

Highlander Center Field Recording Collection (1930s-1980s)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Zilphia Horton

The institution now known as the Highlander Center was founded in 1932 in Monteagle, Tennessee. Its original name was the Highlander Folk School. It was the creation of three men: social activist Myles Horton, educator Don West and Methodist minister James A. Dombrowski.

Myles Horton (1905-1990) was born in Tennessee and educated at the state's Cumberland University. His interest and education was always geared towards religion and sociology and, with time, toward social justice. He completed his studies in New York, studying at the Union Theological Seminary, and at the University of Chicago as well as overseas in Denmark.

Don West (1906-1992) was born in Georgia and was a life-long educator and activist. In his youth, he protested a local university for their screening of the film "The Birth of a Nation." Later, he would be expelled from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee, for other radical acts though he was eventually allowed to return and graduated from there in 1929. After that, he would also enroll in the Divinity program at Nashville's Vanderbilt University.

Like Myles Horton, West, too, would study abroad in Denmark. Back in the US, he renewed his commitment to activism, especially the labor movements of coal miners and textile workers. Along with being a labor organizer and educator, West was also a published writer and poet.

James A. Dombrowski (1897-1983) was also from the south, born in Tampa, Florida. After studies at Georgia's Emory University, he attended New York City's Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, both in New York City. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1933. From 1917 to 1919, he served in the US Army and was stationed for a time near Paris, France.

By 1932, the US was deep into the Great Depression. Across the country, thousands of Americans were unemployed. Influenced by the rural adult education schools he had seen in Denmark, Horton, with West and Dombrowski, co-founded the Highlander Folk School with the original intent to: "provide an educational center in the South for the training of rural and industrial leaders, and for the conservation and enrichment of the indigenous cultural values of the mountains."

Along with the school's focus on training and education, the School was also fully committed to unionizing and, specifically, training future labor organizers. As the Depression eased, this became, increasingly, the focus of the school and its resources.

By the 1950s, the focus of the school would shift again: this time to the issue of civil rights and the desegregation of the American South. Amongst the initiatives that the School undertook in the battle for civil rights, it developed a literacy program for blacks who were often blocked from voting by literacy tests. It also spearheaded voting drives for blacks in the southern states. Over the years, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, John Lewis and Julian Bond all visited the Center. The School was a major incubator for the many social movements including the Montgomery bus boycott and the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

As can be imagined, such activism by the school and its staff did not sit well with many avowed racists. Hence, the school often found itself the focus of violence, threats and all sorts of accusations including allegations that they were a spreader of communistic thought, a major hot-button issue of the 1950s and into the 1960s.

In 1961, the State of Tennessee accused the school of violating its state educational charter and the school's land and buildings were seized. But, the day after the seizure, the school was reopened in Knoxville, TN, and in 1972, it moved to its current location in New Market, TN, where it remains.

Over the years, the Highlander Research and Education Center—as it is now known—has, along with continuing their commitment to civil rights and liberties, also devoted its energies to the betterment of working conditions for the laborers of Appalachia, especially those working in the area's mining industry. The Center has also worked to support various grassroots movements especially those taking on issues related to pollution, toxic waste and other environmental causes. In recent years, the Center has also worked in support of LGBT issues.

Though the entire collection of the Highlander's audio oeuvre was added to the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry in its inaugural year of 2002, the NRR specifically highlights, from this collection, a 1947 recording made by Zilphia Horton of the song "We Shall Overcome."

The gospel/folk standard "We Shall Overcome" was first published in 1901 and was made forever famous by Pete Seeger in 1963. It is, probably, the world's best known protest song not only of because of its use in the American civil rights movement but also for its utilization in various labor movements, and amongst the "troubles" of Northern Ireland and as anthem of the anti-Apartheid movement of South Africa, among other causes.

As mentioned, the song was first published in 1901, as a hymn credited to Charles Albert Tindley. Originally, it was titled "I'll Overcome Some Day." Later, with some alterations to its title and lyrics, the song gained greater notice when it was sung, by Lucille Simmons, on a daily basis, during the Charleston Cigar Factory strike of 1945-1946.

It was from Simmons that Zilphia Horton said she learned the tune.

Zilphia Horton (nee Johnson) (1910-1956) had been born in Spadra, Arkansas, and was a graduate of the University of the Ozarks. From early in her life, she worked for unionization efforts and took her first workshop at the Highlander Folk School in 1935. There, she would meet and later marry Myles Horton.

Joining the school's staff, Horton became the institute's music and drama director; it was a position in which she would serve from 1938 until her death in 1956. Her duties at the school eventually included directing workers's theater productions, leading singing workshops and leading union meetings. She, along with her students, also made efforts to learn various folk and protest songs and spread the knowledge of them to others.

It was while at Highlander that Zilphia Horton not only made a recording of "We Shall Overcome," in the form we now know it to have, but also taught it to others including such emerging activist and artists as Frank Hamilton, Joe Glazer...and Pete Seeger.

Along with Horton's incredibly influential recording, the audio archives of the Highlander Center contain a plethora of other folk recordings, oral histories and other historic audio documents about the US labor movement and the US civil rights movement. These recordings are, today, held at various institutions including the Wisconsin Historical Society, the archives of Tennessee State University, and at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. At Chapel Hill, their Highlander Collection numbers in excess of 1,500 items, including, as this library's finding aid notes:

Recordings of folk music, protest songs, labor songs, and African American religious songs were a large part of the civil rights movement and appear within the collection. Of particular note are the acetate disc recordings of radio programs, recorded songs, and voices of leaders from the civil rights movement, including Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark, Rosa Parks, Miles Horton, and Zilphia Horton; wire recordings documenting a strike in Lumberton, N.C.; and audiocassette recordings of interviews with educators, organizers, and activists, including African American civil rights activist, Cora Tucker.

As well as:

...oral histories, musicals, lectures, and radio campaigns. Subjects of these recordings include globalization, imperialism, organizing, labor struggles, and labor songs related to occupational health and safety.

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