

# Eyes On The Prize: Rosa Parks And The Highlander Folk School

During the Great Depression, Myles Horton, a teacher and community activist, developed a simple philosophy: people are not powerless. With guidance, they can solve their own problems.

Horton put his philosophy into practice in 1932 when he founded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. The problems of oppressed workers in the Appalachian Mountains were the initial item's on Highlander's agenda. The school offered workshops on labor unions, workers' rights, and race relations.

During the 1950s and '60s, the center evolved into a training ground for civil rights activists. Because the school's resources were limited, Horton concentrated on identifying new leaders, training them, and sending them back home to work for change. Rosa Parks attended a workshop at Highlander the summer before the Montgomery bus boycott.

*“At Highlander,” Parks recalled, “I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of differing races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony. It was a place I was very reluctant to leave. I gained there strength to persevere in my work for freedom, not just for blacks but all oppressed people.”* Other civil rights leaders who attended Highlander workshops include James Bevel, John Lewis, Diane Nash, and Marion Barry.

With its emphasis on practical training for daily life, Horton's novel approach to education paid off. In 1955, Highlander began a remarkably successful program in which black adults learned to read and write—and thereby qualified to vote. A black hairdresser, Bernice Robinson, taught the first class, which was held two nights a week in the back of a small store. Horton chose a nonprofessional teacher so that the sessions would not be dominated by old-fashioned pedagogical methods. Robinson taught the fourteen students what they wanted to learn: how to write their names, how to write letters to their sons in the army, how to write a check.

“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,” Horton said. When the first class ended, eight students passed the voting test. Soon, other “citizenship schools” opened across the South.

Not surprisingly, Highlander faced stiff opposition from segregationist whites. In 1957, the IRS revoked the school's tax-exempt status. In 1959, Arkansas attorney general Bruce Bennett led a hearing to determine whether Highlander was part of a communist conspiracy. And in 1960, the school's charter was revoked. Horton was found guilty of selling beer without a license and of violating a Tennessee law that forbade blacks and whites from attending school together.

But Highlander withstood the attack. Horton re-opened his center in Knoxville; later he moved it to New Market, Tennessee. Though the school has turned its attention to new issues – among them nuclear waste and strip mining – the Highlander approach remains the same: education of the people, for the people, by the people.

