

Bernice Robinson and the Citizenship Education Schools

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Andrew Young called the Citizenship Education Schools the basis of the Civil Rights Movement. Starting with fourteen students on Jones Island, South Carolina, the Citizenship Schools grew to teach as many as 60,000 students throughout the South and later became the largest program of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), enabling a large percentage of them to become registered voters, and perhaps more importantly, literate. The schools were a humanizing force against the dehumanization of segregation, transforming its students into agents for social justice.

Any thorough analysis of the schools' initial success would take into account the role of four significant individuals:

Myles Horton, the guiding philosophical force and founder of the Highlander Folk School who provided the structural, economic, and philosophical foundations of the program;

Esau Jenkins, the most prominent black community leader on Jones Island who had the idea for the program and did much of the initial organizing on the island;

Septima Clark, Highlander’s Director of Education, who directly oversaw the schools from their inception until they were adopted by the SCLC; and

Bernice Robinson, a Charleston beautician who was the schools’ first teacher and was most responsible for the schools’ pedagogy.

Robinson also played a role, directly or indirectly, in the training of all subsequent Citizenship School teachers - if she did not train the teachers herself, she trained someone who trained them. Most accounts of the Schools do not give full credit to all four figures. While the two most comprehensive analysis of the Citizenship Schools’ early development, John M. Glen’s history of the Highlander School and Sandra Oldendorf’s unpublished dissertation on the Sea Islands Citizenship Schools, recognize all four actors’ significance, most accounts, whether they are historical or sociological academic works, tend to give exclusive credit to some combination of Horton, Jenkins, and Clark. Robinson, if she is mentioned at all, is often relegated to “merely” a teacher in the first classroom or described as someone following orders from Clark or Horton. Most of these accounts do not fully appreciate how the curriculum Robinson personally developed for the first Citizenship School (which would be the template for all further schools) or the relationship she developed with her students, were necessary for the schools’ success.

Had Robinson not succeeded with her first group of 26 students – all of who passed the Voting Literacy Test after five months – the program would not have spread. Even when Robinson’s pedagogical efforts are appreciated, her later role in training subsequent teachers is not acknowledged. My paper is largely a corrective effort to demonstrate that Bernice Robinson was integral and critical for the success of the Citizenship Education Schools from their start on Johns Island through their spread across the South. Like Horton, Jenkins, and Clark, the schools would not have succeeded without Robinson’s efforts. Due to the well-documented effects of the Citizenship Schools, Robinson also deserves to be remembered as a significant figure in the Civil Rights movement.

MYLES HORTON AND THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL

What is too big for one person to handle can be figured out by all of us together. We will have a new kind of school – not a school for teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, but a school for problems.

~Myles Horton, Founder and Director of the Highlander Folk School⁴

Myles Horton and Don West founded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, TN in 1932. Based on the Danish Folk School Model, the school was founded with the goal of helping people to solve problems in their community. The primary means by which Highlander sought to accomplish this was through residential workshops, where adults would come to Highlander for a weekend or longer in order to discuss, brainstorm, and plan ways to address communal problems. At its founding, and through its first two decades, Highlander mainly focused on the problems of workers in Appalachia. This led Highlander to become heavily involved with labor organizing during the 1930’s and 40’s, particularly with the CIO.

Horton, the school’s director and guiding philosophical force, and his staff operated under four main

assumptions:

- (1) Education is a force for positive social change.
- (2) Solutions to oppressions can be found within the oppressed communities.
- (3) Educational programs are informed by the experiences of the oppressed.
- (4) The responsibility of changing society belongs to the oppressed.

In other words, Horton strongly believed that people were not only capable of solving their own problems, but that they had to do it themselves. The goal of Highlander workshops was to facilitate a discussion within oppressed communities as to how to best accomplish their goals.

While focused on labor issues in its early years, Highlander maintained a large emphasis on human rights. This was most evident in Highlander's practice of running integrated workshops. Even though this was frequently at odds with the policies and practices of many unions (and against the law), Horton refused to allow unions to run segregated workshops at Highlander. This tension, coupled with the Red Scare of the 1950's, led the Highlander Board of Directors to shift its focus in 1952, from labor issues to Civil Rights. Highlander began running workshops on school integration in 1953, and in 1954 was given a grant by the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation to help develop citizenship and local leadership. Highlander initially attempted to start programs around Monteagle, however with little success. This was largely attributed to the lack of a specific problem to address.

SEPTIMA CLARK, ESAU JENKINS, AND JOHNS ISLAND

In 1954, Highlander held a workshop on reforming the United Nations. In attendance was a group of citizens from Charleston and Johns Island, SC. One of these was Septima Clark, an experienced teacher in both Johns Island and Charleston, SC, who would be fired from her teaching job in Charleston because she was a member of the NAACP the following year. She soon began working at Highlander as Director of Workshops. Another of the citizens was a man named Esau Jenkins, a leader in the black community on Johns Island. At one point Jenkins was asked his thoughts on the UN, but responded that he was not concerned with the UN, that he had his own problems in his community: the black residents of Johns Islands were largely illiterate and therefore could not register to vote. Johnson had taught a small handful of blacks to read on the bus he drove from Johns Island to Charleston, but wanted to develop a way to reach more people. Horton recognized that here was a specific problem with the potential to develop leadership

Johns Island presented a unique laboratory to experiment with leadership. Situated just off the coast of Charleston, Johns Island was part of a chain of islands called the Sea Islands. Emancipated slaves founded the majority of the Sea Islands agricultural communities following the Civil War. These communities developed largely in isolation from the mainland (a bridge was not built between Johns Island and Charleston until the 1930's). The black residents on Johns Island mostly spoke Gullah, a dialect combining English and African. Of the four thousand residents living on Johns Island, about two thirds were black, only 10% of whom were literate and registered to vote. There was not a black high school on the island. However, the blacks on the island were largely self-sufficient. Sixty percent owned their land.

Jenkins was not only self-sufficient, he was a successful farmer and owned a bus that he used to transport residents into Charleston, but he was also perhaps the most prominent black on Johns Island. He was president of the PTA, superintendent of the Methodist Sunday School, and an assistant pastor of his church. He also served as President of the Johns Island Citizenship Club, an organization of

about 200 who worked on community improvement issues, and as Chairman of the Progressive Club, a fifteen-person group who provided legal aid to blacks on the island.

In 1948, Jenkins began his bus line. One of his passengers, a woman named Alice Wine, approached him one day and asked him to teach her to read so that she could register to vote. While on the bus, Jenkins helped Wine to memorize the required portion of the South Carolina Constitution from the literacy test. When he drove her to register, Wine read the portion successfully and registered to vote. In 1955, Jenkins decided to run for the Johns Island school board. Though he lost his election, he was able to newly register fifty blacks to vote (only 200 blacks had registered in the previous ten years). Jenkins received 192 of the 200 black votes in the election, losing by 100 votes. This demonstrated to many that not only could a black person run for public office without being killed, but that increasing black voter registration could very quickly lead to political change.

After the U.N. workshop, Zilphia Horton, Myles' first wife, made a visit to Johns Island on behalf of Highlander in November of 1954 to look analyze local conditions. She thought the Island presented the potential to sustain a leadership program. Myles Horton made a visit to the Island the next month, taking with him Septima Clark, who knew it well from her early teaching career and NAACP experience. Horton and Clark would each spend significant amounts of time on the island during the following two years, analyzing the situation on the island in order to develop a program to develop leadership and address Jenkins' problem.

Horton, Clark, and Jenkins decided to start teaching adult literacy class. The main problem for Horton and Clark was to figure out how it was that Jenkins had succeed in teaching adults to read on his bus, whereas state-sponsored adult literacy programs had failed. In fact, the state had allocated funds for adult literacy education on Johns Island that had gone unspent. Horton decided that one of the main reasons these programs failed is because they were held in a traditional school. Kids would make fun of the adults sitting in the children's desks, calling them "granddaddy longlegs."

Horton and Clark knew that a successful adult literacy program would have to respect the students as adults. Horton, Clark, and Jenkins found an appropriate space to teach literacy in the back of a co-operative farming supply store that Jenkins opened with money borrowed from the Highlander. They decided that the program could only run from December to February because this was the only part of the year where residents had time free from agricultural responsibilities. The final question was who would teach. Horton recalled deciding that they did not want a trained teacher, because she would bring pre-conceived notions about the students into the classroom, and potentially treat them like children. Clark recalled deciding they did not want a middle class black to teach for similar reasons. Clark suggested they ask her niece, a Charleston Beautician, and fellow NAACP member, Bernice Robinson.

BERNICE ROBINSON

Robinson was born on February 7, 1914, in Charleston, SC, the youngest of nine children. Her father worked as a bricklayer and did other odd jobs, and her mother worked at home. When she was young, Robinson helped to teach many of the children in her neighborhood. After completing high school (which only went to ninth grade for black children), she spent some time traveling around trying to find steady work. Eventually, after having a child in a short-lived marriage, Robinson moved to New York City in 1936. Here, for the first time, Robinson experienced life outside of the Jim Crow south. She also was able to vote. After spending some time working at a garment factory, Robinson attended beauty school in the hopes of finding more steady employment. She returned to Charleston in 1947

when her at her shop.

Around this time, Robinson became involved with the Charleston NAACP. After working on voter registration drives in the early 1950's, she became secretary and membership chairmen in 1955, and was responsible for recruitment in the Charleston area, including Johns Island.²⁰ Through these efforts, she met Esau Jenkins.²¹ Also in 1955, Robinson attended, at the invitation Clark, the UN Conference at Highlander where the seeds for the Citizenship schools were sewn.²² Horton recalled that Robinson told him that if she could ever do anything for Highlander, she would be happy to oblige.

The opportunity to help arose in 1956 when Horton and Clark approached Robinson to teach the first Citizenship School on Johns Island. Robinson was an ideal choice. As a beautician, Robinson enjoyed a privileged status in the community. She was also economically independent and did not have to fear repercussions from whites for her involvement. Furthermore, she was familiar to the citizens on Johns Island, who were known for being weary of blacks from the mainland. Robinson recalled her response when she was asked to teach:

“You know,” I said, “I never been no teacher and I’m not going to be a teacher. I told you up there at Highlander that I would help you all in any way that I could, and I would even help a teacher with the school, but I ain’t no teacher!”

Well they just laid the law down to me. “There is nobody else to do it. We don’t want a certified teacher because they are accustomed to working by a straightlaced curriculum. They wouldn’t be able to bend, to give. We need a community worker to do it who cares for people, who understands the people, who can communicate with the people, and someone who has been to Highlander who knows’ Highlander’s philosophy, so there’s nobody to do it but you. Either you do it or we don’t have the school. You know a program is needed. You know there is no way you can get out of it at this point.”

So I said, “Okay.”

After Robinson recruited her first group of fourteen students through churches on Johns Island, classes were ready to begin in January 1957.

THE FIRST SCHOOL

At the age of 43, Robinson was younger than most of the students in the classroom (the youngest was 39) on Johns Island on January 7, 1957.²⁶ Nonetheless, on the first day she was prepared with materials she had received from her sisters-in-law who taught elementary students. She realized immediately these would not work with her students. Robinson recalled that on the “first night I guess I was more nervous than the people. They came in that night and I told them, ‘I’m not going to be the teacher. We’re going to learn together. You’re going to reach me some things, and maybe there are a few things I might be able to teach you, but I don’t consider myself a teacher. I just feel that I’m here to learn with you. We’ll learn things together.’ I think that settled the folks down.” (27) This statement demonstrates the respect which Robinson approached her students. This was one of the biggest reasons for her success.

The Citizenship School started with an immediate and an ultimate goal. The immediate goal was to enable the students to register to vote. In order to do this, they needed to read a section of the South Carolina Constitution and to sign their name to the application. The ultimate goal was to teach the

students how to read and write, therefore empowering the students to make positive change in their community. In order to do this, Robinson asked the students what it was they wanted to be able to read and write. This expanded the curriculum to include the use of money orders, catalog order forms, and basic arithmetic. By focusing on subject matter that the students themselves chose to learn, she not only gave the students a sense of control over their classroom, but she also gave them additional motivation to learn. Teaching writing to adults who never developed the fine motor skills to hold a pencil presented a large challenge. As Horton recalled:

“When they’d first hold a pencil, nine times out of ten they’d break it. The physical adjustment isn’t easy. You could hear those pencils snapping all over the room. We decided right there that no teacher should ever show any concern about pencils, because that would be intimidating, but simply hand students another one and say they’re plenty more.”

In order to teach the students how to write their names, Robinson made cardboard cutouts of each student’s name. Clark describes this as the “kinesthetic method,” where students would learn by tracing words over and over using a stencil. This way, they were able to develop kinesthetic memory of the action. The students used this method to learn to sign their names.

Robinson started teaching the students to read using stories that they told. She would ask the students to tell her a story about the work they did in the fields or at their homes. She would then write out the stories and help the students learn all the words involved, telling them “This is your story. We’re going to learn how to read your story.” She then moved on to using the South Carolina constitution and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. After a couple of weeks, Robinson wrote Clark to update her on the school’s progress:

“The school which we have planned for three months is in progress and the people have shown great interest. They are so anxious to learn. I have fourteen adults, four men and ten women, and there are thirteen high school girls enrolled to learn sewing. There are three adults that have had to start from scratch because they could not read or write. I start out with having them spell their names. About eight of them can read a little, but very poorly. So far, I have been using that part of the South Carolina constitution that they must know in order to register. From that, I take words that they find hard to pronounce and drill them in spelling and pronunciation and also the meaning of words so they will know what they are saying. We have to give them some arithmetic. The men are particularly interested in figures. I have never before in my life seen such anxious people. They really want to learn and are so proud of the little gains they have made so far. When I get to the club each night, half of them are already there and have their homework ready for me to see. I tacked up the Declaration of Human Rights on the wall and told them that I wanted each of them to be able to read and understand the entire thing before the end of school.”

In order to teach the students who were interested in figures, Robinson acquired postal money orders, which she traced onto onionskin paper. She then made copies for the class so they could practice. In order to teach the necessary arithmetic, she asked problems that related to the students’ lives, based on what prices they would receive when selling their crops or how many gallons of gas they would need to drive to Charleston.³³ Once again, Robinson’s decision to make the curriculum directly relevant to her students’ lives helped the class to succeed.

The curriculum Robinson developed would eventually be used as the basis for all the future Citizenship Schools. Robinson and Clark developed a textbook of sorts, entitled “My Reading Booklet” and later

another, when the SCLC adopted the program, entitled “My Citizenship Booklet,” which each student who participated received. The contents of the books shed further light on the types of conversations that may have occurred in the first class room. “My Reading Booklet” started with a brief history of Highlander. It then moved on to the policy of Highlander and the Citizenship Schools:

We reaffirm our faith in democracy as a goal that will bring dignity and freedom to all; in democracy as an expanding concept encompassing human relations from the smallest community organization to international structure; and permitting all economic, social and political activities.

Democracy to us means that membership in the human family entitles all to freedom of thought and religion, to equal rights to a livelihood, education and health; to equal opportunity to participate in the cultural life of the community and to equal access to public services.

We hold that democracy is inactive unless workers are given a full voice in industry through unions; or farmers are given a voice in the market place through co-operatives; or when freedom of thought and discussion is limited; that democracy is outlawed legally entrenched discrimination and segregation; that there must be diversity of approach but each step must be in conformity with the goal, which is dishonored by each undemocratic act. ...

The purpose of Highlander Folk School is to assist in creating leadership for democracy...

The nature of specific educational programs will be determined by the needs of the students... (34)

The next page contained a reading on the democratic values of America and a map of the United States and the South Carolina coast. The second chapter included South Carolina election laws and a reproduction of the voter registration form. Subsequent chapters addressed South Carolina political parties, taxes, social security, and health services, and the proper manner to address government officials along with letter writing etiquette. The book concludes with directions to fill out a mail order blank and money order form. Subsequent editions of the book were changed to meet local needs and expanded to include some more reading and arithmetic resources. The SCLC versions of the book contained a history of the civil rights movement and freedom songs.

The students met twice a week, for two hours, for January and February. At the end of the first class, all the students could write their names and read the required section of the South Carolina constitution. Robinson recalled the pride she experienced when a sixty-five year old woman recognized her name at the end of the course, ““That’s my name there, Annie, A-n-n-i-e; and that’s my other name down there, Vastine, V-a-s-t-i-n-e.” I had goose pimples all over me. That woman could not read or write when she came in that class.”

The pedagogical experience of the first school on Johns Island extended beyond the fourteen official students. Many of the students would bring their teenage children to class and they often proved to be a distraction. Robinson dealt with this in two different ways. When the teenagers snickered at the adults as they tried to read, she decided to call on the teenagers to demonstrate public speaking. As Robinson recalled, “We had a good time with those young people. Some of them would get up there and put their hands in front of their mouths, and they would swing from side to side, and they would fiddle with their hair, and we would just laugh at them and kid them and say, “See how it feels now when you’re not doing something right?” Robinson would then help them with their public speaking skills. Robinson

also taught many of the teenagers how to sew. In addition to the students and their children in the classroom, as many as 30-40 members of the community would stand in the co-op store to listen to Robinson teach and talk about the importance of citizenship.

Because South Carolina registrations expired every ten years, the students waited until 1958 to attempt to register. All fourteen students took the course again, this time going three months from December-January. All fourteen of the original students passed the voting exam and successfully registered to vote, as well as many others who had joined the classes as they went on.

The first class succeeded because of the pedagogical approach of Bernice Robinson and the commitment of her students. Robinson created a community of learners that treated her students with full respect rather than as illiterates. Unlike previous adult literacy programs that taught the students as children, Robinson went to the students to find out what they needed and wanted to learn, and she taught them those things. This allowed students to learn in an authentic manner – learning through experiences that applied to their daily lives-- and ultimately led to the success of the program. Robinson's pedagogical approach served not just to develop literacy, but also to develop a sense of worth in the students' lived experiences and leadership capabilities. It served as a tremendous counterweight to the dehumanizing experience of segregation. Horton attributed the success to Robinson's derivation of the curriculum from her "common sense, from her own intelligent analyses of the situation, from loving people and caring for them and, above all, from respecting people and dealing with them as they are. The success would also not have been possible without the initial risk and subsequent commitment of the students who entered Robinson's classrooms. While Robinson was able to lead them to the water, they were the ones who had to drink.

EXPANSION AND SPREAD

Word of the success on Johns Island quickly spread throughout the Charleston area, and others requested Highlander's help in opening their own schools. Schools opened on Wadmalaw Island, Edisto Island, and Charleston in 1958, and St Helena and Daufuskie Islands in 1959. It was not until 1959, three years after the schools started, that white people in the area figured out what was going on. By this time, it was too late to stop the growth of the program. By the end of 1958, Robinson had switched from her role as teacher to that of supervisor. While Clark handled the more institutional aspects of the program, Robinson would travel around the Charleston areas to train and support new teachers. In her autobiography, Clark tells the story of how Robinson helped Mary Davis, a fellow beautician, start the school in Charleston. Davis was concerned about the environment in her part of Charleston, particularly some of the slum conditions and dirt roads. She figured that if more people were registered to vote, she might be able to pressure officials to improve the situation. Davis approached Robinson and offered her shop to teach her citizenship class. Robinson accepted, and worked with Davis to get the class started. Not only did Robinson help Davis become a teacher, but she also got Davis to attend workshops at Highlander. Clark sites Robinson's ability to get "leaders to attend Highlander workshops for training that would in turn quip them to return to their communities and teach" as one of her most important leadership capabilities.

As the schools continued to grow in the late 1950's and early 1960's, two main factors contributed to Horton and Clark starting to look for a new institutional home for the Citizenship Schools. The first was the growing size and financial burden of the schools. Robinson and Clark worked to establish eight schools in Huntsville, AL and Savannah, GA in the winter of 1960-61. The success of these schools showed that the model would replicate itself outside of the Charleston area, but there was extra work involved because Robinson and Clark were not familiar with these new communities. Horton knew that

a more established organization could use their contacts to help recruit teachers and students for new schools. The second factor was Highlander's precarious legal standing. In 1959, Tennessee officials raided Highlander and allegedly found a small amount of alcohol on the premises (Monteagle was located in a dry county). Horton and Highlander were charged with selling alcohol without a license, operating Highlander for a profit, and teaching interracial classes. In 1961, after a series of appeals Highlander was convicted of the alcohol charge on a technicality and acquitted of the profiteering charge. The interracial teaching charge was dropped so that the decision could not be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court on constitutional grounds. Horton and Highlander's land was confiscated, though Horton immediately applied for a new charter for the Highlander Research and Education Center in Knoxville, which was granted and opened in 1961.

Since Highlander's legal trouble made funding nearly impossible to come by, and the size was testing Highlander's personnel resources, Horton and Clark began shopping the program. In 1959, Clark began selling Martin Luther King, Jr. on the success of the program. Though King was initially reluctant, Clark showed him that the Citizenship Schools were getting better results than the SCLC's voter registration programs. King also believed that the Citizenship Schools would help to slow the growing influence of the Black Muslim movement in the South. In 1960, King announced that the SCLC would take over the leadership of the Citizenship School, and officially did so in May of 1961 after receiving a grant from the Field Foundation. Highlander would retain responsibility for operating training workshops. As part of the alliance, Septima Clark and Andrew Young (who had been hired by Highlander in anticipation of the transition), went to work for the SCLC under Dorothy Cotton. Robinson was officially hired as a Highlander staff member in order to oversee training and work with the SCLC. Highlander also assisted with SNCC and CORE as they set up schools of their own.

TRAINING

Robinson, Clark and Cotton began conducting training workshops at Highlander in Knoxville and at the Dorchester Center in Liberty County, GA. By the end of June, Robinson had worked with 88 teachers from 40 different communities in the South. 48 Teachers were sought out who had "the Ph.D. mind in a community who had not had an opportunity to get a formal education, but who was respected by everybody as one of the wise leaders in their community." An undated outline entitled Handbook for Teachers gives some insight into how one of these training sessions would have proceeded. Cotton led the first part, entitled "How to Teach Writing." This included setting the climate and a technique for teaching the actual mechanics of writing words. Clark led a discussion or role-play on how to address a community problem in a systematic way. Robinson taught how to teach reading. She used picture clues and would break down words into smaller syllables. She also discussed the importance of voting and how to use newspaper articles to teach reading that addressed "issues of today". Subsequent sections of the outline include sections on record keeping, government, community organization, federal programs, consumer education, recruiting, and Negro history. The outline ends with a discussion of how to organize the Citizenship classroom on the first night, including a suggested schedule:

- 6:00-6:10 P.M Devotion
- 6:10-6:30 P.M Writing
- 6:30-7:00 P.M Reading and English
- 7:00-7:20 Arithmetic

7:20-7:40 Our Community – Its Government
7:40-8:00 Assignment

As the program continued to grow, the decision was made to produce a written manual. Instead of producing one from scratch, one of Robinson's five-day training sessions was taped and transcribed into a thirty-page manual. Robinson also traveled throughout the South as a consultant to assist with Citizenship Schools that had been set up independent of Highlander and the SCLC. She worked with Charles Sherrod in Georgia, and both Bob Moses and Medger Evers in Mississippi.

Another thing that I feel is very important in ... this beautiful history is how Bernice multiplied the program—that is, how it was possible, starting from Bernice, to multiply Bernice without courses without lots of theoretical introductions! ... Bernice prepared for future educators by teaching in their presence. It's beautiful because she taught through her example.

EFFECTS

The Citizenship Schools had a tremendous effect on both an individual and communal level. The schools were a grass roots institution that simultaneously transformed individuals and created the foundations of the larger Civil Rights movement. By coupling the teaching of reading and writing with a strong emphasis on civic engagement, students changed their opinions of both their selves and the possibilities they saw for change in their communities. In this way, the schools were an important first step towards bring thousands of blacks into the Civil Rights Movement and changing the social conditions of the South. The program also served to develop the thousands of individuals who would become teachers in the schools into leaders in the movement.

Carl Tjerandson, evaluating the program for the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation who gave the initial grant money, acknowledged ten significant contributions the schools made to civic competence in the South:

- 1) The attitudes of southern blacks were changed, which was a prerequisite for them taking political action.
- 2) Learning to read and write opened up previously closed channels of communication.
- 3) Blacks learned how to demand public services.
- 4) Blacks learned community and activist development skills.
- 5) Thousands of new leaders were identified outside of the Black bourgeoisie.
- 6) The schools modeled an effective method of group learning.
- 7) The schools helped to cross boundaries between blacks of different class and education backgrounds, as well as the rural/urban divide.
- 8) Students were motivated to help their home communities.
- 9) Blacks gained the necessary tools to run for public office. 1
- 0) Blacks were prepared from roles on community boards and committees.

For all the results, the schools were remarkably cost effective. To teach a person to read, it took on average only two, two-hour meetings per week for three months. The cost averaged out to less than one hundred dollars per student.

Johns Island provides an illustration of the types of effects the program had on specific individuals and the community as a whole. Alice Wine, Esau Jenkins' first student on the bus to Charleston, was one of the students in the first Citizenship School who saw tremendous benefits in her life. She was able to quit her job as a cleaning lady in a white farmer's home to take a job as the clerk in the Progressive Club's co-op. She also began reading for pleasure, and was able to correspond with her brother whom she had not been able to communicate with for many years. Wine's experiences were representative of many others. Another student, Janie Owens, wrote Robinson in March, 1959, about the effects the school had on her: "I learn so much by going to it learn me how to read and pronounce my spelling and how to crochet tell I can make anything I wont and most of all I learn how to read and I get my Registration Certificate now I can vote and it means so much to me."

The Schools were also successful in developing what Paulo Freire called "political clarity". As a follow up to the Citizenship Schools, various attempts were made to encourage a second wave of participation by the students. On Johns Island, Jenkins organized former students into a Citizenship Club that was able to make tremendous improvements on the island. Robinson later recalled some of the effects:

On Johns Island you see the results now really, the aggressiveness of the people and the confidence they had in moving forward, when you look at the sea island clinic, and you look at the senior citizen center and the nursing home and the housing project for senior citizens. All this is an outgrowth of people feeling empowered by being able to read and write and understanding how to go about pressing for things like that. They became very active in the PTA and things that they didn't bother with before because they couldn't read or they couldn't understand what was going down. Before they had a high school on the island, a lot of people who had relatives over there in the city [of Charleston] would send the children over here to go tot school, to try to get an education.

After the SCLC adopted the schools, Robinson, in addition to training, helped efforts to encourage the graduates to become politically active in their communities. For example, in Beaufort Country, SC, Robinson helped to organize voter turnout for the 1964 Presidential Election. One hundred percent of black voters in the county voted (all for Lyndon Johnson). Also in Beaufort, Robinson described an instance where the organization that was in place from the Citizenship Schools helped to acquit a young woman who was falsely accused of a crime by white men:

Each worker, in the oyster factory where most of the Negroes work, is allowed to carry home a quart jar of oysters. It seems that there were two young white fellows, added to the Forestry and Fishery commission, who trumped up a charge that a woman sold her jar of oysters without a permit. She had been in the Citizenship class and was in the local organization affiliated with SCLC. When a warrant was taken out for her arrest, the Citizenship School teacher called me. I took Esau Jenkins with me and talked with the SCLC group. They raised their own funds, hired their own lawyer, and during the trip filled the courtroom. There wasn't even standing room. Negroes were all over the courtyard that night. Next day, the all white jury came back with a not guilty verdict. This history-making verdict grew out of the fact that the people knew their rights and stood up with them. Just previous to this victory, we had about three other trumped up cases where the people were not organized and the Negroes were convicted and had to spend time in jail.

These types of small victories, taken in aggregate, make up a large and often undocumented aspect of the Civil Rights Movement in the South.

The Citizenship Schools played an invaluable role in organizing and empowering many people who became part of the Civil Rights organization. Often, leaders of the movements gained their first leadership experiences as teachers in the Citizenship Schools. The Schools were responsible for bringing both Septima Clark and Andrew Young into leadership positions in the SCLC. In Mississippi, the schools provided the foundation upon which the 1964 Freedom Summer was built.⁶² Fannie Lou Hamer had been a student at a Mississippi Citizenship School.

Perhaps the most significant organizational contribution of the Citizenship Schools is that they paved the way for rural blacks to join the Civil Rights Movement. Horton believed that the school reached people who could not be reached by speeches. Sociologist Belinda Robnett describes the schools' leadership as "bridge leaders" who could connect rural communities to each other and the larger movement, while giving them the necessary tools to make change in their communities. These bridge leaders both changed mindsets and provided alternatives to established forms of leadership within the black community in the south. Clark described how the schools changed the mindset of many rural blacks:

You see, people having been living on plantations for so many years, had a feeling that they were afraid to let white people know that they wanted to be a part of the governing body. They were afraid to do that. So, we used to put up a regular form on our blackboard with the government at the head and all the people who would come under. Then on down to the masses, and show how you too can become a part of this great governing body, if you will register and vote. In that way, they learned that in a country like the United States they had the right to be a part.

Because the schools had laid this foundation, locals "were already prepared to listen to a black man and to know that the government of that state can be handled by blacks as well as whites. They didn't know it before. We used to think everything white was right." The schools did the "special job of going into the community and getting the community ready to accept Dr. King and his way of speaking. Ready to accept Andrew Young, Dr. Abernathy, and the others." This also enabled the development of alternative leadership to that provided by the black church, which in many communities were hesitant to support the movement due to fears of white reprisals.

CONCLUSION

The success of the Citizenship Schools is ultimately measured by their success in changing both individuals and American society. While the schools were originally nurtured by the Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School and Esau Jenkins local leadership on Johns Island, and later quarterbacked by Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton, and Andrew Young at the SCLC, Bernice Robinson assumed the most responsibility at one of the program's critical moments – as the teacher in the very first Citizenship Education School on Johns Island. Had Robinson not succeeded on the island, it is unlikely that the development of the schools would have proceeded to the extent that they did. The curriculum Robinson developed, and later disseminated through her training efforts, provided the template for one of the most significant programs of the Civil Rights Movement.

The schools worked because they aimed at a specific, tangible goal with tremendous weight. Literacy is both a de facto and, at the time, de jure requirement for participation in American Democracy. The tangible goal of voter registration provided the means through which to address adult illiteracy. Once students became literate, they were empowered to create change for social justice both in their home communities and in the country. Robinson developed a methodology to simultaneously teach adults to read and write, enable them to vote, teach them the importance of voting, affirmed their humanity, and empower them with a sense of agency that created the conditions necessary for the Civil Rights victories of the 1960's. As Robinson herself analyzed:

We knew, we knew that to get black people registered to vote would create a challenge to the white community, and we knew it was important to get that done, but we also knew that for many of those people who weren't registered, the most important thing to them was often something different. Causing political change through voting was too intangible at first. They wanted to be able to order something out of a catalog, or read a letter from one of their children from out of town without having to take it to a neighbor or their white madam. That meant more to them than a registration certificate at that moment. They just couldn't see that far down the road. So you dealt with them on that level. You had to. Then the rest followed. That's why those schools worked.

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A Note on Sources:

Due to access limitations, I have had to rely almost exclusively on published source material for this paper. Further research at both the Avery Research Center in Charleston, SC and the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, WI over the coming months will allow me to augment this paper, though I do not believe that anything I will discover will greatly alter any of the paper's arguments. This paper has relied largely on the wonderful collections of oral history produced by Elliot Wigginton and Guy and Candie Carawan, as well as the insightful analysis of Carl Tjerandsen, Sandra Oldendorf, and John Glen.

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FOOT NOTES

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2 Morris, Payne, and Couto all discuss the Citizenship Schools in more comprehensive accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. Morris credits Horton, Jenkins, and Clark (and probably over-emphasizes the role of Jenkins). Payne gives the primary credit to Clark. Couto gives almost exclusive credit to Jenkins. See Richard A. Couto, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round: The Pursuit of Racial Justice in the Rural South* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

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5. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 142.

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8 Also in attendance was Rosa Parks, who, a few months later, would refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery Bus. Parks would later sight her attendance at this Highlander Workshop as part of her inspiration for her action.

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of Kentucky, 1988), 185.

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15 Jacqueline A. Rouse, "'We Seek to Know ... In Order to Speak the Truth': Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent--Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership," in Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 109.

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- 43 Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, 74.
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