

Oral History Interview with Septima Poinsette Clark

July 30, 1976.

Interview G-0017

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EXCERPT #1

Highlander Folk School volunteers go to jail for voter registration campaigns

The Highlander Folk School taught literacy in Savannah and other areas of Georgia to prepare black residents for voter registration. While working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on these efforts, many of the volunteers went to jail.

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK:

The first part of Georgia that we worked through was Savannah, Georgia, and we worked with Savannah because Hosea Williams was there trying to get people to register to vote and didn't know that he had to teach them to read and write so they could answer the thirty questions that Georgia had for them to answer. When we were successful in Savannah, then Hosea found eighteen counties in the southeastern part of Georgia, and we started schools in those eighteen counties. That's when we brought in people to the center and trained them.

EUGENE WALKER:

What happened in Savannah?

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK:

In Savannah the success was great. We got these people registered to vote, and in three weeks' time we were able, with the help of the SNCC boys and Southern Christian Leadership Conference's staff, we put 9,000 black registered voters on the books.

EUGENE WALKER:

Can you recall whether this was in '60 or '61?

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK:

'61.

EUGENE WALKER:

So in 1960, what were you doing? It was the year you spent organizing or trying to get . . .

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK:

Yes, we were organizing that year. We didn't have the voting rights bill, and numbers of our people were arrested for trying to register. But nevertheless we went through with it and were able to get bail and bond and bailed them out.

EXCERPT #2

Highlander Folk School uses local election law and farming needs to teach basic skills to communities

The Highlander Folk School focused its lessons on helping people to flourish in their communities and pass local poll examinations. The school taught people specifics about local government and farming techniques as a way of conveying reading and math skills. The "other" keyword in this excerpt stands for "illiteracy."

EUGENE WALKER:

So when you recruited someone, what was their responsibility other than agreeing to be one of the participants, in terms of their upkeep?

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK:

They had to also promise that they would go back to the community and open up a school, and they were supposed to teach two nights a week, two hours each night. We had all of the books mimeographed that we wanted them to use in teaching.

EUGENE WALKER:

Could you demonstrate for me, not in detail, but generally what it was that you taught these people and what it was they were expected to take back to their communities?

SEPTIMA POINSETTE CLARK:

We used the election laws of that particular state to teach the reading. We used the amount of fertilizer and the amount of seeds to teach the arithmetic, how much they would pay for it and the like. We did some political work by having them to find out about the kind of government that they had in their particular community. And these were the things that we taught them when they went back home. Each state had to have its own particular reading, because each state had different requirements for the election laws.