I am a PhD student in the English department at Ohio State University. My areas of study are Folklore, Ethnography, Appalachian Studies and Literary Studies. When I first considered applying for the Berea Sound Archives Fellowship in June 2010, I was interested in knowing more about the settlement schools that were established in Kentucky in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I also knew that the Leonard Roberts Collection would be pertinent to my broad interest in the history of education in the Appalachian Mountains. The primary focus of my Fellowship work that I eventually decided on was the audio recordings in Berea’s Leonard Roberts Collection that documented his use of folktale as a teaching resource. A secondary focus was the early records that documented educational philosophy and methodology of Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County, Kentucky where in later years, Leonard Roberts was a teacher.

In the course of my research I discovered that the Leonard Roberts Collection is highly pertinent to the type of work I want to do for my dissertation. I am interested in the ways that current Appalachian-themed courses (Appalachian Studies, Appalachian Folklore, Appalachian Literature, etc.) describe and respond to pedagogies from the earlier half of the 20th century. Specifically, I’m interested in the response to the settlement schools, their founders, and their ideologies of uplift and community service.

The audio and manuscript material I accessed and discussions with Archives staff have led to my understanding that the relationship is not only different from what I expected, but also quite a bit more complicated. In the process I came to the understanding that Folklorist, Leonard Roberts, was also an excellent teacher who had some quite remarkable pedagogical techniques.

Leonard Roberts Collection

The majority of my Fellowship work was spent listening to sound recordings of Leonard Ward Roberts (1912-1983). I logged and partially transcribed eighteen audio recordings of his lectures and storytelling. Manuscript material of special interest included his teaching aids and class syllabi which provided an understanding of his teaching philosophy and suggested what it might have been like in one of his classes.

Leonard Roberts was what Appalachian scholar, Loyal Jones calls a “mountain boy” who was born in the region, left the region, and then returned. He taught in a number of schools mostly in Kentucky, including Pine Mountain Settlement School. He was on the faculty at Pikeville College at the time of his death. While Roberts was teaching at the Berea Foundation School (pre-college) in the 1950s, he began collecting folktales from his students. He would take a homesick student to visit his or her parents in Clay, Leslie and Perry counties, and there he would record the family’s tales. Roberts didn’t just publish these stories, though; he also used them in his classrooms to help students develop confidence in their writing abilities.

Leonard Roberts, the storyteller, eventually developed a story that he told about how he got his students to write:
... here we are with some sort of an old grammar book, you know, that you never can get your teeth into, and I couldn’t get them to write very much. They might write a little old scribbly bit about half a page. And then I read a jack tale to them, and you didn’t know what quite to think, but I realized they took it in because I’d say why don’t you practice writing telling that story. And I saw them begin to lick their pencils, and get them out and sharpen them up. And pretty soon they’d scratched off over a page or something. And I never could get them to write that much on just a theme, you know, theme-topic. You know, ‘what did I do last Sunday.’ [Laughter.] Something like that you might tell them what to do, pick a topic for them or something. I found that I was picking good topics, and some of them on the strength of that I began to ask them to write a story you know, not ones I played to you and read to you. (AC-CT-006-005)

He felt that their writing the story enabled them to tap into their own culture—their own knowledge—and then write freely, without feeling the pressure of academic correctness:

I’d tell the story and then say well I guess I tricked you—let’s see if you can write that up. [laughter] Write five or six pages there before I could get out of the way. That’s the best way to learn to teach writing in the world, I guess. Of course, you have to help them with spelling and punctuation later, but those are just incidentals. They’re thinking and feeling with words here, you see, if they’re working with their own life and literature. (AC-CT-006-001)

I think what Roberts did to reach his students is strikingly inventive because his one action produced an abundance of relationships, reactions, and consequences that are more complex than meets the eye. In the classroom, Roberts became two persons merged into one: the teacher-storyteller. In doing so he merged the two types of people who are supposed to lead a young person through life by giving advice, correcting behavior, and providing examples. He also bridged the student’s home and school life by highlighting his dual relationship to them: he was a mountain boy who was also their teacher; he understood where they came from, respected that place, and sought to help them reach their goals, whatever they might be.

This is only part of the social and imaginative processes that I believe took place when Roberts introduced Appalachian tales into his classrooms. The integration of Southern Appalachian, specifically local eastern Kentucky folklore, into the classroom also legitimated the student’s daily lives within the academy. It validated, according to the university’s standards and values, the tradition from which they came and integrated a part of their home life into their school life. I imagine that Roberts was quite a comforting face and voice for the students who felt homesick or felt out of place at school.

Lastly, the imaginative process that is invoked during storytelling—what folklore scholar, Carl Lindahl calls the *understory*—must have been a very important part of Roberts’ ability to connect with his students. I envision Roberts telling a story to his students and them sitting back in their chairs imagining a scene from “Raglif Jaglif Tetartlif Pole” or “Jack and the Giants.” In such a setting, the room is filled with imaginations and memories that are less easily forgotten than those that are created by learning out of a book or lecture. At the very least, it is a good starting point with underprivileged students—a way to begin their engagement with the educational process, because it can be alienating and discouraging at times.
I believe Roberts’ techniques shed some light not only on the importance of the imagination in the learning process, but also on the types of relationships teachers (especially at the college level) can have with their students. Roberts, from what I can gather, was a mentor, someone who guided his students and, most importantly, met them where they were. In one of the last tapes I listened to and transcribed (AC-OR-006-002) I heard Roberts making efforts over and over again to reach the students in one of Loyal Jones’ Berea College classes. When they didn’t respond to his first question he moved into story mode; when they were shy in responding to another question he cracked a joke to make them laugh. If he thought they were having trouble connecting to a period of history he told it as if it were a long story, complete with dialogue and vocal variation. He never gave up trying to reach the students, and his efforts paid off because on the second tape (AC-OR-006-002-B) they started opening up and asking him questions about the stories he’d told.

**Conclusion**

Support provided by my Southern Appalachian Sound Archives Fellowship grant has been immensely helpful in the pursuit of my doctoral studies. In addition to the rich archival material I accessed, there were many helpful insights gained as the result of thought provoking conversations with Archives staff. They were both eager to understand my project and to answer questions I had about materials. Out of these discussions came suggestions for additional print sources to pursue and the opportunity for an insightful interview with Appalachian scholar, Loyal Jones who was well acquainted with Leonard Roberts and his work.

The near term outcome of my Fellowship study will be a conference paper, “Educating Appalachia: A Semiotic Analysis of Individuals and Institutions,” to be presented at the American Folklore Society annual meeting in Nashville, October 2010. More broadly, my Fellowship study and return visits to the Berea Archives are forming the basis for the historical section of my dissertation. This section will heavily influence my interpretations of data collected through observation fieldwork in a small number of Appalachian-themed courses at 2-3 colleges in the region.