

EDUCATION

Silas Noah Butts, a mountain man who could neither read nor write, somehow saw the need to educate the children who lived with him at his farm. What made him realize the importance of education? If the sole reason for his taking in all of the children who lived with him was working his farm in the Brasstown Valley, why would he insist that they obtain an education? His reasons for providing for their education may never be completely understood but a closer look at his school provides some help.

A recent pictorial history, *Images of America: Oconee County* (1998), places Silas Butts on the pages following Thomas Green Clemson in a section entitled "Education and Institutions." The caption to his picture even reads, "Like Mr. Clemson, Silas Butts offered land and money in an effort to promote education among the hill people of the county."⁶³ Comparing Silas' one-room school to Clemson College may seem exaggerated but

⁶³ Piper Peters Aheron, *Images of America: Oconee County* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 1998), 63.

clearly illustrates that Silas has been seen as a humanitarian who worked for the good of the people.

Spec Jameson, a former member of the Civilian Conservation Corps in Oconee County, remembers seeing Silas at the tax office once and recalls, 'I never seen so many tracks of land. He signed the line and all he was doing was putting an 'X' on it. He looked up at me, and he says, 'I can't write,' but said, 'I trust this man here, he's a good fellow.'"⁶⁴ Later, obviously, Silas learned to crudely write his name as "S. N. Butt" in cursive writing since many court records have his signature on them. Someone obviously taught this to Silas. This shift illustrates that, for some reason, Silas realized the importance of writing, at least in learning to write his own name.

Tom Smith, who lived with Silas for only two months, remembers that Silas Butts was insistent on two things: working the kids and making sure that they went to school.⁶⁵ While, this does not help in discerning Silas' priorities between the two, it does suggest that the orphan children were not there merely to work for him.

⁶⁴ Spec Jameson, personal interview, 12 June 2003.

⁶⁵ Tom Smith, personal interview, 30 July 2003.

Barbara Haynes, who lived with her family in one of Silas' tenant houses in the valley, also went to Silas' school which indicates that the school served more than just Silas' personal needs and those of his children.⁶⁶

Mary Arve taught thirteen of Silas' children in a school of forty three children sometime between 1937 and 1938. This was at Brasstown Church, which also served as a school at that time. During the one year she taught there, she remembers, in her own words:

[I] looked out into that crowd of children: - two sets of twins, in the first grade -two boys that were 16 and 17 years old, barefooted and in the first grade. They were Silas Butts' adopted children. I had 13 of his adopted children in that 43. And one morning, the water bucket just kept getting empty. It was a tin bucket, with a tin dipper in it. And I went back to the little girl that was sitting on the back bench, and asked her, "Nancy, what's going with the water?" And she said, "You better go to the spring and see." Well, I still didn't know what she was talking about, so I declared a recess and we all went down the path to the spring. And I looked over into the spring and there sat a half a gallon fruit jar, half full of whiskey. So, I poured it out in the road- in the path and we went back to the little one room school. And I couldn't get those big boys quieted down because they had been to the spring. And so I expelled them- thirteen of them, and carried them to the door and sent them on down the road and told them to go home.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Barbara Haynes, 19 April 2002.

⁶⁷ Mary Arve, interview by Betty Plisco, 4 August 1992.

If it was Silas' insistence that made them go to school, apparently and ironically, it was his liquor and moonshining profession that prevented them from going that day forward to Brasstown School. Later that same afternoon, after Silas found out what Mary Arve had done, he drove by, looking for the teacher on his way down to town. She recalled:

He was going to Walhalla to get that ol' teacher fired. So, he went up, and the Superintendent of Education was a friend of mine, and he said, "I'll tell you what. You say you've got thirteen adopted children?" He [Silas] said, "Yeah, I got more than that but I got thirteen in school." And the superintendent told him that, "If you'll go back home, and saw you some lumber, and build you a schoolhouse, we'll furnish you a teacher." And so he went back home, sawed up the timbers, built the schoolhouse and its still standing up there- Silas Butts' schoolhouse.⁶⁸

Silas' anger over what Mary Arve had done also illustrates his interesting devotion to the education of his "adopted" children.

One of his lengthy obituaries recalled that, "In the days prior to the present school laws, Silas realized the value of reading, writing and 'rithmetic... Built a school for his 'chillun' and the county furnished a

⁶⁸ Ibid.

teacher. Silas served as the trustee, taking some of the time off being a progressive farmer, livestock grower, and truck farmer."⁶⁹ This obituary presents the widely held view that Silas was an active and avid supporter of the children's education.

But this still does not explain the juxtaposition between Silas, who could not read and write, and the need he saw for education. One obituary explains that "as a young man, he worked in the Oconee mill in Westminster, where both he and his wife, Louisa Rholetter Butts, were weavers."⁷⁰ Another article, many years later, quoted a nephew as remembering, "'As a young man Silas and his wife worked at Equinox mill in Anderson but Silas was just not cut out to be a mill man."⁷¹ Also, Jake and Cleo Gambrell recall that Cleo's father, Rev. King, taught Silas to weave when he came to work in the mill. Every time Silas saw Rev. King after that he would shout, "'Hey King, you the fellow that taught me how to weave checks!'"⁷² Perhaps, Silas' experiences living in town

⁶⁹ "Silas Butts, Adopted Father of 50, Passes."

⁷⁰ "Silas Butts, Kindly Mountaineer Dies of Heart Attack Sunday."

⁷¹ Jerry Alexander.

⁷² Jake and Cleo Gambrell, personal interview, 13 June 2003.

before he took control of the family farm caused him to see the importance of education. Silas never forgot who had taught him to do his job in town. He gained control of the Butts Farm in Brasstown when his older brother, Jim, moved his family into the Walhalla mill village in 1915 where Jim operated the Walhalla Cotton Mill Elevators.⁷³ Silas was therefore well aware of the world outside of his home nestled down in Brasstown Valley in the mountains, and perhaps this is what caused him to realize the importance of formal education.

That is not to say that Silas Butts was not smart. He may not have been able to read or write, but he certainly had intelligence and understood things. Many newspapers, before and after his death, were quick to point out his knowledge despite his lack of formal education. In 1990, in an article published in a campaign newsletter for local elections, Silas was described this way: "Although Silas could neither read nor write, he demonstrated beyond a doubt that he was bright."⁷⁴ In 1953, three years before his death, *The State* newspaper

⁷³ Aheron, 62.

⁷⁴ Ross.

featured him in the magazine section. The article introduces Silas as,

No statesman or politician is the bewildered Mr. Butts, nor is he in the ranks of education and religion. In fact, Silas can neither read nor write and in his 72 years of life in the hills he has exposed his own mental faculties to little or no book learning. Yet the man on the street in Seneca, Walhalla, or Westminster will inform you that this rugged man from the hills packs more brains and native common sense in his frosted cranium than 99 percent of the surrounding populace and that includes preachers, teachers, and business men.⁷⁵

It seems, therefore, that despite Silas' lack of formal schooling, it was widely believed that he was a smart man.

The historian Richard Drake points out that,

the Appalachian region has strong anti-intellectual tradition... Yet it is true that the folkish, yeomanesque Appalachian often found little of value in the 'book learning' of the school, since what was emphasized at school had relatively little applicability to his real needs.⁷⁶

Silas, a smart man himself, had seen and experienced the coming of the mills, been to town, and been to court. He saw and appreciated the value of this "book learning."

Even today people remember Silas for his common sense notwithstanding his scant education. Clem Smith, a

⁷⁵ Bigham.

⁷⁶ Richard Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 227.

neighbor and friend, remembers that "Silas was smart. He wasn't no man's fool." When asked if Silas could read or write, Mr. Smith responded with, "God no! He didn't know where he was at. But I'll tell you one thing, you couldn't beat him out of a penny. He know'd what it was all about." People often comment that Silas' crazy notions were the way in which he won people over.

"Everybody thought Silas was crazy, but he was a smart man."⁷⁷ The Butts family history indicated that "his wit and mountain ways often disturbed the most educated," and that Silas was "uneducated according to modern standards, but his wit and humor as a mountain man made up for this lack of schooling."⁷⁸ An article in the *Charlotte Observer* nearly twenty years after his death described him much as Mr. Smith had done, as "nobody's fool... Not many folks with strings of degrees could run an orphanage-- of sorts --on produce and moonshine whiskey."⁷⁹ Humor always plays into Silas public appearances as will be seen in his court "escapades."

⁷⁷ Clem Smith, 25 February 2003.

⁷⁸ Carlie Butts, *Butts Generations*, (Owensboro: Cook-McDowell Publications, 1981), 822-823.

⁷⁹ Jackson.

It seems that there were at least two teachers over the years at Silas' school: Mater Watkins and Laura Thrift. There are differing accounts as to how Silas paid a teacher and where she lived. Many say that the county provided a teacher whereas others say that Silas paid her out of his own pocket. Personal memories also differ as to whether she lived with Silas or boarded elsewhere. Gladys Elliott, who knew Mater Watkins, remembers, though, that, "Miss Mater Watkins was the teacher and she felt like it was a mission. Even though he paid her a small salary, she worked for that small salary because she wanted to help the children to learn."⁸⁰ Watkins, who lived down in Westminster, felt the need to help the children up in the mountains. Others like Watkins, especially in town, would see Silas' efforts to educate as humanitarian, helping to justify his "orphanage" and his use of the kids on the farm.

In terms of formal education, the need can be seen in Mary Arve's recollections of the year she taught at Brasstown school. The two boys mentioned above as being 16 and 17, barefooted, and in the first grade, also could not read at the time. Mary Arve remembered sitting on the

⁸⁰ Gladys Elliott, personal interview, 17 June 2003.

bench between them and making them take turns, back and forth, at trying to read.⁸¹ This is not to say that these boys were ignorant, just that in the eyes of organized schools, they seemed to need an education. Somehow, Silas saw this need as well.

As with a great deal of the legacy that Silas Butts left in Oconee County, humor played a role in the children's education. Mary Arve decided that she would teach the children Literary Society on Friday afternoons and give them a lesson in public speaking. Friday afternoon came around and it was time for one of the same first-grade, barefooted boys to give his speech. "He walked up to the front of the room: flop, flop, flop, flop, flop and turned around and said, 'I chew my tobacco, I spit my juice, I go to school, but it ain't no use!' Flop, flop, flop, flop and he went back and sat down."⁸² Where there is talk of anything related to Silas Butts, there is often humor.

Appalachian historian, David Whistnant, writes of the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky in his book *All That is Native and Fine*. At one point in the school's

⁸¹ Mary Arve, 4 August 1992.

⁸² Ibid.

history, an old mountain man, strikingly similar to Silas in physical features, walked twenty-two miles to "implore the 'quare women' to start a school for his 'grands and greats.' His reasons, he explained, were:

"When I was jest a chunk of a boy... And hoeing corn on the steep mountainside, I'd look up... And down... And wonder if anybody'd ever come in and larn us anything. But nobody ever come in, and nobody ever went out, and we jest growed up and never knowed nothin'. I never had a chanst to larn anything myself, but I got chillern and grandchillern just as bright as other folkses', and I want 'em to have a chanst."⁸³

This man, Uncle Sol, was used as an icon for the school following his journey to see the ladies. Uncle Sol represented an internal realization among people in the mountains of the need for formal education. Like Uncle Sol, Silas too must have felt the need for this "chanst to larn."

Whistnant goes on to explore the relationship that was created between the Hindman School and Uncle Sol and his popularity. Sol is described as "at once a recognizable cultural archetype and stereotype... A regional and national patriarch... An idealistic and progressive hillbilly, barefoot and ignorant himself, of

⁸³ David Whistnant, *All That is Native and Fine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 81-82.

course, but properly ambitious for his multigenerational progeny." This sounds not too unlike Mr. Butts and his view of what he did for his "orphans." Uncle Sol understood the need for formal education "not as a result of painstaking historical, economic, social or cultural analysis but in the midst of one's essential innocence, guided and transformed by a miraculous vision."⁸⁴ Whether this is true or not of Silas, it is what he is often remembered for, that same internal realization that his poor, orphan, mountain children needed to go to school.

Other evidence of this same attitude towards the need for education in Appalachia is illustrated in the booklet *Old Andy the Moonshiner*. Written in 1909 by Martha Gielow, this short story recounts the fictional life of a Tennessee mountain man who, along with his wife, raises their granddaughter after her mother died during childbirth. Isolated and uneducated, Andy hears of a school and saves money earned from moonshining to send the young girl to school. It is the child's persuasion of the court in the end that saves Andy from going to jail when caught running moonshine. On the final page of the booklet, the author notes:

⁸⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

An unenlightened farmer who can not read knows little of the advantages of trade, and where there are no facilities for knowledge there can be no progress. Illiteracy in this enlightened age is a crime against humanity, and a shame to the nation. The high percentage of illiterate native born whites in the Appalachian mountains is a menace to the future welfare of this country. We give millions every year for foreign missions, millions for the education of emigrants and negroes. Let us give the same chance to these American children of the Nation.⁸⁵

Gielow used this story to bring attention to the need for education in Appalachia. Andy, much like Silas, used the means available to him to support the education of the orphans. Historian Wilbur Miller notes this same practice in yet another case, writing that,

One moonshiner, Samson, told a sympathetic reporter that he was not "making this whiskey to speculate on." Instead he was only making enough to buy books and shoes so his three children could attend school and "get a little taste of education."⁸⁶

Obviously, people like Silas, Samson, and Uncle Sol from within Appalachia, as well as certain outsiders, like Martha Gielow and the women of the Hindman School,

⁸⁵ Martha Gielow, *Old Andy the Moonshiner* (Washington D.C.: W.J. Roberts Company, 1909).

⁸⁶ Wilbur Miller, *Revenuers and Moonshiners: Enforcing Federal Liquor Law in the Mountain South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 29.

realized the importance of education for mountain children.

Silas' school was not in operation all the years in which he ran his orphanage. When the reporter from Columbia traveled to the mountains to find the legendary Silas Butts in 1953, he noted that,

At one time Silas built a school for his children and hired a teacher to give them an elementary education. With some help from the county, he maintained this school for several years but today it is an abandoned building and the children attend public school in Westminster.⁸⁷

Sending the children to school in town would also "mainstream" them into the modern society. When it became available to bus the children into town in order to go to school, it made Silas' efforts to make use of what he had to educate his children an even greater sign of generosity. When they were expelled from the school at Brasstown Church, Silas made sure they received an education even before it was readily available to them through the county.

So what happened to the children after Silas' school? Spec Jameson tells that, "a lot of the kids, though, went through school there, and went on to the DAR

⁸⁷ Bigham.

[school] and finished and went to college."⁸⁸ Barbara Haynes, who attended Silas' school during the 1940's, followed up her two or three years at his school by moving on to the Long Creek Academy.⁸⁹ The Tamassee DAR School and the Long Creek Academy were established "for underprivileged children living in the mountainous areas of Oconee County." The Long Creek Academy, built by the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1914, "operated as a grammar school and high school and also offered Bible and missions courses." After eventually becoming a private school, the Academy closed in 1956.⁹⁰

Martha Gielow, author of *Old Andy the Moonshiner*, was influential in the creation of the Tamassee DAR school. In a conference of the South Carolina Daughters of the American Revolution in 1914, she spoke "most feelingly of the needs of these Saxon-Americans and urged the South Carolina Daughters to do all possible to help educate and uplift these worthy people." The selection of

⁸⁸ Spec Jameson, 12 June 2003.

⁸⁹ Barbara Haynes, 19 April 2002.

⁹⁰ Oconee Historical Society, *Historic Sites of Oconee County, S.C.*, 1991.

Tamassee as the site for the new school encompassed several reasons, including:

The great need for such a school in this immediate section is emphasized by the pitiable condition of the neighboring district schools - short term, one teacher sessions held in one-room, delapidated [sic] buildings.

These children are eager but have no opportunities.

Their outlook is barren and the future holds nothing for girls of this class except heavy field work or the cotton mill.

Their ignorance of housekeeping, cooking, caring for the sick is appalling.

The only hope for community betterment and the uplift of this class is through the children.

These mountain children living at the foot of the Blue Ridge are waiting for the glow of education to brighten their darkened horizons. Their fathers and mothers have expressed their willingness to help and co-operate with this school in every possible way.⁹¹

Even before Silas' school, there was a recognition of the need for education in the mountains of Oconee County.

The idea that Silas wanted his kids to be educated and even the humorous stories remembered by Mary Arve provide a quaint and romanticized view of a one-room schoolhouse in the mountains. However, realistically, this is not all that is remembered. Evelyn Walker, who lived with her grandmother in one of Silas' tenant houses and later married a man raised by Silas, remembers

⁹¹ Grace Ward Calhoun, *Tamassee's First Decade: 1914-1924*.

another side of Silas Butts' legacy and the community in Brasstown Valley. Evelyn Walker recalls that as her future husband was pulling his younger sister home from school one day, two of Silas' boys "took her out of the wagon, up in the wooded area, and they raped her and from that day forward, she never took another step. It crippled her for life."⁹² Mary Arve also recalled another story that was funny to her nearly sixty years later, but not at the time:

One day, two boys were out fighting at recess with knives. I always carried my lunch on Monday morning, enough to do me a whole week and I hid it in the organ. And I marched the children out and then I went to the organ and ate my lunch. I was eating lunch and I heard this awful hollering out in the yard and I went out and it was two boys- big boys, fighting with knives. And I went out and took them away from them- wouldn't do it now for anything- and one of them said, "We can't do anything to you and we know we can't do anything to you. Silas got us from Clayton, Georgia, out of jail, for throwing rocks at women. And we know we can't bother you. But we've got a sister at home, and we'll bring her tomorrow and she'll get you. She tried to commit suicide yesterday by jumping in the lake, and we got her out. And we'll bring her tomorrow and she'll get you." But, I didn't sleep much that night but she didn't come the next day, thank goodness.⁹³

⁹² Evelyn Walker, 13 June 2003.

⁹³ Mary Arve, 4 August 1992.

These stories suggest a far different side of living and going to school in the mountains than the attitudes portrayed in the newspapers. However, it could be instances like these that the formal education was hoping to prevent.

Silas Butts served as a transition between his own generation, which was uneducated by schools, and the children that he raised in a modern society tearing at the isolation known to previous generations of mountain people. Before they were able to be bussed into town and after Mary Arve had expelled them for drunkenness, Silas built his own school to provide this education. Perhaps it was his experiences outside of his home in the remote Brasstown Valley, or something within him, like Uncle Sol, but nevertheless, he made sure that his "adopted" children received "the things the old man had never had a chance to learn himself."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ "Silas Butts, Kindly Mountaineer Dies of Heart Attack Sunday."