

Septima Clark And Myles Horton: Discovering Local Leadership

(From “I’ve Got The Light Of Freedom”)

Septima Clark of South Carolina is best remembered for the Citizenship Schools she developed in conjunction with the Highlander Folk School. Born in 1898, her first name means “sufficient” in her mother’s native Haiti. She grew up in Charleston, where her mother was a washerwoman, her father a cook. In 1916, although she had had the equivalent of two years of college—her parents could not afford more—she passed the teachers’ examination. Since Black teachers could not teach in the public schools, she got a job on Johns Island, just off the coast from Charleston, where she and another teacher were responsible for 132 children of all ages. Johns is the largest of the Sea Islands, the coastal island that traditionally have had Black-majority populations isolated from mainland culture. There was little to do after work, so Septima started to spend part of her evenings teaching adults to read, just to occupy some time. She had few teaching materials and got into the habit of developing her own. In place of a blackboard, they used large drycleaner bags on which students wrote stories about their daily lives.

In 1918 someone came to the island talking about the NAACP, and she joined. In 1919, she returned to Charleston to teach in a private academy for Black children. With other NAACP members, she took part in a successful petition campaign to change the policy that prevented Black teachers from working in Charleston’s public schools. Eventually hired by the Charleston schools herself, she continued working with the NAACP and a number of other civic groups including the YWCA. Working with these groups eventually brought her into contact with federal judge Waties Waring, arguably the most hated man in Charleston by the late 1940’s. The product of eight generations of Charleston aristocracy, the son of a Confederate veteran, Waring had married an outspoken Yankee woman, had ruled that Black and white teachers had to receive the same pay, and in 1947 had ruled that Blacks could not be excluded from the Democratic primary. He let it be known that anyone trying to interfere with Black voters could expect to spend a long time in jail. On the day of the first election after his ruling he spent the day in court waiting, just in case anyone started trouble. After Mrs. Waring gave a speech at the Y in which she characterized anyone who supported white supremacy as mentally ill and morally defective, Mrs. Clark, who had been pressured to cancel the talk, became a friend of the Warings, a friendship that so frightened the other teachers at Clark’s school that they devoted part of a faculty meeting to trying to convince her not to associate with the Warings.

In 1953 a coworker at the Y, looking for someplace in the South where Blacks and whites could meet together, went to the Highlander Folk School in the Tennessee mountains and came back telling Septima that she had to go see the place herself. Highlander was indeed worth seeing. Highlander is what sociologist Aldon Morris calls a movement halfway house, his term for change-oriented institutions, lacking a mass base themselves, that bring together a range of key resources- skilled activists, tactical knowledge, training techniques, networks of valuable contacts. It was not the communist training school authorities assumed it to be, but it was a school for social activists.

Highlander was co-founded during the Depression by Myles Horton, who had grown up in a poor white sharecropping family in Tennessee. Horton saw Highlander as a school for the poor of Appalachia, “dedicated to developing its students’ capacities for both individual and collective self-determination,” a place where the “learned helplessness” of the poor would be replaced with a willingness to take more control over their own lives. In the 1930s, it organized and taught coal miners, mill-hands, timber cutters, and small farmers. Later the school was heavily involved in training labor organizers, as CIO industrial unions penetrated the South (an often uneasy relationship, given the differences in values between Highlander and the CIO.) In the 1950s it became a very important meeting place and training center for civil rights leaders at all levels. Almost from its beginning, defying state law and saying that Blacks and whites could neither eat together nor sleep in the same building, Highlander’s philosophy was interracial, a philosophy that frequently generated as much initial discomfort for Black visitors as for white ones. Many visitors testified that the experience of egalitarian living in an interracial situation had greater impact on them than the courses and workshops.

Highlander’s work was guided by the belief that the oppressed themselves, collectively, already have much of the knowledge needed to produce change: “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.” Thus, much of the burden of change is on the oppressed themselves.

Workshops at Highlander brought local leaders together to share experiences and to develop techniques that would, in the ideal cases, allow them to return home and develop the leadership potential of others. The emphasis on developing other was crucial to Highlander’s conception of leadership. According to Horton: “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.”

Highlander was also committed to a vision of change that respected the culture of the people with whom they were working. People need something for the spirit and soul. Music and singing were an integral part of the Highlander experience. Horton’s first wife, Zilphia, played particularly important role in preserving the music of the people Highlander worked with and in providing the music that helped give Highlander workshops their emotional definition. In later years a similar role would be played by Guy and Candie Carawan. It is not accidental that “We Shall Overcome” was introduced to the modern civil rights movement at Highlander workshops.

Many people who were to become well-known civil rights leaders – E.D. Nixon and Rosa Parks of Montgomery, James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, C.T. Vivian, Bernard Lafayette, Bernard Lee, Dorothy Cotton, Any Young, Hosea Williams of SCLC, John Lewis, Bob Zellner, Marion Barry, and Diane Nash of SNCC – attended Highlander workshops, and many of them attended regularly. Mrs. Clark first visited Highlander in 1954, and she became a regular, carrying other people to workshops there and then directing workshops herself. Never a retiring woman, she said her visits to Highlander made her “more vociferous” and “more democratic.” She first met Rosa Parks while directing a workshop on leadership. Mrs. Parks, quiet and soft-spoken, was quite a contrast to the more outgoing Mrs. Clark. Mrs. Parks had difficulty believing that she was in an interracial environment where she could safely say whatever she felt. She had been working with the NAACP Youth Council at home and had had some success with the group, enough so that she had begun to get threatening phone calls. She came to Highlander to get more ideas about what she could do with her young people. Highlander workshops often began by asking the participants what they wanted to learn and ended by asking them what they planned to do when they got home. Mrs. Parks wasn’t optimistic about the latter. “Rosa answered that question by saying that Montgomery was the cradle of the Confederacy, that nothing would happen

there because blacks wouldn't stick together. But she promised to work with those kids. " Three months later, of course, she sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. Septima Clark remembered the 1955 workshop Mrs. Parks attended as a pivotal one. Previously, Negroes had made up only ten to fifteen percent of workshop participants and had tended to be very outspoken. At this workshop, they were half the participants, and they lost much of their reluctance to speak out, setting two patterns that would continue.

In 1955, the South Carolina legislature, reacting to *Brown*, decided that no city or state employee could belong to the NAACP. Refusing to resign her membership, Mrs. Clark lost her job. Being such a controversial figure – A friend of the despised Warings, an NAACP member, and someone who consorted with the subversives at Highlander – she could find no other work and suffered from the usual harassments and threats. Her sorority, AKA, was supportive enough to give her a testimonial in recognition of her courage, but her sorors took care not to be photographed with her. After failing in her attempts to organize other Black teachers to fight for their rights, she accepted a job at Highlander as director of workshops, starting in 1956. She was so emotionally drained from the experience of losing her job that it was three months before she could sleep well at nights.

Highlander had tried with little success to get people from the Sea Islands to attend workshops. Islanders were not anxious for contact with outsiders. Mrs. Clark had the advantage of having taught on one of the islands, and she was able to get Esau Jenkins, whom she had taught on Johns Islands, to start coming to workshops. He came with a practical problem. By the middle 1950s, he had become a respected leader on the island. He had run for school board on Johns Island and had been defeated because so few Blacks were registered

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and had been defeated because so few Blacks were registered farmer, Jenkins submitted his income with a bus he use tobacco workers and longshoremment to work in Charleston the women who rode the bus, Mrs. Alice Wine, told him she been to the third grade, but she'd like to register is someone teach her how to read and write. Jenkin's bus became a rolling He gave copies of the South Carolina laws on registering to his passengers and went over them line by line. Mrs. couldn't read but had a phenomenal memory, just memorize

With fifteen hundred dollars borrowed from Highlander, group bought and fixed up a run-down building. They called themselves the Progressive Club and had about twenty-six membership set up the front part of the building like a grocery store, partly the white folks wouldn't learn that it was a school. The two rooms were used for teaching. With the profits from the grocery they were able to pay back Highlander's loan. Mrs. Clark was [too pre-occupied] at Highlander to be the teacher so she recruited her niece Bernice Robinson. Robinson was a beautician who had moved back to Charleston after living in the Norh and had with Esau Jenkins on a voter-registration campaign, which gave her certain status on the island. "esau could be trusted," wrote Clark, "and because he could be trusted, he could introducenumbers of other who would trust us."

For Mrs. Clark, the fact that the islanders did trust Mrs. Robinson and would not think her high-falutin' more than outweighed Robinson's lack of teaching experience. It was not that easy for an outsider to be trusted on the island. Septima Clark was very familiar withstood patterns of class and color snobbery among Blacks in the area and defensiveness these traditions engendered in the poor. Even though she was a teacher and had studied in the North, the ligh-skinned Negro upper class of Charleston would harly have considered_____

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social equal. Similarly, people from the islands expected Blacks from the mainland to look down on them. That Bernice Robinson was socially accepted on the island was the important thing for Mrs. Clark, not her educational credentials.

Robinson didn't feel competent to be anybody's teacher, so Horton and Clark had to persuade her. Robinson quickly learned that grade-school material did not interest adults, so she worked directly from the voter-registration forms, going over and over short sections of the documents and teaching students to write their names in cursive. The teaching style developed ty Robinson and Clark emphasized the direct experiences of the students. Students would talk about whatever they had done that day – started a vegetable plot, dug potatoes; their stories would be written down, becoming the text for the reading lesson. Discussion deliberately emphasized “big” ideas – citizenship, democracy, the powers of elected officials. The curriculam stressed what was interesting and familiar and important to students, and it changed in accordance with the desires of students. When students said they wanted to learn to write money orders, that was added; when some said they wanted to learn to use sewing machines, that was added. Eventually, Robinson began trying to teach skepticism as well, trying to get students to read newspaper stories critically and look cautiously at the promises of politicians.

At first classes were held four hours a week for two months, January and February, the time of year when people didn't have much to do in the fields. The initial group brought others, and the following year class was held for three moths, and another class was started on a nearby island. From the first class of fourteen people --- three men and eleven women – eight were able to get registered. It wasn't long before they had five schools going on various islands.

It took the local whites three years to figure out what was going on, although the increasing numbers of Black successfully registering caused a minor panic. Eventually, a white visitor to Johns Island found out about the original school and told the papers. By this time, Black islanders didn't care what white people knew.

By 1961, thirty-seven Citizenship schools had been established in the island and on the nearby mainland, and Black voting strength had increased significantly.

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The aim of the schools, though, involved citizens, not just voters. Citizenship-School students start a credit union, a nursing home, a kindergarten, income housing project

Highlander was responsible for spreading the Citizenship

across the South. At first Mrs. Clark and Horton disagreed aspects of the program. He though that registration campaign be conducted without so much emphasis on basic literacy agreed, and they had several shouting matches over the Clark winning in the end. As the idea of the schools spread recruited and trained teachers. By the spring of 1961, she h__ eighty-one of them. About that time, the program was turn__ SCLC. At the time Highlander was afraid that it was about down by state and, in any case, Highlander was more in starting programs than in administering them. Although__ being lobbied by both Ella Baker and Septima Clark and __ were registering voter across the South in far greater numb any SCLC program, Martin Luter King was reluctatnt to take program over. Eventually, though, nearly ten thousand people trained as teachers, and as many as two hundrend schools wo__ operation at one time, “in people’s kitchens, in beauty parlors, __ under trees in the summertime.”

Under SCLC, Clark continued to treat literacy and registration ____ means to an end, not as ends in themselves. “The basic purpose__ Citizenship Schools is discovering local community leaders,” __ It was particularly important that the schools had “the ability ____ at once to specific situations and stay in the local picture or ____ enough to help in the development of local leaders It is m__ that crative leadership is present in any community and only__ discovery and development.” Her philosophy of recruiting ____ continued to reflect a concern for how they fit in with the lo__ social structure”

“The teachers we need in a Citizenship School should be people who are respected by the members of the community, who ca__ well aloud, and who can write their names in cursive writing.

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are the ones that we looked for we were trying to make teachers out of these people who could barely read and write. But they could teach.”

Even so pre-eminently middle-class an activity as teaching the poor can and should provide a large share of the leadership. Similarly, Horton, in his work with miners, had learned that they learned best when taught by other miners. “Formally educated staff members, it turned out, were never as effective in teaching as the people themselves, once they saw themselves as teachers.” Horton never tried to teach Citizenship classes himself and “discouraged other well-meaning whites from doing so, too.” With SCLC, Mrs. Clark continued to exhibit a sensitivity to class privilege. She once chided Andrew Young for sitting down to breakfast at a time when there wasn’t enough to share with the students. What he needed to do, she told him, was either find money to buy them breakfast or go hungry with them. She criticized Ralph Abernathy for his habit of being late for services at this own church in order “to flaunt his mastery over the common people.” She spoke disdainfully of Negro women who came to

civil rights meetings to play bourgeois games. “They were going to *be* there because they were going to show those beautiful clothes and those summer furs and the like, but they weren’t listening.”

She was never entirely comfortable as a member of SCLC’s executive staff. SCLC’s conception of leadership was very different from her own. It bothered her that people all around the country would ask Kin to come lead marches, so “I sent a letter to Dr. King asking him not to lead all the marches himself, but instead to develop leaders who could lead their own marches. Dr. King read that letter before the staff. It just tickled them; they just laughed.”

Mrs. Clark idolized King, but she wasn’t blind to his limitations, including his inability to treat women as equals. Women within SCLC circles were expected to neither ask nor answer questions, and that expectation applied to the wives of the leadership as well as to staff. “Mrs. King and Mrs. Abernathy would come and they were just like chandeliers shinging lights sitting up saying nothing.” She was un-

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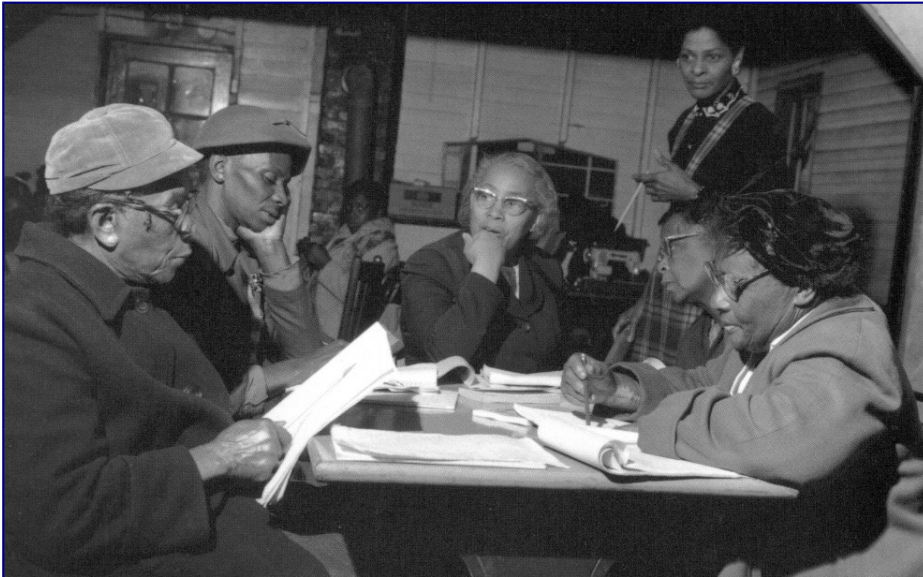
willing to play chandelier herself, but it didn’t make any difference at executive staff meetings, “I was just a figurehead ... When I had anything to say, I would put up my hand and say it. But I ___ that they weren’t paying any attention.”

Septima Clark’s Citizenship Schools became an important --ing tool for younger activists in Mississippi and virtually everywhere else in the South. They were a relatively non-threatening ___w people involved in the broader movement. Once you bri___ together to talk about literacy, you can get them to talk about ___ many other things. Once the schools became funded, they ___ source of income for people fired from their jobs because of ___ Highlander also continued to be an important source of support for ___ SNCC. Indeed, before SNCC launched its first statewide re ___ campaign in Mississippi, Highlander conducted a week-long ___ workshop for them. Mrs. Clark and Highlander had evolved ___ ___tive way of thinking about the process of social chnge. Through ___ experience working with impoverished communities, they h ___ developed a faith in the ability of communities of the poor to provide ___ of the leadership for their own struggle and concrete ideas at ___ that ability could be nurtured. That faith and those ideas we ___ by Ella Baker.

<https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/alliances-relationships/sclc/>

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was best known for mobilizing large, nonviolent protests in places like Birmingham and [Selma](#), aimed at moving the national conscience and pushing the federal government to support civil rights initiatives.

Rev. King's charisma was crucial to this effort, which created confrontation between nonviolent protesters and local law enforcement but also aimed to stir up public outcry against blatant and often violent racial discrimination.



Septima Clark teaches a citizenship class in the South Carolina Sea Islands. Standing in the background is Citizenship School teacher, Bernice Robinson, cirmvet.org

But another less well-known component of SCLC engaged in voter education work in the form of the Citizenship Education Program (CEP). The idea for a citizenship education program for potential Black voters was born during a 1954 workshop at the [Highlander Folk School](#) in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee. [Septima Clark](#), a Charleston school teacher who had been fired from her job because of her [NAACP](#) activities, was leading the workshop. One of the attendees was Esau Jenkins, a Black farmer, businessman and former student of Septima Clark from the majority-Black John's Island off the coast of Charleston. He said he wanted to create a school to teach literacy to Black residents of John's Island, most of whom were unable to vote because they were illiterate or could barely read and write.

Highlander loaned Jenkins \$1,500 to set up the school. By 1961, there were citizenship schools operated by seven different organizations in 21 counties in Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, and South Carolina. These citizenship schools became the roots of the Citizenship Education Program, which SCLC took over in 1961.

Unlike massive direct action protests, CEP classes became important spaces for grassroots organizing, as both teachers and students were drawn from local populations. In Mississippi, this work was important to SNCC's work, and SNCC and [COFO](#) workers helped bring participants to CEP schools. In the relatively protected spaces of classrooms located in the Black community, students and teachers discussed ways in which they could effect change and address locally-defined problems. Through these classes, students learned more than literacy; they began to craft their own understandings of first-class citizenship.

CEP had a strong presence in the Mississippi Delta during the early sixties and worked hand-in-hand with SNCC's [voter registration organizing in the area](#). In 1961 and 1962, local Mississippians organized six citizenship schools in the Clarksdale area. CEP continued to expand in the Delta as [James Bevel](#), a former SNCC field secretary turned SCLC staff member, and his wife [Diane Nash](#) worked to recruit teachers.

Citizenship schools provided an essential educational component for the emerging voter registration campaign in the Delta. They transcended organizational affiliations with NAACP members working closely with field secretaries from SNCC, [CORE](#), and SCLC. Citizenship schools existed in every major area of movement activity, typically taught by local women who could use their established reputations, economic resources, and considerable community contacts to support local movement activity. CEP provided a vehicle for local women of varying backgrounds to become leaders within the Mississippi Movement, in charge of instilling within local people the confidence to attempt to register to vote. Citizenship schools became important politicization centers for community adults, as well as institutionalized grassroots leadership development.