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Faith In Action: The First Citizenship School on Johns
Island, South Carolina

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
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August 2008

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Keywords: Citizenship Schools, Gullah, Civil Rights
Movement, Johns Island, SC, Highlander Folk School

ABSTRACT

Faith in Action: The First Citizenship School on Johns
Island, South Carolina

by

Amanda Shrader Jordan

This thesis examines the first Citizenship School, its location, participants, and success. Johns Islanders, Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, Myles Horton, Bernice Robinson, and the Highlander Folk School all collaborated to create this school. Why and how this success was reached is the main scope of this manuscript. Emphasis is also placed on the school's impact upon the modern Civil Rights Movement. Primary sources such as personal accounts, manuscripts, and archive collections were examined. Secondary sources were also researched for this manuscript. The conclusion reached from these sources is that faith was the driving force behind the success of the Citizenship School. The schools unlocked the chains of political, social, and economic disenfranchisement for Gullah Islanders and African Americans all over the South, greatly affecting the outcome of the Civil Rights Movement. African Americans, who had once been forced into second-class citizenship, now through faith and the vote, obtained first-class citizenship.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Oppression has plagued African Americans throughout the history of the United States. There is a history behind this adversity. The bonds of slavery gave way only to the bonds of segregation. African Americans were legally given the right to vote after the official abolition of slavery, but, "a series of informal practices in the South prevented them from registering and voting in large numbers."¹ White political leaders introduced and strictly enforced poll taxes on poor blacks, while often overlooked this requirement for poor whites. Literacy tests and constitution tests were also instituted. Once these strategies were declared illegal, other forms of restriction took their place. Long registration lines, extensive paper work, intimidation, humiliation, and acts of violence reduced African Americans to second-class status.²

For many African Americans the attempt to become first-class citizens only seemed to solidify their second-class status. With threats of violence, unfair treatment, poll taxes, and high illiteracy rates African Americans

¹ Jonathan H. Turner, et al., *Oppression: A Socio-History of Black-White Relations in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984), 105.

² Turner, 105.

were left powerless and could not participate in American government. Thus, they were forced to be second-class citizens. Political disenfranchisement created black powerlessness in national political decision. Poverty, inadequate health care, and lack of employment opportunities are each part of the damaging effects of second-class status. Political enfranchisement as well as literacy for African Americans created great social change in America. It had the power to open doors for all African-Americans.

White southerners were not unaware of the significance of the black vote. With the power of the black vote, they saw the end of their political system, the one they dominated for nearly one hundred years: "For white segregationists, the political and economic consequences of opening a lunch counter or a front seat on a bus to blacks were relatively small. The consequences of allowing blacks to vote were enormous." ³ Losing economic supremacy was a major concern and "white resistance had proved that it would kill to keep blacks from the polls. There was little reason to believe that it would not happen again."⁴

³ Hampton, 210.

⁴Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 210.

These issues pressed heavily on the African-American community. The literacy and constitution tests were implemented because of the high illiteracy rates among southern African Americans. These tests automatically restricted them from registering to vote and becoming first-class citizens. However, nearly a decade before the Voting Rights Act passed a South Carolina Sea Islander was already taking a stand against illiteracy and disenfranchisement. Johns Island's Esau Jenkins, along with Myles Horton of Highlander Folk School, Bernice Robinson, and Septima Clark, took the challenge to change the status quo. Their decision to act changed the lives of thousands, even millions of African Americans.

To many Americans the story of the Civil Rights Movement is rooted in names like Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. It is a tale of protest, marches, speeches, and dreams but also of violence, fear, and upheaval. The movement is also a tale of faith and Christian principles of non-violence, civil disobedience, and passive resistance. Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, Washington, D.C. each come to mind as the grounds upon which this modern Civil Rights Movement took place. Public movement toward equality was of critical importance. But as the modern civil rights movement began to emerge with the

overturn of the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954, another movement was already underway.

This movement was one of education, promoted by the Highlander Folk School, a progressive adult education center comprised of, and for, people of all classes and races who worked to create social change. Highlander and those who worked there have been largely neglected in American history, primarily because they worked just beneath the surface of the Civil Rights Movement.

Highlander Folk School (HFS) operated on the basis that education could help transform society from a place of racial, social, economic, and political inequality to an egalitarian society.

Highlander also used faith and Christian principles to create its unique form of education. By advocating a true care and concern for those in need and those facing oppression, HFS expressed Christian love and faith. The type of education HFS developed was not a typical form of education for it had far more to offer. It was the most valuable form of education that any person regardless of class and race could receive. In fact, many adults who attended HFS became the leaders of the modern civil rights movement. There they learned group activism: how to

organize, effectively protest, and to demand their rights as first-class citizens.

However, voter education quickly became the main goal for it had the power to create change for all African Americans. Jenkins, Horton, Clark, and Robinson of Highlander Folk School took the challenge and implemented a program that came to be known as the Citizenship Schools. Voter education was the primary goal of these schools along with teaching African Americans how to better their lives and overcome problems at the local level through and by local individuals. They collaborated to create and realize the Citizenship Schools. Together they were ready to end political disenfranchisement of African Americans and transform them from second-class citizens to first-class citizenship. A whole world of opportunity opened up for African Americans with the ability to read, write, and vote. Communities would change, individual lives would change, and people would no longer accept defeat.

Looking deeper into this program will show that it was so much more than learning to read, write, and fill out a voter registration form. Voter education was the key to unlocking the chains of not only political bondage but social and economic as well. By obtaining this knowledge that it was not acceptable to be treated as second-class

citizens, African Americans on Johns Island and all over the South could finally feel a sense of empowerment. The ideas that you *do* indeed have rights and you can fight for them, that you no longer have to be afraid, that you can overcome through education, organization, protest, and group activism are what Highlander encouraged and expressed.

Some have suggested that the Citizenship Schools were the highest accomplishment of Highlander Folk School, and rightly so. But together they were the greatest achievement of the modern civil rights movement. Without them, the movement would not have been what we know it to be today. A foundation of this modern movement was set by that first Citizenship School Program on the South Carolina Sea Island of Johns Island.

By exploring further into Johns Island, Sea Island culture, Highlander Folk School, and the first Citizenship School, one can discover why these programs were the foundation of the modern civil rights movement. Examination of the origins of these ideas, the curriculum and instructors of the schools, the students who attended, and the results of the program will highlight the one element that made the schools and the movement possible. That one element is faith.

The account of the first citizenship school on Johns Island, South Carolina, is not only a history of political and social enfranchisement for African Americans. It is also a chronicle of faith. Faith is the common thread that binds this crucial part of American History together. The faith referred to here is faith in its simplest form, faith defined as a firm belief in something for which there is no proof, complete trust, something that is believed especially with strong conviction, without question.⁵ This faith was and is held in many different entities: each other, in justice and equality, in the power of the vote, and in God. This faith was anchored in a belief that ran so deep that it could not help but to shape the perfect conditions for the development and success of the first Citizenship School on Johns Island. The unique culture, known as Gullah, that abounds on Johns Island and other Sea Islands engenders this faith as it encompasses all aspects of life. Johns Island expresses the perfect example of this faith in action and its significance.

The key players of the first Citizenship School all embodied faith, though they may have expressed and understood it in different ways. Jenkins, through his deep faith in God and in the power of education, certainly

⁵ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition, 2005, 450.

achieved great success that spread throughout the entire South. Robinson's faith in her students and in the power of the vote led hundreds toward the path of first class citizenship. Clark, with her faith in Christian principles, in possibility, and in change, was able to overcome many personal obstacles. These impediments gave her with the strength to lead others through their own problems. The reason behind the first school's success was faith.

Faith led to hope and hope led to the vote. Through years of second-class status, many islanders relied on their faith. Faith enabled many to feel a sense of hope that enabled the islanders to attend the citizenship school and work toward a better future. Hope was found in the vote and the vote would be the key to unlocking the chains of poverty and inequality. The sea islanders had faith in the vote that brought them hope. The ability to read, write, and vote instilled a new confidence, a renewed faith within hundreds of African Americans thus enhancing the movement. Faith superseded any doubt, confrontation, reality, and obstacle that stood in the way of freedom and first-class citizenship. Faith could overcome second-class citizenship status, achieve freedom, and realize success.

CHAPTER 2

JOHNS ISLAND

Johns Island lies just off the coast of South Carolina and is part of a larger chain of islands called the Sea Islands. The Sea Islands stretch along the coasts of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Located six miles south of Charleston, Johns Island is the largest Sea Island.⁶ African Americans comprise the majority of the island's population. South Carolina Sea Island culture has a rich history rooted in its inhabitants. Thousands are descendants of slaves from many different areas including the West Indies, Bahamas, Barbados, and West Africa.⁷ They worked on plantations and farms that produced indigo, rice, and sea-island cotton.⁸ In 1863, African American Sea Islanders were able to purchase portions of the land on which they toiled as slaves. They built their homes and lived as Freedmen:

⁶ Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird, "Introduction to Sea Island Folklife," *Journal of Black Studies*, 10, no. 4 (June 1980), 387; Sandra B. Oldendorf, "The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961," In *Women of the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 169.

⁷ Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 6; Guion Griffis Johnson, *A Social History of the Sea Islands* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1930), 33;

⁸ Johnson, 17-30; Paul Sanford Salter, "Changing Agricultural Patterns on the South Carolina Sea Islands," In *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia*, ed. Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1991), 20-21.

"for three generations they lived quietly in independent Negro hamlets hidden away on the Sea Islands."⁹

Separated from the mainland by rivers, marshes, inlets, and streams, Johns Island and other sea islands were generally inaccessible for many years. Bridges and causeways were not built until the 1930s.¹⁰ Without bridges it took eight to nine hours by boat to reach Charleston.¹¹ With little pressure from the outside world, Johns Islanders were able to cultivate their unique culture and way of life. Their distinctive customs consisted of folk tales and remedies, spirituals, and superstitions known as Gullah. Gullah also refers to the creole language created by the Sea Island slaves. It is a combination of French, English, German, and the African languages they remembered of their ancestors.¹² In addition, religion represented a significant element in Sea Island life. Faith gave the islanders a deep sense of hope, community, and encouragement that allowed them to overcome the many adversities they faced. Sea Island spirituals are vital to

⁹ Johnson, 186-190; Carawan and Carawan, 6.

¹⁰ Johnson, 4; Twining and Baird, 387.

¹¹ Cynthia Stokes Brown, "Literacy as Power," *Radical Teacher*, (May 1978) Septima Clark File, Highlander Research and Education Center Library, New Market, TN.

¹² Carawan and Carawan, 6, 9; Septima Clark, *Ready from Within*, ed. Cynthia Stokes Brown (Trenton: African World Press, Inc., 1990), 106.

their religious culture along with dancing, singing, prayer, and testimonials.¹³

The aspect of faith in Sea Island culture is the one constant element that is the defining part of their unique culture. Since slavery, Gullahs have maintained and strengthened their faith and their culture. Margaret Washington Creel examines the relationship between Gullah spirituality, community, and resistance in her book, "*A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs*:"

In bondage, Gullahs achieved elevation on the level of personal culture and the molding of community values. The edifying qualities of Gullah religious beliefs must be seen as having contributed much to that achievement, just as an element of truth must be recognized in the assertion that insofar as people develop their own culture they are not slaves.¹⁴

African American Sea Islanders not only obtained faith in their religion but also in each other. Despite the realities of slavery and poverty, Gullahs cared for one another, providing food and shelter for those in need. This

¹³ Twining and Baird, 405-407.

¹⁴ Margaret Washington Creel, "*A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1988), 322.

cultural trait of generosity and kindness came from both Christian principles and African traditions.¹⁵

Gullahs attempted to exert control over their environment just as their African forbears had. For Africans it was a hostile natural ambiance that most threatened the group. For slaves it was an oppressive socioeconomic system that challenged their will to develop self-esteem and social cohesion. Gullahs successfully met that challenge and rose above bondage in a spiritual and communal sense. By combining the edifying features of Christianity and African culture and philosophy, they created a practical folk religion that served them well, under the travail of slavery.¹⁶

Along with faith in God and in each other, Gullahs had faith in justice: "Aside from a spirit of cooperation, Gullahs used their religion to foster a sense of justice."¹⁷ Gullahs waited many years for justice to prevail. But they knew, by the power of their faith that one day freedom and equality would reign. Freedom came with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and true equality came with the vote nearly one hundred years later.

Through these years, isolation preserved sea island culture. On the other hand, seclusion also "meant poor education, poor health care, and little economic

¹⁵ Creel, 281-282.

¹⁶ Creel, 302.

¹⁷ Creel, 282,

opportunity."¹⁸ The poverty and segregation that permeated the rest of the South in the early twentieth century found its way to the isolated Johns Island. African American islanders understood the experience and the effects of segregation.¹⁹

During the early to mid twentieth century, most Gullah islanders "engaged in domestic and seasonal labor with small cash incomes."²⁰ They worked as cooks, maids, and laborers for white plantation owners. However, many suffered from unemployment. With large families and minimal education, most families lived in poverty despite the fact that "they have worked for a lifetime on their own tiny bits of land and on the farms and in the kitchens of their white neighbors."²¹ Illiteracy, disease, and superstition remained a consistent problem for Johns Islanders: "only one out of ten black adults on the island was literate, about the same percentage as the number of registered voters."²²

African Americans residing on the Sea Islands were isolated from the ballot just like their brothers across

¹⁸ Oldendorf, 170.

¹⁹ Carawan and Carawan, 7.

²⁰ Myles Horton, "Memorandum on Citizenship School Training Program," December 1960, Citizenship Program General File, Highlander Research and Education Center Library, New Market TN.

²¹ Carawan and Carawan, 9.

²² John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* 2d ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 188.

the South. By the mid twentieth century, Johns Island managed to maintain its rich Gullah culture in the African American community, but the island was facing the effects of modern Southern segregation:

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. Black schools were old, crowded, and drafty in 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 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.²³

Only the ability to vote and community activism could change these extreme conditions for the Sea Islanders. As the mid twentieth century approached, registering African American citizens to vote became the top priority for Esau Jenkins. He enlisted the help of Myles Horton, HFS Creator and Director, Septima Clark, native of Charleston, South Carolina and Director of Education at HFS, and Bernice Robinson, HFS participant and teacher. Together they helped

²³ Oldendorf, 170.

spark the modern Civil Rights Movement by creating the first Citizenship School to teach African Americans (Gullahs) on Johns Island how to read and write so they could register to vote.

As expressed earlier, faith encompassed all aspects of life on these islands. Johns Island was the perfect example of this faith in action. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Johns Island was home the first Citizenship School. The Citizenship School program was the most successful program of the modern civil rights movement. As it reached success on Johns Island, the program spread to other Sea Islands and then throughout the entire South. The reason behind the first school's success was faith - faith in God, in each other, in justice, and in the power of the vote.

CHAPTER 3

THE KEY PLAYERS

The collaboration of Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, and Bernice Robinson created the greatest program of the modern civil rights movement. Jenkins' idea, Clark's direction, and Robinson's instruction, along with their faith in God, justice, and helping others, made the first Citizenship School a success. These three extraordinary people were not complete strangers. They were all connected to each other and to this program through Johns Island and Gullah Culture.

Esau Jenkins: "Love is Progress, Hate is Expensive."²⁴

"On Johns Island, in the year of 1948, I saw the condition of the people who had been working on the plantations for many years. And I knew that we were not able to do the things that would need to be done unless we could get people registered citizens."²⁵

The above words were spoken by Esau Jenkins, a name unfamiliar to most, but who was one of the key figures of

²⁴ "In Loving Memory of Esau Jenkins." Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

²⁵ Esau Jenkins, "Mr. Jenkins, I Would Like Very Much To Become A Registered Citizen," In, *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 167.

the Civil Rights Movement. One of the many unsung heroes of the movement, Jenkins was a man ahead of his time. He began his activism against discrimination, poverty, and illiteracy well before the modern Civil Rights Movement emerged and he continued his effort well after the movement faded. Jenkins was not only a progressive businessman and community leader but also a man of faith. Jenkins' faith greatly impacted his life, especially in forming his belief in the power of education, God, and the vote. With his faith and his determination he created and led many community organizations with a hands-on approach that sparked great change, not only for his community but for other communities as well. Out of his many great accomplishments, his greatest were the Citizenship Schools. Together with Highlander Folk School, Jenkins started the first school on Johns Island. He was a man of the people and he "played the game of politics with the aplomb of a diplomat, never hating, never the threat of physical violence, but the promise of love and understanding."²⁶

Jenkins held these ideas because the principles of his faith encouraged living a life of peace, love, and goodwill toward others. A close friend described Jenkins as, "a

²⁶ Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

self-made man, everybody here live practically on the same level, but Esau is in a class by himself."²⁷ Instead of simply being a spokesman for those in need, Jenkins actually "belonged to the people, understood and had personally participated in every step of the struggle."²⁸ Deeply involved in his work on Johns Island, "Jenkins was a farmer who had worked for years to improve the conditions under which he and his island neighbors lived."²⁹ A closer look at Jenkins' life will prove the significance of his faith, activism, and role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Esau Jenkins was born on July 3, 1910 on Johns Island, South Carolina. Born in a four-room farm house, his parents, Peter and Eva Jenkins, had "virtually no formal education".³⁰ His father was a hard worker who farmed four and a half acres of land while working part time as a

²⁷ Rev. C.G. Brown, "The Struggle Has Come With Esau" In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 158.

²⁸ Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

²⁹ Stephen Hoffius, "Citizenship School on Johns Island Provided Model for Civil Rights Campaign" *The Chronicle* (Charleston) 7 February 1990, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 22.

³⁰ "Esau Jenkins Funeral Service To Be Thursday," Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.; Billy E. Bowles, "Esau Jenkins Engineers Change For Negro People" *The News and Courier* (Charleston), 28 July 1968, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

carpenter. His carpentry skills were quite excellent.³¹ His mother died when he was nine years old.³² Though Peter was his sole surviving parent and they had a close relationship, Esau did not follow in his father's footsteps. Fearful of white men, his father was careful not to instill in Esau a sense of independence. Esau, however, believed in himself. He even challenged a white man who figured the price of their cotton. Jenkins added the price for himself and knew that the white man's figure was wrong. His father told him not to add it up for himself in fear of retaliation from the white man. Esau, despite his father's suggestion, addressed the man and the man admitted his mistake and gave the Jenkins the correct price for their cotton.³³

With a strong faith in himself and what was right, Jenkins would change the world that his father knew; an unjust world filled with fear and discrimination, attitudes that became commonplace and acceptable. This inequitable society was not acceptable to Jenkins. Of his own will and

³¹ Bowles, 28 July 1968. Esau Jenkins "It's Good To Do Your Own Figuring," In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 162.

³² "The Legacy of Esau Jenkins Still Lives on Sea Islands" *The Chronicle* 29 January 1977, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 15.

³³ Bowles, 28 July 1968; Jenkins, "It's Good To Do Your Own Figuring.", 162.

faith, it appears as if Jenkins was born to work for the betterment of the people of Johns Island and people everywhere. Sarah Richardson, Jenkins' adoptive mother, supported him and his beliefs. She "became his beacon of light in a world seared by undiminished conflicts of racial character and where reasonableness was construed as betrayal of faith in the cause of justice."³⁴

In 1917, at age seven, Jenkins went to Legareville Elementary School. Esau and his forty or fifty classmates received little encouragement from the sole teacher in their small "one door" building. After only four years, Jenkins left school to assist his father in farming and carpentry work.³⁵ Jenkins married Janie Elizabeth Jones when he was seventeen years old and soon realized that with a family came great responsibility.³⁶ His lack of education and meager farm earnings of fifty cents a day made it difficult for Esau to support his family. Previous employment included working on a boat and hauling produce, making only \$1.25 a day.³⁷ So Jenkins decided to work for himself. For several years, Esau and his father planted

³⁴ "The Legacy of Esau Jenkins Still Lives on Sea Islands," 29 January 1977.

³⁵ Bowles, 28 July 1968; Jenkins, 160.

³⁶ Jenkins, "It's Good To Do Your Own Figuring," 161; "The Legacy of Esau Jenkins Still Lives on Sea Islands," *The Chronicle*, 29 January 1977, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 15.

³⁷ Bowles, 28 July 1968.

cotton but he soon found a new crop to harvest; as he recalled, "my mind tell me to start with vegetables."³⁸ Jenkins' progressive mind had already developed, even at such a young age. Planting vegetables proved to be the first step in creating change on Johns Island and creating one of the most enlightened and significant men of the twentieth century.

In the early 1930s Greek immigrants managed several grocery stores in Charleston. Esau, with his new truck and his new vegetable farming venture, often went to Charleston to sell his produce.³⁹ The Greeks bought a great deal of produce from Jenkins, who determined, in his own words, "the best thing for me to do then is to try to learn the Greeks' language. I could sell more stuff and help me to do more business and help my family better."⁴⁰ After two years of studying Greek, Esau could "understand the Greek language in everyday speaking in business."⁴¹ Jenkins found his passion in education and realized its importance.

In the late 1930s Jenkins studied under two African American ministers, Reverend G.C. Brown and Reverend T.C.

³⁸ Jenkins, "It's Good To Do Your Own Figuring," 161; Esau Jenkins, "Then I Notice The Greeks," In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 162.

³⁹ Bowles, 28 July 1968: Jenkins, "Then I Notice The Greeks," 162.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, "Then I Notice The Greeks," 162.

⁴¹ Jenkins, "Then I Notice The Greeks," 162-163.

Coleman.⁴² Reverend G.C. Brown provided evening tutoring in English, grammar, and reading. He then attended evening classes in Charleston at Burke High and at Henry P. Archer Elementary School.⁴³ He held a deep faith in education and believed in the power of knowledge. Jenkins drove his own children to Charleston to attend Burke High School because Johns Island schools only accommodated students up to the eighth grade. Charleston County eventually agreed to pay tuition to Burke High for any student passing the eighth grade. So many students graduated the eighth grade and were awarded tuition that Charleston County built Haut Gap High School on Johns Island. Indeed, Jenkins' influence on Johns Island was reaching new heights.⁴⁴

Jenkins understood that education provided the solution to the problems that plagued him and all disenfranchised African Americans. Once, Jenkins asked himself a question:

Am I my brother's keeper? And the answer that I got was, You are. So then I decided to myself, since I'm no better than anybody, I don't feel I'm any worse than anybody. I decided to do

⁴² Rev. C.G. Brown, "The Struggle Has Come With Esau," 158; Bowles, 28 July 1968; "The Legacy of Esau Jenkins Still Lives on Sea Islands," 29 January 1977.

⁴³ Rev. C.G. Brown, "The Struggle Has Come With Esau," 158; Bowles, 28 July 1968.

⁴⁴ Cynthia Stokes Brown, "Literacy as Power."

anything I can to help people in order
to help myself.⁴⁵

With this conviction and belief, Jenkins began his long and rewarding career of helping others. His faith in education stemmed from his faith in God. As he explains, faith is "where I got my root from, it only takes obedience and a simple mind to go home and go into your closet and get on your knees and ask God for what you want."⁴⁶ Jenkins confirms that his faith is real, "And I tell you one thing: every progress that I have made in life, it came to me while I was doing some good for somebody."⁴⁷

Jenkins' faith always came first in his life despite his involvement in many projects. He was so busy and so involved yet he always made time for God, it "was his salvation; an unswerving fidelity to God and his church."⁴⁸ He never got "caught up in popular fads of denial of God's Grace and Mercy to mankind."⁴⁹ Jenkins' faith obscured any doubt. He believed that if there was anything he and his

⁴⁵ Esau Jenkins, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 159; C. S. Brown, "Literacy as Power," *Radical Teacher*, (May 1978).

⁴⁶ Jenkins, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" 159.

⁴⁷ Jenkins, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" 159.

⁴⁸ Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

⁴⁹ Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

colleagues could not accomplish, then "God would do it for us."⁵⁰ Jenkins' progressive mind frame stems from his faith in Christian principles. One of Jenkins' colleagues describes, "Progress was Esau's most sought after goal. Progress could only be found in the ever broadening base of love."⁵¹

Jenkins' life motto suggests, "Love is progress, hate is expensive." He knew first-hand the cost of hate "and found it too expensive for the individual and for the community. In the love of God, he found his refuge."⁵² Jenkins explains his position on hate in relation to the black power movement,

I believe in black power...to the extent that the Negro should build himself up morally, spiritually, politically, and economically. But when it comes to hating white folks and hating the church and cursing white people, I don't buy that. It take[s] a pretty large person to love. Any small person can hate.⁵³

With his faith in God, education, and his unwavering commitment to helping others, Jenkins was ready to create

⁵⁰ Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

⁵¹ Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

⁵² Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

⁵³ "Bowles, 28, July 1968.

change for himself and for the people of Johns Island. Jenkins attributes two events for sparking his involvement in improving conditions for African Americans on Johns Island.⁵⁴ One incident involves two African Americans who accidentally ran over a white man's dog while driving their truck. The white man shot and killed the passenger of the truck as he was pleading for the white man not to shoot because it was an accident.⁵⁵ The case was never heard in a court of law and this greatly upset Jenkins: "Well, that's something that I felt like people who have good will and think about decency and human dignity should do something about."⁵⁶

The other incident also involved a dog. An African American man was accused of allowing his dog to attack a white woman's dog. The man proclaimed his dog's innocence, but the woman's husband shot him anyway. He lost a great deal of blood and would have died had Esau and two of his family members not donated their blood. Jenkins also worked very hard to make sure that this case was heard in court. The man was eventually compensated for his pain and

⁵⁴ Jenkins, "Here's A Man Being Shot For A Dog." In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 163.

⁵⁵ Bowles, 28 July 1968; Jenkins, "Here's A Man Being Shot For A Dog", 163.

⁵⁶ Jenkins, "Here's A Man Being Shot For A Dog," 163.

suffering.⁵⁷ Jenkins explains the significance of these events and his determination to stop these incidents from happening again:

These are the things, then that motivated me to organize in 1949 a progressive movement, that we could help the people to be better citizens, give them a chance to get a better education, and know how to reason and look out for themselves, and take more part in political action.⁵⁸

Jenkins worked toward these goals the rest of his life. He worked to promote first-class citizenship for downtrodden African Americans. He knew exactly how to achieve these goals after assessing the situation of Johns Islanders in 1948. He considered the conditions in which they lived. He was quite familiar with the issues African Americans faced as he experienced them first hand. The lack of educational opportunity and encouragement framed his early life experiences. Jenkins was well aware of the immense poverty, violence, and inequality that gripped Johns Island. But he never let an opportunity pass him by and he was ready to tackle these challenges.

In 1948 Jenkins established The Progressive Club to improve individual citizenship, increase political action, and to help Gullah Islanders improve conditions for

⁵⁷ Bowles, 28 July 1968; Jenkins, 163-164.

⁵⁸ Jenkins, "Here's A Man Being Shot For A Dog," 164.

themselves.⁵⁹ Instead of reaching out to their white counterparts, African Americans would reach out to each other through the Progressive Club. They would all work together to achieve the goals they set for themselves. For example, they encouraged and helped those who lived and worked on plantations to buy their own homes and land.⁶⁰ The result they were aiming for was that "their children might have freedom to attend schools." They also requested Charleston County to build a four-year consolidated high school and a school bus transportation system.⁶¹ The Progressive Club offered African Americans legal aid as well.⁶² A gymnasium was built by the club and it became "an object of particular civic pride, and young people traveled from all over the island to play there."⁶³ It was the only place available for the young and old alike of Johns Island. But more than that, it was "a visible symbol of Sea Islanders' fortitude, a monument to their united endeavor."⁶⁴ A grocery store, a small motel, and a Civil

⁵⁹ Brown, "Literacy as Power."

⁶⁰ Esau Jenkins, Handwritten notes and a composition paper. 14, 24 September 1966. Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 13.

⁶¹ Jenkins, Handwritten notes, 14 September 1966.

⁶² Glen, 189.

⁶³ Septima Poinsett Clark and Mary A. Twining, "Voting Does Count: A Brief Excerpt From a Fabulous Decade," *Journal of Black Studies*, 10, no. 4 (June 1980): 446.

⁶⁴ Clark and Twining, 446.

Rights Movement Workshop Center all operated at the Progressive Club.⁶⁵

As stated above, Jenkins, after assessing the conditions and situations of African Americans, strove to help Gullahs become registered voters.⁶⁶ Once African Americans could rise to first-class citizenship become registered voters and political activists, they could overcome the hardships of poverty, violence, discrimination, illiteracy, and lack of education. Jenkins was determined for his children to receive proper education. So in 1945, he purchased "an old school bus and began transporting children to Charleston because of the lack of educational facilities on Johns Island."⁶⁷ He also drove the bus from Johns Island to Charleston, transporting islanders to and from work.⁶⁸

Jenkins began discussing with his fellow Johns Islanders the importance of voting. His bus soon transformed into a classroom where he would "prepare his passengers for the questions they would be asked when they

⁶⁵ Clark and Twining, 446.

⁶⁶ Jenkins, "Mr. Jenkins, I Would Very Much Like To Become A Registered Citizen," 167.

⁶⁷ Bowles, 28 July 1968; "Memorial Services Sunday for Late Esau Jenkins: Hundreds Expected." *The Chronicle* (Charleston) Esau Jenkins Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

⁶⁸ Septima Clark, *Ready From Within*, ed. Cynthia Stokes Brown (Trenton: African World Press, 1990), 46.

attempted to register" to vote.⁶⁹ He obtained copies of the state constitution and voting laws and provided them to his passengers. Those who wanted to register to vote would have to pass a literacy test that required one to read and interpret parts of the Constitution. So Jenkins taught his nonvoting passengers reading and comprehension.⁷⁰ On the forty-five minute drive from Johns Island to Charleston, Jenkins would teach definitions of words like miscegenation, bigamy, larceny, and sodomy. All of these words were in the South Carolina constitution and they would have to pronounce them correctly to pass the literacy test. He would also discuss registration and voting procedures with his passenger-students.⁷¹

One passenger, Alice Wine, was not ready to register when Jenkins said he would take her to the registrar. She was not ready but she was willing to learn. She explains in her own words:

Mr. Jenkins, I would like very much to become a registered citizen, but I cannot read this Constitution because I did not get but just so far in school, and I cannot pronounce these words. But if you willing to help me, I will show you that I would be one that

⁶⁹ Bowles, 28 July 1968.

⁷⁰ "Memorial Service Sunday For Late Esau Jenkins, Hundreds Expected" 3 November 1973; Glen, 190.

⁷¹ Bowles, 28 July 1968; Glen, 190.

would be willing to vote in every election.⁷²

Jenkins decided to work with Mrs. Wine a little more, give her more attention as to prepare her to pass the test. When Mrs. Wine was ready, Jenkins took her to the registration board and they got in line. The woman who was in front of Alice was having trouble and she mispronounced a word. So Mrs. Wine pronounced it correctly for her, and the registrar informed her that no coaching was allowed. Once it was Alice's turn, she read right through the constitution, passed her test, and became a registered voter.⁷³ Jenkins continued to hold classes for nonvoters at the Progressive Club instead of on the bus.

Though Jenkins was teaching his passenger-students, some were only memorizing the Constitution, and never actually learned to read: "the fortunate few who registered were still unable to read, and most people were neither able to register nor to read, nor even, many of them, to write their names."⁷⁴ He knew that he needed help to teach the African Americans of Johns Island to read and write so

⁷² Alice Wine, "Everybody Read And Get A Paper," In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 167.

⁷³ Bowles, 28 July 1968; Wine, "Everybody Read And Get A Paper," 167.

⁷⁴ Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*, (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1998), 99; Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Problems, 1932-1961*, (Brooklyn: Carlson Pub., 1989), 223.

they could vote. He also knew the power and significance that came with the ability to vote: "The Negroes outnumber the white here 'round about two and a third to one. The potential voting strength for Negroes is about two thousand against around one thousand white, if we could get them all registered."⁷⁵ So he went to a local African American principal to ask if he would offer night classes. But the principal declined because he was apprehensive about the white response to educating African American adults.⁷⁶ Jenkins continued to search for ways to start an adult education program on Johns Island. In 1955 Jenkins found a way to help the Islanders with the assistance of Highlander Folk School. Jenkins' idea to set up a school for Gullahs would soon reach new heights and achieve outstanding success.

Septima Clark

"So, as I look back more than four decades to my experiences as a teen-age teacher, I realize that it was the Johns Island folk, who if they did not set me on my course, surely did confirm me in a course I had dreamed of taking even as a child, that of teaching and particularly teaching the poor and underprivileged of my own underprivileged race. In teaching them and thereby helping them raise themselves to a better status in life, I felt

⁷⁵ Esau Jenkins, "Everybody Is Jubilant For The Highlander Folk School," In *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 168.

⁷⁶ A. Horton, 223.

then that I would not only be serving them but serving my state and nation, too, all the people, affluent and poor, white and black. For in my later years I am more convinced than ever that in lifting the lovely we lift likewise the entire citizenship."⁷⁷

Septima Poinsette Clark is not a name commonly associated with the Civil Rights Movement. She has become unfamiliar over the years and her story is not generally well known. Her dedication and activism made a significant impact upon the Civil Rights Movement and upon thousands of individual lives. With strong faith in helping others, Clark helped create the first Citizenship School and later schools that educated and empowered thousands of African-Americans.

Clark was born on May 3, 1898, in Charleston, South Carolina. From a very early age she felt her calling as a school teacher. Clark credits her parents and her environment with the strong faith she held in education and helping others.⁷⁸ From her mother she learned not to fear anything or anyone and to stand up for herself. Her mother was courageous and a dedicated activist. "She had a way of letting you know that she was never afraid of anyone, and

⁷⁷ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 52.

⁷⁸ Clark, 128; Septima Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962), 13.

she wanted you to be able to stand your ground regardless of where you were or whatever happened.”⁷⁹

From her father, she learned the importance of education. Mr. Clark never had the opportunity to go to school, so it was very important to him that his children receive an education. So he pushed Septima to go to school and learn her lessons. She recalls how he would walk her and her brother to school when the weather was bad and carry her books.⁸⁰

But though he had none of the culture one gets from books, he did have a deeper culture, an inborn graciousness clearly manifested in his genuine love of people. And he loved not only the poor and underprivileged of his own race, but also the wealthy and highborn.⁸¹

Mr. Clark exhibited his faith in Jesus Christ by having genuine love for everyone, regardless of race or social status. He taught Septima about faith and Christian principles. Her father taught her to be honest, help strengthen other people’s weaknesses, and find the good in everyone. She explains that “he wanted you not to exalt yourself, but to look at the culture of others and see whether or not you could strengthen their weaknesses and

⁷⁹ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 96.

⁸⁰ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 95, *Echo In My Soul*, 16.

⁸¹ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 13-14.

try to investigate how you could improve yourself towards them."⁸²

Clark believed in the power of faith to help one identify with others. She understood and realized the idea that having faith, having Christ in your life, is the "one thing that helps you understand people better. If you can get the spirit of Christ into your life, you will learn to see others as Christ saw them and be able to live with them and help them to live with themselves."⁸³ Her fearless, faithful, and understanding traits are exactly what led her to become such a great civil rights activist and teacher.

As a child, Clark attended both private and public schools through the seventh grade. She then entered Avery Normal Institute where she graduated with a high school education. During her time in school, she qualified for teaching certificates to become a teacher herself. She also expanded her desire to learn and to teach others. Clark describes her experiences at Avery as "a paradise. I soon began to glory in browsing through what seemed to me an illimitable sea of books."⁸⁴ She encountered many intriguing subjects like astronomy and religion and "really fell in love with reading and exploring the wonderland embraced in

⁸² Clark, *Ready From Within*, 97-98.

⁸³ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 98.

⁸⁴ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 24.

the covers of countless books."⁸⁵ Faith was the part of the curriculum at Avery that helped Clark further develop upon her already established foundation. Her admiration for her teacher's dedication inspired her even more.⁸⁶

Septima began her career as a teacher in 1916. African Americans were not permitted, by law, to teach in any Charleston city schools, so she applied for a teaching position on Johns Island. The school hired her and Clark was excited to start her new job. "Teaching was an honorable work that ranked well above most other work available to Negro girls. And it would be a life of service."⁸⁷ Clark began her life of service on Johns Island where she faced many obstacles. The school building was drafty and small with students ranging from first to eight grades all in one room. They had little to no school supplies and work on family farms rendered attendance inconsistent at best. The area was extremely poverty stricken and Septima even suffered several medical conditions due to the harsh environment. But she taught the children there despite the troubles she and they faced.⁸⁸

Two years later, Clark returned to Avery to teach and began her career as an activist. While there, she "first

⁸⁵ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 24.

⁸⁶ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 24.

⁸⁷ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 28.

⁸⁸ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 104-109; Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 27-40.

became actively concerned in an organized effort to improve the lot of my fellow Negroes."⁸⁹ In 1919, she participated in a petition to allow African American teachers to teach in African American schools in Charleston. The petition was a success and in 1920 the law passed to allow African American teachers to teach in Charleston city schools for African Americans.⁹⁰ She moved to Columbia, South Carolina in 1929 and taught there while she took classes in the summer. She attended Columbia University and Atlanta University. She ultimately received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Benedict College in Columbia. She then attended Hampton Institute and received her master's degree. She studied activism and participated in many efforts to gain equal pay for teachers.⁹¹

Septima, over the years, became involved in several civic organizations. She joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1918 while she was still teaching on Johns Island. She even lost her job as a teacher because of her involvement with the NAACP. South Carolina school authorities required every teacher to fill out a questionnaire and list the organizations to which they belonged. She explains, "I refused to overlook

⁸⁹ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 59.

⁹⁰ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 58-61.

⁹¹ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 103-118.

my membership in the NAACP, as some of the teachers did. I listed it."⁹² Within a year the South Carolina legislature passed a law that said no city or state workers could be a part of the NAACP. She was fired because she belonged to the NAACP. Clark endured other forms of segregation and discrimination first hand. She became very good friends with a white Judge and his wife. Judge and Mrs. Waring were civil rights activists who succeeded in securing the African American vote for Democratic primaries in 1947. Because their friendship was frowned upon by white segregationists, she faced direct threats of violence and harassment.⁹³ But she would soon learn of a place where blacks and whites coexisted in harmony and racism was checked at the door.

The dismissal from her job proved to be a pivotal point in the life of Septima Clark as well as the histories of the Citizenship Schools and the Civil Rights Movement. Clark, with her bold activism and participation in many civil rights organizations, soon grabbed the attention of Myles Horton. She first learned about Highlander Folk School from Anna Kelly, a Johns Island resident, who had spent the summer there and described it as "a wonderful

⁹² Clark, *Ready From Within*, 36.

⁹³ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 23-29; Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 101.

place" where blacks and whites could come together to discuss problems.⁹⁴ Upon hearing Kelly's description of Highlander, Septima was intrigued and decided to attend this unique school. When Clark arrived in 1954 she found exactly what her friend had described.⁹⁵ During the summers of 1954 and 1955, Clark worked at Highlander as Director of Workshops, and then in 1956 she moved to Highlander to live.⁹⁶ Under Clark's direction, Highlander would help create one of the greatest educational programs of the civil rights movement.

Bernice Robinson

"Voting is not merely a civic duty. It is a religious obligation. In a country that is democratically governed as the United States, every citizen shares moral responsibility for what his government does, as well as for what it leaves undone."⁹⁷

Bernice Robinson was a great civil rights activist who changed the lives of many African Americans. Her name is still unfamiliar to most as she is one of the many unsung

⁹⁴ Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience*. Santa Cruz: Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, Inc., 1980. 150; Clark, *Ready From Within*, 30.

⁹⁵ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 30.

⁹⁶ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 41; Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 119-122.

⁹⁷ Bernice Robinson, "Political Education/Working with Blacks in Rural South Carolina," Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 3.

heroes of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Robinson was involved in numerous organizations and programs, and she traveled extensively, and received many awards. One of the most effective and valuable programs Robinson ever worked with was the Citizenship Schools. Robinson's faith in justice and in the vote helped hundreds and even thousands of African Americans overcome illiteracy and second-class citizenship. Robinson deserves great recognition and respect for all of her accomplishments. She deeply believed in her work and in what she taught others. Her understanding of the power of the vote is expressed in her own words as she compares the vote civically and religiously. But, in order to fully appreciate her contributions, one must understand where she came from and where she was going.

Bernice Robinson was born on 7 February 1914 in Charleston, South Carolina to James C. and Martha Elizabeth Robinson. She attended Burke High School in Charleston until 1930 when she married Thomas Leroy Robinson. She did not complete high school in Charleston; instead she completed her degree in New York at Wadly High School. Robinson's college career was very diverse as she studied several different specialties. She attended Poro School of Cosmetology in New York City where she received her

Cosmetology Certificate. In 1945, she attended Pace College, also in New York City, where she obtained a Real Estate Brokerage Certificate. Then in 1967, she took a course in Community Development from the University of Wisconsin. She was certified as a Community Action Program Technician and she also completed a course in Interior Design.⁹⁸

Bernice worked for twelve years in New York as a beautician/cosmetologist, "Clerk at the Internal Revenue Services, Statistical Clerk at the Veterans Administration and as a Real Estate Sales person."⁹⁹ Robinson returned to Charleston "when her mother became ill and her parents needed her."¹⁰⁰ She became deeply involved in community work. She joined the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People (NAACP). She was involved in several different aspects of the NAACP: she was Chairperson of Membership, worked with the

⁹⁸ Typed Resume, "Bernice V. Robinson," Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 2; Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, "Manuscript Collections Available at the Avery Research Center: Robinson, Bernice (1914-1994)" (2005) <http://www.cofc.edu/avery/collections.htm#R> (accessed 15 November 2007).

⁹⁹ Typed Biography, "Bernice V. Robinson," Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 49.

Christmas seal drive, and even held the position of Secretary.¹⁰¹

Robinson, through her cousin, who happened to be Septima Clark, learned of Highlander Folk School and its unique philosophy. Bernice was both surprised and impressed by Highlander. Septima Clark explains Robinson's first experience with the progressive school,

when she went up there and found the type of people that we had, southern whites and northern whites, southern blacks and northern blacks, all living and working together, she decided that she should try to do something herself.¹⁰²

Robinson continued to visit Highlander and attend workshops. She told Horton and Clark "that if she could ever do anything for Highlander to let her know."¹⁰³ Bernice did not realize it at the time, but Horton was about to "let her know" that there was indeed something she could do for Highlander. Her instruction and encouragement of Gullah Islanders would lead them to reach goals that were once believed unattainable.

¹⁰¹ Typed Biography, "Bernice V. Robinson."

¹⁰² Clark, *Ready From Within*, 49.

¹⁰³ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 102.

CHAPTER 4

HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL

"Horton and other seminarians from the South who were stirred by hope that the biblical principles of love and justice could redeem society. Horton took his Christian idealism and sought a model by which people could educate themselves."¹⁰⁴

Highlander Folk School, known today as Highlander Research and Education Center, played a crucial role in the development of the Citizenship School program. HFS enhanced the Civil Rights Movement with the institutions dedicated to education. Rather than using major public demonstrations like most civil rights organizations, Highlander worked just beneath the surface of the movement by using education. Highlander's particular form of education was based on the philosophy that all people were equal and deserving of love and justice. Reflecting Christian principles and faith, HFS inspired many to join the struggle for social, political, and economic justice.

One's race, ethnicity, or religious background did not matter at Highlander. It only mattered that you wanted and

¹⁰⁴ Marshall Surratt, "Myles Horton: activism and Gospel: Highlander Center and the tradition of Social Gospel," *Christianity and Crisis*, 50, no. 18 (December 17, 1990): 398-402, Franklin Parker Collection, Acc. No. 598, Box 2, File 2-6, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

worked for the same cause and toward the same goals. Many Civil Rights leaders visited Highlander before they became heavily involved in the movement. Highlander is where they discussed and learned how to overcome oppression and that they indeed *could* do something to create change. Highlander was a place where ideas could be openly discussed, where ideas were appreciated, understood, and expanded upon.

Founded by Myles Horton, HFS began operation in 1932 in the mountains of Monteagle, Tennessee.¹⁰⁵ Horton, a native of the Appalachian region of East Tennessee, was born in 1905 to a proud, hard-working family that lived their lives in the service of others. Horton had various influences in his life which instilled in him a sense of faith and activism. His mother, father, and grandfather all contributed to Horton's social, political, and economic activism. His grandfather could not read or write but he could calculate things in his mind and comprehend information read to him. Horton explains the significance of his grandfather's influence upon his life, "Because of him I've always understood there is a difference between being able to read and being intelligent."¹⁰⁶ Horton also understood the gap that separated the rich from the poor.

¹⁰⁵ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, xix.

¹⁰⁶ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 2.

Horton experienced faith in action throughout his childhood by the example of his parents. He learned the concept of service, the responsibility to serve your fellow man. He learned more through their actions than by their words. His mother took food to sick and impoverished neighbors. She held Bible classes for those who could not read. She helped those in need despite the fact that she and her family too were struggling.¹⁰⁷

His family attended a local Presbyterian church. While in grammar school, Horton read a few theology books and began to question certain aspects of Christian doctrine. His mother explained that doctrine is not what is important in your faith, but that loving your neighbor is paramount. He understood that simply believing that God is love and when one has faith in this love, then it is extended to one's neighbors. Horton explains that his mother had faith in love. It "was a religion to her, that's what she practiced. It was a good nondoctrinaire background, and it gave me a sense of what was right and what was wrong."¹⁰⁸

Horton took all of these influences and beliefs and built his own philosophy of life. He set out to serve

¹⁰⁷ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 3-4.

¹⁰⁸ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 7.

people, to build a faithful world, one that provides equality for all. He explains this idea further,

If you believe that people are of worth, you can't treat anybody inhumanely, and that means you not only have to love and respect people, but you have to think in terms of building a society that people can profit most from, and that kind of society has to work on the principle of equality. Otherwise, somebody's going to be left out.¹⁰⁹

Horton's parents stressed the importance of education: "you're supposed to do something worthwhile with your life, and education is meant to help you do something for others."¹¹⁰ Following grammar school, he and his family moved to another county so that he could attend high school. The various jobs that he held throughout his time in school exposed him to the inequalities and terrible conditions workers endured. During his employment at a crate factory, he organized workers into a union to gain better pay for himself and his co-workers.¹¹¹ With these issues in mind, Horton attended Cumberland University beginning in 1924. Horton encountered many opportunities to stand up for justice and equality while at Cumberland. He was an active member of the YMCA, "which was involved in

¹⁰⁹ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 7.

¹¹⁰ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 2-3.

¹¹¹ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 8-11.

working for racial equality as well as other aspects of social and economic justice."¹¹²

During his summer vacation in 1927, Horton organized a Bible School in Ozone, Tennessee. While the children were in Bible class, Horton held adult meetings to discuss problems in their communities. Through their discussions and questions, Horton helped the community realize that they already had most of the solutions. He learned that he could lead a discussion about problems without always knowing a direct solution. The Ozone community enjoyed and benefited from these discussions and attendance continued to increase. In Ozone, Horton began to understand the benefits of these community discussions, "the Ozone experience, he later said, was the genesis of Highlander."¹¹³

Horton furthered his education and experiences at Union Theological Seminary from 1929 to 1930. While at Union, Horton developed his idea for a school by studying and "seeking a philosophy to guide the school he envisioned."¹¹⁴ He continued to read on his own and he took several theology courses. He studied under professor, and

¹¹² M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 14.

¹¹³ Franklin Parker and Betty J. Parker, "Myles Horton (1905-90) of Highlander: Adult Educator and Southern Activist." In Horton, Myles, 1905-1990 Appalachian Vertical File, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

¹¹⁴ Parker and Parker, 2.

theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a very influential social thinker of the time. Niebuhr encouraged and challenged Horton. Niebuhr believed in the social gospel and helped Horton build upon his firm foundation of faith to "help downtrodden people find ways to solve their own problems."¹¹⁵ His understanding of the world broadened with his studies at Union.¹¹⁶ There, he envisioned his school as "loosely structured and adaptable to involve, serve, and help poor people in labor and racial strife, help them find ways to gain dignity, freedom, and justice."¹¹⁷

The next year, Horton attended the University of Chicago where he studied sociology. He added to his philosophy the idea of using "conflict creatively to move people away from the status quo and toward a better economic, political, social, and moral position."¹¹⁸ Gathering more information from professors, his readings, and from Jane Addams of Hull House, Horton learned that education can, and must, be put into action to create social progress. He also discovered Danish Folk Schools while at the University of Chicago and their unique resemblance to his own ideas. So the next year, 1931-1932,

¹¹⁵ Parker and Parker, 3.

¹¹⁶ Parker and Parker, 3; M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 34-36.

¹¹⁷ Parker and Parker, 3.

¹¹⁸ Parker and Parker, 4.

Horton traveled to Denmark to study their folk schools.¹¹⁹ The development and history behind the folk schools intrigued Horton. Studying Bishop N.F.S. Grundtvig and Christian Kold, creators and developers of the Danish schools, Horton strove to form his ideas for a folk school in Tennessee.¹²⁰ He took notes as he traveled from school to school, labeling his notes "O" reflecting upon his experiences in Ozone, Tennessee, which Horton explains was his "symbol for reality."¹²¹ As he compiled his notes Highlander Folk School began to take shape.

In his mind and in his notes, Horton placed the school on a farm with beautiful scenery that also offered solitude. Staff members would be selected based on their abilities and interests. Efforts would be made by the student staffers to have hands-on experience with education and local labor issues. Horton envisioned the school's students as young men and women of the Appalachian Mountains, laborers and workers, regardless of race. He noted that they would learn by studying, working, and living with each other. On Christmas night, 1931, Horton realized his life's plan. He had a dream, a goal, and knew

¹¹⁹ Parker and Parker, 4-5.

¹²⁰ Myles Horton, "Grundtvig and Danish Folk Schools," *Mountain Life and Work*, Winter 1944, 23-25, In Highlander Research and Education Center (Knoxville, Tenn.) Appalachian Vertical File, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, 23-25.

¹²¹ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 53.

that he needed to let this dream grow and "take its own form." His time in college would come to an end because, "you can go to school all your life, you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in the life situation."¹²² He explains the significance of that moment,

I still remember that night. It was the sweetest feeling, a five year burden had rolled away, and I went back to sleep wondering why it had taken me so long. It all seemed so clear and simple - the way to get started was to start. That Christmas night I had rediscovered Ozone.

Horton returned to Tennessee in the fall of 1932 and began to realize his dream. Dr. Lillian Johnson offered land to Horton for his folk school. For ten years, she had "maintained an active and valuable community center near Monteagle, Tennessee, on the southern edge of the Cumberland Plateau." By the early 1930s, she was no longer using her acres of farm land in Monteagle, so she offered the land to Horton for an experimental period of one year. After that year, she conferred the property to Highlander as a gift.¹²³ With this gift, Horton achieved his goal of

¹²² M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 55.

¹²³ Leon Wilson, "Highlander Folk School: An Informal History," *Life and Work*, Fall 1940, 15-19, In Highlander Research and Education Center (Knoxville, Tenn.) Appalachian Vertical File, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, 15, 19.

establishing his school on a farm along with some friends from Union Theological Seminary and Don West. West also studied in Denmark and also wanted to establish a school in Appalachia. Together they organized and developed the Highlander Folk School. Horton, through the first year, began to understand that he could not help people achieve social justice overnight, that this would be a step-by-step process.

Highlander, unlike traditional educational institutions, focused upon the poor and the oppressed by creating ways for them to learn from their own experiences.¹²⁴ Highlander's principal belief was in "the power of education to change society."¹²⁵ The overall goal envisioned by Horton for Highlander was to educate, discuss, and find a way for people to

have more control over their lives, achieve a higher standard of living, gain unrestricted access to community services and institutions, associate with whom they choose without penalty, make government responsive to the popular will, and exercise individual creativity that contributes to the common welfare...respect for individuals, love, and human relationships free of prejudice or barriers that prevent the fullest enjoyment of life.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 57, 97-99.

¹²⁵ Glen, 2.

¹²⁶ Glen, 4.

At Highlander, individuals of every race, religion, and educational background could gather to discuss specific issues and analyze problems in their local communities. They used residential workshops to discuss the issues and find solutions. Participants were then instructed to go back to their respective communities and implement their new solutions.¹²⁷

Highlander began its educational endeavors with rural and industrial leaders focusing on labor movements and striking workers. Then by 1953, HFS leaders concluded "that racism presented the greatest obstacle to the kind of economic and political order they had envisioned since 1932."¹²⁸ Racism, oppression, violence, poverty, and illiteracy plagued many African-Americans and a society based on white supremacy helped to ensure the continuation of this oppression. HFS worked to put an end to these problems by conducting integrated workshops where participants could freely discuss racism and possible resolutions. There was no specific method, no theoretical or scholarly direction, "they just decided to get the people together and trust that the solution would arise from them."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Glen, 4.

¹²⁸ Glen, 2, 4.

¹²⁹ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 97-98.

Residential workshops and programs were central to Highlander's unique form of education and the essential ingredient for implementing change in society, individual lives, and history. The lessons learned at HFS workshops were not out of a textbook nor were they the result of a typical structured classroom approach. The participants learned in a free, unrestricted environment because learning takes place at all times, not just in a structured time period. Horton expressed that life is not structured, thus "some of the best education at Highlander happened when the sessions were over": during meal times, leisure times, walking, or over afternoon coffee.¹³⁰ The lessons learned came from the everyday lives of attendees: "based on the mining of the experience that the students bring with them, their awareness that they have a problem to deal with, and the relationship of that problem to conflict."¹³¹

These experiences could range anywhere from facing oppression from employers or the government to being turned away by restaurants and deprived of public resources. Horton explained that those at HFS had to learn that the problems they faced had to be solved collectively by an organized group and not on an individual level. Highlander

¹³⁰ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 160.

¹³¹ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 148.

did not have all the answers, but by sharing the knowledge of each individual a solution could be created. The purpose of the workshop was also to create a circle, an atmosphere of relaxation where experiences could be shared freely. Then once experiences were shared, they were encouraged to analyze, learn, and build from these experiences. Staff members also shared, then provided other sources of information and other ideas. No experts were brought into the workshops; it consisted only of the circle of those who all shared the same problems. Collectively they could learn and work toward transforming a prejudiced society, instead of simply reforming or amending it.¹³²

In order for there to be a transformation, people had to take risks and set aside traditional views of creating change. It was more than an education, it was a responsibility, and it was not for everyone. Most of those who attended Highlander were individually invited or were sent by the organizations they worked for.¹³³ Those selected to attend Highlander "had already shown promise as potential leaders who would have some responsibility when

¹³² Bernice Robinson, "Reaching Out: Empowerment of the Estranged, The Powerless," Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 1; Horton, *The Long Haul*, xx, 148, 150.

¹³³ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 147-148.

they went back home."¹³⁴ Highlander's selection of Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, and Septima Clark would prove the school's success. By honing their leadership skills and strengthening their faith and activism, HFS helped these three individuals create great social change.

¹³⁴ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 138.

CHAPTER 5

THE FIRST CITIZENSHIP SCHOOL

*I got to move, we got to move,
We got to move, we got to move,
Oh, when the Lord, Lord get ready, you got to move.
Oh, You may be rich, you may be poor,
You may be high, you maybe be low,
But when the Lord get ready, you got to move.¹³⁵*

In 1954, Jenkins, Clark, Horton, and Robinson all gathered at a workshop at HFS. The topic of this workshop was intended to be on the United Nations. The topic, however, quickly shifted to the South and the problems of racism, particularly the social, economic, and political problems of Johns Island. Each participant was asked how they would use the workshop discussion to solve problems in their own communities. Jenkins explained that the greatest problem on Johns Island was the high illiteracy rates among African American adults. The ability to vote could improve conditions for the Islanders and boost them from second-class citizenship to first-class. Jenkins firmly believed that giving Gullahs the opportunity to become better citizens would radically enhance their communities and

¹³⁵ Mrs. Janie Hunter and the Moving Star Hall congregation, "You Got to Move," In *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs*, ed. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1966), 165.

their lives. Clark, with her own experiences on Johns Island, understood the need Jenkins referred to and expressed her interest. Jenkins asked Highlander Folk School to help him create a night school for Johns Island adults.¹³⁶

It was at this workshop that the idea for one of the greatest civil rights programs was set in motion. Developing the Citizenship Schools took a lot of time and money and a great deal of faith and creativity. Horton agreed to help Jenkins and spent nearly a year on Johns Island, familiarizing himself with the Gullah Islanders and their culture. Horton had previously visited the island and tried to get people interested in Highlander, but achieved little success. But when he met Jenkins, he suddenly had a way to reach the people of Johns Island. Jenkins believed that Horton was an admirable man and this was all the Gullahs needed to know: "They loved Esau, and they knew that anybody he would bring to them would be somebody that they really liked."¹³⁷ The people really enjoyed Horton as he had a way of talking to people. He always made sure to express the injustices they endured,

¹³⁶ Jenkins, "Everybody is Jubilant for the Highlander Folk School," 168; Horton, *The Long Haul*, 99; Tjerandsen, 152.

¹³⁷ Clark, *Ready From Within*, ed. with an introduction by Cynthia Stokes Brown (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1990), 44.

even when they did not realize it. Horton explained this idea further:

Now, you know, any day I can go back with my own people and not have to endure these things, but you have to live with them always. I want you to see if you can get to the place where you can register and vote. After you've learned to read and write, you can become a person who will look into these things more and get to do more of it yourself. Then your children are coming along, and you need to think about what you need to do for these children, because they don't want to be living from hand to mouth like you have done all the time.¹³⁸

Horton knew that the schools had to be different, that they couldn't be held in a traditional classroom. They needed to be in a setting that was familiar to the adult students. Clark, Jenkins, and Horton all worked together to determine how the Citizenship Schools would operate. Bearing in mind previous experiences of adult students, Horton stressed the importance of a comfortable and dignified learning atmosphere.¹³⁹ Previous attempts at literacy programs on the Island failed because the adults had to sit in children's desks and use elementary curriculum that did not meet their educational needs.¹⁴⁰ Placing the adult students in an age and experience

¹³⁸ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 45.

¹³⁹ Aldon Morris, 150-151; M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 100-101.

¹⁴⁰ Bernice Robinson, "Literacy For Citizenship and Education," Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 12.

appropriate environment would enhance their ability to learn more freely and openly. The students must learn to read, not as children, but as adults, doing adult work; work that was a part of their everyday lives.¹⁴¹ Horton explained that they were looking for a way to teach these adults that was based on respect and making them feel comfortable in this new, difficult learning endeavor. He applied his 'learning from the people' strategy.¹⁴² Jenkins' and Clark's ability to carry the leadership training programs to success was what convinced Horton that Highlander could indeed help on the island. But he knew that the only way for the project to truly work was for the HFS staff to remain in the background. Local black leaders were a must for the Gullah islanders.¹⁴³

As part of their agreement, Jenkins had to find a place to set up an adult school while Horton secured funding for the program.¹⁴⁴ Jenkins asked the local principal if he could use the school for adult night classes. The principal turned Jenkins away for fear of school authorities disapproving of African Americans

¹⁴¹ Frank Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*. (Winston-Salem: Heritage Printers, Inc., 1975), 115.

¹⁴² M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 100.

¹⁴³ Glen, 191.

¹⁴⁴ Bernice Robinson, "Political Education/Working with Blacks in Rural South Carolina," Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 3.

bettering their lives. He did not want to take the risk of losing his job. Another local leader, a preacher, feared allowing Jenkins to use the Methodist Center for adult classes. He too feared the retaliation of white authorities. Jenkins explained the situation to Horton and Highlander loaned money to Jenkins so he could buy an old school house. The price of the school was \$1000.00, but when the owner learned that Gullah Islanders were going to use the building, the price increased to \$1500.00. Highlander agreed and paid for the school building that Jenkins and some of his colleagues repaired to make the front of the building a grocery store with two rooms in the back for adult classes.¹⁴⁵

Jenkins paid Highlander back with the funds from the grocery store. Once the building was paid for, the Islanders used the funds to help each other when needed. Highlander planned to use the repayment of the loan to pay the teachers of the Citizenship School.¹⁴⁶ Horton also secured funds through the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation. Mr. Emil Schwarzhaupt willed his funds to this foundation upon his death. His intentions for this foundation are explained as follows:

¹⁴⁵ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 47.

¹⁴⁶ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 47-48.

To promote the well-being of mankind, including such purposes he upbuilding and betterment of American citizenship and increasing among all American citizens, and especially among the foreign-born, the knowledge of the history of the United States government and the meaning of the obligations and privileges of citizenship in the United State of America.¹⁴⁷

An immigrant from Germany, Schwarzhaupt deeply believed in citizenship and actively participating in one's government. His faith in voting intelligently, being informed on issues at hand and a deep sense of history led Schwarzhaupt to establish his foundation.¹⁴⁸ The Citizenship School program was the perfect candidate for funds from the foundation. In April 1953, Horton received approval for a three-year grant totaling \$44,100.00 from the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation.¹⁴⁹ Over the next eight years, the foundations would award the Citizenship School program \$82,653.00.¹⁵⁰

The next step was to find a teacher for the first Citizenship School for Johns Island. Clark suggested Bernice Robinson and Horton asked Robinson to be the teacher for the first Citizenship School on Johns Island. Horton wanted Bernice to teach precisely because she was not a formally trained teacher. She was an African American beautician, which in the black community held a prominent

¹⁴⁷ Tjerandsen, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Tjerandsen, xiii-xiv.

¹⁴⁹ Tjerandsen, 142.

¹⁵⁰ Tjerandsen, 688.

status, "they had a higher-than-average education and, because they owned their own businesses, didn't depend upon whites for their incomes."¹⁵¹ Horton knew Robinson was the type of person the people of Johns Island needed, "to build around black people who could stand up against white opposition, so black beauticians were terribly important."¹⁵²

Robinson, however, was very quick to say no because she was not a teacher.¹⁵³ Highlander would not take no for an answer. Horton explained to Robinson that she was the right person for the job exactly because she was not a certified teacher. They wanted someone who was not trained in specific curriculum but who would work in the community, who would care, understand, and communicate with the people. But it was also important for the teacher to attend Highlander and understand its philosophy. Clark and Horton, without question, knew Robinson was the one for the job and explained to her that if she would not teach then they would not have the class.¹⁵⁴

Robinson then understood her role, accepted the challenge, and was soon recruiting people to attend classes

¹⁵¹ Horton, *The Long Haul*, 102.

¹⁵² Horton, *The Long Haul*, 102.

¹⁵³ Robinson, "Reaching Out: Empowerment of the Estranged, The Powerless.

¹⁵⁴ Horton, *The Long Haul*, 102; Robinson, "Reaching Out: Empowerment of the Estranged, the Powerless.

at the Citizenship School. Clark introduced her to the Gullah Islanders. However, Robinson knew many people on the island from working there on voter registration drives with the NAACP, which is where she first met Jenkins. Bernice was familiar with the Island and the people, which was very important to this Gullah community. The people of Johns Island had to be able to trust Bernice as they trusted Jenkins. Many did not trust African Americans who came from the city. They feared city people would belittle or demean them based upon past experiences. So, because Robinson worked with Jenkins before and because he and Clark introduced her to people who already trusted them, she was able to gain the Islander's trust.¹⁵⁵ Horton and Clark knew that Robinson would be perfect for the job as Clark explains, "Myles and I believed she could do it. We knew that she had the most important quality, the ability to listen to people."¹⁵⁶

The time came for the first Citizenship School to begin and "on January 7, 1957, Robinson stood nervously before her first class on Johns Island."¹⁵⁷ Through their recruiting efforts, Robinson had fourteen students, three

¹⁵⁵ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 49.

¹⁵⁷ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 194,

men and eleven women.¹⁵⁸ She walked into the classroom that night and put them at ease and created an atmosphere where they could open up to her. She explained to the adult students, "I am not your teacher, we are here to learn together. You will teach me things and I will teach you some things."¹⁵⁹ Bernice explains how significant her statement was:

And I think that just sort of set the stage for everything. Because this student-teacher thing is a 'I'm up here, you're down there, and I'm going to teach you something.' But by letting them know that we're going to learn together; they were going to teach me as much as I was going to teach them. I really did learn a whole lot, believe me.¹⁶⁰

The only materials Robinson had with her that night were the Declaration of Human Rights, some elementary school materials, and a voter registration application. But after she talked with the students, she realized that the elementary school materials were too juvenile for her adult students. She explains that she "became immediately sensitive to the fact that they were adults and I had to

¹⁵⁸ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 51.

¹⁵⁹ Bernice Robinson, "Literacy For Citizenship and Employment." Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 12.

¹⁶⁰ Typed Text of a talk given by Bernice Robinson about the Citizenship Training Schools at a Workshop On "Using the GED as a Vehicle for Community and Labor Education," 17-18 November 1979, at Highlander Center, New Market, TN, transcribed by June Rostan, Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 3, folder 8.

work with them on that level."¹⁶¹ She also only had two months to work with them while they were not planting or harvesting their crops.¹⁶² Many students, mostly in the sixties, had trouble holding a pencil. They were used to holding a plow or other farming equipment and the pencils were so light that they broke them.¹⁶³

The students began to tell Bernice what they wanted to learn: to write their names, read letters from relatives, write letters to relatives, how to fill out money orders, catalog orders, grocery lists.¹⁶⁴ They also wanted to be able to read the Bible, read the newspaper, do simple arithmetic, and, of course, to register to vote.¹⁶⁵ She explains that the students were so excited to learn, "I have never before in my life seen such anxious people. They really want to learn and are so proud" when they succeed and make progress."¹⁶⁶

Robinson listened to the students; she understood their needs and desires to learn, so she "developed a

¹⁶¹ Robinson, "Literacy For Citizenship and Employment."

¹⁶² Robinson, "Literacy For Citizenship and Employment."

¹⁶³ Horton, *The Long Haul*, 103, Clark, *Ready From Within*, 50.

¹⁶⁴ Robinson, "Literacy For Citizenship and Employment."

¹⁶⁵ Oldendorf, 172.

¹⁶⁶ Glen, 195.

number of successful techniques."¹⁶⁷ Together, Bernice and her adult students "developed the curriculum day by day."¹⁶⁸ She had them tell her a story, she would write it down, and then teach them to read the story. They even made up stories about their farming experiences, the vegetables they grew, and the tools they worked with. Robinson also used the words they had trouble with in their spelling lessons. Bernice explains that it was their story, their words, thus they were more interested and it enhanced their learning. Horton states that "she gave priority to their immediate interests so they could experience the usefulness and joy of learning."¹⁶⁹

In most of her activities, Robinson would try to incorporate reading, writing, and arithmetic. The students had to use all three when working on money orders and catalog orders. Bernice started her classes with devotions. A different student each night would give the devotion that "relaxed and warmed up the group."¹⁷⁰ They would then go over their homework, have about thirty minutes of reading, worked on spelling, then definitions. Bernice helped the students work on arithmetic by using grocery lists and

¹⁶⁷ Oldendorf, 172.

¹⁶⁸ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 103.

¹⁶⁹ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 103.

¹⁷⁰ Bernice Robinson, Handwritten Speech, 11 September 1986, Bernice Robinson Papers, Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston. Box 1, folder 10.

catalog orders. She would then take the students through the process of filling out the voter registration certificates. Sometimes Robinson showed a film to the class or had singing and music lessons.¹⁷¹

Robinson also worked to help the students understand political structures in their communities. Then they would discuss state and national political structures. She wanted them to know who to contact about the problems in their communities and to know that they themselves could run for public offices. She stressed the importance of exploring, organizing, and planning to create social, economic, and political changes.¹⁷²

Word quickly spread about Robinson and the Johns Island Citizenship School and her class grew from fourteen to thirty-seven. Eighty percent of her class registered to vote.¹⁷³ Bernice explains the significance of this first class,

People started registering on the island as an outgrowth of the class because the students who came to the class was all excited about the fact - when they got their registration certificate and I would get there at 7 o'clock, they would be there ahead of me and as soon as I walked in the door, they were waving it in my face, 'I got it! I got it!' And their enthusiasm bubbled on out into the community to people they knew who

¹⁷¹ Robinson, Handwritten Speech, 11 September 1986.

¹⁷² Robinson, Handwritten Speech, 11 September 1986.

¹⁷³ M. Horton, *The Long Haul*, 103.

could register and didn't before and so everybody wanted to know, 'What's happening, why are the Johns Island people are getting registered so fast.'¹⁷⁴

Under the Highlander program, the average amount of time it took an illiterate student to learn how to read and write was eighty hours. Compared to the Adult Education Association's time period of one hundred fifty hours, Highlander's time is relatively short. However, the program did involve intensive, hard day after day work over a five-month period. The first thirty-seven people in the Citizenship School program on Johns Island completed their learning in a five-month period and all of them signed their own names, read everything required of them, and respectively fulfilled all the requirements of the registrar.¹⁷⁵

But what kept the students coming even when the obstacles seemed so overwhelming? What was the driving force? Faith appears as the strong driving force behind the citizenship program. One can clearly understand why there might have been a lack of motivation in registering to vote when violence, illiteracy, and inequality seemed to await them at the registration office. But there was a way

¹⁷⁴ Bernice Robinson, interview by Eliot Wigginton and Sue Thrasher, 8 November 1980. Transcript, Bernice Robinson File, Highlander Research and Education Center Library, New Market, TN.

¹⁷⁵ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 194-195.

to completely turn around this lack of motivation and turn it into the driving force that sparked a significant movement. The deep sense of faith that surrounded Johns Island enabled the adult students to have hope in their own abilities. The Citizenship School program enriched this faith and hope by encouraging and supporting them. The schools also explained the importance of politics in the Gullah community, how their vote contributes to the process of determining and changing the course of their lives.¹⁷⁶ The program provided this exact information while encouraging their faith in each other and in the vote.

But who attended these schools and why do they attend? Clark illustrates how a man or woman who already has the ability to vote (as many Highlander staffers did) and does so on a regular basis have no need or interest in a workshop on registration and voting. However, one must consider a man or woman who wants to register to vote but does not have this freedom because a law prohibits them or a registrar deems him or her unqualified. Clark explains, "you can see how this man or woman would be virtually interested in learning the laws and in qualifying himself

¹⁷⁶ Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? : African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.

to register and vote.¹⁷⁷ There is another person who wants to attend the citizenship school, as Clark explains, "He would be the man who votes but who is anxious to see the voting privileges extended to many of his fellows who for one reason or another do not vote." This man or woman could be a white Southerner who is eager to help his or her African-American neighbor who is striving to achieve his or her goal of first-class citizenship.¹⁷⁸

Clark created Reading Booklets and Citizenship Booklets for the adult students. The Reading Booklet began by giving a description of the Highlander Folk School, detailing the school's purpose. A statement of policy for HFS was also included detailing Highlander's ultimate belief: "We affirm our faith in democracy as a goal that will bring dignity and freedom to all."¹⁷⁹ The booklet then begins with a quotation of the South Carolina election laws concerning registration for voting. There is a duplicate of the registration certificate and the application for registration, which a citizen applying for registration must fill out once he or she is entitled to vote. This allowed the student to practice filling out these forms and thus gives him or her confidence as it prepared them for

¹⁷⁷ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 180.

¹⁷⁸ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 181.

¹⁷⁹ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 197.

completing these forms at the Board of Registration. A map of the United States was also included along with an enlarged map of Charleston and the coastal region.¹⁸⁰

Other chapters in the booklet cover political parties in South Carolina, state taxes, social security, health services, how to address officials, how to write names on a mail order, and how to fill out a money order.¹⁸¹ There were also several word exercises as well as lists of words to study and learn which were all related in some way to citizenship and government. Included in the booklet were small chapters on writing letters, arithmetic, good manners, and being polite.¹⁸²

The Citizenship School Booklet, used in later Citizenship Schools, was constructed much like the Reading Booklets. It began with "The Purpose of the Citizenship Schools" that explains: "It is open to all people of a community who face problems related to first-class citizenship and want to do something about them."¹⁸³ This booklet let the adults attending the Citizenship Schools learn by doing, a hands on approach that held a real and

¹⁸⁰ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 196-200.

¹⁸¹ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 200-201.

¹⁸² Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 203-205.

¹⁸³ *My Citizenship Booklet*, 1961-1962, Citizenship School File, Highlander Research and Education Center Library, New Market, TN.

practical value.¹⁸⁴ Similar to the Reading Booklets, the Citizenship Booklet described state requirements for registration and voting, learning the alphabet and using it to construct words and sentences, writing letters, order forms, and mailing addresses. The Booklet also described Social Security, arithmetic, and politeness.¹⁸⁵

The first Citizenship School on Johns Island set the tone for future schools that spread through the Sea Islands and then all over the South. Robinson's methods proved successful because she worked with the students. The curriculum of using their own experiences and educational needs allowed the students to flourish. Robinson exhibited faith in her students and they in turn had faith in her. Robinson did not ignore the students' desires with her own aspirations of seeing her class succeed, "to become registered voters, participating in the political process, which governed their entire lives."¹⁸⁶ Together they reached their goals of reading, writing, and political activism.

¹⁸⁴Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 201.

¹⁸⁵*My Citizenship Booklet*, 1961-1962, Citizenship School File, Highlander Research and Education Center Library, New Market, TN.

¹⁸⁶ Robinson, "Literacy For Citizenship and Education."

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In 1958, nearly a year after the first school began, Robinson instructed two Citizenship Schools and witnessed her students, some who could not even write their own name, become registered voters.¹⁸⁷ Horton illustrates that many of these students once believed that they could not do anything. But once they finished at the Citizenship School, "they felt confident; they were being challenged; and most of all, they were forcing whites to treat them with respect."¹⁸⁸ From 1956 to 1960, African American voters on Johns Island increased three hundred percent.¹⁸⁹ By 1960 seven hundred Gullahs were registered and participating in elections by almost one hundred percent. The entire community benefited from the Citizenship Schools as roads were built, public schools improved, and public health facilities became available. Home life even experienced a better quality. The key significance here is that African American citizens achieved these goals themselves.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Oldendorf, 173.

¹⁸⁸ Horton, *The Long Haul*, 104.

¹⁸⁹ Oldendorf, 174.

¹⁹⁰ Myles Horton, Memorandum on Citizenship School Training Program, December 1960, Citizenship Program General File, Highlander Research and Education Center Library, New Market, TN.

With a new confidence and a registered voter card in their hands, Johns Islanders shared their success with other Islanders. Other Sea Islands requested Citizenship Schools including Wadamalaw and Edisto Islands. Schools were even set up in North Charleston and Charleston.¹⁹¹ The first Johns Island Citizenship School "became the model for the citizenship schools that spread throughout the South in the 1960s and provided thousands with voter education."¹⁹²

So many people were requesting Citizenship Schools by 1960 that Horton, Robinson, and Clark could not handle the program alone. So Highlander developed a teacher training program to prepare instructors for their own Citizenship Schools. Organizations were contacted to send people to Highlander for training.¹⁹³ Clark also recruited teachers and students for the citizenship schools. When it came to choosing teachers, "the first practical decision was to use a nonteacher, because anyone trained as a teacher would probably revert to traditional schoolroom methods."¹⁹⁴

To be a teacher of voter education, the volunteers had to have the following requirements: at least 21 years old,

¹⁹¹ Oldendorf, 173.

¹⁹² Crawford, 157.

¹⁹³ Bernice Robinson, "The Program was Transferred to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," In *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?: The People of Johns Island, South Carolina - Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989, 203.

¹⁹⁴ Morris, 152.

a high school graduate, and be from the same community as the students. Those who were drawn to teaching in the citizenship schools were all of diverse ages and occupations such as housewives, farmers, union members, dressmakers, and ministers. Time, homes, and business were all offered to the citizenship schools by women of these communities.¹⁹⁵

These teachers soon found that their Citizenship Schools produced rapid results, despite the diversity of their backgrounds.

The eighty-eight teachers trained at the January, February, March, and April workshops returned to more than forty communities in the South and enrolled between fourteen hundred and fifteen hundred adults in citizenship classes. By the end of September, 1961, over seven hundred of these students were registered voters.¹⁹⁶

Teachers were also trained to provide political education which explained the process of American government.¹⁹⁷ Clark then traveled all over the South visiting up to three schools in one day. She checked to make sure they were teaching the students to read election laws, write their

¹⁹⁵ Crawford, 157.

¹⁹⁶ Glen, 201.

¹⁹⁷ Robinson, "The Program was Transferred to The Southern Christian Leadership Conference," 204.

names in cursive, and to make sure they were by no means using any textbooks.¹⁹⁸

Then in the summer of 1961, Highlander transferred the Citizenship School program to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC continued the program as Highlander had established it and Robinson and Clark joined their efforts. SCLC helped spread Citizenship School all over the south including Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi.¹⁹⁹

The SCLC joined four other groups in 1962: the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Together they all formed the Voter Education Project. This major force of organizations trained about ten thousand teachers for Citizenship Schools within the next four years. Nearly seven hundred thousand African-Americans registered to vote all over the South throughout this time period. Registration continued to increase, especially after 1965 when the Voter Registration Act was passed and by the year 1970 at least one million more African-Americans registered to vote. Then in 1972, two African-Americans from the Deep South were elected to the

¹⁹⁸ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 69-70.

¹⁹⁹ Robinson, "The Program was Transferred to The Southern Christian Leadership Conference," 204; Clark, *Ready From Within*, 61-62.

United States Congress, which had not happened since Reconstruction. The elected officials were Andrew Young, who had helped Clark set up many Citizenship Schools, and the other was a woman named Barbara Jordan.²⁰⁰

When measuring the success of the Citizenship Schools, one can take note of how the student applies his or her new knowledge to personal lives. By reading books, magazines, and newspapers, serving on committees, and performing civic duties, they are not only voting citizens but participating citizens.²⁰¹ They learned to register and learned they could live life with a measure of dignity. For so long they were held captive by the inability to read and write, "Telephones are hard to dial; road and store signs are meaningless; routine forms are incomprehensible...even holding a pencil can be a chore."²⁰² But the Citizenship Schools and its volunteer teachers broke the chains of illiteracy. They taught many African-Americans to hold their pencils, read signs, and to fill out forms: "learning to read, write, and do sums became a practical matter, not just for elections, but for everyday."²⁰³ Part of the success of the schools can be found in the faith and hope of the students.

²⁰⁰Clark, *Ready From Within*, 70

²⁰¹ Clark, *Echo In My Soul*, 195.

²⁰² Adams, 119.

²⁰³ Adams, 119.

The civil rights movement indeed owes a great deal of its own success to the Citizenship Schools, "That's how the Civil Rights Movement began - from Esau Jenkins's bus."²⁰⁴ Feelings of oppression faded as African Americans realized they could do something about their situation. With their new training, renewed faith and hope, Sea Islanders and African Americans all over the South became first-class citizens. Faith helped establish the culture on these islands and faith cannot be taken away from anyone. Though African Americans were controlled by oppression, no one could control their faith. Thomas Merton, best describes the historical impact of faith upon the civil rights movement as a whole,

The non-violent-Negro civil rights drive has been one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that has been seen anywhere in the twentieth century. It is certainly the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States.²⁰⁵

The combined faith and activism of Jenkins, Clark, Robinson, and Horton, created one of the greatest social movements to date. Together, they brought the vote to the Sea Islands of South Carolina and also throughout the

²⁰⁴ Dorothy Cotton, "Citizenship Schools, Roots of Open Education in America." Ed. Ruth Dropkin and Arthur Tobier Dec. 1976, 104. Franklin Parker Collection, Acc. No. 598, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN.

²⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 130-131.

South: "without the pressure of the vote, progress toward eliminating gross discrimination against blacks would have been slow indeed."²⁰⁶

In conclusion, through oppression, inequality, and illiteracy, African Americans overcame political dominance and second-class citizenship through education and the power of the vote. Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson, and Myles Horton, played incredible roles in helping African Americans reach their goals. Even though violence, inequality and unfair treatment at registration offices persisted in the South, voter registration did not become an issue for major civil rights groups until 1962. It was not until this year that these groups were ready to take action. But, as Clark explains, she and others at the Highlander Folk School had developed the ideas of these schools to help African Americans become complete citizens between the years of 1957 through 1961, "so all the civil rights groups could use our kind of approach, because by then we knew it worked."²⁰⁷

Faith in God, each other, and the vote was the key that unlocked the chains of oppression. The world known to African Americans changed forever once they learned that

²⁰⁶ Tjerandsen, 612-613.

²⁰⁷ Clark, *Ready From Within*, 70

they were indeed free to exercise their rights. Septima Clark, Esau Jenkins, Bernice Robinson, and Myles Horton do not receive the credit they deserve for creating the opportunity for this change to take place. They and the schools are left out of today's general history books but the legacy of the Citizenship Schools shall live on forever. The history of the Johns Island and the schools created there is a true chronicle of inspiration and achievement that will inspire many generations to come.

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