From: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Communities Organizing For Change
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Highlander Folk School and the Citizenship Schools

The citizenship schools were probably the most profound contribution of all those made to the emerging civil rights movement by movement halfway houses, and Highlander made that contribution. During the 1940s and early 1950s Esau Jenkins, a black community leader of Johns Island, South Carolina, spent long hours trying to formulate methods by which his people could overthrow the yoke of domination. One day Jenkins hit upon what he considered “the solution.” He reasoned that blacks were oppressed because they had no political power, so the vote was the key to freedom. He was overwhelmed by the idea that the main obstacle standing between blacks on Johns Island and the vote was their inability to read or write.

The “white man” required blacks to read and interpret complicated sections of the Constitution of South Carolina before they were allowed to vote. The “white man” had the system of domination structured so that blacks were systematically excluded from the opportunities to learn to read and write. Jenkins decided that he would teach them. He drove busloads of blacks to their work places in Charleston from Johns Island.

Jenkins, who himself had little formal education, set up a school on the bus and began teaching blacks how to read the South Carolina Constitution. For thirty minutes each working day, the blacks who rode Jenkin’s bus struggled with complicated sentences that included such words as “miscegenation,” “larceny,” and “patriotism.” That remarkable effort, however, resulted in the addition of very few blacks to the voting rolls; it did not yield the sort of political power that Jenkins had envisioned. The efforts of one man could not wipe out the massive black illiteracy that had existed for centuries. The collective efforts and resources of countless people were needed to attack the problem effectively.

Jenkins’s friend, Septima Clark, who had taught in the public schools on Johns Island and who was also affiliated with Highlander, asked Jenkisns to accompany her to its workshops. After much persuasion Jenkins agreed to participate in a workshop on the United Nations. AT the end of the session participants were asked, “What are you going to do for the United Nations?” Mrs. Clark recalls Jenkins’s response: “I don’t want to do a thing for the United Nations. I want to do something for Johns Island. I want black people of Johns Island to learn to read and write, so they can register to vote. This is the kind of thing, and if you can help me, I can get them together.” Jenkins explained that a building, books, and transportation were needed to make such an effort fruitful. Horton remembers Jenkins as a brilliant man who knew exactly “what he wanted to do, and he also knew what he wanted us to do.” Indeed, “He knew we were into education and he thought we might be able to figure this thing out.” Soit was decided to organize schools for teaching blacks on Johns Island to read and write so they could seize political power.

Clark, Horton, and Jenkins spent several months on Johns Island formulation an educational program that was to become extremely successful. Their first step was an investigation to discover why other educational methods had failed. Horton and his team found that educational programs existing on Johns Island had money.

They had money from the state fund, the federal fund for literacy training for black people, but they couldn't get any black people to take the training. It wasn't lack of money. They had teachers who hadn't had a class in two years, just getting on the payroll for doing nothing. The black people who were teachers couldn't find anybody to teach.

Then it was discovered that mature people who labored in the fields and headed large families had been made to sit at little school desks designed for children. Children of the community joked about the men who sat at those desks, referring to them as "Daddy Long-Legs." The adults were also being taught as children,

…step-by-step; a-b-c-d; "the ball is red"; "New York is a big city." They were being asked to delay reading sentences useful to them until they could read sentences of dubious value to children. It seemed very far from the Constitution. The few who had enrolled just stopped going to classes.

Horton, who understood the culture of the poor and the working class, was appalled at this group's discoveries. It was decided that an effective educational program would have to honor the life-style and self-work of the people on Johns Island. It would have to discard the paraphernalia of grade schools. Horton decided that intimate knowledge of the people was required before an authentic program could be instituted. He moved to Johns Island and lived there for several months. Horton recalls that once he was situated,

> *… I would just sit and watch them. Go fishing with them, work with them and sit in homes with them. You began to see how they live. Get a feel on it. Got to internalize it. How do you treat this person with respect? How do you honor their dignity? Somehow it was just intuitive. You wouldn't make a survey to find out. You have to get closer to it than that.*

After the "field work" had been completed, Horton, Clark, and Jenkins met to formulate the guidelines for the program.

It was agreed that the program would not be limited to voter registration training. It would be built around " 'big ideas,' 'adult ideas,' ideas worthy of a good, strong, intelligent people." They believed that blacks on Johns Island would learn to read and write if they came to view voting, writing, and reading as an obligation and a political responsibility. They began to find ways to convince blacks that they owed it to their grandchildren and the community to learn to read, write, vote, and change society. Horton explained:

> *We decided we'd pitch it on a basis of them becoming full citizens and taking their place in society and demanding their rights and being real men and women in their own right. Putting into practice all these religious things they talked about, and the humanitarian things they talked about, and doing something about it. They owed it to the future generations.*

In other words, the citizenship schools were designed for goals similar to those of the emerging civil rights movement. Horton's group turned to practical matters once the guiding principles of its novel educational approach were cemented into place.

The first practical decision was to use a non-teacher, because anyone trained as a teacher would probably revert to traditional schoolroom methods. Horton persuaded a black beautician, Bernice Robinson, to become the first citizenship teacher. Classes would be held in the back room of Jenkins's small co-op store two nights a week for two hours, covering a three-month period. Benches, pencils, paper, and a stove were placed in the room, and explicit instructions were given to keep the environment simple. The adult students were told that they could come and go as they pleased and if they wished they could sew, knit, chew tobacco, or use snuff while learning to read and write. The idea was to maintain a "homey" environment and at all costs to avoid intimidating the students. Finally, Robinson was instructed to "keep the ideas big."

By this time Clark had joined the staff at Highlander on a full-time basis as Director of Education after being fired from teaching in the public schools for her NAACP activities. While Robinson taught on the Island, Clark refined the educational program. She reports: "In '56 and '57 night after night I sat down and wrote out a citizenship education program which would help illiterates to learn to read and write, so they could register to vote." Clark became the theoretician of the citizenship school, while Robinson creatively taught adults the difficult task of reading and writing.

The method employed in the school followed Highlander's axiom that the oppressed had to be educated through their own concrete experiences. Robinson began a class by asking the participants what they wished to learn. Many of the students wanted to learn to write their names in their Bibles, others wanted to write to their sons in the military, and some wanted to make out money orders. Robinson laboriously worked through these formidable tasks. At times the students were instructed to visit the employment office and return with the name of the supervisor, the hours the office was open, and information about how they could apply for work. Clark recounts:

> *When they came back the next night, they'd bring us this information. Then we had dry cleaners' bags and hung it on a broomstick. They learned to read those things that were said to them. That's one way of teaching the reading.*

Many ingenious methods were used. People were taught to write words they had sung for years. Newspapers were brought in, and words taken from them were woven into new paragraphs.

As soon as the students learned to read and write simple ideas, Robinson challenged them with the "big ideas." After the first group had successfully mastered the basic tasks, Robinson asked Horton to send over the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Horton, a little bewildered by the request, sent over a copy. A few days later he discovered that "Bernice was absolutely right. She wanted to treat these people as world citizens and adults, and let them learn something important. They would struggle to learn that. Damned if they didn't learn to read that and to copy it instead of, 'Mary did this and that.' Horton went on to say that Mrs. Robinson "was getting them to work. It was perfect. These people felt important. They were important. They weren't treated like kids. They were treated like adults. They

were into adult stuff. We found that big words were no harder to learn than little words. If they wanted to learn them, they'd learn them." They were reading the South Carolina Constitution, smoothly pronouncing such words as "miscegenation," and becoming familiar with other big words they had never heard.