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"Beyond These Hills:" Cautious Reformism, Grass-Roots Activism, and Backlash in Western North Carolina

Joey Harrington
History
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights Asheville
North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sarah Judson

Abstract

In 1964, with the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity and the onset of the "War on Poverty," Community Action Programs across the country were provided with financial backing by the Federal Government to fight poverty. W.A.M.Y. was one of eleven Community Action Programs in North Carolina, all kick started in 1963 by the North Carolina Fund. The W.A.M.Y. Community Action Program, mirroring the ideological orientation of policy makers at the national level, sought to address what they saw as behavioral and cultural problems in lieu of addressing systemic economic and political realities to fight poverty. Out of W.A.M.Y.'s "cautious reformism" emerged grass-roots efforts to confront the political and economic status quo, only to be met with swift backlash. The story of W.A.M.Y., from 1963 to 1967, represents a microcosm of the War on Poverty in the Western North Carolina counties of Watauga, Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey.

1. Body of Paper

In the early 1960s, anti-poverty workers across the United States embarked on a project to "eliminate the paradox of poverty."[1] By the late 1960s that revolutionary dream would be deferred. The arc of the War on Poverty in the 1960s can be glimpsed in the stories of Community Action Programs, the local agencies on the frontlines of the anti-poverty movement. One such Community Action Program was located in the Western North Carolina region of Watauga, Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey counties, known by its acronym "W.A.M.Y.."

In a 1964 interview with Ernest Eppley, the director of W.A.M.Y., Eppley stated that "we are trying to bring about a social and economic revolution."[2] In an interview four years later, the recently departed director stated that the most important impact W.A.M.Y. had was in "changing attitudes and views of life and making people face up to the problems of poverty in the four-county area."[3] He went on to add that "no community action agency in the country has really had the resources to make dramatic changes in the poverty situation at the local level."[4] The change from Eppley's early rhetoric, which reflected the grandiose language of national policy makers in the early years of the War on Poverty, to his "cautious reformism" captures the gulf between War on Poverty rhetoric and the actual programs and policies of Community Action Programs like W.A.M.Y. in the mountains of Western North Carolina.[5]

W.A.M.Y. was one of eleven Community Action Agencies in North Carolina, all coordinated by the North Carolina Fund, that received funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity during the early years of the War on Poverty. Eppley's acknowledged focus in 1968 on "attitudes and views of life" captures the overarching ideology of the War on Poverty policy which emphasized liberal reform minded efforts aimed at individual actions and behaviors over a confrontation with economic, social, and political realities. Despite the education orientated policy of the program's founding in 1963, small victories were achieved from 1964 to1968 by local residents of the W.A.M.Y. district through the utilization of community grants and neighborhood organizing efforts. For instance, a small women-led welfare rights group emerged from the community organizing movement.[6] By the end of 1967 however, backlash against the grass-roots efforts led to the termination of W.A.M.Y.'s more experimental programs, including a News

Demonstration project, and to director Ernest Eppley's resignation. The backlash against W.A.M.Y.'s programs represented a microcosm of conservative backlash to War on Poverty programs throughout the country in the late 1960s, which often utilized red baiting and accusations of outsider agitation to delegitimize the efforts. In order to understand the significance of the W.A.M.Y. Community Action Program during its initial four-year funding tenure from the North Carolina Fund, from 1964 to 1968, it is important to review scholarly work on the War on Poverty, the ideological frameworks underpinning the War on Poverty, and W.A.M.Y. and its parent organization, the North Carolina Fund.

Ronald Eller, a professor of History at the University of Kentucky, explores the question of why the War on Poverty in Appalachia did not deliver on the supposed goal of eradicating poverty. Eller, in his book *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, provides an economic-oriented history of Appalachia after WWII with ample time given to analyzing the War on Poverty. Eller emphasizes the impacts of mechanization in Appalachia in the post-World War II years, as well as the impacts of an out-migration of industry and human power during the first half of the 20th century. While recognizing the exploitative nature of the coal and timber industries which were the largest industries in Appalachia in the first half of the 20th century, Eller simultaneously acknowledges the jobs they offered were nevertheless a much-needed resource for some folks in the region. When the decline of industry jobs occurred over the course of the twentieth century, specifically in the years following World War II, many Appalachian communities were hit hard. In addition, due to a massive push towards mechanization in the agriculture industry, Appalachian communities also experienced a sharp decline in the sustainability of mountain agriculture. According to a report published in 1967 by the Appalachian Regional Commission, half of the farm laborers in the region migrated out of the mountains between 1950 and 1960.[7]

Absent in Eller's account of poverty in Appalachia and the dynamics of the post-World War II economy in the region, is a focused analysis of race and gender in the dynamics of those histories. Although the region of W.A.M.Y. in North Carolina is 99% white-identifying in the time period under study, many areas of Appalachia had prominent communities of color, including African American and indigenous American populations.[8] Appalachian poverty, in addition to the dynamics of industry development and mechanization, is therefore also defined by the discrimination, violence, and historical inequities of a society founded upon, and developed in tandem with, an ideology of white supremacy. In addition, the dynamics of class within white communities also plays a major role in maintaining economic inequalities. Matt Wray, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, explores the significance of the boundaries of whiteness as it relates to poor whites in his 2006 book *Not Quite White White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*.[9] The dynamics of liberal paternalism, from middle- and upper-class white communities to poor white communities, played a major role in the visibility of Appalachian poverty in the 1950s and 1960s media landscape.

The visibility and recognition of Appalachian poverty in mainstream United States discourse underwent a resurgence during the idealism of the post-World War II era. Writers like Michael Harrington and Harry Caudill, in *Night comes to the Cumberlands*, and publications like Look Magazine brought the presence of primarily white Appalachian poverty to the forefront of United States discourse.[10] Although many intellectual orientations to poverty offered nuance and complexity, the idea of a "culture of poverty" became particularly prominent in the mainstream post World War II discourse. Writers, including Oscar Lewis, Michael Harrington, and Jack Weller, promoted an analysis of poverty which emphasized individual and familial behavior as the prime driver of poverty. The behavioral analysis came to be known by the term "culture of poverty" and had a profound impact on various anti-poverty initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s.

Scholar Alice O'Connor, in her book *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History*, explores the history of the behavioral discourse known as the "Culture of Poverty." O'Connor shows how a discourse oriented around industrial capitalism and the need for jobs in the first half of the 20th century transformed into a behavioral discourse by the end of World War II.[11] Although O'Connor's work provides a broad analysis of "poverty knowledge" over the course of the 20th century in the United States, scholars Ronald Eller, Thomas Kiffmeyer, and Robert Korstad all provide specific histories of the "culture of poverty" ideology in the context of North Carolina. In the context of a heightened awareness of conditions of poverty in Appalachia in mainstream discourse (primarily white poverty), major anti-poverty initiatives emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The largest of the anti-poverty initiatives, the federally funded War on Poverty, emerged out of an interstate organization of Appalachian governors, known as the Appalachian Regional Commission.

The Appalachian Regional Commission was eventually associated with infrastructure projects and "growth center" theory, however in its early years the commission explored the possibility of an anti-poverty initiative in Appalachia. In an interview with Ernest Eppley, who headed the anti-poverty organization in North Carolina called W.A.M.Y., Eppley provides an anecdote about the inception of the War on Poverty in relation to the Appalachian Regional Commission:

> They [a group of men in the Kennedy Administration including Walter Heller] were working on the Appalachian Regional Commission, anti-poverty social programs to help the people, and there were going to be other programs that would develop the regional roads and industries, and things of that type. And Kennedy leaned over and whispered to Heller and said why don't we make these social programs, the anti-poverty programs, make them a national effort rather than a regional effort and to continue having the Appalachian Regional Commission function for these other purposes. And that was the point where the Anti-Poverty program began to develop nationally as a separate thing from the Appalachian Regional Commission.[12]

The centrality of white Appalachian poverty in motivating policy makers in the Kennedy Administration, and the following Johnson Administration, is echoed by the scholar James Patterson. Patterson, in his work *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* recognizes that the roots of the War on Poverty were "intertwined with the Civil Rights Movement, urban decay, presidential politics, and the rising influence of social scientists in government, but Appalachia [...] was at the center of that campaign."[13] The campaign, begun in the Kennedy Administration and carried on by President Johnson, was formally signed into law on August 20th, 1964 as the Economic Opportunity Act.

The Economic Opportunity Act consisted of three "Titles," each outlining different initiatives that would receive federal funding. In addition to James Patterson's *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*, the collection of essays in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964–1980*, edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, delve into the Economic Opportunity Act and how they related to people on the ground.[14] Among the many initiatives launched in 1964-5, the Community Action Programs (CAPs) ended up receiving half the entire budget of the OEO and would serve as an umbrella organization to coordinate the operation of many of the other programs of the Economic Opportunity Act in communities across the nation.

One of the Community Action Programs approved for funding by the OEO in 1964 was W.A.M.Y. Inc. (W.A.M.Y. stands for the four Western North Carolina counties of Watauga, Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey Counties). W.A.M.Y., and the other North Carolina CAPs, had a head start on funding proposals due to an anti-poverty initiative started the year before by the North Carolina Fund. Scholar Robert Korstad in his book *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* provides the most thorough scholarly account of the North Carolina Fund, including a chapter devoted to the Western North Carolina CAPS like W.A.M.Y. The North Carolina Fund was a non-profit organization created by the democratic Governor Terry Sanford and a small team of professionals, including John Ehle and George Esser, a few of whom also served on President Kennedy's task force for the creation of the OEO.[15]

The North Carolina Fund, created in late 1963, received a four-year funding plan to "stamp out the twin scourges of discrimination and economic deprivation."[16] As a non-profit, the North Carolina Fund (NCF) bypassed the North Carolina State Legislature for funding and received all of its initial funding from the Ford Foundation and the Z Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations. Over the course of its four-year tenure the NCF would also go on to receive $7 million in funding from the OEO. After the creation of the NCF in 1963, requests were sent to every county in North Carolina for communities to submit anti-poverty initiative proposals to the Fund. In 1964, out of fifty-one proposals received by the NCF eleven were approved to receive funding for the short, four-year tenure of the state-wide organization.[17] Among the accepted proposals was W.A.M.Y., an organization spanning the four Western North Carolina counties.

Dr. W.H. Clemmons, the president of Appalachian State Teachers College, coordinated a meeting in Burnsville, North Carolina to begin working on a proposal. At the meeting "the responsibility for developing the [NC Fund] proposal and putting it into shape was delegated to a committee composed of representatives of schools, departments of welfare, local governing boards, and the ministerial association."[18] It is important to note the dominance of institutional people at the founding of W.A.M.Y. and the absence of people from a low socioeconomic status.

The initial W.A.M.Y. proposal, which would also serve as the basis for a proposal to the OEO a year later, provides insight into the organization's intentions and their overall orientation to poverty in Western North Carolina. In the proposal, Dr. Plemmons lists the primary justifications for the creation of W.A.M.Y. Plemmons states that "schools of the area are far behind the national average" and that "taxable properties in the area are not sufficient to support a good educational program and other essential services that are supported."[19] Plemmons also advocates for vocational training becoming incorporated into school curriculums -- "The school curriculum is academic in nature [...] children not academically inclined lose interest in the school's program and tend to drop out."[20] The focus on education as the number one way to "eliminate the paradox of poverty" perfectly illustrates the liberal, cautious reformism of W.A.M.Y. 's orientation.[21] Plemmons goes on to state in the proposal that "Education is the means or process chosen by a democratic society to improve and enrich the lives and the ways of living of the people who constitute that society."[22] In the proposal's top seven anticipated results, number one is the "improvement of general educational

level," and coming in at number seven is that the "economic level of the area will be raised and the public welfare load reduced," but only so that "more money can be diverted to education."[23]

The four counties of W.A.M.Y. in Western North Carolina all border the state of Tennessee with roughly seventy-five percent of the district being forested with "low grade [...] largely second and third growth hardwoods" as of 1960.[24] Small scale agriculture had long been practiced on the land that was not forested, however with post World War II mechanization the district witnessed a "drastic decline in agricultural employment and farm population."[25] The region also contains a plethora of minerals including "mica, kaolin, feldspar, tale, quartz, olivine, and asbestos, as well as some gemstones," but only mica, kaolin, and feldspar were being mined in significant amounts with about 1,000 persons employed in the mining industry as of 1960.[26]

In the years following World War II, low-wage industrial plants, mainly garment factories, began moving into the district. In addition, with the growth of a tourism based economy, "retail and service trades also steadily expand[ed] in their local employment."[27] The foundation of the district's tourist-based economy goes back to the early twentieth century when it became a "retreat for the industrial barons and the growing middle class of the urban Piedmont."[28] Some of the resort towns of the W.A.M.Y. district included Banner Elk, Linville, Burnsville, Boone, and Blowing Rock.

The non-tourist population of the W.A.M.Y. district in 1960 totaled 57,000, with ninety percent of those living outside the two urban areas of Spruce Pine and Boone.[29] The permanent population of the district underwent a sharp decline, between 16% to 24% depending on the county, from 1950 to 1960 largely due to job related outmigration. Demographically, the majority of the population in the district self-identified as White or Caucasian according to the 1960 census with a little under one percent identifying as African American. If one simplifies political allegiance to Democrat or Republican, Watauga, Avery, and Mitchell counties voted mostly Republican in the 1964 election, whereas Yancey county voted mostly Democratic.[30] Despite differing political allegiances, all W.A.M.Y. residents had to navigate an economic system that often did not provide adequate resources. According to the 1960 census, 57% of families in the district lived on less than $3,000 per year and 52% of all housing was considered "substandard."[31]

The establishment of W.A.M.Y. was the first common endeavor of all four counties. W.A.M.Y. 's 1963 proposal provided an education-oriented framework for the organization but it was not until W.A.M.Y. had an official staff in 1964 that their role in the district was clearly outlined. W.A.M.Y. 's initial leadership structure, which would more or less stay the same for its four-year funding tenure from the NCF, called for a Board of Directors, with an Executive Committee and a Chair, and an Executive Director.

Ernest Eppley, W.A.M.Y. 's executive director from 1964-1967, was working on his doctorate at Duke University when he received a call from the NCF to operate the Western North Carolina Community Action Program. Eppley, who grew up in Cramerton, a "Piedmont cotton mill town," began his professional career as a teacher, first in two Greensboro area high schools and then at Brevard Junior College. Eppley then served as a missionary teacher at the American Institute in La Paz, Bolivia before attending Duke for a doctorate degree.[32] When asked about W.A.M.Y. 's goals in a 1964 interview shortly after Eppley accepted the position, Eppley stated that "we are trying to bring about a social and economic revolution."[33] Such a strong statement, although in-line with the grandiose language of the Economic Opportunity Act, was a far cry from the organization's 1963 proposal of cautious educational reform. In fact, Eppley's statement was also a far cry from W.A.M.Y. 's own stated goals under his leadership in its first full year of operation.

According to W.A.M.Y. 's internal documents the organization's primary functions, in order of priority, during their first full year of operation included, "Outreach, [...] Motivation, [...] Education, [...] and Referrals."[34] The organization sub-contracted nearly all of their budget to existing agencies in the area, primarily to the county board of education and the county welfare agencies. The only project that W.A.M.Y. directly operated in their first year was the Mountain Crafts and Training program. The cautious, reform-minded orientation of W.A.M.Y.'s first year of operation did not reflect Eppley's "social and economic revolution," although it did reflect a board of directors composed of a who's who of the district's establishment, with Dr. W.H. Plemmons, the president of Appalachian Teachers College, as the Board Chairman. After the organizations by-laws were officially adopted on January 25th, 1965, calling for a seventy-two-member board, district agencies had a majority of the seats with government workers coming in second. None of the initial board members were of a low socioeconomic status.

W.A.M.Y.'s initial staff also reflected a lack of representation of folks of low socioeconomic status. The organization hired a "corps of Friendly home visitors, marginal family case workers, remedial reading specialists, basic adult education recruiters, guidance counselors, and community organizers." In addition, the CAP utilized college volunteers through the "VISTA Volunteers, the North Carolina Volunteers, and the SPAN volunteers (Catholic Students)."[35] In an interview with Eppley, the director acknowledged the "limited participation of the "poor" to the head start advisory committee and certain school positions." However, Eppley went on to correct himself saying that "some of the friendly home visitors were and are poor women from the area" but that "more of them are "bridge"

people who know the poor but are not themselves hard core poor."[36] Despite a few exceptions, the early CAP leaned heavily towards a staff and leadership that was entrenched in the economic and political life of the four counties.

The cautious leadership of W.A.M.Y., combined with the organization's stated educational goals and limited funding stream, is reflected in the programs launched in its first full year of operation from 1964 to 1965. While reflecting back on W.A.M.Y.'s first year, Eppley acknowledges that they "didn't begin with a radical kind of a program." He goes on to state that "we were in the process originally of trying to work with all these agencies subcontracting our projects to them."[37] As was already mentioned the majority of W.A.M.Y.'s programs, with the exception of the Mountain Crafts program, were subcontracted to existing agencies. These included Summer Head Start, Community Youth Services, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Horticulture, Community Information, and the Friendly Home Visitors.

The Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC) received by far the largest amount of funding, primarily from the OEO, all of which was delegated to the different county boards of education. The stated purpose of the NYC, a program created by the EOA, was to "prepare for the responsibility of citizenship and to increase the employability of young men and young women aged sixteen through twenty-one by providing them in rural and urban residential centers with education, vocational training, useful work experience, including work directed toward the conservation of natural resources, and other appropriate activities."[38] The W.A.M.Y. counties divided the funding between the In-School NYC which served "high school students by providing an income-producing job which helped to enable them to finish their education" and an Out-of-School NYC which attempted to help youth either attain work or return to school or both.

A majority of the NYC projects included either reforestation or sanitation, in which enrolled youth dug "drainage ditches and installed septic tanks, constructed or repaired privies [...] and put in pipes to take out sewage" to name a few tasks.[39] Nancey Triplett, a Watauga resident, had some work done on her house by NYC enrollees. According to Triplett, NYC youth workers came to her house in July of 1966 to help the Tripletts get running water. The boys "found springs on a hill right out from our house. The first thing they did when they got to the springs was to kill three copperhead snakes. Then they laid the pipe and we have running water to our house now."[40] The W.A.M.Y. records document an extensive list of small projects, like the one completed at Nancy Triplett's house, that the NYC completed in the early years of the program. According to W.A.M.Y. leadership, despite such accomplishments, the biggest problem with the NYC was that the program "didn't have jobs to place people in after we got them."[41]

Despite the employment-oriented mission of the NYC, when pushed on the program's effects, Eppley cites education as one of the best outcomes of the program, specifically the improvement of enrollees "personal appearance and concept of self."[42] The focus on education and personal behavior, the main elements of the "culture of poverty" ideology embraced by various political leaders during the 1960s, can also be glimpsed in a description of the Head Start program, W.A.M.Y.'s second highest funded program behind the NYC.[43] In a W.A.M.Y. newsletter announcing an increase in the Head Start budget, a narrator states that "in the belief that education is the most important weapon in the fight to eliminate conditions which cause poverty, WAMY has allocated a large portion of its budget to the schools of the four counties to continue Head Start classes during the summer of 1966." As of that newsletter, the program was serving "500 economically deprived children who will enter school for the first time this fall." In the first year of operation the staff included "34 teachers, 34 aides, 15 lunchroom supervisors, 15 custodians, and four supervisors," and in addition, "a morning snack consisting of milk and cookies or fresh fruits and a well-balanced lunch at noon are provided free to each child." There are many accounts of the positive impacts of the Head Start program, for instance a Buladean community member said of the experience of her daughter that it "did her a lot good."[44]

Two programs in W.A.M.Y. 's first year of operation, the Mountain Crafts and Training program and the Friendly Home Visitors, included relatively more folks of low economic status in their operation. The Mountain Crafts and Training program, which despite a late start in September of 1965, eventually received the most publicity out of all of W.A.M.Y. 's early programs. The program was led by Ann Moore, who, according to the *Journal Sentinel*, "worked with the Army's craft program in Korea and Germany [and also] taught in Appalachian State College's art department."[45] In a W.A.M.Y. Newsletter, an anonymous author claimed that in the first year "the crafts workers have discovered talented artisans throughout the four counties, have introduced much of their work to the expanding market, and have encouraged and assisted many people to take up Handicrafts and to improve their work."[46] By late 1966 the program grew "from 63 craftsmen working a year ago, to 210 working now." Retail sales a year and a half into its operation were "made from six craft shops in North Carolina [...] plus 12 outlets throughout the country, including the Smithsonian institution."[47]

Although the program reached a high profile in the media landscape outside of Appalachia and many of its artisans were of a low socioeconomic status, the influence of the program in bringing about a "social and economic revolution"[48] are questionable. A year after its operation began, 95% of the people who participated in the program

earned an average of $3.16 a month from the craft sales.[49] Some scholars have also pointed out that in many cases families in Appalachia, like people all over the United States during this time, "had long ago abandoned [the art of weaving and basket, broom and doll making] in exchange for the convenience of store bought goods" and that the program required an "all-out effort to teach local people skills."[50] At best, the program created another, albeit minor, flow of income for local low income residents and strengthened the practice of various art forms, and at worst "threatened to propagate a nostalgic view of highlanders that obscured the realities of mountain poverty."[51] W.A.M.Y.'s Mountain Crafts program is just one example in a long history of Appalachian folk art revival movements in the 20th century, many of which are explored by scholar David Whisnant in his books *All That is Native is Fine* and *Modernizing the Mountaineer*. Such nostalgic views were not limited to outsiders either.[52] Rachel Rivers, a W.A.M.Y. resident and writer for the Watauga Democrat, said to Ernest Eppley, director of W.A.M.Y., that she would be "very happy to have the kind of life that a poor mountaineer has out in a shack."[53]

The Friendly Home Visitors Public Health Education Project (FHV) represented another program that involved the participation of folks of low income. In its early years the FHV, like every program but the Mountain Crafts, was subcontracted to an existing agency, in this case the Health Departments in the four counties. According to a 1966 newsletter, twenty-nine visitors were employed by the four county health departments. They provide "advice and information" about "childcare, home gardening and canning, and other aspects of home management."[54] According to the same newsletter, a year and a half into its operation "the visitors [had] contacted over 5,000 families in the four county area and [...] spent a considerable time with about 750."[55] The visitors were W.A.M.Y.'s "fingertips" according to director Ernest Eppley, who also said that if he "had to cut back to the bare minimum, the one project I'd probably keep is that one."[56]

Ms. Pauline S. Jenkins was one such visitor for the FHV. Jenkins was a visitor for the Buladean Community in Mitchell County. According to Ms. Jenkins in a 1966 interview, she "rendered services of different kinds to about 60 families [...] furnishing transportation to families of low income, taking them in to see doctors, dentists, and getting the children in for their shots at the Health Office."[57] Betty Whitson was another such visitor. Whitson had grown up on a small farm in the W.A.M.Y. district and identified herself as lower middle class. Betty heard about the job from a friend who worked in the town of Burnsville, and with four young children and a husband who couldn't work Whitson decided she could use the extra income.[58] According to Eppley, "some of the friendly home visitors were and are poor women from the area," but "more of them are "bridge" people who know the poor but are not themselves hard core poor" -- folks like Pauline Jenkins and Betty Whitson.[59]

The tasks that the FHV performed were endlessly varied on a day to day basis, but one such service the visitors offered was information about family planning and access to birth control.[60] W.A.M.Y. received a small grant from the North Carolina Fund to purchase contraceptives, to reimburse planning counselors, and to produce media -- for instance, a pamphlet was distributed in Yancey county that provided basic sex education.[61] Despite potential obstacles in providing contraceptives and family planning advice in terms of North Carolina state law, the W.A.M.Y. district had already been a part of an early experimental contraceptive program. In Watauga County the Gamble company had used the health department to test a prototype for a contraceptive powder.[62] The Friendly Home Visitors and the Mountain Crafts Program were two of the most innovative of W.A.M.Y.'s early programs, yet many aspects of the programs still reflected the cautious leadership of W.A.M.Y. and the educational orientation of the CAP's official goals.[63]

Unlike many Community Action Programs, W.A.M.Y. and other CAPs in North Carolina got a head start on their organizational plans through the NC Fund initiative. After the passage of the OEO in 1964, many of the NC CAPs, including W.A.M.Y. began receiving OEO money but in doing so they had to comply with OEO requirements. One of the most concerning violations that W.A.M.Y.'s staff and leadership had to contend with was the order for Maximum Feasible Participation. The phrase refers to section 202(a) of the EOA which states that the CAP must be "developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served."[64] In other words, low income folks must be involved in the organizational and leadership aspects of the CAP to the greatest extent possible. In the case of W.A.M.Y.'s leadership, they had zero participation of the poor in their largest governing body, the Board of Directors. To combat that reality, twenty-four additional directors were added to the Board, bringing the total to 96. The new members, all of which were low income residents, were either elected by advisory committees or chosen by the W.A.M.Y. staff. Neither represented an extremely democratic process but were nevertheless steps in the right direction. The increase in board membership was officially adopted by W.A.M.Y. in January of 1966, and a few months later W.A.M.Y. would receive another nudge towards higher democratic engagement in their program.

In the summer of 1966 representatives of the North Carolina Fund spent five days in the W.A.M.Y. district shadowing their staff in order to compile a review of the Western North Carolina CAP. The NCF review reflected a new democratic lean in the NCF programs around the state, particularly the PPOP in Choanoke and the UCI in Durham

-- both heavily organized and operated by the marginalized populations in those regions. The review criticized W.A.M.Y. for funneling most of its money to existing public agencies which due to political patronage, in the opinion of the reviewers, had a "lack of vitality" that "spilled over into the W.A.M.Y. program."[65] The head of the NCF urged Eppley to have more involvement of low income folks in the creation of W.A.M.Y. 's programs, to incorporate civic participation vis-a-vis voter education, and to support local leaders that represented the disadvantaged communities in the district. Amongst all the criticism of W.A.M.Y. in the NCF review, the reviewers did have praise for a new W.A.M.Y initiative known as the Incentive Grants Program.

The Incentive Grants Program originated from an idea put forth by members of Wildcat Hollow community in Yancey County. The community needed sanitation facilities at various locations and put in a request to W.A.M.Y. for help. W.A.M.Y. replied that if the community could raise the money needed for supplies that NYC enrollees could supply the labor. The community responded that it should be the other way around. They were perfectly capable of supplying the labor but lacked the resources to purchase the materials.[66] W.A.M.Y. received a small grant of $38,875 from the NCF to begin the program which made awards of $1,000 or less.[67] Community Development Advisory Councils were set up to determine who got grants and according to W.A.M.Y.'s internal documents low income residents made up a majority on the councils.[68]

In Colbert's Creek, which is in Yancey County, residents used the incentive grants program to repair three roads, including an infamous road known as "Connie Fender's Road." In Mitchell County, both Bandanna and Buladean received grants to build community centers. In Avery County, four communities, including Roaring Creek, Lick Log, Carey's Flat, and Blevins Creek all received incentive grants for the "development of water systems, community buildings and the repair of cemeteries."[69] The project in Blevins Creek received quite a bit of press compared to other incentive grants projects due to an unexpected visit. The grant in Blevins Creek was used to build a new well and a water system to connect fresh water to thirty families in the community. Upon the completion of the project in the spring of 1967, Sargent Shriver, the director of the OEO, and Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, flew into Blevins Creek by helicopter for the dedication of the water system. Articles like "Shriver Visits Mountains" in the Goldsboro News-Argus and "Sargent Shriver and Billy Graham Visit Avery County" in the Tri-County Newspaper ran throughout North Carolina newspapers.

Momentum from the Incentive Grants Programs and the related Community Development, Multi-Purpose Community Centers, and Small Business Loan Programs, continued to push W.A.M.Y. towards higher levels of participation by low-income folks in the district. In late 1966, W.A.M.Y.'s board membership was reduced from 96 to 60, without removing any of the "representatives of the poor," to increase their overall representation in leadership. W.A.M.Y. also moved to end subcontracts with various agencies, for instance the Friendly Home Visitors were no longer under a subcontract to the county health departments by 1967 in order to give the visitors more flexibility and freedom to determine their organizing methods. In the midst of the new democratic push, Eppley also hired a staff of community organizers, consisting primarily of white men, most of them graduates of Theology, Seminary, and Divinity schools. One of the hired organizers was Ed Adkins who held a degree in Theology from Northwest Christian College and had strong ties to the grassroots United Appalachian Communities Movement. Adkins was assigned to tour each W.A.M.Y. county for a week to meet people and learn about the different W.A.M.Y. initiatives in the district. Adkins, an experienced organizer, decided to end each week of travel with what he called a "Poor People's Mass Meeting."[70] The meetings usually consisted of a Talent Show and a Gospel Sing and brought out hundreds of people. A flyer for one talent show at the Watauga County court house contains slogans like "A Chance for the Poor to Speak!" and "All Low Income people are invited to attend community meetings and be in talent show!"[71] Hugh Wire, W.A.M.Y. coordinator for Watauga County wrote that "the knowledge that WAMY is here to help the poor and that we can work together for the good of all is spreading!"[72]

Adkins used the meetings to provide a platform for people to speak out and connect with one another. In an article published in the *Watauga Democrat* titled "WAMY Talent Show Period Winds Up with Discussion," the author states that Adkins led off by "talking of what the poor can do, what they can accomplish when they come together." A mother of nine "told the crowd of her children going to school without lunch, the family living on $7 a week for groceries and the high taxes" after which another woman spoke up about her financial instability to "carry hospital insurance." At the end of the meeting, Adkins took the stage again where he "stressed organization of the poor and told his audience they must become 'mad enough' to do something about their common predicament."[73] In Yancey County, WAMY staffer James Mcdonald wrote in a report that "some 250 attended [one of Adkins' meetings]." According to Mcdonald "the people are encouraged by Adkins to speak up about their problems, and to volunteer to work with their neighbors to seek solutions." Mcdonald went on to note that at a follow-up meeting, "committees of the poor have been formed to work in such areas as housing, jobs, welfare, schools, resource location."[74]

It was in the context of one such follow up meeting in Yancey County that low income residents from across the region linked up over demands for the "rules and regulations that governed welfare services" because they felt services

were not being distributed fairly.[75] On February 14th, the residents requested that Adkins accompany them on a trip to Raleigh to confront state welfare commissioner Clifton Craig. In an *Asheville Citizen Times* article, it was reported that upon their arrival Craig reminded Adkins that he had made an appointment with just Adkins so that he could "relate the 'problems' of the Yancey group." Adkins responded, "here they are -- welfare problems," apparently with a "sweep of his arms toward the group from Yancey." At the meeting, Lena Angel, a widow and mother of two boys in Yancey County, asked Craig how her $18 per month welfare check, which was exceedingly low to begin with, was "terminated the week before without explanation by the caseworker and just the form notice form the Department of Public Welfare." According to Carol Wilson who accompanied the group on the trip, the answers Commissioner Craig gave to most of the questions were "inconclusive." In her opinion his tone was "let's hurry up and get this over with, I'm a busy man -- take this up with your local welfare department -- don't bother me and what in the hell, Mr. Adkins, are you really up to?"[76] The welfare rights group from W.A.M.Y. was tapping into a way of thinking that was developing all over Appalachia. According to Dr. Jessica Wilkerson, the welfare rights movement in Appalachia during this time began to embrace the idea "that to accept public assistance was not a matter of dependency [...] it was a necessity in an economic system that produced inequality."[77]

The support provided by Ed Adkins and other W.A.M.Y. staff of grassroots leaders and low-income people created a stir both in the W.A.M.Y. organization and within the local community. Hubert Justice, in a W.A.M.Y. board meeting, criticized a Poor People's Mass Meeting held in Micaville, Yancey County. Justice claimed the meeting was just an attempt to "get a bunch of rabble rousing poor people involved in a revolution."[78] Justice was joined in his critiques by board member Robert Helme who claimed that the entire War on Poverty had fallen "under the spell of Civil Rights and integration."[79] Amidst the backlash to the community meetings and the trip to Raleigh to confront Clifton Craig, Eppley made the decision to fire Ed Adkins a mere two months after he was brought on board. The backlash against Ed Adkins and the grassroots organizing in W.A.M.Y. in 1967 reflected the conservative backlash occurring around the country to War on Poverty programs, which often employed tactics like red baiting and accusations of "outsider agitation."[80]

Despite Adkins firing, in a later interview Eppley admitted to having been influenced in a positive way by the grassroots movements and leaders who embraced Adkins. In Eppley's words "I don't think that we can completely look at his [Adkins] being there as a negative kind of experience because we did learn from it."[81] In fact, a month after Adkins left, Eppley and the W.A.M.Y. staff decided to put in a request from the OEO to fund a "News Demonstration" project for one year, utilizing the help of Billy Barnes, the director of public information for the NCF. The project trial was going to occur between May of 1967 and April of 1968 to create a radio and newspaper that would be a platform for W.A.M.Y. community members to get their opinions heard. It would also provide information on "how to register to vote, how to qualify for welfare, how to go about getting a road paved" etc.[82] In many ways, the project represented an attempt to revive the democratic momentum that bubbled up during the Poor People's Meetings just months before. Unfortunately, as soon as the project proposal was publicized, a frenzied backlash occurred.

Newspapers around the state, and eventually the country, ran articles criticizing the News Demonstration project with accusations of communist propaganda. The title of an article in the *Asheville Citizen Times* read "Are seeds being sown for America's Pravda?" and papers around the state ran similar stories. The *Durham Herald, Burlington Times, News and Observer, Tri-County News, Yancey Record,* and *Charlotte Observer* all ran stories criticizing the News Demonstration project, often using anti-communist rhetoric. On May 28th, 1967, a few weeks after the hail-storm, the *News and Observer* ran another story on the outcry, in an attempt to provide some balance in the media landscape. The author wrote:

> Two weeks ago, a thin and distorted cry of "fire" arose from the valley of the North Carolina Mountains. It picked up volume as it was echoed by the press in Asheville, Charlotte and Durham. By now a shriek, it skittered across the floors of the North Carolina legislature and the United States Congress [...] The panic would have befitted [...] an invasion by communist paratroops. Instead it was aimed at a novel plan for employing a couple of dozen mountain poor people and a professional journalist to put out a daily radio program, print a weekly publication, and maintain neighborhood bulletin boards for 8,000 poor, isolated North Carolina Mountaineers.[83]

Unfortunately for the project, such sympathetic opinions were too little, too late. A week before the *News and Observer* article was published W.A.M.Y. held a board meeting where it voted twenty-one to six to withdraw the proposal. In a speech to the Boone Rotary Club in June of 1967, Eppley vigorously defended the News Proposal idea. Eppley firmly stated that people "need information about government, about available services, about the duties and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy" and that he felt the News Demonstration project could have achieved

that.[84] A few months after the Boone speech, Ernest Eppley resigned from his position as executive director, a move that seems to be in direct response to the defeat of the experimental news program.

Another wave of harsh criticism swept the W.A.M.Y. CAP in December of 1967 when the Boone Jaycees published an extensive review of the W.A.M.Y. program. Jack Trawick of the *Winston Salem Journal* summarized the Jaycee report, stating that the "The Boone Jaycees have concluded that Watauga County residents feel that the war on poverty, as it is being conducted here, is too costly, will provide no long term benefits and could better be carried out by agencies other than the one doing it [WAMY]."[85] An article in the *Rocky Mount Newspaper* read "the survey shows that the people simply don't think much of the project [W.A.M.Y.]. We suspect the same result would hold true in many areas regarding such poverty gimmicks."[86] A journalist for the *Watauga Democrat* pointed out however that the average person interviewed in the Jaycee survey was a "22-50 year old male who owned his home, and was a high school graduate," in other words, a person that was likely not involved nor had much knowledge of the program.[87] In that same month, a documentary titled "Retreat from the Hills" aired on WBT in Charlotte.[88] One of the narrator's opening lines reads, "Three years, and three and a half million dollars later, their uniforms tattered, the revolutionaries are in retreat -- rejected by the mountaineers they sought to help [...] WAMY's director has resigned [...] a few of the more radical were fired, and talk of immorality has followed them wherever they have gone."[89] The narrative largely resembled the anti-communist dog whistles used by folks around the country to attack the Community Action Programs and other Great Society initiatives.[90]

In the late 1960s, the War on Poverty experienced a national backlash, largely oriented around accusations of association between the War on Poverty, Communists, and the Black Freedom Struggle. Congress folded to the backlash and passed amendments to the EOA to limit the power of local organizers. In 1967, the Green Amendment was passed requiring all CAP funding to be approved by local governments prior to being received by the CAP, severely limiting CAPs from engaging in work that challenged the political and economic status quo.[91] With the election of Richard Nixon, Donald Rumsfeld was appointed as the new head of the Office of Economic Opportunity and openly engaged in conservative reforms of the agency's practices.[92] In that same year, congress passed the 1969 Tax Reform bill which entailed a provision to keep philanthropies, like the Ford Foundation, from engaging in political work (i.e. funding the NC Fund).[93] The OEO was transferred under Reagan to the Department of Health and Human Services, further restricting the independence of the department. Furthermore, all Great Society programs, including CAPs, received another major cut to their funding and independence in Clinton's 1996 Welfare Reform bill.[94]

The War on Poverty began with revolutionary rhetoric. The keystone of the War on Poverty, the Economic Opportunity Act, called for the elimination of the "paradox of poverty."[95] W.A.M.Y. also began with similar rhetoric, with the director Ernest Eppley calling for a "social and economic revolution."[96] Such rhetoric, however, was out of touch with the policies of both the national program and local CAPs like W.A.M.Y. -- policies that emphasized personal behavior and the addressing of a perceived "culture of poverty" above a confrontation with economic, social, and political realities. In the case of W.A.M.Y., although very real victories were achieved in many of their programs, it wasn't until low income folks attained leadership positions that larger structural changes seemed possible. Unfortunately, it was at that same moment in 1967 that such change proved too threatening for the status quo and a massive backlash occurred against the program which succeeded in constructing barriers to the grassroots organizing efforts of W.A.M.Y. residents.

The W.A.M.Y. organization continued to operate after Eppley's departure under the leadership of H.C. Moretz, whose cautious and conservative views helped to quell the criticism of the organization. Bob Walker, a W.A.M.Y. staff member, said in 1968 that W.A.M.Y. "has lost momentum and the staff has lost morale."[97] The history of W.A.M.Y.'s development from 1968 to the current time (2020) is obviously not in the scope of this essay, and therefore commentary about its legacy would not be appropriate. However, it is important to note that as of March of 2020, W.A.M.Y. is still in operation. According to their current website W.A.M.Y. "provides programs and services designed to help low-income individuals and families become more self-sufficient."[98]

2. Endnotes

1 "Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, S. Rep. No 1458 (1964)," *United States Code, Congressional and Administrative News*, 88th Cong., 2d Sess, (1964): 2900–89.

2 Eppley Interview, Folder 3546, Subseries 4.2, North Carolina Fund Records (From here on NCFR), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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4 George Esser, Interview by Frances A. Weaver, 41.

5 Robert R. Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

6Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2019). Dr. Jessica Wilkerson writes about places across Appalachia where women-led welfare rights groups emerged.

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16 Robert R. Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs*, 1.

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18 A Plan to Improve Education and Living in Avery, Mitchell, Watauga, and Yancey Counties, Folder 3527, Subseries 4.2, North Carolina Fund Records, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 12.

19 A Plan to Improve Education, Subseries 4.2, Folder 3527, NCFR, 5.

20A Plan to Improve Education, NCFR, 7.

21 "Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, S. Rep. No 1458 (1964)," *United States Code, Congressional and Administrative News*, 88th Cong., 2d Sess, (1964): 2900–89.

22 A Plan to Improve Education, Subseries 4.2, Folder 3527, NCFR, 7.

23 A Plan to Improve Education, Subseries 4.2, Folder 3527, NCFR, 11.

24 Background Paper, Folder 3530, Subseries 4.2, NCFR, 2.

25 Background Paper, Folder 3530, Subseries 4.2, NCFR, 8.

26 Background Paper, Folder 3530, Subseries 4.2, NCFR, 2.

27 Background Paper, Folder 3530, Subseries 4.2, NCFR, 8.

28 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs, 232.*

29 A Plan to Improve Education, Subseries 4.2, Folder 3527, NCFR, 2.

30 Background Paper, Folder 3530, Subseries 4.2, NCFR, 10.

31 Background Paper, Folder 3530, Subseries 4.2, NCFR, 4.

32 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs*, 235.

33 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs*, 235.

34 Analysis, Structure, Media, 1964, Series 4.2, Folder 3529, NCFR, 1.

35 Analysis, Structure, Media, Series 4.2, Folder 3529, NCFR, 3.

36 Ernest Eppley Interview, Series 6.10, Folder 7270, NCFR, 20.

37 Ernest Eppley Interview, Series 6.10, Folder 7270, NCFR, 7.

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50 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 242.

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52 Matt Wray, *Not Quite White White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006).

53 Ernest Eppley Interview, Series 6.10, Folder 7270, NCFR, 13.

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55 Newsletters, Series 4.2, Folder 3600, NCFR, 3.

56 Ernest Eppley Interview, Series 6.10, Folder 7270, NCFR, 34.

57 Newsletters, Series 4.2, Folder 3600, NCFR, 8.

58 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 242 and Press, Series 4.2, Folder 3598, NCFR.

59 Ernest Eppley Interview, Series 6.10, Folder 7270, NCFR, 20.

60 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 249.

61 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 249 and Series 4.2, Folder 3643, NCFR.

62 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 249. Further research could be done to discover what the Gamble study entailed and how it was carried out.

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66 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 254 and Series 4.2, Folder 3611 and Folder 3734, NCFR.

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68 Series 4.2, Folder 3742, NCFR.

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71 Field Reports, 1967, Series 4.2, Folder 3625, NCFR.

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77 Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight*, Urbana, Illinois: (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 98.

78 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 265.

79 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 266.

80 Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, 140.

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90 Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, 141.

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92 Eller, *Uneven Ground,* 155.

93 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 8.

94 Korstad, *To Right These Wrongs,* 8.

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