

Interview with Gurney Norman
Date of Interview: October 23, 1990
At the home of Gurney Norman
Interviewer: Chris Green

Green: What is the list of publications that SAWC is responsible for? There's Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, New Ground, and Mucked.

Norman: And there's another magazine called Strokes. Actually, this group for all its long existence can't claim a big long publishing resume. So whatever it all means it can't mean much on the basis of the amount of material. It isn't that much: what's interesting is how only four publications have sustained social relations between a bunch of crazy people for going on sixteen years.

Green: O.k., let's go back to the beginning. The notes from the first meeting said that it all began a couple of years before the first meeting.

Norman: It first came up in beginning of 1974 and got formed later on.

Green: Do you remember the beginning when this idea first came out? Who was around and what was going on?

Norman: Well, I think it was '74 at Highlander in Tennessee. There were some younger staff people who were writers, and primarily this was Mike Clark who couldn't have been more than 25, a recent Berea College graduate. But a man of paternalistic bent, very smart and intensely political. He later became director of all of Highlander. He is a very interesting figure to follow.

Mike, true to the definition of the way Highlander works, didn't personally undertake to do the organizing work of the writers, that's not it. The point is to empower and encourage other people to build community, to build itself. And it's in the doing of it that you build strength. You know if some one does it for you then it's just another gift. So Mike was probably among the first people to suggest it.

Closely associated was Don Askins, south-west Virginia poet, self-made lawyer. He became a lawyer by reading law with an established lawyer, he didn't go to law school. Yet he became an attorney in Virginia. It's a nineteenth century concept. Don was active in anti-strip mining organizing and that was a very hot issue at the time; and anger on the strip mining question was causing people to come together. A lot of people who wound up in SAWC had met each other previously in other contexts such as anti-strip mine organizing. And maybe even in anti-war organizing even though that wasn't as strong.

So Clark and Askins are two I know about who called that very first meeting in '74. I wasn't present at the time. And I'm not sure who else was part of that. But there was a planning committee to plan a meeting which came about in the spring of '75 and that to me was where a body of people who would become SAWC first came together.

Green: When people were coming together, did they have this idea that they were going to form a group?

Norman: We had no idea that we'd undertake publishing, but I had flown in to come to this meeting at Highlander in the spring of '75. I think that there were about 25 people there. Some had driven all the way from West Virginia 12

hours to get there, some from Virginia, east Kentucky, east Tennessee, western North Carolina. Very representative group from around the mountains. Everybody was between the age of 25 and 39. That would be my guess. Now there might of been younger people, but that was basically the age strata.

The meeting was called because people were writers with common interests and problems. But we didn't have an agenda as I remember it. The agenda was to be discovered once we got there, and I think I'm right in remembering that I took the role of proposing that we give ourselves a job of work. I remember this idea coming to me, I may not have been the only one to say this, but I remember this idea coming to me that we need a job of work to galvanize our energies-- let's make a book. And by the end of the weekend we had decided to do something.

David Morris, got to mention David Morris. Very important. He was a hard core 1974 member of the planning committee. Morris and Askins were at the time the prime movers. And I must distinguish, this is writin' Dave Morris. There is a singing Dave Morris: the writin' one lived in West Virginia.

Green: Where was he from?

Norman: At the time Beckley. I think he was the son of missionary parents in India, and he had lived in India a lot and had an international view and amount of sophistication. But he was just a young guy, very talented.

Green: I'm really interested in how he fit into this community coming from his background.

Norman: No, he was a West Virginian and he lived in West Virginia, but as a kid he had this in his background. But let me refer you now to the Beckley West Virginia community and I say you must account for "The Soup Bean Poets of Beckley". Antioch College, in Yellow Springs Ohio, at the time was experimenting with radical approaches to education. Somehow people affiliated with Antioch opened up Antioch South in Beckley. And there was a teacher, a very amazing guy, named Bob Snyder.

Bob was the teacher of writing classes and some literature classes at Antioch Beckley. This would not be like your basic community college situation. Antioch is not a community college, its a whole other thing with a radical tradition. To know the spirit of Antioch is very important.

There are educational institutions in America that are in the radical progressive tradition. And in terms of liberal arts higher education Antioch has a unique place. In terms of folk school non-academic education Highlander has a primary place. And to draw these distinctions would be important to know the difference in what is Highlander and what is Antioch and therefore what was Antioch Beckley.

Bob Snyder advertises this course, all these people come to it, including a lot of very young people. And, as I understand it, these folks were given to drinking beer after their classes and they became friends. It was a political time: the writing was fresh, brand new. The Beckley writers were unique in Appalachia in that they pre-existed as a group.

The other writers who came into SAWC were individuals scattered across all these mountainous regions. There were probably a half a dozen or more writers there in Beckley who made a group, publishing magazines. They had their own scene going. So individuals from that group came as individuals to the larger all embracing region wide group.

I was commuting from California to come to these meetings and I had also

published a novel and had a certain little kind of buzz of energy about me in those days because I had come off of this experience. I was starting to relate to Appalshop and finding ways to be engaged in the life of the Appalachian region.

Green: Beforehand did you feel away from the Appalachian region and were you looking for ways to relate to it?

Norman: Definitely. I had begun to feel by '70-'71, before Divine Right's Trip was published, that I was loosing touch with this place as a place. I was close to my family, but the reasons I would come home usually had to do with funerals. Some relative would die and I would come home and then I would parley a funeral weekend into a three week visit. But I didn't know anybody, didn't have anywhere to go. I wasn't going around Highlander, I wasn't going to Lexington to see old friends. I didn't feel like I had any old friends except two or three individuals, nothing like a community group you see.

But after my book came out it was easy for me to find people. And I was welcome at literary scenes around here. I had a certain energy and expertise to offer the situation.

Green: So you got sucked into the vortex down at Highlander.

Norman: In 1972 Appalshop asked me to come visit. That is the specific beginning of my return to the mountains. In '74 Highlander called and said there's this meeting of writers at Highlander. I said well good, I'll put it on my calender, and I'll get there. And so that was another group of artists, young radical creative people from my own region who had emerged and come together.

As late as '65 or '66 I was living as a young guy in my mid-twenties in my hometown and I didn't have one person my age to drink a beer with. That's why I left Kentucky, it was so damn lonesome. I went around the country and after four or five years went by, I had become kind of a Californian. And now here was all this action and ferment right here in the mountains. I was experiencing this thrill of finding colleagues and community that formerly you had to go to the city to find.

Green: Did all the people you talked to share this same experience, this isolation?

Norman: Yes, I think so. And a lot of people have lived away and gone to school or work but wanted to come home and live in the mountains. But life was hard if you were an intellectual artist outside of the universities. See--Major Point--this whole thing happened outside the universities.

We did not have Xerox machines, we did not have telephone budgets, we did not have travel budgets, we did not have per diem. We did not have access to any of those perks. And a major thought on people's minds was how can you get a tank of gas to go to Highlander? How can you possibly imagine. . . gas--you have to buy gas. And people were just broke.

Green: So this is where people depended upon other individuals?

Norman: You get a car pool. And by the time you ride six hours with somebody you get to know them pretty well and friendships were formed, relationships. And that's what SAWC has really been: an excuse or a vehicle for people to come together in a network situation. The publishing record is the top of the iceberg. You look at the four publication and you're looking at their start-

ing place to understand an interesting aspect of literary life in North America from '75 to '90. To me that's what stands behind those four magazines.

Green: It seems to me that that is part of literature that generally goes ignored, and maybe the most important part. We're just seeing the end product of a very wonderful process. How wonderful to see the coffee stained manuscripts, to see the late nights that people spent talking to each other. Because, to me, that's where the life and the vibrancy comes from: that's ignored.

Norman: And that's what you're doing with your anthology¹ right now. You all as friends and colleges are being pitched together in a way that a year ago wasn't. So imagine working with your immediate group of friends on this anthology. Imagine continuing to do that kind of thing for 15 years.

Green: How continuous has the original group of people been? Have members of the group come and gone?

Norman: Totally continuous. There is a core group of people who have stayed in touch with one another and other people have gone on with their lives and lived in different places, but if there was an original group maybe at the maximum 30 or so people or more identified with this SAWC idea. Some one of us will be in touch with everyone of those people, like I myself haven't seen Gail Amburgy², whose poetry is in the first anthology, in 10 years.

But I see Bob Baber pretty often who is also in that <Soup Bean> anthology. And Bob will see Richard Hague and Richard will see Pauleta Hansel every now and then and Pauleta will have news of Gail. And I will hear every few years a report.

Green: Is there new blood moving in too, younger people coming in?

Norman: I think so. But I think it would be a mistake to try and portray this loose network of American writers as well-organized and with momentum and with an agenda. If you could catch the true flavor of how it really is, it would be much more interesting than to present us as efficient and well-organized and so on.

It's very amorphous. It's really a concept. And, as I said, it's an excuse or an occasion for people to keep up with each other, for conversations, and for ideas to flow which are very important. I've come to value the social side of it as maybe the most important part. It has to do with how people outside of the Institution³ sustain each other spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically as friends. And the key thing is that we are outside of the institutions, even if I as an individual am on the inside of an institution. The University of Kentucky does not answer this side of my writing life.

1. *Through the Gap: An Anthology of Contemporary Kentucky Poetry*, The Lexington Press, 1991.

2. Member of the Soup Bean Poets and the Southern Appalachian Writers' Co-operative.

3. The University System.

Green: Peers?

Norman: Old comrades, old history, old strugglers. People who have common memory of struggle-- that word is very important, it's a civil rights concept. We struggled together when we were younger. And when you struggle you are bonded. And bonds continue even if your work-load shifts and you do something different, you see.

After a while, I will tell you about the mail I got today because this mail, this letter from Bob Baber, comes in the wake of the recent Highlander meeting in October, 1990. The new agenda is being formed and in the next year or two you will see what this is about and it has to do with the censorship question. Apparently one of the themes of the recent meeting was: what is it that your afraid to write about. Why are your afraid? What is it that you are afraid to publish? Bring to this meeting the most dangerous writing you've got and the next thing is let's all publish it. The next issue of Pine Mountain Sand And Gravel will be dangerous work or something like that.

So this is a fresh spurt of energy. And I have to refer us again to the Highlander model of how change occurs and how people learn. Highlander has always valued the dormant times, the times when not much seem be going on, because ideas circulate in uncanny ways. And there's a book about Highlander, it's called Unearthing Seeds of Fire and it means that a seed of fire can lay dormant for years then something will fan it to life again. There will be a need for it to flame up again. And I think that that is the way that the progressive movement and spirit in America has always functioned.

And certain situations call it into being. Here's an example. The reason I think writing is so important is the same reason that I know for sure that the songs of this radical tradition are important. Guy Carowon and Candy Carowon are singers, song-writers, performers and organizers who live and work through and with Highlander. And what they mainly do is make sure the old songs don't die.

They give workshops in singing and they are very close to the black community, the tradition of black songs of struggle, and the songs which sustain people in a time of struggle which may not be being sung so much now. But they're being preserved and it's very important that they be sung every now and then to keep them alive, and the time will definitely come when millions of people will sing those songs again.

Green: Let's go back and look at the publishing record. We start off with New Ground. Everybody is excited about it but in all co-operative in all the letters that I read it sounded like it this extremely hard going. For instance, nobody knew where the books were. Nobody knew who had what, or who was doing what.

And then there is a relative period of latency until there is Mucked, which is in reaction to a specific crisis, Tug Valley. And then there is Strokes, which I haven't read.

And then there is a period of latency during, not unsurprisingly, the Reagan era. It sounds like from what you were saying about rising to a situation that the Reagan era for almost everybody was a period of complacency, no-- not complacency but a watch and waiting.

Norman: Well those things, but more closer to the bone I would say is that it was just a time of personal lives in disarray. Why it coincided with the early 80's I don't know. I can confess that my personal life was in disarray. I was coming from a broken marriage and probably drinking and partying too

much, living a fairly unruly life, and depressed a whole lot. So my energies that I had formerly had for community participation I just didn't have. And so I was a casualty for a while and withdrew in a way. I offer myself as an example with this confession, but I think many people could say the same thing. I know Jim Webb had a very hard time.

I could just list my friends and colleagues who needed about five years to get their lives in order. And to me I don't know if we can say that that is the Reagan influence or not. People got older, suddenly people weren't 27 or 37, people were 45 and there are other life priorities. Also people scattered to go away to jobs, Bob Snyder went to graduate school at Harvard. And just people moved. And also that whole thing of grass roots effort and alternative models of publishing mimeograph magazines and distributing them and driving all night in cars with no place to stay. There wasn't energy to sustain that though.

I think we had meetings at Highlander in '81 and '82 and they were well attended, I organized them along with others. In '81 we had 40 people and it was very lively and full and satisfying. With the energy to draw together to meet there was a little flurry there. Actually no production came out of those meetings, we didn't make anything. But we met, the '82 meeting was important. I don't know if we even generated any documents. But it was right after '82 that I lost my grip and two or three year went by.

Green: But there was sharing during those meetings?

Norman: Absolutely. A lot of people came to that meeting who weren't necessarily part of that old original group, and they were very exciting people. But I can't necessarily say that we jelled or formed a new nucleus. In fact, we went moribund right after that.

And two or three years went by before Jim Webb moved back to Letcher County, his father was dying and after he died Jim moved into his father's house on Pine Mountain. He and his brother inherited some land on Pine Mountain which included an old rock quarry and it was called Pine Mountain Sand And Gravel. And Jim found these old letter sheets from that company. And that became the logo for the magazine. And then there have been three issues of Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel. It's important to see these in order, because it's by looking at all this in sequence that you'll see in '75 a fairly professional attempt to get a finely bound book together. And then another kind of more urgent and funky publication in two little smaller magazines. And then one, two, three in Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel you see the progress.

Green: They show progressing maturity, that process of aging that everyone went through coming into their powers.

Norman: People wanted to make a book that you wouldn't just throw away, that would stand on its own on the shelf as a literary work. And the last two Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel have that feel I believe.

What's the next question?

Green: This goes back to the concept of this loose network of people in a cooperative situation: how did you all determine who had what responsibilities,

1. Strokes and Mucked.

and who was supposed to do what?

Norman: There always have been people who at the proper time would have the energy to do what needed to be done. But it was usually one or two or three people. At book making time there are certain obvious people who have been good at that. And Jim Webb has emerged as the one we rally around to get out new issues. But others, like Peggy Hall, a social worker in northern Virginia, and someone who has written some very good poems and other works, called meetings for while. She was the one who said we should be getting together. Sometimes these meetings were for parties or for readings. Modest little affairs, but they had the effect of keeping this little concept alive.

Green: It seems like that's kind of a nice balance.

Norman: It is; but again, every time we drift toward complimenting SAWC I feel like shying away from it because it's a totally inept outfit. If all the principles who know the history of this weird outfit for fifteen years were to hear us sitting in praise of this process, it would be totally hilarious because the whole thing has been completely goofy in a way. And every few years, some one of us will try to sit down and summarize and perhaps glamorize our pathetic story.

Green: On the other hand, you have the what would have happened if it had never happened. Since, so often we're confronted by this-- "we can't do it professionally, we're not experts"-- that we fail to do things for ourselves in our lives that we have to do.

Norman: See, that's exactly right. And at that point we have to go right back to Miles Horton, who always says that if you want to change things you have to change them yourself. If you want something to happen you just have to roll up your sleeves and make it happen. That you can't be passive and wait to be saved or served. You have to claim the power and the energy to make things be like you want them to be. And none of us have been totally faithful to the teaching that Miles made available to us and that Highlander stands for.

But at the same time all of us have been affected by those teachings, and even though, to use myself as an example again, I can't say that I have been a very excellent representative of a worker in the tradition of Miles Horton, still, some small part of that teaching I have internalized in so far as I manage to do anything at all that is public-spirited, community oriented and politically aware-- all those things. I see how much I owe to Miles, Miles Horton.

So to assess, I think that it's important what you just said. If you imagine that nobody had done anything, there would be a gap. At that point I do give our group credit for just trying to shine a light in a place that didn't have these kinds of lights. And also, in our country, where our power and our resources tend to be centralized in the power of the dominant society, culture industry, and educational systems, you know if all initiative is gained and controlled by the institutions, then you're going to have a lifeless body politic. And so for people to be on their own, at a community level to do things, is very important.

I have also left out a very important chapter in the history of the Southern Appalachian Writers' Co-operative. If you'd like me to tell you the story I would.

Green: Talk until you want to stop.

Norman: All right, here is a point that we've entirely missed and we've got to give it major play. This gets a Roman numeral. It's 1979 and a foundation called the Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry in New Mexico, I think it's Santa Fe, gave SAWC a grant of 20,000 dollars to encourage and nourish the writing and appreciation of poetry in the Southern Mountains. Now briefly here's the story of how that happened, although it may just be for your amusement.

At my first day at UK when I first came here to work, on my first day on this campus, I went to the UK Appalachian Center to make a professional courtesy on Doctor John Stevenson, Director of the Appalachian Center, which in fact, had just been established.

When I walked in John was on the phone long distance talking to someone. And I moved as if to stand aside so he could talk but he waved me to stand closer by. We shook hands while he was talking and then after a few minutes he put his hand over the mouth piece of the telephone and said to me, and these are the first words that John said as a colleague although we were friends before, he said, "Gurney if you had 20,000 dollars to spend on Poetry in the Appalachian region, would you know how to spend it?"

And I said, "Yes!"

He said, "How would you spend it?"

I said, "I would mobilize the Southern Appalachian Writer's Co-operative. And create workshops all over the region." So John said, "Good." And then he spoke the idea right back into the phone to this person, because this foundation was looking for places to give this money out into the boon-docks. So with that phone call it was a done deal. That afternoon we dashed out a little proposal and within three weeks the money came into the university system.

And here's how I spent the money. I established myself as the director of the poetry project-- The University of Kentucky's Appalachian Center's Poetry Project to encourage poetry in the mountains and so forth.

I divided the money into two parts, 10,000 and 10,000. I said that I, as a faculty member, would be an unpaid director of this project. And I said that I need two assistants, I need one person to be the brains of the things, in other words the executive director, the one who does all the work, and that must be George Ella Lyon, Dr. George Ella Lyon. Fine poet, scholar and so on. She will be paid \$5,000, and it will be like a 1/4th time job. And we would have as the field organizer Bob Henry Baber, who was living up in Richwood, West Virginia. His job was to coordinate, specifically to coordinate a series of poetry workshops around the mountains.

So there is salary money for two poets right there. That was my priority. I said I believe in getting poetry money into the hands of the working poets. So I created two jobs, see. And then that left 10,000 to spend, to disperse in the form of honoraria and expenses for these workshops. So we found 20 people around the region in all the six states, qualified people, working writers, most of the experienced workshop-type leaders, to organize and present a weekend workshop in poetry at the local library, or church basement or courthouse or local meeting hall.¹

1. The complete files from this project are held in the University Archives at the University of Kentucky including details on each workshop and the manuscript of the Mystery Anthology.

I can't remember where this all took place. One took place in Mount Vernon, Kentucky, one took place probably in Beckley, West Virginia, in out laying places all around. We found 20 people and gave them four hundred dollars apiece. One hundred was honorium for the individual. They had 300 to work with, to advertise the weekend workshop, to do whatever they wanted to do, to give it as prize money to some student poets or whatever.

So how much is 20 times 400 that's 8000, and then we had 2000 contingency--I don't remember phone bills or whatever. But that was how the money was spent and that took us eight months to organize this and in the summer of eighty like explosions going off all over the region: BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! these workshops happened. All around. And we had rules. Each local workshop leader was obliged to keep records, to keep a list of how many people came, what did they do and samples of writing from everybody.

And 400 people attended these workshops. The citizens loved it, they came out. The one in Mount Vernon, Kentucky has always been my favorite. It was conducted by Sidney Farr¹, one of our members, and a wonderful poet. This is ten years ago and Sidney was the workshop leader of her little deal in some little corner of the public library in Rockcastle County. And she presented her weekend workshop and people came, and it was the first poetry event, literary event of any kind, that these folks had ever seen. They came on Friday night to readings. All day Saturday there were workshops and people read aloud to each other. And this was available to country folks and the point was-- you are important, you are valid, speak your truth, write it down and together we'll make a song. That was the spirit.

I had pins in a map. We had a map on the wall and we organized this deal, if we had been politicians we could have won an election. We really put it together, it was amazing. So Sidney had her's in 1980.

OK in 1988 I'm talking to a UK student who is a distinguished alumnus of the Gaines' fellows, one of the brightest young people who had been through the university of KY. He was our nominee for the Rhodes Scholarship-- Dyke Mullins. He's finishing a PhD now but it must of been '86. Dyke was in the first group of Gaines Fellows. And he's Rhodes Scholar material, his major at UK was physics, Russian literature and Appalachian Studies.

I was very interested, I said you're from the wilds of Rockcastle County, where did you get interested in ideas and literature and think about going to college and stuff like that. And he said, "Well, you know, my parents are educated people; and I always knew that I would go to college, but I think that the first time I ever thought my own place where I ever lived was interesting and that literature had something to do with me", he said, "I went to this funny little writers workshop in Mount Vernon in 1980 when I was a senior in high school or a junior or something." And I said, "OH, MY GOD!" I said, "you mean you're a product of the poetry project?" And he didn't even know that it was this vast scheme you see.

Well, I don't want to claim too much credit for Dyke's success but that tells me a lot that it meant something to him so that a little light bulb went on that suggested that Rockcastle County's a pretty interesting place.

So anyhow, the Poetry Project lasted essentially through the year 1980 and it resulted in all these people sending in reports to Bob Baber and Bob consolidating them and sending them to George Ella. And George Ella and Bob, with a little bit of participation from me, not a whole lot, they did the real

1. Editor of Appalachian Heritage, Berea College at time of writing.

work, completed these writings, culled out the grossly awful from the more readable poems and declared that they had an anthology. And then we solicited more poetry and then they went through every small magazine that had been published in the mountain region up until then like in 10 years like from '70 to '80. They culled every good poem.

They used this as the basis for creating a representative anthology of the best poetry and this is the one, this anthology, came together, is all typed up, packaged, introductions have been written and we tried seriously for four or five years to find a publisher, we even had a publisher at one time. A prestigious publisher, but it all fell through.

And the result is what is a definitive book, the best Appalachian poetry up through 1980, exists in manuscript and has never been published. The only time this manuscript has been made use of in recent years is when our friend Scott borrowed it from me. Now that book that he's got in Xerox is the fruit of our network's efforts to spend this \$20,000 which kind of came around magically from the Witter Bynner foundation.

Green: What fruit it is too!

Norman: Yeah, and it's a beautiful book. I guess we have given up trying to publish it.

Green: Maybe it's time to use it as the manuscripts were in the old days. When the manuscripts were circulated from hand to hand to hand.

Norman: Well, I've always been happy about that. And I remember saying this to Bob Henry and George Ella but none of us were focused enough to know that we really should act on this. I remember saying, "Look I'm for just getting a few thousand dollars and printing this ourselves." But that was just one idea among many and we were distracted by these offers from such people as the University of Mississippi Press. They kept it two years.

Green: Two Years?!

Norman: Or something, I don't remember exactly but a long time and built up our hopes and in the end they were dashed. And that happened several more times. But anyhow, that is a major episode in the ongoing saga of this unlikely writers co-operative that has its beginnings as we described and continues.

Sometimes with a high profile, sometimes with no profile, and sometimes just as a pleasing gossip among friends. It does continue. And in 1990 the Co-operative has convened again.

Pat Arnow, who is editor of a very important magazine who does have institutional backing, the magazine is called Now and Then published by East Tennessee State University, was the organizer of this year's SAWC meeting. And it was through Pat and others that this idea of dangerous writing be gathered and read aloud at the meeting at Highlander. With the idea that this will be the nucleus of the next Pine Mountain Sand And Gravel.

Green: Have the other issues of Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel had other individual editors; in other words, a different editorial group each time, working and collecting materials?

Norman: Yes, that's right. Each person who is willing to do the work is editor, in other words whoever has got the energy to apply. And if you're willing to go bust your ass then by right you can set the tone of the maga-

zine.

And that's the way we've had certain variety, you know. I was editor, primary compiler and editor, of the last issue, and I put that post-modern spin on it because that was my interest, and I felt that critical language and theoretical talk should be part of our discourse here in the mountain region. I wanted to stuff it into the ongoing conversation, this theoretical talk.

Green: Did you hear people taking it up then, was there any response?

Norman: At first, no. But any time you expect instant results you, of course, are committing folly. This is another Miles Horton teaching--this whole thing of instant result or instant gratification. Something you do now may not bear a dividend for five or ten years. The thing that Miles has always taught is that you can't look at this kind of creative project as if we're trying to market a product or trying to run for office or something. It cuts much deeper than that, and in the broadest sense, what it is is education for change. And at this point we have to refer to the thinking of Paulo Friere as I mentioned to you earlier. And if you haven't had a chance to read Friere--

Green: I read the entire book, it was wonderful.

Norman: YOU did?!

Green: Yeah, I'm making all my friends read it, I'm forcing it down their throats, I'm like take it--ignore the postmodernism right now just read this.

Norman: O.k. see, Miles Horton, Highlander, SAWC, The Gaines Center, all of these good efforts are all combining, it all flows, you see. Am I the one who mentioned the book to you?

Green: Yeah.

Norman: And you read the book and you're getting your friends to read it--that is the life of the mind. That is how the grand flow goes on. And in that sense, this is one of the effects of this whole SAWC process. And that's where it lives. That's where it lives. And that's why it's not an organization by any stretch of the imagination, it is not an organization. It is an organism. It's a living thing. It's process. And every now and then it does spit out a product, just whenever it does, it does.

But the product, all the magazines are just the occasional constellation and crystallization of three or four or five years of conversation among one of these networks of friends. And finally the network is untraceable, you can't trace the linkage at all forward. You can trace a whole lot backward. You can trace a whole lot back to this meeting in '74 at Highlander. But there is a direct line of process; it's not even a line there is a direct motion of process that results in you handing your friends Friere. See, and that is the heart of the matter.

And Miles calls this true education.

Green: And indeed it is.

I guess that that is the way that the art of SAWC works, which is writing, which is taking something inside yourself and pushing it outside, and it's a reflection so you can see yourself. George Ella Lyon had a section in the

book¹ that you edited and she is talking about community, she is talking about looking at our lives through the Medusa shield, and she is seeing what we are so we can act on it.

Norman: Exactly. And another theme that runs through the literary talk in this community comes from these old folk tales. Folklore is the survival necessity of being clever. You've got to outwit the system you're in, you have to finesse it because none of us as individuals are strong enough to stand against Moluk, or you know the system. And to be an artist in the face of that is a mighty challenge, it's definitely David and Goliath. But the thing is you see can a mouse beat an elephant. Or all those equations: can a mongoose beat a cobra? And a mongoose can beat a cobra by sheer speed.

This tradition I've studied and have become familiar with-- remember Jack? Jack is just a kid, he's just a little ole country boy. He's not educated, doesn't have any connections, his people are not important, and yet he's setting out to go out and deal with the world. And he runs into giants, ogres, kings, lions, witches, robbers and every time because his heart is pure and also because he has courage but is also as sly as he can be but in a way that no one can catch him at, you see. He wins, he triumphs.

This is important, these are important points. So that your very act of doing this research and writing this paper is part of this process, that finally isn't confined to the SAWC thing at all, really it just leaps out and is much larger, and in a way is about how do the weak deal with the strong, how do the oppressed deal with the opposers, and this is where Friere is so fantastic when he says that nobody can free the slaves; you've got to generate your thinking yourself.

Green: The title of the paper is "Conscientizacao", I don't know how to say the word, but this is Friere's word for the initial self-reflection. So the title is "Conscientizacao: the Process of Communication in Little Magazines".

Norman: And that is what Appalshop is. Appalshop makes films, they know how to be professional, they have consistently for twenty years learned how to be medium: play, radio, t.v., records, film, documentary film, dramatic film, all this. So SAWC is only one of many that especially burst into being at about the same time, late 60's early 70's. And SAWC is unique in that it has created its own form as it has gone along, and the reason that we are alive even now, as a process, is because we never became a fixed institution.

Green: You were always able to adapt.

Norman: That's right. And also, I'd say this as a Miles Horton teaching, is fundamental, is that even when we were clearly defunked we never admitted that we were or acknowledged that we were; we never had our own funeral. And so therefore lo and behold in 1990 there has been this important meeting. And now what you have is a group of people in their 40s who are seriously engaged with dealing with this national issue of censorship in the arts. And this shows a broadening of awareness, the arena is the American arena, the issue is a national issue.

Green: I've got two questions, both of them relate to this. The first one

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goes back to Appalshop, this is a historical question, and a lot of the literature especially in your letter that you're writing to Bob Baber and to Jim and Betty Edwards, who worked on the Mountain Review, and you kept encouraging, this real tone of encouragement, said go and for a year take your seat with Mountain Review and let it be your base and center. What happened-- did that occur?

Norman: Yeah, definitely. O.K. here's an important note, at the same time that SAWC was coming into being little magazines were springing up all around the region. And I'll tell you the names of a few of them. In Knott, county Appalachian Heritage began. Al Stewart, poet, was the founding editor. In Pikeville there was a little literary magazine edited by the folklorist Leonard Roberts. And this magazine had various names but I think it was finally called Twigs. Down in Tennessee there was, no, no it was in West Virginia there was a wonderful funky radical alternative magazine called The Appalachian Intelligencer.

There was an important kind of newspaper coming out of east Tennessee called Plow. It was more political. We always had Mountain Life and Work and it took a radical tone in the 70's. And Mountain Review.

Green: So all of these were kind of feeding off each other's energy?

Norman: They were all simultaneous, like mushrooms after a rain. I mean they just popped out. The energies that crystallized in the SAWC meetings-- that was one constellation of people. There were many other constellations all around but SAWC was a unique one because we claimed to be a region-wide outfit, six or eight states, and we also have continued to grow for 15 years, without an institution. Appalachian Heritage was eventually taken over by Berea College. Mountain Review was sponsored by Appalshop which has become its own kind of institution. Pikeville College and Leonard Robert's Twigs, so others found institutional backing, most have collapsed, a few have survived. As an intermittent organization in an intermittent magazine we live by different rules.

Somewhere in all of this you have to say what Anarchism is because this is all in the spirit of Anarchism. And my understanding of what Anarchism and the tradition of Anarchism is is small groups of people in an ad-hock basis getting together to do something without being organizationally obliged to some larger entity.

So it was simultaneous, this stuff was happening, popping out all over.

Green: In the introduction of New Ground, they were talking about the Vietnam War, do you think that this was the result of activism?

Norman: Yes! Well, it was part of the turbulence of American life in the late 60's and early 70's. It was part of the political ferment that the entire nation experienced even though issues might be different in region to region. The issues in Appalachia were the Vietnam War but also strip mining. The whole thing of welfare rights, the abuses of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the anti-poverty programs which went corrupt and became a point of focus.

Here is another very important thing which was happening. In 1974 the era from '69 to '74 is of the reform movement in the United Mine Workers of America. The old regime in the United Mine Workers of course was John L. Louis, John L. Louis handed the leadership to a hand-picked stooge named Tony Boyle. Tony Boyle was a corrupt bastard, and he was challenged in '69 by, I think, Jake Yoblonski.

Green: And Yoblonski was killed.

Norman: And Tony Boyle had Yoblonski murdered, plus his family. But it took a few years for that to get figured out. So there was a reform element of progressive democratic people in the United Mine Workers that challenged the old guard leadership, and it was very fierce within the union throughout the early 70's. And it was precisely 1974 that this came to a head with the victory of the reform candidate, Arnold Miller. And this was happening all over the same geographical region--the coal fields-- that SAWC represented, see. So you had people demonstrating, poor people were sitting in the state capital in all these places. There were strikes, there were demonstrations, and, this is a very important point, the real ferment was among the people in the communities, the average ordinary working people of the mountain region were in an uproar over all of these questions. And the literary expression came from that. And this is very different from a bunch of effete intellectual snobs presuming that they can speak down to the people and cause something to happen--no. It had to come from the ground up, and this whole idea of new ground.

If you think, what does new ground mean? Do you know what it means? It's an agricultural term, especially in the mountains.

Green: Does it mean unbroken ground?

Norman: It means ground that is broken for the first time. The old mountain people say, we've got to cut a new ground this year, we've got to go cut the forest away and clean it and get it ready for planting. And so that's what the image of new ground means. So in the ferment of these times people were very intense, very into the politics of the moment. And writers were coming right out of these issues. You take writers like Gail Amburgy and Peggy Hall: I mean they were living and working in communities and very much involved in the intense life of the people. Nobody was campus-bound. The entire university campus thing was very far away. Nobody thought about it. A lot of us have gone on to campuses since then or on to steady jobs or whatever but at that time, no.

This is when Appalshop is born, in this climate; and the history of Appalshop is probably important to make some reference to-- but maybe you're better off just to talk about the ferment of the times in all of America, you've seen "Born in the USA".

Green: No, I haven't.

Norman: You didn't see it? Well you ought to see that movie because there are street scenes and scenes of political action and unrest that shows you what this country was like at the time. Not that you don't know about it is already, but it's a recent portrayal of those times, and here in the Mountains we had those very times. Other issue I could go on and on and on. But all of these little literary communities, "The Soup Bean Poets", some of whom were in SAWC's other little efforts, shoe strings, those are the most delicious, shoe strings. And so that's the situation and much of this action would filter through Highlander. This week a bunch of writers might be meeting to organize SAWC, last week it would be textile mill workers talking about Black Lung. Next week it would be welfare recipients talking about how to organize to receive their rights as welfare recipients. And they met at Highlander because it is the natural traditional home for working class people who wanted

to organize politically.

People who go to Highlander are people who cannot afford to have a convention at the Hyatt or even the Holiday Inn, can't afford to have a hotel room. You go to Highlander and eat communally and everybody helps do the dishes. And sleep in a dormitory.

Green: I'm enjoying this, this is immensely invigorating and helpful-- that's something, I want to talk about the reason I'm interested in this. Because Scott and I got into a conversation about a year and a half ago where we began trying to talk about home, about where we were, and we began to compare the work that we were attracted to reading because this way we could find out. And we were attracted to all these people who were just nowhere, these people who are nowhere. So we began really saying where do we belong, what community do we belong to?

And it has become my fantasy since then to just wander around. I have my friends which is a nice little community-- but it's not part of the bigger. I'm part of the living room t.v. community. That's my community, that's my closest heritage and it pisses me off. And I want to find out why and I want to find out why people are so quiet about it. I don't understand it.

This is something coming into a community that has any sort of gel or culture. . .

Norman: Yeah, rooted in the land, in history!

Green: And we talked about the disinherited people, how do you go about. . .they have to create a heritage, they don't have one.

Norman: That's right--which is what an artist does--an artist creates reality, they generate the world. And a lot of rootless artists have created and re-created the world and part of your inheritance includes the artistic community and traditions but also the community of scholars and learned people who are interested in the mind. And then the other branch of that, the mind applied to the social world, so in the act of doing this you are creating a place for yourself in the world. It is very necessary and honorable, but to pursue the whole point of place is an ongoing thing you know. But you've tapped into something here which is modest in its surface aspects: four or five little old publications, but underneath that is this vast thing. It's like this key to this whole other phenomenon which is kind of as you were saying.

Green: How can you just talk about one poem without talking about everything which surrounds it and gives it its life and energy? Investigation and connection. And just with anybody it's an important act, it seems like; if I'm to find out, it doesn't matter where I am or who I am investigating, if they are people who are around me and touch me and who we are constantly brushing shoulders with. Most of the time we go around with our eyes shut. . .and I go to Kroger and I come back and I curse the people who are in my way when I'm driving my car, but this way its just something watching them.

Norman: See, what you are really uncovering is a story, it's like your an investigative reporter in a way and you are uncovering a story.

I used to hang around Highlander a lot, and I was on the same path as you. I was living in California, I didn't know any of this, I didn't know any of these people, I was just a West Coast Guy. But I remembered, I had in me a lot more knowledge than I knew I had, but it took certain other things to bring that out. But when I was able to track my East Kentucky and literary

impulses and Appalachian impulses and political interests and so on, I was able to make that connect to the Spanish revolution.

It just knocked the hell out of me-- well, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. You know what that is?

Green: No, I don't; tell me.

Norman: Well the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was a brigade of fighters made up of Americans, left wing guys, who volunteered as young soldiers as a combat unit to fight on the side of the republicans, which was being challenged by the fascist; see, it was the fascists who were the rebels, the legitimate government was a people's government newly installed and the revolution came when the Catholic church, capitalist and land owners went in rebellion against the legitimate government because they couldn't stand it. And what had happened politically in Spain--the left wing was the legitimate government, they had won in every honorable way, and they couldn't stand it because it was so Socialist. And it was two generations ahead of its time and so, boy, fucking Franko and these guys and the church and Hitler and Musolini and all these forces declared war on it, and well all the left-wing people in all the European Countries formed brigades and went to Spain to fight against Hitler in 1936.

This is a fabulous story, there is a lot of romantic idealism in it. And well, as soon as you do that, if you follow the story of UMW back through its thing you go through these amazing chapters, the career of John L. Louis, god what saga that is, and did you see the movie Matwan?

Green: Yep.

Norman: See, that was a chapter in the saga, and it is the same issues. It is the oppressors and the oppressed, capital versus people, property versus people, and it's an ancient issue. And you can follow it as far back as you want to go, back to the time of Christ and Palistine. It's everywhere you want to go with it.

One could do a PhD dissertation on poets who have, Poets as Revolutionaries, that's a dissertation. And we don't have to be so political and left-wingy all the time either, you know. Well, I mean there are these other ways to go. And what I love about Highlander is its able to be of this side of the political spectrum but instead of talking about revolution and romantic engagement, it talks about adult education. And it's about changing consciousness, and that's why the Highlander tradition is so appealing to me.

Green: I think it's an extremely amazing tradition: it makes sense. When I was first interested in these sorts of things, I was attracted to them because I hated the people who ruled over me, especially schools and parents. And then, I mean, I began understanding that I had to just ignore them, and learn how to do things myself, which is the most difficult job, because it's much easier just to say I'm going to fight against you. You have to build your own world.

Norman: Exactly, because if that's the only position that your willing to imagine yourself in (as a fighter against authority) you can get stuck in it. What that does is that it means that you have ruled out the possibility that you yourself will someday have authority. And where is that at? To always take the position, or to see the only possibility as the underdog in opposition to oppressor, in what way have you internalized the victim role? And if

we are democrats, we hold out the possibility that its possible for power to be wielded justly and equably and we need to imagine that we ourselves will be capable of doing that. You know if you be a scholar and get a PhD or something you may be a Dean someday and the point is to be a good dean. The point is to don't shy away from being a Dean because you made some early life decision. That's why I like the models that suggest participatory democracy means that people will take turns at sharing the power and even the wealth. there are traditions in Native America where you share the wealth.

Green: You give it away.

Norman: Yeah! You give it away, that's your honor. And so these are worthy things to study and pursue, and at the same time to know how to finesse the system and speak its language and you package your report in the way that the system your in needs you to package it. And I think this thing that your doing, if you do it by the rules, it'll be a great contribution to the process, because everything that has happened so far is so screwy, so amorphous, and scattered in these funky little drawers and sacks of old recites and shit, you know. I mean no one has put it together.