
The Highlander Folk School

A HISTORY OF ITS MAJOR
PROGRAMS, 1932-1961

Aimee Isgrig Horton

PREFACE BY DAVID J. GARROW

CARLSON
Publishing Inc

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, 1989

Series Editor's Preface

Aimee Horton's careful and detailed history of the Highlander Folk School is a major contribution to twentieth-century southern history, for Highlander, as much as any other indigenous southern institution of the mid-century period, played a crucial role in a succession of significant southern social change movements, from organized labor to black civil rights.

Horton's study, first written in 1971, was a valuable precursor to the subsequent flowering of scholarly interest in Highlander, a flowering reflected by a number of useful books, particularly Frank Adams' *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (John F. Blair, 1975), Carl Tjerandsen's *Education for Citizenship* (Emil Schwartzhaupt Foundation, 1980, pages 139-232), and John M. Glen's *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (University Press of Kentucky, 1988). Horton's important volume merited publication well prior to 1989 and I am very pleased that Carlson Publishing's series of books on *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement* can now bring Horton's work to the wider audience that it has long deserved.

Highlander's important role in assisting the southern black freedom struggle during its formative years in the 1950s and early 1960s is nicely highlighted in chapters twelve through fourteen of Horton's study. Participation in a multi-day Highlander workshop in the summer of 1955 had a crucial influence on Mrs. Rosa Parks five months before her refusal to surrender her seat on a segregated bus sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and Highlander's Citizenship Schools program, initiated by long-time South Carolina educator and black activist Mrs. Septima Clark, made a major contribution to the grass roots strength of the southern civil rights movement both before and after it was transferred from Highlander's auspices to those of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Additionally,

Highlander in the early 1960s repeatedly served as a site for discussion and reflection on the part of the young college activists of the southern movement who made up the cutting edge of the black struggle in the South.

Aimee Horton's work traces not only Highlander's crucial civil rights contributions but also its earlier and oftentimes less-heralded efforts to sponsor and assist progressive southern unionism during the 1930s and 1940s. Her detailed history of Highlander's development and its program initiatives is extremely valuable both to students in her own field of adult education and equally, if not more so, to students of twentieth-century southern liberalism. Highlander's consistent emphasis on the long-term value of local organizing and indigenous community empowerment through grassroots educational initiatives has not only proven repeatedly successful in the past, but continues onward even now through the efforts of the present-day Highlander. Aimee Horton's valuable volume has already been of much value to students of Highlander's history, and now can be of expanded use to those interested in the ongoing lessons that can be learned from Highlander's important and instructive heritage.

David J. Garrow

Preface 1989

When I came to Highlander on a visit to the Tennessee Mountain School in the winter of 1961, I was Director of the Illinois Commission on Human Relations in Chicago. The Commission, a largely ceremonial body that met periodically to hear staff progress reports on combating discrimination, had just received a disturbing report: students at Southern Illinois University were being refused service in local barbershops and other establishments in spite of a State public accommodations law in existence since the 1890s.

In contrast, at Highlander, leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and adults from other movement organizations who had come together for a "New Alliances in the South" Workshop, were alive with news of what they were doing to open up facilities and what they planned to do to increase black voter registration.

That was in February. In April, 1961, I came back to stay as wife of Myles Horton, Highlander's founder. "To stay," as it turned out, was to be for only a six-month period. In the fall, the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee was closed and its property confiscated in an unprecedented action by the State courts. During these last six months, I served primarily as report writer and fund raiser among northern friends and supporters of the School, along with being an observer of its movement-related residential workshops and field activities. Among the residential programs was the so-called Citizenship School Program. It was designed to prepare volunteers from Deep South civil rights groups to teach the unschooled and disenfranchised in their communities to read and write and understand their State constitution in order to pass voter registration tests, to become "first-class citizens." Somehow, the development of literacy/voter education teachers took place in a one-week workshop. Somehow, a former beautician and Highlander student from Charleston, South Carolina, who had taught the first Citizenship School class on nearby John's Island was the educational director of the workshop. Somehow, most of the workshop