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Community centers and settlement houses in Appalachia¹

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Neighborhood and community centers generally are decentralized educational, recreational social service and/or social action establishments operating out of buildings strategically located in urban neighborhoods or rural communities. The term is a generic one and may refer to settlement houses, religious missions, youth- and senior activity centers, multi-service centers and clinics and other, similar facilities.

While the term community center may refer to a building, an entire neighborhood (as in *central business district*), or the middle of the community, a large body of scholarship places emphasis on centers as focal points, gathering places, points of interest or embarkation points for community action.

Intentional communities in Appalachia, from Arthurdale, West Virginia (1934) and Rugby Tennessee (1880) to contemporary middle class housing sub-divisions feature community center buildings. However, community centers were originally outside imports into an Appalachian culture that often placed much greater emphasis on individuality and family than upon community. The concept has been repeatedly introduced by successive generations of “do-gooders” coming to Appalachia. In at least one major case, however, Appalachian thought and practice in this area led the entire world in new directions: Robert Putnam credits L.J. Hanifan, superintendent of rural instruction in West Virginia, with the first use of the concept of *social capital* in a 1916 publication – seven decades before that concept became more widely known. (Putnam, 2000, 16) Social capital generally refers to the potential for creating economic value embedded in social relationships such as trust. In a subsequent book, Hanifan laid out the social capital notion in an entire chapter to support his argument for rural schools as the community centers of rural communities. (Hanifan, 1920) Hanifan’s book was distributed to educators nationally and had a significant impact on pre-depression thinking about the place of rural schools in their communities.

Settlement houses and community centers

There is also a direct link between Appalachia and the international settlement house movement in the person of Miles Horton and the Highlander Center. The settlement house movement began in London, England in the late 19th century when a group of Oxford students, under the influence of Canon Barnett moved to the East End to a residence they named Toynbee House, in memory of one of their number. A 28-year old Jane Addams visited Toynbee House and applied its

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philosophy in the Halsted Street neighborhood of Chicago (“back of the yards”) in 1895. Addams eventually became the leader of a national movement. Larger cities in the Appalachian region including Atlanta, Knoxville and Pittsburgh were all active in the settlement house movement, which at one time included more than 600 settlements in the U.S. Smaller cities, including Charleston, Clarksburg, Fairmont and Morgantown, West Virginia also established community centers termed “settlement houses”, usually without the resident reformer population. Thus, most of these are more accurately termed neighborhood and community centers, or missions.

In his autobiography, *Miles to Go*, Horton recounts how he visited Addams in Chicago and came away determined to create a rural social settlement in Tennessee. Horton achieved regional notoriety in the 1950’s when Highlander became the first “white” institution in segregated Tennessee to open its doors and racially integrate its staff and participants, a move entirely consistent with settlement house principles.

In general, settlement houses were characterized predominantly by their pattern of educated and idealistic young, upper-middle class men and women coming to live among the poor for a time as neighbors. Religious missions are characterized both by their religious affiliations and their missionary outlook. Following World War II, settlement houses in this original sense largely died out. Most settlement houses abandoned their residential programs (the original source of the name: settlers) and became neighborhood or community centers, whether or not they continued to use the name of settlement house.

Senior Centers

From the late 1960’s through the mid-1970’s and beyond, many communities in the Appalachian region created senior citizens’ clubs and public funds available through the Older Americans Act were used to initiate Senior Citizens Centers. Following passage of the Older Americans Act in 1965, and several crucial amendments in the early 1970’s, senior citizen centers have sprung up in all of the larger and many of the smaller communities in Appalachia. In fact, the senior center may be the single most pervasive type of community center in Appalachia and the United States today.

One of the long standing ideals of various community center movements has been co-location of a broad array of coordinated services operating out of a single location. Such *multi-service centers* have been created in Appalachia in conjunction with religious missions, senior centers, family resource networks, and a number of other auspices.

Settlement houses share with other neighborhood and community centers an emphasis on locality development.

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