

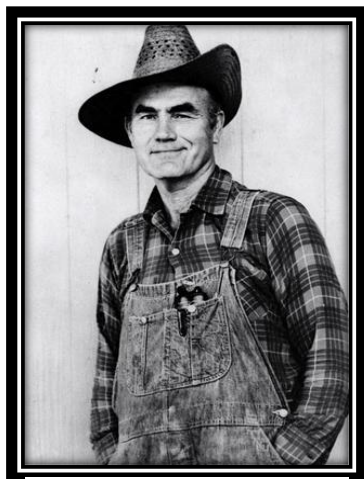
PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

DON WEST

educator, innovator, writer, activist, organizer

"I was pretty well known for believing in organization."

Page | 1



COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Background Information

Born on June 6, 1906; Died on September 29, 1992.

Don West was an activist early on. West was expelled from his first high school for leading protests. West went to Vanderbilt and worked jobs in textile mills and coal mines, where he consistently led protests for workers' rights. At Vanderbilt University, West learned about using education as a tool for activism, which directed him towards education.

West's Resistance

After college, West traveled to Denmark where he learned about folk schools there. Folk schools are adult education centers that focus on skills based education. In 1932, West returned to the US and realized that folk schools could help adults in the US develop literacy skills and learn to become activists. With the help of Myles Horton, the two founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.¹ The Highlander school provided training sessions for organizers and activists of the Civil Rights Movement while helping Black communities develop their literacy. Particularly, West worked to help Black adults pass literacy tests and vote.²

West then went on to create numerous folk schools in Georgia and Kentucky. West also taught public schools, was a superintendent in Georgia, and eventually became faculty at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. In 1946, West released a powerful, popular collection of poetry called *Clods of the Southern Earth*, which focused on democratic, working class political action.³ At the end of his career, West went to West Virginia to establish the Appalachian South Folklife Center, which continues to operate today.

Achievements

West was never fully recognized for his work, however, West was able to educate and influence thousands of activists and citizens through his teachings, schools, and writing. West helped create a curriculum and spaces across the South that influenced the Civil Rights Movement and voices like Martin Luther King Jr. His curriculum focused on uplifting oppressed populations, building relationships, and creating bridges of understanding amongst all communities to fight for social, economic, and political justice in the US.

¹ New York Times News Service. (2018, September 2). CIVIL RIGHTS ADVOCATE, EDUCATOR DON WEST, 86. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-10-04-9203300671-story.html>.

² Faherty, R. (Ed.). (1975, January 22). Oral History Interview with Don West, January 22, 1975. Interview E-0016. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007): Electronic Edition. "I Came by It Naturally": A Southern Leftist Tries to Change His Homeland. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/html_use/E-0016.html.

³ Lorence, J. (2017, August 5). Don West (1906-1992). Retrieved November 12, 2019, from <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/don-west-1906-1992>.

