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Weavers of the Southern Highlands

Philis Alvic

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Weaving centers led the Appalachian Craft Revival at the beginning of the twentieth century. Soon after settlement workers came to the mountains to start schools, they expanded their focus by promoting weaving as a way for women to help their family's financial situation. Women wove thousands of guest towels, baby blankets, and place mats that found a ready market in the women's network of religious denominations, arts organizations, and civic clubs. Although the sales appeal often emphasized helping women with very few resources, the centers frugally covered their own expenses without charity, paying the weavers a prevailing wage. In Weavers of the Southern Highlands, Philis Alvic details how the Fireside Industries of Berea College in Kentucky began with women weaving to supply their children's school expenses and later developed student labor programs, where hundreds of students covered their tuition by weaving. Arrowcraft, associated with Pi Beta Phi School at Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and the Penland Weavers and Potters, begun at the Appalachian School at Penland, North Carolina, followed the Berea model.
Women wove at home with patterns and materials supplied by the center, returning their finished products to the coordinating organization to be marketed. Dozens of similar weaving centers dotted mountain ridges. Philis Alvic, a weaver for over thirty-five years, brings a special insider's perspective to the history of Appalachian handweaving and the people, agencies, and programs that made it all work.

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