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The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961

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I'm a Negro, born black in a white man's land. I am a teacher. I have spent my whole life teaching citizenship to children who really aren't citizens. They have fulfilled all the requirements for citizenship; many of their fathers and brothers have died for their country; but this is not enough to qualify them to vote, to receive a decent education . . . I can no longer aid in their education, because I joined in the movement to help them claim their citizenship.

—Septima Poinsette Clark, 1958¹

The Citizenship School Story

In 1957 under the guidance of Septima Clark, Myles Horton, Esau Jenkins, and Bernice Robinson, Highlander Folk School established the first Citizenship Schools on the Sea Islands of South Carolina. The initial purpose of these schools was to teach black adults to read and write in order to pass the South Carolina literacy tests for voter registration, but the more far-reaching goal was citizenship education for democratic empowerment. Received enthusiastically by students, teachers, and the black community, the schools eventually spread throughout the South during the 1960s, leading Aldon Morris in his book *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* to conclude: "[civil rights] activists of various persuasions stated repeatedly that the Citizenship Schools were one of the most effective organizing tools of the movement."²

The South Carolina Sea Islands are part of a chain of coastal islands that extend from North Carolina to Florida. Johns Island, the largest and the site of the first citizenship school, is located six miles south of Charleston.

Citizenship schools were also started on Wadmalaw and Edisto islands, both south of Johns Island.³

Until recently, the majority of the population on the Sea Islands were black descendants of former slaves who worked on huge rice and cotton plantations. Historically they have engaged in truck farming and raising cotton on small farms that they own. Most blacks have owned land since Reconstruction, but their isolation from the mainland for hundreds of years created a "people [who] have been substantially by-passed by the mainstream of American life and development."⁴ This isolation has meant poor education, poor health care, and little economic opportunity. Today bridges have eliminated the physical isolation, but part of the culture of an earlier time remains. For example, Gullah, a language composed of Standard English, archaic English, and corruptions of English words and African words can still be heard: "Old-time talk we still de talkem here!"⁵

Today many young blacks leave the islands and subsistence farming to work in cities on the mainland. The old culture is gradually disappearing, due partly to white real estate corporations developing the land for recreation and retirement. Although these developments offer employment for some of the island blacks, they also threaten the sea island culture: "The islanders' ineffectiveness in resisting the often reckless advances of developers must be laid at the door of the very insularity that for so long protected their culture."⁶

One aspect of this insularity was disenfranchisement. Blacks on the Sea Islands and throughout the rest of the South were essentially disenfranchised beginning in the late nineteenth century. Devices such as the grandfather clause, the white primary, the poll tax, and the literacy test were created to keep Southern politics free of black influence. By the 1950s, there were few black registered voters on the Sea Islands because there were few literate adult blacks. On Johns Island about ten percent of the black residents were registered to vote and about the same number were literate.⁷

The 1950s were characterized by problems other than lack of voting power. Sea Islanders suffered from discrimination, lack of education, few jobs, and insufficient health care.⁸ Black schools were old, crowded, and drafty in the winter. The teachers had few supplies and attendance was sporadic because of the growing season. Venereal disease was epidemic. There were many unwed young mothers, most of whom knew little about child care. Poor sanitation and health habits led to almost continuous cases of hookworm and skin rashes. Black farmers had to use middlemen to sell their

produce. Since many of them were illiterate, they were often cheated. And, of course, everything was segregated—churches, stores, schools, parks, and beaches.

In addition to understanding the place, four personalities are also crucial to understanding the development of the Citizenship Schools: Myles Horton, a white, "radical hillbilly" and director and cofounder of Highlander Folk School; Septima Clark, a black schoolteacher from Charleston; Esau Jenkins, a black bus driver and farmer from Johns Island; and Bernice Robinson, a black beautician and seamstress from Charleston and Clark's cousin.

Myles Horton and Don West co-founded Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1932. Under Horton's leadership, the school became known throughout the South as a school for labor organizers in the 1930s and 1940s and by the 1950s as a school for civil rights. At Highlander adults learned to work cooperatively on problems in their communities; they ate together, sang together, and planned actions together. Highlander measured the success of its programs by the activities of its students when they went back to their communities. Highlander was established as a school for social change, a school that would upset the status quo in the South. It was at a Highlander workshop in 1954 that the seed for the Citizenship Schools was planted.

Septima Clark, a well-educated black schoolteacher and local civil rights leader from Charleston, became Highlander's director of education in 1956. She had been fired from her teaching job in South Carolina for being a member of the NAACP. As a former teacher from Johns Island, she was aware of the education and political needs of the Sea Islands. She invited Esau Jenkins, a black leader from Johns Island, to a 1954 Highlander workshop. Out of this workshop the Citizenship Schools began.⁹

Jenkins, a self-educated bus driver and farmer, had been attempting to increase the number of black voters by teaching them the section of the South Carolina constitution that they needed to know for voter registration. But this was a tedious process, and he could not teach two thousand people. At the 1954 workshop he asked Horton to help him establish schools to teach people to read and write in order to vote. Horton agreed. Jenkins would provide the local leadership and the place; Highlander would provide the funds through the Field Foundation and the Schwartzhaupt Foundation.¹⁰

The next step was finding a teacher. Horton recommended that a black man or woman with knowledge of the islands but no formal training as a

teacher be found. Earlier efforts by the public schools to start adult education classes on Johns Island had failed because black adults were embarrassed to admit their illiteracy to college-educated whites, and learning to read using children's books was humiliating. Bernice Robinson, an NAACP recruiter in Charleston County, was exactly the teacher Horton had in mind.¹¹

Teaching the Disenfranchised

Robinson began teaching in January 1957, in the back of a cooperative store organized by Jenkins and other island residents. On the evening of her first class she told her students, "I'm not really going to be your teacher. We're going to work together and teach each other."¹² She asked her students what they wanted to learn and then developed teaching materials to meet those needs. Her students wanted to fill out order blanks for catalogues, read the newspaper, read letters from their children, do simple arithmetic, read the Bible, and register to vote.

Robinson developed a number of successful techniques. She taught students to write their names using the kinesthetic method. She provided reading material relevant to their needs. She developed vocabulary and spelling lists from words they needed to know from the South Carolina constitution and their everyday lives. Words such as *tomato*, *cotton*, *register*, and *imprisonment* were more relevant to their lives than *cat*, *dog*, *Dick*, and *Jane*. She asked them to tell her stories about their work in the fields and their homes. Then she put their stories on paper and told the students, "This is your story. We're going to learn how to read your story."¹³ Robinson knew this was a good way to teach, without ever having heard of the "language experience" approach. Math was made relevant by using grocery ads and problems with practical applications: "How much do you expect to receive when you sell your crops?" Later Robinson and Septima Clark combined resources and methods to create *My Citizenship Booklet*. One story problem not likely to be found in standard math texts reads as follows: "Ten students were arrested in the sit-in movement and were fined \$75 apiece. How much fine was paid?"¹⁴

By 1959, Robinson was teaching students songs to help them learn. Music became a regular part of the classes through the work of Guy Carawan, Highlander's music director. Carawan and his wife Candie recorded songs

that were part of the islanders' heritage, such as "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore," which had originated in the islands in the 1850s.¹⁵ Myles Horton once said that in addition to action, people "need something to cultivate the spirit and the soul." Music was that "something" both at Highlander and at the Citizenship Schools.¹⁶

By February 1958, Robinson had taught two classes on Johns Island and twenty-six students who had attended all five months registered to vote by reading a paragraph from the South Carolina constitution and writing their names. The classes had met twice a week for two hours a night. Adult students, some of whom could not write their names when they began, passed the literacy test after only eighty hours of classes.¹⁷

The new voters on Johns Island influenced others to get their certificate and before long, Johns Island was "infested with voters." Word spread to adjoining islands, Wadmalaw and Edisto, and to North Charleston. Expansion coincided with additional grant money from the Schwartzhaupt Foundation. Potential leaders on these islands were identified and they attended a workshop at Highlander.¹⁸

The class on Wadmalaw was taught by Ethel Grimbball, Esau Jenkins's daughter, in a small building belonging to the Presbyterian Church. Grimbball was a college-educated teacher but had close ties to the people of Johns and Wadmalaw islands. Although she developed her own methods, Grimbball, as Robinson, was tuned in to the needs of the students who wanted to read and write, do arithmetic, and to learn to sew or crochet.¹⁹

A class was started on Edisto Island in 1958 by Alleen Brewer (now Wood). Brewer was a social worker from the Presbyterian Church, which, in turn, furnished a meeting place. Although thirty-eight men and women enrolled (the largest class so far), Brewer met the challenge by grouping students so that they could help one another. She also taught reading, writing, arithmetic, citizenship, sewing and leathercraft, and the history of the United States and the civil rights movement based on expressed student needs.²⁰ For many of the students, the social part of each class session was extremely important. One man said, "Now we don't have to wait until Sunday to fellowship together."²¹

From December 1958 to February 1959, four Citizenship Schools were held on Edisto Island, Johns Island, Wadmalaw Island, and in North Charleston. With 106 students enrolled in these new classes, ranging in age from 15 to 76, Bernice Robinson became a supervisor, overseeing the

development of new classes. By the end of the school term, 66 students were registered to vote.²²

The students' responses to these early classes were enthusiastic; most wanted classes to continue. Student comments were recorded on tape and some wrote letters to the teachers and to Highlander:

I enjoyed the school very good and I hope it will be a little longer if its able to continue.

—Ms. Wright, Johns Island²³

The adult school means so much to me I cannot express my appreciation and thoughts by words. The only think I am so sorry the school terms was so short. I would like to thank our teacher Mrs. Brewer for helping us out so wonderful in sewing, arithmetic.

—Minnie R. Washington, Edisto Island²⁴

In 1959-60, 182 adults enrolled in Citizenship School classes on Johns Island, Promise Land (northern section of Johns Island), Wadmalaw, Edisto, and North Charleston; 65 became registered voters. By March 1960, there were 200 black voters on Edisto, up from 40 in 1958. Johns Island black voters had increased by 300 percent from 1956 to 1960. In 1960-61, classes were held in North Charleston, Edisto, and Wadmalaw, and 105 out of 111 black students registered to vote. In 1950-61, Bernice Robinson and Septima Clark organized 8 classes in Huntsville, Alabama, and Savannah, Georgia. By the end of this session 245 students, ranging in age from 17 to 65, had attended the school and 232 had registered to vote.²⁵

In 1961, the Citizenship Schools plus the teacher-training workshops Highlander had developed were transferred to the SCLC, with Highlander remaining as a consultant for the program. Andrew Young, who had joined the Highlander staff earlier that year, and Septima Clark went to the SCLC to organize the schools along with Dorothy Cotton of the SCLC. Bernice Robinson remained at Highlander and acted as a consultant to the SCLC.²⁶

The spread of the schools under the SCLC was rapid. By September 1963, there were seven hundred teachers and fifty thousand new voters who could be traced to the Citizenship School movement.²⁷ These figures represent dramatic growth considering the humble beginning on Johns Island with fourteen students and one inexperienced teacher. But voter registration is only one part of the story. Highlander's goal was that the Citizenship School students would become leaders in their communities, "empowered citizens" who would address problems of health, education, jobs, and discrimination.



Alleen Brewer (at left, standing) began a citizenship school class on Edisto Island in 1958. She was a social worker from the Presbyterian Church, which furnished the meeting place.

[Photo: Highlander Folk School]

Empowerment and the Citizenship Schools

In 1981 Myles Horton used the word *empower* to explain Highlander's purpose: "We try to empower people to take more control over their lives."²⁸ Horton points out that at Highlander the subject matter may range from labor issues to civil rights to multinational corporations, but the purpose remains the same. Horton also stresses that people must be able to see beyond "what is" and try to envision a better world and universal principles that apply to all cultures. Empowerment, according to Horton, is a creative process that enables people to participate in shaping a better world.²⁹

But how can teachers and students become convinced that they can shape their social, political, and economic reality? According to Sissela Bok, we must teach that one person can make a difference; an individual can "spark an action" that can lead to a larger movement. Major problems in society must be addressed by individuals who believe that they have the power to effect change by working together for common goals.³⁰

The key question to address is: Did the Citizenship Schools empower people? To discuss this question, empowerment in a democratic society will be defined as: (1) believing that people can be effective in addressing injustice and oppression in their lives; (2) asking questions about the differences between democratic ideas and the realities of society; and (3) acting to change society based on universal principles of benefit to all.

There is evidence that the Citizenship Schools helped people identify their problems by looking critically at their own culture and history. Many of the students had acquired "learned helplessness." They believed that it was better for whites to make the big decisions about politics and that blacks had no need to vote. Robinson, however, validated their backgrounds and helped them recognize that their ideas and experiences had worth. By learning together students realized that they had a responsibility in the learning process. Robinson also tried to open their minds to a bigger world, to shed light on the lives of the people who were formerly illiterate. Students were encouraged to learn to use local resources so that they could get help to solve their own problems.

The second step in the empowerment process is critical awareness, developing skepticism. Esau Jenkins told his students that the Lord wanted them to be aware and involved. He said that they could honor the Lord by

becoming active citizens and that a good Christian was not passive but took an active role and addressed problems.³¹

Students also became more aware of problems in their culture: lack of political power, apathy, fear of whites, and poor schools. Robinson posted the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in her classroom. Although the rights in the document were supported by the United States for the rest of the world, they were not a reality for many poor people and minorities in the United States. Democracy, or lack of it, took on new meaning for a number of Citizenship School students. Solomon Brown, a student on Edisto, said, "We learned much of what democracy means that we did not know before. We were inspired to help others toward first-class citizenship."³²

Bernice Robinson taught students to be more skeptical about what they read in the newspapers and the promises made to them by people who wanted their support. She taught how "to read between the lines" by bringing newspaper articles to the class and discussing what they really meant or what was left out. She was sensitive to the fact that many blacks on the islands had been taken advantage of, and she urged them to take a more critical view of their world by not being so accepting of what whites handed out. She urged them to speak up, telling them that being heard was an important part of becoming effective citizens.³³

The ultimate evidence of empowerment, however, is action. Although Esau Jenkins was a leader in his own right, through the organization of the Citizenship Schools, he increased his influence. He encouraged students on six islands and two mainland communities to start "second step" political action groups that would address issues, discuss candidates, analyze political power, and develop strategies for practical problems in their communities, such as driving safety.³⁴ Jenkins' influence spread beyond the islands, through the Palmetto Voters Association and the Citizen's Committee of Charleston County. Through these organizations, Jenkins persuaded candidates to address black needs. He pointed out that the magistrates on Johns Island no longer assumed that blacks were guilty when they entered court because the magistrates needed black votes to get elected.³⁵ Jenkins was appointed to the school board, thirteen years after he ran unsuccessfully for that same board. He is credited with being instrumental in establishing racial harmony at St. Johns High School, the integrated high school on Johns Island today.³⁶

With help from Citizenship School students and other island residents, Jenkins helped establish adult education, a kindergarten, a credit union, a

nursing home, The Sea Islands Comprehensive Health Center, and a low-income housing project.³⁷ Today a number of places bear testimony to his work. The Esau Jenkins Bridge between Wadmalaw and Johns islands in particular symbolizes the strength of Jenkins's leadership as a link between people on the Sea Islands and his work to promote the welfare of all. Jenkins died in an automobile accident in 1972.

Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson increased their activity in the civil rights movement as a result of the Citizenship Schools. Clark became a board member of the SCLC, a close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., and in her eighties a member of the Charleston school board that fired her in 1956. Clark, who died in December 1987, was remembered by South Carolina governor Caroll Campbell as "not only a leading civil rights activist but a legendary educator and humanitarian."³⁸ A recent book about her life and work documents her courage and leadership.³⁹

After teaching with the first Citizenship Schools, Robinson became a consultant for teacher-training workshops all over the South and worked on voter registration in Mississippi. She is currently a member of Highlander's Board of Directors and in the early 1970s ran for the office of state representative from her district in Charleston and narrowly lost.

Ethel Grimball, the teacher on Wadmalaw Island, and Alleen Brewer Wood, the teacher on Edisto, also grew in their roles as activists. After serving as a Citizenship School teacher, Grimball became a director for Head Start, a director of programs for migrant families, and an executive assistant for the Charleston County Economic Opportunity Commission.⁴⁰ Wood led a group to Washington, D.C., to meet with the secretary of education to protest the practice of integrating Edisto Island schools by putting black children in trailers and white children in the buildings. She continues today to be involved with the Edisto Community Center, the Presbyterian Church, and adult education.⁴¹

The Board of Concerned Members of Wadmalaw Island was formed by the students of the first Citizenship School class. They helped raise the number of registered black voters from zero in the mid-1950s to over one thousand in 1973. A black woman was also elected as a precinct leader and another elected to the school board in 1973. Willie Smith, a Wadmalaw student, helped establish Second Step voter education classes and a community center on Wadmalaw.⁴²

Anderson Mack, Sr., credits the Citizenship Schools with helping him become a leader. He came to the Wadmalaw Island school as a student in

his early twenties with a second-grade education. Encouraged by the Citizenship School experience, he took more classes through adult education at Haut Gap High School over the next few years. Together with Citizenship School students Willie Smith and Mary Steed, he helped establish a community center on Wadmalaw, which sponsors a senior citizen's program. He worked to get home mail delivery, paved roads, a kindergarten, and more parent involvement in the local school. All three of his children received college educations. Today he is a community leader and works as a supervisor for the County Public Works Department.⁴³

Many students experienced greater leadership roles and autonomy in their communities as a result of the schools. One student from Johns Island came to the Citizenship Schools as a cleaning woman for a white family, but she learned to read, write, and figure well enough to become bookkeeper for the Progressive Club and clerk in the cooperative store.⁴⁴ One student on Edisto became an officer in the Voter's Association of Edisto Island in 1961.⁴⁵ Another finished high school, went to a Baptist training center, and today is the minister of a large Baptist church. Other students finished high school, became church leaders, and helped to establish a community center.⁴⁶ Fifty percent of the class on Wadmalaw finished high school. A few went to college,⁴⁷ but for most students the primary function of the schools was to help them develop personally and/or socially. The skills they gained in reading, writing, speaking, sewing, and crocheting enabled them to become less dependent on others and to make greater contributions to their communities and families. The evidence from letters, tapes, and interviews is clear: many of the students, teachers, and others in the Sea Island communities were empowered because of the presence of the Citizenship Schools.⁴⁸

Conclusion

First-class citizenship is a process of continued growth and change. Herman Blake, after he studied the effects of the schools in 1969, noted: "It is no longer possible to speak of the citizenship program in terms of the Sea Islands only . . . for the program has reached out to embrace the entire county of Charleston, and its impact is felt statewide since Charleston is the largest county in South Carolina."⁴⁹ The Citizenship Schools got people moving, first on the Sea Islands, then throughout the South. According to

Bernice Robinson: "The Citizenship School program became the basis for the civil rights movement because it was through these classes that people learned about their rights and *why* they should vote."⁵⁰ The schools, in Myles Horton's opinion, were probably Highlander's most successful program, a spark that helped ignite the civil rights movement throughout the South.⁵¹

The Citizenship Schools furnish an example of education that is based on the belief that people have the power within themselves to effect change in their own lives. Although the relationship of education and power is the theme of the work of educators such as Michael Apple and Henry Giroux,⁵² there are few examples of schools or programs that have actually put this belief into action. Paulo Freire's literacy schools in Brazil⁵³ and Highlander Folk School's programs are two of the most notable. The Citizenship Schools, therefore, were unique—and successful. The Citizenship Schools, a key program in the civil rights movement, challenge us to ask today what Septima Clark asked in 1958: Do our schools confront the conflict inherent in our world and aspire to promote dignity, justice, and first-class citizenship for all?

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