

A Game from the Past

A sense of play has always been part of Penland, but there's only one Penland program which began with a game. Not a game in some psychological or symbolic sense, but an actual game. It was croquet, played in white clothes with steel balls, sledge hammers, and forged wickets, and it led directly to the building of the Penland iron studio.

The first smithing at Penland, however, happened ten years before the game. Sometime in the late 1960s Brent Kington, who would later head the famous iron program at University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale, was teaching jewelry at Penland. He had an interest in blacksmithing and had made friends with Alex Bealer, who wrote an important book on iron work.



Jim Wallace working at the outdoor forge.

Alex and Brent got together at Penland with Daniel Boone IV (direct descendent), an excellent blacksmith who lived in nearby Burnsville. They borrowed an anvil from Gunter's Machine Shop in Spruce Pine (the anvil is still on loan to Penland), and set up two hand-cranked forges in a low shed that housed the salt kiln (it was just behind the Lily Loom House). Bill Brown Jr., who was a boy at the time, remembers that the roof was so low that you couldn't raise a hammer over your head. They had to put the anvil just outside the shed. This makeshift setup was used from time to time, but it didn't result in any sustained interest in iron at Penland.

It did serve to spark Bill's interest in ironwork, however, and he eventually served an apprenticeship with a blacksmith in Atlanta and returned to Penland as a Resident. He built a blacksmithing shop in what is now called the Bascombe Annex (it's used for housing these days). As soon as he returned to Penland he began to pressure his father (former director, the late Bill Brown) to build an iron studio and add this craft to the Penland program. But his father said that he wouldn't build a studio until he saw proof of sufficient interest.

In 1979, Bill (Jr.) got Jim Wallace, now the director of the National Ornamental Metals Museum, to do some weekend smithing workshops at Penland, and he asked Jim to help



Some of the wickets.



The crowd in white.

him come up with a dramatic gesture.

Their idea was to concoct an event that would get lots of people forging. "We needed to find something that could be easily made by anyone and didn't have to look like anything—something that could be made simply and quickly," Bill remembers.

"That's how we came up with the croquet wicket. The idea was to have a big croquet game, but in order to play you had to forge a wicket."

Penland Blacksmith's Croquet 1979 Smith's Croquet Local Rules

Dress Code:

Players: Whites required. Safety Gear Recommended
Caddies: Approval of Umpire

Behaviour Code:

- A. All beverages consumed during play must be held by a caddy.
- B. It is rude to whoop and/or dance while a player is attempting a shot.
- C. Spitting is discouraged but not expressly prohibited.
- D. Tripping over wickets is considered highly awkward and is discouraged.

Rules:

- 1. A player who loses his ball(s) is disqualified.
- 2. Loss of mallet is decadent and will not be tolerated.
- 3. A player who strikes his own body while attempting to shoot loses one turn.
- 4. Striking an opponent with either mallet or ball is prohibited.
- 5. Wicket movement is prohibited at all times.
- 6. Players cannoning other player's ball(s) are responsible for damages.
- 7. Penalties may be assessed for playing the wrong ball.
- 8. Striking the umpire is considered breach of etiquette. Player loses one turn.
- 9. All decisions of the umpire are law. Challenging the umpire will not be tolerated. Penalty: Death.
- 10. Any struck ball which is determined to have gone more than 12 inches off the ground is considered a dangerous play. Penalty: Gain one turn.

Some of the rules (we don't have room for all of them).

AN OVERWHELMING RESPONSE

The response was overwhelming. "We had a tremendous crowd out there," Bill said. "People were getting burned and there were two or three on one anvil; the whole thing was just bizarre. But it got a hell of a crowd." The forging went on for three or four days and at the end there were so many elaborate iron wickets they had to double them up on the lawn.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, Bill and Jim realized that they didn't know anything about croquet. Naturally, a hitchhiking Englishman showed up about that time and he was drafted to write

the rules and serve as referee. He took up the challenge and required everyone to wear white and travel with a caddy (to carry drinks, of course).

The iron balls (which were industrial surplus) were the size and weight of small cannonballs. Bill Helwig's metals class painted them each with a different design. For mallets they used sledge hammers and Lenore Davis's surface design students made banners to decorate the course.



Bill Brown Jr., assisted by his caddy.

The game took place on Sunday afternoon on the lawn between the Pines and the Dye Shed. The extremely creative rules were enforced by the English referee, backed by a Trappist monk (a student) who wore his robe and hood and carried an axe.

"He was the executioner—in case there were penalties," Bill explained.

"The whole school turned out. It was a huge festivity, and when it was over, Dad couldn't deny that the interest was there. Of course then he said, 'OK, we'll do it, but you have to build it.'" So Bill and the school maintenance staff spent that winter adding a shed roof to the back of Penland's old sculpture studio and building coal forges from sheet steel. The next summer (1980) the first classes were held and Brent Kington was one of the first instructors.

While the larger outcome of the croquet game is well known, nobody is sure how the game actually came out. Glass artist Mark Peiser claims to have won—by attrition if nothing else—but his status as victor was vigorously denied by Bill Helwig. "He didn't win," Bill said, "He was just ahead when we broke for dinner."

Jean McLaughlin and I had a great time visiting Bill Brown to hear this story and look at the

artifacts (he still has most of the balls and wickets). When we finished talking, Jean went into Bill's office to return an earlier phone call—it turned out to be confirmation of a major foundation grant in support of Penland's new iron studio (see next page).

—Robin Dreyer; most photos by Bill Brown, Jr.



A student in one of Penland's first iron classes.