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Mountains Ho! The Centrality of Experiencing the Blue Ridge Mountains at Black Mountain College

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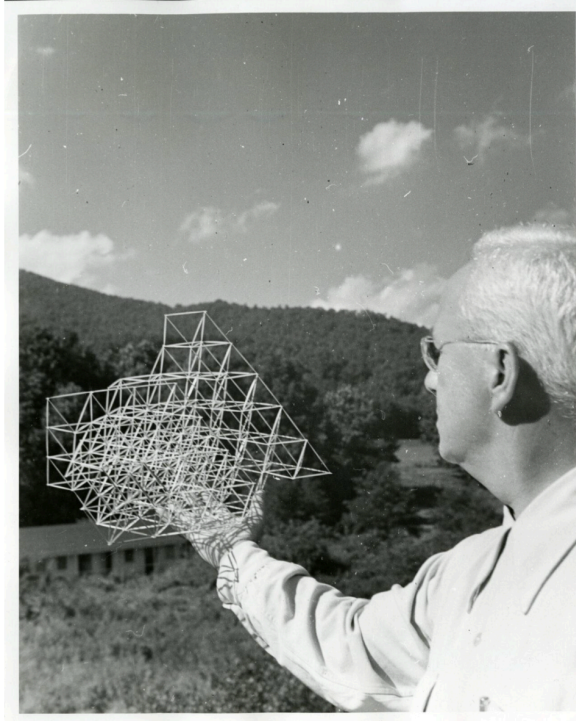
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Kenelm Winslow, *Photograph from Fotofolio*, ca. 1936-38. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center. | Photographer unknown, (*"Angy" Bodky, Nic Muzenic, Franziska Mayer, and Charles Bell hiking*), n.d. The Jalowetz Aronson Family Collection. | Masato Nakagawa, *R. Buckminster Fuller with model*, 1949. Black Mountain College Research Project, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Mountain. The word is at the center of Black Mountain College, and the town in which it existed. And both Black Mountain College campuses are surrounded by a rim of mountains: the Swannanoa Mountains to the South and the Great Craggy Mountains to the North.¹ Everyone who arrived at the College could not help but notice being surrounded by these extensive mountain ranges as well as some of North Carolina's highest mountain peaks.²

While at the center of Black Mountain College and everyone's experience living there, the mountains and landscapes surrounding the two BMC campuses have received little scholarly attention. I return to this topic after having lived in the town of Black Mountain for two years, during which I contemplated, hiked, and gazed out from the multiple peaks surrounding me. By focusing on the mountains around BMC, examining their geology, as well as how BMC faculty and students experienced them, I hope to show how central the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains were to people's experiences at Black Mountain College.

A College in the Mountains

Black Mountain College's first campus (1933—1941) was located on the slope of the Swannanoa Mountains, at the YMCA's Blue Ridge Assembly, in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Above it rise two named peaks: High Top, with an elevation of 4,260 feet, and High Windy at 4,380 feet. The College's second campus (1941—1957) was located across the Swannanoa Valley around Lake Eden, in a smaller valley of its own. Lake Eden faces Allen Mountain (also referred to by some as "Mae West") with an elevation of 3,260 feet; the Craggy Mountains ascend behind the iconic Studies Building.³

The mountains around BMC are the oldest in North America. Their rocks were formed over a billion years ago.⁴ The Appalachian Mountain range came into existence about 300 million years ago when the movement of continental plates caused two land masses (Laurentia and Gondwana) to collide, and the earth's crust to be folded and uplifted.⁵ Weathering and erosion resulted in the Appalachian's rounded peaks. Additional uplift events followed, creating more mountain ranges including the Black Mountains.⁶ The first people to live here date back to 1000 BCE.⁷ These expanses of time and large-scale events are hard to comprehend, but hiking, observing, and living in these mountains helps one ponder their expanses of time and change.

The changes in the color of the soil—soil being the result of weathering and erosion of rock—were often noticed by those traveling to Black Mountain College. "*Right now it's red clay and hills, very pretty. The trip has been OK.... Mountains ho! And they're lovely.*" These impressions were recorded by student Phyllis Josephs in the first

letter she wrote home. She also mentioned the gorgeous panorama of the mountains visible from the steps of Eureka Hall at the Blue Ridge Assembly campus.⁸

Most students and some faculty arrived in Black Mountain, NC by train. The train station was downtown and miles away from Black Mountain College's campuses. Often someone from the College would pick them up by car, or the option of a local taxi was also available.⁹ Anyone who looked up from the train station saw the Swannanoa Valley Rim of mountains that surrounds the town.



Marion Post Wolcott, *View from steps of Black Mountain College. Black Mountain, North Carolina, 1939.* Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF346-052166-D.

The view mentioned by Josephs is the same view that Marion Post (Wolcott) photographed in September 1939. Post Wolcott was in the area as a Farm Security Administration photographer. In a 1965 interview she commented how landscapes were

one of her favorite themes to photograph and said: “I think landscape can tell a great deal about living conditions as well as the people...”¹⁰ Following this line of thinking, in her photograph we see two young adults engaged in conversation with their backs to the mountain; the man smiling and listening to the woman. The mountains were beautiful at Black Mountain College, but the students there were also always constantly being amazed by their fellow students, the faculty, and visitors too.



Helen M. Post Modley, Students tilling soil at the Blue Ridge Assembly with Ross Penley, 1937. Helen Post Modley Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Marion Post Wolcott’s sister Helen M. Post (Modley) visited BMC in 1937. Helen, like Marion, also included the mountains in the framing of this photograph of students working on the farm. Whether Helen told Marion about BMC, or if Marion knew about it through her own work with the Farm Security Administration, is unknown. When viewed

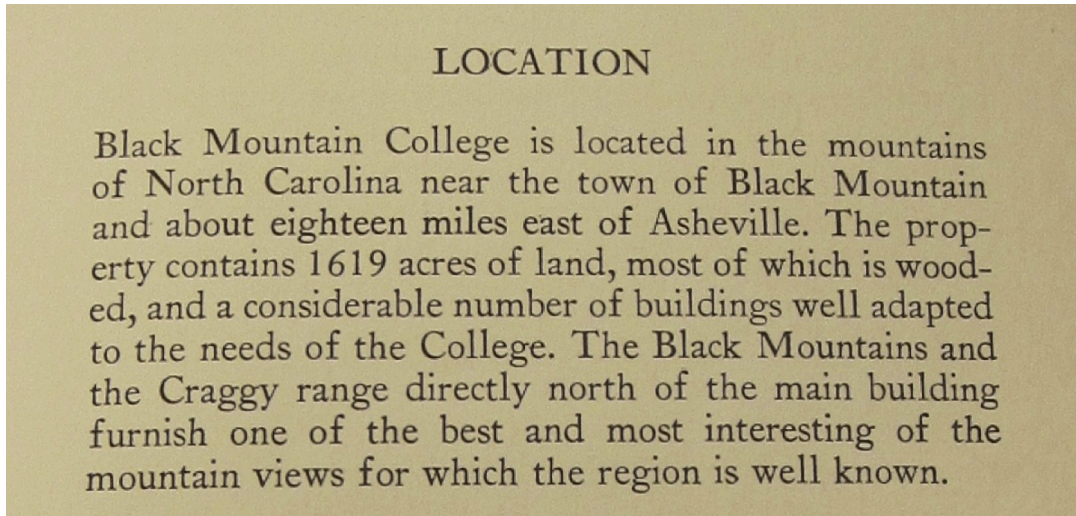
together these photographs show how both Post sisters found moments in which to show BMC's students within the context of the mountains that surrounded them.





Kenelm Winslow, Photographs from Fotofolio, ca. 1936-38. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

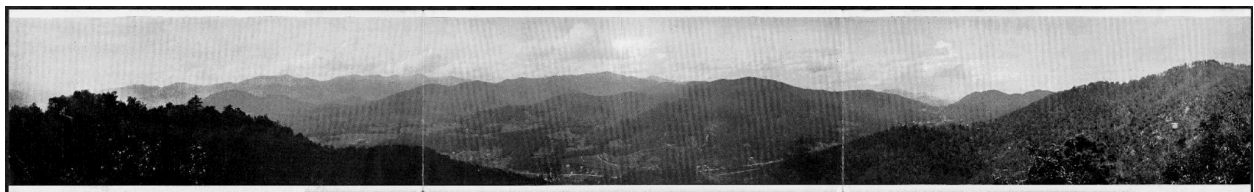
Kenelm Winslow (BMC student 1936-38) also photographed the Blue Ridge campus and the mountains surrounding it. His focus was the landscape, both the natural one and the constructed one. Through Winslow's composition, he presents a comparison of the angular edges of buildings constructed by people decades earlier, to the rounded, eroded mountains that have stood for millions of years.



Black Mountain College Bulletin, 1933-34.
Martin Duberman Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

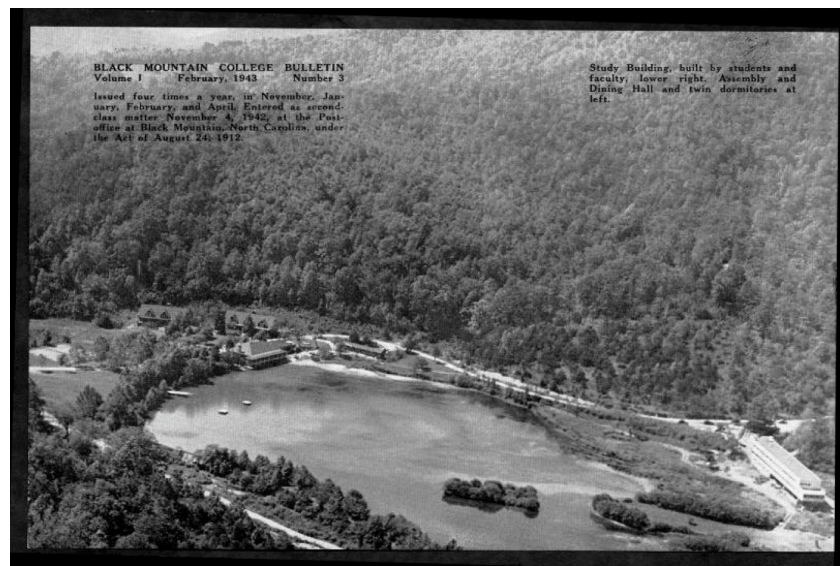
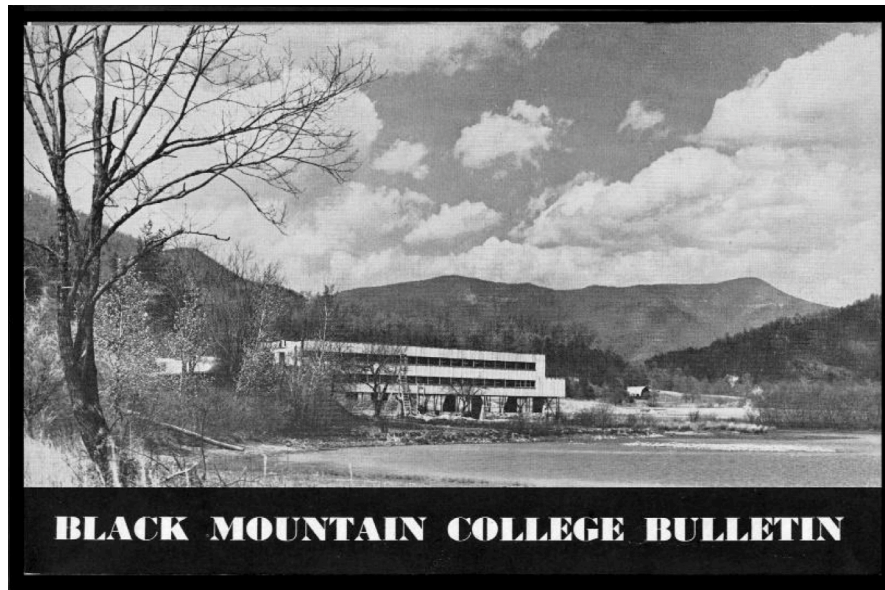
Mountain Allure: Promoting the College's Mountain Setting

BMC's faculty realized their location was special, and the ways they promoted and shared their mountain setting continued to evolve during the College's existence. The first 1933-34 Bulletin names the Black Mountains and the Craggy ranges while describing their location. By sharing these names, the College helped people be able to say where they were and orient themselves, or for readers, to imagine these ranges from afar.



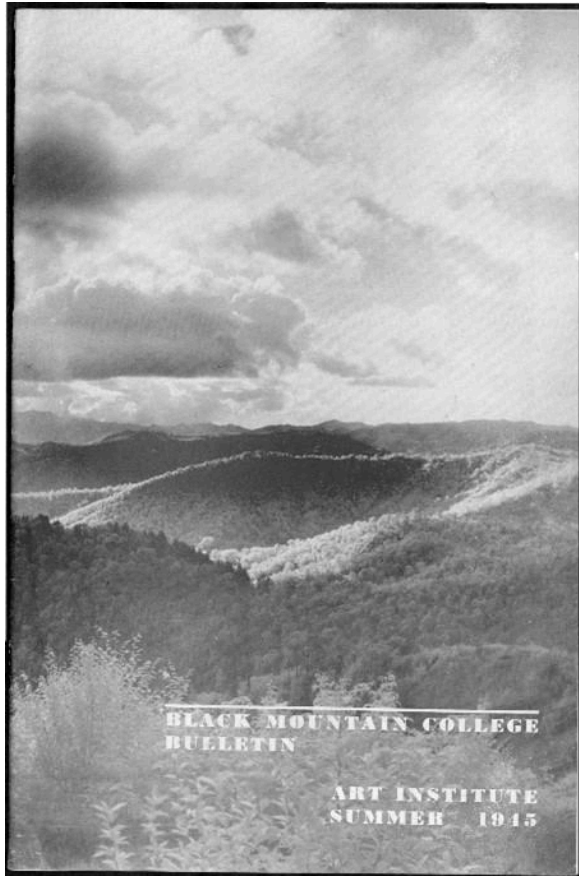
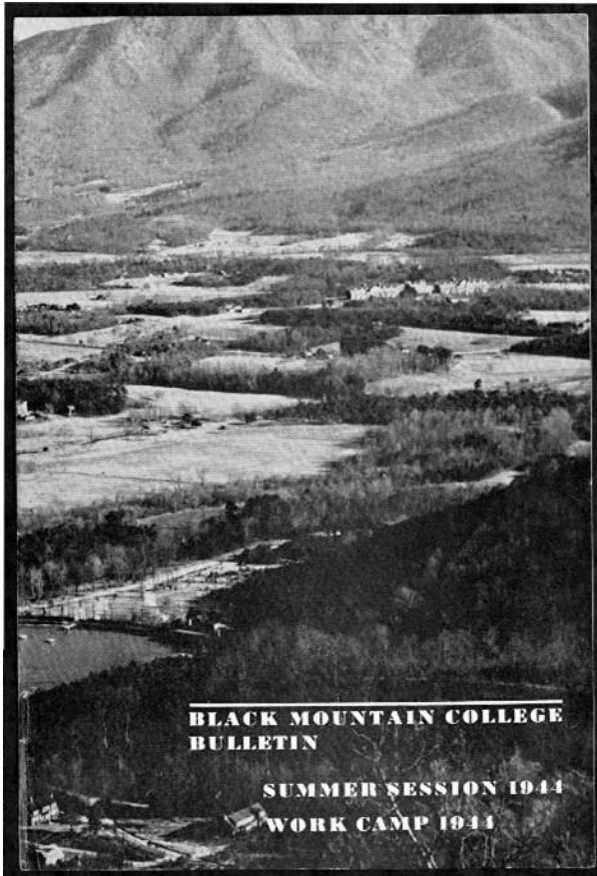
Black Mountain College Bulletin, No. 3, Views of and from the College [1934-35]
Black Mountain College Research Project. North Carolina Museum of Art. North Carolina Digital Collections, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

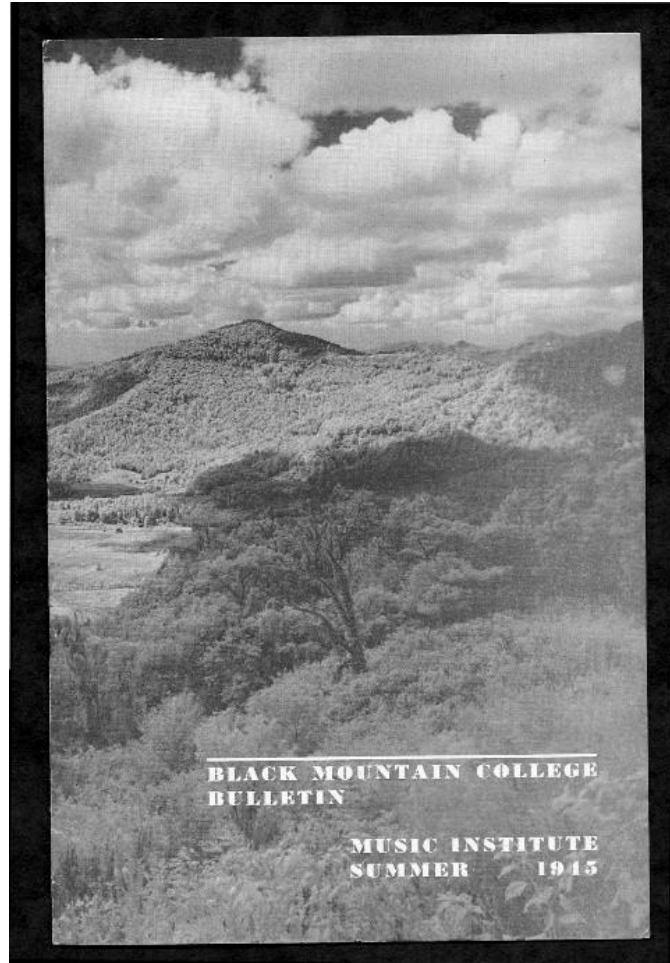
Soon after the College opened, a panoramic view brochure was created to promote the College. This remarkable printed resource encourages the imagining of one's self at Black Mountain College as it opens to reveal a spread of the Great Craggy Mountains and the Swannanoa Valley. In later Bulletins they mention the elevation being 2,700 feet as well as the location of the College being "on the slope of the main Blue Ridge," again giving readers, students, and faculty very specific details about their location that could be visualized or imagined.



Black Mountain College Bulletin, February 1943. Black Mountain College Research Project. North Carolina Museum of Art. North Carolina Digital Collections, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

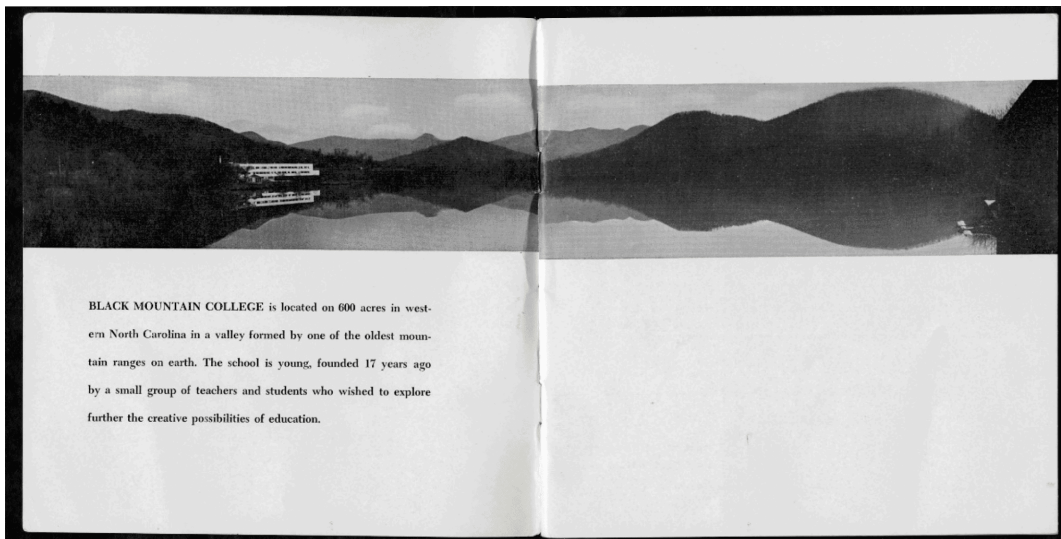
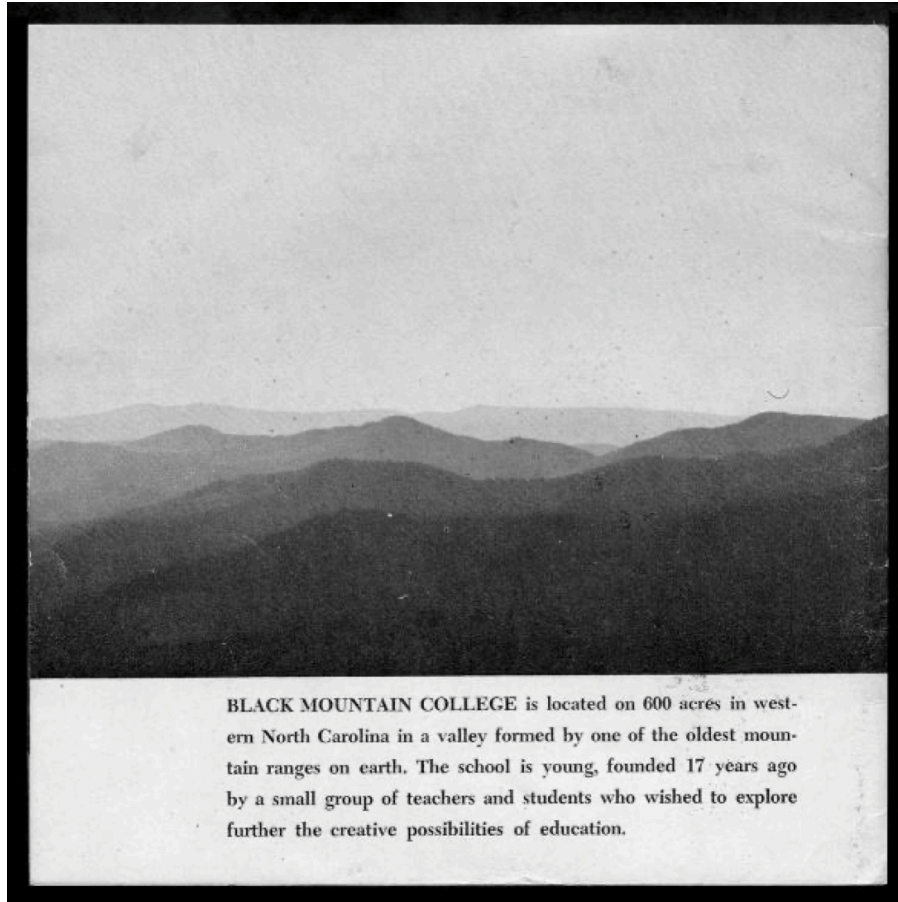
When the College purchased the Lake Eden campus the 1937-38 Bulletin provided the following geographic update: “on the North Fork of the Swannanoa River, three miles across the valley” from the Blue Ridge Assembly campus.¹¹ Soon after, in the 1943 Bulletin, they highlighted the mountains surrounding the Studies Building and Lake Eden on both the front and back covers.





Summer Institute Bulletins, 1944. Black Mountain College Research Project. North Carolina Museum of Art. North Carolina Digital Collections, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

By 1944 the College put even more emphasis on the mountains around Lake Eden, as seen in the Summer Institutes Bulletins with photographs by Elliot Lyman Fisher, a commercial photographer based in Asheville. These Bulletins seem to say, “imagine yourself here, hiking in our mountains, looking out at these awe-inspiring views.”



Hazel Larsen Archer and photography students Nick Cernovich, Andy Oates, Vernon Phillips, and Stan VanDerBeek, *Photographic Viewbook*, 1950. Black Mountain College Research Project, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Students' Experience of the Mountains

Some of the most beautiful photographs of the landscape and mountains surrounding Lake Eden were made by Hazel Larsen Archer (BMC student Summer 1944 and graduate studies 1945-48; BMC Faculty 1949-1953) and her photography students: Nick Cernovich (BMC Student 1948-1952), Andy Oates (BMC Student 1949-1948-1950), Vernon Phillips (BMC Student 1948-1950), and Stan VanDerBeek (BMC Student 1949-1950). A selection of these was shared through the Photographic Viewbook published in 1950. It's fun to imagine how many more views of BMC's mountains that they recorded in their minds, and on the rest of their rolls of film.



Felix Krowinski, Fall 1948. Collection of Felix Krowinski, Sr., Gift of Mary Emma Harris, Black Mountain College Project, Courtesy of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina. Standing from left: Nancy Miller, Edward Adamy, Charles Boyce, Harry Weitzer, Susie Schaufle, and Julian Bergman. Seated from left: Eine Sihvoven, Charlotte Robinson (?), Warren Outten, and Mim Sihvoven.

BMC's Bulletins from the Summer of 1944 on, directed students to bring "Clothing appropriate for walking in the mountains and for working outdoors." Black Mountain College was progressive even in its dress. Female students often wore pants at BMC, a freedom some public universities didn't allow women until the 1950s—1960s.¹²

While photographs convey much about the mountains surrounding BMC, the experiences of BMC's mountains were also documented and shared through written accounts. Fielding Dawson's (BMC Student 1949-53) is especially on point: "Where else could you sit on top of a mountain and look down through clouds at the school you attended?"¹³

Doughten Cramer (BMC student 1933-37) shared the following about his walks and experiences in Western North Carolina's mountains:

The College's setting was extraordinarily important to me. The mountains of western North Carolina are beautiful beyond description, and it is as if the atmosphere of the College was consciously a part of the living beauty. It made one sensitive to everything.

I took many walks in the mountains while I was at BMC, sometimes overnight, sometimes for a mere thirty minutes. ... A few yards from [Eureka Hall] one could plunge into real wilderness ... It was an experience, especially for a city dweller, to venture into such a rugged unknown...

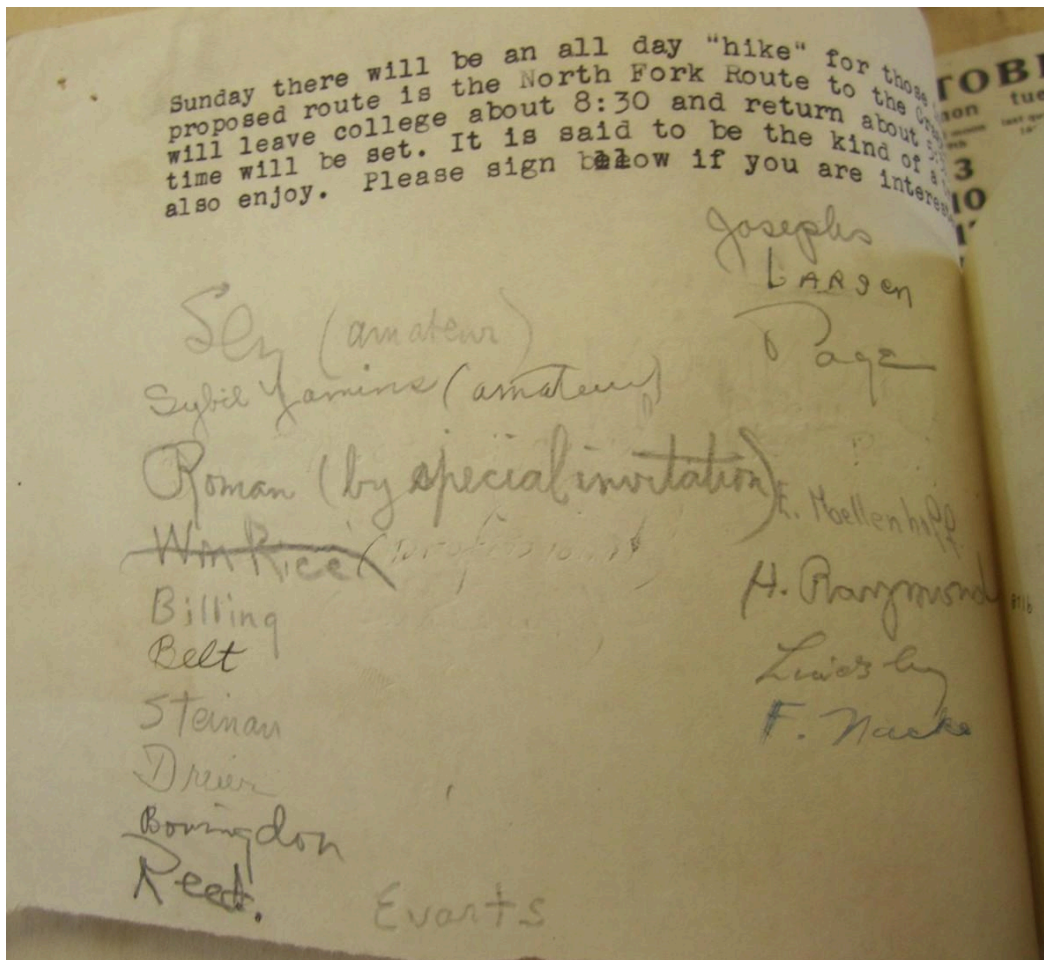
The hike to Craggy Dome was my first real experience in [the] wilderness... Later on, we took many overnight trips in the mountains, and these trips, taken alone or with other students and faculty members, became an important part of my growing up.¹⁴

Jane "Slats" Slater Marquis (BMC student 1940-45) recalled the beauty and the restorative nature of the BMC campuses:

It all took place in a landscape of heartbreaking beauty. Wonderfully out of the ordinary world—isolated from the families, communities, expectation, obligations, and banalities that we had left behind and were later, inevitably, to return to. At eighteen I nearly fainted with wonder at the ferns and moss thick on the paths outside the buildings that led up the mountain to Blue Ridge. I was a girl from Utah. My 'first love' and I would climb this trail late at night.¹⁵

Albeit in different ways, both Cramer and Slats equate their experience in the mountains with growing up and maturing.

Many BMC faculty members, students, and visitors hiked the mountains, and directly experienced their elevation gain, terrain, views, and peaks. Returning to Phyllis Joseph's letters, about a month after she arrived at BMC she wrote to her mother about a day-long hike in the Craggies. She describes the view from the Craggy Dome as "exquisite" and "awe-inspiring."



Scrapbook, ca. 1938, PC.1956, The Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier Black Mountain College Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Thanks to Ted Dreier (BMC Faculty 1933—1949), records of many BMC group hikes were saved, through the sign up lists posted to BMC's community bulletin board.¹⁶ Through these and other written accounts we know that people at BMC hiked the

mountains above both campuses including: Craggy Dome; Mount Mitchell (via Graybeard in Montreat), Hemphill Springs (near Mount Mitchell), the Asheville watershed North Fork Reservoir, Shumont (by Chimney Rock), and “The Saddle” and the “Garden of Eden” above Lake Eden.



Photographer unidentified, Untitled, n.d. Black Mountain College Records, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.



Photograph by Julie J. Thomson, View from Craggy Pinnacle, 2017.

The experience of ascending to the top of the Craggy Dome is shared through an undated photograph from the College's archives. I can attest that the views from nearby Craggy Pinnacle have filled me with awe. A 2017 photograph I made looks towards BMC's first campus; Eureka Hall is the white dot on the mountain slope. With views and experienced expanses of time and history like this, one senses how these mountains gave students and faculty perspective about their place in, and relationship to, the world.



Photographs by Jerrold Levy, n.d. Black Mountain College Research Project, Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier, Black Mountain College Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Photographs by Jerrold Levy (BMC student 1947-1950) document and allow us to follow a hike that he and his fellow students Stanley Hebel and Felix Krowinski made. The number of miles that they covered, and their elevation gain seems vast from Levy's dramatic photograph of Hebel and Krowinski on a peak, photographed from an even higher peak above. There's also their humorous performance for Levy's camera, portraying how it can feel after a long hike.

Even when Albert Einstein visited and lectured at BMC in 1941, he noticed and mentioned the proximity to nature and the mountains:

I want to congratulate you upon the work you are doing. You are here as a little community to work with your hands and with your brains, which is a good thing for you. ...you are in such close contact with nature here. You are getting near to science in a way it should generally be done.

What is done out of pleasure is much better done than what is done out of duty. If you have to climb mountains out of duty, you would not mount these high mountains. I think that is also true with the high mountains of the spirit.¹⁷

The Faculty's Experience of the Mountains

The mountains around Black Mountain College were inspiring, just like the founders had hoped, and this was especially true some of the faculty who were there. Josef and Anni Albers repeatedly mentioned and described the mountains, trees, plants, and landscape in their letters to Wassily Kandinsky and his wife Nina, who they knew and were friends with from their time together at the Bauhaus. In November 1934 Josef Albers wrote to the Kandinskys:

The air is very special just now. Frequently cool but sunny at the same time. That makes our—sadly rather rare—walks really refreshing. Then there are also really warm days, when everybody sits outside in the sun. *And every day the mountains are different and interesting.*¹⁸



(Left) Alvin Lustig, Cover for *Design* magazine, April 1946. Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center Collection. | (Right) Alvin Lustig, Book cover design for *A Season in Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud, 1945, New Directions.

The landscape and mountains were also something graphic designer Alvin Lustig (BMC Faculty, Summer 1945) emphasized, albeit abstractly, in his later design for the cover of a special issue of *Design* magazine devoted to Black Mountain College. While at BMC Lustig also drew the forms for the cover for the paperback edition of Arthur Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*.¹⁹ Lustig replied to Ray Johnson: "As to the Rimbaud cover—I just drew them—in fact I drew them while I was at Black Mountain." Knowing this, looking at the rounded and organic forms on the Rimbaud cover that he drew, as well as his use of black and white, which recalls reflections of the landscape in Lake Eden, allows one to make connections between BMC's mountains and this design too.



Nancy Newhall, “Mae West” North Carolina, *Black Mountain College*, 1948. © 1948, Nancy Newhall, ©2025, the Estate of Beaumont and Nancy Newhall. Courtesy of Scheinbaum and Russek Ltd., Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Another summer visitor was Nancy Newhall, a photography curator and writer. She accompanied her husband Beaumont Newhall (BMC Faculty Summers 1946, 1947, and 1948)—the first curator of photography at MoMA—for the three summers he taught at BMC. She worked on her own writing at BMC but also assisted Beaumont with photography classes. During the summer of 1947 the Newhalls and students built additional darkroom facilities at BMC.

Experiencing BMC’s people and mountains prompted in Nancy a desire to photograph them. She wrote to her friend Ansel Adams about how she wanted to “shut myself up in it [the College’s darkroom] for a while. For, really, the first time, I want to master photography. But the main current must still go elsewhere; there are photographers but very few people to write about them.”²⁰ A month later Newhall wrote to Adams about the drama of seeing BMC’s summer afternoon thunderstorms: “Bright

mists and glittering dews in the mornings, thunderheads standing on the mountain tops at noon, storms sweeping down brief and passionate in the afternoons.”²¹ The feelings that Nancy felt toward photography and the mountains surrounding BMC are evident in the 1948 photograph that she made while there.

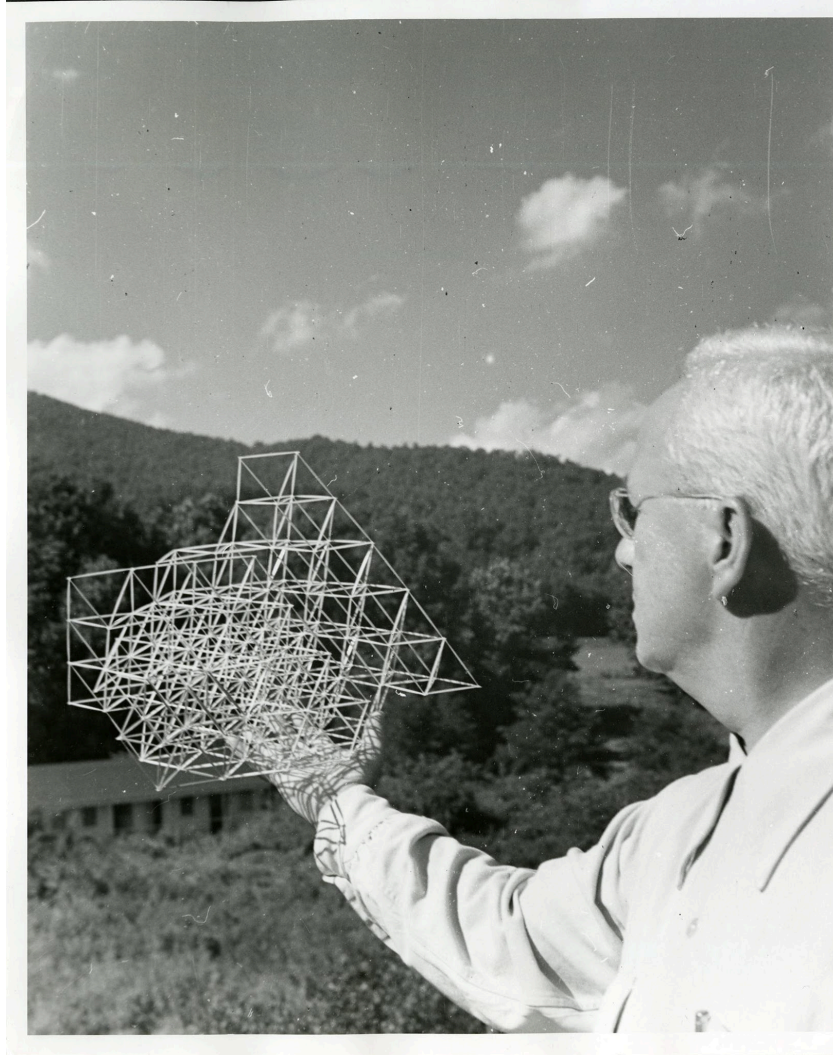
This section of the mountains that Newhall photographed was referred to by some as “Mae West,” after the curvaceous movie actress by the same name. A focal point visible from the Studies Building and while walking around Lake Eden, “Mae West” (Allen Mountain on local maps) was the subject of photographs by many people at BMC.





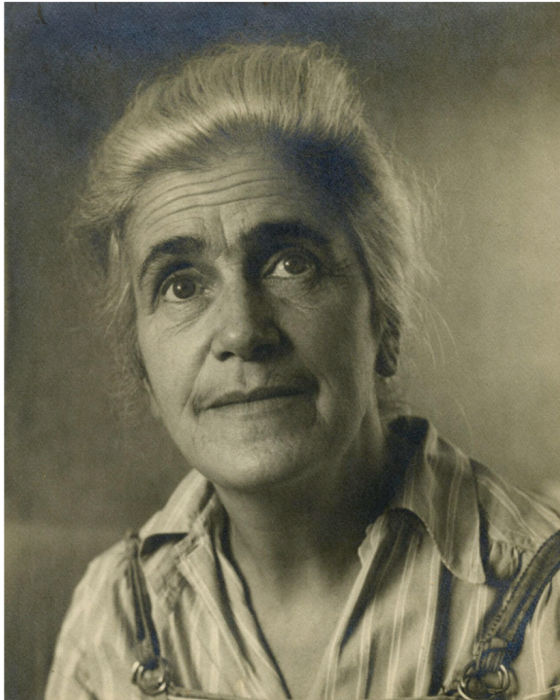
Trude Guermonprez, “Mae West,” ca. 1947-49. Courtesy of the Jalowetz Aronson Family Collection. | Andy Oates, Lake Eden and Mae West, ca. 1950. Courtesy of the Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center Collection.

Trude Guermonprez (BMC Faculty 1947-1949) also photographed Allen Mountain in the late 1940s. Her picture shows a very different reflection of the mountains in Lake Eden, one that emphasizes the mountain’s formal qualities, and abstracts it. Andy Oates, who studied with Guermonprez and Hazel Larsen Archer and graduated in photography and weaving, made a darker and moodier photograph of “Mae West.” By including the mountain behind a tree, Oates adds a layer of texture to his landscape, with the willow’s limbs resembling threads. Both Guermonprez and Oates were weavers so texture and form was part of their thinking. Each artist’s emotional and individual sensibilities come through in these very different pictures of the same subject. The “changing” nature of BMC’s mountains that Josef Albers commented on to Kandinsky, is also conveyed through these pictures too.



Masato Nakagawa, R. Buckminster Fuller with model, 1949. Black Mountain College Research Project, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

The power of the Blue Ridge Mountains was even felt by Buckminster Fuller (BMC Faculty, Summers 1948 and 1949). In a letter to Bobbie Dreier (wife of Ted Dreier, BMC Faculty 1933-1949) written after the successful rise of a Geodesic dome at BMC, Fuller devoted a few paragraphs to the mountains, closing with this sentence written in dialect: “Yes Mam ther’s black magic in them thar hills, and it warnt put there by people,—they are its puppets.”²² Magic, inspiration, exhilaration, awe; whatever word one uses the hopes of BMC’s founders in finding a singular place where “the highest type of mental and physical activity” could occur was realized in many fields and media, and by many BMC students as well as faculty.



(Top) Ted Dreier, Anni Albers and Josef Albers at the Blue Ridge Assembly campus, 1938. Courtesy of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. | (Bottom left) Josef Breitenbach, Portrait of Johanna Jalowetz, 1944. ©Josef and Yaye Breitenbach Charitable Foundation. Courtesy of the Jalowetz Aronson Family Collection and Gitterman Gallery. | (Bottom right) Photographer unknown (possibly Trude Guermontprez), Franziska Mayer at BMC, ca.1946-47. Collection of LaFarge-Moore, Gift of Mary Emma Harris, Black Mountain College Project, Courtesy of the Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

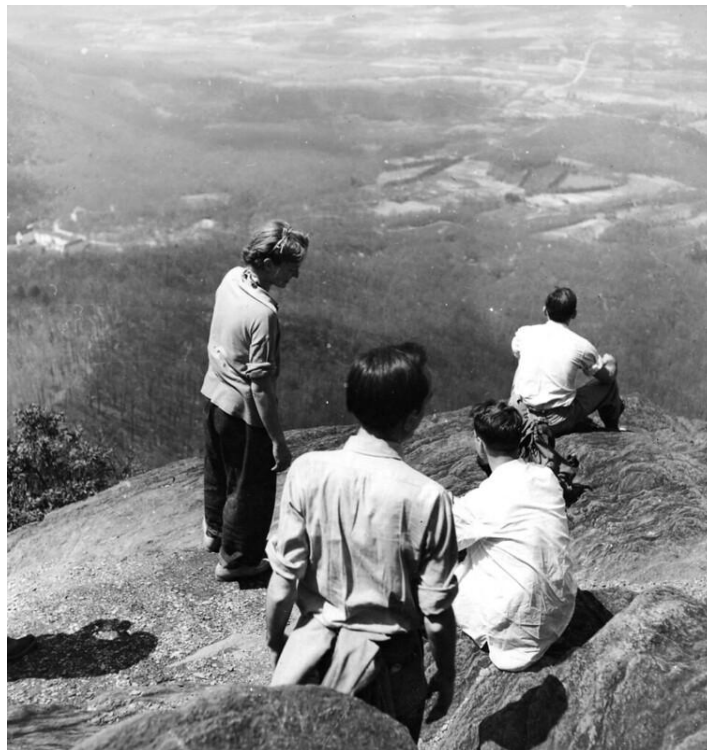
The Mountains as Respite, Refuge, and Acceptance

While the mountains around Black Mountain College were inspirational, they were also a place of respite, refuge, and acceptance. The pressures and stress many of BMC's faculty and students faced was extreme. Some had escaped from Nazi Germany including Josef and Anni Albers; the Jalowetz Family (Heinrich, Johanna, Lisa, and later Trude Guermonprez); Max Dehn, his wife Toni, and his niece Franziska Mayer; and Lore Kadden Lindenfeld.

Several BMC students served during World War II. Many corresponded with friends still at BMC, those still back in the mountains. Of those who served some died overseas including Roman Maciejczyk, Derek Bovingdon, Tommy Wentworth, and Harriett Engelhardt. After WWII a number of students attended BMC on the GI Bill: Robert Rauschenberg, Norman Solomona, and Charles Archer.²³ Further research on these individuals might be able to uncover the ways BMC provided them respite and recovery from the war.

Black Mountain College accepted BIPOC staff, students, and faculty decades before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (1954) "that separating children in public schools on the basis of race was unconstitutional."²⁴ Located in the American South, North Carolina's Jim Crow laws required racial segregation between whites and blacks, but despite these, BMC accepted Black cooks, Jack and Rubye Lipsey, starting in the 1930s and the first Black student, Alma Stone Williams, in 1943. In 1945 BMC hired Black faculty members Percy Hayes Baker, Carol Brice, and Roland Hayes, followed by Jacob Lawrence and Mark Oakland Fax in 1946.²⁵

Beginning in 1942 the U.S. government imprisoned Japanese people and Japanese-American citizens in internment camps, including Ruth Asawa and her family.²⁶ Asawa was accepted as a student at BMC starting in the Summer of 1946. She thrived at BMC, was a star pupil in Josef Albers's class, became lifelong friends with Buckminster Fuller and others, and met her husband Albert Lanier there. Even survivors of the polio epidemic found refuge, respite, and acceptance at BMC. Hazel Larsen Archer had polio when she was in high school. She began her studies at BMC in 1944, rose to the level of faculty in 1949, and continued to teach there through 1953.



(Top) Photographer unknown, Studies Building nearing completion, Lake Eden campus, ca. 1941. Black Mountain College Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

(Bottom) Photographer unknown, Hike with valley view, n.d. Black Mountain College Records, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Located fifteen miles outside of Asheville, both of Black Mountain College's campuses were rural and miles outside of downtown Black Mountain. Even with their remote and removed setting, many at the College followed world events. Communal living and differences in opinions about College decisions also resulted in stressful interpersonal relations throughout the College's history. In 1939 Phyllis Josephs shared with her mother how a two-day overnight trip to Mt. Mitchell and Hemphill Springs (which covered about thirty miles) was "a wonderful way to get away from local [College] trials and tribulations."²⁷

John Corkran, the son of David Corkran (BMC Faculty 1945-50), was one of the children who grew up at Black Mountain College. He went on hikes with students and faculty and remembered going to Mt. Mitchell (by way of the Greybeard trail) as well as trying to hike to Craggy Dome. Like Josephs, he also commented on how hiking offered relief for his father: "Max Dehn and my father walked together a good deal. I think it was their way of decompressing from the intensity of the college."²⁸



(Left) Photographer unknown (possibly Trude Guermonprez), Portrait of Max Dehn, n.d. Courtesy of the Jalowetz Aronson Family Collection. | (Right) Photographer unknown, (Angy Bodky, Nic Muzenic, Franziska Mayer, and Charles Bell hiking), n.d. Courtesy of the Jalowetz Aronson Family Collection.

BMC's most committed hiker was Max Dehn (BMC Faculty, 1945-52), who taught mathematics and physics. He was also a wildflower enthusiast. Many students have shared memories of hikes with him. Angelica Bodky Lee (BMC Student 1947-50) and daughter of Erwin Bodky (BMC guest faculty, 1945 and 1947, faculty 1947-49), recalled:

Some of the most memorable hikes I went on were with Max Dehn to the Garden of Eden, the steep ascent to the ridge behind the College. The path went near a little waterfall where beautiful red flowers grew, and chanterelle mushrooms.²⁹



(Top Left) Norman Solomon, *Portrait of Marie Tavroges Stilkind*, 1952. Black Mountain College Research Project, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina. | (Top Right) Marie Tavroges Stilkind, (*Trueman MacHenry*), 1952, Courtesy of the artist and the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center Collection. | (Bottom) Marie Tavroges Stilkind, (*Untitled*), 1952, Courtesy of the artist and the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center Collection.

Marie Tavroges Stilkind (BMC student 1952) also has memories of Dehn hiking and his love for WNC’s wild orchids. His concern for them was so deep that she said that he “would be following you around to see that you don’t pick any of these wildflowers, especially the wild orchid. He barged in my apartment at BMC—the upstairs from he

and Toni in Stone Cottage—just to check to see I hadn't hidden any precious plants away in vases. I had a small branch of Forsythia, which grew in abundance at that time. He gave a sniff at that, but we remained friends.”³⁰ Stilkind studied photography with Hazel Larsen Archer and was particularly interested in making photographs showing the “beauty of nature.”

Trueman MacHenry (BMC student 1946-52) was Max Dehn's star pupil who graduated from BMC in mathematics. In his reflections later in life, he emphasized the importance of nature and hiking to people at BMC:

At Black Mountain we lived a life quite isolated from the rest of the world. It is clear that the geographical position of the college aided this...

One important influence on life at BMC that should be mentioned is that of nature: the woods, the wildflowers, the passing of the seasons, the weather. ... It was usual for people there to take frequent walks in the woods or go hiking in the mountains. ...

The hour's trip up to the Saddle was among the first trips taken by a newcomer, and re-walked, probably, many times later. Most parts of the 600 or so acres had been given names by the walkers giving the illusion of more history and tradition than there really was.³¹

Today the restorative benefits of nature on both mental and physical health have been researched and proven in greater detail than what was known when BMC existed. In her book *The Nature Fix*, Florence Williams shares a range of research findings showing how “place matters” and how like our animal relatives, we too “seek places that give us what we need.”³² One study shared by Williams is a creativity study, called the Remote Associates Test, that was conducted after a three-day backpacking trip. Following this time in nature, a 50% improvement in creativity resulted.³³ Such findings quantify what the founders of BMC sensed when they chose the location for Black Mountain College and the singular art and thinking that was explored and realized by people who were there.

It's also been shown how the benefits of exercise and moving—including walking and hiking—improve brain function, which can result in “academic grades, creativity,

perceptual skills, memory recall—and acts as a mood-regulating stress buffer.”³⁴ With such research available today we can now see the countless ways in which BMC’s natural setting, including the mountains, fortified those at BMC.

For some, BMC provided their first opportunity to live outside of a city. Stan VanDerBeek, who grew up in Bronx, recalled this about attending Black Mountain College:

I didn’t know what I was as an artist, or what I was as a person. ...I went to a completely rural kind of escape situation to try to find myself. And essentially, that’s what happened. I went through all kinds of just very severe personal and agonizing searches of identity. I mean, I removed myself from the rest of the community. *I went to join the community, and essentially I sat on the side of the mountain for about a year in complete silence.* It was really one of the major discoveries at that place... I had long, removed walks in the woods, [and] sitting in...the Quiet House.³⁵

From this reflection, we hear how being in the mountains, walking in the forests, and sitting in quieter places allowed VanDerBeek the time and space to figure out who he was.

The Blue Ridge Mountains offer many opportunities to experience awe, which Williams defines as: “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.”³⁶ Awe also connects us to something bigger than ourselves. The lasting effects of PTSD and trauma have both been shown to be helped by experiencing awe; awe also helps make us more resilient.³⁷ Many of the awe-filled students and faculty at BMC were extremely productive in their fields, creative and critical thinkers, who continued to inspire others through their later teaching and for some, their activism.

Coda in 2025: Hurricane Helene and the Mountains



Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, *The Studies Building and Lake Eden*, 1949. Courtesy of the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center Collection.

Black Mountain was a place of its own being, like freedom, it didn't nullify or ignore The Real World—it was away from it. The world wasn't there, like the other side of the mirror or beyond the horizon..., every aspect intangible, invisible, except the lush natural Paradise that it was.

...If you didn't look where you were going at Black Mountain, you might not know where you were. It was of the very essence of dreams. Other aspects—its fossil and mineral life—lent an air of Before History.³⁸

—Fielding Dawson

In late September 2024 Hurricane Helene hit Black Mountain and Western North Carolina. Its impact ranks as the deadliest hurricane in the U.S. since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.³⁹ Both former BMC campuses were impacted: Blue Ridge Assembly and Eureka Hall were inundated with landslides, causing damage to Eureka Hall's

foundation, as well as flooding, and downed trees. The Lake Eden campus fared better, but many trees were uprooted and felled by the hurricane's winds. Nearby, many neighbors in Swannanoa lost everything as the Swannanoa River and tributaries rose.

Local relief efforts, including area aid societies (Bounty & Soul, Manna Foodbank, and BeLoved Asheville), mobilized to provide food, supplies, and support to area families, followed by relief assistance from FEMA and the National Guard. Recovery efforts in Swannanoa, Black Mountain, Montreat, Asheville, and Western North Carolina are ongoing and continue today at the time of this publication. The phrase "Appalachian Strong" was used and circulated in multiple ways. WNC's mountains are where people have chosen to live, and the resiliency and perspective they provide inhabitants was stated as a source of strength, which allowed many to persevere in the face of this disaster and devastation.

Today BMC's campuses and some of the surrounding ridges are owned by the YMCA, Lake Eden Preserve, and the Pickering Family. Each works in different ways to preserve and share BMC's legacy. Many of the mountains and ridges where BMC faculty and students hiked are protected by conservation-oriented groups including the Southern Appalachians Highlands Conservancy, National Forest Service, National Park Service, and North Carolina State Parks (Mount Mitchell and Shumont Mountain at Chimney Rock State Park).

While much of this land is currently protected, 2025 is a time once again when political and corporate forces continue to search for ways to profit off these lands in destructive and extractive ways. WNC's and the U.S.'s public lands need our continued advocacy and vigilant protection. Understanding and being able to articulate our relationship to WNC's mountains and landscape—especially this one that sustains and inspires us—is particularly important. During the COVID-19 pandemic record numbers of visitors hiked and went to State and National Parks (once they reopened), and park visitor numbers remain higher than they were before 2019. Preserved natural spaces and wilderness restore our bodies and minds. As the world grows even more technological, future generations will need these places too.

An undated document titled "The Story of BMC" reminds us what we can still learn from the College's legacy today:

BMC was started in 1933 as an experiment in adapting liberal education to modern life...

The founders chose Black Mountain, North Carolina, for the new college because they felt the exhilarating atmosphere and the beauty of the mountains would be conducive to the highest type of mental and physical activity.

The liberal arts were originally the studies deemed worthy of free men. In a democracy, where all may be free, it is the duty of the liberal arts to make free men and women understand themselves and their environment so that they may be worthy of their freedom. If they understand that freedom is not an heirloom which may be inherited like wealth, but something that must be won by every individual and every generation, it is assumed that they will treasure and protect the democracy which makes freedom possible.⁴⁰

With the terribly challenging present political situation in the United States, as well as the world—ongoing wars, conflicts, and climate change—words like this from the past give us a sense of how to find our way through this chaos and inspire us to find out what kind of people we need to be.

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¹ The Swannanoa Valley Museum & History Center in Black Mountain offers the Swannanoa Valley Rim Explorer Hiking Series each year. Polaris Cartography’s 3D Panoramic View of Black Mountain and the Swannanoa River Valley is also helpful <https://www.oppsmaps.com/speciality-maps>.

² Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in NC (6,684 feet) was one place BMC students and faculty hiked.

³ Buildings used by BMC still exist today. Both campuses are privately owned today. Blue Ridge Assembly is still owned by the YMCA. The Lake Eden campus is Camp Rockmont for Boys and owned by the Lake Eden Preserve. One can contact the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center for tours and events on each campus.

⁴ Timothy Silver, *Mount Mitchell and the Black Mountains: An Environmental History of the Highest Peaks in Eastern America* (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2003) xv.

⁵ Silver, 3.

⁶ Silver, 5.

⁷ The Woodland people were the first Indigenous people to inhabit these mountains. Silver, 39. A few BMC students and faculty, including David Corkran and Jerrold Levy, focused their academic research and work on Native Americans.

- ⁸ Phyllis Josephs, "Letters from Lee Hall," 1938-41 (re-typed in 1969 from letters sent to her mother), Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina. Lee Hall was renamed Eureka Hall in 2015.
- ⁹ The train station in Black Mountain is about three miles from the Blue Ridge Assembly campus and about four and a half miles from the Lake Eden campus.
- ¹⁰ Oral history interview with Marion Post Wolcott, 1965 January 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- ¹¹ Black Mountain College Bulletin, 1937-38. Martin Duberman Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.
- ¹² At Michigan State University female students were not allowed to wear pants until 1965. Personal exchange with Donna Thomson, 4/3/25. For more on this topic see Wikipedia contributors, "Trousers as women's clothing," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Trousers_as_women%27s_clothing&oldid=1282742320 (accessed April 4, 2025). This mentions how women at Penn State University were not allowed to wear jeans for off-campus events until 1954.
- ¹³ Fielding Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book, A New Edition* (North Carolina Wesleyan College Press: Rocky Mount, 1991) 108.
- ¹⁴ Doughten Cramer, "A Hike to Craggy Dome" in Mervin Lane, ed., *Black Mountain College Sprouted Seeds: an Anthology of Personal* (University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 46-47.
- ¹⁵ Jane Slater Marquis, "This Paradise Apart" in *BMC Sprouted Seeds*, 90.
- ¹⁶ Scrapbook kept by Ted Dreier, 1938 and 1939. Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier, Black Mountain College Collection, 1925 – 1988, WRA.
- ¹⁷ Josephs (Thomas), "Letters from Lee Hall."
- ¹⁸ [emphasis added] Josef Albers letter to Wassily and Nina Kandinsky, 4.II.1935 in *Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky: Friends in Exile A Decade of Correspondence, 1929—1940* (Hudson Hill Press: Manchester and New York, 2010), 56.
- ¹⁹ Alvin Lustig letter to Ray Johnson, circa 1947. Reproduced in author's essay "The Art of Graphic Design: Lustig, Albers, Johnson, and the 1945 Summer Session" in the *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, June 2014. <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/art-of-graphic-design-1945-thomson/> (Accessed May 20, 2025).
- ²⁰ Nancy Newhall letter to Ansel Adams, July 11, 1947, Ansel Adams Archive, Center for Creative Photography. Quoted in Julie J. Thomson, *Begin to See: The Photographers of Black Mountain College* (Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, Asheville, NC: 2017), 84.
- ²¹ Nancy Newhall letter to Ansel Adams, August 11, 1947, Ansel Adams Archives, Center for Creative Photography. Quoted in Thomson, *Begin to See*, 84.
- ²² R. Buckminster Fuller letter to Bobbie Dreier, September 22 1949. The Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier Black Mountain College Collection, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.
- ²³ "Roman Maciejczyk and Derek Bovingdon both died in aircraft crashes during training, Tommy Wentworth died in France in September 1944," Michael Beggs email to the author, April 9, 2025. Harriett Engelhardt who worked for the American Red Cross was also killed in a tragic Jeep accident. For more on her see Thomson, "The Harriett Engelhardt Memorial Collection of Textiles" in *Weaving at Black Mountain College: Anni Albers, Trude Guermonprez, and Their Students* (Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, 2023).
- ²⁴ "Brown v. Board of Education (1954)," Milestone Documents, National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education> (accessed May 21, 2025).
- ²⁵ William C. Haygood, "Negro Teachers in White Institutions," in *The Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 28, no. 2 (October 1946), 74-75.
- ²⁶ Ruth Asawa Lanier, Inc. website, "Incarceration" <https://ruthasawa.com/life/incarceration/> (accessed May 21, 2025).
- ²⁷ Josephs, letter October 9, 1939, 55-56.
- ²⁸ John Corkran personal email to the author, August 12, 2017.
- ²⁹ Angelica Bodky Lee, "A Flautist's View" in *Black Mountain College Sprouted Seeds*, 165.
- ³⁰ Marie Tavroges Stilkind email to the author, April 20, 2022.
- ³¹ Trueman MacHenry, Black Mountain College" edited by David Silver, *Journal of Black Mountain College*, vol. 7, <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume-7-spring-2015/a-bmc-alum-recollection-by-trueman-machenry/> (Accessed April 4, 2025).

³² Florence Williams, *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York and London, 2017), 4-5.

³³ Williams, 36-37. Study details on p. 264: R.A. Atchley et al., "Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning Through Immersion in Natural Settings," *PLoS ONE*, vol. 7, no. 12 (2012), published online e51474.

³⁴ Eva M. Selhub and Alan C. Logan, *Your Brain on Nature*, 107.

³⁵ [emphasis added] Stan VanDerBeek interviewed by Mary Emma Harris, Black Mountain College Research Project, interview transcript, p. 3-4, 1971, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

³⁶ Florence Williams lecture, North Carolina Arboretum, April 12, 2023.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Fielding Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book: A New Edition* (North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1971 and 19991), 8-9.

³⁹ Andrew B. Hagen, John P. Cangialosi, Marc Chenard, Laura Alaka, and Sandy Delgado, *Tropical Cyclone Report Hurricane Helene (AL092024), 24–27 September 2024* (National Hurricane Center: 21 March 2025) https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/data/tcr/AL092024_Helene.pdf (Accessed April 23, 2025)

⁴⁰ Author unidentified, "The Story of Black Mountain College," n.d. (possibly 1943) Theodore and Barbara Loines Dreier, Black Mountain College Collection, WRA.