



Felix Robinson

A Minister, Classical Musician, a Friend of Eleanor Roosevelt and Native of Garrett County, Maryland

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Few individuals experience the success and notoriety of Garrett County native, Felix Robinson. A person of impressive intellectual and emotional energy, he embraced a variety of interests in the spirit of a Renaissance man throughout his lifetime. While Robinson's life journey lead him to lofty places and events, he remained closely connected to Garrett County, Maryland.

Felix Robinson's story begins in 1898 as the son of Dr. John and Martha Robinson. He attended Garrett County elementary and high schools prior to enrolling at Gettysburg College in 1916. Upon completion of studies, he was offered a position at the college teaching ancient languages and history before entering the Lutheran Seminary also located in Gettysburg. A Bachelor of Divinity degree was awarded in 1925 to be followed by successive pastorates

in Queens, the Bronx, and Long Island, New York. Additional divinity studies at the University of Chicago and Union Theological Seminary in New York City completed formal training in the ministry while a stint with Loudon Charlton, impresario at Carnegie Hall, brought him into contact with the most influential musicians of the time.

Later assignments at Trinity Lutheran Church in Keyser, West Virginia, and a non denominational church in Arthurdale, West Virginia, allowed Reverend Robinson and his family to return to the Allegheny Mountains. Arthurdale, a rural New Deal homestead community located in Preston County, proved to be particularly well suited to the pastor who long sought unity among disparate Christian

groups. Members from seventeen different denominations, including two Quaker families, regularly worshipped together!

While ministering in Arthurdale, Reverend Robinson organized an a capella choir who's repertoire consisted of works by Victoria, Mozart, Palestrina, and Bach. And during a time when such performances were generally confined to metropolitan centers, choir members committed to memory more than 100 choral works and could present one of five completely different concerts. According to Ariel Robinson, son of Felix Robinson and Garrett County resident, "Very few professional groups could do that anymore."

Felix Robinson's relationships within the classical music community made possible an appearance by Felix Mendelssohn, grand nephew of the famous German composer of the same name. According to Muriel Franc, daughter of Felix Robinson, Mendelssohn's performance was broadcast over national radio, thereby enhancing the cultural reputation of Arthurdale and the choral director. Mendelssohn also provided cello lessons to Muriel while she attended school in Baltimore.

Robinson's choral accomplishments caught the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady and benefactor of Arthurdale. Muriel recalls that her father and Eleanor became good friends and corresponded regularly regarding musical interests. Mr. Robinson's conversations were so highly valued by Mrs. Roosevelt that she hosted the choral director and wife, Lucille, for tea at Hyde Park, home of the Roosevelt's.

Additional friends and associates were Johana and Roy Harris. Johana was the premier North American pianist and music educator of the 1940s and 1950s, while her husband became the "dean" of American composers until Aaron Copeland's rise to prominence. Ariel Robinson remembers that, "Johana Harris was the finest pianist performing in the United States. Her greatest talent was an inexhaustible ability to improvise. Some critics believed that she had the same genius as Mozart. My father met her at the Westminster Choir School and they became lifelong friends."

Mr. Robinson's passion for choral music also led to the formation of the Mountain Choir Festival in 1934, a summer event held in the Amphitheater at Mountain Lake Park. The series attracted choir directors, musicians, and members of the arts community from four states, while achieving national stature. The Mountain Choir



Lucille Henry Robinson



Muriel Robinson Franc



Ariel Robinson

Festival ran from 1934-1941 and was sometimes broadcast by radio to a nationwide audience over NBC stations. Another highlight was the 1941 performance of Eleanor Steber, dramatic soprano of the Metropolitan Opera.

A musical Folk Festival was also organized in the 1930s and ran into the next decade. This series highlighted Mr. Robinson's association with major figures in the field, including Appalachian folklorist Jean Thomas and added another cultural attraction to Garrett County.

The most impressive aspect of Felix Robinson's musical accomplishments is what did not happen—formal training. Felix Robinson was self-taught in all aspects of the field! A violin virtuoso, choir conductor, composer, and featured solo tenor, Mr. Robinson's spirit of inquiry knew few boundaries as he explored the world of classical music.

An important musical influence on Felix Robison was his wife, Lucille. Formally trained at Fairmont Normal School (forerunner of Fairmont State University) where she graduated at the age of 19, Lucille accompanied her husband to Gettysburg and became the first supervisor of music in the local public school system. When residing in New York, she would regularly accompany artists of the day and later during the Mountain Lake festivals performed similar roles. "She was an excellent teacher and musician. Without mother, my father would not have been able to achieve as much as he did," stated Muriel. Lucille was also a major influence on the Robinson family ensemble that participated in school and church events when the children were young.

Felix Robinson returned to Oakland, Maryland, in 1949 and immediately began work on the town's centennial observances. His composition, "The Ballad of Oakland," may be the only history of a town written in poetic form; portions of it were set to music. A second poem, "The Glades of Garrett," was also dedicated to his home county, while additional works were inspired by local events and landmarks.

Literary interests lead to the creation of *Tableland Trails* in 1952, a periodical devoted to history, culture, and folklore of the mid-Allegheny Mountains. Muriel recalled the beginning of the publication, "My father called me when I was working in Virginia and asked if I would help with the magazine. So, I returned and helped to get everything started."

Ariel Robinson created most of the artwork for the *Tableland Trails* covers. Additionally, he accompanied his father on visits to advertisers and local historians, thereby making the publication a family enterprise and part of his upbringing. Ariel vividly recalls those days, "My father was an exuberant person who was always wanting to converse. He would often bring guests to our home where discussions would go on for days."

The first issue of *Tableland Trails* was published in 1953 and it ran until 1963. Today, the magazines are considered to be historical treasures for history and book enthusiasts.



The Amphitheater at Mountain Lake Park where Mr. Robinson's Mountain Choir Festivals were held.

Mr. Robinson's interests and beliefs extended into social issues, including race relations. During the 1930s when Jim Crow practices prevailed in many parts of the country, African Americans experienced discrimination that could be difficult to remedy. Reverend Robinson had no problem acting upon his deeply held beliefs and confronted racial prejudice wherever it was to be found. Upon discovering that a Ku Klux Klan group was clandestinely meeting in the church basement, Reverend Robinson entered the room unannounced, jumped onto a table and exclaimed, "This meeting is over!" His act of courage caused the KKK to retaliate by burning a cross near the church building. Also, when hosting the Mountain Choir Festival during the 1930s in Mountain Lake Park, an African American group was invited.

Mr. Robinson continued to pursue eclectic interests in the town of Oakland until his sudden passing in 1967. It was appropriate that his passing occurred in Garrett County. As Ariel stated, "My father felt it unnecessary to be immersed in the urban centers of society to be important and influential."

Today, visitors to the Garrett County Historical Museum in Oakland are welcome to view issues of *Tableland Trails*, festival programs, photographs, and other archival information relating to his life. A vast collection of his works was donated to Georgetown University in 1991. While five decades have passed since Felix Robinson maintained a busy schedule in Oakland, the extent and quality of his accomplishments continue to impress historians and inspire those gifted with the spirit of inquiry.

The Garrett County Historical Museum is located at 107 South 2nd Street, downtown Oakland, Maryland. Summer hours are Monday through Saturday, 10:00 am - 3:00 pm.