From Utopian Isolation
To Radical Activism:
Commonwealth College,
1925-1935

By WILLIAM H. COBB
Greenville, North Carolina

COMMONWEALTH COLLEGE, IN MANY RESPECTS THE MOST UNIQUE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT IN THE PRE-CIVIL RIGHTS SOUTH, ANTICIPATED MANY OF THE PERPLEXING ISSUES NOW COMMON TO THE AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SCENE. INITIALLY FOUNDED IN 1923 AT NEWILLANO COOPERATIVE COLONY, VERNON PARISH, LOUISIANA, THE SCHOOL MOVED TO MENA, ARKANSAS, AFTER ONE YEAR OF OPERATION. HAVING COMPLETED AN ACADEMIC TERM THERE, THE COLLEGE FINALLY MOVED TO A PERMANENT SITE IN WESTERN POLK COUNTY, ARKANSAS. HERE THE COMMONERS, AS THEY CALLED THEMSELVES, WERE ABLE TO SUPPORT THEIR LITTLE SCHOOL WITH A COLONY OF THEIR OWN, THUS APPARENTLY RESOLVING THE PROBLEM OF FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE FROM "BOURGEOIS" INTERESTS.

The founding premise of the college was simple and straightforward. It was a "resident labor school," and its single goal was to provide the working class with leaders who had an education which would enable them to make an immediate and meaningful contribution to the task of unionization. Its structure, personnel, and aura were all subjugated to this particular goal, consequently Commonwealth was a far cry from being a typical example of the educational "Establishment."

The additional responsibility of running a farm had little effect on the structure of the school. As at Newillano, the ultimate authority of the college was vested in an unincorporated trusteeship: the Commonwealth College Association. The original body had had only three members, but in response to student demands during the fall of 1928, all third-year pupils were included in the Association. The day to day operation of the college was in the hands of the Director, who was the only permanent administrative officer. To be sure, there was also a financial director, a field director, and an executive secretary, but frequently these titles were honorary, and those functions that might naturally fall to the officeholder were absorbed by the Director.

The college operated on a vague quarter system, with sessions in the fall, winter, spring, and summer. Occasionally it was necessary to skip a quarter because operational funds were not available. This was no problem, however, because the prevailing characteristic of academic life at the college was flexibility. Since the school aimed to provide its students with an education so functional that it could be quickly and directly applied to their individual situations within the labor movement, no notion of required courses existed. In fact the curriculum changed with bewildering rapidity, generally as a result of new student interests or the presence of new staff members. Academic programs did not exist at Commonwealth for the bald reason that the college did not

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*Mr. Cobb received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Arkansas and his Ph.D from Tulane University. He is presently assistant professor of history at East Carolina University.


4Commonwealth College Fortnightly (Rocky, Ark.), Mar. 1, 1929. (Hereafter cited as Fortnightly.)
confer degrees. As a result, students simply stayed until they were satisfied with their worker's education, and then left carrying "their degrees away in their heads." The typical Commoner was seldom in residence for more than two years, a factor which contributed to the already fluid curricula.8

The lack of program was complemented by the fact that classes were very small, perhaps no more than four students,4 and that the universal classroom format was group discussion. William E. Zeuch, one of the college's founders and its first Director, stated the general philosophy behind this method by noting:

the small discussion circle is the "natural" teaching method in that it most nearly duplicates the family, the gang, the comrade circle, in which and from which we can learn the most in everyday life.9

Instructors expected their pupils to do considerable reading in preparation for class. If they failed to absorb the materials, the class would be ignominiously dismissed. Conversely, if students were not satisfied with the faculty member's subject or method, they could dismiss him by cutting class en masse. In this case, staff reprisal was impossible because class attendance was wholly voluntary.8

In keeping with the freewheeling atmosphere, the college did not permit examinations. Letter grades which were derived from test results were anathema to the Commoners. The college's rationale was simple; tests were incapable of measuring student performance and letter grades were ill-defined symbols of a complex phenomenon. Hence, the idea of rating students in such a haphazard and deceiving

fashion was emphatically rejected at Commonwealth.9 Instead, instructors wrote a detailed appraisal of each pupil's performance in his class, and these accumulated evaluations formed the student's permanent record.10

Students were expected to pay a tuition of $40.00 per quarter, but occasionally this was waived for a particularly poor and promising young person. Each pupil had to furnish his own clothing, books, and bedding, while the college provided room, board, and laundry. Moreover, all students took part in the mandatory work details that were the basis of the college's economic structure.11

The weekday schedule at Commonwealth began at five o'clock in the morning, when three alarm clocks rang, and three students, generally two men and one woman, got out of bed and stumbled through the pre-dawn darkness to the kitchen. These three people constituted the kitchen crew for the day, one of the divisions in the school's four-hour daily work program. They started a fire in the kitchen stove, and in the dining hall stove if the weather was cold. Then they began to prepare breakfast, which was generally pancakes and bacon. The bacon was homegrown, and was probably the only meat the students got that day. At 6:15 a.m. the school bell rang, and those wanting breakfast crawled out of bed and dressed, generally in overalls. From 6:30 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. breakfast was served to all personnel at the school, and no one, including the Director, was served late.

At 7:30 a.m. students went to their first class, which was usually held in a teacher's cottage.12 During the summer months classes were held outside if the weather permitted.13 Classes lasted fifty-five minutes, and they were extremely informal, with discussion being the rule rather than the exception. There was a five-minute break between classes. Each morning was divided into five periods, and if

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9Ibid., 508-509.
11Cunningham, "Learning and Earning," 198.
12Ibid.
13Cunningham, "Teachers May Teach," 5.
15Ibid., 509.
16Cunningham, "Teachers May Teach," 5.
a student had a period without a class, he was at liberty to
do anything he desired.14

At 12:00 noon lunch was served and both students and
teachers rushed to the Commons to eat a meal that generally
consisted of potatoes, corn fritters, corn bread, beans, rad-
ishes, carrots, soup, and homemade peanut butter. Meat
was served at the lunch table only three or four times a
week. By one o’clock the dishwashing crew was at work
on the lunch utensils, and everyone else was trooping off
with their respective crews for a long afternoon’s work.

Women worked in the kitchen, the library, the laun-
dry, and the school office, while the men held various jobs
on the wood crew, carpenter crew, farm crew, masonry
crew, or hauling crew. Four hours of work found everyone
delighted to hear the bell ring again at five o’clock ending
the scheduled routine for the day.15 A general rush to the
showers or to Mill Creek was almost universal for both
students and teachers. Supper was at 5:30 p.m., and after
that everyone was free to pursue his own desires. Some
played volleyball while others got an early start on the
topics to be considered by the general discussion groups
that met each evening. There was an outlet for almost
every interest, drama, poetry, foreign language, a Scribbler’s
Club, or just a general session consuming most of the eve-
nings. By ten o’clock, however, almost everyone was in bed,
preparing for another rigorous day.16

Like their students, instructors seldom stayed longer
than two academic years, primarily because the routine at
Commonwealth was extremely demanding. Everyone in the
community was required to contribute twenty- to twenty-
four hours of manual labor per week on the college’s farm
as well as maintaining the physical plant. Moreover, staff
members were not paid, though the school did provide
housing, food, laundry, and recreation.

The work requirement for all Commoners was funda-

mental to the practical application of the anti-capitalistic
philosophies of the staff. The college maintained that tra-
ditional colleges and universities were incapable of honest
worker education simply because they were controlled by
middle class interests that were indifferent to or hostile
toward the needs of labor. These schools were incapable
of reform, as they were supported by gifts and endowments
that bound them to middle class aspirations. In short, a
bourgeois education was irrelevant to a worker. Given this
situation, Commonwealth determined to divest itself of
any income that was unrelated to the labor movement. The
most basic source of support for the college was its own
farm, worked without expense by students and staff. Ideally,
Commonwealth would be self-supporting, selling a surplus
of marketable products in order to buy things which it
could not produce. In practice this never worked. The
college was always in a state of financial desperation.17

Tuition was never a particularly lucrative source of
revenue, because enrollment was tiny by current standards.
There were never more than 55 students in residence during
a single quarter, with 40 to 45 a more typical figure. Denied
total self-sufficiency, Commonwealth was forced to rely upon
gifts and donations from sympathetic individuals and groups.
The Director had to spend more than half his time on
the road in attempts to raise funds to make up a deficit
that was chronic after 1928. In spite of sporadic support
from prominent contributors like Louis Brandeis, the Ameri-
can Fund for Public Service, or the Carnegie Corporation,
the college was continually in the red.18 Appeals for money
in the school newspaper, the Fortnightly, later the Com-
moner, became a journalistic tradition at Commonwealth.19

As the radical reputation of the college grew, its moderate
contributors evaporated, forcing new reliance upon groups

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15Ibid., 504.
16Cunningham, “Teachers May Teach,” 6.
17Fortnightly, May 15, 1932, May 1, 1933, Apr. 15, Oct. 15, 1934.
18P. M. Goodhue, "Notes," St. John Collection (unpublished typescript,
1931), 48, 95; Memphis (Ark.) Weekly Star, July 7, 1932. (Hereafter cited as
Weekly Star.)
that gravitated further and further toward the political left. The orthodox Commonwealth world-view was typical of the era. Being pre-ecologists, they defined civilization as the accumulated knowledge and instruments which man developed to shape nature. Thus, to the Commoner, civilization was a technical achievement; consequently, its progress could be measured objectively. On the other hand, culture was distinct from civilization, and, by contrast, very subjective. The cultured man should constantly strive for a grasp of "the good, the true, and the beautiful" and incorporate such teachings into human relationships. With this in mind, the founders and organizers of the college made much of the need to incorporate "culture" into the educational processes, and frequently accused "bourgeois" institutions of failing to recognize this responsibility. By catering to middle class interests, the ordinary college or university had rendered itself incapable of honest education. Emphasis upon larger classes, isolated professors, research, archaic testing systems, and many other standard "higher education" procedures completely eliminated the possibility of imbuing students with "culture," Commonwealth style.

The school prided itself upon its academic freedom, which purportedly sprang from its well-publicized non-alignment with any ideological faction. A great deal of energy went into proclaiming the determination of the Commoners to include representatives of every politico-economic position on campus. William Cunningham, one of the college's most articulate spokesmen, noted that everything but Communism and Fundamentalism had a protagonist at the school. Cunningham averred that the Commoners never found a Communist who was willing to live a communal life nor a Fundamentalist preacher willing to work four hours a day.21

Levity aside, the Commoners lusted for alignment, especially during the thirties. In 1931, the college was instrumental in the organization of the Arkansas Socialist party. The following year the school founded the state's first local of the National Farmer's Holiday Association at Old Potter. From 1934 until 1939 Commonwealth was deeply involved in the work of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and at one point it considered itself simply a trade school for potential STFU leaders. The equally cherished notion of complete academic freedom was just as ignored. The history of Commonwealth College is a magnificent example of the inability of political radicals to tolerate independence.

The school had come to Arkansas in 1925 as a result of an ideological schism with Newllano Cooperative Colony in Louisiana. It had not been in the state more than six months before it was determined that the planned unification with a colony at Ink, Arkansas, could not materialize because of a difference in political and economic priorities. Located on the campus site west of Mena, there were serious splits in 1926, 1927, 1931, and 1932. After the departure of activists Director Lucien Koch in 1936, Commonwealth drifted rapidly toward complete identification with the Communist party. This last phase resulted in a break between the radical Commoners and the more pragmatic socialists of the STFU.22 At best, the school was merely a cross section of the radical American left.

The drift toward active participation in the labor movement and away from isolated worker education was especially pronounced after the Great Depression began to affect every strata of American life. The school took a long step nearer to radicalism with the expulsion of utopian founder William Zech in June 1931. He was replaced as Director by Lucien Koch, a former student with a much more militant attitude about the role of an institution like Commonwealth College in the fabric of contemporary so-

22 Ibid., 4; Clay Folk to Editor, New Republic, Vol. LX (Oct. 9, 1929), 298; Cunningham, "An Educational Mutant," 807.
Koch described the school by noting that “Commonwealth is not an institution, it is a movement.” The Fortnightly reaffirmed the thrust toward activism by editorializing that

Workers' education, it seems to us at Commonwealth, must seek not only to impart information but also to arouse a desire to act. Commonwealth, of course, has sought in the past to do both, and will continue to do so, but the time has now come when it should intensify its militant mission of educating people who will do something in addition to being broad minded.

Student-faculty involvement in the labor movement took the initial form of sending delegations to strike areas to encourage workers and hold organizational meetings. In April of 1932, Koch, staff-member Harold Coy, and three students took sacks of food and 5000 copies of the Bill of Rights to Harlan, Kentucky, where coal miners in the area were attempting to unionize. The situation was very tense; miners had been killed and injured by guards, and the Commoners were driven to the Virginia state line, beaten, and told never to come back to Kentucky.

In August 1932, a delegation of four Commoners to the coal fields of Illinois were beaten, jailed incommunicado, and driven to Franklin County, Illinois, under guard. The Commoners had been agitating for the formation of a more progressive union, as the United Mine Worker's had allowed a wage-cut agreement to be forced on the miners.

In September and October of the same year, the Commoners increased their activity in the field of farm labor. Two Commoners were dispatched to investigate a farmer's strike near Sioux City, Iowa, and they were pleased to find a militant attitude among the strikers. Commonwealth began to investigate and advocate the National Farmer's Holiday Association, an organization that sought shorter working hours and a fairer share of the nation's income for farmers. In October, by agitation and lecture, the Commoners organized Arkansas's first Farmer's Holiday Association Local at Old Potter, Arkansas. In January 1933 the school sent a delegation to Washington, D.C., for the Farmer's National Relief Conference.

One of the most consistent of the projects of the new Commonwealth were the various attempts, beginning in October 1932, to improve the situation of the coal miners around Paris and Jenny Lind, Arkansas. In addition to union locals, a socialist local was formed at Jenny Lind, and it was enthusiastically supported by the Commoners. The school found an unexpected ally in Claude Williams, the ex-minister of the Paris Presbyterian Church, whose attempts to befriend the miners in his area had cost him his job. Williams refused to leave Paris, and he worked closely with the Commoners in their attempts to make the lot of the miner a tolerable one. Williams spoke at Commonwealth on several occasions, and on November 9-10, 1934, he held a Conference for Economic Justice, to which Commonwealth sent a sizable delegation.

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America asked the college to send a labor organizer to the Weaver Pants Company, Corinth, Mississippi, in August 1933. The union was trying to organize a local, but all attempts had been thwarted by plant officials supported by municipal law enforcement agents.

The Commoners' new militancy was also manifested in an outpouring of labor drama, art, and literature. Director Koch was convinced that these mediums had far greater appeal for workers than simple harangues by organizers.

The school's first dramatic production was an original play entitled "Can You Hear Their Voices" which the college players presented in February of 1932 before 300

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Fortnightly, June 15, 1932.

Ibid., Nov. 1, 1931.

Ibid., Apr. 15, Nov. 1, 1932.

Weekly Star, Aug. 18, 1932.


Ibid., Nov. 15, 1934.
local farmers. The plot concerned a starving farmer who requested aid from a local capitalist. When the aid was refused, the farmer turned revolutionary, attempting to kill a Red Cross organizer. In July 1932, the school presented a one-act play on the campus written by the United Mine Workers called "What Price Coal?" later giving it before numerous groups of miners in the Paris-Jenny Lind area. Several other skits were written by the Commonwealth staff and published in the Fortnightly, and copies were made available to any group which wanted them.

A Commonwealth Experimental Theatre was organized during the summer quarter of 1933, under the direction of Ben Low, an experimental labor dramatist. The purpose of the theatre was to give the students first-hand knowledge of the workers' theatre. The group traveled and presented labor skits to various local audiences.

Commonwealth announced in the July 15, 1934, Fortnightly that the school would publish the Winsor Quarterly, a literary magazine with a definite pro-labor viewpoint. The Quarterly had a national reputation for excellence. The original publishers, Irene Merrill and F. B. Maxham, had been extremely selective about their stories, short stories, and poetry, which comprised the bulk of the periodical. Merrill and Maxham continued as editors, and became members of the college staff. The first two issues of the Quarterly published at Commonwealth were oversubscribed, which delighted the administration for it indicated a new income and propaganda potential.

In February 1935, a Writers Local Union was formed at Commonwealth, with 18 members. William Cunningham was the chairman and policy maker of the union, which was nothing more than a journalism club. The group had as its purpose to promote a militant labor movement through journalism.

Commonwealth had been concerned for several years about the uncoordinated efforts of various small labor publications throughout the country to build a concerted, aggressive labor movement. The little magazines had such limited publicity and circulation that cooperation between them was impossible, because in many cases their individual staffs were not aware of the other publications. The administration determined in April 1935, to try to organize these small labor publications into a united movement. Consequently, the school formed the Associated Little Magazines, incorporating over 100 member publications. The Association ran a regular column in the Fortnightly to keep subscribers informed of the affairs of these small labor publications.

Labor art was manifested primarily at Commonwealth through "The Museum of Social Change," a series of displays dedicated to labor, the first of its kind in the United States. Primarily the creation of Robert Brown, who joined the college staff in November 1934, the museum came into official existence in December 1934. Its purpose was to illustrate the history of the working class by displaying the paintings and objects that illustrated the decadence of capitalism. The school hoped to record systematically the collapse of capitalism by preserving the record of profit devastation. The idea was a popular one, and friends of the college, including H. L. Mencken, contributed numerous displays.

Nowhere was the transformation at Commonwealth better illustrated than in the curriculum changes that occurred under Koch. The formal curriculum of the Zeuch years virtually disappeared as actual participation in labor organization became the new order. The first major break

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**Footnotes:**

4. **Fortnightly**, June 1, 1935.
with the old curriculum occurred in September 1932, with the initiation of a labor orientation course. This course comprised almost the entire Commonwealth curriculum, and students were generally required to do two things to complete it. First, the student was to make a brief survey of all knowledge pertaining to labor philosophy, and, secondly, each student was to work as an individual in a special project that would generally require field work. At this meeting the curriculum was trimmed to 16 courses, most of which were extremely specialized for laborites. General knowledge of the social sciences, the core of Zeuch's curriculum, was no longer important. The curriculum shrank still further by 1933-1934, with the catalog for that year listing only 15 courses. The majority of these were oriented exclusively toward labor agitation, for example: Proletarian Literature, and Propaganda Methods.

The last year of Koch's administration saw two decisive changes in the confrontation policies that had become a part of life at Commonwealth. First of all, the school began to take an active interest in the organizational efforts of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. After a tour of the cotton belt during the fall of 1934, Koch concluded that "The cropper is so completely subjugated and at the mercy of the planter that he is unequivocally the most exploited worker in America." Secondly, the sensational efforts of the Commoners in eastern Arkansas on behalf of the STFU prompted the state House of Representatives to adopt a resolution on February 13, 1935, calling for a legislative investigation into the alleged Communist activities of the school.

The STFU called upon Commonwealth for help in their organizational activities in January 1935. Koch immediately sent a delegation to Marked Tree. There the Commoners promptly "became the centers for opposi-

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**Weekly Star, Sept. 14, 1932.**

**Fortnightly, Sept. 15, 1932.**


**Memphis (Tenn.) Press Scimitar, Aug. 29, 1933.**

**Arkansas Democrat (Little Rock), Feb. 15, 1935.**

LaCien Koch, director of Commonwealth, who made it a part of the militant labor movement in the South.
adding fuel to an already volatile situation. After several incidents, including arrest and detention, Howard Kester, a union leader, suggested that the STFU, “Ship the whole crowd back to Mena, Arkansas, and let’s get rid of them now.” Hence, the Commoners’s first venture into the business of the STFU ended with a rather ignominious dismissal.

While Commonwealth’s delegation was stirring up trouble in eastern Arkansas, the Commoners remaining on the campus organized a United Front “for work in the State of Arkansas and vicinity.” The organization was formed without a dissenting vote, and it was composed of the Commonwealth College Association, the Socialist Local, the Communist faction, and an unaffiliated group. All of these factions had representatives on the United Front Action Committee. The avowed purposes of the Front were: (1) To work with the STFU, (2) To build organizations of the unemployed in Arkansas, (3) To work with the International Labor Defense, and (4) To build revolutionary student and teacher organizations within the state.

The legislative investigation which ensued was a form of publicity that the Commoners welcomed, but which tended to make the school’s position in organized labor much more tenuous. A joint investigating committee composed of two state representatives, three senators, two sergeants-at-arms, and a virtually illiterate stenographer arrived on the rustic campus on February 16, 1935. There they sat in on classes, examined the library, and visited the “Museum of Social Change,” where they were visibly unimpressed with displays “recording the fall of capitalism.” After only one morning on the campus, the committee adjourned to Mena and began hearings; taking testimony from staff, students, and local citizens. The following day

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48Fortnightly, Feb. 15, 1935.
49Southwest American (Fort Smith, Ark.), Feb. 15, 1935.
the committee returned to Little Rock, where it heard further witnesses. The accumulated testimony proved without doubt that many Commoners were militant Communists, but this, though unpopular, was not illegal. Many witnesses were profoundly offended by the life-style practiced at the school, and much testimony centered about rumors of "free-love" among Commoners. But nothing illegal could be proven, consequently concerned legislators introduced drastic sedition legislation (H.B. 211) aimed not only at Commonwealth, but at the entire union movement within the state. After passing the house, H.B. 211 was defeated in the senate. At the same time, two of the investigating committee members introduced a bill in the house that made certain "nuisances" illegal. Among these "nuisances" were acts of anarchy, of Communism, and of advocating the violent overthrow of any established government. Of course, this bill was aimed specifically at the college, but after passing the house it was killed in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The Koch administration had thoroughly radicalized the college. Certainly the militant atmosphere generated by earlier confrontations in the coal fields of Kentucky and Arkansas had been reinforced by the school's involvement with the STFU, and by its experience with the state legislature. When Richard Whitten, "A fighter in the ranks of the revolutionary working class," replaced Koch as Director on September 1, 1935, the ideational distance traveled by Commonwealth from the utopian and isolationist Zurch era was well evidenced by the new masthead of the Fortnightly. In answer to the question, "What is Commonwealth College?" the masthead stated that: "Commonwealth College ... has as its function the training of young men and women for active service in some militant organization in the labor movement."

A far cry from the declaration which had answered the same question five years earlier by explaining that "Commonwealth is a non-sectarian, non-propaganda institution. It sponsors no particular religious, political, or economic dogma. It holds that scientific experimentation carries the only hope of adjustment or solution of personal and social problems."

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**Fortnightly, Sept. 1, 1935.**


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**Arkansas Gazette (Little Rock), Feb. 16, 1935.**


**Arkansas Gazette, Feb. 20, 1935.**

**Ibid., Mar. 9, 1935.**