

“The Discovery of Ourselves”: The Rockefeller Foundation and Regional Drama in the 1930s

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The Rockefeller Foundation’s (RF’s) interest in drama at the University of North Carolina (UNC) in the 1930s and 40s was part of a program within the RF’s Humanities Division that promoted the development of community theatres and university programs for the training of theatre professionals. This same interest led the Humanities Division to support the Federal Theatre Project, a Works Progress Administration jobs program from 1935-39, and the first federal government-sponsored theatre in the United States. Both endeavors were informed by regionalism, a political and cultural concept about American national identity. Although not a new concept, regionalism was popular in the interwar years among intellectuals who saw it as a counter to the negative impact of modernism, urbanization and commercialization. It was also used to explore the possibilities of cultural pluralism. ¹

My dissertation focuses on the Federal Theatre Project and its relationship with the University of North Carolina drama program. Although the project’s main objective was employment, its leaders had another mission: to lay the groundwork for a permanent government theatre. Their plan was to establish regional theatres, adopting the theories and practices of drama leaders like Frederick Koch at the University of North Carolina. His program was a model for the Federal Theatre Project, and the Rockefeller Foundation program officers were part of developing this idea. Like the nonprofessional, community theatre movement it came from, the Project’s effort to establish regional theatre centers was an attempt to democratize cultural

expression, encouraging more people to become involved in the artistic process. The introduction of federal funds and private philanthropy opened up creative opportunities to marginalized people otherwise excluded from the larger arena of public cultural expression. In North Carolina, it encouraged efforts to build community theatres in isolated rural areas and within African American communities and schools.

I spent a week at the Rockefeller Archive Center in October to learn more about the Rockefeller Foundation's Humanities Division, staffed in the 1930s by David H. Stevens and John Marshall, and its involvement with the University of North Carolina and the Federal Theatre Project. What follows is a brief overview of the division's relationship with drama at UNC.

In October 1933, Humanities program officer John Marshall visited the University of North Carolina. He was there to look at humanities projects that already received RF support or might merit funding. Among the latter was the university's drama program, led by Frederick Koch. A well-known figure in American theatre, Koch had started the program at UNC fifteen years earlier with playwriting classes in the English department, teaching students to write folk dramas based on local traditions and experience. He built an active program of theatrical production and community extension work, sending instructors into high schools and other colleges across the state. The UNC had converted an older campus building into a theatre in 1925, funded in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation. The Carolina Playmakers (as the production part of the enterprise was known) produced student-written plays on campus and on tour, taking shows into North Carolina communities and to other states. Koch had published four volumes of student folk plays, which had sold more than eleven thousand copies. His successful graduates included Paul Green, who had won the Pulitzer Prize in drama in 1927; and Thomas Wolfe, who was about to publish his second novel.²

Marshall found a program hampered severely by budget cuts enacted as a consequence of the Great Depression. There was no university funding other than salaries for Koch and another instructor and some office expenses. Touring, which was the program's main source of income, was sharply curtailed and limited to nearby towns, although Koch had increased the number of experimental productions in Chapel Hill as a way to give his students the audience exposure they needed. Community and faculty volunteers did all of the production work, and handled the publication of the program's quarterly journal, *The Carolina Play-Book*. As a public university, UNC was dependent on the state legislature for funding and like virtually every other state during the Depression, North Carolina struggled to meet its obligations.³

It was in this context that the Rockefeller Foundation made a grant of \$7,500 to the UNC drama program, its first award to a university drama program and the beginning of a project to which it would devote resources for the next ten years. The grant was an integral part of the Humanities Division's plan to support the "preservation and interpretation of American cultural traditions." David Stevens, head of the Division, was interested in drama, especially nonprofessional theatre, for its potential to be a vehicle of "vital cultural expression," and its use of regional materials. He began with this grant to the University of North Carolina drama program, and in the following year expanded the effort with grants to Yale University, the University of Iowa and other institutions, all with the intent of training students for work in school and community drama in various regions of the country.⁴

Stevens and Marshall were interested in developing the idea of American culture and expanding its role in society. In this context, the term "culture" was used not only to describe a community or people's way of life, but also as the forms of artistic expression communicating that culture. They explored newer forms of mass communication – radio and film – but also the university and community-based drama movement that spread across the country in the 1920s. Inspired by Progressive ideas about social reform, these noncommercial drama leaders saw the

arts as a way to alleviate social stress. Artistic projects that expressed a community's traditions and values would unite people by reminding them of the values they shared and would educate newcomers about the place where they now lived.

Drama leaders operating in different kinds of venues around the country embraced regionalism. They used regional culture as subject matter, but they also saw regionalism as a solution to the challenge of developing a civic-sponsored national theatre similar to European models. Artistic centers located in specific geographic regions – the South, the West, New England, for example – could focus on developing forms of expression unique to that region's culture and thus of interest to audiences within the region. The best work of any region would eventually be performed in other parts of the country and New York, the artistic center of the nation. The sum total of regional work would equal an integrated expression of national identity.

The aims of Rockefeller Foundation program officers echoed this idea. Culture was not “something to be acquired,” they noted in a report to the RF Board, but “what we have.” Finding out what culture the nation had “lies in an exploration of our regional life.” Using regional materials in creative expression was part of “the discovery of ourselves,” and Koch's folk drama was a prime example.⁵

Unlike scholars who believed that folk traditions were fast-disappearing artifacts in a modern world, Koch espoused a folk drama focused equally on stories about the present. The folk had not died out as the nation became more urban and more connected, he believed, but had moved to town to become the workers in mills and factories; or were still in the country as tenant farmers, fisherman and cowboys. Their stories were yet untold to a wider public. Koch was driven by more than a desire to preserve a cultural artifact from an imagined past. He encouraged the use of folk characters and stories to create American stories, based on contemporary situations and rooted in place. While Koch described the folk as “our less sophisticated and more primitive people, living simple lives apart from the responsibilities of a highly organized social

order,” that did not mean an untroubled life. In his students’ plays the folk might be white mill workers on strike or black sharecroppers fighting economic injustice, reflecting conflicts prevalent in Southern society.⁶

Marshall was impressed with Koch, whom he called “a rare combination of vision and practical judgment,” and was eager to support his work. The University of North Carolina was already well-known to the Rockefeller Foundation, which had supported other programs there. In addition, the UNC had a national reputation for research on the American South as a region. This included the scholarship of sociologist Howard Odum and the Rockefeller-funded Institute for Research in Social Science; the collecting and preservation of historical records by J.G. deRoulhac Hamilton, founder of the Southern Historical Collection; and the work of the UNC Press, the first university press in the South and a pioneer in publishing works about the region’s problems; and Koch’s Carolina Playmakers.⁷ UNC President Frank Porter Graham wanted to build the arts and humanities despite bad times, telling Stevens that he had tried to protect drama from budget cuts, believing it to be “work of the most fundamental kind, both as a part of the life of the University and as part of the answer to one of the great needs of our people.”⁸

After several years of annual grants, the Foundation in 1938 made a major commitment to UNC’s Department of Dramatic Art. In addition to continuing operating grants, the RF offered an endowment of \$150,000 if the University secured \$350,000 for a new building to house the program. The Playmakers had grown considerably since 1933. It now had a graduate program with sixteen master’s students, a more extensive touring schedule, and more state funds. It was active with Federal Theatre Project community drama work in the state, especially with a summer production on Roanoke Island to commemorate the anniversary of the landing of English settlers. This production, *The Lost Colony* by Paul Green, had premiered in 1937 and was set to be an annual performance event linked to a summer drama school. In addition, Koch

and Green were talking to community leaders in Asheville about establishing a similar summer institute in playwriting and production in the western part of the state.

With UNC administrators cautiously optimistic about finding the funds, Koch commissioned plans for a new building in Chapel Hill that would include a theatre, classrooms, and shop and office space, designed by architect Waldron Faulkner of Washington, DC. From 1938 to 1941, the University tried without success to secure building funds either through federal works programs or from the state legislature. The Foundation extended the pledge three times during the 1940s. Koch died unexpectedly in 1944, and by 1946 University officials reluctantly concluded that they could not raise the matching money.

In all, from 1934 to 1947, Rockefeller Foundation grants to UNC for the “development and maintenance of work in creative regional drama” totaled just over \$88,000, excluding grants made through the General Education Board and several fellowships. These grants kept the program alive during the Depression and were critical to the development of graduate programs and extension work. By the end of the 1930s, the RF ended annual support for other university drama programs as they secured funds and capital needs from either public or private donations. Only the University of North Carolina failed to raise similar support, an indication of the region’s continued economic woes even as the rest of the country left the Depression behind.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Robert Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

² Walter Spearman, *The Carolina Playmakers: The First Fifty Years*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970.

³ John Marshall officer's diary, October 8, 1933, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Sleepy Hollow, New York.

⁴ "Humanities—Program and Policy Excerpt from Interim Report Presented at Trustees Meeting," Dec. 13, 1933, pgs. 12-13, Folder 9, Box 2, Series 911, RG 3.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.

⁵ "Program in the Humanities," March 1934, Folder 9, Box 2, Series 911, RG 3.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC; William J. Buxton, "Communication Practice and Theory in the 'New Humanities' and 'New General-Education' Programs of Rockefeller Philanthropy, 1933-1940." In William J. Buxton, editor, *Patronizing the Public: American Philanthropy's Transformation of Culture, Communication, and the Humanities*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009; Kenneth Macgowan, *Footlights Across America: Towards a National Theater*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929.

⁶ Frederick J. Koch, "Making a Native Folk Drama." In *Southern Folklore Quarterly* I (Sept. 1937), pp 29-33.

⁷ William D. Snider, *Light on the Hill: A History of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 202.

⁸ Frank Porter Graham to David H. Stevens, Dec 1, 1933, Folder 80, Box 7, Series 236, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RAC.