The Farm at Black Mountain College by David Silver
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Barn Raising

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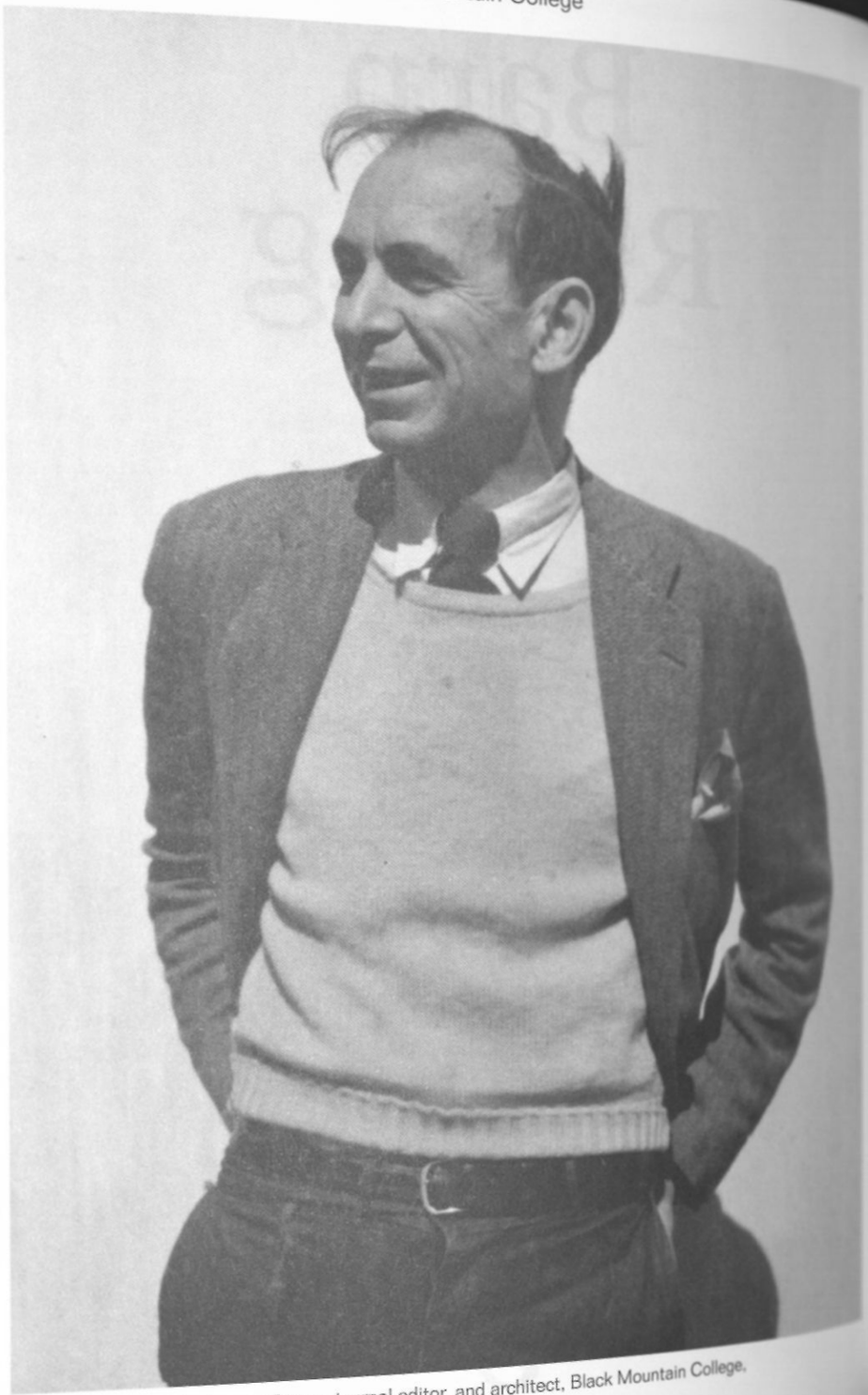


Lawrence "Larry" Kocher, professor, journal editor, and architect, Black Mountain College, April 1942.

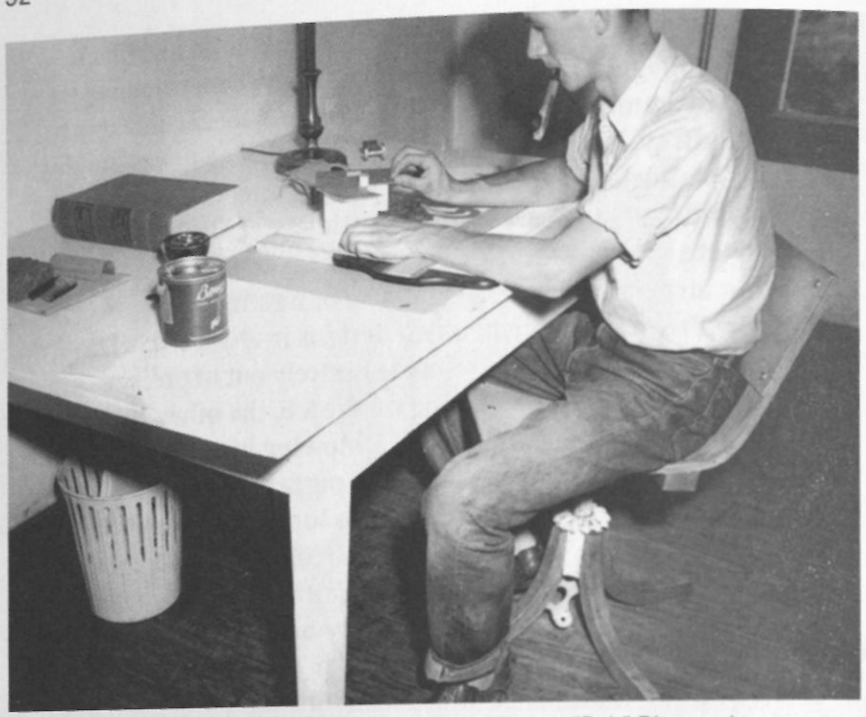
The early 1940s were marked by frantic construction at Black Mountain College. The Studies Building and other structures were underway by summer 1941, led by Kocher and local contractor Charlie Godfrey. When the college wasn't building it was moving furniture, pianos, looms, the college's press, and an entire heating system—radiators and all—from Blue Ridge to Lake Eden.

In late spring 1941, Kocher turned his attention to the farm. Designing farm-related buildings was not new to him. In 1934, he and Albert Frey had published two designs in *Architectural Record* —one for a low-cost farmhouse made entirely out of prefabricated materials that required no cutting on the job, the other for a neighborhood of subsistence farmsteads. Following his own advice and building upon a precedent set by Nat's pigpens, Kocher designed the barn to be built primarily of campus lumber, chestnut poplars, once again. The barn's overseer was Bob Bliss.[87]

Robert "Bob" Bliss grew up in Seattle. While his college-bound friends enrolled at the University of Washington, young Bliss wanted something different. He found himself moved by an article Louis Adamic had written about a unique school, Black Mountain College. Originally published in *Harper's Magazine,* excerpted in *Reader's Digest,* and extended in his book *My America,* Adamic's article was an enthusiastic, albeit idealized distillation of the college, its faculty leaders (Rice, Albers, Wunsch), and its involved-in-everything students. The article had reached such a wide audience that for years it served as the college's single most effective recruitment tool. Bliss was fascinated by the college, especially its communal living and real-world application of knowledge. He also liked the price tag; his family didn't have much money and the college had a sliding scale for tuition. Despite high hopes, upon arrival he felt intimidated. "I remember feeling very unsophisticated in relation to students that had been to private schools in the east and were very articulate. In fact, I hardly talked for the first year." Instead he quietly took Dreier's math classes, which only decreased his interest in the subject.[88]

Things changed his second year when Bliss took Albers' acclaimed Werklehre class. Another class that had an impact was furniture making with Edward "Ed" DuPuy, a Black Mountain-based photographer, carpenter, and furniture maker. An experienced carpenter himself, Bliss especially looked forward to the days when class took place in DuPuy's Village Workshop in Black Mountain where students were given access to specialized tools.[89]

Most exciting for Bliss, however, were Kocher's classes in architecture and building. Partly out of feelings of intellectual inadequacy and also out of a growing interest in architecture,



Architecture student and overseer of the barn building Robert "Bob" Bliss working on a model for low-cost housing, 1942.

Charles "Charlie" Godfrey, local contractor, builder, and friend of Black Mountain College.

Bliss poured his efforts into several of the early Lake Eden construction projects, and his favorite was the barn. While the other buildings were riddled with complexities, the barn, Bliss recalled, was a satisfyingly simple structure to make.

While Kocher designed the barn and Bliss oversaw it, Charlie Godfrey and his crew did much of the building. Charles "Charlie" Godfrey was an experienced Black Mountain-based contractor and builder, who in 1940 had completed a hotel in nearby Montreat. The hotel was unique because of its massive size and the fact that it was built without an architect. Members of Black Mountain College were of two main opinions. First, the hotel, built with conflicting materials and assembled in conflicting styles, was hideous; second, considering its large size, it sure seemed sturdy. Charlie was an appealing option to take on the Lake Eden campus build for several reasons. He had a diverse skill set that included stone and concrete masonry, welding, carpentry, plumbing, and electrical wiring. He had an excellent reputation as a manager of his construction crew, which at the time was comprised of three men, Parley, Hurley, and Pearson Mundy. And, importantly, he expressed excitement at the idea of working with the novice student crew. Throughout March and April 1942, the professional team of four worked seven straight weeks to complete the barn with the help of BMC students. Mundy, an experienced plumber, was a favorite on campus. Student Ike Nakata recalled that he "delighted in telling us what kind of sex lives some of the preachers practiced in private, judging from their stopped plumbing."[90]

THE WORK PROGRAM

The building of the barn concretized the rhythm of manual labor at BMC. While there had been no formal program to facilitate daily chores at Blue Ridge—chopping wood, hauling coal, and tending to pigs were all voluntary—this would change at Lake Eden. Overnight, the newly focused Work Program altered the very time and space of everyday life at Black Mountain College. Morning classes were scheduled earlier and afternoon/evening classes scheduled later, freeing up five-to-six hour chunks of the day for work. Each weekday and most Saturdays, the BMC community would gather on the porch of Lee Hall, pile into the back of the college truck, and travel to Lake Eden for an afternoon of physical labor. Campus, in other words, became distributed: Students and faculty would discuss ideas and make art at Blue Ridge, learn skills and build structures at Lake Eden, and hopefully fit in some social time while squished together in the back of the truck traveling back and forth between sites.[91]

Kocher was in charge of designing the buildings and supervising their erection. Charlie was tasked with construction and supervising students. Bas worked tirelessly wiring and winterizing existing and new buildings. Dreier served as program manager and chaired and coordinated all phases of the Work Program and building project. As always, they relied on key advice from their local network, including Laursen of the Asheville Farm School and Clapp from the Swannanoa Test Farm.[92]

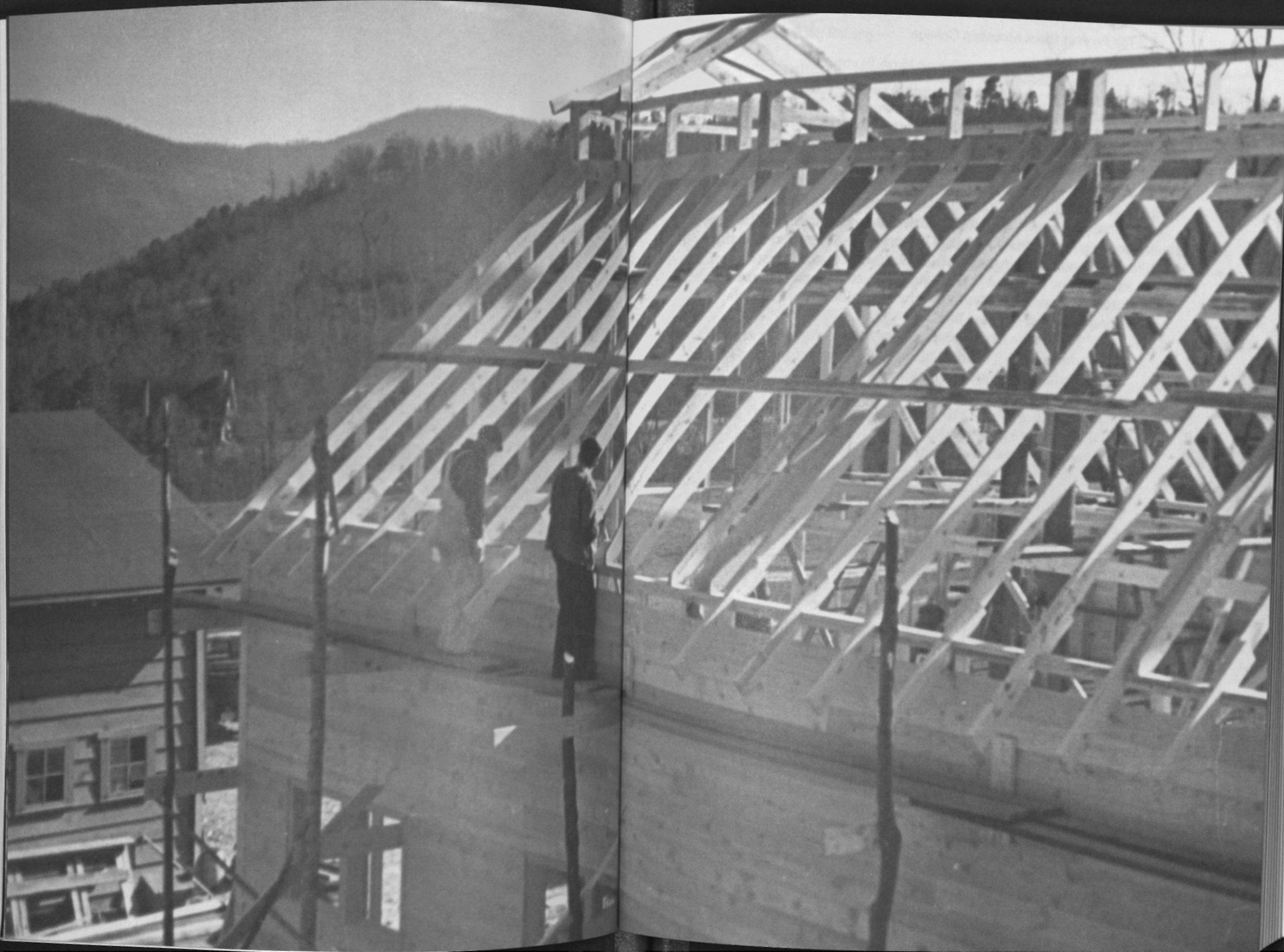
The secret sauce that would drive the whole operation, Dreier and others hoped, was Dr Richard Gothe. Gothe visited Blue Ridge Assembly for a non-BMC-related matter in July 1940. As he was about to leave, he ended up meeting Dreier and sharing his life story. He told Dreier that he had been born in Berlin, Germany, where he trained to become a master mechanic and toolmaker. After nearly a decade of developing his craft, including in Brazil and the US, Gothe returned home. Although he had neither a high school diploma nor an undergraduate degree, he was admitted to the University of Berlin, and later the University of Kiel, where he earned a PhD in economics. When the Nazis rose to power Gothe fled to the US to study and direct voluntary work camps through the Civilian Conservation Corps, a part of Roosevelt's New Deal. With this experience he was qualified to run the Work Program, and he could also teach economics. Conveniently, because Gothe was on a fellowship with the Rockefeller Foundation, BMC would not have to pay his salary during the first year. Dreier, one can imagine, was beside himself. The wheeling and dealing treasurer pushed Gothe to remain on campus, organized a few campus talks for him, and suggested the Board of Fellows hire him immediately. They did.[93] It wouldn't take too much time to realize that despite looking great on paper, Gothe was not a popular addition to the faculty or the farm.

For the time, with Gothe at the helm, the BMC community worked incessantly throughout the 1940–41 school year, practically willing the Work Program into full action. As Bliss recalled: "We gathered river boulders and mountain stone, cut trees for pilings, dug foundation trenches, poured concrete, and set masonry. Carpentry, plumbing, wiring, laying oak flooring, and painting completed the work. Everyone took part and all could take pride in what a small group could accomplish given the desire and obvious need." The work log entry for Thanksgiving 1940 offers a picture.

> Thanksgiving Day: we worked as usual on this beautiful sunny but windy day. It was pretty cold where people were exposed to the wind. Ken Kurtz worked with a group cutting hard wood poles for Mr. Godfrey. A group of five girls with Cynthia Carr as straw boss graded the hillside down to the wall and put the dirt into the cavity between the walls and the hill. Four boys with Rudy Haase worked on the farm ditch. Morris Simon and Tommy Brooks built a bridge across the opening of the fire tower. Four boys worked as carpenters. Hill was the mixer with Eva and Phyllis Josephs as helpers. John Evarts, Chenkin and Roman worked on the wheelbarrows and I had to help them bring the wheelbarrows up for the pouring. Three girls helped on the pouring, and we finished the wall at about 4:30, the time to go home and dress for the Thanksgiving dinner. Bobby Dreier had come over and refreshed us all with hot coffee which was most welcome.[94]

Some individuals, including student Isaac "Ike" Nakata, shone amid all this dusty labor. Born on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, in 1919, Ike was raised in a company house in a company village and, like his father, worked for a corporate sugar plantation, where from a young age he did it all—weeding, fertilizing, irrigating, and tending the fields. But Ike wanted out—from the plantation system, which he hated, and from the unfair expectations of his widowed father. "As the last one, the youngest," he wrote, "I took the brunt of his self-pity, his accusations of ingratitude." As eager as he was to leave and not look back, Ike decided he would work three years beyond high school graduation to help his father and save for college. In summer 1940, he read a back-page article in a Honolulu newspaper about Black Mountain College. He was intrigued by the school's educational experimentation, attracted to its communal living, and drawn in by the accompanying photo showing students playing chess on a sundeck. He arrived in late summer 1940, just as the college began its building spree at Lake Eden.[95]

At first, Ike felt out of place. Still "green from the sugarcane fields of Oahu," as he said it. The shy and observant but built-like-a-boxer young man was surrounded by students who had been trained at expensive private schools where they had taken college prep classes, which in turn prepared them to thrive as participants in the college's soaring intellectual discussions. By contrast, Ike had taken required classes in high school (no calculus or algebra,



Previous two spreads: Construction of the barn, featuring Pearson Mundy (in white overalls) and Bob Bliss (next to Mundy, in black pants), at Lake Eden campus, spring 1942.

no French or Latin), and had devoted Sundays, his one day off, to correspondence courses in literature and history. His lack of funds made his education feel precarious, but within a year things changed, due in part to classes with sharply observant economist Karl Niebyl, and history, literature, and theater courses with talented professor Eric Bentley. Years later, after the war, Ike returned to the college, this time with GI funding. No longer racing through coursework to save money, he took classes that interested him, traveled to New York and Washington, DC, to expand his horizons, and hitched occasional rides to nearby Asheville, where he enjoyed a T-bone steak or Chinese food.[96]

Though he felt more comfortable over time, Ike experienced racism on campus. One day, during an otherwise routine game of touch football, he made a professor look bad, prompting him to call Ike "a damn Jap." Ike recalled, "I was too dumbfounded to take insult." Starting in 1944, the college made a concerted effort to racially integrate their academic community, first with Alma Stone (Williams), the first Black student at the college, then with Dr Percy Baker, a biologist from Virginia State College, next with painter Jacob Lawrence, and later with five Black students, including Mary Parks Washington and Ora Marie Williams.

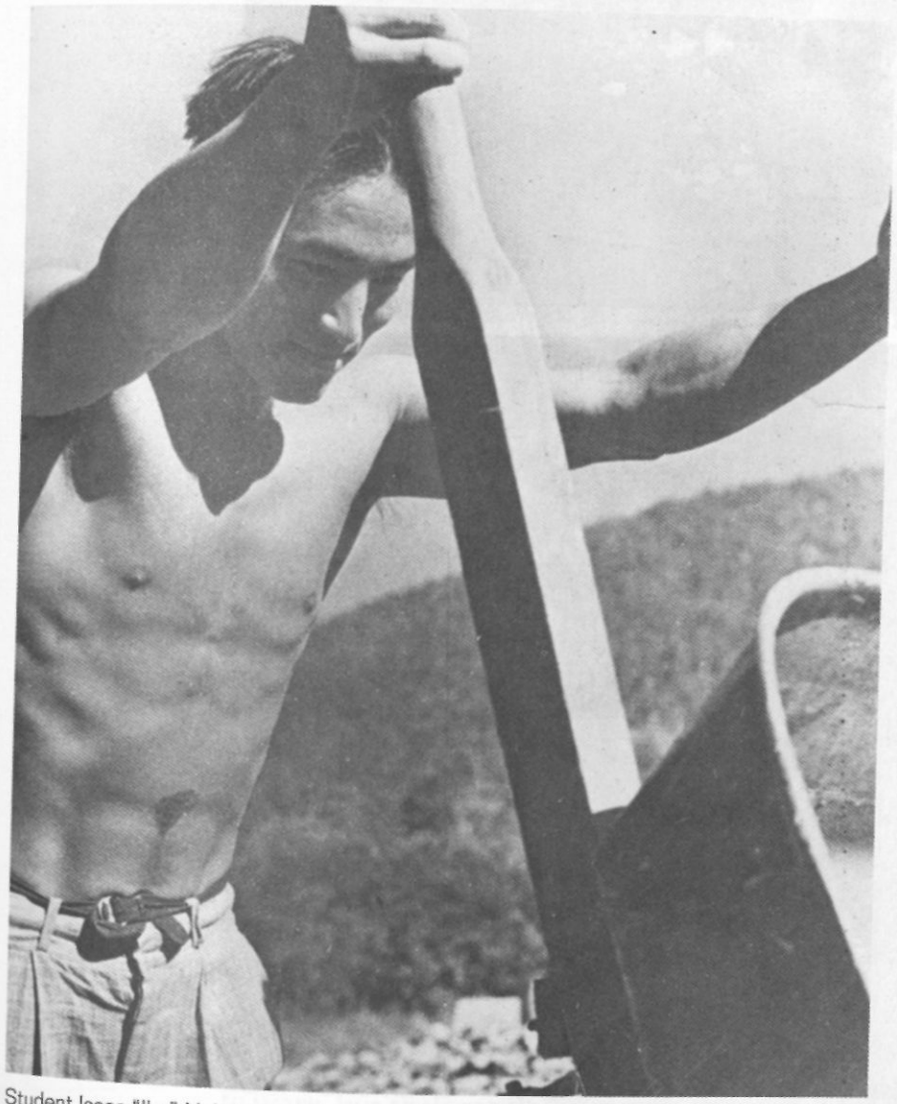
The complex intersections of race, cultural identity, segregation and community among white and Black staff, students and faculty, Japanese-American students like Ike and Ruth Asawa, as well as dozens of immigrant faculty and faculty families, many of them Jewish, plus local residents merits its own book-length treatment. In the meantime, interested readers should look up Bryan Barcena's contribution to 2015's *Leap before you look: Black Mountain College,* and Brenda Danilowitz's chapter in *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment.*

Ike challenged his introverted ways by seeking friendship with these new students, but he still felt a bit lost at sea. "I was hardly attuned to the white mainstream," he wrote, "or the black sidestream. Where was the little creek in which I would swim?"[97]

Ike instead tuned into his natural surroundings, developing a passion for foraging and other outdoor pursuits. He hunted for wild strawberries with fellow student and future wife Alexa McLane, and giant blackberries, which Jack Lipsey baked into pies. Once, he accompanied history professor David Corkran to the backcountry to purchase applejack, the original moonshine, from a subsistence farmer. During his time at Black Mountain College

after the war, Ike would walk with math professor and resident ecologist Max Dehn who taught him how to forage mushrooms, wild persimmons, sassafras root, cress, garlic, dandelions, hickory, chestnuts, and walnuts.[98]

But most of all, Ike threw himself into physical labor. As a devoted member of the Work Program, he joined small teams to haul coal, mix concrete, and cut pine and tulip poplar trees—all to help build the barn. He gathered creek rock and rock slabs, chopped trees for lumber and scaffolding, cleared brush, and dug ditches. More than anything, he worked tirelessly in the cornfields. With years of experience on the sugar plantation in Hawaii, Ike knew exactly what to do.[99]



Student Isaac "Ike" Nakata participating in the Work Program, Black Mountain College, 1942.

Summer work campers, which included current Black Mountain College students and visiting students, level a small hill and dig a ditch in preparation for the barn, summer 1941.

SUMMER WORK CAMPS

As the amount of work needed at Lake Eden became abundantly clear, the college sought ways to increase labor. Some BMC members, including Ted and Bobbie Dreier, looked to the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization, and their two decades' experience running work camps. An early example of what is now called community-engaged learning or, before that, service learning, the work camps invited college and university students to live, work, and participate in areas of economic turmoil—such as the Mississippi cotton delta or the Pennsylvania coalfields—for eight weeks in summer. To learn more, Bobbie Dreier tapped into her family's social reform network to bring AFSC member J. Olcutt Sanders to campus for guidance. The school's first summer work camp was initiated in 1940. It enrolled about 20 female and male students who worked for five hours a day, six days a week, for which they were paid $65 plus room and board for eight weeks. Although successful in terms of launching the Lake Eden build program, the summer 1940 work camp, helmed by Gothe, was run haphazardly and often overlapped awkwardly with Lake Eden Inn's activities. Further, unlike the Friends' work camps, there was very little integration between the camp and the community. Some work campers said the only thing they remember doing was working.[100]

Fortunately the 1941 summer work camp was a vast departure from the previous year. First, Gothe, for whom Dreier had held high hopes, was gone. Although he had successfully established a culture of work and moved building and farm projects forward, Gothe was hated by the students. He barked out instructions, expected the students to have endless skills and energy, and got enraged when they didn't. "He ran the organization like an army," recalled Molly Gregory. "He was a fascist," remembered student Suzanne Noble. Even gentle Bob Bliss called Gothe "the SS man." By the end of spring 1941, Gothe was asked not to return, prompting a collective sigh of relief.[101]

That second year, 26 campers—BMC students and alumni as well as students from other universities—joined the work camp. They helped with construction on new buildings and old ones too, excavating under the lodges to install heating systems, constructing chimneys and installing insulation in the cottages, and renovating the bathhouse into a science classroom and dark room. They also worked on the slowly developing farm, helping Penley plant beans, corn, squash, and potatoes.[102]

Unlike the previous year, not only were their bodies put to work, but their sensibilities were stimulated too. Participants

WORK CAMPERS FIRST SESSION SUMMER 1941

Name	College	Home
Bliss, Robert (Bob)	BMC	Seattle, Washington
Coolidge, Frederic	Harvard	Cambridge, Massachusetts
Dabbs, Maude	BMC	Mayesville, South Carolina
Deaver, Danny	BMC	Escondido, California
Forberg, Chuck	BMC	Minneapolis, Minnesot a
Friedman, Pearl (Freddie)	Bennington	Hempstead, New York
Guth, Otto	(Vienna)	Cambridge, Massachusetts
Huntington, Priscilla	Sarah Lawrence	Norwich, Connecticut
Joseph, William	Harvard	Cincinnati, Ohio
Katz, Leslie	BMC (alumni)	New York City
Kronenberg, Gisela	BMC	Cincinnati
Kubie Leon, Fernando	BMC	Firthcliffe, New York
Malek, Bernard	BMC	Bronxville, New York
Metzger, Robert (Bob)	Art School	Syracuse, New York (Lakewood, Ohio)
Morand, Margit	Austria-	New York City
Nakata, Isaac	BMC	Hawaii
Oldenburg, Nan	BMC	New York City
Page, Don Pond, Richard Schaffle, Karl	BMC Princeton	Denver, Colorado Waltham, Mass. Asheville, North Carolina
Scoville, Elizabeth Stoller		New London, Connecticut
Secord, Jim Wolpert, Jerry	Harvard BMC	St Catherines, Ontario W Orange, N J.
Wyke, Edward	Univ of Florida	Miami, Florida
Zhitlowsky, Eva	BMC	Croton-on-Hudson-N

Starting in summer 1940, Black Mountain College hosted Summer Work Camps, which attracted both BMC and visiting students to work on campus for room, board, and a modest stipend.

enjoyed regular field trips, had access to the college's library and record collection, engaged with BMC faculty, and attended an impressive series of talks by guest lecturers. Dr Warner F. Brook, from the New School for Social Research, organized a summer course, The World Today, and Dr Jacob Klein, of St. John's College, gave a series of lectures on Descartes, Galileo, and Hobbes. In a four-part lecture series, Dr Arthur Raper, from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, discussed economics and race in the American South.[103]

Among the work, campers' most important task was leveling the ground upon which the barn would be built, on what was then a substantial hillside. Using pickaxes and shovels and the college's new Farmall H tractor, campers worked alongside Mark the (award-winning) horse to chip away at the hillside to make a straight and stable flatland for the coming structure.[104]

By mid-May 1942 the barn was complete. At 54 ft long, 44 ft wide, and two-and-a-half stories high, it was enormous. The main floor was divided into 11 stalls, each with stanchions, feed troughs, and drinking fountains at every other stall. The second floor, constructed from campus pine, had openings on both sides for loading and unloading grain. The loft, also built from campus pine, had a storage capacity of 75 tons of hay. The barn was fully electrified, painted red, and sat on a small hill overlooking the farm; it was stunning from every angle. Today, the barn is still standing but is used for weddings and events, rather than housing livestock.

In late May 1942, Black Mountain College celebrated the completion of the barn with a barn dance. College dances were nothing out of the ordinary. Throughout BMC's first eight years at Blue Ridge, dancing took place after dinner on Saturday nights. Everyone dressed up and the dancing lasted for hours, with live piano played by music professor John Evarts. For this dance, the college truck hauled a piano from the Round House, the college music library and practice space named after its shape, to the barn so that Evarts could bang out songs. Proud of their accomplishment, the Black Mountain community waltzed, polkaed, and fox-trotted around the pristine, cavernous barn all night long.

Molly
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