

From: The Origins Of The Civil Rights Movement

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Movement Halfway Houses – The Highlander Folk School

The Highlander Folk School (HFS) played three important roles in the civil rights movement. First, before and during the movement the HFS assisted in pulling together black leadership. Second, as an institution it provided a visible and successful model of a future integrated society. Finally, the HFS developed a successful mass education program that was later transferred to the SCLC, along with three trained staff members. That program was revolutionary from an educational, political, and social standpoint and was directly involved in the mobilization of the civil rights movement.

The Highlander Folk School was organized and directed by a remarkable man, Myles Horton. Horton, born in 1905, came from a poor white working-class family in the small town of Savannah, Tennessee. According to Horton, "I was poor, we were sharecroppers, we worked in factories. I had to leave home when I was fourteen to go to school, and start earning my own living – we lived in the country and we didn't have a school.... I was the first person in my family ever to go to college." Poor Southern whites of Appalachia had begun to suffer acutely by the 1920s, already experiencing the economic and social impact of the Great Depression that wrecked the national economy during the 1930s. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Horton began searching for effective solutions to the problems of these oppressed mountain people.

After working closely with mountain people in Ozone, Tennessee, during his senior year at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee, Horton searched for answers at Union Theological Seminary in New York. There Horton met a great theoretician of the social gospel, Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, who influenced him and encouraged him to think about "the idea of a school in the mountains for mountain people." By then Horton had become an avid reader, and after absorbing the works of John Dewey, Edward Lindeman, and Joseph Hart, he was convinced that adult education could be used as a potent agent of social change. In 1930 Horton left New York to study for a year with Robert E. Park, a pioneering sociologist at the University of Chicago.

While in Chicago, Horton learned that folk schools had existed in Denmark since 1864. Late in 1931 he traveled to Denmark, studied those schools, and interviewed the older folk school directors. Horton returned to the mountains of Tennessee in 1932 with definite ideas about how to organize an effective folk school. He decided against modeling the HFS after existing institutions because, after reading numerous books and visiting various schools, Horton "found that they were all too opinionated and doctrinaire, academic... but primarily they did not deal with the problems of people. They only dealt with some conception of what education is, and imposed it on people." Rejecting these "models,"

Horton located himself and the HFS among the oppressed mountain people and began studying the problems of their everyday lives.

The basic philosophy of Highlander was the idea that oppressed people know the answers to their own problems and the “teacher’s job is to get them talking about those problems, to raise and sharpen questions, and to trust people to come up with the answers.” Horton stressed, however, that the answers to problems of the oppressed line in the experiences and imagination of the group rather than individuals. He argued that the oppressed seldom discover these answers, because they do not engage in group analysis. In his words:

They’ve got much of the knowledge as a group. Not as individuals, but the group as a whole has much of the knowledge that they need to know to solve their problems. If they only knew how to analyze what their experiences were, what they know, and generalize them...they would begin to draw on their own resources.

Horton insisted that the way to bring about change for the oppressed was by a process of education through actual experiences. Highlander’s philosophical outlook was derived from religious principles and Marxism. Yet Horton persistently held that theoretical and academic approaches were of no value if they did not grapple with practical problems. Highlander’s staff operated under the following assumptions: (1) Education through experience was a potent social change force. (2) The solutions to oppression were rooted in the experiences and communities of the oppressed. (3) People and their situations would inform Highlander’s educational programs. (4) The task of changing society rested on the shoulders of the oppressed. In this way, Horton points out, “we stay with the people, we have ideas, we have philosophy, we have theories, but we always stay where the people are. [And] try to give a little leadership, help develop leadership among the people, whatever stage of development they’re at a given time.” Over the years Horton and Highlander “stayed with the people,” both geographically and educationally.

Highlander attempted to assist the oppressed in overcoming their problems by training potential leaders. It was too small, and its resources were too meager, to train more than just the potential leaders. Potential leaders from local communities dealing with the same problems were identified, brought to Highlander, and taught to analyze their situation in a group context. Then the leaders were taught how to go back and take other community people through the same process. Horton contended that it was crucial to train leaders to introduce the process to the community.

If you don’t do that, they inevitably go back with these ideas, get up with all these solutions and people say what they do to anybody that comes up with solutions: “Go ahead and do it. Fine, go ahead and do it.”... We debunk the leadership role of going back and telling people and providing the thinking for them. We aren’t into that. We’re into people who can help other people develop and provide educational leadership and ideas, but at the same time, bring people along.

From the beginning Horton envisioned HFS as an integrated institution, a rarity in the South of the 1930s. Horton’s persistent attempts to attract blacks to Highlander usually went unrewarded. Blacks

who attended Highlander were taking a great risk, because such participation would at best cause them to lose jobs and, at worst, their lives. Chances of being discovered were fairly good, because the HFS was often under surveillance. It was constantly accused of being a communist training ground. Yet during the early 1930s, a few black leaders, such as Professor Herman Davis of Knoxville College and the black sociologist Charles Johnson of Fisk, took a chance and visited the HFS.

When efforts to unionize workers became widespread in the South, the HFS found itself directly involved in the conflict and conducted numerous workshops for labor groups. Highlander's staff also assisted workers on the picket lines, taught them protest music, and performed many other services for the labor movement. Horton maintains that the labor movement showed many Southerners that poor blacks and poor whites had common economic interests. Hence the question of racial oppression immediately confronted the labor movement. For example, during the late 1930s some workers who had attended the HFS attempted unsuccessfully to organize the all-black labor force of a pickle factory into a CIO union. Horton asked his friend E. D. Nixon – the man who would later play a prominent part in organizing the Montgomery bus boycott – to organize the black workers.

The majority of working-class white Southerners upheld segregation in the belief that blacks were inferior and segregation was their “way of life.” Even common class interests were not enough to dissuade them. Horton found, as he worked with labor unions, that racial segregation “just kept blocking everything.” Horton had wanted HFS to be integrated because it was the “right thing to do,” but, he now discovered, “We weren't hitting that problem head on programmatically, but later as we worked in the labor unions ... we had to deal with it head on.”

“In 1940, Highlander informed all the unions that it served in the South that the school would no longer hold worker's education programs for unions that discriminated against blacks.” One scholar of the HFS states that the position taken by Highlander

...first paid off four years later when Paul Christopher, regional CIO director and a member of Highlander's board, organized a workshop for the United Auto Workers. It was attended by forty union members, black and white, from every corner of the South. The workers attended classroom sessions on collective bargaining, the economics of the auto and aircraft industry and the UAW's postwar plans; while there, they also organized a cooperative food store. After this, Highlander began urging other unions to join the pioneering UAW. Support was soon developed from the Tennessee Industrial Union Council and the Southern Farmer's Union. Others followed.

Horton's treasured dream of Highlander as an integrated institution was finally materializing. In the 1940s Highlander began pulling Southern black and white leaders together and encouraging them to struggle against domination.

Highlander's staff believed that oppressed people remain dominated because they are unaware of isolated individual efforts made by some of their members to overthrow domination. Thus Highlander's role has been to send its staff to oppressed communities and bring the potential leaders together so they

can exchange information and build group resources. Earlier HFS had brought together leaders of coal miners, labor organizers, and leaders of educational institutions. People interested in solving the same problems attended the workshop uniquely organized for them. Highlander developed techniques that enabled every potential leader to participate by speaking up and sharing his or her respective knowledge. Horton found it important to develop these sharing techniques, because otherwise the “talkers” would monopolize the discussion.

Once solutions emerged in workshops, Highlander’s staff turned to questions of action. They informed the potential leaders:

The way to use this information is not to say that we have learned a lot, and isn’t it wonderful and great to have been at Highlander? Unlike people in school, there’s no exams to put it down and then you’re through with it. You’re here to act on it. It was education for action.... Now, how you going to act on this? Let’s just plan what you’re going to do when you go back. Let’s start talking about how you’re going to use this new insight and understanding you’ve got.... So they begin to formulate their actions so when they leave, they’re geared to action. They got plans they’re going to carry out when they get back...Then we say, now when are you going to do this? You get time in that.

One’s “diploma” from HFS was the action performed upon return to the local community.

Beginning in the mid-1940s, Horton and Highlander’s staff brought together blacks and whites at the school specifically to confront the problem of segregation and to discuss the United Nations, world problems, local problems, school problems, and community organization. As time passed, individuals who wanted to meet on an interracial basis and discuss racial problems would hear about Highlander and find their way there, often bringing others with similar concerns. During the 1940s and 1950s HFS attracted a particular segment of the black population. As Horton stated, “What you had to do in the pre-civil rights period was to find black people who for the most part were in situations where they weren’t too dependent on white people. Otherwise, they would lose their jobs for coming.” For that reason HFS attracted black ministers, funeral home directors, beauticians, people in unions, and independent small farmers.

Horton discovered that black beauticians were quite important in the pre-civil rights period:

A black beautician, unlike a white beautician, was at that time a person of some status in the community. They were entrepreneurs, they were small businesswomen, you know, respected, they were usually better educated than other people, and most of all they were independent. They were independent of white control. Just by sheer accident, I noticed that some of the people that came to Highlander were beauticians, and I followed up that lead and used to run beautician’s workshops at Highlander, just for beauticians.

Horton explained that people thought his main consideration when he organized beautician workshops was vocational. “They thought that I was bringing these beauticians together to talk about straightening hair or whatever the hell they do.” But, he continued, “I was just using them because they were community leaders and they were independent....We used to use beauticians’ shops all over the South to distribute Highlander literature on integration.”

During the 1940s and 1950s independent blacks, including E. D. Nixon, Shuttlesworth, Reverend Vivian, Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, and others, visited the integrated school surrounded by poor mountain people. Significantly, Rosa Parks attended Highlander workshops just four months before she “sat” into history. A number of black leaders met each other for the first time at HFS and began relationships that would prove important during the movement. Highlander’s message to these leaders was that the dominated themselves had to bring about social change, or none would result. Horton would inform the community leaders that they “couldn’t wait for some government edict or some Messiah, it had to be done by the people. And that was a message that wasn’t too well received.” The reason:

Both blacks and whites thought somehow somebody would do this big thing. They wouldn’t have to do it. They couldn’t do it, they didn’t know how to start it Somebody was going to do it for them....Blacks would quite often say to me, “it isn’t right that we have to struggle, we have to stick our necks out, that we have to take chances. We didn’t ask for this. The people who are doing this to us should have to change, and they should be the ones that do this.”

Horton had heard these same pleas from the mountain people. While understanding their perspective, he put forth another view:

I’d always agree that [the dominators] should [change], that the blacks weren’t responsible for their plight, they were victims, and you should never blame the victims, but I said, “You know, now that that’s agreed on, let’s talk about the reality.” The reality was [Southern whites] aren’t going to change, the realities are they never will, and there’s nothing in history to suggest that they will, so the right thing is not going to be done... so if that’s not going to be done, black people are going to have to force the white people to respect them...the burden and the responsibility is on the whites, but the burden of change is on the blacks.

In this way HSF pulled together many of the individuals who became civil rights leaders and prodded them to become activists.

In the early 1950s black students came to Highlander, many of them children of economically independent adults who had attended the school. Of the rest, a significant portion had heard of Highlander by word of mouth or directly from Horton, who frequently spoke at black colleges about Highlander and its programs. Young blacks often thought their parents and Horton were kidding, because the idea of an integrated school up on a mountain, surrounded by blue lakes, sounded like a fairy tale. They had been taught that failure to keep a distance from whites and respond to them with “yes,sir” rather than “yes” could be fatal. They had heard adults speaking softly of how fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was killed in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. To these young people the existence of a place like HFS seemed unreal.

Gradually young blacks took the trek up the winding mountain and discovered that Highlander was, indeed, a reality. Many of them were attending college, where they were immersed in academic theories. Highlander’s workshops looked to them like the ideal setting in which to expound academic theories. Horton informed them that, on the contrary, Highlander’s workshops were designed to deal

with concrete community problems. Horton's admonitions upset parents and students, so he decided in 1953 to create the "Annual Highlander Folk School College Workshops." The students accepted the idea and began to attend the annual workshops organized specifically for them. As a result, Highlander was also bringing young black leadership together. Many future sit-in leaders, such as Marion Barry, the present Mayor of Washington, D.C., James Bevel, Diane Nash, John Lewis, and Bernard Lafayette, were visitors to Highlander.

At the college workshop of April 1959 a number of issues were discussed. Resolutions were made regarding "campus censorship; integration of college faculties and student bodies; exchange opportunities between Negro and white colleges; treatment of the 'minority' student Negro or white as the case may be; and fraternity exclusion." The Reverend James Bevel, a young student at the time, spoke of a 1959 workshop he attended at Highlander:

That's when I first met Mrs. Septima Clark, Myles Horton, and I guess for the first time in my life, I was introduced to a man who reminded me of Socrates. Myles was a guy who'd ask questions about your assumptions. He would challenge you on your inferior feelings. He sort of decrudded Negroes from being Negroes and making them think of themselves as men and women. His psyche didn't agree with a "nigger" being a "nigger." So that's not a game with him. He has arrived at a self-respect and self-appreciation of mankind. He, in that sense, is not a liberal, he's an enlightened man. When you come upon it, and you assume that you're a Negro, and you assume that white folks are oppressing you, he would tear your assumptions up. He, like, destroyed all the false assumptions of the oppressor and made us deal with the fact that we were cowards and that we were lying, and were not serious about being who we said we were.

Bevel's conception of Highlander and its staff during the late 1950s was shared by the other activists interviewed for this study who had visited Highlander.

Being an integrated institution, HFS provided its participants with a microcosm of an integrated society and facilitated interpersonal relationships of social equality through the use of music, poetry, song, and dance. The staff recognized the centrality of human feelings in social life and in social action designed to change society. At HFS one found well-equipped, expertly staffed departments of drama and music, as well as the academic subjects. Zilphia Horton, director of the music department, traveled through oppressed communities singing and recording the songs and experiences of indigenous people. She visited picket lines of workers during the 1930s and 1940s and observed the solidifying role that music played in protest activities. Those songs were meticulously recorded and stored away in Highlander's music files. Myles Horton had discovered in 1931, while studying the Denmark folk schools, that the successful ones had been "emotionally charged."

Emotions and the lessons of racism usually determined the behavior of the newly integrated recruits who nervously entered Highlander for the first time. The staff members were trained to make these recruits comfortable by engaging them in music, song, and dance before entering the workshops. The immediate task was to create a new social definition of the situation. That is, blacks had to be convinced that they could trust whites at Highlander and that interracial encounters would not cause

them to be thrown into a river for failing to arrive at the “true” definition of the situation. Horton related:

And as you know, black people can't be very easily fooled. And it doesn't do any good to talk. We never spent any time stating what we believed, and how we felt, or anything like that. We wouldn't expect you to believe it. We just went ahead and ran our program and everybody was accepted as an equal and treated as an equal, and they got the message.

Because Highlander practiced what it preached, blacks and whites came away thinking maybe this “integration thing” was possible. Horton and Septima Clark pointed out that Rosa Parks, four months before the Montgomery boycott, came to the conclusion that there were at least a few whites who could be trusted. Septima Clark recalls Parks’s visit to Highlander:

Rosa Parks was afraid from white people to know that she was as militant as she was. She didn’t want to speak before the whites that she met up there, because she was afraid they would take it back to the whites in Montgomery. After she talked it out in that workshop that morning and she went back home, then she decided that, “I’m not going to move out of that seat.”

The myth that Rosa Parks was simply a tired old lady who decided on a particular day not to give her seat to a white man falls by the wayside in the face of the evidence of her long involvement in the movement.

Also in the late 1950s, Reverend Shuttlesworth’s children attended workshops at HFS. Mrs. Clark tells what happened on their trip back to the Birmingham movement center:

Riding back through one of those towns [Gadsden, Alabama], they sat in the front seat, and they arrested those children. Fred came up there in the middle of the night, about 2 o’clock in the morning, without a gun or anything, he walked through there, and went in to that little town – He got his children out. I say that man had a lot of guts.