

Cristina Liebolt
Project on Lived Theology Research Grant
Trip report
January 21, 2010

I spent the last week of my winter break traveling from Charlottesville down to southwestern Georgia and then back up to Black Mountain, North Carolina to gather research for my Interdisciplinary Studies thesis on theological community compared to non-theological community. I have chosen Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia and Black Mountain College in Black Mountain, North Carolina as my two case studies. Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice to be a progressive, experimental college. The community did not have a specific mission statement or founding vision, but rather was a liberal arts college where an eclectic group of artists, scholars, and thinkers came together to pursue various passions. Koinonia Farm, on the other hand, did have a specific intent; in Clarence Jordan's words, the community was to be a "demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God." Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm in 1942 as a place where the 2000-year-old Gospel could be lived out in every-day life.

My trip was both an enjoyable and a productive one. After driving the 13 hours from Charlottesville to Americus, we spent two nights at Koinonia Farm itself, living and working with the community of 30 Koinonians. As I expected, they were wonderfully hospitable people and openly shared their lives with us. Upon our arrival the first afternoon, we walked the Peace Trail that weaves through the farm's 90 acres of pecan orchards. We happened upon Clarence Jordan's "shack," where he wrote the Cotton Patch Gospels and died quietly of a heart attack in 1969, the community's meditation gazebo, and several goats, chickens, and cows. That evening, we were invited to join the community and 3 other visitors for dinner. We said grace and

fellowshipped together, sharing stories throughout the tasty yet humble meal of how we had all come to Koinonia.

The next morning, we met for chapel at 7:45am, where a member gave a brief devotion before the day's work duties were assigned. I was assigned to pecan sorting, which meant sitting at a table and picking out rotten pecans on the conveyer belt for a neighboring farm's pecan harvest. After the 3 hour morning work shift, we shared a communal lunch, taking time to pray together after the meal and listen to a joyous song played by one of the community's interns. During the afternoon, Sarah, a "steward," or lifetime community member, gave the visitors a tour of the farm. We learned about its most recent endeavors in permaculture farming, how exactly the pecans are harvested in its factory, and the inner workings of the bakery before sampling some yummy chocolate pecan bark. I then had the opportunity to officially interview some of the community members, namely Bren Dubay, a steward, and Amanda Moore, an exploring member who is considering taking the lifetime vows to become a steward. Though they avoid official titles at Koinonia, Bren serves as the Farm's executive director, and Amanda serves as the director of communications and intern coordinator. They are working alongside other committed members to reestablish the community's founding vision after financial problems and a shift in values brought the farm to a near-closing in 2005.

We left the next morning after chapel, brimming with hope and blessings for the humble community with such a rich, tumultuous history. During the drive from the flat Georgia farmland to the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, we switched gears from a living Christian community to a historically-preserved artistic college. We arrived in the hip, bubbling city of Asheville with plans to explore the region that surrounds Black Mountain College the next day. At the Black Mountain Chamber of Commerce Visitor's Center, I was lucky enough to catch the

executive director, Bob McMurray, before he left for the weekend. Mr. McMurray is the resident expert on Black Mountain College, and he happily provided me with many articles that even Asheville's Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center does not possess. He also pointed me in the right direction to visit the sites of Black Mountain's two college campuses and the town's historic sign that recognizes the College. We walked around the college's first campus at the YMCA Blue Ridge Conference Center and took in the view of the mountains from Lee Hall, where the first students slept, studied, and ate. We then drove to the College's second home on Lake Eden, about ten minutes away. The grounds of Lake Eden are now empty during the winter and serve as home of the all-boys Camp Rockmont during the summer.

We spent the last full day of our trip at the Black Mountain Museum + Arts Center in the city of Asheville. A simple, one-room museum, it was recently founded in 1996 by Mary Holden. Ms. Holden grew up in the town of Black Mountain but did not learn of the College's famous history until she mingled with artists in Paris who raved about the experimental College. Upon returning home to the States, she put her energy into creating the first and only museum dedicated to Black Mountain College. The museum is only one room, but has a plethora of documents that are not available elsewhere, and select art pieces by Black Mountain students.

I enjoyed very much visiting these two places that I have read about so extensively in books. In a sense, a place does not come alive until you see it first-hand, and I feel lucky to have had the time and financial resources to visit these two special places. Their atmospheres soaked through my skin, and armed with concrete documents, personal anecdotes, and my own vivid memories, I am confident that the process of writing my thesis will be a successful one.