

The Story of Arthur Morgan School  
By Ernest Morgan

When Arthur Morgan was a young man, around the turn of the century, he had a vision of a new kind of school. It would be a living, learning, working community of students and teachers, sharing the work and decision-making. Within the group there would be strong mutual affirmation. Life in this school would be a happy and challenging experience. The vision was strong, but at that stage of his life Arthur Morgan had no resources with which to pursue it.

Ten years later, he had been successful in his engineering practice and felt that, on a modest scale, he might launch the school of his dreams. However, he had no college education and was lacking in experience so he started looking for someone with better qualifications who might work with him.

One of the people to whom he was referred was Lucy Griscom, a Quaker woman whose father had helped establish a school in the Pestalozzi tradition. Lucy had attended that school and gone on to college, ultimately acquiring a master's degree.

Pestalozzi was a Swiss educator of the Napoleonic era whose ideas were similar to those of Arthur Morgan. Arthur had never heard of him, but Lucy had and was familiar with his ideas and methods. She shared Morgan's vision. Arthur had been widowed some years before, and he and Lucy eventually married. They planned to found an innovative school in the country – preferably in the mountains.

After a long search they bought a couple of abandoned farms in the Berkshires on Jacob's Ladder Road. Observing the boulders that were everywhere, Lucy remarked “Jacob would have no difficulty finding a pillow here!” From that remark came the name of their project, Jacob's Pillow.

At about that time, Arthur was called to head up a giant flood control project at Dayton, Ohio, a difficult and challenging assignment, and the school was put on the back burner. As the flood control job neared completion, Arthur and Lucy planned to go ahead with the school but unexpectedly found themselves involved in Antioch College instead. So, they set about to apply their educational ideas at the college level. Jacob's Pillow was sold to Ted Shawn and became a school of the dance, which continues to this day.

Thirty years later the “Jacob's Pillow” idea was picked up by another generation of the family. Elizabeth Morey had been taught at home. She was reading at age five and learned briskly. When she reached the age for eighth grade her parents entered her in public school. She found this exciting and raced through high school in three-and-a-half years as an honor student. Later she entered Antioch College where she got acquainted with Arthur Morgan's ideas – and married me.

During the early years of our marriage another important educational influence came to bear on Elizabeth. She had as a close friend and mentor, a cousin of Lucy Morgan, Caroline Urie, who had worked with Madame Montessori in Italy (until Mussolini ran her out of the country!).

After raising a family Elizabeth took up public school music teaching. Never having experienced public school in the lower grades she was shocked at what she found. “If they were trying to stamp out imagination, initiative, and responsibility, they couldn't do it better!” But she was successful as a public school teacher, and when the school consolidated she was offered a job in the larger school. However, she declined, remarking to me that she wasn't going to teach again in a public school if she could help it. At that point, with my encouragement, she took the “Jacob's Pillow” idea off the shelf.

In 1938 Arthur Morgan had founded Celo Community, located in a beautiful mountain valley with a good climate, near Burnsville, North Carolina, as an experiment. It had grown into a successful land trust community. In it was an innovative children's camp. Our younger son, Lee, attended this camp in the early 1950's with great benefit. That is how we got acquainted with the Celo Community. For one dollar a year in 1958 the Community leased us fifty acres of land with some rudimentary buildings in which to start the school.

We didn't have the resources to open a school right away, so for four years we conducted a teenage work camp, getting the place ready. Since the school did not yet exist, we were unable to take tax deduction on the money we were putting into it. This problem was solved by the school becoming a subsidiary of the Celo Health Education Corporation, which had been set up to operate the Celo Health Center. This gave us tax exemption and a sympathetic board. It was a member of this board, Gorman Mattison, an Antioch graduate, who suggested the name, the Arthur Morgan School. This, he said, would define its philosophy and provide a rallying point for recruitment and support. He was right about that.

We had two reasons for starting with a work camp. The obvious one was to fix up the place and get it ready for a school. A reason we didn't mention was the we had read A.S. Neill's comment in his book *Summerhill* to the effect that he had never known kids to work without being driven to it. We were projecting a working school, and we wanted to find out for ourselves whether or not kids would work willingly.

Our campers worked hard all morning and had activities in the afternoon. They ate it up! A problem was that, toward the end of camp, some of the kids were distressed by the thought that this wonderful experience was about to end – and behavior problems resulted. We resorted to various devices to wear them out during the last couple of days – such things as strenuous folk dancing and all-night hikes.

The school finally opened with the help of Bob and Dot Barrus of Camp Celo in the fall of 1962. Elizabeth was the director, but I was still tied up with our business in Yellow Springs, Ohio. However, I spent all the time I could at the school and had a good view of its operation.

Elizabeth didn't start with classes right away. At the outset staff and students sat around a campfire and discussed the meaning of community and how we should all work together and seek to affirm one another rather than be competitive. There was a lot of work to be done, so the students were busy harvesting garden produce and carrying on other activities. When one of them asked, "When is school going to start?" Elizabeth would answer, "It's already started!"

Among the staff that first year was a co-op student from Antioch. A capable young man, he entered heartily into the life of the school. When his college work period drew to a close, he had the college shift him to another period so that he could stay on. When that period, too, drew to a close, he simply dropped out of college for the rest of the year. "I'm learning more here than I would at college!" he remarked.

Early on it became the policy of the school to house the boarding students with staff families – not over four students to a house. The aim was to maintain the quality of family life rather than use dormitories. The usual size of the faculty is twelve – half the size of the student body. Faculty salaries are modest but the psychic rewards seem to make up the difference.

Celo Community not only provided the necessary land and initial buildings for one dollar a year, community members have a great variety of knowledge and skills which they make available to the students through elective courses. Also, not surprisingly, some Arthur Morgan School faculty members become members of Celo Community.

The school was designed to serve the junior high years – grades seven, eight, and nine. Elizabeth had a logic for choosing that age group. She reasoned that children at that age are young enough so there is a good chance of influencing their basic ideals and value patterns, and they are old enough to go away to school. The other reason was that beyond the ninth grade a school tends to be centered on college preparation and needs more highly specialized academic resources. Lastly, Elizabeth felt that the junior high age level was the most neglected in American educational life. So, junior high it was!

The basic junior high curriculum was followed, though without strict grade differentiation. The students were encouraged to move ahead at their own pace and often went faster than was expected of the group as a whole. With the occasional exception of students who came to the school with serious

learning disabilities, boys and girls leaving Arthur Morgan School have transferred comfortably to high school. In some cases they have even been moved ahead an extra grade.

I recall one girl who went on to high school after three years at Arthur Morgan School and then returned for a visit. I asked her how she found the transition. "Very difficult," she said, "In what particular subjects?" I asked. "Oh," she said, "academics were no problem. The hard part was going from a place where people cared about each other to a place where no one cared about anyone but one's self." However, she had developed a circle of friends and was getting along all right.

Incidents from the daily life of the school may give a better idea of it than a general description. Elizabeth played down competition, and that has been the custom in the school ever since. At one time there was a staff member who was an excellent folk dance leader. Arthur Morgan School students did a lot of folk dancing and entered a team in the mountain youth jamboree held at Asheville, North Carolina, at which dance teams from all over the South came to compete in a big auditorium. For two successive years the Arthur Morgan School team won first place in its category. The third year, Elizabeth forbade our team to compete. "Dancing," she said "is for joy – not to beat somebody!" She had seen children leaving the auditorium crying because their teams had lost. However, the Arthur Morgan School team auditioned for the jamboree and was accepted as an exhibition team. I remember their performance well. They danced beautifully, happy and relaxed, smiling at each other, in sharp contrast to the tension shown by the other teams.

In athletic events, when our soccer team played a team from another school, it was not unusual to "scramble" the teams. For sophisticated soccer that would have been disastrous, but for the level at which we played, it was fine.

The students at Arthur Morgan School are given a good deal of responsibility and participate actively in decision-making. Once some of them began to wonder just how far this process could be carried. Speaking up in all-school meeting, a student asked, "What if we decided to abolish classes?" "That's an interesting idea," Elizabeth responded. "Let's talk about it." A lively discussion followed at which the students soon came to the conclusion that classes were important.

A parallel situation arose at another time. Noise has been a perennial problem in the Arthur Morgan School dining room, and at one point the staff decided to have assigned seating in an effort to diminish the noise. The students didn't like this, and at the next all-school meeting one of them made a motion to abolish assigned seating. Ordinarily decisions were reached by consensus, but voting was occasionally practiced. All the students voted for this motion, and all the staff against it. There were more students than staff, so the motion carried. I happened to be a spectator at this meeting. How, I wondered, was the staff going to change this situation without being dictatorial?

At this point, Bob Barrus, our principal teacher, spoke up. "The passage of that motion brings us back to the problem which assigned seating was intended to solve – the matter of noise in the dining room. I suggest that we adopt a policy, not a rigid rule, but a policy, to the effect that when the students sit down in the dining room they leave at least one place at each table for a staff member. In this way there will be somebody at each table to quiet things down a bit if the situation gets too unruly." After a brief discussion a motion to that effect was entertained and passed with the support of the students.

I recall one entertaining incident that had substantial educational value. The woman in charge of our kitchen went into the pantry one day and found that someone had jabbed a screwdriver through the lid of a jar of peanut butter – and left it there! Naturally, she was annoyed and brought the matter up at the next all-school meeting. Lively discussion followed, and Bob Barrus instructed his English class to write papers on "Why would someone jab a screwdriver into a jar of peanut butter?" The resulting papers were interesting. Some would have done credit to a psychologist. Others would not! At the next all-school meeting these papers were read and discussion was renewed. It proved so interesting that classes for the rest of the morning were canceled so the meeting could continue. At the end of the meeting the question was raised as to whether the pantry should be locked in the future. A consensus was promptly reached that it wouldn't be necessary to lock the pantry.

There was a period at the school when the laundry was poorly handled. Laundry problems came up for discussion at every all-school meeting. Finally, a student was chosen to take charge of the laundry and be responsible for its efficient operation. The staff selected a boy who suffered from a severe inferiority complex. The boy took hold of the laundry and did a good job with it, and emerged in the process as a happy and self-confident young person.

I recall an equally dramatic incident. A business project in Celo Community was being closed out; part of this project, a mail-order business in nonprescription pharmaceuticals, was offered to the school. One of the community members who knew the business offered to manage it for the school. Each day a student assistant went to the office to help. Suddenly the man died of a heart attack. The next morning Elizabeth and a staff member went to the office to see what might be done. With them went the ninth grade girl who had been the man's helper. To their surprise, the girl knew the business from top to bottom. A new manager was hired to run the project, and the student assistant was assigned to breaking him in! The effect on this girl was striking. Although intelligent and attractive, she had been extremely shy and unsure of herself. From this experience she emerged as a poised and confident young woman. I could tell a number of stories like that.

Elizabeth served as director for seven years and was succeeded by Herb Smith in 1970. At first she stayed away to avoid cramping him, but he soon drew her back into the life of the school where she functioned happily. This reflected the democratic way in which the staff had functioned under Elizabeth's leadership.

Elizabeth died in 1971 of cancer, but her ideas and methods were firmly established. It is remarkable that throughout the changes that occur every year in the staff and student body the central thrust of the school continues the same.

The democratic organizational culture of the school had a curious by-product. Directors brought in from outside always failed! This happened with three excellent men. Conversely, directors recruited from inside were always successful. In the course of time "directors" of the school were replaced by "clerks," after the manner of Friends, and Arthur Morgan School became a staff-run school. This arrangement has strong advantages and some disadvantages, too. The school still has a board which takes part in important deliberations and holds legal authority – an authority that has not been invoked since Arthur Morgan School became a staff-run school.

It is a commentary on the life of the school that when it held a celebration on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary some 25 percent of all the students who had ever attended returned for the occasion, some from as far away as Alaska, California, Canada, and Florida. Also attending were many former staff members.

The normal enrollment of the school is twenty-four students. One time the enrollment was allowed to grow to thirty-four, but the school seemed to lose some of its community character, so the following year enrollment was cut back to twenty-four.

Each fall the school has a recurring problem. Part of the students are fresh from public schools and bring with them the attitude "every man for himself." Every year the school struggles to overcome this attitude and replace it with one of mutual affirmation. The success of this effort varies from year to year.

Sometimes folks wonder if it's a good idea for young people to retreat to this remote mountain utopia, away from "the real world." That is a good point. Once a year the school closes down for a few weeks while the students and most of the staff go on field trips. These trips are taken in different directions. Sometimes they go south to the Everglades, or west into Texas where Mexican immigrants are having a hard time, or north to some city where they can help Habitat for Humanity. Always these field trips involve some form of volunteer service work.

And there are other forms of outreach. One year recently the students got "steamed up" about a peace march planned in Washington and worked hard helping to raise the funds necessary to take part in that march. While in the Washington area they assisted in shelters for the homeless. On another occasion recently a group went to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to witness the trial of some women who had

protested nuclear developments there. On another occasion some of the students became concerned about military exercises scheduled to be held in this area and proceeded to write letters to the newspapers and legislators. The mountain valley does not seem to isolate them from the real world.

Now approaching its thirtieth anniversary, alive and vigorous, the Arthur Morgan School represents the continuity of a long educational tradition and adventure.

Retyped and Edited by Susan Higgins