

FOLK DANCER, TEACHER, PENLAND INSTITUTION

"I'm a Willis from Snow Creek, so I understand the mountain people, but I grew up at Penland, which is a world unto itself."

Bill Ford started working at Penland for ten-cents an hour when he was 6 years old. In the more than 50 summers since then, he has taught enameling and folk dancing, made copper plates for the gift shop, and washed pots. He's currently in charge of the school's lawns, and, along with his wife Suzanne, he runs the Chinquapin Inn, in a house that his family used to share with Penland's founder, Miss Lucy Morgan.

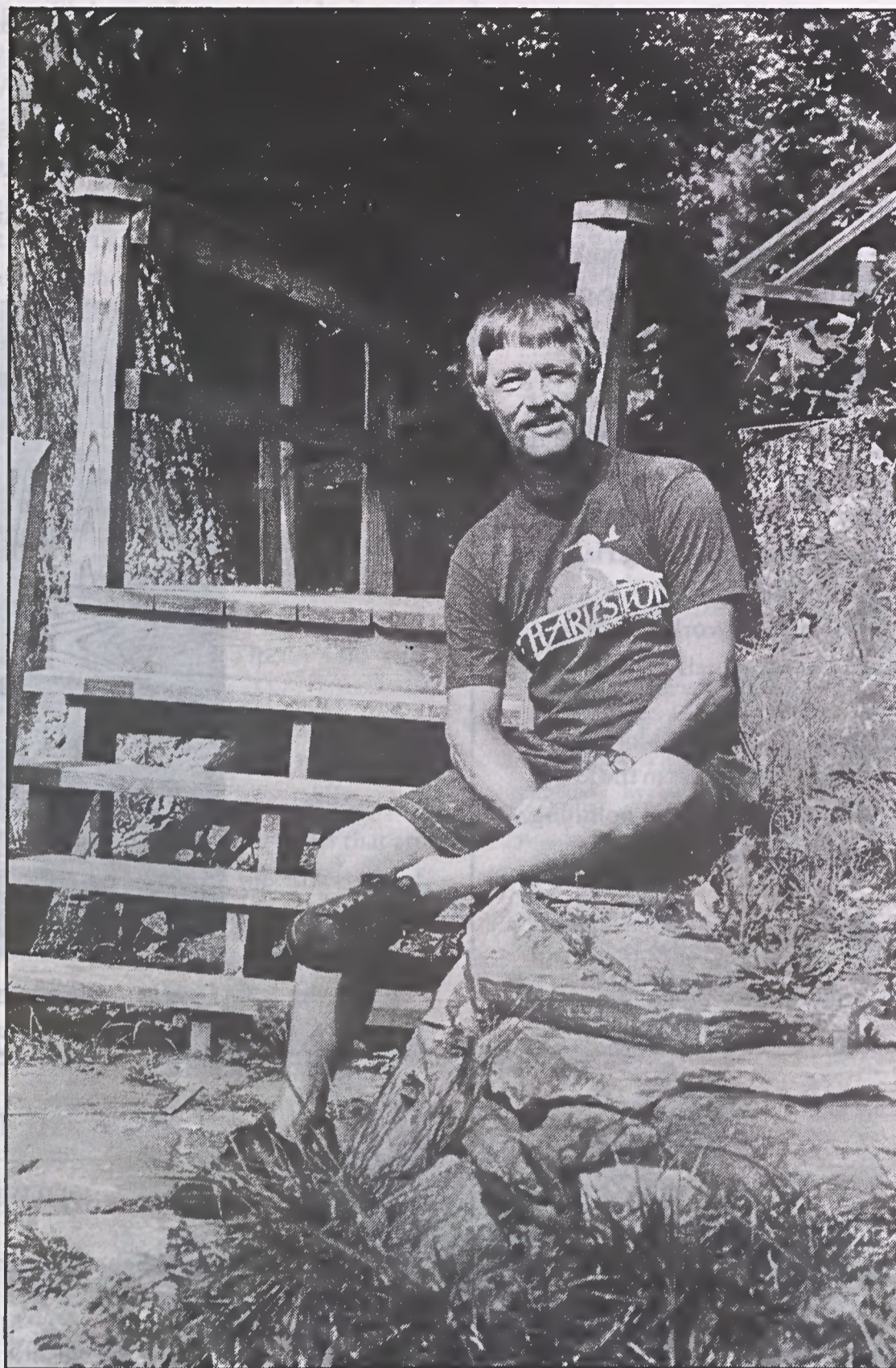
Bill's roots at Penland School go even deeper than his many summers of work. Miss Lucy was his godmother, and his grandmother was the first Penland Weaver. His mother was, at various times, secretary, registrar, comptroller and interim director. His father taught several different crafts, provided technical advice to Miss Lucy, and once took a small log cabin on a Model T pickup to the Chicago World's Fair as a sales booth for Penland crafts.

In addition to Penland School, Bill's other great passions have been folk dancing and teaching. He retired in June from 30 years as a social studies teacher in the Mitchell County Schools, but he originally wanted to be a dancer. He learned folk dancing at Penland as a teenager, when the school used to host weekly community dances. He picked up more folk dances in India, Europe, and Lebanon while his father was stationed overseas with the State Department. At Appalachian State Teacher's College, he was president of the Folk Dance Club and choreographer for school musicals.

"I took ballet and modern dance when I was 20, and felt like a pregnant cow the whole time," he remembers. "All my muscles were set. I realized all of a sudden that that was the end of it, that I couldn't go any further. At that point I settled for teaching, which I enjoy doing, but I guess there's always been a struggle between the very physical aspect of dance and the intellectual pursuit of teaching." He did continue folk dancing, however, and taught it at Penland for over 20 years.

FROM DANCING TO SOCIAL STUDIES

His passion for international dance reflects a deeper interest in the cultures of the world, which became the focus of his teaching. "My parents were very inquisitive and broad minded. From them I got an openness to other people," he says. Through his teaching, Bill hoped to foster this openness in his students, "I tried to get them to be less ethnocentric, to be more accepting of people who are different."



Bill Ford

His teaching took him in a lot of different directions, and sometimes got him into trouble. "I taught everything imaginable in social studies: psychology, sociology, art history, geography, world history, world religion, world culture; anything that could be considered social studies," he said. "I taught a lot about world religions, which is pretty liberal for this area, I guess, but I felt it was important to teach what other people think. Of course, I used to get into hot water about twice a week."

He often had to explain to parents that the ideas he was presenting were not his own opinions, but were reflections of cultures with a whole different way of looking at things. Despite these misunderstandings, Bill was not one to shy away from a touchy subject. "A lot of teachers absolutely will not talk about anything that's the least bit controversial, like sex, or religion, or politics. My position was that

if something grew out of a class discussion, if the student was sincere and asked a question, that I would answer the question or tell them where to get the information. I believe that if a student is sufficiently motivated, they are going to learn with you or in spite of you." He added, however, that he lived in a trailer until the tenure law was passed.

POTWASHING WITH SHAKESPEARE

In between all the years of teaching were the summers at Penland, twenty of which he spent washing pots in the kitchen. "Jane Brown put me in the pot room, and Hunter Kariher got me out," he laughed. "But I was interested in the young people that I worked with, and they said it was fun. It was wonderful for them to say that they enjoyed washing pots with me. If I got a pot that was really difficult to scrub, rather than bitch about it, I would recite a Shakespeare sonnet, and when I got through, it was clean, and we would laugh about it."

One might wonder why a gifted teacher would want to devote so many summers to such unglamorous work. Bill had this answer, "Penland means a great deal to me personally. I grew up here. The Craft House was built from poplar logs the year I was born. And I want to be useful, in my small way."

But it isn't just his personal connection that has kept him coming back. "There is a spirit, a dream that Penland has represented," he says. "People talk about Penland as not being the real world, as being a place where they come and get involved and go away feeling tired, but happy and fulfilled. This comes from allowing people to do their thing. I would hate to see that spirit ever get lost....I'm not afraid of change; it's necessary; it's important. The school has to keep up with modern things, but I want to see the best of the past preserved as well."

Bill believes that students and visitors to Penland who take the time to read Miss Lucy's book or to talk to some of the folks who've been around for a long time will have a richer sense of where the school has been. So maybe the next time you see Bill Ford getting off of his lawn mower, you might want to ask him about the days when the studios closed at 9:00 PM!

-Robin Dreyer