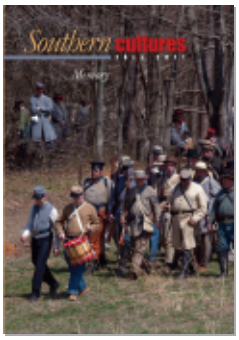
Mountain Feminist: Helen Matthews Lewis, Appalachian Studies, and the Long Women's Movement



Jessica Wilkerson, David P. Cline

Southern Cultures, Volume 17, Number 3, Fall 2011, pp. 48-65 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2011.0044*

Voices from the Southern Oral History Program

Mountain Feminist

Helen Matthews Lewis, Appalachian Studies, and the Long Women's Movement

FROM AN INTERVIEW BY JESSICA WILKERSON

COMPILED AND INTRODUCED BY JESSICA WILKERSON AND DAVID P. CLINE

This 1966 photograph of Helen Matthews Lewis outside of a mine entrance embodies her life; it is a portrait of the scholar as coal miner, the worker as scholar, and the academic as activist. Photograph courtesy of Helen Matthews Lewis.

A 1966 photograph of the Appalachian historian and activist Helen Matthews Lewis captures much about a woman who has been studying, writing about, and fighting for the people of Appalachia for three-quarters of a century. In the photo, Lewis sits outside of a mine entrance, hair emerging beneath a hard hat, with a big smile and coal-smeared cheeks.[1] It is the portrait of the scholar as coal miner, the worker as scholar, the academic as activist. The image of Lewis in the garb of a coal miner—hard hat, head lamp, and rolled up sleeves—anticipates the 1970s movement of Appalachian women into the male-dominated coal industry following Title VII legislation, while also recalling Lewis's own history as a trailblazer for women in the academy.

Helen Lewis has long been a towering figure in Appalachian Studies, designing the first academic programs and developing an interpretation of Appalachia as an "internal colony" of the United States, a model that influenced a generation of Appalachian scholars and activists.[2] She describes herself as part of the "long movement for women's rights." Her experiences as a child in rural Georgia, her education at a progressive women's college, and her tireless efforts working for justice in Appalachia and the South are emblematic of how a generation of southern women activists who came of age in the 1940s confronted racial, gender, and class discrimination in their native region.

While Lewis's scholarship has been profoundly influential, her personal story is less known. As she recounts it, early encounters with a range of social movement activities informed her work. Lewis's activist career began with the YWCA as an undergraduate at the Georgia State College for Women in the 1940s, where she participated in interracial organizing. As she entered graduate school and began teaching anthropology and sociology in the 1950s, she navigated an academic system that discriminated against her because she was a woman and the wife of an academic. After she left academia, she became an important ally and supporter of grassroots women's activism in Appalachia. Although women's equality was not always at the forefront of her activism, Lewis's struggle for gender equality and her awareness of how it relates to class and race equality weave throughout her narrative.

She was born in Jackson County, Georgia, in 1924. Her mother was a homemaker and dental assistant, and her father was a rural mail carrier who had high hopes for his two daughters, Helen and JoAnn. Despite her loving and secure family, Lewis witnessed the injustice of the Jim Crow racial caste system. She tells a story of meeting a black schoolteacher who was on her father's mail route and whom her father held in high regard. The teacher wrote her name on a card in beautiful calligraphy, and she speaks of cherishing that card and keeping it for years. When she was seven or eight years old, the same man came to her home to see her father. "Mr. Rakestraw is at the door," young Helen announced to her mother, who was quilting with other white women. "The women laughed because

you weren't supposed to call a black man 'Mister,'" Lewis explained. "I was so shamed by that . . . As a child, to be laughed at is a terrible thing."[3]

When Lewis was ten years old, she and her family moved to Forsyth County, Georgia, where whites had forced nearly all black people out of the county in 1912. Her father, who did not agree with the violent treatment of African Americans, used his position as a mail carrier to warn those who did come into town that Forsyth County was not a safe place for them. Lewis says her father provided a foundation of fairness and caring that later influenced her interracial activism during her college years and her work long afterward. Yet, the story about Mr. Rakestraw captures the social contradictions that she faced as a young woman: her mother allowed her to play with African American children—and behaved kindly toward African Americans—but did not question local customs; her father actively tried to protect African Americans from dangerous encounters in the county.

After graduating high school, Lewis headed to Bessie Tift College, a small Baptist women's school. There she had her first "conversion experience"—the moment when she began to think more critically about race relations in the South. Clarence Jordan, the white preacher who founded Koinonia Farm as an intentionally interracial, religious community in Americus, Georgia, exposed her to a liberal Protestant Social Gospel message: justice and equality should be realized in the here and now. After completing a year at Bessie Tift and taking a year off to work, Lewis entered Georgia State College for Women (GSCW). In the early 1940s, the YWCA sponsored Lewis and a friend as they attended an interracial program in which students worked together on industrial projects at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. There she lived in integrated cooperative housing with students from across the country. Not only did Lewis have opportunities to travel and meet people from different regions, the Campus Y exposed her to some of the most progressive public figures of her day, including the Presbyterian minister Charles Jones, a leader in the progressive Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, and Lucy Randolph Mason, an organizer for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). While these people and experiences helped her envision a more just society, she also came face-to-face with the repressive politics of Georgia segregationists. She relates these stories here.

In 1946, Georgia became the first state to allow eighteen-year-olds to vote, and Lewis joined the GSCW League of Women Voters and led a campaign to register young voters. After graduation in 1946, she went to graduate school at Duke University, and there she met Judd Lewis, whom she would soon marry. He wanted to attend the University of Virginia for his PhD in philosophy, so she went with him and completed her MA in sociology in 1949. Her thesis, "The Woman Movement and the Negro Movement: Parallel Struggles for Rights," draws historical

Lewis's mother allowed her to play with African American children—and behaved kindly toward African Americans—but did not question local customs; her father actively tried to protect African Americans from dangerous encounters in the county. Photograph courtesy of Helen Matthews Lewis (here) with her sister Jo Ann (to her right) and parents.

comparisons between the U.S. suffragist movement and the early stirrings of the African American Civil Rights struggle.

In 1955 Helen and Judd both took jobs at the newly opened Clinch Valley College in Wise, Virginia. Marriage policies at the college restricted wives of male faculty from holding full-time positions; thus, Helen taught sociology part-time and worked part-time as a librarian. Not until the late 1960s did she receive a full-time faculty position in sociology and anthropology at Clinch Valley. In 1970, she received her PhD in sociology from the University of Kentucky, and her dissertation, "Occupational Roles and Family Roles: A Study of Coal-Mining Families in Southern Appalachia," again showed her ongoing exploration of identity, in this case regional and gender identities among coal field communities.

While the Civil Rights Movement was taking off in much of the South in the 1960s, Lewis lived and worked in rural, largely white communities tackling the oppressive policies of the coal companies that dominated politics in the coalfields of Appalachia. Yet, her activism in Appalachia was not isolated from the insurgent Civil Rights Movement; her work demonstrated similar concerns about equality,

economic justice, authenticity, identity, and democratic government as the organizers for freedom in the Deep South. Indeed, Lewis's academic work forged a connection between her region and the Civil Rights Movement; the Appalachian Studies program she developed at Clinch Valley in the late 1960s influenced a cadre of activists, including grassroots leaders and white Civil Rights activists who migrated to the mountains to build alliances with rural whites. Together, they forged a progressive movement in Appalachia in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Lewis's proposal for the Appalachian Studies program reveals her approach to life in Appalachia and to her academic study of the region: "The education process must provide a true understanding of the history and exploitation of the area and a commitment to creative change. Education must be directed to changing the system by educating change agents and the resources of the colleges must be used constructively to attack real problems in the area . . ."[4] Her philosophy of education embodies a commitment to creative change, and it was likely influenced by the citizenship schools that spread throughout African American communities in the South.

After a long struggle with university gender policies and a series of confrontations with powerful coal corporations in the local government and college, Lewis left formal academia in 1976 and continued her commitment to democratic education as a staff member at the Highlander Research and Education Center. This adult education center in New Market, Tennessee, fosters grassroots and social-justice organizing, and sociologist Aldon Morris characterized it as one of the Civil Rights "movement halfway houses" that inspired and nurtured participants. While at Highlander, Lewis showed special interest in local women's involvement in community activism and was keenly aware of how poverty and sexism intertwine in Appalachian communities. Drawing on her experience with women's cooperatives and economic education programs, she co-edited the handbook "Picking Up the Pieces: Women In and Out of Work in the Rural South."[5] Her two most recent books, *It Comes From the People: Community Development and Local Theology* (co-authored with Mary Ann Hinsdale and S. Maxine Waller) and *Mountain Sisters: From Convent to Community in Appalachia* (co-authored with Monica Appleby) evidence the pervasive Social Gospel discourse, although with a distinct Appalachian flavor that still permeates much of the progressive social activity in the region.

Lewis is currently working on a book manuscript about the progressive activities of the Campus Y in the South. She herself is also the subject of a forthcoming academic work, *Helen Matthews Lewis: Living Social Justice in Appalachia* (University of Kentucky Press), a collection of articles, interviews, and abstracts from 1942 to the present, honoring the career and vision of this pioneering spirit.

She sat down for this interview last year as part of the Southern Oral History Program's "Women's Movement Project," a component of the SOHP's research on

the "Long Civil Rights Movement." What follows is Helen Matthews Lewis, in her own words.

GROWING UP IN CUMMING, GEORGIA

When I moved to Forsyth County [at the age of ten, I] discovered that this was a county with no African Americans in the whole county. Some ten or fifteen years before, [local whites] had accused this black [man] of raping a woman—one of those episodes—and they ran every black out of the county, took over their farms and whatever they had. I was told stories about how they hung blacks around the courthouse. I know they at least lynched the guy that they were accusing of this, and I don't know how many others. Some people maybe have done some research on it, but the stories were told. I could just see bodies hanging all around the courthouse, in my mind as to what happened. So it was . . . horror. And then blacks coming in through the town on trucks to deliver stuff to the stores were afraid to get out of the truck. They would hide in the back. I found this to be just horrifying, but somehow I never quite got it connected with doing anything about it or thinking about it in that way.

My father came home from the mail route one day, and he said he saw this old black man bicycling through town and he was on his way to Gainesville. And he said, "I'm worried he's got to go through Chestatee." The young Chestatee boys were the ones that started the riot—the rowdy boys of Chestatee. They threw all the blacks out. He said, "He'll never make it to Gainesville." So he gets in his car. "I'm going to go find him." He goes and picks him up and takes him to Gainesville and comes back. So, there was that little bit of episode.

It was a real backwoods little town at that time. It was our first move to what I call "the mountains." Now, Appalachia legally includes Jackson County, but we were more like hill country. The hillbillies lived up here, you know, more in the Blue Ridge area. When we got to Cumming there was a lot more country or mountain culture there, even though it's just forty miles from Atlanta. In my classes [in the fifth grade] very few people had even been to Atlanta, and [our teachers] took us on a field trip. We'd go to the cyclorama and the zoo and see the city.

So it was quite a real country town. I mean, there were not even sidewalks. One year they did sidewalks and all the kids in town got skates—and it was not safe for anybody to walk on the sidewalks because we were all skating. We even skated in the middle of the highway, all the way up toward Dawsonville. Dawsonville was the moonshine capital of Georgia at that time, and all of these people, who became race car drivers, were running liquor every night down the only paved highway in north Georgia at that time, the road between Atlanta and Dahlonega, which came through Cumming. And the state police would be chasing these rum

Lewis's activism in Appalachia was not isolated from the insurgent Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, Lewis's academic work forged a connection between her region and the Civil Rights Movement. Harlem demonstrators in support of the Selma's Civil Rights marchers, 1965, photographed by Stanley Wolfson, courtesy of the New York World-Telegram *and the* Sun Newspaper *Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress.*

runners every night, so that was our sport, to say, "Oh, there goes Parker C.," or "There goes—." We knew them all by name, the drivers of the cars.

WHO IS THE GOOD SAMARITAN?: HEARING CLARENCE JORDAN SPEAK AT BESSIE TIFT COLLEGE'S CHAPEL AND HAVING A "CONVERSION EXPERIENCE"

When I was in high school—those experiences in Forsyth County—there was a sense of horror, but I had not connected it with religion or anything.

Chapel was required [at Bessie Tift]. I'm sitting in chapel, paying no atten-

tion, and this young man [Clarence Jordan], who had just graduated from Southern Seminary, told how he had bought this farm in south Georgia and was going to have an integrated communal farm with blacks and whites working together. [Jordan] had re-written all the gospels, the *Cotton Patch Gospel*, which he had written as if they were talking about today. He told the story of the Good Samaritan, in which the Good Samaritan is a black man, and he tells it in a southern dialect, almost, is the way he talked. He says, here's this preacher running down the road in his Model A Ford, getting ready to go to church and singing "Brighten the Corner Where You Are"—he acts it out—and he says, "Oh, look at that poor fellow over there. Well, I don't have time; I've got to get there and open up the church and see how many people I can get saved today." And the Good Samaritan ends up being this old black man in a wagon who treats [cares for] the guy, and then at the end it's like, *who is the Good Samaritan?*

It was like a flash of light or something. I call it a conversion experience. I said, "My God, that's what religion's all about. That's what it's all about." And so it was from then on that I became an activist.

1942–1946: THE GEORGIA STATE COLLEGE FOR WOMEN CAMPUS YWCA AND INTERRACIAL ORGANIZING

After a year back at home I went to Georgia State College for Women, and there I became involved both with the Baptist Student Union and with the YWCA. The student YWCA was at that time pushing for integration—that was the mission of the student Y—and they would take you to integrated meetings and integrated conferences. They would have these conferences at Paine College, the black college. So I got involved in going to integrated meetings. I spent a weekend at Atlanta University, living in a dormitory with black students, and had some really interesting experiences, changing all my views. I didn't have the real problem that other students did whose parents were real racists, because my father, even though he was not an activist, was this gentle, caring person, and they had no objections to my doing these things.

One summer another student and I did "Students-in-Industry" [a YWCA program to expose students to wage work, politics, and social life in urban centers] at Hartford Theological Seminary. We rode a Greyhound bus all the way from Atlanta to Hartford, Connecticut; it took three days to do it in those days. This was of course during the war and there were lots of problems with transportation and a lot of servicemen on the bus, and two nights you were on the bus. We all had to find jobs, and it was a great group. It was about eighteen of us. There was one black student and one Japanese student, American Japanese, but he'd been in one of the concentration camps until that summer and then been released to go to MIT. We lived in this co-op house together and cooked together. The black student was

Helen Matthews Lewis: "I'm part of the long women's rights movement, I'd say. I remember when I was writing my thesis. I wanted to live in the 1830s and to have been at Seneca Falls. I really identified with all of those early abolitionist women." Abolitionist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1880, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

from Harvard and came from a very upper-class family who did not want him to participate, because there were going to be these two young girls from the South there, who they thought would mistreat their son. As it turned out he became one of our very best friends, and he and the Japanese guy and my friend and I hung out together the whole time and did all sorts of things together.

The Y at that time was a very important part of the whole college. The woman who was the Y secretary was on the staff, and they were given the job of doing the religious emphasis week—all the speakers for chapel—so they brought in all of these radical speakers, mostly from labor unions, and ministers who were really preaching social gospel, which was pretty radical. Then people like Clarence Jordan came, and he would do workshops. Frank McAllister from the CIO would come. Lucy Randolph Mason, who was this wonderful woman organizer, labor organizer—she would come speak. Everybody was part of the Y. Now later the schools got rid of the YWCA because it was so radical. It was really radicalizing students. Not everybody attended these things, but I just happened to be one of the ones that did. And the YWCA secretary had an apartment, a sort of open place,

where we would go for breakfast and pancakes and discussion. And every speaker we had—afterwards, we would have meetings with them and ask questions and sit around on the floor.

BEING CHARGED WITH DISORDERLY CONDUCT AFTER ORGANIZING AND ATTENDING AN INTERRACIAL MEETING IN 1948

In Atlanta, on the Emory campus, I take a job for the summer working with the YWCA. I am in the office, and we have this group of seminarians who come down to do service learning jobs. They're staying out at the black college, because there's one black student in the group. The Fellowship of Reconciliation [an international pacifist organization founded in 1914] was sponsoring them, and they asked the Y if we would have a little reception for them. I said, okay, good, and I'll invite all these YWCA girls who are here for the summer. Some of them have just graduated—and they've got jobs—and one of them was working with the Girl Scouts and stuff. We had this reception for this group, and another black couple comes with them. And the police raid us and arrest us for disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace.

They didn't take us to jail. They pulled us out individually, and the policeman said to me, "What would your daddy think if he saw you dancing with a nigger?" We had been doing this little play party game, something like the Virginia reel [a folk dance] or something like that. Then they gave us all a ticket, and then we were to go to court. Well, the day we were to go to court the Klan marched against us, and [segregationist Georgia governor] Herman Talmadge was running this big newspaper, the *Statesman*, at that time. He jumped on the case, so we were getting too much publicity. Finally, we had a lawyer, James Mackay from Emory, and he got the disturbance of the peace, disorderly conduct, dismissed. Oh, it made the front pages of the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal* and listed everybody's name and where they lived. Girls lost their housing. Some of them lost their jobs. Their families went into hysterics because [the newspapers] said "arrested at mixed dance."

That was another experience which was important in my life.

THE DECISION TO MARRY, FEMINISM, AND ATTENDING THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

[Getting married] was considered the thing to do.

I'm working in the governor's office. [My boyfriend Judd Lewis was] at Emory, and he would visit every weekend. Of course, my family liked him. My sister thought it was great. All my girlfriends thought it was wonderful, and they

"There were really, really strong women in the '30s. There was Eleanor Roosevelt. There was Frances Perkins [U.S. Secretary of Labor]; there were role models. There were women that were very, very strong union organizers. Lucy Randolph Mason." Eleanor Roosevelt, talking with a machinist during her goodwill tour of Great Britain, 1942, photographed by Toni Frissell, courtesy of the Collections of the Library of Congress.

planned what they would be [in our wedding]. And he does this really awful thing at a gathering, a party: he comes up with this ring and proposes—I mean makes a real definite proposal. He'd been talking about it, and I just kept saying, "no, no, no." I was just caught. I was really caught, and being a nice southern girl you don't talk back that much, you know. I mean, now I think, *Why did I do that?*

Anyway, it was not bad. It was okay. But he wanted to go to the University of Virginia; that was the philosophy department. I did not want to go to the University of Virginia, [but] we had worked up this idea of this perfect partnership, you know. We would have this partnership marriage, and we would find a place where

we could both teach. And so I applied to go to the University of Virginia. Floyd Nelson House, who had come out of the Chicago School, was there, and he wrote back and said, "Really, you ought to go some other place. We don't have that good a program. But if you want to come we'll give you a Stokes Fellowship, and you will work on something that will be related to race relations."

I thought, "Okay, that doesn't sound too bad."

He said, "We don't give a PhD. We just give a master's," so maybe we could work out something and "you could go somewhere else."

He was not real encouraging. I mean, he said we'd love to have you, *but*.

So anyway, I end up in that department, and [House] was quite a good social theorist. Also, I had this Stokes Fellowship, and I was to do something related to race. I had read [Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*]. It had just come out, and in the back was a little appendix that talked about the comparison between women and blacks or slavery and how similar it was. So I decided that that was what I would do my thesis on: the women's movement. It's called "The Woman Movement and the Negro Movement: Parallel Struggles for Rights." It was published [in 1949] in a little Phelps Stokes Fellowship paper, a booklet.

In some sense this was in-between the suffragist movement [and the second-wave feminist movement], and a lot of my teachers at GSCW came out of that first [campaign for] women to vote, a lot of women who were old suffragettes. They pushed us really hard on the importance of a women's college—that women can do anything. If you'd been at the University of Georgia, they'd say, you'd be secretary; here, you can be president. There, you'd be a cheerleader; here, you play the sport. I mean, they pushed us to be feminists.

I was already an outspoken student at that point, but not quite as strong in terms of marriage. It still was the thing you did—and it was before the Pill, so if your hormones are raging you got to get married. There wasn't any such thing as trial marriages or living with somebody or anything like that. Anyway, we had a good time at the University of Virginia. It was not that bad.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

I'm part of the long women's rights movement, I'd say. I remember when I was writing my thesis. I wanted to live in the 1830s and to have been at Seneca Falls. I really identified with all of those early abolitionist women. I just felt like that was where I should have been—that's who I was—but I was in the 1940s and '50s by then. So when the new women's movement began, I fell right in. I think that I was one of those hanger-on-ers that kept something going, at least in myself, during the period when there wasn't much of a movement. But I don't think it ever completely disappeared. You can talk about the first wave, second wave,

"While we're up there [in New York City], the Young Lords had taken over this church, and they were like the Black Panthers, and they said, 'Well, you know we probably will be busted by the police pretty soon and probably killed. Anybody that tries to do any change gets killed.' And of course there was Martin Luther King, the Kennedys—all that had happened by then." Robert Kennedy, then New York's senator, and Donald F. Benjamin, of the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council, surrounded by children, 1966, photographed by Dick DeMarsico, courtesy of the New York World-Telegram *and the* Sun Newspaper *Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress.*

but [the Y and probably other women's organizations] kept the movement going, maybe even some missionary societies. I don't know. I know [you wouldn't think] some of those literary clubs were progressive at all, but I bet you some of those tea parties had also led to some solidarity of women. They were like women's support groups, if nothing else. And those 4-H Clubs and home demonstration clubs. My mother was part of a home demonstration club back in the '20s and '30s, and she even went to a conference at the University of Georgia and left my sister and me just with my father. That was really weird that she would do that, you know.

But I think those home demonstration clubs were largely related [to a women's movement]. Unfortunately, they got taken over by the electric power companies that were selling electric stoves and modernizing cooking and selling stuff. I think we need to really re-look at what was happening to women in that period, between what you would call the real suffrage movement and the vote, and when Betty Friedan and those people came forth. I think that we missed giving credit to some of those things that were happening. The YWCA was very deliberately working to promote women's empowerment and things, but these others—probably, that wasn't their mission. But I think they were filling a role that we've not understood fully.

There were really, really strong women in the '30s. There was Eleanor Roosevelt. There was Frances Perkins [U.S. Secretary of Labor, 1933–1945]; there were role models. There were women that were very, very strong union organizers. Lucy Randolph Mason. There were all sorts of people at that period of time, and there was this group of women who helped organize and get Highlander going and who were union organizers.

But there was this real macho thing, and I guess your style of confrontation was—I don't know if you'd call it more gentle or more subversive. I mean, you learned how to get around it without putting up your dukes. You catered to certain things, but then you just did what needed to be done—and maybe you had to pretend somebody else thought it up. Women have done that all their lives. If you judge the degree of authority that women [had to assume] against [their actual authority]—where you didn't have that much in terms of legal position—[then] you worked in other ways. You could still make a difference.

THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN FACULTY DURING THE 1950S AND '60S, AND A SUMMER IN BERKELEY

I was hired both to teach sociology and be librarian [at Clinch Valley College], a double job, but they would not hire me full-time. I was part-time temporary. I was not covered by any of the perks, because I was married—and the University of Virginia at that time would not employ both a husband and a wife. What they did was exploit the wives by having them work but not be "full-time employees,"

although I was working full-time. I don't know how they were able to do that. But anyway I started pushing. I fought with the University of Virginia for fifteen years.

So I decided to go back [to school], and I applied and got a National Science Foundation grant to go for the summer to Berkeley. I get on a train in West Virginia and ride all the way to California for the summer for this particular workshop for people who taught anthropology but didn't have degrees in anthropology. It was to be a degree program where you could get your PhD, but you had to go three summers and go back and do certain things within your class, like how you teach anthropology and what it was all about. Anyway, I had this great summer in Berkeley the year before the free-speech movement, and every movement, every problem, issue, was being talked about and had booths all over the campus. It was the most exciting, thrilling experience to be in Berkeley at that particular time.

I come back all ready to really do this, and the librarian is gone from the college. I had been the librarian for four years; then they had finally gotten a librarian, and I was just teaching. I come back to teach anthropology, and I have to be librarian again because their librarian is gone—and they promise me that they're going to give me a real job. Well, they didn't.

It wasn't easy. I mean, we [students from women's colleges] felt so powerful, and then we get out and we're in this world, just fighting those battles for employment. I mean, the idea that [Clinch Valley] wouldn't employ me—I had as good an education as anybody teaching there, and I had published a lot more than anybody else after a few years, *and* my resume was better than theirs. I still couldn't be hired. I ran across those barriers and that just infuriated me, because I had expected [to succeed].

TAKING APPALACHIAN STUDIES STUDENTS ON A TRIP TO NEW YORK IN 1969

I had people like Harry Caudill [Appalachian historian and author of *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*] and all these people coming to speak and students doing all these things, and we ended up going to hear [Joseph Yablonski, labor activist and unsuccessful candidate for presidency of the United Mine Workers Association]. I taught an urban sociology course. We had to deal with urban problems, and so we go to New York and stay and study the Puerto Rican immigration to New York.

While we're up there, the Young Lords had taken over this church, and they were like the Black Panthers. So they let us into the church they were taking over before the police had busted them, and they said, "Well, you know we probably will be busted by the police pretty soon and probably killed. Anybody that tries to do any change gets killed." And of course there was Martin Luther King, the

Kennedys—all that had happened by then. We get up to Times Square and go into this record shop, and they're playing "Oh Death," which is a Dock Boggs piece, and Dock [an Appalachian songwriter and banjo player] is one of our neighbors. He had been in my classes some and been interviewed by the class about his coalmining and his coalmining songs. Then we walk out and [hear] the news that Yablonski and his wife and daughter had been killed.

It looked like the assassins probably had come from our district, because it was a big Boyle district. [W. A. "Tony" Boyle was the president of the UMWA, Yablonski's opponent in the presidential race, and later found to have hired the gunmen who killed Yablonski.] Because I had taken students up to hear Yablonski speak—I mean, the students and I sat up all night long in the Y where we were staying, talking about it. If you had planned any educational experience to shock your students you couldn't have done better. It was just incredible that all those things happened right there. It affected all the students—every one of them.

THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL, THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION

I had heard about Highlander even when I was in college but had never been part of it, and, being in Appalachia during the really hot times of the Civil Rights Movement, we were too busy fighting the coal companies.[6] I wasn't at Selma, I didn't walk across that bridge, I didn't go for the Mississippi Summer, I was not involved. My Civil Rights stuff was early. It was in the '40s, when people don't know that there was anything going on. So I was [at Highlander] for the Appalachian period and on into the times when we were trying to pull together the Civil Rights South people and the Appalachian people—and that was the last phase—and then integrating in the new immigrants and the Spanish[-language] immigrants.

[Longtime southern activist Sue Thrasher] and I went up to [the University of Massachusetts at Amherst] and took that radical economics course that they have there in the summer. We checked out every program in the country, got all the syllabi together, and all of them didn't really fit us. The Amherst thing was great for people who already had an economics major or were college educated, but it was not for ordinary country people with a seventh-grade education, even high school education. So we decided to go back to our form of education and see what we could do in terms of economic education based on [the] Highlander style of people learning from each other.

People are storytellers. People like to tell stories, so we developed a curriculum which could be used in some of these outreach programs. One of the things that I and other people were doing was develop little education programs, like in Dungannon, Virginia. We developed a GED program, and then we talked Mountain Empire Community College into offering some college courses there. They

"There are certain things you have to do. You're going to get in trouble, but that's all right. [Highlander's co-founder] Myles Horton always said, 'You're better known by the enemies you make.'" Photograph courtesy of Helen Matthews Lewis (center).

agreed to try out our little program, a class that we would have on learning your economic history. So we taught a class there, and [labor activist and historian] John Gaventa and I taught one at [the community center at Jellico, Tennessee] later.

It all grew out of our developing this thing where we start with oral histories, and what we start with is *what did your grandparents do to make a living?* And *what did your parents do to make a living?* And *what do you do to make a living, and what does your generation make a living doing?* And then we analyzed the history of the economy of this community and how it has changed, and you come up with actually a history of the economic changes in the United States, even with a small group of people. Even in these isolated places people have migrated out to get jobs, migrated in to get jobs, been involved in all the various changes that have occurred in the economy. Then we get to the point of *What is our economy today? Where does the money come from? Who has the money?*

WHAT INSPIRED HER ACTIVISM

I think it had to do with principles of equality and fairness and justice, and where I got all of that. Part of it was through religion. Part of it was through my father, who was a very just, caring person, and my mother, who was a really hard-working, loving person. And things I read. I read about powerful women, strong women. I was a great admirer of Eleanor Roosevelt.

I felt I had to do it. There are certain things you have to do. You're going to get in trouble, but that's all right. [Highlander's co-founder] Myles Horton always said, "You're better known by the enemies you make."

NOTES

1. The photograph was taken in 1966 while Lewis was doing research on coal mining safety for the Bureau of Mines. The smears of coal dust on her cheeks were applied after her first trip below ground as part of an initiation by local miners, mimicking the initiation male miners endured of being rolled in coal dust. Lewis was one of very few women allowed in a mine during this period. Prior to the lawsuits of the 1970s that opened up the industry, women were banned from entering mines because this was considered to bring bad luck. The custom was so rigidly enforced that during her work for the Bureau of Mines she was forced to employ male researchers to interview men in the mines, while she interviewed women and families above ground.

2. See Helen M. Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Don Askins, eds., *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978).

3. Patricia Beaver, "An Interview with Helen Matthews Lewis," *Appalachian Journal* 15 (Spring 1988): 238–65.

4. "Appalachian Studies Programs: The General Philosophy Syllabus and Reading Lists," Research and Activism Series, Curriculum Subseries, Folder 2, Academic Papers, 1972–1986, Box 1, Helen Lewis Matthews Papers, Collection 103A, W. L. Eury Appalachian Collection, Appalachian State University.

5. Helen M. Lewis, Linda Selfridge, Juliet Merrifield, Sue Thrasher, Lillie Perry, and Carol Honeycutt, eds., "Picking Up the Pieces: Women In and Out of Work in the Rural South," (New Market, TN: Highlander Research and Education Center, 1986).

6. For more on the Highlander Center, see "I Train the People to Do Their Own Talking: Septima Clark and Women in the Civil Rights Movement," edited by Katherine Mellen Charron and David P. Cline, *Southern Cultures* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 31–52.