Women in the Civil Rights Movement

TRAILBLAZERS AND TORCHBEARERS, 1941-1965

Edited by Vicki L. Crawford
Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods
Associate Editors: Broadus Butler
Marymal Dryden, and Melissa Walker

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To

Septima Poinsette Clark

who was scheduled to appear on the program,
but who died before this conference took place

Modesta Monteith Sinkins

who was scheduled to appear on the program,
but whose hospitalization prevented her from attending

and

Myles Horton

who attended the conference and was honored at the banquet

and to three pioneer civil rights activists

in whose spirit this conference was organized

Ella Jo Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Viola Gregg Liuzzo

We came together to celebrate their lives

as well as to recognize the contributions of other women

of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in local communities

who were Trailblazers and Torchbearers

in the civil rights movement.
Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights

GRACE JORDAN McFADDEN

Septima Poinsette Clark's death on December 15, 1987, ended her struggle for human rights for her people within the framework of the United States' political, social, and economic system. Referred to as the "Mother of the Movement," by Martin Luther King, Jr., she had been at the vanguard of the human rights quest.1

A native of Charleston, South Carolina, she was born on May 3, 1898. Her father, Peter Poinsette, was born a slave on the Joel Poinsette farm between the Waccamaw River and Georgetown. Her mother, Victoria Warren Anderson Poinsette, was born in Charleston and was taken to Haiti by her uncle in 1864, along with her two sisters, Martha and Maseline.2

My father was very gentle and my mother was very haughty. The English did a better job in Haiti teaching them to read and write, so she [Victoria Poinsette] boasted of being a free issue. She often said, "I never gave a white woman a drink of water." My father was such a gentle, very wonderful guy. It was good for those two to be together because my mother, with her haughtiness, and my father, with his gentleness, I felt that I stood on a platform that was built by both. And when I went to Mississippi and Texas and places like that, I had a feeling that his nonviolence helped me to work with the people there and her haughtiness helped me to stay. . . . I got into many places where we had a lot of harassment from the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Council in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Grenada, Mississippi, and Natchez, Mississippi. I stood on a platform built by my mother and father.3
Septima Poinsette's father worked as a caterer following the Civil War. Her mother took in laundry. Since teaching was one of the few professions available to black women at the beginning of the twentieth century, Septima took the state examination in 1916 after having completed twelfth grade at Avery Normal Institute in Charleston, South Carolina. Teaching would enable her to have a career and help her family financially.

I had to take an examination of eleven subjects in order to teach. I received the licentiate of instruction and went over to John's Island to teach in a two-teacher school there. In that two-teacher school we had 132 children and a building that was decrepit black. We were all black together. Across the road from where I worked was a white schoolhouse that was whitewashed and three children attending that with one teacher. That teacher received $85 a month for her teaching and living. And the rest of us, the two teachers who taught across the street—I was the teaching principal so I got $35 and the assistant $25. Both of us made $60 to the one teacher who made $85 for three children. And there we were working for $60 a month with 132 children.

Poinsette remained on John's Island for three years, during which time she became a crusader for the equalization of teachers' salaries as well as an active proponent for black teachers being allowed to teach in Charleston's public schools and becoming public school principals. In 1919, she returned to Charleston to teach sixth grade at Avery Normal Institute. It was then that her civil rights work commenced. She attended NAACP meetings in Charleston and heard Edwin Halston, a prominent artist and civil rights advocate, discuss the conditions facing black people during that historic epoch. She was inspired by Halston as well as by Thomas Ezekiel Miller, who had served as a congressman from South Carolina during Reconstruction and later became president of South Carolina State College. Miller and Halston addressed mass meetings in order to generate support for black teachers to teach in the public schools of Charleston. Poinsette began her civil rights work by going door-to-door, asking people to sign petitions.

Now, a lot of people in downtown Charleston said that only the mulattoes wanted their daughters to work in the schools, but that the chauffeurs and cooks didn't mind whatsoever. They were satisfied for their daughters to come to us as they had. And that's when we put on the door-to-door campaign. Some people wrote their names on pieces of paper tags to say that they wanted their daughters to work in the public schools as well. I was teaching at Avery then. I was teaching the sixth grade. So I took my class one day, with the permission of the principal, and we walked the streets from one door to another and received those signatures. And those signatures Mr. Halston gave to Tom E. Miller who was at State College in Orangeburg. And Tom E. Miller wanted 10,000 signatures. We put them in a crockery sack and he took them up to the legislature to let them know that there were blacks who were cooks and maids and chauffeurs who wanted their children to teach black children in the public schools of Charleston. And in 1920, well, the end of 1919, when the legislature closed, that thing became a law. And the following year we had Negro principals. We had been victorious in this my first effort to establish for Negro citizens what I sincerely believed to be their God given right.

As a youngster she enhanced her social and racial consciousness while watching ships from Marcus Garvey's Black Star Shipping Line dock at Charleston Harbor and passengers embark and disembark. This venture filled here with racial pride and dignity. Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant, had founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1916. The UNIA was a worldwide racial and economic program among people of African descent. Later, as a student at Atlanta University in 1937, Clark would take a course from Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois whom she described as "an aloof professor" but a thorough scholar. Du Bois, an eminent scholar and author, founder of the Niagara Movement, co-founder of the NAACP and editor of its Crisis magazine, would influence Clark's documentation of events as well as her commitment to writing.

Septima Poinsette married seaman Nerie Clark in May 1920. Two children were born to the marriage, a daughter who died a month after her birth and a son, Nerie Clark, Jr. Nerie Clark was at sea during the early years of the marriage. Following his discharge from the navy, the family moved to Dayton, Ohio. The marriage was short-lived, however. Nerie died of kidney ailment in December 1925 shortly before his thirty-sixth birthday. Having to support his young son, Septima Clark lived with her husband's relatives in Dayton and Hickory, North Carolina, before finally settling in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1929, where she remained until 1947. During her time in Columbia she received her B.A. from Benedict College and her M.A. from Hampton Institute. In 1935, she sent her son back to Hickory to live with his paternal grandparents. Nerie, Jr. remained there through high school. Clark explained that the move was necessary because she didn't earn enough money to support her son and most boarding houses would not allow children. A benefit of this separation from her child was that Clark now had the freedom necessary for social and political action.

The move to Columbia had increased her consciousness.
I hadn't been in Columbia long, in fact, before I discovered that upcountry Columbia, in the center of the state, was different from my native low country Charleston. In Charleston, both white and Negro were rooted in tradition. Columbia was more democratic... In Columbia everyone mixed, and the schoolteachers were considered rather high up in the social ladder and the doctor's wife and the schoolteacher and the woman working as a domestic sat down at the bridge table. In fact, when Negro doctors in Columbia had their meetings, they would invite not only their wives and their more elite friends to the social functions but also their patients. They left no one out.9

During her years in Columbia, South Carolina, Clark began her work in citizenship education. Wil Lou Gray, head of the South Carolina Adult Education Program in 1935, had been asked by the army to establish a program to help educate black illiterate soldiers stationed at Camp Jackson (now Fort Jackson) following World War I. Approximately 50 percent of South Carolina's men who sought military service were not accepted because of illiteracy.10 This introduction to citizenship education trained soldiers to sign their names to pay slips, read bus routes and learn to count. The Camp Jackson program later became the basis for the citizenship schools Septima Clark designed at Highlander Folk School and SCLC. Clark's ability to link social reform with educational advancement began with her teaching on John's Island in 1916. It would continue throughout her life as a proponent of citizenship education.

It was in Columbia that Septima Poinsette Clark became actively involved in the teachers' salary equalization campaign. She worked with Booker T. Washington High School principal J. Andrew Simmons; NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall, South Carolina's civil rights lawyer Harold R. Boulware, and others in preparing a court case. Poinsette Clark: "My participation in this fight to force equalization of white and Negro teachers' salaries on the basis of certification, of course, was what might be described by some no doubt, as my first radical job. I, however, would call it my first effort in a social action, challenging the status quo. It was the first time I had worked against people directing a system for which I was working."11 The hearings were held in the South Carolina State House. The black people who attended were not allowed to sit on the main floor. Clark recalls:

When we were having the hearings for the teachers' salaries equalization, we had to sit in the balcony. We couldn't sit on the main floor. Segregation was still in '35 and '36. But, I went and stayed from around 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon until around nine o'clock at night. And, I was hearing this thing through. And, finally they decided that we would have to take an examination... I took the examination and made an A on it. Immediately my salary tripled. I thought I was wealthy then... Now the principal who worked on the equalization, J. A. Simons, he resigned after we met because he felt they were going to dismiss him. But, I worked on until 1947, from '36 until '47, when my mother took sick and she had a stroke and then I came home because I wanted to be with her. I had been in Columbia for eighteen years. Following that court decision my salary had advanced to almost $4,000 a year.12

In 1945 Federal District Judge J. Waties Waring of South Carolina, who later became a friend of Septima Clark, ruled in Viola Duvall's class action suit on behalf of Charleston, South Carolina's black teachers that teachers with equal education should receive equal pay.13 Clark worked in the Charleston public schools from 1947 to 1956. During this time, she was active with the YWCA, attended workshops on desegregation at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and supported civil rights efforts. She was also a member of the Charleston NAACP, serving as its membership chairperson. On April 19, 1956, the South Carolina legislature passed a law stipulating that no city or state employee could be affiliated with any civil rights organization. But Clark refused to conceal her membership: "I couldn't refuse them, and I was dismissed." Clark's political action was well grounded by now. She had signed her name to 726 letters that were sent to black teachers requesting that they protest the law. Only 26 answered, and when Clark urged them to talk to the superintendent of schools, only 11 agreed to go and only 5 actually showed up. (The superintendent told them that they were years ahead of their time.) Shortly thereafter, Clark was fired. She was 58 years old and had been teaching for forty years. She not only lost her job, but also her state retirement benefits. In 1976 Governor James Edwards, the first Republican governor of South Carolina, wrote Clark to acknowledge that she had been unjustly terminated and thus was entitled to her pension.14

Once again Clark turned adversity to her advantage. She now had more time for social activism, and Myles Horton, director of Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, recruited her as director of workshops. Highlander was an authentic proponent of social change: the school advocated human brotherhood; sought to eliminate stereotypes, break down racial barriers, and develop leaders. Beneficiaries of its programs spanned a wide gulf, from Eau Jenkins of John's Island who gained social welfare skills to aid his fellow islanders to Rosa Parks who gained knowledge of civil disobedience and, as a consequence, sparked the Montgomery bus boycott.
[Rosa Parks] came to Highlander Folk School while I was directing the education program in 1965. She was working with a youth group in Montgomery and she said, "I want to come and see if I can do something for my people." So she came. We sent money and gave her a scholarship. And when she went home, she had gained enough courage, enough strength to feel that she could stand firm and decide not to move when that man asked for her seat.15

Highlander Folk School prepared Clark for her subsequent work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Highlander workshops were planned and conducted to emphasize a cooperative rather than a competitive use of learning. They hoped through the teaching of leaders to advance a community, rather than individuals, though the advancement of the community always advanced the individuals in it. People came to Highlander to seek enlightenment on issues whose proper solution, followed by adequate social action, would promote the advancement of all. Highlander Folk School's workshops included persons of all races and levels of economic and education success.16

Clark sought the assistance of many outstanding black leaders to assist her at Highlander. In July 1960 she wrote to Ella Baker: "We are attempting to help these people [the young people in the sit-in movement] by bringing them to the school for a workshop on the tactics and techniques of follow-through in school desegregation, voter registration, leadership education. Won't you come to this workshop and show your experiences in the current problems?"17 Baker came to Highlander in 1960 and worked with Clark training young people for leadership roles and responsibilities in the civil rights movement.

In the spring of 1961, Septima Clark departed from her position at Highlander Folk School, though she remained on the staff as an educational consultant. She was recruited by Martin Luther King, Jr. and joined the staff of SCLC as director of education and teaching. This affiliation paralleled her work at Highlander, focusing on citizenship training, voting, and literacy. At the age of sixty-three, Clark traveled throughout the Southern states directing workshops for SCLC. She instilled in the minds of her workshop participants that they must become cognizant of "the non-partisan basis of the American system. They are taught their constitutional rights and how to organize to obtain the political power to get streetlights or better roads and schools in their part of town. The right to peaceful assembly and to petition for redress of grievances is related to how they can organize their own
community for change.” She was the first woman elected to the Executive Board of SCLC.

Clark's involvement with SCLC fully tested the qualities of patience, endurance, and strength of mind that had been instilled in her by her parents. Of her years with SCLC, she stated:

I went to SCLC and worked with Dr. King as director of education and director of teaching. And there traveled from place to place getting people to realize that they wanted to eliminate illiteracy. We had to eliminate illiteracy first! And then after eliminating illiteracy, then we went into registration and voting and getting them to want to register and vote. And of course, you know we had a terrible struggle because thirty or more persons were killed in the registration and voting drive. But we didn't stop! We went on! And in '64 we got the Civil Rights Bill and they couldn't harass us as we worked in the lines.

I first started holding workshops in a place called Liberty County, Georgia. People in Liberty learned how to write their names and read and write under trees, in beauty parlors. Then we would go down with them to the registration office. The people were eager to go there. A man in Liberty County, Georgia said to me, "It's a dangerous thing to do. Why do you live dangerous?" And I replied, "It's something that I have to do!" And it was. We were often harassed by the White Citizen's Council. Following one of our meetings in Grenada, Mississippi, just about five minutes after we got out of the church, it was set afire. I don't know how they got in to put those things around the church.

Clark's work with SCLC required that she travel throughout the Southeastern United States directing workshops in citizenship, education, and voting. In southern Georgia, she conducted workshops on how to make out a bank check.

We brought in a banker from a little town outside of Savannah, Mr. Bae, I think it was, and he put the whole form up on the board and showed them how to write this thing out and how to put your date and how to write it out. He told them, "Don't leave a space to the end of the check. Someone else could write your number in there and you'd get out more than you expected, and then when you finish putting down the amount, take a line and carry it all the way to that dollar, to the thing that says dollar."

The white citizens started to harass black people who were learning proper banking methods.

The Black people had been in the habit of having them make out the check for them, and they'd just sign with a "X." One fellow said, though, that he went to the bank and the white man said to him, "Just bring it over here, and I'll fix it for you." The black man said, "No, I can write my name." The white man said, "Oh, God, these niggers done learned to write their names." The goal of the Citizenship Schools was to provide full citizenship through education. Clark sought to place non-traditional teachers at her schools. Communities which sought her-teachers desired individuals who by their backgrounds would make good teachers, such as beauticians, farmers, tradesmen, etc. Clark wanted those who offered "a folk approach to learning rather than a classical one."

Septima Clark's recollections of SCLC provide insight into the role of women in the organization as well as the reluctance of some black ministers to have their parishioners involved in her program.

I found Dr. King to be a very, very nonviolent man. He proved to us all that nonviolence would work. He also made black people aware of their blackness and not ashamed of being black. The thing that I think stands out a whole lot was the fact that women could never be accorded their rightful place even in the southern Christian Leadership Conference. I can't ever forget Reverend Abernathy saying, "Why is Mrs. Clark on the Executive Board?" And Dr. King saying, "Well, she designed a whole program." "Well, I just can't see why you got to have her on the Board!" They just didn't feel as if a woman, you know, had any sense. See, Mrs. King has come into her own since Dr. King's death. Because most of them felt that a woman couldn't say much or do much. I don't know if you know Ella Baker who lives in New York now. She had a brilliant mind in the beginning of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But the men never would feel, you know, she had a rightful place there. I think that up to the time that Dr. King was nearing the end that he really felt that black women had a place in the movement and in the whole world. The men didn't, though! The men who worked with him didn't have that kind of idea."

According to Clark, Rosa Parks never managed to achieve her rightful place in the civil rights movement.

If you notice the movie, From Montgomery to Memphis, not even Rosa Parks was accorded her rightful place in the whole movie. We talked about it, she and I. She gave Dr. King the right to practice his nonviolence. Because by refusing to get up out of that seat was the real fact that he could organize the boycott and work with people all through. And it went into many countries.
People from China sent money for station wagons and from India and other places. And it was Rosa Parks who started the whole thing.25

Septima Clark, too, has been an outspoken advocate of nonviolence. Her Christmas message in December 1967 articulated her convictions.

The way I see it, the test is on us now, those who believe in nonviolence and brotherhood. Things which I hear labeled out-of-date and unrealistic, we must make it work. We must build a foundation through the long hot summers and long cold winters. This foundation, whether rooted in Christianity or single person-to-person contact must achieve what has not been done before, and it must be solidly rooted in truth and love. This must be done more quickly than ever before, because time is running out and may have already run out.26

As a social activist, Clark was committed to leadership training and follow-through. In December 1963, she wrote Martin Luther King, Jr., concerning her frustrations with those who felt they were more interested in glamour of the movement than the daily work with the people.

Many states are losing their citizenship schools because there is no one to do follow-up work. I have done as much as I could. In fact, I'm the only paid staff worker doing field visitation. I think that the staff of the SCLC working with me in the Citizenship Education Program feels that the work is not dramatic enough to warrant their time. Direct action is so glamorous and packed with emotion that most young people prefer demonstration over genuine education.

It seems to me as if Citizenship Education is all mine, except when it comes time to pick up the checks.27

Reflecting on her years with SCLC, Clark believed that training in citizenship education helped women to realize their worth in society. Of course, she stressed that this was not a goal of the training schools. However, Clark contended that women who participated in citizenship education became aroused citizens and assumed positive roles in the quest for civil as well as women's rights. Their gaining the right to vote freed the individual as well as the group.

Women, ninety-one, eighty-one years of age, we could teach them in twenty minutes and we had cars outside waiting to take them right to the courthouse. They signed their names and they got a number that said that they could register and vote in August [1965]. Well, I stayed there from May until August and by the time we left, 7,002 of them had signed their names and

had received a number. That's why we have a large number of our people in Alabama voting today.28

The SCLC Citizenship Education Program that Clark directed went into eleven deep South states. Her efforts resulted in black people achieving the right to vote and, thus, becoming active participants in the body politic. After her departure from SCLC, Clark still remained a social activist. She conducted workshops for the American Field Service, helped raise scholarships for deserving young people, organized day-care facilities, and remained an advocate for civil rights. In 1975 she was elected a member of the Charleston, South Carolina, School Board. The College of Charleston awarded her an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters in 1978. (The home where she was born is now owned by the college.) In February 1979, President Jimmy Carter recognized her work by presenting her with a Living the Legacy Award. Since then, a section of the Charleston Highway has been named in her honor.

Clark maintained that her greatest honor was serving humanity. From collecting signatures in a croaker sack to her productive citizenship education program, she never wavered in her conviction that if you put forth the effort, change would eventually come.

The only reason why I thought the Citizenship School Program was right was because when they went down to register and vote, they were able to register and vote. They received their registration certificate. Then I knew that what I did must have been right. . . . It was an experiment that I was trying. When I went into communities and talked to people, I couldn't say that I was saying the right thing. But as I see people work in these communities and decide that they were going to attempt to do some of the things that were recommended and after attempting to do some of the things that were recommended they were able to be successful, like housing, and being able to get checks signed at banks, getting able to be recognized in the community among their own people and in their churches, then I knew that that experiment had worked out. But I couldn't be sure that the experiment was going to work. I don't think anybody can be sure. You just try and see if it's coming.29

Clark's Christmas message in 1965, "A Look to the Future," articulated the essence of her political and social philosophy.

The greatest evil in our country today is not racism but ignorance. . . . This is the great challenge to black and white leadership. Our basic philosophy is clear. We do not need a new one. We are committed to an integrated
society—for a truly democratic society, there can be no freedom without integration. Our task then is to nurture and strengthen the newly developing political strength among both young Blacks and young Whites, who have already made a magnificent contribution to the struggle for a more humane and just society. But further, we must try harder than ever to reach the great mass of the uninformed, whose basic interests are no different from our own—if they but knew it.30

Clark nurtured her social and political philosophy with her strong beliefs. One had a moral obligation, she asserted, to serve God via his or her service to humanity. In 1971, she proclaimed:

We are young at heart when we have a tremendous faith in God and in the future, when we have a sense of exaltation in the sweeping movements of a rapidly changing society and world. We are old when we rise against our times, when we resist all change. We are young as our dreams, our hopes and our enthusiasm. We are as old as our fears, our frustrations, our doubts. We need to feel wanted and to find the joy that grows out of service to others if the last of life for which the fine was made is to be a time of happiness for those of us who are growing older.31

On the occasion of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death in 1968, Clark proclaimed, "His was no middle-class write-in campaign for Civil Rights, it was a movement that took the people into the streets to confront clubs, hoses, horses, and dogs; to face the oppressors while armed only with the almighty power of love; to turn the cheek not to avoid the present pain, but to see the true nation and new order of the future that God was already making. His peace was not in a cozy rally, but in a reordering of our national priorities from military power to that of human empowerment."32 Her tribute to King could easily be extended to her. The depth of her commitment, the magnitude of her faith, her power of endurance, and her unrelenting crusade for justice allowed her to put into operation a program of citizen participation that transformed American society. Myles Horton, who died in January 1990, gave Clark the framework at Highlander Folk School to develop her program of citizenship education. Clark, he proclaimed, was a committed public servant and dedicated advocate of social change.33

NOTES

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
9. Clark, Echo in My Soul, p. 80.
11. Clark, Echo in My Soul, p. 82.
15. Clark interview, February 1, 1975.
16. Clark, Echo in My Soul, p. 178.
18. Septima P. Clark, Nature of the Citizenship Education Program, private collection of Septima P. Clark, Charleston, SC.
22. Ibid., p. 76.
23. Clark, Echo in My Soul, p. 466.
25. Ibid.
27. Septima P. Clark to Martin L. King, Jr., December 1963, Septima P. Clark Collection.
32. Septima P. Clark, The Occasion—Martin Luther King Jr., private collection of Septima Poinsette Clark.
33. Grace Jordan McFadden, conversation with Myles Horton, October 17, 1988, Atlanta, Georgia.