

**CHAPTER 2**  
**KONNAROCK TRAINING SCHOOL:**  
**FULFILLING A MISSION**

*Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token to save it from that ruin, which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. An education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their choice of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.*

*Hannah Arendt, Teaching as Leading*

**Realizing a Dream**

The Appalachian Mountain chain is among the oldest on earth. Millions of years ago, the land mass called Pangea was severed and the earth's movement created mountains. Through the next million years, the ridges were abraded by wind and water until they could no longer be called mountains. During the Cenozoic Era, another turbulent earth movement lifted the land skyward and reactivated rivers that cut deeply into the layers of earth. Whitetop Mountain is one of those mountains thrust upward in what is now Southwest Virginia. Today, if you stand at the 5,540-foot summit and gaze north, you will observe a sedimentary landscape deposited by the sea and later uplifted by movement of the earth. Turn to the south, and the panorama is a volcanic landscape. This mountain is a place where worlds came together and created breathtaking beauty. Konnarock Training School, the subject of my research, found a fit setting at the foot of Whitetop Mountain. The school, too, was a place where worlds met, a place where past and present collided and built a new future.

In 1922, women at a national Lutheran convention in a faraway city listened to the impassioned pleas of twenty-five year old mountain missionary Kenneth Killinger and his cousin Laura Scherer Copenhaver. These two wanted a school for mountain children, a school that would help fulfill Killinger's conception of the Church's mission as helping people to flourish in all ways. Within Killinger's sermon notes, the following lines were written:

A church that brings to the community salvation, brings also

Cooperation and Friendliness

Charity and Kindness

Material Benefits

Educational Facilities (Tannen, 1995, p. 22)

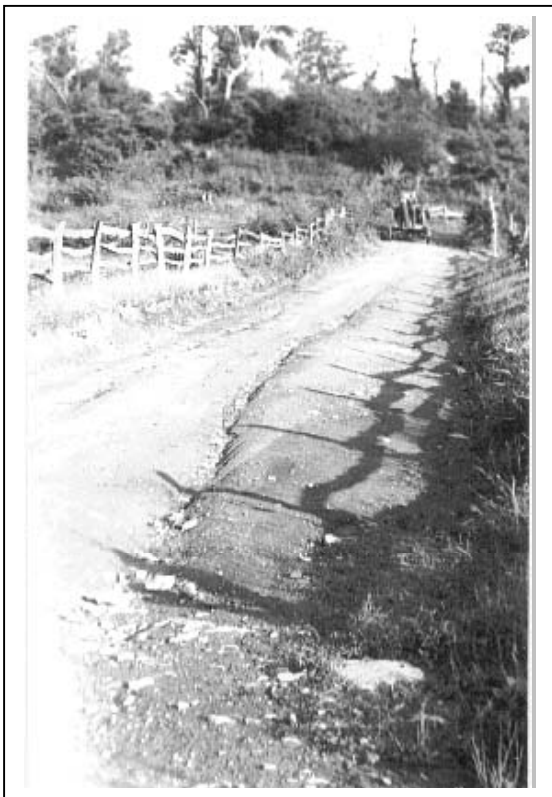
Copenhaver and Killinger had traveled the three hundred fifty miles to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to ask for aid in their efforts to provide spiritual and secular education for girls in isolated communities in Southern Appalachia. The Women's Missionary Society of the United Lutheran Church in America was made up of the descendents of German and Scandinavian Lutheranism. The convention was being asked to help a population that was in many cases underprivileged and undereducated fundamentalist Christians of the Primitive faith. Church worship for the Lutheran women often meant a "high-church," liturgical, and probably staid ceremony in neat, white-washed and red-doored chapels with proper paraments and altar ware brought from the old country. Even though Lutheranism had come to Southwest Virginia with the earliest settlers, the mountain girls were just as likely to go to "meetin'," irregular gatherings held by an itinerant preacher in someone's barn, a tent, or perhaps a nearby one-room school house, where "shoutin'," "gettin' happy", and hearing dreadful warnings against all manner of sinfulness were the norm.

The girls and their benefactors had other differences. The representatives at the Lutheran women's group were for the most part well educated. Lutherans had long encouraged both religious and secular education for everyone, and church-supported colleges and seminaries encouraged female students to attend. Although it was to be another fifty years before the Lutheran church would ordain women, from the church's early years, deaconesses had been called to serve in a variety of capacities and to play a significant role in ministry. At the time of the 1922 convention, there were 897 women enrolled in Lutheran colleges in the United States, a number with some financial support from the Missionary Society (Convention Report, 1922). The Society itself was also deeply involved in other work of the church, including funding ninety-seven women as

foreign and home missionaries in 1924 alone (Tanner, 1995). In contrast, in a number of homes where the future Konnarock Training School students lived, there were those who saw little “sense in” education. Certainly, boys needed to read and write, but not much else. Girls, it was thought, had even less need of schooling to prepare them to have babies and wash clothes and clean house. This attitude toward education was found frequently in the homes of Appalachia, but there were an equal number of homes where great value was placed on education, and the means of obtaining it were simply not available. In some cases, there was another obstacle to education. Primitive preachers had engrained in some of the mountaineers a distrust of any “learnin’” beyond the word of the Bible. To want to know other things was viewed as sinful as well as useless. For a portion of the girls living in the remote mountainous areas, a life of self-fulfillment as anything other than a farm wife was beyond even dreaming about (Smith, 1999). When young people did have the opportunity to attend school, it was often for very short sessions. Most mountain schools were in session for only six or seven months a year and offered only six or seven grades. It was not until 1932 that a public high school was constructed in the Whitetop area, but buses could not travel over portions of the mountain roads. A new school for mountain children could both provide much needed opportunity and encourage positive change.

The environments of the supporters of Konnarock Training School and the environments of its students were worlds apart, but the two came together and produced a unique and significant endeavor. The Women’s Missionary Society had already funded foreign missions, schools, and hospitals, but the conference was stunned by Copenhaver and Killinger’s impassioned reports of the poverty of opportunity so close to home (Tanner, 1995). Mrs. Copenhaver’s address to the convention, entitled “Mountain Folk in the South-Our Untouched Opportunity,” was so stirring that the Society soon approved support for a mission effort and undertook the project with alacrity. Teacher Mary Phlegar Smith from Ephrata, Pennsylvania, was commissioned to study the area and determine the most pressing needs. For more than year, Miss Smith resided near Marion, worked with a health center and mission in the Currin Valley community, conducted a school for children and a night school for adults, and traveled to the surrounding

communities. While Miss Smith was working in Virginia, Miss Cora Pearl Jeffcoat, who had given up her job as supervisor of district schools in Davidson County, North Carolina, was sent as parish worker to the neighboring mountains of North Carolina. The work of the two women was remarkable, as evidenced by the frequent reports they sent to be published in the Missionary Society's monthly magazine, *Lutheran Woman's Work*.



**FIGURE 3: ROAD IN KONNAROCK AREA IN THE 1930s; AN OXCART IS SEEN IN THE DISTANCE.**

(Private files of LaVerne Kiser)

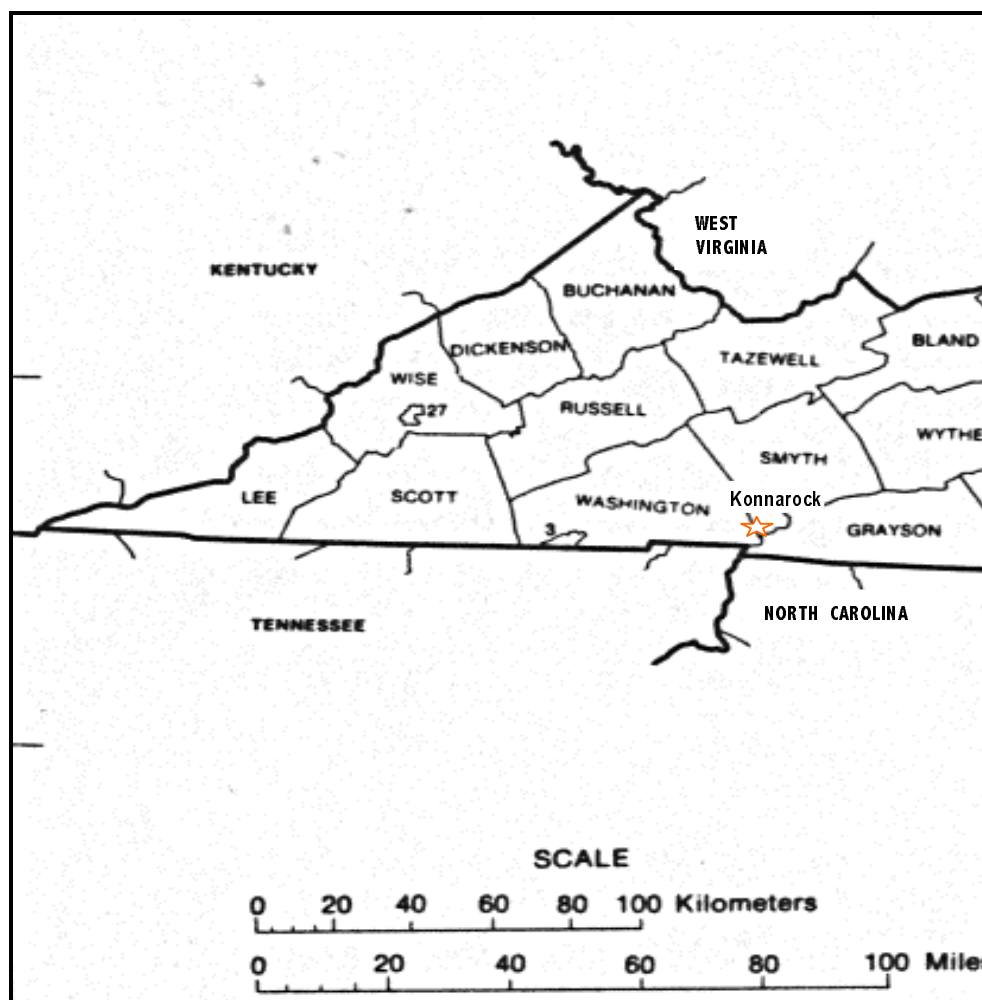
This magazine, with a circulation of 34,285 in 1922, kept women through the country apprised of the work efforts they were supporting (Convention Report, 1922). As an increasing number of women learned of the mission efforts in the mountains, the support grew. Moreover, this magazine attracted a number of young women into the mission field in the southern mountains.

In a short time, for both Miss Smith and Miss Jeffcoat, “the idea of a training school for girls took precedence over all other plans” for mission work (Morehead, 1932, n.p.). The tiny village of Konnarock, at the foot of Whitetop Mountain and near Mount Rogers, the state’s highest peak, was chosen as the site, in part because of its

central location. (Figure 4). The community is situated not only near the borders of three Virginia counties--Smyth, Washington, and Grayson--but it is only about fifteen miles from both North Carolina and Tennessee, and about fifty miles from West Virginia and Kentucky. Here the work of both Miss Smith and of Miss Jeffcoat could be enhanced.

The school could and did reach students from several isolated areas. Indeed, the Konnarock community, itself in a secluded valley, was reached only by traveling over Iron Mountain, Mount Rogers, or Whitetop Mountain. The nearest towns, Marion and

Abingdon, twenty-five and eighteen miles away, respectively, were only accessible by unpaved mountainous roads that frequently became impassable in bad weather. At the time the location for the Lutheran school was chosen, Konnarock's main link to the outside world was the train that carried lumber from the Hassinger Lumber Company, an enterprise that would in a very few years complete its depletion of virgin timber and close its logging business and band mill.



**Figure 4—Location of Konnarock Training School**

*Note.* Outline map is a portion of “Virginia County Selection Map” published by the US Department of Commerce. Location of KTS, North Carolina, and West Virginia added.

The Hassingers, either through the company or personally, owned large tracts of land in and around Konnarock. In spite of the environmental damage their business in-

flicted, the family's philanthropy and interest in education were significant. When the three Hassinger brothers moved to the area in 1906, there was no local elementary school for their own children or for those of their workers. The nearest secondary school was in Abingdon. When the Washington County School Board refused to provide a school and a teacher for what they considered a transient business operation, the lumber company built its own school and invited any local children who wished to attend to do so (Gay, 1998). The Hassingers then returned to the school board for help furnishing the school and providing teachers. When the school opened its doors in 1908, its principal and teachers were paid in part by the lumber company and in part by the board of education (Gay, 1998). This building itself, which housed grades 1-11, and the precedent of public and private cooperation created by the venture, are both important in the history of Konnarock Training School.

By 1923, the Hassinger lumber operation was winding down to its permanent close on the day before Christmas 1928, yet Luther Hassinger's interest in education had not waned. When Mr. Hassinger learned of the work being done by Preacher Killinger, Miss Smith, and the Lutheran Church, he wanted to help. His generous donation of 235.5 acres of land, added to the funds provided by the Woman's Missionary Society to purchase another 103 acres from the Douglas Lumber Company, put a school for girls within the realm of possibility (Minutes, 1926). Yet the school could not be built overnight, and there was an immediate need for education. Mr. Hassinger again intervened by contacting an agent for what was known as the Douglas Estate. This property was once owned by another lumber company that had already moved on to greener forests. A sister of Theodore Roosevelt, Mrs. Corrine Roosevelt Robinson, had obtained the estate as a vacation home. Miss Smith, who had been given a biennial budget of \$16,920 for salaries and school needs, reached a rental agreement with the agent, and in December 1924, the first Konnarock Training School classes were held in that house (Biennial Budget, 1924).

From the beginning, KTS was a boarding school; it was founded on the premise that most of the children who would be enrolled could not easily travel to school. The staff that first year consisted of Miss Smith, a nurse/teacher, and a housekeeper/cook. Six

girls boarded at the school, and there were additional elementary day pupils (Minutes, 1926). Five of the boarding students were from Miss Jeffcoat's parish in North Carolina, including "one little tot 5 years old" (Smith, 1925b, p.191). The tot referred to was probably one of the narrators in this study, Dora Bentley Testerman, now in her eighties. She remembers being brought by Miss Jeffcoat from the Boone area to the first building used for Konnarock Training School and reports she was the smallest child there.

Now that a temporary place for home and school was available, Pastor Killinger began recruitment throughout the mountains. In a very short time, more students put their names on the school's waiting list, and plans were made to build a modern boarding school in the middle of one of the most disadvantaged sections of the country. At its August 1925 meeting, the Biennial Convention of the Women's Missionary Society appropriated funds for construction of a school that was equipped with the most up-to-date conveniences. Again, two worlds met. From small homes without indoor plumbing, running water, or electricity, students would soon move into a second home equipped with its own power plant; its own sewer system and bathrooms; a well, reservoir and running water; a refrigeration plant; a central heating system; a fire-protection system; and a modern electric kitchen. Support poured in from women throughout the nation. Money for the home economics room came from the Kansas Synodical Society, for dining room furniture from the Pacific Northwest, for kitchen equipment from Pittsburgh, for library books from New York, and for dishes from the Wisconsin Young Women's Society (Morehead, 1926). In addition to dormitory rooms, rooms for teachers, classrooms, and a large dining room and a parlor, the building contained a beautiful chapel with stained glass windows and both a piano and an organ. The building was completed in an astonishingly short time, four months from ground-breaking until the first students moved in. One of the narrators in this study, Emily Umbarger described the chapel.

*The chapel was one of the loveliest little buildings that I've ever been in. Very worshipful! Donations were made throughout the church [for the chapel]. The best part of it for me was the Moeller organ that was a gift from I suppose the women's society in Maryland. I think the Moeller headquarters were in*

*Baltimore. We had stained glass windows; I'm not sure who donated them. A beautiful triangular one over the altar, which is now in Faith Lutheran Church over on the other side of the mountain, of Christ blessing the children.*



**FIGURE 5: SUN STREAMS THROUGH THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS IN THE KTS CHAPEL.** (Private files of LaVerne Kiser)

Even as the modern world came to Konnarock, the builders paid homage to mountain tradition. All interior woodwork was made from local hardwoods, and the three-story structure was covered in shingles carved from the bark of the American chestnut tree, a majestic tree that once covered the mountains of Southwest Virginia but that had been decimated by chestnut blight. The choice of building material was no doubt made for practical reasons, but it symbolizes the attitude of those who came to Konnarock “to minister to the spiritual, mental and physical needs of the children of the Appalachian mountains” (Smith, 1925a, p. 236). The teachers and nurses who left their homes in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Indiana “did not condescend and patronize. Rather, these pioneering women immersed themselves in the mountain culture, grew to love and respect it, and in the process, enlightened and changed the perceptions of many people” (Tannen, 1995, p. 59). In a 1934 article, Principal Helen Dyer expressed her



beliefs concerning the actions of the mission. She wrote that the workers themselves were the best ones to tell the story of the labor,

[to tell] how the preaching awakened the need, too, of better schools throughout the region; how the parish work showed the necessity of ministering to bodies as well as souls; how the school work uncovered other even more basic social, economic, and religious needs. So many complex needs arise the moment one begins anything at all that has the least quality of leadership or help in it! Workers need to bear constantly in mind both their immediate and their remote goals. They must be sensitive to the growth and the changing needs of the individuals and groups through and with whom they are working; must know how to conserve and encourage fine local enthusiasms as well as those of supporting or contributing groups, until the time comes to fit what they offer into the whole plan of things. (Dyer, 1934, p. 3)

Throughout its history, the goal of KTS was “to educate our girls not away from the mountains, but back to the mountains” (Smith, 1925a, p. 236). On December 14, 1925, the doors of a new building and a new world were opened to twenty-eight girls from the hollows and ridges and mountaintops of the surrounding area; seven local boys were admitted as day students (Tanner, 1995). By the next year, more local Konnarock children attended. In addition, there were thirty-five day students admitted from Smyth County for which the school board paid Konnarock Training School sixty dollars each month for eight months (Minutes of the Fifth Biennial Convention, 1926). This money seems to have been used to help pay salaries of two additional teachers from the community, and staff was increased with a third teacher who lived at the school.

Although KTS was later to become an accredited Virginia high school, its first pupils were elementary students. During the 1925-26 year, the four teachers taught classes for grades primer through seven. Because of the overwhelming number of children who wanted to attend KTS, the principal decided that the best way to accommodate them would be to teach two sessions, one from 8:00 to 12:00 and a second, identical session from 12:30 to 4:00 (Gay, 1998). During the next several years, KTS taught the

first seven grades on the premises. Boarding students who wished to obtain a high school diploma would continue living at the school, but for classes required for graduation, they would walk to the nearby Konnarock High School--the same school built by the Hassinger Lumber Company in 1908, and now operated by Washington County. For the first few years, Washington County did not charge tuition for these pupils, possibly because Mr. L. C. Hassinger was a member of both the county school board and the board of directors of KTS (Gay, 1998).

The new Konnarock Training School building was officially dedicated “to the service of God” on Sunday, May 16, 1926. For that occasion, Mrs. O. J. Kreps wrote the following poem that became the KTS alma mater:

In the gorges of the mountains  
 Where the treetops kiss the sky  
 Where the dogwood and the redbud  
 Smile on every passer-by  
 Where the waters leap and sparkle  
 Dancing o’er a downward trail,  
 Konnarock awaits your presence  
 In its lovely sunlit vale.

Mountain school with doors wide open  
 Calling, “Come, and Learn, and See,  
 I am here to bless the children.  
 Suffer them to come to me.  
 I will teach and help and guide them;  
 Give them standards good and great,  
 Make life count for God and country  
 In the old Virginia State.”

Konnarock, your name is music,  
 Like the rhythm of a song.  
 And your mission, it is holy,  
 May God keep you true and strong.  
 As you teach the blessed Gospel,  
 May the mountains and the plain  
 Echo back and forth your message,  
 “Praises be to Jesus’ Name.”

Inspiration for the song’s second stanza came from the stained glass window over the altar in the chapel. Chairman of the building committee and President of the Women’s

Missionary Society, Mrs. Sidney Kepner, had “insisted that the altar window in the chapel be that of Christ blessing the children, ‘Suffer little children to come unto me’” (Deal, 1959b, p. 9).

### **The Southern Woman’s Educational Alliance**

Soon another group of women became interested in and impacted the lives of the young women at Konnarock Training School. The Southern Woman's Educational Alliance consisted of a group of university women and operated from 1920-1936 for the purpose of researching women’s educational and vocational opportunities throughout the South. Under the leadership of Dr. Orië Latham Hatcher, a pioneer in the field of women’s vocational education, the association embarked on a study of Appalachian mountain schools. Dr. Hatcher wrote,

The interest of the Southern Woman’s Educational Alliance in mountain schools, particularly in the smaller and less privileged ones, is a long standing one. Questions as to how far they are actually adapting education to the individual child and to the actual community needs and possibilities, as to the educational and vocational philosophy on which they are working in regard to the rights of the child and to the child’s obligations to the community, and other questions related to these, have increasingly drawn [the Alliance’s] attention... (Hatcher, 1930, p. xvii).

The genesis for the study affecting KTS was application by the head of the board of trustees to the Woman’s Alliance for further training for Principal Mary Phlegar Smith. The church granted her a year’s leave of absence beginning July 1926, and a grant from the Alliance provided Miss Smith with research training, “a Ford car, two assistants, an itinerary and schedules to be used in interviewing” (Hatcher, 1930, xix). Miss Smith and her assistants visited twenty-three public and private schools and colleges in six southern states, interviewing administrators at each site to determine program strengths and needs (Hatcher, 1930). The analysis of data gathered from this investigation led the Alliance to pursue a more intensive study into ways to improve mountain schools and to the choice of KTS as the site of that study. Of course, Miss Smith’s and new principal

Catherine Cox's<sup>1</sup> involvement in the data collection must have influenced the choice of schools, but Dr. Hatcher lists ten "claims upon a research undertaking" for KTS to justify the choice (Hatcher, 1930, xxiv). These include the excellent physical facility, the willingness of the Lutheran Church to give financial support as far as possible, the fact that the school staff had articulated problems and were open to suggestions and eager to participate, the "typical" nature of the mountain children attending, and the fact that the school was "new and uncluttered with educational and other preconceptions" that might inhibit change (Hatcher, 1930, xxiv).

A formal study of the girls and the education they were receiving at KTS began in November 1926 and lasted through the 1928-29 school year. Again, church and state worked together as the school and educational authorities from the Woman's Alliance, Washington and Lee University, Columbia University, Carnegie Institute, and the University of North Carolina completed the study. Case studies that included personal interviews, personality/interest inventories, aptitude and achievement testing, home visits, and discussions with school personnel were completed on thirty-eight girls attending KTS. Results of the study were published in 1930 in a volume called *A Mountain School: A Study Made by the Southern Woman's Educational Alliance and Konnarock Training School* that both reported the conditions at the school and made recommendations for improvement. The Konnarock Training School program was also the sole subject of the July 1930 issue of *Lutheran Woman's Work*, the national publication of the Women's Missionary Society. In that magazine, Principal Catherine Cox Umbarger wrote of shortcomings in the educational program and of how the faculty was attempting to remedy those weaknesses, following a number of the recommendations of the Alliance study.

We were only doing stereotypical public school work. ... We felt the need of knowing our children better, in their homes as well as our school. Our grade education was not vital. It took only half an eye to see that "lessons" were only

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Cox was unmarried when she first came to KTS and served as teacher and then principal. After her marriage to Edward Umbarger, farm manager at the Iron Mountain Boys School, she remained at the school as Mrs. Umbarger for some time, and then later returned for a short period as a teacher. Miss Catherine Cox's sister, noted social worker Cordelia Cox, was also involved in the study undertaken by the Southern Women's Educational Alliance.

“books to go through,” and then at the beginning of another, another set of “books to go through.” The old rote type of work seemed to be [the students’] idea of good work. Words were words to be memorized and given back to the teacher. ... Seeing the factory or the city was impossible because of their limited experience. A map had no meaning to those children who had never gone beyond their own blue hills. ...The old system of forcing a child to take all classes in the same grade was broken up ... each child was placed in a group where [s]he could do the best work. ...The idea of failure was abolished except where a student showed plainly that [s]he was unwilling to try. But this was not enough. We needed to break up the idea of “English” as a study all to itself; and “History” as having no connection with anything in our present day existence; and “Hygiene” as the study of health. We undertook a number of studies combining all the [disciplines]. One class spent several weeks studying Early American History. Reading material was supplementary history material. English lessons were stories and letters and finally a play on the “Landing of the Pilgrims.” ... With all this, our state course of study has been very closely followed. We use state textbooks-but we use others in addition. We give the required number of hours to each subject-and often more.

We do believe that we are on the right road to helping our girls and perhaps other mountain girls to live a “more abundant life.” A definite effort has been made to give each child what she needs to strengthen her weak points, to teach her to think and reason, to broaden her background and vision, and to make her school work vital and of some practical present value to her as an individual. (Umberger, 1930, p. 305-310)

One of the major recommendations of the Alliance study that was adopted by KTS was the institution of a standardized testing program. The list of tests was extensive: the Pintner Cunningham Primary Mental Test, Otis Group Intelligence Scale, Trabune Mentimeters, Stanford Achievement Test, National Intelligence Test, Terman Mental Ability Test, and Iowa High School Contest Examination were all administered to KTS girls (Gay, 1998; Hatcher, 1930). These were all tests that were gaining popularity throughout American education after World War I in an effort to bring schools into the

modern era (Urban & Wagoner, 2000). Devotees of the tests argued their value in determining the best avenue for meeting individual needs, while critics pointed out tests were used to exclude some children from educational services (Urban & Wagoner, 2000). It is interesting that “modern,” “scientific” testing was implemented in this tiny corner of the mountains so early, and at the same time those involved in the school were aware of the haunting realization that even scholarship and science can not always measure human well being and the ingredients of human happiness to others, since the determination of the exact sense of values and proportion of values by which any other life should proceed is a precarious undertaking. (Hatcher, 1930, p. xvii)

It is not surprising that the study of KTS by the Women’s Educational Alliance would produce recommendations for vocational education programs for the students. Not only was Dr. Hatcher a leader in women’s vocational education, but the idea of comprehensive high schools had gained momentum nationwide during the 1920s (Urban & Wagoner, 2000). These schools sought to train students in classical liberal arts, in vocational pursuits, and in general studies within the same building and became the model for much secondary education throughout the twentieth century. In 1918, a document from the National Education Association (NEA) entitled *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* called for schools whose mission included development of “health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, citizenship, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character” (Urban & Wagoner, 2000). These aims are echoed both in Hatcher’s list of needs for mountain schools (Appendix C) and in a list entitled “Things We Want in our Curriculum” found in the Virginia Synod Archives (Appendix D). There is no date on the list, but it was found with materials from Helen Dyer’s principalship in the 1930’s and names targets of homemaking, carpentry, care of person, right use of leisure, citizenship, and reading, writing, and clear thinking—comprehensive high school goals.

Another extension of the Southern Woman's Educational Alliance study was the implementation of case studies developed for each student. Both Catherine and Cordelia Cox were trained social workers, as were others involved in the study. The published

results of the study include six “visualizations” of girls under pseudonyms, written from the results of three interviews—with the girl, her parent(s), and her teacher(s)—questionnaires, and observations (Hatcher, 1930). Judging from the school files remaining from the 1930’s, it seems that each year the principal sent a “condensed case history” of at least the newly enrolled girls, and some years of all the students, to the Board of American Missions. Three brief examples of these case histories are included here and several others are included in Appendix E. The names here are pseudonyms composed of common names in the area during the 1930s, used because I have not received permission from the individuals to share materials about them. I have also chosen to omit the dates on the papers to further protect the identities of the women. Clearly teachers today would not be able to write such frank assessments of students for fear of legal action, but these portraits give much insight into both the students and the teachers of the 1930s. The histories are a mix of kindness, acceptance, and judgment.

Mertie Trivett—Very immature and babyish, irresponsible, and needed to be placed back quite a bit in classroom work, but is improving and seems to be trying. Has had very poor home life, as her mother died some years ago and the children were separated and lived with first one relative then another, scarcely ever seeing their father. Mertie is an attractive and lovable little person but somewhat demanding, and inclined to pout. We hope to help her out of these habits as well as to give her good training in the household and school.

Emma Jackson—Trying hard to form new habits of study and her classroom work in general is improving.... She is one of our two smallest girls and naturally needs more mothering and attention. She takes suggestions quickly, has improved much in her personal habits. Believe she is quite gifted...

Agnes Shupe—A serious little piece, far too old for her years, very willing and eager, but she could not conquer her homesickness, nor could the mother bear to be without her. She came for her before the end of the second week. Perhaps after

another year or two, Agnes may be more ready and may be given another chance. She is still quite young. (Archives Virginia Synod)

One major concern of KTS was the economic circumstances of its students and their communities. School personnel adopted the philosophy of educational reformers during the early twentieth century, that a major goal of education should be to support the development of committed, knowledgeable citizens who would endeavor to bring about social and economic change in their worlds ( Spring, 2002).

### **School and Community**

The work originally commissioned by the Women's Missionary Society had a three-fold purpose: to preach, to teach, and to heal. Konnarock Training School understood its work to be not for the students only, but for the entire mountain community:

[In] Mountain Schools...one finds the same purpose to help the students who are enrolled in the school and a purpose to help the communities from which the children come and in which the school is located. ("Our Mountain Work," 192 6, p. 272)

Not only was there a shortage of educational opportunity in the mountains; there was also a shocking lack of medical care. (See Appendix F for Principal Catherine Cox's letter concerning the need of medical assistance in the community surrounding KTS.) When KTS was opened, one of the staff hired was a nurse, a practice that continued even after a doctor was brought to the community in 1939. The first duty of the nurse was of course to care for the KTS students, both boarding and day. The school nurse conducted the state-mandated physical examinations for public school students, and she cared for students through illnesses, seeking the services of a physician when the children were beyond her care. In addition, the nurse taught health and hygiene classes, and soon instituted a school lunch program for day students. Without telephone service in the area and without any local physicians--the nearest were in Marion, Damascus, and Chilhowie--the work of the school nurse took on greater and greater importance. Soon a dispensary was set up in the basement of the school building, and local individuals could come there when they



needed health care. Not only did the nurse see patients at the dispensary, but she also conducted clinics and gave immunizations throughout the area.

When Miss Amy Louise Fisher became the nurse, she prevailed upon the church and school to build a separate dispensary building next to the school. When this building was completed, also with chestnut bark siding, it was furnished with examination tables, a dental chair, and other medical equipment (Gay, 1998). Miss Fisher was often able to convince doctors and dentists to donate their time to the clinics, but the shortage of a doctor still plagued the school and community. In some cases, the school bore the expense of medical treatment even for children who did not attend, seeing to it that they saw doctors or had needed operations. Principal Cox reported to the Women's Missionary Society that during the winter of 1928 there were outbreaks of scarlet fever and flu that swept through the school and community. She had unbudgeted expenditures of \$715.28 for the services of physicians and an additional \$122.31 for medicines and supplies (Gay, 1998). Miss Cox made a plea for a full time physician's services in the area, a dream that would come true in the next decade.

Another important part of the KTS outreach program was the Daily Vacation Bible Schools that began in the summer of 1926. More than sixty children from the surrounding area attended this first school, held in the KTS building. The Bible school lasted for six weeks, and over one-half of the students received perfect attendance certificates (Gay, 1998). During the second and succeeding years, an "Opportunity Class" was added to the daily schedule Bible School for those students who needed tutoring in basic language and mathematics skills, helping prepare them for success in their public schools. Because of the expanded scope of the program, volunteers were added to the teaching staff during that second summer; five were from Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Minnesota (Gay, 1998). During the next summer and for several years following, the Vacation Bible School program was even more far-reaching. Staff, students, and volunteers took the program into four outlying areas. The KTS program was reduced to four weeks, and those in other communities were three weeks in length. Teachers and volunteers lived in the communities while they conducted the Bible Schools. While Bible

Schools were in session, the nurse traveled to those areas and held various health clinics, including healthy baby clinics for new mothers. During the summer of 1930, there were forty adult volunteers, 650 students, and 162 mothers who took part in the nine Bible Schools and accompanying clinics (Gay, 1998).

Church-related activities such as Sunday schools, Luther League, and Light Brigade<sup>2</sup> welcomed children and adults from the surrounding communities. A local mother's club was an integral part of the nurse's work as she provided not only instruction in child care and nutrition but also provided a way for women to get away from their routines and to establish a network of support. Social events at the school, including May Day festivities and "Little Red Wagon Parties" on Saturday nights, were also open to and well attended by individuals from the local communities. These activities are discussed more fully in chapter 4.



**FIGURE 6: A GROUP OF KTS CHILDREN AND TEACHER PLAYING A GAME ON THE FRONT LAWN AT A MAY DAY FESTIVAL IN THE 1920S. THE BACKGROUND SHOWS THE EFFECTS OF CLEAR-CUT LUMBERING IN THE AREA. (From the personal files of LaVerne Kiser)**

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<sup>2</sup> Luther League and Light Brigade were two youth organizations within the ULCA. Luther League was for older children and the Light Brigade for younger. Both encouraged children to learn about the Bible and Lutheran Church history, to participate in community projects, and to develop leadership skills.

### The Board of American Missions

The Konnarock Training School principal had an astonishing list of responsibilities. Even though there was an abundance of volunteer help in the summer, it was apparent that she could not administer all the programs. In 1931, again as a result of appeals from Pastor Kenneth Killinger, a school was founded for mountain boys, who had previously been day students at KTS. This time the mountain missionary turned to the men of the Lutheran church and presented his petition throughout Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The Lutheran Brotherhood of the United Lutheran Church undertook the financing of the Iron Mountain School for Boys. Again, Luther Hassinger provided assistance. He sold the school 400 acres of land, a building that had been a hotel, farm buildings, an apple orchard, and livestock for \$25,000 (Gay, 1998; Tannen, 1995). Here the boys would live, learn farm operation, and be able attend classes at KTS. According to Tannen (1995), the two schools “became increasingly interconnected and models of self-sufficiency.” The boys raised food; the girls processed it, and both schools were nourished.

By 1936, Pastor Killinger and the church had established a number of Lutheran congregations and several health centers throughout the mountains. Although these segments of the mission, and both the girls’ and the boys’ schools, were under the auspices of the church, work was overseen by several agencies: the Virginia Synod, the North Carolina Synod, the Women’s Missionary Society, the Inner Mission Board, Lutheran Brotherhood, and the United Lutheran Church of America Board of Education (Gay, 1998). In order to better coordinate efforts in the mountains, the Board of American Missions headquartered its Southern Mountain Work in the former dispensary on the campus of KTS. Reverend Kenneth Hewitt was appointed as Superintendent of the Southern Mountain Mission. A secretary, Sarah Miller, who also lived at KTS, was hired to help with the administration of the programs, and both she and the superintendent were called upon to teach classes on occasion.



**FIGURE 7: REV. KENNETH KILLINGER**

Now that the day-to-day operation of these facilities was taken care of, Pastor Killinger turned his attention to a medical center in Konnarock. This time his appeals went to the youth of the Lutheran Church. He spoke to several state conventions of the Luther League of America with the result that they gathered enough contributions from their home churches for the construction of a medical center building. Again, cooperation and support came from across the nation. In 1939, a full time physician, Dr. Heinz Meyer, and his wife Marga, who was a nurse, came to Konnarock to staff the center. Dr. and Mrs. Meyer were German immigrants who had escaped Nazi Germany after Dr. Meyer had gained his release from detention. Worlds were once again meeting in the Konnarock valley. Dr. Meyer became the physician for KTS as well as for the community. He and his family lived in an apartment in the medical center until a home was built and the apartment space was converted to a dental clinic. A Lutheran deaconess and nurse, Sister Sophia Moeller, had joined the mission work in 1938, and after a short time as the school nurse, took the position at the Helton Health Center, one of the centers built through Pastor Killinger's work. This center was about twelve miles from the Konnarock center, and "Sister Sophie" worked closely with Dr. Meyer to see that medical care was provided throughout the region. Sister Sophie quickly gained the love of the mountain people, and through her home visits, it was she who frequently saw girls who were most in need of what KTS could offer. Because the parents respected this tall woman with the strange accent and clerical garb, they entrusted their daughters to her and to KTS.

The medical program carried out by Dr. Meyer, his wife, and Sister Sophie paid huge dividends in the area. According to an article in the *Konnarock Echoes* newsletter, by 1946 the local infant mortality had been reduced from 30 percent to 2 percent. In addition, applications from residents of the community for welfare aid fell from the highest percentage in the county to the lowest ("Health Program," 1946). A later report in *Lutheran Woman's Work* said that in its first twelve years, the Medical Center treated approximately 45,000 individuals, and the number of patients was growing yearly (Ritchie, 1953). Both Sister Sophie and Dr. Meyer had been retired from medicine for a few years, but in a twist of fate, Sister Sophia Moeller died on Feb. 25, 1987 and Dr.

Heinz Meyer five days later on March 2, bringing an era of remarkable health care to an end.

### **Operating a Boarding School**

The ordinary operation and finances of a boarding school where more than forty students and several teachers lived must have been quite a challenge for the principals of KTS. There was a basic operational budget allotted from the Missionary Society, and special offerings at individual churches would help meet unique needs as they arose. During the thirty-five years of the school's existence, its teachers and staff received their pay from a variety of sources: sometimes from the Women's Missionary Society, sometimes from the American Board of Missions, sometimes from local school systems. Teachers' salaries at between \$40 and \$90 a month were comparable to those of other local teachers, especially since room and board were received as part of the KTS payment; however, the demands on the teachers were extraordinary. Since they lived at the school, they were on duty twenty-four hours a day, receiving only one weekend off each month. The 1940 budget of KTS listed the following amounts for yearly teacher salaries:

Nurse--\$720; Home Economics teacher--\$720; Craft-music teacher--\$600; High school teacher--\$600; Grade school teacher--\$450; Principal--\$900 (Budget, 1940).

In addition to their regular duties, most of the teachers worked two months during the summer, either in the outreach programs, helping with guests, or doing the work of canning and preserving food for the winter. One source of a small amount of income and a large amount of continued support was the opening of the school in the summer months to guests from throughout the United States. Church officials and lay people who were traveling through the area and were interested in the mission would often stop by the school and pay a small amount for a bed and meals. These same individuals would then return to their home churches with a list of needs that would often be met. An added benefit of the practice was that the girls at the school met people from all walks of life and from all over the nation.

One way the women of the church continued their support of KTS was through the Christmas gifts they sent each year to the students and staff at the school, giving some students the only Christmas they would have. Every girl received a gift, and some benefited from special requests sent by the staff to the churches, especially during the first years of operation. Members of the community, grateful for the services of the school and clinic, often brought food donations including vegetables, fruits, and even venison, rabbit, and squirrel in the early years.

There was a small tuition charge for attending KTS, but if parents could not pay the nominal fee, girls were given credit for the work they did at the school. Although some records indicate that tuition had not been fully paid, neither the records nor the interviews show that any girl was ever turned away because she could not pay. There was a cook employed to oversee meal preparation, and a maintenance man who took care of the grounds and the building repairs, but the girls themselves did the cleaning and much of the cooking. Every girl, even if her parents could pay the minimal tuition, was required to work two weeks during the summer. Others, whose parents could not pay, worked most of the summer to earn their tuition. In a 1944 article, Rev. Kenneth Hewitt reported that students were expected to pay \$50 of the \$300 yearly cost; those unable to pay could work during the summer for up to six weeks at \$5 per week (Hewitt, 1944). By 1950, the tuition had risen to \$500 per year, and students were expected to pay an additional \$2.50 for textbooks and \$7.50 for medical care (Archives Virginia Synod).

In the summer, the girls picked berries and made jams and jellies, processed the food raised by the boys on the farm, and prepared the rooms and meals for the guests. Even during the school year, the girls and their teachers continued to process food for use at the two schools, making apple butter and processing the meat from hogs that were killed in the fall. Each girl also had other chores for which she was responsible, tasks that were necessary for the upkeep of the building. The chores were rotated at intervals so that every girl had every job at some time. The staff considered these jobs as much a part of the training the girls received as their class work. They learned skills such as food preparation, housecleaning, laundry, caring for animals (The girls' school had chickens

and cows in the early days.), setting a proper table, and serving food. As important as the skills were in themselves, girls were also learning to live together, to accept responsibility, and to take pride in their work. At first, under Miss Cox, the girls earned “Konnarock money” for the time they worked, and they could then spend the money for items sent to the school by churches. Although this practice was discontinued, girls who most needed money could take on extra chores and could work beyond their tuition time in the summer. The girls were also responsible for cleaning their own rooms, and each girl did her own laundry.

### **Konnarock Training School Transformed**

After the United States entered World War II, a number of teachers left their classrooms to serve in other ways. For whatever reasons, the public Konnarock High School could no longer fully staff its faculty, and Konnarock Training School made the decision to convert to a secondary school, achieving accreditation for the 1943-44 school year. The two schools had worked together throughout the years with students from one attending classes at the other as the need arose; for example, KTS students frequently took higher math classes at the public school, and those public school students who wished to do so would take Bible or home economics at KTS. Rose Kirby remembers how the schools cooperated.

*They had a cooperative program. Like Jochim [Dr. Meyer's son] and I had Latin up at the Training School; we went down to [the public school] and we got math, Algebra II and geometry. We had those two classes in the afternoon. And the Konnarock students came up to the Training School for English, and biology. [We had] three hours in the morning, we had three classes in the morning --and many of the [public school students] chose the Bible. They were fascinated. They had not learned to read it on their own but to expect to listen and hear the interpretation from the pulpit. And many of the Baptists are fire and brimstone. So the ones that wanted it, if they had permission from their parents, they could take Bible. But there was a financial way, I don't know whether the state paid for their*

*students; I don't know how it worked. But when I was a student, the money that the women of the church gave went through that Board of Missions. So it was a cooperative endeavor.*



**FIGURE 8: STUDENTS AND FACULTY IN FRONT OF KONNAROCK PUBLIC SCHOOL, 1944-45 PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS AND FACULTY AND KTS STUDENTS AND FACULTY ARE INCLUDED SINCE THE TWO INSTITUTIONS COOPERATED TO PROVIDE AS BROAD A CURRICULUM AS POSSIBLE.** (Private files of Virginia Whittaker)

During the '43-44 school year, the Bible teacher, who also taught English, spent the day at the public school so she could teach the local students. Four other teachers remained at KTS and a vocational teacher was employed at the boys' school (Hewitt, 1944). Cooperation between the schools continued as more local students took high school classes at KTS. From 1943 on, young children were not taken as boarding students by the school, and the name was changed to Konnarock Lutheran School in 1950. KLS continued as an accredited high school until its closing in 1959.

Citing the improved state roads and public schools in the mountains, the decision by the Board of American Missions to close the school was announced at the 1958 Lutheran Church in America convention. The convention report contained the following announcement:



Throughout the years, the Konnarock Lutheran School, the Konnarock Lutheran Medical Center, the Helton Lutheran Health Center and twenty-two mountain missions, have contributed to the physical, mental, and spiritual lives of countless numbers living in this area. The board is grateful for having been the instrument of God and the church in carrying out this work. ...Special work of this nature, if it is successful, must come to an end. ... In light of this, and in order that we might be good stewards, the Board of American Missions ...recommended that the Southern Mountain Work be discontinued at the end of the 1958-59 school year. . . .(Gay, 1998)

### **Far-reaching Effects**

It is impossible to assess the influence that Konnarock Training School and its outreach programs had in the surrounding area, and indeed, throughout the nation. It would be difficult to find an endeavor that had more people united in its support or that reached more people in some way. Students who would have had great difficulty or who may never have received an education otherwise went on to serve their families, their communities, and their God. Some were educated away from the mountains, but a part of their hearts has remained in the mountains, evidenced by the large number of alumni and faculty who return to attend the reunions each year. Principal Catherine Cox Umbarger wrote that the school endeavored to reach the individual student and build on her strengths. What these individuals accomplished and the people they became as a direct result of their time at KTS are immeasurable. The women of the church had undertaken and supported a mission whose effects are continuing even today. Rose Kirby says this of the mission:

*But those ladies of the church—and it was the women! They just took that on their shoulders, that they could do something that would make an impact on the communities. And many of the graduates went on to college or further training. You just can't realize. Now Dr. Meyer said that there's no way to assess the impact made by the church. And I think if Konnarock had continued, if it had been*

*[supported], if it could have survived--. The women, I guess, were thinking of other jobs that they could support and make a difference.*

Why did the school close? This is the one area of the school's story about which there seems to be little agreement or understanding. The ULCA statement said because the work was completed. Rose Cox said the women were thinking of other ways to make a difference. Others say because there was no longer a need for the school since roads had been improved and transportation was more accessible. Peggie Baldwin said,

*They said financial problems. But I thought that right up until closing time they had a great group, maybe not a full house, enough to keep it running, but I've heard they had financial problems. I think probably they couldn't get the teachers to come and live there; I don't know. But the teachers had to be there [all the time.] I always felt the Lutheran Church gave freely, and I felt they could have kept it open. I understand that they [the school] were having hard times, and that their enrollments were down and everything, but I do feel that it could have been built up to be just a booming school again. You've got to work at anything like that, and I think maybe that had died. I don't know.*

The question of whether there was enough enrollment to support the program is not clearly answerable. When Peggie entered school in the fall of 1953, she says there were so many girls that at first there was not enough room for them. Superintendent Ritchie reported that in the fall of 1952, "Our Konnarock Lutheran School was filled to its capacity with boys and girls, in one of the largest enrollments in the history of the school" (Ritchie, 1953, p. 5).

Emily Umbarger feels there were several reasons for the closing:

*The church decided to close the school in 1959. Enrollment had dropped for a long time. I went back and taught the year of '57-'58, and even with students from the community, I don't think we had above thirty students during that year, and probably less at times. And it was the next year, it was figured that there was just too much expense to justify continuing the program on the scale on which it*

*had been to serve that few people, all of whom could get to school in their home communities. In the 20s and early 30s, some of these people were in mountain communities; they couldn't even get out for supplies or anything, much less on a daily basis to get the children to school. Better roads and better living conditions and so forth had made a great change in that 30-40 year span. And I think it was a justified decision on the part of the church at large, but also, a lack of looking forward to see well now look we've got these facilities that are in relatively good condition. Why can't we redirect our program to meet other problems in society?*

*[At a church meeting once, we had an] after dinner speaker, Mr. Luther Hassinger from Bristol, who was the head of the Hassinger Lumber Company in the earlier years, and a life-long Lutheran who hasn't been dead too many years. He was there, and I think this was a public statement; I don't think it was just conversation, and he said something about it just looked to him like somebody had lost the vision. And I think that may be a very good way of putting it. I guess that's the regret that I will always carry to some extent, that, yes indeed, somebody lost the vision along the way and it was easier to drop the ball than to find a way to make a change.*

### **Building Restoration Efforts**

When Konnarock Lutheran (Training) School was first closed, part of the land was sold, but the building and 680 acres remained in the hands of the Lutheran Church. For a few years, the church maintained the building for use as a youth retreat; however, in 1967, it and the remaining land were sold to the US Forest Service. For a short time, the Forest Service cooperated with Flatwoods Job Corps Center in Wise County, using the building as a camp for about twenty young men working in the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area. Training School alumnae were allowed to use the school each July for their reunions, and naturalist rallies were also sometimes held in the building. After the major work on the recreation area was completed, the Forest Service no longer used the building and did not maintain it. Soon the damages of time made the building hazardous,

and alumnae were told they could no longer have their reunions there. A gate is across the drive, and the property is posted against trespassers.

Through the years, there has been a great deal of discussion about the loss of the building and about its state of deterioration, but since the property was in the hands of the US Forest Service, there seemed little that could be done. Efforts by some citizens to convince the Forest Service to renovate the building for an environmental center were not successful. Recently, however, Peggie Wingler Baldwin has spearheaded efforts to find a way for the church to reclaim and restore the building. Peggie believes this work is extremely important.

*There's so much history right there that once the building itself is gone, I feel that the history is gone. There were so many lives and so many people that lived that history, and that are still alive, and their offspring that are still interested. I think it belongs back with the Lutheran Church. I want to know that we have done all we can do to retrieve, to save, to bring it back into the mother church. (Peggie Baldwin)*

After much negotiation with the US Forest Service, the agency is considering donating the school building and a few acres of land back to the Lutheran Church. It seems the building has become an albatross—too expensive for the Forest Service to repair and creating disapproval because they are allowing it to deteriorate. Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary (LTSS) in Columbia, South Carolina has expressed interest in the site, and Peggie Baldwin has been working with them. Architects, building inspectors, and restoration experts have visited KTS and have studied the feasibility of a project to repair and renovate the building so that it might become a retreat center for the seminary and for the larger church. Dr. Mary Ann Shealy, Vice President for Development and Seminary Relations at LTSS, attended the July 2002 KTS reunion and told the alumnae of the possibility.

The narrators in this study feel deeply saddened that the KTS building has been allowed to deteriorate.

*It just seems like such a shame where so many happy things happened-- happy, and useful, and good--to just let it go to waste. I'm just sorry they have waited so long. (Geneva Shepherd)*

*[KTS] was a beautiful place. I remember. It grieves me to see it now because I remember it as so pretty. I wish they'd do something with it to keep it from falling in. (Betty Reedy)*

*I feel that we can reclaim that school, the building itself. I feel that it can be repaired, restored. I think there's so much history there that it's almost a must. (Peggie Baldwin)*

*The facilities could have continued to have been used for something that would have been of help to some group that needed [it], that might have developed into something with the facilities that we could offer. I think that it has been a waste all these years that we've had this building that has open space for meetings or classes of several sizes and capacity upstairs for twenty to thirty people, making a rough guess, of two to a room, and the teachers' rooms and so forth. For a long time it could have been used as some kind of a retreat center, or I don't know what. (Emily Umbarger)*

*I wish the building could be saved. I really do. (Rose Kirby)*

*[It was] beautiful, just beautiful. I could cry when I think of that chapel today. (LaVerne Kiser)*

When I last interviewed Peggie, the most recent news she had received from LTSS was that discussion on the matter had been tabled. In February 2003, I contacted the Coordinator of Region Nine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and was told that the decision concerning the building had indeed been tabled until the March 2003 Board of Trustees meeting. It was also suggested that letters from former students

and others could be crucial in the decision-making process (Huntley, 2003). Since that time, I have contacted a number of alumnae and interested individuals, and have encouraged them to take part in a letter-writing campaign to convince the board that the building is worth saving not only because of its architectural uniqueness, but also because Sit is a vital part of the Lutheran heritage in the Southern mountains. These individuals have in turn told others about the effort. I have personally written the board members expressing my concerns for the future of the building. (See Appendix G for a sample letter.) In addition, several local Lutheran churches have joined the efforts by sending letters from members of their congregations to the Board of Trustees. Those of us who want to see the building reclaimed by the church and restored to a useful function eagerly await the Board's decision.



**FIGURE 9: VIEW OF WHITETOP MOUNTAIN, JANUARY 2003**