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"Everyone You Don't Like is a Communist:"

The Highlander Center and the Civil Rights Movement in Knoxville,

1961-1971

By Michael Blum*



In June 1963, Myles Horton, director of the Highlander Folk School, his attorney Ed Lynch, and their wives had lunch at Cline's Grill and Sundries in Maryville, Tennessee. As they finished eating, the owner, Jim Cline, cursed at them and then attacked Myles Horton and hit Ed Lynch. After the beating, Cline expressed little regret, saying: "I had informed Horton's lawyer not to bring him out here. His lawyer has been a customer quite a while. Horton came just to provoke. I had several customers get up and leave when they came in. When they were slow in leaving I helped them. Their story is exaggerated." The attack left Horton unconscious, with a cut on the back of his head, a black eye, and possibly a broken elbow. Because of those injuries, Horton could not remember much of the incident afterward.¹

The Highlander Folk School invoked strong feelings for Tennesseans, because of the long-running public belief that Highlander harbored communists and promoted pro-communist thought. Jim Cline and many others believed that Horton was a communist who threatened the American way of life. More directly, Horton scared off customers, and his vilification in the media justified the beating. Horton, who repeatedly denied charges of promoting communism, saw himself as a promoter of American democracy. Through Highlander, he provided civic education, encouraged African Americans to vote, and promoted integration, all of which created greater racial equality and spread democracy. Lynch supported Horton's goals and risked harm to ensure that Highlander continued its efforts. In the

* The author is an assistant professor of history at Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, Texas. He would like to thank Aram Goudsouzian and Brandon Jett who read an earlier draft of this essay.

¹ "Attacked in Maryville, Horton Says," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, July 6, 1963.

larger picture, the two perspectives brought to issue what it meant to be an American in the early 1960s. For Cline, Americanism meant fighting communism and maintaining the status quo. For Horton, Americanism was about expanding democracy to all, especially groups on the periphery of society. These differing philosophies converged during Highlander's participation in the Civil Rights Movement in Knoxville during the 1960s.

In 1961, after decades of inquiries from anti-communist investigators, the state of Tennessee revoked the Highlander Folk School's charter and seized all of its buildings and property near Monteagle. After the closure, leaders secured a new charter, relocated the school to Knoxville, and renamed it the Highlander Research and Education Center. But few Knoxvilleans welcomed the school with open arms, especially as the Civil Rights Movement intensified at the national level. In fact, Highlander's reputation made it too radical for many of the city's civil rights leaders, social activists, and elected officials.

The Civil Rights Movement in Knoxville remained low key because it was conducted through negotiations among activists, elected officials, and business leaders. Civil rights leaders in Knoxville believed that Highlander's presence had the potential to derail their progress. Negotiations led to a degree of social change, minimal violence and unrest, and limited media attention. For example, the direct action movement brought about the desegregation of most public spaces before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but failed to address other inequalities. Such partial victories created a fragile relationship among these groups. Highlander threatened to upset the progress of the movement by attracting negative media attention to the city's race relations. More importantly, Highlander pushed for an accelerated pace of change and complete racial equality, a step that city officials remained unprepared to take. Highlander's agenda had the potential to disrupt the balance between activists, elected officials, and business leaders.

The Highlander Center drew the ire of elected officials and local whites in Knoxville, largely because Horton and other leaders refused to engage with local officials and businessmen. Instead, Highlander focused on civil rights activism across the country and expected local activists to embrace their work on national issues. Because of the charges of promoting communism, many activists viewed the Highlander Center as an unwelcome outsider capable of disrupting the Civil Rights Movement in Knoxville and also a challenge to their control of civil rights activism. In response to the perceived spread of communism, several groups, including elected officials and the Ku Klux Klan combined their efforts to rid Knoxville of the school, which came to fruition in 1971.

Scholars have focused on the school's founding in the 1930s until the Monteagle campus closed in 1961, with limited discussion of Highlander's

decade in Knoxville. Several lessons. Primarily, communism permeated the community. Scholars have shown that civil rights organizations faced harassment and resistance from investigators or politicians. Various approaches and segregation practices were used over years of Highlander's operation. Highlander to relocate.

The Highlander Folk School. Highlander Folk School. The school in Monteagle. The mission to combat racism. To do so, Highlander worked with unions, making it a challenge and perhaps the only unique philosophy. Highlander after the school. Highlander advocated the participatory Highlander program. Highlander participatory research. Highlander national. Highlander harbored subversive.

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² Scholars have examined organized labor or the in Tennessee: The *Historical Quarterly* 43: Junior Union Camps citizenship schools see (Santa Cruz, 1980). *Pursuit of Racial Justice: Education in the South* Peabody College for of religion see, Myles *Autobiography* (New York: *Road by Walking: Confronting Pushing the Boundaries*

³ See, Penny Von Esch (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

⁴ Highlander defines its experiences and, through and strategies for action everyone has within the Center, *Weaving the Tapestry* Market, TN, 2007).



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decade in Knoxville.² Highlander's ten-year stint in Knoxville offers several lessons. Primarily, it illuminates how the Cold War culture of anti-communism permeated through many aspects of American life. Other scholars have shown how a Cold War mentality disrupted national civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, but Highlander received more harassment and resistance at the local level than from federal government investigators or politicians. The local opposition to Highlander reveals the varied approaches and efforts to attain civil rights and eliminate Jim Crow segregation practices in East Tennessee.³ This essay reviews the troubled ten years of Highlander in Knoxville and the multiple local factors that forced Highlander to relocate to New Market in Jefferson County.

The Highlander Research and Education Center (HREC) began as the Highlander Folk School in 1932. Myles Horton and Don West established the school in Monteagle, Tennessee, about 150 miles from Knoxville, with the mission to combat Appalachian poverty during the Great Depression. To do so, Highlander organized farmers, unskilled workers, and labor unions, making it one of the country's premier activist training centers and perhaps the only integrated one. This success came from the school's unique philosophy, made famous by Horton, who became the sole head of Highlander after West's 1933 departure. A radical theologian, Horton advocated the participation of grassroots people in American democracy. Highlander programs had three primary components: popular education, participatory research, and cultural organizing.⁴ This agenda brought Highlander national recognition and charges that the school trained and harbored subversives.

Highlander's successful organizing of labor unions, concern for workers, and racially integrated workshops set the stage for scrutiny during the Cold

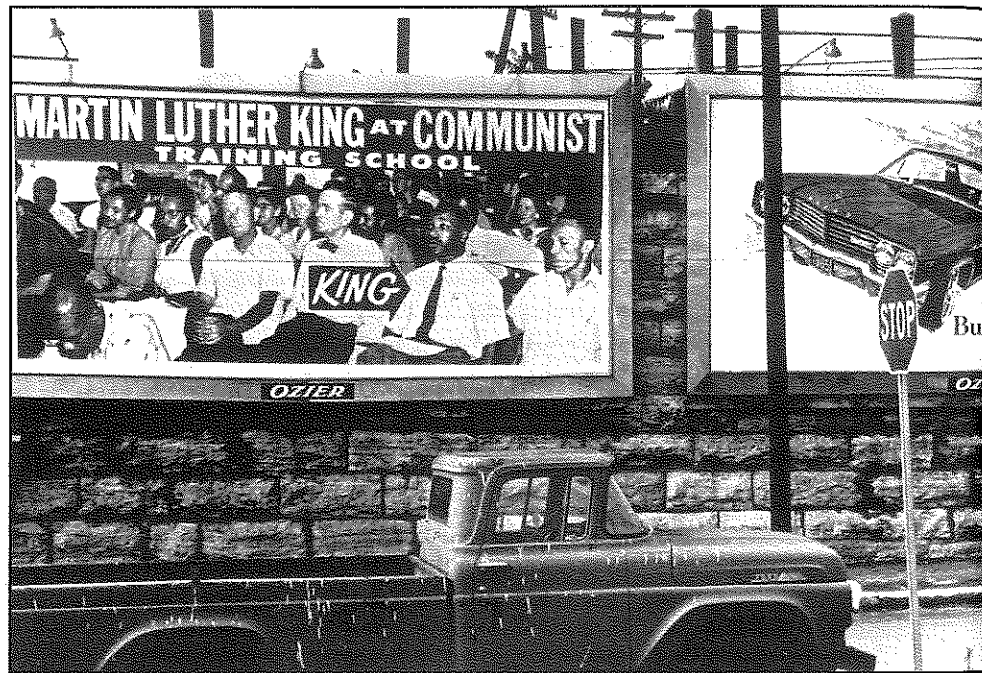
² Scholars have examined Highlander from a number of angles. For interaction with organized labor or the Civil Rights Movement see, Michael E. Price, "The New Deal in Tennessee: The Highlander and Workers Response in Grundy County," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 43 (Summer 1984): 99-120; John P. Beck, "Highlander Folk School's Junior Union Camps, 1940-1944," *Labor's Heritage* 5 (Winter 1993): 28-41. For its citizenship schools see, Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience* (Santa Cruz, 1980), 139-231; Richard Couto, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round: The Pursuit of Racial Justice in the Rural South* (Philadelphia, 1991); Jerome Franson, "Citizenship Education in the South Carolina Sea Island, 1954-1966" (Ph.D. dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1977). For educational philosophy or the influence of religion see, Myles Horton, Judith Kohl, and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York, 1990); Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations* (Philadelphia, 1990); Jane Harris Woodside, "Myles Horton: Pushing the Boundaries," *Now and Then* 7 (Fall 1990): 22-23.

³ See, Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

⁴ Highlander defines popular education as a "participatory process that beings with people's experiences and, through reflection, dialogue, and co-creation, develops collective analysis and strategies for action." In this process, everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner, and everyone has within them the seed to make change. Highlander Research and Education Center, *Weaving Threads of Justice: Highlander Center's 75th Anniversary Book of Years* (New Market, TN, 2007), 2.

War. Following World War II, the perceived threat of domestic communists emerged a concern for many Americans. Politicians and law enforcement demanded investigations and led relentless pursuits of alleged un-Americans. In the process, however, red hunters applied the label of communist to many people and groups, including those involved in the Civil Rights Movement, in order to silence or suppress their voices. The anti-communist rhetoric of the Cold War thrust Highlander into the national spotlight. The school's activism made it a prime target for accusations of communist training. During this unpredictable time, any threat to the status quo seemed harmful to American efforts to win ideological victories in the Cold War. Criticism of the American system of government helped the Soviet Union, the reasoning went, and therefore communists were at the root of attempted change. This argument made Highlander's efforts for social change difficult. The controversy surrounding the school intensified when it shifted its focus to school desegregation.

In 1955, shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions, the Highlander staff began programs aimed at desegregating schools. Their



Highlander's efforts to desegregate schools during the 1960s resulted in charges that the school taught communists, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. This 1965 billboard, which showed King attending an integrated event at Highlander in 1957, announced to motorists that King and all who supported Highlander were communists. Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee.

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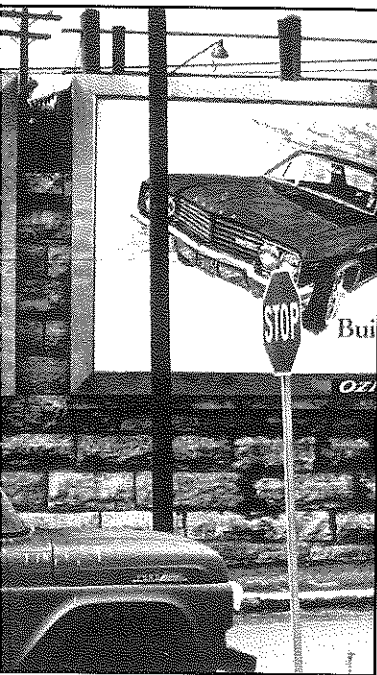
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plan called for neighborhood schools, the simultaneous desegregation of all grades, integrated staff, and a standard curriculum.⁵ It shifted, in concert with the national Civil Rights Movement, to sit-ins, desegregation of public spaces, and citizenship schools, which taught participants to read and encouraged voter registration. Because of the Cold War and the culture of Jim Crow segregation practices, these efforts garnered harassment from politicians and white extremists, especially in the South. For example, in 1954, the Georgia Commission of Education launched a propaganda campaign across the South that cast Highlander as a communist training ground. Such red baiting campaigns led to further scrutiny and inquiry into the work at Highlander.

In early February 1959, Tennessee's House of Representatives passed legislation to investigate charges of communism at Highlander. In the following weeks, the investigating committee, composed of two state senators and three representatives, heard testimony from the school's neighbors, Ed Friend of the Georgia Commission of Education, Myles Horton, and a few sympathetic witnesses. The hearings established that the integrated structure of the school violated state segregation laws. By early March, the committee recommended that the school's charter be revoked. The state's house and senate responded with a joint resolution authorizing further investigation of Highlander.

In late July 1959, the Grundy County Sheriff, highway patrolmen, and state Attorney General A.F. Sloan raided Highlander. The results of the raid led Sloan to file an additional motion requesting that the property be shut down immediately because of illegal beer sales. This charge stemmed from an incident in 1957, at the end of a program for labor union officials, when Highlander served beer and charged each participant a small fee to cover costs. In addition, staff made communal shopping trips, during which money was collected upfront before a white person purchased toiletries, candy, cigarettes, and other small items, including beer for African American visitors who could not shop in the county's segregated stores.⁶ The "evidence" uncovered during the raid eventually forced the school out of Monteagle.

In late 1959, the state circuit court in Grundy County heard the Highlander case. Lawyers for the state of Tennessee took issue with the school's charter, which classified it as tax exempt "non-profit, general welfare" private school. State attorneys argued that Highlander violated segregation laws, sold beer, and that founder Myles Horton profited from running the school. In February 1960, the court ruled in favor of the state, with Judge C.C. Chattin explaining that "the segregation laws of the state

⁵ Highlander Folk School, "Basic Policies for Presentation to Local School Boards" July 24-August 6, 1955, McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library, Knoxville.

⁶ "A Brief History of the Present Investigation Involving Highlander Folk School" 1961, Highlander Dated Materials, Attack on HREC, Investigation, Press Coverage, Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee.

as applied to private schools are constitutional and valid" and the selling of beer without a license violated state laws. The decision revoked Highlander's charter, which meant that because the school had no stockholders or owners the state of Tennessee took control of the property. Highlander's attorney Cecil Branstetter and others expected the ruling because many of the jury members reported that "it was against their religion for whites and Negroes to sit in the same classroom."⁷ After the ruling, Highlander's Board of Directors approached the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to help overturn the decision, Branstetter worked to obtain a new trial, and Horton vowed to appeal to the Supreme Court to reinstate the school's charter.⁸

Throughout the legal battles, staff members continued their interracial activism. In late June 1960, Highlander conducted a workshop for white southerners focused on helping African Americans register to vote. In early July, Reverend Ewell Reagin began a six-week program to prepare black and white high school students for integrated education.⁹

By the summer of 1960, leaders of Highlander planned to expand programs to East Tennessee and temporarily relocate their school to Knoxville. By late July, the Board of Directors announced plans for the move. The school would move into a large two-story home on Riverside Drive, which was located in a racially mixed community close to downtown known as Mountain View. The board also elected Lewis Sinclair, the first African American to receive a graduate degree in economics from the University of Tennessee and a Tennessee Valley Authority statistician, to the group, in an attempt to build connections with the local African American community. At the same time, Horton and others established a trust agreement to create a new institution legally separate from the Highlander Folk School, which would allow their programs to continue if the courts upheld the decision to revoke the charter and seize the Monteagle property.¹⁰

The publicity surrounding the case heightened fears about Highlander's ties to communists. In March 1961, an anonymous citizen wrote to the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover to inquire about the school's link to communists. Hoover did not release the FBI's information, but left a note in Highlander's file that the school had "been the subject of numerous allegations that it is a communist school and the headquarters of communism in Eastern Tennessee due primarily to its racial character."¹¹ Hoover's unwillingness to share information was explained in a later memo, which reported that the FBI's most recent investigation,

⁷ "Folk School Charter Held in Race Violation," *Knoxville Journal*, February 17, 1960.

⁸ "Highlander School Asks ACLU to Help," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, February 24, 1960.

⁹ "Highlander Plea for New Trial Denied," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 24, 1960.

¹⁰ "Highlander School Plans Knox Branch," *Knoxville Journal*, July 23, 1960; "Highlander to Expand in Knox," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, July 23, 1960; John Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville, 1996), 245, 247.

¹¹ Letter to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, March 27, 1961; J. Edgar Hoover Letter, April 5, 1961, all in Highlander Folk School, FBI File 61-7511-270.

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from 1941 to 1943, did not find any evidence of communism. The report was not released because the "derogatory information contained therein has been repudiated by the individuals previously furnishing information." Therefore it did not "appear desirable to volunteer information concerning the Highlander Folk School and Horton to outside agencies."¹² The FBI's refusal to reveal these findings only furthered Highlander's reputation as a communist led organization.

In April 1961, the Tennessee Supreme Court upheld the circuit court's decision to revoke Highlander's charter. The opinion noted, "large stacks of beer cans, whiskey jugs and bottles were found about the school; many exhibits appearing in the record show revolting and inexcusable conduct carried on at the school." It also agreed that Horton benefited from his involvement with the school because he drew a salary and received seventy acres of land as payment for previous work.¹³ Many southern politicians applauded the ruling. Mississippi Senator James Eastland offered, "I wish we had a United States Supreme Court the same caliber as the Tennessee Supreme Court."¹⁴ Highlander's attorney Cecil Branstetter appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The application read, in part, that Highlander's case stood "as a warning to any who challenge the segregationist traditions of Tennessee that they will be subject to harassment by the full power of the state and will be treated as a class apart in the application of state law."¹⁵ On October 9, 1961, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review the Highlander case. That action effectively ended legal options for Horton and Highlander to remain in Monteagle.¹⁶

As the chapter on the original Highlander Folk School closed and the state took over the Monteagle property, a new Highlander began. In the fall of 1961, Horton and four others secured a non-profit charter from the state of Tennessee for the Highlander Research and Education Center. The intention was to build a new campus on donated property in rural Jefferson County. In the meantime, the school based its local and national efforts in Knoxville.¹⁷

Highlander proved to be the outcast among the Knoxville's civil rights organizations. It came to Knoxville in the middle of direct action movement, which was conducted through negotiations among middle class African Americans, student activists, powerful businessmen, local elected

¹² Memo, FBI Internal security, June 29, 1961, FBI File 61-7511-270.

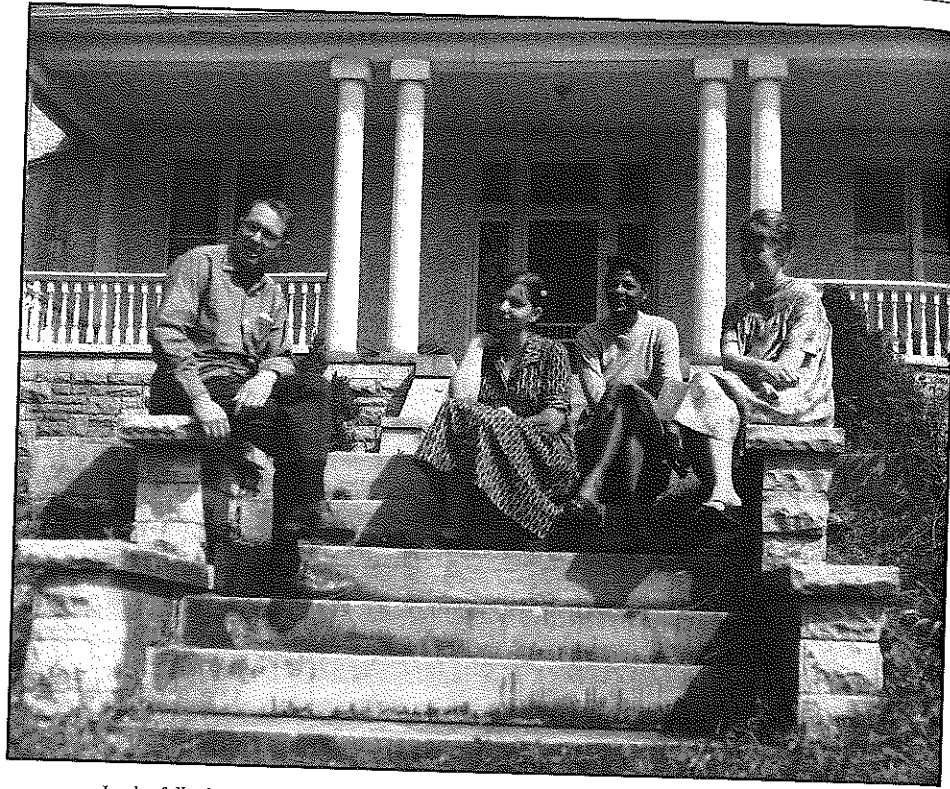
¹³ "Supreme Court Orders Folk School Closed," *Knoxville Journal*, April 6, 1961.

¹⁴ "Memo from Highlander," April 10, 1961, Highlander Dated Materials, 1961 News Releases, Highlander Center.

¹⁵ "Folk School Appeals Decision," *Knoxville Journal*, August 4, 1961; "Highlander Files Appeal with U.S.," *The Chattanooga Times*, August 4, 1961.

¹⁶ Glen, *Highlander*, 248.

¹⁷ "Purpose of Highlander Research and Education Center as Stated in the Charter of Incorporation, August 28, 1961," McClung Collection; "Highlander to Use Property for Office," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, October 31, 1961; "Highlander School May Start Soon," *Knoxville Journal*, October 9, 1961; "Highlander Coming to Knox," *Knoxville Journal*, October 10, 1961; Glen, *Highlander*, 245, 247.



In the fall of 1961, Highlander relocated its headquarters to a large home on Riverside Drive in Knoxville where it operated throughout the decade. Pictured on the front porch of the house are (left to right) Myles Horton, Bee Moulton, Bernice Robinson, and Candie Carawan, ca. 1960s. Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee.

officials, and segregated merchants. While these groups had divergent views, negotiations led to a degree of social change, namely desegregation, and racial peace. These tenuous negotiations continued throughout the remainder of the 1960s. Highlander's leaders never participated in these discussions. Instead they pushed for racial equality at the national level.

In Knoxville, Highlander conducted programs for local activists and those across the South. Myles Horton remembered "We moved to Knoxville, where we knew it would be safer than out in the country and settled into a big house in the Black community, and we had a lot of support and protection from local labor unions."¹⁸ Once in Knoxville, Highlander resumed a full slate of programs. Staff members rented a second building on East Main across from the Shiloh Presbyterian Church. It housed a number of citizenship schools, during which staff members taught participants, usually poor African Americans, how to register to vote. Highlander also

¹⁸ Myles Horton, Judith Kohl, and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York, 1998), 111.

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¹⁹ Aimee Horton, "Highlander," *September* 1967, 1966.

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held weekly discussions for students from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville College, and nearby Maryville College.¹⁹ These programs made up only a small portion of Highlander's activism. Most of their programs occurred across the South. For example, in the fall of 1966, Highlander staff members led a voter education workshop in Fitzgerald, Georgia, an agricultural stabilization and conservation program in Edwards, Mississippi, and an Appalachian cultural revival workshop in Knoxville.²⁰

For conservative whites in East Tennessee the arrival of Highlander signaled trouble. Rumors of the school's communist teachings traveled fast in the Cold War climate, where fear of change and hypersensitivity to perceived threats to the traditional American way of life dominated. These circumstances made Highlander a threat to the city's safety, unpopular with residents, and fundamentally un-American. It also brought the possibility of inflaming civil rights activism by pushing for faster and more drastic social change.

Highlander's arrival provided a challenge to those involved with civil rights activism and created fear of racially based violence. For elected officials and businessmen, the school threatened to disrupt the city's economic growth and change the dynamics of the local Civil Rights Movement. Any race related violence threatened economic growth, and therefore Highlander's aggressive tactics could not be part of local efforts to improve race relations. Highlander also put local activists in a precarious position. The school had the potential to connect local efforts with the national Civil Rights Movement, but it also had the potential to ruin their relationship with powerful whites. In the end, activists were unwilling to gamble with Highlander and instead put their efforts into other forms of activism, including War on Poverty programs or electoral politics.

Local elected officials took steps to prevent Highlander from operating, such as creating new city ordinances. City law director T. Mack Blackburn, at the request of Mayor John Duncan, produced an emergency ordinance forcing any school opened after November 7 to submit parking plans, numbers of students, teachers, staff, and guests, and a schedule of events for the City Council's approval. The ordinance did not apply to schools already operating. Though the ordinance did not mention Highlander, Blackburn "conceded that it is directed at that school."²¹ The *Knoxville Journal* reported the ordinance "indicates strongly that the intent is to provide the Council with more than one ground for refusing to approve the Highlander location

¹⁹ Aimee Horton, "Highlander Center Serves the South," *Knoxville Flashlight Herald*, September 14, 1963.

²⁰ Highlander Center, Summary of Highlander Center Programs May 1, 1966 to May 1, 1967; 1966 Workshops, Summary, Activities, all at Highlander Center.

²¹ "New Zone Ruling May Bar Highlander," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, November 2, 1961.

on Riverside Drive."²² Local elected officials wanted Highlander to vanish immediately. They did not, however, break the law to force its exit. Staying within the law ensured dealings with Highlander remained orderly. Instead, local officials waited for Highlander's staff to violate the law, but they never did.

The City Council's measure did not stop Highlander from carrying out its programs. The school refused to be intimidated by or work with Knoxville institutions, including the City Council or the *Knoxville Journal*, the city's conservative newspaper. Throughout November 1961, Highlander hosted informal discussions and held workshops across the country. The staff also learned to navigate the inner-workings of Knoxville. For example, anticipating a negative article, the schools banned a *Knoxville Journal* reporter and photographer from attending a talk by Robert Blakely, a journalist and adult education professor at the University of Iowa.²³

The move to Knoxville did little to change the outlook of Highlander's staff and students. Given its mission and history, the school had been unpopular, garnered harassment, and suffered decades of investigations and accusations. Staff members carried on because of their moral responsibility to expand American democracy, often risking harm to do so.

The constant red baiting of the period drew white supremacists to Knoxville. In late 1962, a group of white supremacists founded a chapter of the White Citizens' Council, a segregationist group which originated in Mississippi. The chapter developed strategies to prevent integration in Knoxville and to interfere with the activities at Highlander. Leaders explained that the chapter started because "Knoxville is especially important as the location of the Highlander Folk School. This communist-related organization uses its Knoxville headquarters to promote racial strife throughout the South."²⁴ The White Citizens' Council brought an additional threat and served as a good example of how Highlander disrupted the gradual progress of the Civil Rights Movement in Knoxville.

In June 1963, a group of Highlander volunteers and staff members hiked up Rich Mountain, one of the peaks in the Great Smoky Mountains located about an hour outside of Knoxville, to conduct a program. Robert Gustafson, a graduate student from the University of Vermont, and his wife Mary taught black and white students from across the country about the importance of integration. The Gustafsons, both white, wanted to "provide living and working experience for Negroes and whites from the North and the South." During their trip, the Blount County sheriff received a number of phone calls demanding a stop to the campout. One anonymous

²² Dudley Brewer, "Action Slated Tuesday," *Knoxville Journal*, November 11, 1961.

²³ "Guests' Drop in at Highlander," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, November 25, 1961; "Highlander Bans Two from Journal," *Knoxville Journal*, November 30, 1961.

²⁴ Highlander, "Citizens' Council Organized, Highlander Attacked," October 1962, McClung Collection.

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caller threatened, "There will be nigger blood running in these mountains if something isn't done." These calls prompted the sheriff's office to investigate. Upon reaching the camp site, Sheriff Roger Trotter witnessed, "white and Negro males and females were in bed in the same tent, but not together. . . . One Negro man was sitting on the bed of a white woman . . . others were up laughing and talking."²⁵ Deputies arrested the entire group on charges ranging from disorderly conduct to contributing to the delinquency of minors. Officers immediately questioned Robert Gustafson about Highlander's links to communism. He denied any affiliation but was arrested.²⁶ The next day Myles Horton arranged bond for the group.²⁷

The arrests led to the end of the program. Afterward, the campsite became the target of a suspected arson incident. As group members awaited trial the Blount County sheriff's office received a call about a fire at the Rich Mountain camp site. On arrival, they found the camp site destroyed and gas cans strewn about. After a preliminary glance, Knoxville Fire Marshall Gene Hartsook suspected arson saying: "There were two separate fires, and they definitely were of an incendiary nature."²⁸

The ensuing trial was tense because of allegations of interracial sexual encounters at the campsite. The *Knoxville News Sentinel* reported that "considerable tension and some hostility towards the defendants was apparent in the courtroom. More than 200, including a few Negroes, jammed into the room, lining the walls solidly. Another 100, who could not get in stood in the large hallways on the second floor."²⁹ It was later reported that the Grand Dragon of the Tennessee Ku Klux Klan attended the trial and that those involved in the proceedings, including the judge, received threats.³⁰ Several sheriff deputies testified about the camp raid, with their recollections more inflammatory than first reported. Deputy Bob Kennedy said, "A girl came out of one of the tents, putting her brassiere on" and that he saw a "colored boy and girl on a cot together, and a white boy and colored girl on another cot." He claimed, "most of the girls had on pajamas. Some of the tops were not buttoned." Maryville Policeman James Allen told the court he entered a tent and saw two youths nude from the waist down and

²⁵ "Highlander Head Posts \$4500 Cash in Bond in Blount for Mixed Group," *Knoxville Journal*, June 21, 1963.

²⁶ Dwayne Summar, "Integrated Smokies Work Camp Raided," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 20, 1963. For an example of the misinformation surrounding the incident see, "28 Seized in Raid on CORE Training Camp in Tennessee," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 27, 1963.

²⁷ "Highlander Head Posts \$4500 Cash in Bond in Blount for Mixed Group," *Knoxville Journal*, June 21, 1963.

²⁸ "Biracial Camp in Blount Destroyed," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 24, 1963; "Highlander Fire Seen as Arson," *Knoxville Journal*, June 25, 1963.

²⁹ "2 Judges Hearing Camp Raid Case," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 25, 1963.

³⁰ Highlander, News Release, August 8, 1963, McClung Collection.

one without a top.³¹ The testimony alluded to interracial sexual activities, a major violation of Jim Crow mores.

As Highlander's attorney questioned the camp participants, hostility continued. Repeated interruptions to Mrs. Gustafson's testimony and references to race by state's attorney David Rosier "brought a sharp rebuke from Judge Shields following an outburst by spectators in the emotion laden atmosphere of the courtroom." Rosier also sent a warning to future campers: "we want them to know what will happen to them when they start this kind of thing in Blount County . . . we don't want them here!"³² The insinuation of interracial sex ensured that the Highlander group would be judged on their violation of local customs rather than adherence to the law, and thus they stood little chance of receiving a fair trial.

The trial ended quickly. Seven of the camp attendees were found guilty of their minor offenses and received five or ten dollar fines. The Gustafsons were held until a grand jury could hear their charges for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Myles Horton paid all the fines and posted \$1,000 bond for the Gustafsons.³³

Knoxville Mayor John Duncan relied on the criminal justice system to deal with Highlander. In the middle of the Blount County trial, Walter Gourdin, of the Fountain City Central Baptist Church, wrote to Duncan asking him to close Highlander. While lacking the legal authority to close the school, Duncan replied, "we have certainly been greatly concerned about the operation of this place since it has been in Knoxville." The mayor also suggested that Attorney General Clarence Blackburn should investigate because it might spur "individuals who did have information concerning violations of the law would come forth and divulge this information." He also implied that the FBI already kept a close watch on Highlander.³⁴

Other city officials disagreed with Duncan's call for an investigation. Not all law enforcement officials were eager to close the school, especially if no crimes were being reported. They waited for proof of a crime before taking interest in Highlander. In response to Duncan's call for an investigation, Blackburn told the *Knoxville Journal* that he did not wish to conduct a witch hunt, but he would prosecute the school for legitimate violations of city laws. Discussions of an investigation led to conversations between Horton, Police Chief French Harris, and Sheriff Carl Ford. Harris offered, "We will be glad to investigate any legitimate complaints at the school, but I can find nothing that would indicate any law being violated there. Just because an organization

³¹ "2 Judges Hearing Camp Raid Case," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 25, 1963.

³² "7 Freed of 1 Camp Raid Count," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 26, 1963.

³³ Ralph Griffith, "Directors Bound to Blount Grand Jury; Fines Levied," *Knoxville Journal*, June 27, 1963; "New Attack on Highlander," *The Southern Patriot*, September 1963.

³⁴ "City Lacks Authority to Ban Highlander," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, July 24, 1963; "City Lacks Authority to Padlock Highlander," *Knoxville Journal*, July 25, 1963.



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or person is doing something that doesn't agree with the feelings of certain other persons, doesn't mean that an organization or person is violating a law." Further, many city officials believed that the FBI and the IRS were keeping close watch on Highlander.³⁵ Blackburn's response was supported by a memo from J. Edgar Hoover to the Knoxville branch instructing agents to "discreetly obtain the names of all officers, teachers and students who are currently connected . . . [but] no active investigation may be conducted. You should insure that obtaining these names does not become a matter of public information in your territory."³⁶ To offer proof of their good intentions, Highlander staff members began their own publicity campaign shortly after the Blount County trial.

In August 1963, Highlander launched an educational campaign explaining the school's purpose and programs to help distance itself from the communist label. Highlander staff bought space in newspapers to reprint supportive articles, wrote stories presenting the facts, and encouraged local people to express their support in print.³⁷ Several days later during a speech at First United Presbyterian Church in nearby Oak Ridge, Horton declared the school was "unpopular but not subversive" and promoted brotherhood and democracy. He then separated the school from past leaders James Dombrowski and Don West, who many called unapologetic communists. Horton pointed out that those early leaders had not participated in Highlander activities since the 1930s.³⁸

Horton took his education campaign to other parts of the South. An interview with the *Charleston News and Courier* provided Horton an opportunity to educate the public. He blamed the charges of communism on the school's racially integrated environment. Horton explained that a "chief of police said after talking with me 'the trouble with Horton is he's been an integrationist for 30 years.' I think you know anybody who's an integrationist is immediately suspect."³⁹ In a *Knoxville Flashlight Herald* article, Amiee Horton, daughter of Myles Horton, highlighted the school's voter education programs and their efforts to increase participation in American democracy. She explained that most of Highlander's local programs included discussion groups and lectures by prominent people, including University of Chicago historian Walter Johnson's talk on "The President and the People." Her article aligned Highlander with well-established American institutions, such as Christianity and electoral politics.⁴⁰

³⁵ "Highlander Won't get 'Witch Hunt,'" *Knoxville Journal*, August 2, 1963.

³⁶ Memo from J. Edgar Hoover to SAC Knoxville, July 29, 1963, FBI File 61-7511-270.

³⁷ Highlander, Staff Meeting Minutes, August 22, 1963, Highlander Dated Materials 1963, 1963 Staff Meeting, Highlander Center.

³⁸ "Myles Horton Speaks to OR Presbyterians," *Knoxville Journal*, August 29, 1963.

³⁹ "Director Denies Highlander Communistic," *Charleston News and Courier*, August 21, 1964.

⁴⁰ Amiee Horton, "Highlander Center Serves the South," *Knoxville Flashlight Herald*, September 14, 1963.

The education campaign had few immediate effects. In fact, extremist groups went on the attack. In August 1966, the Ku Klux Klan staged a march in Knoxville. Rather than attempt to stop the march, staff members supported their right to demonstrate. As the Klan arrived, Myles Horton remembered that they invited:

all the Black neighbors and all white friends of Highlander in Knoxville to come to a picnic on the Highlander lawn. . . . We had seven or eight hundred people there, and we had a hundred kids playing right down by the road, and off-duty Black policemen volunteered to come out to see that none of the Klan people got on our land. . . . The chief of police had told them to take a vacation that day because he didn't want them near the parade. They didn't wear their uniform, but they had their guns strapped around them. . . . The Klan was humiliated, because we turned the purpose of their march around and made fun of it instead of letting them intimidate us. They looked very embarrassed as they went by, and although they were supposed to march back again, they took another route to avoid having to deal with that crowd jeering and making fun of them.⁴¹

The demonstration was the most visible manifestation of the Klan's harassment. Since Highlander's move to Knoxville, leaders routinely experienced sinister phone calls, vandalism, break-ins, and threats.⁴² The harassment culminated in early October when two homemade fire bombs burned part of the house on Riverside Drive. As a result, Highlander had its property and automobile insurance cancelled, creating a financial crisis, which would not be resolved for over a year.⁴³

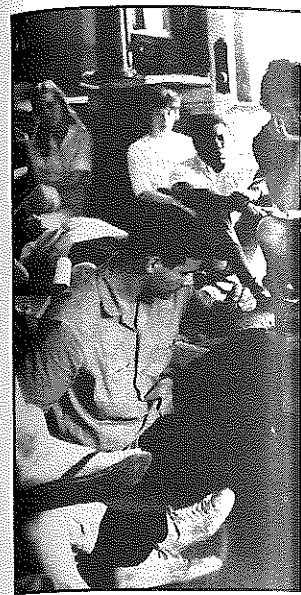
As Highlander recovered from the attack, state politicians geared up for a new investigation. In their view, the school was an immediate threat to the citizens of the state. To rid themselves of this threat, they stretched the law. The process of fighting investigations cost Highlander resources and time, both of which were scarce. Even though the looming investigation never occurred, the discussion tarnished Highlander and reinforced its association with communists. On the other side, the politicians who pushed for investigation cast themselves as anti-communist, a feather in their cap for upcoming elections.

During 1967, members of the state legislature rehashed charges of communist activity at Highlander. In December, State Representative Odell Lane, a Republican from Knoxville, proposed two resolutions to the state

⁴¹ Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 173.

⁴² *Highlander News*, October 1966, McClung Collection.

⁴³ "Highlander, Emergency," October 1966, Highlander Center Dated Materials, 1966 Mailing Lists, Highlander Center.



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Despite outside attacks and charges of harboring communists, leaders of Highlander hosted many training programs and conferences at their Knoxville headquarters including an Appalachian conference in 1965. Photograph by Thorsten Horton, 1965, Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee.

legislature to investigate Highlander. Lane was the nephew of Cas Walker, a City Council member, local business owner, and vocal critic of Highlander. The first resolution, which called for an investigative committee made up of two state senators and three representatives, explained that "it has been reported that the Highlander Research Center of Knox County . . . may be involved in activities subversive to the govern of our State and that it is in interest of the State and its people that a committee of this General Assembly be constituted for the purposes of investigating such reports."⁴⁴ The other resolution mandated that a number of law enforcement agencies, including the state attorney general, investigate Highlander to "cut this cancerous growth from our state and cast it out to die in the richness of Americanism and loyalty." Lane also claimed that Highlander served as a "front for wild parties, a headquarters for plots and dark schemes" as well as communist activity. The House tabled the second resolution, but continued discussions about a possible investigation.⁴⁵

The legislature questioned Lane's demand for an investigation as fellow congressmen worried about the validity of his claims. During the ensuing debate, Representative Thomas Wiseman asked if Highlander violated any

nter Dated Materials, 1966

⁴⁴ House Joint Resolution No. 14, FBI File 61-7511-308.

⁴⁵ "Lane Tries in Vain for Highlander Probe," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, January 17, 1967.

laws. Lane replied, "only what I've heard. . . . Officer Frank Sherwood in Knoxville told me about a sex orgy in a funeral home. Highlander was having one of their workshops, members were drunk, girls and boys falling off the tables and talking in unknown tongues." Representative Harold Bradley asked about the possibility that nothing illegal occurred at Highlander. Lane responded that he only knew what he had been told and that "our mayor [Leonard Rogers] is upholding the school." Bradley retorted, "you are putting us [the Legislature] in a most unusual position if the mayor is upholding the school."⁴⁶

Highlander's officials knew that the vague terms of the resolution could lead to a wide ranging investigation and another shutdown of the school. Highlander board chairman Dr. Charles Gomillion responded to Lane's resolution: "This sort of investigation is primarily for the purpose of making sensational charges which seldom, if ever, are proven. These charges pave the way for continued harassment and intimidation."⁴⁷ Leaders argued that Highlander had already been through several investigations, which revealed no wrongdoing. On March 1, Lane's resolution to investigate Highlander moved to the Judiciary Committee. It traversed the legislative process despite the efforts of Scott Bates, a professor at the University of the South and Highlander board member, who sent letters to representatives. Bates argued that Highlander had been investigated twice by the FBI, was not on the attorney general's list of subversive organizations, and had been granted tax exempt status by the IRS. In addition, the 1959 investigation failed to uncover any communist activity.⁴⁸ Bates failed to halt the process, but he recruited several legislators to his position.

In early April, the proposed resolution drew more criticism. The vague wording of the resolution created disagreement among elected officials. Democratic Representative Tom Wiseman argued "this is a legislative witch hunt. If they've violated any laws, we've got the grand jury process." Democratic Representative Norvell responded that the legislation did not make any charges, it only asked for an investigation. Wiseman retorted, "if you can do it to Highlander Folk School today, you can do it tomorrow to the Presbyterian Church or any other group."⁴⁹ All of the Knoxville legislators except Robert Booker, a Knoxville-based civil rights activist turned politician, supported the resolution. Booker told his colleagues "it is not the function of this Legislature to do the dirty work of local governments. . . . Now Knox County is back again tossing the controversy [over Highlander] into the lap of the Legislature to satisfy the petty prejudices and political chicanery of local

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Highlander Opposed to Proposed Probe," *Knoxville Journal*, January 26, 1967.

⁴⁸ "Highlander Probe Passes 2nd Reading," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, March 1, 1967.

⁴⁹ "Highlander Probe Set for Vote," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, April 7, 1967.

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demagogues." He claimed that Lane pushed for the investigation because of Highlander's history of labor organizing and its connection to a group of activists who protested Cas Walker's grocery stores, in which Lane had a business interest. Booker proposed a motion to delay the vote, but it failed. On April 11, the resolution passed in the House 57 to 17. The resolution cleared the State Senate in late May, and Governor Buford Ellington signed the resolution. Unlike most investigations, the sponsors did not designate funds to pay for the investigation.⁵⁰

The passage of the resolution garnered a number of reactions. Myles Horton told the *UT Daily Beacon* that the pending investigation was based on bad intentions and lies. The people who testified were immune from libel laws and therefore free to make unfounded charges. Horton explained that "the only reason the legislature wants to have another hearing is that ten or twenty years from now, they can come back and take testimony in publicized records against us as a fact." It was also motivated by "the old fashioned idea that everyone you don't like is a communist."⁵¹

Highlander's lawyers, with help from the ACLU filed suit in district court. On June 20, District Court Judge William Miller issued an injunction against the investigation until the matter could be heard in court. Highlander's lawyer Cecil Bransetter argued that the investigation "was not enacted in good faith and is without basis in fact to justify the assumption that plaintiffs' activities were subversive."⁵² During the hearing, the court considered a brief filed by Martin Luther King Jr. He proclaimed Highlander was not subversive and that legislative investigations "result inevitably in inhibiting the free exercise of rights under the Constitution." Judge Miller postponed the investigation until another hearing in August.⁵³

The injunction led to turmoil in the Senate. Elected officials had different ideas about the legality of the resolution. Senator Clayton Elam, a Democrat from Memphis, claimed that the State Attorney General George McCanless refused to fight the injunction. Elam reported, "I personally asked for the attorney general to defend the resolution and we got no cooperation. He [McCanless] said they wouldn't defend the lawsuit because it did not have a chance."⁵⁴ Republican Senator W.E. Michael also encouraged McCanless to act saying: "the overriding question here is whether the sovereign state

⁵⁰ Dana-Ford Thomas "Highlander Probe Gets House OK," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, April 12, 1967; Ralph Griffith, "Funds for Highlander Probe Already in Till," *Knoxville Journal*, May 31, 1967; Minrose Bryan, "Highland Center Investigated," *UT Daily Beacon*, May 24, 1967; Glen, *Highlander*, 257.

⁵¹ Minrose Bryan, "Horton Urges Disregard of Highlander Probes," *UT Daily Beacon*, May 31, 1967.

⁵² "Highlander Probe Enjoined," *Knoxville Journal*, June 21, 1967.

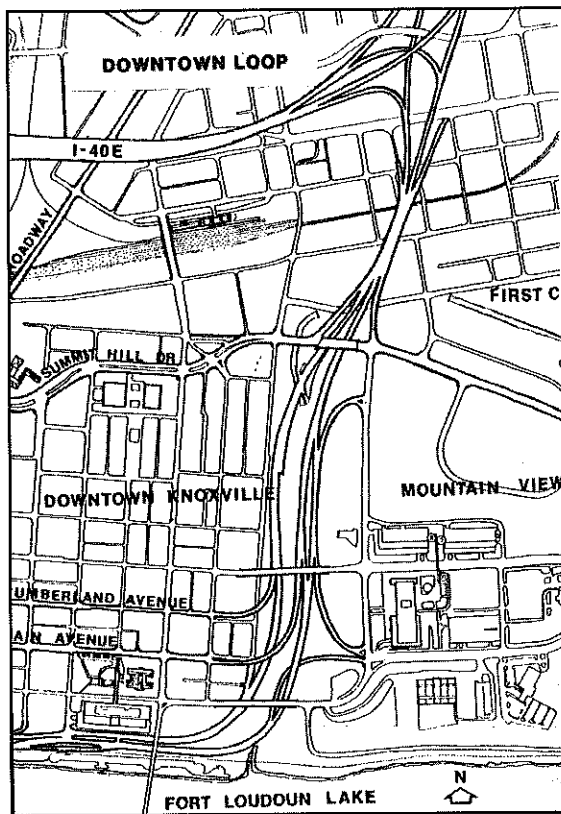
⁵³ "King Denounces Highlander Probe," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 30, 1967; Dana Ford Thomas, "Constitutionality of Highlander Probe is Issue," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, July 2, 1967.

⁵⁴ "State Won't Defend Highlander Probe Suit," *Knoxville News Sentinel*, June 24, 1967.

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In the late 1960s, city leaders launched a significant downtown revitalization effort, which included the development of the Mountain View area. This effort effectively uprooted the Highlander Center from its Knoxville location. Downtown Loop, map by Gary L. Lundy, in William Bruce Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee: A Mountain City in the New South* (Knoxville, 2005), 112.

of Tennessee, through one of its three coordinate branches of government can exercise the same function in Tennessee, under its constitution and the Constitution of the United States that the national congress exercises."⁵⁵

In January 1968, Judge Miller ended any possibility of investigation. The vague wording and threat of a witch hunt overruled any danger that Highlander presented. Miller ruled that "states have a legitimate concern in this area [but] such investigations are fraught with constitutional dangers." Miller based his ruling on the vagueness of the term subversive, which lacked an exact definition and failed to justify the investigation. The ruling broke new legal ground, as well, according to the *New York Times*, as "legal authorities believe it was the first time a federal court had

enjoined a state legislative investigation."⁵⁶ The following month, Lane and State Senator Fred Barry began planning another investigation, this time by looking into welfare corporations chartered by the state of Tennessee.⁵⁷ By 1968, however, Knoxville officials finally found a way to get rid of Highlander.

City officials planned for a massive revitalization effort which put parts of Knoxville just east of downtown, and the location of Highlander, in the crosshairs of urban development. City officials and local businessmen focused on improving the downtown area to attract businesses and industry. New

⁵⁵ "Probe Right Defense Supported," *Knoxville Journal*, June 29, 1967.

⁵⁶ "Tennessee Halted School Inquiry," *New York Times*, January 16, 1968.

⁵⁷ Highlander, Press Release, February 14, 1968, Dated Materials, Highlander Center; "Inquiring Committee Gets Okay," *Knoxville Journal*, April 3, 1968.

companies combined with the loss of jobs in the rest of Tennessee would create room for these new businesses. The city planned projects simultaneously to be the most germane to displaced most of the people in the Riverside Drive area, opening up land for business. The Knoxville Housing Authority, including 'shotgun' houses, maintenance is lacking in the structures."⁶⁰

Urban renewal was a major part of the plan for Knoxville. With the new investigations, in the late 1960s, the staff began to move the school to a new site up its capital fund-raising money would fund the school's Jefferson building, inadequate. The new building, including a library and a new environment.⁶² In January 1968, the project commenced.⁶³

Staff member M. Lane, in the middle of November, asked local supporters to get together that "there will be so many people in that situation and we can deal with it by getting people

⁵⁸ William Bruce Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee: A Mountain City in the New South* (2005), 136-137.

⁵⁹ Knoxville Housing Authority, Honorable John Dunbar, Corporation Papers.

⁶⁰ Knoxville Housing Authority, MGC 1, Community Development.

⁶¹ Conrad Brown to George Brown, "Highlander Center."

⁶² Fundraising Letter, Highlander Center.

⁶³ Staff Meeting Minutes, Minutes, Memos, Files.

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companies combined with the expansion of Oak Ridge and the University of Tennessee would create additional jobs and boost the economy.⁵⁸ To make room for these new businesses, the city undertook several urban renewal projects simultaneously. The Mountain View area urban renewal proved to be the most germane to Highlander. The project began in 1964 and displaced most of the African American community, including residents in the Riverside Drive area where Highlander was located.⁵⁹ In addition to opening up land for businesses, the project sought to eliminate housing that the Knoxville Housing Authority described as "obsolete frame buildings, including 'shotgun' [shacks] and similar type structures. Upkeep and maintenance is lacking due to the futility of trying to upgrade most of the structures."⁶⁰

Urban renewal was the ultimate cause of Highlander's departure from Knoxville. With the Mountain View project on the horizon and threats of new investigations, Horton and others planned to depart the city. In the late 1960s, the staff began an extensive fundraising campaign to support the move of the school to New Market, Tennessee.⁶¹ In 1970, Highlander stepped up its capital fundraising campaign, which aimed to raise \$250,000. The money would fund the costs of the move and construction of new facilities on the school's Jefferson County property. The facilities in Knoxville were inadequate. The New Market site could house a number of buildings, including a library and large dormitory, which created a better learning environment.⁶² In July 1970, construction at the New Market property commenced.⁶³

Staff member Mike Clark planned for the final move to take place in the middle of November. He suggested a Thanksgiving gathering for staff and local supporters to get them comfortable with the new facilities. He worried that "there will be some resistance or uneasiness from some mountain people in that situation and the sooner we can have folks who know that and deal with it by getting people involved fast the sooner that place will be used to

⁵⁸ William Bruce Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee: A Mountain City in the New South* (Knoxville, 2005), 136-137.

⁵⁹ Knoxville Housing Authority, Annual Report for Year Ended March 31, 1964 to the Honorable John Duncan of the City of Knoxville, 16, Knoxville Community Development Corporation Papers, Knox County Archives.

⁶⁰ Knoxville Housing Authority, Knoxville Urban Renewal Final Project Report, Part I, 2, MGC 1, Community Development Papers, Knox County Archives.

⁶¹ Conrad Brown to George Pratt, September 10, 1968, Administrative Records, Highlander Center; "Highlander Center within Renewal Area," *Knoxville Journal*, June 7, 1969.

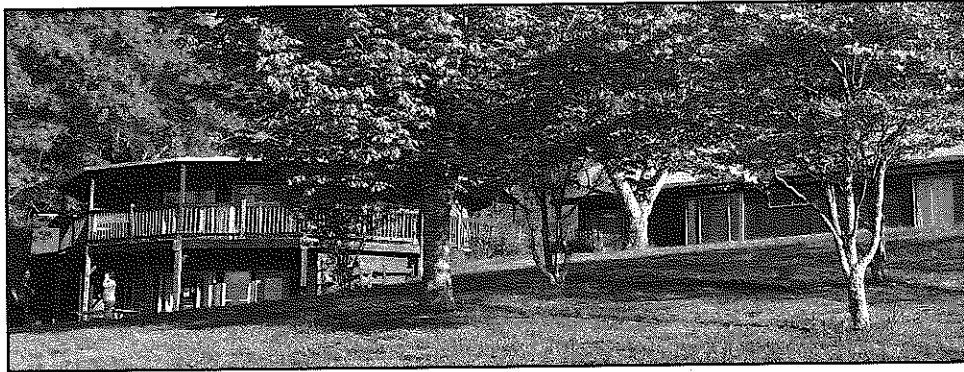
⁶² Fundraising Letter, December 4 1970, Highlander Dated Materials, 1970 New Center, Highlander Center.

⁶³ Staff Meeting Minutes, July 15, 1971, Highlander Dated Materials, 1971 Staff Meeting Minutes, Memos, Field Notes, Correspondences, Highlander Center.

its full potential."⁶⁴ The staff also worried about securing the necessary loans to finance the property. Leaders reported that Hamilton National Bank in Knoxville denied Highlander a loan because "we were too controversial," but Wilson York, of Danville, Virginia, pledged to find a loan by speaking to African American bankers in Tennessee.⁶⁵

The *Knoxville Journal* had the final word on Highlander's move. It reported that "the interracial institution which already has left its controversial mark on at least three Tennessee counties soon will move its headquarters from Knoxville to rural Jefferson County." Fittingly, the second half of the article was dedicated to past controversies and accusations of communism.⁶⁶

The Highlander Research and Education Center's decade in Knoxville provides an example of the Cold War's effects on the Civil Rights Movement. The fear of communism proved pervasive enough to make allegations and rumors about Highlander's ties to communism a fact in the minds of many Knoxvilleans. This made Highlander an outsider in the city's civil rights community and paved the way for a decade of harassment. It also ensured that local activists avoid the school, funneling their efforts into other forms of activism, such as War on Poverty programs. Further, Highlander was unable to gain a foothold in Knoxville because of the power of local politics, community activism, and the deep roots of segregation in the South well after the *Brown v. Board* decisions. Since leaving Knoxville, the Highlander Research and Education Center prospered, and today it offers a wide range of training and educational programs from its headquarters in New Market.



The Highlander Research and Education Center located in rural Jefferson County just outside of New Market sponsors a variety of programs designed to empower grass roots organizations and promote social justice. Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee.

⁶⁴ Memo From Mike Clark to Frank Adams, October 20, 1971, Highlander Dated Materials, 1971 Staff Meeting Minutes, Memos, Field Notes, Correspondences, Highlander Center.

⁶⁵ Staff Meeting, October 8, 1971, Highlander Dated Materials, Highlander Center.

⁶⁶ "Highlander Center Builds in Jefferson," *Knoxville Journal*, November 17, 1971.

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By W. C.

Sampson W. C. of the late eighteenth century, unknown to Tennessee history as an explorer, military leader, the peace, legislative offices in early Davidson County, military operations in office in Knoxville, interacted with many William Donelson.

Most often in his connections to the state westward frontier, but during the tribes. This essay on his contributions to the region that was a separate part of the

Born in La. Sampson Williams and H. Williams was six years old, nothing is known

- W. Calvin Dickins, Technological University of Tennessee