967, 1, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

⁷¹ “Redburn-Rhodarmer Interview with Ernie Eppley,” 43, Folder 7270, Subseries 6.10, NCF Papers.

⁷² “WAMY Crafts,” 3, Folder 3678, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.

⁷³ George Esser, “The Role of a State-Wide Foundation in the War on Poverty,” *Anti-Poverty Programs* Ed. R.O. Everett (Durham, Duke University School of Law: 1966), 90.

⁷⁴ Daniel Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 128.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁷ “Community Support Strategies in WAMY,” 4, Folder 3526, Subseries 4.2, NCF Papers.