

A Brief History of the Highlander Folk School

1930-1953:

Beginnings & The Labor Years

Beginnings

Highlander was created in 1932 by Myles Horton and Don West in Grundy County, Tennessee. Theologian Reinhold Neibuhr wrote the first fundraising appeal for Highlander, and Lillian Johnson, a Tennessee educator and suffragist, donated her farm outside of the town of Monteagle where the founders established what was then known as the Highlander Folk School. Highlander's original mission, which has since been adapted and expanded, was to educate "rural and industrial leaders for a new social order."

The Labor Years

From 1932 until the mid-1940s, Highlander strove to build a progressive labor movement in the South among woodcutters, coal miners, government relief workers, textile workers, and farmers in the region. Highlander staff supported strikes and organizing drives and trained workers to take leadership in labor unions.

In 1937, Highlander joined the southern organizing drive of the Committee for Industrial Organization (renamed the Congress of Industrial Workers in 1938). Highlander became an integral part of the labor movement in the region and conducted labor education programs with workers from 11 southern states. During this period, Highlander developed a residential educational program designed to help build a broad-based, racially integrated, and politically active labor movement in the South.

While the first black speaker at a workshop at Highlander arrived in 1934, the decision to fully integrate the workshops did not come until 1942, mainly because of fears of reprisal from the local community, and the resistance of labor unions. Until 1942, only field extension projects held outside of Highlander were integrated.

In 1944, leaders of United Auto Workers locals attended the first integrated workshop at Highlander. The integrated workshops defied the conventions of Southern society and labor unions of the time. Highlander's racial policy reflected the staff's belief that the success of the labor movement required confronting racism and the evils of segregation.

These integrated workshops caused great controversy among segregationists and union leaders. Opposition leaders equated Highlander's racial policies with communism and began a campaign to shut Highlander down that culminated in 1961.

1953-1961:

The Civil Rights Movement & The Citizenship Schools

The Civil Rights Movement

In 1953, Highlander changed its focus from labor to the Civil Rights Movement. The impetus for the change was two-fold. First, the staff believed that “conquering meanness, prejudice and tradition” in the form of racism and segregation was key to conquering poverty and winning progressive change throughout the region. Second, the staff predicted that the impending Brown versus the Board of Education Supreme Court decision would set off a major upheaval in the South whichever way it went. Highlander's long tradition of working with African Americans in the labor movement put the school in a strong position to support the movement to end segregation, which is right where it wanted to be.

Highlander's work in the Civil Rights Movement throughout this period focused mainly on school desegregation and voter education/voting rights. Because of its pioneering efforts to conduct cross-race educational sessions, Highlander also served a role as a key gathering place for civil rights activists. Groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee used Highlander as a place to meet and make plans.

Highlander also played a vital role helping to spread freedom songs throughout the Civil Rights Movement, including “We Shall Overcome,” “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” and others. Cultural workshops at Highlander brought together activists and song leaders to share songs and create new ones, often by adapting existing hymns or popular songs. These freedom songs—sung at marches, rallies, and in jails across the South—became one of the hallmarks of the movement, providing inspiration, hope, and solidarity for all those fighting racism and segregation.

Since 1966, Highlander has administered the We Shall Overcome Fund, which is generated by royalties from the commercial use of “We Shall Overcome.” Created to nurture grassroots efforts within African American communities to use art and activism against injustice, the We Shall Overcome Fund supports organizing in the South that is at the nexus of culture and social change.

The Citizenship Schools

The Citizenship Schools represented Highlander's most successful voter education strategy. The program started in the South Carolina Sea Islands as the brainchild of Johns Island resident Esau Jenkins, who brought the idea to Highlander in 1954. The schools, which operated under the leadership of Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, and Highlander's Education Director Septima Clark, soon spread throughout the Sea Islands. The purpose of the Citizenship School program was to help African Americans learn to read so that they could pass the literacy tests required to become eligible voters in the South at the time.

Eventually, the Citizenship Schools led to a region-wide citizenship education program under the management of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Citizenship Schools played a critical role in building the base for the Civil Rights Movement by helping those African Americans who were among the 2.5 million functional illiterates in 8 Southern states in that period participate in politics.

1957-1971:

The Conservative Backlash & Transitions

The Conservative Backlash

Highlander's civil rights work provoked a vicious backlash among southern segregationists. At its 25th-anniversary workshop, held on Labor Day weekend, 1957, Highlander came under attack from the press. Aubrey Williams and Martin Luther King, Jr., both speakers at the event, were blamed for the racial strife that was growing throughout the South.

Soon afterward, the Georgia Commission on Education published a sensational piece of propaganda called Highlander Folk School; Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tennessee. Featuring pictures from the Labor Day event, including one of a black man dancing with a white woman, the publication proved to be an effective tool for organizing white supremacists against Highlander.

Transitions

The campaign against Highlander culminated in 1961 in a move by the State of Tennessee to revoke the Folk School's charter and confiscate its land, buildings, and other property. Despite the support of people such as Eleanor Roosevelt and United Nations Under-Secretary Ralph J. Bunche, the Tennessee Supreme Court was able to manipulate the law to shut down Highlander.

Anticipating the inevitability of defeat, leaders of the Folk School took action to preserve the idea and work of Highlander by securing a charter for the Highlander Research and Education Center. The new Highlander relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1961 and remained there until 1971, when it moved to its current location.

During this period, Highlander also began to shift its focus away from school desegregation. This shift was the result of the staff's recognition that a new generation of black leaders had emerged in the movement. Highlander's commitment to staying on the cutting edge of change, and to supporting the indigenous leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, led it to begin to look to other struggles for economic and social justice.

1970-1990:

Appalachian People's Struggles & Supporting Local Communities in a Global Context

The 1970s: Appalachian People's Struggles

In 1971, Highlander opened a new center on a ridge-top farm near New Market, Tennessee, and turned once again to organizing in the Appalachian communities where it began. These communities faced a wide array of problems, including deeply rooted poverty, growing environmental devastation from stripmining, and outside corporate control of land and resources. There were also growing organizing efforts around these and other environmental and economic justice issues.

Highlander's primary focus was encouraging local leadership to build community organizations that could break the hold of undemocratic governments and companies in the region. Through fieldwork and workshops, Highlander reached out to groups organizing around issues such as banning stripmining, improving healthcare in the coalfields, and eliminating toxic pollution in their communities.

Highlander also helped to develop the Southern Appalachian Leadership Training program (SALT), which provided training and support to emerging local leaders. Additionally, the staff organized cultural workshops throughout the region to highlight the strength of Appalachian cultures and the need for cultural workers to engage in social-change efforts.

In the late 1970s, Highlander joined with the Appalachian Alliance in a participatory research study of land ownership in Appalachia. Over one hundred activists and academics pored over tax rolls and deed books, documenting the vast corporate control of land and the resulting environmental devastation and lack of resources available to local communities. Highlander provided research assistance to this effort and helped train local activists to do their own research to strengthen their voices on issues affecting their communities.

The 1980s: Supporting Local Communities in a Global Context

Following Highlander's 50th Anniversary in 1982, the staff and Board decided to keep working in Appalachia but also to rebuild the Center's connections with local organizers and activists in the Deep South. And recognizing that many local problems are the result of global economic forces, they decided to forge new connections with activists and organizers beyond the borders of the United States as well.

In Appalachia and the South, Highlander's field work and workshops served to link groups involved in democratic economic development, helping them figure out how to do development that really aids the community. At the same time, Highlander once again began to host summer youth gatherings to support youth leadership and organizing in the region.

The number of communities organizing around toxics began to grow, both in the United States and in other countries, and Highlander's Community Environmental Health Program grew as well, providing workshops, research, and field support to groups fighting industrial pollution and toxic waste and helping to forge connections among these groups. Following the 1984 gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, which killed and injured thousands of local residents, for example, Highlander connected community people from Bhopal with people affected by Union Carbide facilities in this country.

Highlander also played an active role in international adult education efforts, helping to host exchanges and education programs with community-based educators and researchers in Nicaragua and other countries.

1990s-Today:

The 21st-Century Highlander

Much of Highlander's work of the 1980s continued into the 1990s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, Highlander's work with local organizations struggling with environmental issues resulted in the creation of the Stop the Poisoning program, which provided ongoing support to these efforts.

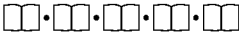
Highlander also sponsored several major workshops on the problems caused by declining rural economies in Appalachia and the South. A collaborative church, labor, and community project on the growing number of factory closings resulted in the formation of the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN), which continues to address structural economic issues like free trade and living wages. Adult and youth leadership development also continued throughout the decade, as did as cultural work.

In the late 1990s, the Highlander staff and Board undertook a major strategic planning process to analyze current conditions and provide an overall focus for Highlander's work. This process identified economic justice and democratic participation as common themes that connected groups working on many different issues. It also affirmed Highlander's commitment to Appalachia and the South, the continuing need for Highlander to serve as a democratic gathering space for local organizations, and the importance of keeping alive a sense of regional, national, and international struggles.

As the new century dawned, Highlander worked hard to transform this strategic thinking into effective support and capacity building for local organizations. The staff and Board identified young people, poor and working class people, people of color, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people as marginalized populations and important targets for organizing. As a result, a newly formed education team decided to focus on groups working with these constituencies and to encourage them to join forces to build a multi-racial, multi-generational movement for social and economic change.

The growing population of immigrants to the southern United States, largely from Mexico and Central America, provided the first new constituency. Highlander helped groups organizing among this population to create a loose educational-support network that functions in Spanish. We continue to provide assistance to this network through workshops and ongoing staff contacts.

As Highlander looks towards its 75th year, many challenges remain. The need to construct a more complete democracy in organizations and communities in this country and around the world is as pressing as ever. Our hope is that by providing a democratic space at Highlander, we can encourage people struggling for justice in their communities, while at the same time building connections across race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, class, and age that will lay the groundwork for a broad movement for social and economic justice.

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