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The Highlander Folk School: Its Students, Its Destruction, and the Long Shadow of Racial Restriction

A School Shut Down by Lies, Fear, and the State of Tennessee

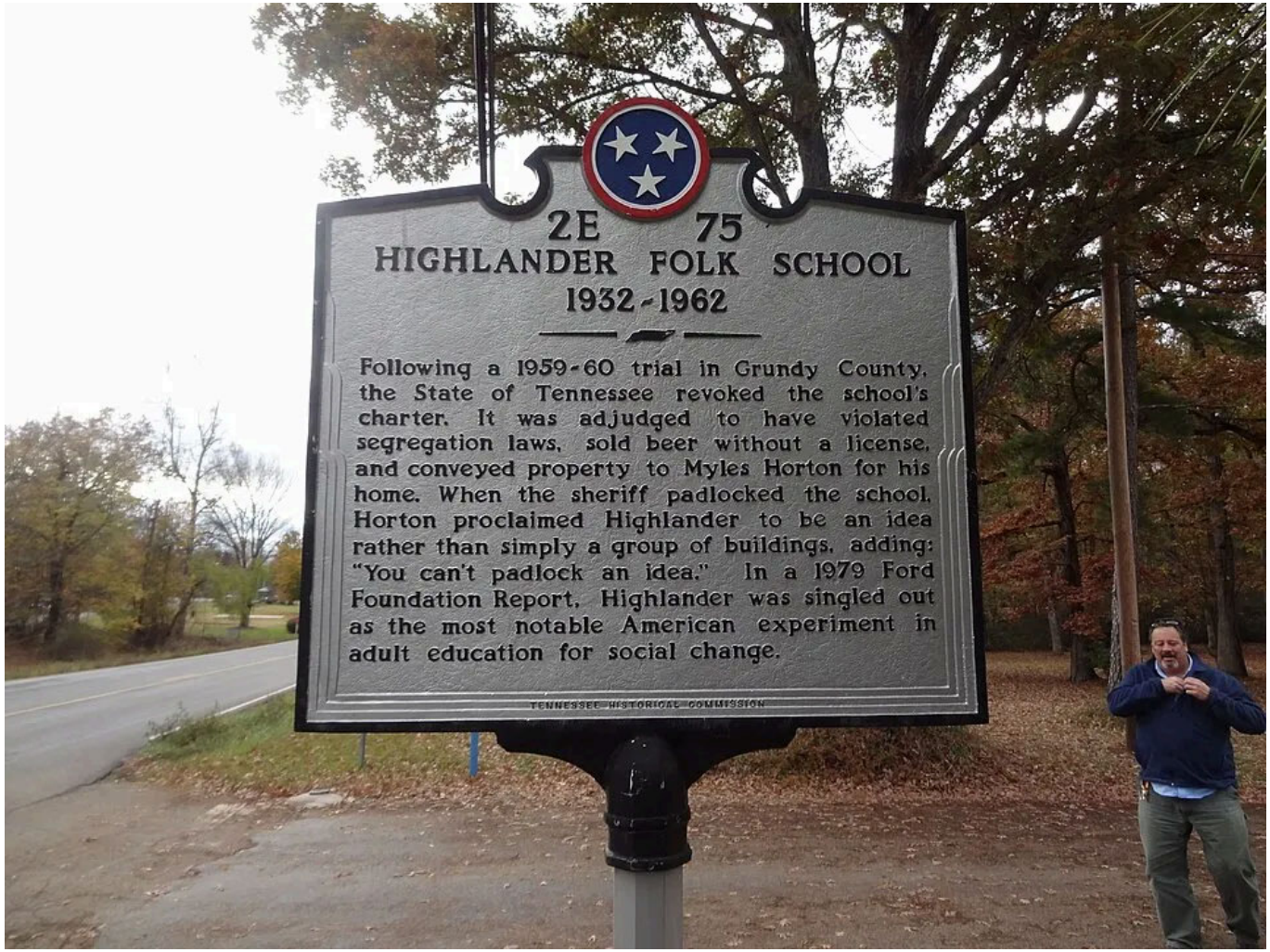


William Spivey

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I graduated from Fisk University in Nashville, TN, and during my time there passed through Monteagle, TN, several times, 90 miles east on I-24 on the way to Chattanooga, Atlanta, and other points I had cause to visit. I remember Monteagle as the high point of the mountains between Nashville

and Chattanooga, which, depending on the direction traveled, meant either leveling out after a steep incline or the beginning of a long drop. I always paid attention when reaching Monteagle, but not because of the significance of the Highlander Folk School once located there. The next time I pass through, it will be the school I think of.

The Highlander Folk School, founded in 1932 in Monteagle, Tennessee, was never a university in the formal sense, but it functioned as a school in the deepest democratic tradition: a place where working people, Black sharecroppers, union organizers, and young civil-rights activists learned how to analyze power, confront oppression, and build movements that could change the nation. Its students went on to reshape American life. Its enemies went on to burn it down, seize its land, and sell that land under conditions that reflected the racial caste system Highlander had spent decades fighting.

Highlander was founded by Myles Horton, a young Tennessean who had studied theology and social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Horton believed that education was not a top-down process but a collective one: people learned best by analyzing their own lives, communities, and struggles. Inspired by Danish folk schools — rural institutions designed to empower farmers and workers — Horton returned to Tennessee determined to build a similar model in the American South.

He found allies in educator Don West and activist educator James Dombrowski. Together they established the Highlander Folk School on a 200-acre tract of land in Grundy County. The school's mission was radical for its time: to bring Black and white Southerners together to learn from one another, to challenge segregation, and to build interracial coalitions capable of transforming the region.

Highlander was not a college. It did not grant degrees. It did not have a registrar's office or a football team. What it had was far more dangerous to the Jim Crow South: a pedagogy rooted in equality, a curriculum built around collective problem-solving, and a willingness to let Black and white people sit together, eat together, and strategize together.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Highlander became a training ground for labor organizers. Textile workers, miners, and farm laborers came to Monteagle to learn how to negotiate contracts, challenge abusive employers, and build unions. The CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) relied on Highlander as a Southern training hub. The school's interracial workshops were a direct affront to segregationist law and custom. Horton and his colleagues refused to segregate classrooms, dining halls, or dormitories. They insisted that democracy could not be taught in segregated space.

Highlander's most famous students came from the Civil Rights Movement. The school's role in the movement is so significant that it is impossible to tell the story of mid-century Black freedom without passing through Monteagle.

Rosa Parks

In the summer of 1955, months before she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, Rosa Parks attended a workshop at Highlander. She came as part of her work with the NAACP Youth Council. At Highlander, Parks experienced something she had never seen in Alabama: Black and white people living, learning, and strategizing together as equals. She later said that Highlander "gave me the courage to do what I did." Her act of defiance was informed by years of activism, and sharpened by her time at Highlander.

> *"At Highlander, I found I could express myself freely. It was the first time I had been in an integrated situation where I felt completely natural." — Rosa Parks*

Septima Clark

Septima Poinsette Clark, often called the "Mother of the Movement," became one of Highlander's most influential teachers. A South Carolina educator fired for refusing to renounce the NAACP, Clark developed literacy programs at Highlander that became the backbone of the Citizenship Schools —

grassroots institutions that taught Black Southerners how to read, write, and register to vote. These schools helped tens of thousands of Black citizens overcome literacy tests designed to disenfranchise them. Clark's work at Highlander helped lay the foundation for the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Who Speaks for the Negro: Septima Poinsette Clark | by William Spivey | Black History Month 365 | Medium

John Lewis

John Lewis, then a young activist from Troy, Alabama, attended Highlander workshops as part of his early training with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Highlander helped shape his philosophy of nonviolent resistance and his understanding of grassroots organizing. Lewis would go on to become one of the most important civil-rights leaders in American history — a Freedom Rider, a speaker at the March on Washington, a leader on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and a member of Congress for more than three decades.

Martin Luther King Jr.

King visited Highlander in 1957, speaking at the school's 25th anniversary celebration. Segregationists used his presence to smear him as a communist sympathizer, but King understood Highlander's importance. He praised the

school for its commitment to justice and its willingness to challenge segregation directly.

> *"I have long admired the noble purpose and creative work of this institution. For twenty-five years you have stood with dauntless courage and fearless determination. You have given the South some of its most responsible leaders in this great period of transition." — Martin Luther King, Jr*

Diane Nash, James Bevel, and SNCC organizers

Many SNCC activists passed through Highlander's workshops, learning strategies for sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and voter-registration drives. Highlander's emphasis on collective leadership and participatory democracy deeply influenced SNCC's organizational style.

Labor leaders, Appalachian activists, and anti-poverty organizers

Beyond the Civil Rights Movement, Highlander trained generations of labor organizers, Appalachian community leaders, environmental activists, and anti-poverty advocates. It became a hub for Southern grassroots movements long before "grassroots" became a political buzzword.

Highlander's students became union leaders, civil-rights strategists, elected officials, and movement elders. They carried Highlander's philosophy into every corner of American public life.

The Attack on Highlander and the State-Engineered Shutdown

Highlander's interracial workshops made it a target from the beginning. Segregationists accused the school of communism, immorality, and racial mixing — all code words for the same fear: that Highlander was teaching Black Southerners how to challenge white supremacy.

> *"Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School."-Georgia Commission on Education*

In 1961, the Tennessee legislature launched a coordinated attack on the school. State officials raided Highlander, seized documents, arrested staff, and charged the school with violating liquor laws, a pretext widely understood to be fabricated. The state revoked Highlander's charter, confiscated its land, and shut the school down.

> **"The present status of the investigation is a recommendation from the state legislature that legal proceedings be taken to cancel Highlander's charter and to find me and put me in jail if the evidence warrants. They dropped**

> **the charges of subversion and just decided to close Highlander anyway." — Myles Horton**

Shortly afterward, one of Highlander's main buildings burned. The fire was widely believed to be arson, though no one was ever charged. The destruction of the building symbolized the state's broader goal: to destroy Highlander's influence, erase its presence, and scatter its community.

Highlander's staff regrouped and reopened as the Highlander Research and Education Center in Knoxville, later moving to New Market, Tennessee. But the original Monteagle campus, the land where Parks, Clark, Lewis, and King had walked, was gone.

The Land, the Sale, and Racial Restriction

After the state seized Highlander's 200 acres, it subdivided the land and sold it off. The sales took place during an era when racially restrictive covenants were common across the South, legal clauses that prohibited Black families from buying, leasing, or occupying land. These covenants were used to maintain segregation, protect white property values, and prevent Black communities from gaining footholds in desirable areas.

While the reporting does not quote the exact language of the covenants used on Highlander's former land, it documents the racialized control of the property and the exclusion of Highlander's community, which included many Black activists, from reclaiming it. The land passed into the hands of white preservationists and private owners who maintained control for decades. Highlander itself was barred from returning.

It took more than sixty years for Highlander to regain even a portion of its original campus. In 2024, the organization finally acquired 8.5 acres of the land that had been taken from it, a small but meaningful reclamation of its history.

Highlander's Legacy and the Long Memory of the South

The Highlander Folk School's legacy is not measured in buildings or acreage. It is measured in the movements it helped build, the leaders it trained, and the democratic practices it nurtured. Highlander taught that ordinary people could analyze their own conditions, challenge their own oppression, and build their own solutions. It taught that interracial cooperation was not only possible but necessary. It taught that democracy was not a spectator sport.

The school's destruction, the fire, the raid, the land seizure, the racially restrictive sales — reveals how threatening that vision was to the Jim Crow

South. Highlander was not shut down because of liquor violations. It was shut down because it was teaching Black and white Southerners how to dismantle segregation.

The land's fate reflects the broader history of racial exclusion in America. Even after the school was gone, the land itself became a site of racial control — a reminder that white supremacy is not only enforced through laws and violence but through property, ownership, and access.

Today, Highlander continues its work in New Market, Tennessee, supporting movements for racial justice, labor rights, immigrant rights, environmental protection, and LGBTQ+ liberation. Its workshops now train a new generation of organizers, people fighting voter suppression, police violence, climate injustice, and economic inequality. The school's history is not a relic. It is a blueprint.

Conclusion: A School That Refused to Die

The Highlander Folk School was burned, raided, shut down, and stripped of its land. But it was never defeated. Its students carried its lessons into the streets of Montgomery, the bridges of Selma, the buses of the Freedom Rides, the halls of Congress, and the classrooms of America. Its philosophy

that democracy must be learned, practiced, and lived continues to shape movements today.

The land where Highlander once stood tells a story of resistance and repression, of interracial cooperation and racial exclusion, of democratic possibility and authoritarian backlash. It tells the story of the South, not as a monolith, but as a battleground.

Highlander's history reminds us that education is dangerous when it teaches people to question power. It reminds us that land is political, that ownership is a form of control, and that racial restrictions do not disappear simply because laws change. It reminds us that movements are built not only in marches and speeches but in classrooms, workshops, and quiet conversations among people learning how to fight for their own liberation.

Most of all, Highlander's history reminds us that democracy is not inherited. It is taught. And sometimes, the places where it is taught must be rebuilt — again and again — on whatever land remains.


SIN ACCIÓN, NO HAY CONOCIMIENTO



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I've never been to New Market, TN, the current home of the Highlander Research and Education Center. It's somewhere near Knoxville that I have driven through. Should I be in the vicinity, I'll make it a point to stop by where history is still being made.

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Written by William Spivey

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Responses (15)

Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Sofia K she/her
Jul 15

William, this was a fascinating and important piece of history. Your storytelling shows how powerful ideas can outlast fear and injustice. “You can’t padlock an idea” is a message that still resonates today.

21 Reply

John glavin
Jul 15

The history of this school must continue to be told. I live about 20 minutes north of Monteagle, and when I first read of Highlander, I found myself inspired.

The current TN government is NO different from the segregationist government of 1961... more

49 Reply

Sue Burvill-Shaw
Jul 16

You write, "The land’s fate reflects the broader history of racial exclusion in America." I believe it goes further- The school's fate reflects the Fear built into the USA's very constitution by founders who feared the loss of the

benefits of labour... more

15 Reply

See all responses

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