

## Septima Clark, civil rights fighter, knew another kind of discrimination

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By Sam Heys

CHARLESTON, S.C. - In seeking equality for an entire race, the civil rights movement practiced its own kind of discrimination: Men led, women generally followed.

That's why many people have never heard of Septima Clark, quintessential civil rights foot soldier.

The daughter of a slave, Mrs. Clark was a grandmother-like teacher who urged black college students to seize their rights and, despite never learning to drive, scoured the South for men and women who would teach illiterate blacks to read and write so they could vote. She commanded a forum with both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a bridge few could cross.

"She was truly one of the unsung heroes of the movement," said 5th District Rep. John Lewis. Former SNCC chairman and one of the college students exhorted by Mrs. Clark in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lewis understands why Mrs. Clark's name is not found in the histories of the civil rights movement.

"It was dominated by men and, really, pretty chauvinistic," said Lewis. "A great deal of the work was done by women, even in the sit-ins and freedom rides, but the men got projected as the leaders."

Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young believes the citizenship education program Mrs. Clark developed was the foundation of the civil rights movement. "It was an attempt to teach people to read and write well enough to pass literacy tests to register to vote. Out of that evolved a program that I think is as much responsible for transforming the South as anything anybody did," said Young, then administrator of the SCLC's citizenship education program.

"From 1960 to 1970, over 10,000 community leaders were trained," Young said. "We covered every county in South Carolina, almost 90 counties in Georgia, the whole Black Belt of Alabama, Mississippi and northern Louisiana. Those people are now grass-roots elected officials, and they got their introduction to politics through the program Septima developed."

In her 90th year, Mrs. Clark is finally receiving recognition decades overdue. Last weekend, she received a 1987 American Book Award in Philadelphia for her first-person narrative, *Ready From Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*, published in November by Wild Trees Press.

### **Black cultural history**

"Mrs. Clark's book is an outstanding example of not only American history but also of oral history and black cultural history," said Gundar Strads, executive director of the sponsoring

Before Columbus Foundation, a non-profit California organization dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of contemporary American multicultural literature. (The Association of American Publishers also sponsors an American Book Awards competition.)

Mrs. Clark's influence on the civil rights movement was illustrated earlier this month in Santa Monica, Calif., in "Voices of a Sit-In," a play written by Angeline Butler. It details how Mrs. Clark's unwavering devotion to non-violence prevented Ms. Butler and other college students from giving in to the temptation of violence during sit-ins in Nashville, Tenn.

"My father never felt violence was the thing to do," said Mrs. Clark. "He came out of slavery non-violent."

A large portrait of her father, Peter P. Poinsette, hangs in the entrance foyer of Mrs. Clark's century-old home on President Street in Charleston, a couple of blocks from The Citadel and a few hundred feet from picturesque Hampton Park. On knees racked with arthritis, Mrs. Clark moves slowly but steadily through the five-bedroom, two-story house that also contains pictures of The Last Supper and Martin Luther King Jr.

Wherever King went in the 1960s -- Birmingham, Selma, Mississippi -- Mrs. Clark was often there, somewhere in the background, trying to get voters registered. "I wasn't afraid of those people (segregationists). I don't know why, but I wasn't. They came to me at Monteagle, Tenn., and chained my hands behind my back because I was teaching blacks and whites together," she said. "I think my belief in Jesus carried me through all those places I had to go alone."

Her courage came from her mother, Victoria Anderson Poinsette, a free black who grew up in Haiti. (Septima means "sufficient" in Haitian.) "She wasn't afraid of anything," Mrs. Clark said.

Mrs. Clark's father was born a slave, her grandmother having been pregnant with him when she arrived from Africa in 1846 and was bought by rice plantation owner Joel Poinsett, a famous botanist who brought home a flowering shrub from Mexico that became known as the poinsettia.

Mrs. Clark decided to become a teacher after seeing how much education meant to her mother, who helped support the family by taking in laundry. "The rent man came by one month - I think I was 10 -- and told her to take her big children out of school so they could help her pay rent. She said she would never do that," recalled Mrs. Clark.

Unable to afford college after high school -- she later received bachelor's and master's degrees and did advanced study at Atlanta University and Columbia University -- Mrs. Clark began teaching in 1916 on Johns Island, off the coast of Charleston.

Blacks had not been allowed to teach in Charleston's public schools, but Mrs. Clark saw that law changed in 1920. As a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), she helped get 20,000 names on a petition to the state legislature urging the change.

In 1921, Mrs. Clark married sailor Nerie Clark. Their first child died without living a month, and they separated a few days after the second child's birth. Nerie Clark died a year later of kidney failure, and his parents took over the rearing of his son as Mrs. Clark had to return to teaching.

She was teaching in Charleston in 1955 when the South Carolina legislature passed a law forbidding any state or city employee from being a member of the NAACP. Although many of the state's black teachers had denounced their NAACP membership in fear for their jobs, Mrs. Clark and 41 other black teachers did not. They were fired.

### **Highlander Folk School**

South Carolina was one of several Southern states that attempted to destroy the NAACP through legal tactics following the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation. Their efforts were somewhat successful as the NAACP's Southern membership dropped from 128,716 in 1955 to 79,677 in 1957. But many historians believe the attack on the NAACP fostered the emerging civil rights movement by prompting direct confrontation rather than the NAACP's reliance on the courts.

South Carolina's anti-NAACP legislation shoved Mrs. Clark into a position where she would touch the lives of hundreds of civil rights workers throughout the South. She became director of workshops at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tenn., where she had attended workshops the two previous summers.

Located in the mountains northwest of Chattanooga and supported by private donations, mostly from the North, the Highlander Folk School had been integrated since its founding in 1932. Initially focusing on labor problems, it began to work toward the desegregation of the South in the early 1950s. It was widely regarded as a communist training school by white Southerners. (Georgia governor Marvin Griffin used taxpayers' money to print 250,000 leaflets linking King to the school after King spoke at its 25th anniversary. A photo from the leaflet ended up on billboards throughout the South, proclaiming "King Attended Communist Training Center.")

Mrs. Clark was the most visible black person on Highlander's staff and was able to encourage other blacks to attend workshops in an era when blacks were still hesitant about being seen meeting with whites. "She was a very inspiring person," said Lewis, a Nashville student who attended workshops in 1959 and 1960. "She was an eager, energetic teacher who was trying to encourage young people to take a stand."

Mrs. Clark, a teetotaler, was serving as temporary director of Highlander in 1959 when she was arrested and charged with possession of liquor in a dry county. The charge was later dropped.

It was at Highlander that Mrs. Clark first developed the citizenship education program. When the state of Tennessee closed the school in 1961, she went to work with the SCLC.

"Martin wanted the SCLC to have a similar program and said he would like to have Highlander people to run it. And she (Mrs. Clark) wanted to stay with the program," said Highlander founder Myles Horton. "By that time, she had developed tremendously."

In her mid-60s by then, Mrs. Clark spent the next decade riding throughout the South, her most frequent companions being Young and Dorothy Cotton, director of the program. They would travel to recruit teachers to start citizenship schools and then would go to Liberty County

in southeast Georgia once a month to hold a weeklong training session for the 50-60 teachers they had recruited.

Mrs. Clark retired from the SCLC in 1970 and returned to Charleston and was elected to the school board that had fired her in 1956. Having lived through the women's movement, she sees her role in the SCLC differently now. She believes the male leadership had no faith in women, viewing them as sex symbols.

"I don't think they realized I had brains enough to do the things I did," Mrs. Clark said. "When I'd go to an executive staff meeting, Rev. Ralph David Abernathy would always say, 'Dr. King, what is Mrs. Clark doing sitting in this meeting?' And Dr. King would laugh and say, 'She has expanded our program.' But he'd come right back and ask it another time."

Although Mrs. Clark admired King, she writes in her book: "I had a great feeling that Dr. King didn't think much of women. . . . I don't think he thought too much of me."

"The women's movement had not yet happened," said Mrs. Cotton. "We sort of meshed into that role that was delineated for women, which was to really do the hands-on work. The kind of work Mrs. Clark did, and women generally did, was not at a level where the cameras went."

Mrs. Clark does not speak with bitterness, just reality. She calls this the best time of her life, having lived to see the progress she worked years for. "So much change will come," she said, "if you have patience enough."