

Highlander Folk School

Essential Question: What role did Highlander Folk School play in the Civil Rights Movement?

Highlander Folk School was founded in 1932 near Monteagle, Tennessee by Myles Horton and Don West. As college students Horton and West had both been active in social justice movements during their college years and were deeply impressed with the folk school of Denmark. They believed that if people were given a safe place to talk about their problems they would be able to find solutions through their collective wisdom. Leadership from within became one of the founding principles of Highlander.

The first social justice issue that Highlander addressed was the plight of miners, timber men and unemployed workers in the mountain communities. In the late 1930's Highlander helped organize unions in textile mills. However, Highlander's relationship with organized labor was strained by segregationist practices within the organizations. By this time West had left Highlander and Horton was sole director. Horton had long been an advocate of desegregation and in 1953 the board of the school announced that their new focus would be school desegregation.

Horton believed that desegregation of schools in East Tennessee would serve as an indicator of how desegregation would be carried out in the nation as a whole. The nearby town of Clinton, Tennessee had a desegregation case pending in the courts when the Brown case was decided. The judge in the Clinton case then ruled that Clinton school had to desegregate by the fall of 1956. Highlander reached out to school officials in Clinton to offer their help in planning for integration. Highlander hosted summer camps for the students as well as training sessions for teachers and administrators. Desegregation in Clinton proceeded smoothly in the fall of 1956 until outside segregationists stirred up trouble. Highlander then served as a support for the African American students who remained in the school despite threats and constant fear. Students were brought to Highlander for parties and took part in a tutoring program to help them through the difficult first year of integration.

Highlander also hosted leadership workshops for African Americans and whites interested in ending segregation. One of the most important parts of the workshop was the experience of living, eating and working in an environment free of segregation. People who came to Highlander often left with the skills and resolve to take actions against segregation in their own communities. Rosa Parks was one such Highlander graduate. Parks had been a leader in the African American community in Montgomery, Alabama for years. She had served as secretary of the local NAACP association and had earlier refused to enter a bus by the back door. After her experiences at Highlander, Parks returned to Montgomery ready to demonstrate that

“we would no longer accept the way we had been treated as a people.” On December 1, 1955, four months after the workshop, Parks refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger became the spark for the Civil Rights Movement.

Highlander also began a literacy project in the Sea Islands of South Carolina that had voter registration as its ultimate goal. Literacy tests for voting had been deemed constitutional in South Carolina which meant many African Americans could not vote. Highlander hired locals as teachers and gave them money to buy buildings in which to hold evening classes. As locals learned about the classes, the numbers skyrocketed. Dr. King, who himself attended workshops at Highlander, would later send teachers to train for leading the Citizenship School throughout the South.

When Dr. King came to Highlander to speak at the 25th anniversary celebration, he heard the song that would become the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, “We Shall Overcome.” The song began as an African American spiritual with the refrain “I’ll Be All Right.” In 1946 a group of black students from the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers Union in South Carolina came to Highlander. They had just won a hotly contested strike. Zilphia Horton, the schools music director, urged them to share their version of the spiritual that they had transformed into a labor song. Horton took their “rough draft” and recast it using her musical background to alter the rhythm and harmonies. The song became “We Will Overcome.” The song was later shared with college students who had participated at some early sit-ins. The song was sung on national television for the first time in the spring of 1960 during the Nashville Sit-Ins.

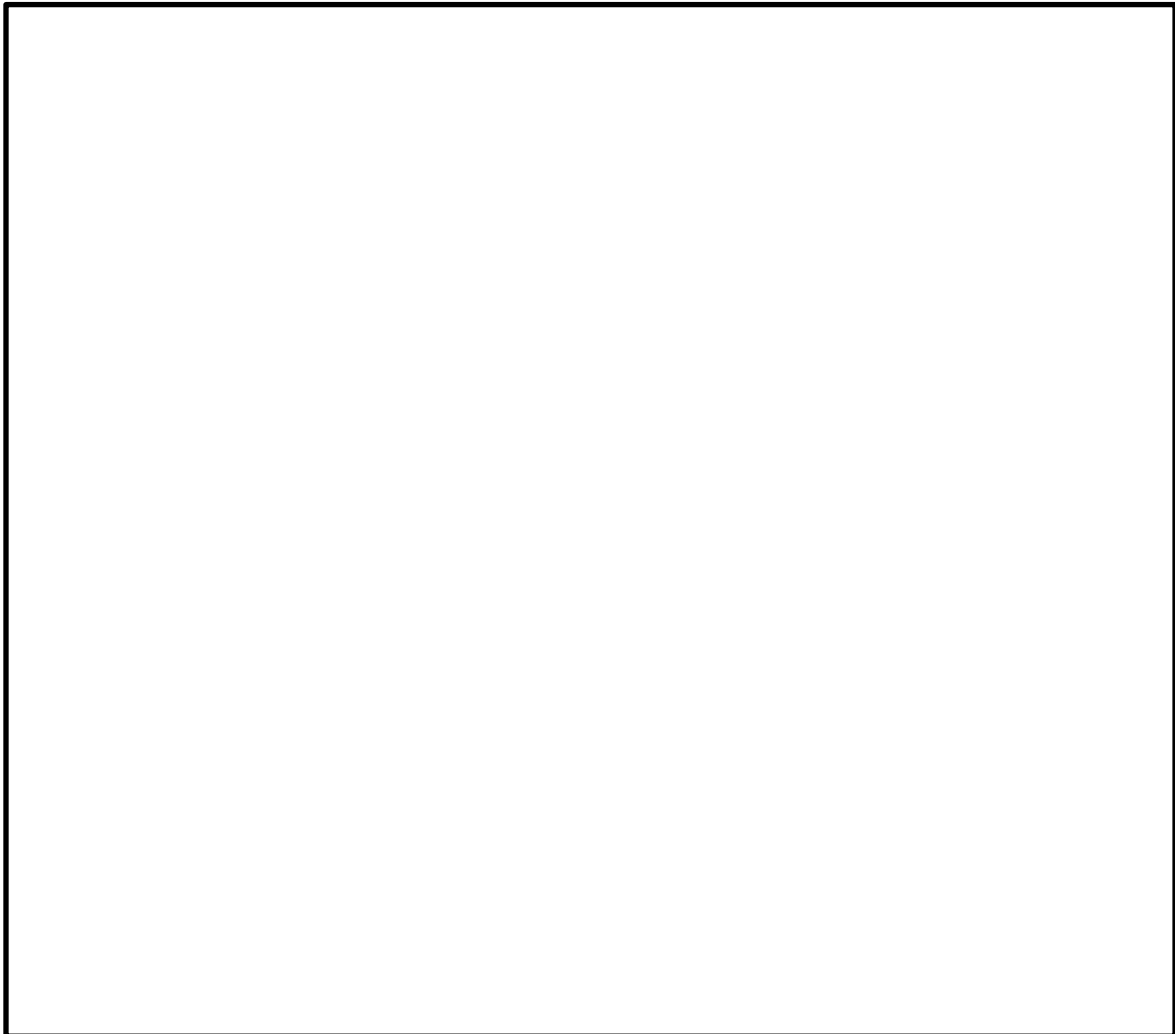
During the 1950’s and 1960’s Highlander underwent intense scrutiny from politicians and law enforcement. The school was accused of everything from being a communist training school to place where people “engage in immoral, lewd and unchaste practices.” In 1959, the school was raided by law enforcement, the staff arrested and the school closed. In a trial the following year, the judge threw out most of the charges but found that the school had “sold” beer and that Horton had used the non-profit school for his personal gain. The charges, while flimsy, were enough to get the school closed and its property sold. On the day of the public auction, Horton and his staff were a few miles away setting up another school. For as Horton said, “A school is an idea and you can’t padlock an idea.”

Source: “Highlander Folk School.” *Tennessee Encyclopedia and History and Culture*. 1st edition. 1998. Print.

Biggers, Jeff. *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006. Print.

Highlander Folk School

Create a poster advertising the Highlander Folk School. Be sure to include text in the poster that outlines some specifics of the program.



How did the school impact the Civil Rights Movement?
