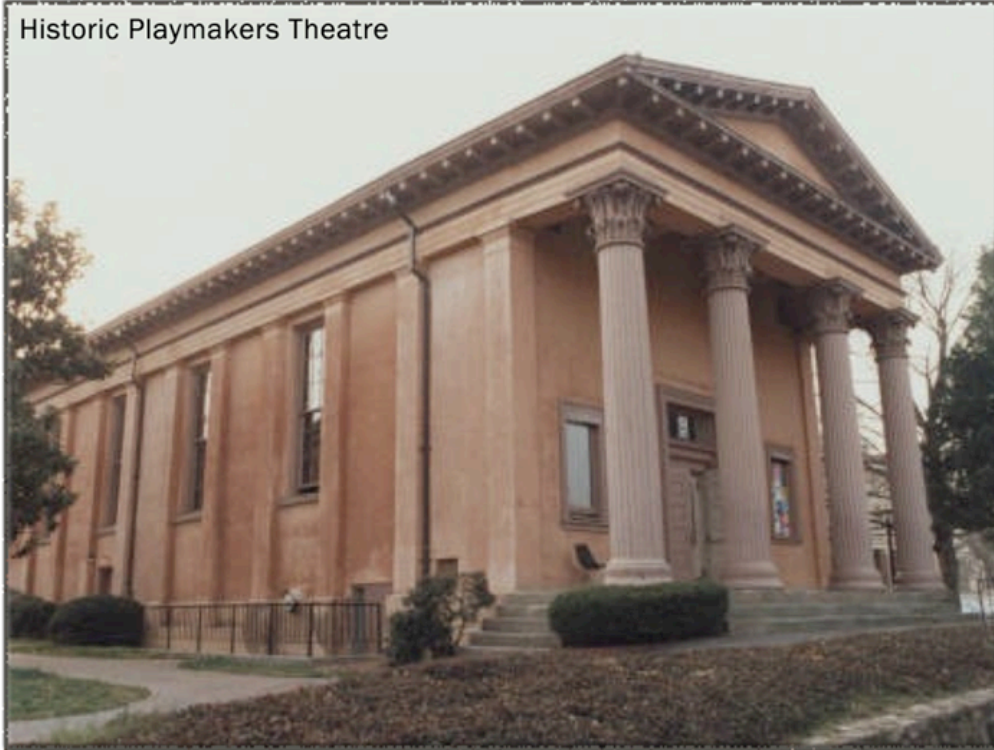


Historic Playmakers Theatre



A Model for Folk Theatre The Carolina Playmakers

by

**Cecelia Moore, Special Assistant to the Chancellor and University Historian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

2014 Gladys Hall Coates University History Lecture

Good evening. It is an honor to give the Coates Lecture on University History. In 2004, I was in the audience when Jim Leloudis delivered the inaugural Lecture, and I remember wondering if I would ever get to do something as cool as that. Thanks to the support of many people, including Jim — who was my doctoral advisor — I got my chance. And that anecdote tells you something about how nerdy historians generally are.

Thank you to Bob Anthony for inviting me to speak. Throughout my graduate studies at NC State and here, I became well acquainted with the people of Wilson Library and I owe a great deal to their professional skills and unflagging enthusiasm. For those of you who do not regularly read academic books, you should know that their names appear in hundreds of acknowledgement sections of books across a

range of subjects, and that they are known literally around the world for what they do.

I also have to give credit to the people in the Department of Dramatic Art and PlayMakers Repertory, and to the Carolina Playmakers I met over the years; they made me want to learn more about this piece of American theatre. Even before I knew I would return to school to study history, I was the designated person at PlayMakers who "liked all that old stuff" and would listen to the stories of former Playmakers who dropped in.

I didn't even have to wait for them to come to me. Sometimes it seemed that no matter where I went in North Carolina, someone had some connection to the Carolina Playmakers, or at least a strong belief that there was a lot of theatre in the state and that it all started with them.

The fascination of theatre

In addition to history, theatre fascinates me — not only the art or the ideas communicated in the art form, but also by the activity of "putting it together," in composer Stephen Sondheim's words. Theatre is not a solo activity; there must be actors, but also writers, designers, technicians, promoters, ticket-sellers, and above all an audience. Theatre is much more than the words of a play — it is, in fact, not theatre until it is performed in front of an audience.

For that reason, the content of a play *and* the act of dramatic production — the what, but also the who and the how — offers a way to understand something about a community, a region, a nation at a certain point in time. Take Shakespeare's plays, for example. We still go to see them. Sometimes they are transplanted to different places and times — the plots and characters have this universal quality. However, how they came to be and were first produced — how the history plays arose from contemporary politics, for example, or why men played womens' roles — tell us things about Shakespeare's own time.

Proff Koch

And that brings me to my subject — because for me the most important person in the early history of drama at the University of North Carolina was Frederick Henry Koch, better known as "Proff Koch." He loved the plays of William Shakespeare. He acted in them, he directed them, he quoted them, and the entire impetus for his playwriting classes was his passionate belief that by encouraging people to write about themselves and their own experiences, he would help produce an American Shakespeare — someone who would chronicle her or his own time in ways that would reflect a uniquely American vision and resonate on a universal level. Shakespeare came along when he did, Koch often said, because the Elizabethan



English had a tradition of amateur artistic expression. He happened "after the continuing efforts of many generations of folk-players," Koch said, "after slow years of experimentation in which every English tradesman had a part."¹

A fanciful notion, perhaps, but it served Koch's vision of folk drama; plays based on the lives of ordinary, real people, performed by those people, rooted in place and shaped by their background. Folk drama was in some ways part of a larger movement in the early twentieth century that spawned the study of folk music and art; a drive to capture what people saw as a disappearing rural past in the face of modernity.

Folk plays about the "mountaineers of Appalachia" and "fisher folk" of the Outer

Banks reflected this impulse to preserve an imagined past. At the same time, other observers interpreted folk plays as a radical expression of racial and class agitation. Plays by and about tenant farmers, African Americans and mill workers were part of a progressive tendency to use art in the cause of social reform. In the more radical era of the 1930s, Koch began to call folk drama "peoples' theatre," a phrase adopted from socialist and communist artists interested in drama as propaganda.²

Beginnings

Theatre at UNC did not start with Frederick Koch, but his arrival in 1918 was the beginning of an academic and extension program. My purpose this evening is to tell you something about its beginnings, to show you how their story is part of a much larger story of community-produced art, and to inspire you to explore the rich history of cultural expression at UNC.

Let's begin with the buildings — people are at the heart of this history, but buildings are important too, as you'll see at the end. In the center is the Playmakers Theatre, or Old Playmakers; the first home for the Department of Dramatic Art. It was turned into a theatre in 1925 thanks to a combination of state appropriations and private money from the Carnegie Foundation. That should sound familiar.

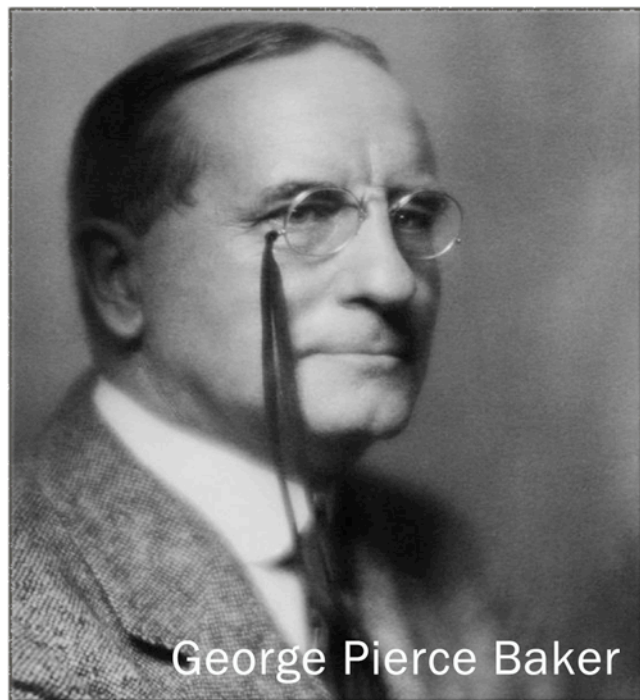
¹ Frederick H. Koch, "The Return of the Pageant," Introduction to *A Pageant of the North-West* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota, 1914).

² Frederick H. Koch, "Making a Regional Drama," Reprinted from the *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, August 1932, for the National Theatre Conference, 1-8, 8.

The Center for Dramatic Art wraps around the Paul Green Theatre — named for UNC’s best-known playwright. The Forest Theatre — not many people know that this space is dedicated to Frederick Koch’s memory. With the assistance of UNC botanist William Chambers Coker, Koch made this natural bowl in the landscape into a performing space; at first a sloping lawn; the stonework was added in 1940 as a WPA project.

Frederick Henry Koch grew up in Peoria, Illinois, earned a bachelor’s degree at Ohio Wesleyan University, studied drama at the Emerson School of Oratory in Boston, and later earned a master’s degree from Harvard University. His father was an accountant who in his free time was an artist and inventor. His mother came from a Mississippi family that had been prominent slave-owners before the Civil War. He worked for a while as an actor, but in 1905, he turned down an offer from a professional acting company and joined the faculty at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. There, he taught playwriting and staged plays on campus and on tour, traveling with his student actors some eight hundred miles across the state in his first year.³

The primary influence on Koch and a generation of men and women like him was George Pierce Baker of Harvard. Baker began teaching dramatic literature there in 1884. Eventually he started playwriting classes and developed the 47 Workshop, named after the course number, to produce student-written plays and invite audience critique. Theatre people in the



audience have probably already noticed that this building is not at Harvard — it’s the Yale School of Drama. In 1925, after Harvard refused to create a drama degree, Baker moved to Yale, an institution whose leaders agreed with him about the value of theatre as an academic discipline. And they had the endowment to build him a new theatre building and start a department.⁴

In North Dakota, Koch encouraged his students to use family experiences of frontier and farm life as dramatic subject matter. He also developed the idea of communally-

³ Samuel Selden and Mary Tom Sphangos, *Frederick Henry Koch, Pioneer Playmaker: A Brief Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Library, 1954).

⁴ Wisner Payne Kinne, *George Pierce Baker and the American Theatre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).

written pageants. For example, eighteen students compiled the script for *The Pageant of the North-West*, a dramatization of European settlement. It featured a cast of 300, including students, faculty and staff, members of the community and members of the Turtle Mountain Reservation.



These photos point up an inconsistency about folk drama as the democratic and communal form that Koch described: while Native Americans appeared in the pageant, it is unlikely they helped write it.

Koch and UNC

Koch's success brought him to the attention of UNC president Edward Kidder Graham, who was interested in how Midwestern public universities had created programs to **extend** learning to people beyond the campus, and used scientific knowledge to help public education, economic progress and civic betterment. Following their example, Graham started UNC's extension service. He liked Koch's ideas and thought that folk drama could use the state's people and their heritage to promote unity across class lines and demonstrate to a national audience that the State was a progressive enlightened place with culture, in the artistic expression sense.

Nothing better illustrated Graham's hopes for Koch's work than journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken's 1917 critique of the South, titled "The Sahara of the Bozart." The entire region, according to Mencken, was a cultural desert. Where once there had been a civilization, he claimed, there was now "a vast plain of mediocrity, stupidity, [and] lethargy." There was no art or culture.

"The little theater movement," he observed, "has swept the whole country, enormously augmenting the public interest..., giving new dramatists their chance. Everywhere else the wave rolls high-but along the line of the Potomac it breaks upon a rock-bound shore. There is no little theater beyond. There is no gallery of pictures. No artist ever gives exhibitions. No one talks of such things; No one seems to be interested in such things."⁵

Whether Koch's folk drama would restore a lost civilization or refute the Old South myth by demonstrating that the New South possessed a vital culture was an open question. The region was certainly different from the Midwest of Koch's youth. He probably thought he had some understanding of the South because of his mother, but there was little else in his background to prepare him for the racial segregation, poverty and social conservatism of the Jim Crow South. One of his earliest experiences at UNC was a presentation by a Ku Klux Klan organizer who spoke on campus. The "mysterious Mr. Smith," according to an account in *The Daily Tar Heel*, found few volunteers, but a great deal of skepticism from several audience members including Koch.⁶

Folk drama

⁵ H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," in *H.L. Mencken: Prejudices, First, Second, and Third Series* (New York: Library of America, 2010).

⁶ "Clan Representative Comes to University to Organize Klu Klux," *Tar Heel*, Jan. 28, 1921.

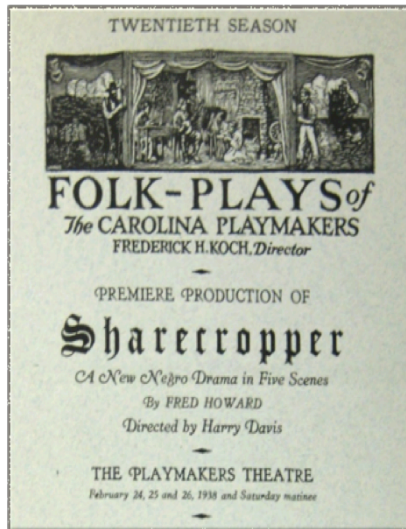
Folk drama echoed the language of white supremacists of the time who argued for a superior Anglo-Saxon race. But Koch never restricted his vision in the search for indigenous drama. Instead, he maintained that every individual, no matter where they came from, had a folk background and a culture. He spoke to middle class white North Carolinians about the "customs of the first English settlers" that were still practiced in the Great Smoky Mountains and "among the dunes of the shifting coast." At the same time he told African American North Carolinians that their culture offered "a rich fund of folk lore, a great heritage," the interpretation of which "should be made by the colored people themselves and for themselves."⁷

From 1918 to 1933, the UNC drama program — classes in playwriting, experimental performances and community service — produced notable writers including Thomas Wolfe and Paul Green. By 1930, Green had won a Pulitzer Prize for drama and Wolfe had published his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*. Other Playmakers graduates were in charge of college and community theatres across the country. Four volumes of student folk plays had been published, collectively selling more than eleven thousand copies.



Under the rubric of folk drama, Koch's students wrote about a wide variety of things. Some plays dramatized old legends or showed the humorous side of college life while others attempted to paint a realistic depiction of the "folk" they knew. These plays, such as *Strike Song*, produced in 1931, about white mill workers; or *Sharecropper*, produced in 1938, about black sharecroppers fighting economic injustice; and Paul Green's Pulitzer-prize winning play, *In Abraham's Bosom*, dramatized the paradoxes and conflicts of the New South. These plays contributed

⁷ Frederick H. Koch, quoted in "The Carolina Playmakers," *New York Times*, December 31, 1922, 13. "Colored Race is Rick in Folk Play Material," noted as "Winston-Salem 1919," newspaper clipping, Carolina Playmakers Scrapbooks, v. 1, North Carolina Collection (NCC), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



to the University's radical reputation and inspired more than one angry letter from trustees and donors.

On the other hand, the Playmakers received positive attention from theatre critics and educators, and were an acknowledged force in the world of regional theatre. While there was a growing list of colleges and universities who had classes in theatre or drama, only a handful had a comprehensive program of theatre writing and production, and UNC was one of the pioneers.

A model for cultural expression

Koch had plans to set up a new department — take the drama classes out of the English Department — and establish a graduate program. These plans changed with the Crash of 1929. In the next academic year, UNC's state appropriations dropped by twenty-five percent, and another twenty percent the following year. Faculty salaries were cut by thirty percent. In drama, state funds covered salaries for Koch and one other instructor, while ticket revenue covered nearly all of the non-salary expenses. This income likewise plummeted with the Great Depression. Only a very welcome grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1933 saved the program and enabled Koch to continue his plans.

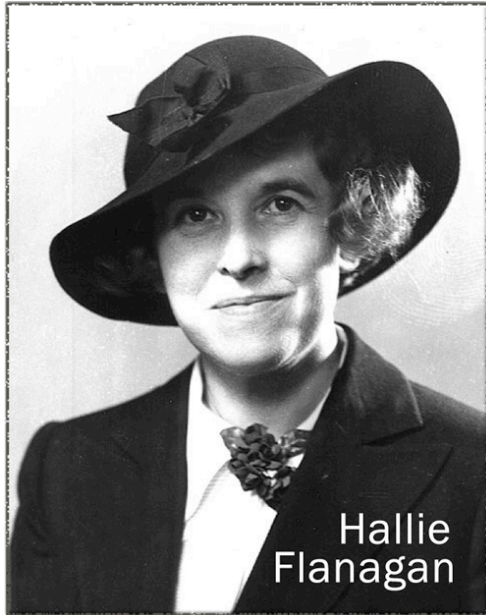
The Rockefeller Foundation was interested in how the humanities might be an active transmitter of culture and understanding. Under the leadership of David Stevens, an English professor from the University of Chicago, the Foundation's humanities division sought ways to bring the benefits of creative expression to more people. The grant to the UNC drama program was the first to any university for that purpose, and the beginning of an effort to which it would devote resources for the next ten years. In addition to UNC, the Foundation eventually supported theatre at Yale, the University of Iowa, Case Western Reserve, Stanford and Cornell.



David H. Stevens

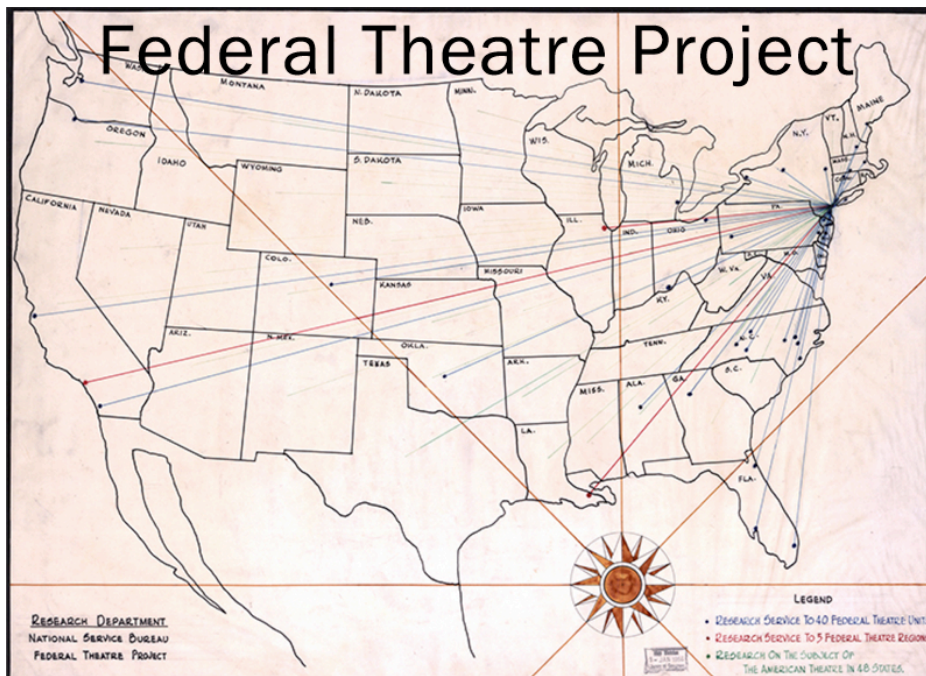
In 1935 — in fact, on this day in 1935 — another project came into being that looked to the Carolina Playmakers as a model for cultural expression. This was the Federal Theatre Project, part of the Works Progress Administration — or WPA.

The WPA was a jobs program, designed to employ people in ways that would use their skills. The professional division included projects for art, music, theatre and writing. Some of the people who helped organize the arts projects believed that the temporary jobs program could be used to develop a government agency devoted to the arts. This included the director of the Federal Theatre Project — Hallie Flanagan.



Flanagan, another protégé of George Pierce Baker, was also a college drama professor — founder of the Vassar College Experimental Theatre. Her challenge was to build a national project — because the federal money came from every state — when most of the tens of thousands of unemployed theatre artists were clustered in New York and Los Angeles. She turned to the

community and college theatre directors like herself who had theatres all across the country. They also believed that the federal government should support art. Frederick Koch was one of the first people that Hallie Flanagan contacted when she took the job.



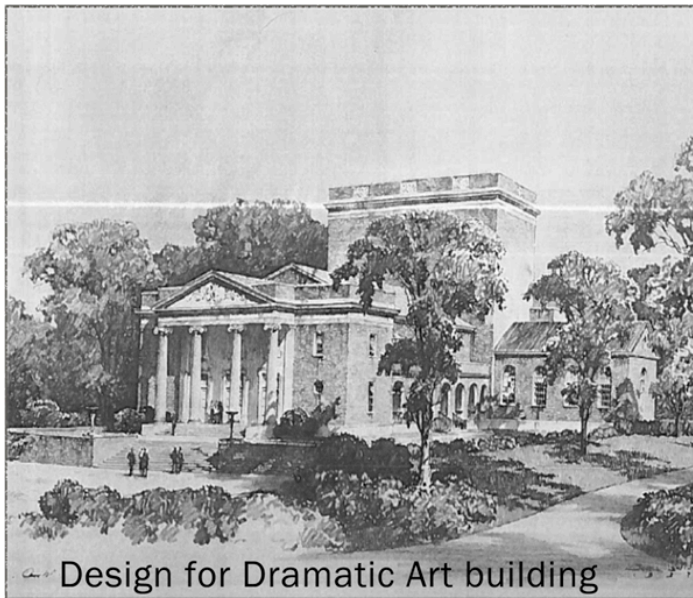
The South was a tough region for the Federal Theatre Project because there were few large cities and very few unemployed theatre professionals. Flanagan initially talked to Koch and Paul Green about a regional center in Chapel Hill, with a company of professional artists based there who would tour the region. In addition, the Federal Project decided to "build on the work of the Playmakers" and employ a professional director to create a community theatre, build local support and train volunteers. This second idea was seen as a way to put theatre into small towns and rural areas and grow new audiences for live performance. Flanagan hoped that eventually the Federal Theatre could use this community theatre setup as a model for other rural states.⁸

The Federal Theatre Project lasted only four years, from 1935 to 1939. In North Carolina, the regional touring company plan never worked out, however, the community theatre idea had better luck. Initially, there were eleven projects: in Asheville, Charlotte, Durham, Goldsboro, Greensboro, Greenville, Manteo, Plymouth, Raleigh, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem; with two separate projects for African Americans in Raleigh and Durham. The Federal Theatre Project — and the Rockefeller Foundation — also supported Paul Green's *The Lost Colony*, which opened on Roanoke Island in 1937.

Department of Dramatic Art

In 1936, UNC created the Department of Dramatic Art and in 1938, the Rockefeller Foundation approved a multiyear operating grant and pledged a \$150,000

endowment if the University secured \$350,000 for a new theatre building.



Design for Dramatic Art building

The Department had outgrown the Playmakers Theatre and the small shop spaces it had scattered around campus. Hallie Flanagan, who still hoped for a regional Federal Theatre center, suggested that the building could be a WPA construction project.

Conditions were promising. *The Lost Colony* was a very successful venture. The

⁸ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: the History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: B. Blom, 1965); Hallie Flanagan to Frederick Koch, Dec. 11, 1935, Folder 11: North Carolina, 1935-36, Box 2188, FTP-National Archives.

Federal Theatre continued to send professionals each summer, supplemented by Playmakers staff, all of whom conducted training programs for community theatre leaders during the summer run. Koch was in discussions with the city of Asheville about a similar setup of outdoor production and training institute there. The University's 1938 request to the state legislature included funds to restore faculty salaries to pre-Depression levels and to authorize a number of new buildings including one for theatre.⁹

The Federal Theatre-WPA construction plan collapsed as political opposition to the New Deal grew in Congress, and culminated in the abrupt cancellation of the Federal Theatre Project in mid-1939. The state legislature funded only the first two buildings on UNC's 1938 list — for social sciences and medical education. A new theatre building needed a private donor or a better funding climate, conditions that UNC would eventually spend many decades waiting for. The Department of Dramatic Art had to eventually give up on the Rockefeller pledge; and the Paul Green Theatre did not get built until 1976.

As 1938 ended, Koch sent Christmas greetings to University president Frank Porter Graham, along with news about new theatre buildings at Amherst College, the University of Wisconsin, and the College of William and Mary in Virginia. The last location was particularly galling. Situated near the new tourist attraction of Colonial Williamsburg, the College of William and Mary had also approached Paul Green to write a play about Jamestown — direct competition for *The Lost Colony* at Roanoke. Koch urged Graham, "We mustn't let Virginia get ahead of us Frank — after our twenty years of pioneering in the South."¹⁰

Pioneering in the South

How pioneering was folk drama? Despite UNC's progressive reputation, the Playmakers reflected their place and time — a conservative, racially segregated region that remained foreign to the rest of the country. Koch could argue for the validity of every group to tell its own story, but he could not integrate casts or audiences in Chapel Hill.

In 1940, in a retrospective about the first twenty years of the Playmakers, he remarked that the theatre had come a long way from the minstrel show and melodrama of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. White and black playwrights had brought realistic black characters to the stage, and to a degree, that work now had an acceptance that had not existed before. Koch could point to the growth of drama programs in

⁹ "Larger University Seeks Less Money, Graham Says," *Raleigh News and Observer*, Oct. 20, 1938.

¹⁰ Koch to Graham, Dec. 2 and Dec. 6, 1938, University of North Carolina Archives, Office of the President, Frank Porter Graham, 40007.

Southern white and black colleges, and how black troupes regularly presented their work at the University, if not on equal social footing as white groups.¹¹



consolidated school," he noted, and of "radio and cinema," who tend to treat folk subjects as colorful material and to "write down" to them and produce a "condescending" rather than sympathetic portrait.¹²

He left it to others to point out the flaws in folk drama. UNC graduate student William Peery wrote an essay the same year, criticizing the genre because it tended to "preserve the past... as a living anachronism." Peery observed that newer generations of college students were removed from the subject matter. They are the "product of the

Frederick Koch died in 1944. The World War II years changed the University of North Carolina as much as it changed American society. The Playmakers left folk drama behind, although the organization remained active until the Department created the professional theatre company — PlayMakers Repertory — in 1976.

That history — from 1940 on — remains largely unexplored. But I promise anyone who wants to study it that there is a treasure trove of primary sources waiting for you.

I'll end with an observation from my dissertation. In a TED talk, Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, suggested that artists are important because they provide a space bigger than people can imagine in their daily lives, and allow a community to "talk about ourselves and to talk to each other." She says that art shows a community "how to look and where to look." I would add that art performs a similar function for the historian, suggesting "how to look and where to look" for ways to understand the past.¹³

Thank you.

¹¹ Frederick H. Koch, "Drama in the South," address delivered on Apr. 5, 1940 for the Southern Regional Theatre Festival, reprinted in Archibald Henderson, ed., *Pioneering a People's Theatre* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), 7-19.

¹² William Peery, "Carolina Playmaking: A Portrait on Its Coming of Age," Bulletin of the Dramatists' Assembly, 1939, in Frederick H. Koch, Jr. Collection, Otto Richter Library, University of Miami.

¹³ Thelma Golden, "How Art Gives Shape to Cultural Change," TED2009, http://www.ted.com/talks/thelma_golden_how_art_gives_shape_to_cultural_change.html

Cecelia Moore delivered this talk on April 8, 2014 in UNC's Wilson Library for the Gladys Hall Coates University History Lecture series.

She is Special Assistant to the Chancellor and University Historian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this role, she prepares briefing materials and speeches, and advises the Chancellor and senior administrators on university history and related issues. A resident of North Carolina for more than twenty years, Moore was drawn to research on the Carolina Playmakers through her background in theater and her interest in history.

Moore holds a BA in Theatre from Barry University in Miami, Florida, and worked as a production assistant and lighting technician before turning to the more stable career of university development. Her first job at UNC was development director for PlayMakers Repertory Company, which provided her with the opportunity to explore the rich history of drama at Carolina. She pursued this interest through further studies. Moore earned an MA in Public History at North Carolina State University and a PhD in History at UNC.