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No One Knows Their Names: The Women of the Southern Regional Council and the South Carolina Council on Human Relations

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The structure of many civil rights organizations suggests that men dominated the Movement. "Men lead, women organize" was the popular notion of the time. However, women were far from being a minority, except in prominent, highly publicized positions of leadership. They showed up more often to mass meetings and took a very active participatory role in ground-level activism like sit-ins and voter registration. Many look to women's pre-existing and extensive social and kinship networks as well as their strong religious beliefs for an explanation. (1) This presents an interesting juxtaposition as most churches, especially traditional Southern ones, are male-centered and limit the participation of women, especially at the higher levels of organization. However, women's participation was expected to include matters of community, family, and education, ideals central to the civil rights movement. (2) Essentially, though contrary to what Executive Board rosters show, women played a huge role in the day-to-day existence of the civil rights movement and filled the trenches with their family and friends. They frequently played a role very similar to the typical domestic role of the 1960s: mobilizing social networks to achieve a movement goal, passing on information, managing activities, and "creating and sustaining good relations and solidarity among co-workers." (3) It appears as if the traditional definition of "leadership" needs reconsideration; the Southern Regional Council and its state affiliate, the South Carolina Council on Human Relations did just that.

Historian Belinda Robnett argues that an organization's ideology plays a large role in the shaping of its organizational structures, which in turn determine women's leadership opportunities. An organization such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, while still dominated by men, had a style much more like a participatory democracy, which allowed women a voice. (4) However, the Southern Regional Council appears to be one organization that gave many women leadership opportunities. It had a traditional, male-dominated hierarchy and a great number of women in prominent and powerful positions, although it had no specific "ideology" to merit such an uncommon lack of patriarchy. Robnett suggests that women acted as "bridge leaders" who kept up ties between the community and the organizations and "were critical mobilizers of civil rights activity." (5) It appears that the Southern Regional Council, and especially its South Carolina Council on Human Relations, recognized this.

The Commission on Interracial Cooperation existed during the 1920s and 30s and, sensing its own demise, sponsored a conference of black movement leaders in Durham, North Carolina, in 1942. A similar conference of

white leaders met in response to Durham, and in the late summer of 1943 the two met in Atlanta and organized the Southern Regional Council (SRC). Its purpose was described as "fight[ing] racist propaganda and prepar[ing] Southern opinion for gradual amelioration of black social conditions."⁽⁶⁾ Regardless, they did not take a solid, liberal position against segregation for several years. In trying to appease its more conservative, typically white, members, the SRC adopted a policy of achieving the status of "separate but equal," calling for a much more gradual dismantling of segregation.

In 1949 the Southern Regional Council adopted a more liberal, less gradual stance, calling for an end to segregation. In the year ending edition of the Council's journal, *New South*, it asserted that legally enforced segregation "in and of itself constitutes discrimination and inequality of treatment." The SRC declared that "separate but equal" was a "constitutional anachronism."⁽⁷⁾ The gradual approach to desegregation disappeared, as did the more conservative members of the Southern Regional Council who disagreed with the new position and left the organization.

In its early years, though not taking on large, public campaigns, the SRC revived the state chapters formerly associated with the Council on Interracial Cooperation. The state chapter in South Carolina, the South Carolina Council on Human Relations (SCCHR) established in 1919, saw the emergence of the new SRC from the failed CIC in 1944 as the breath of fresh air needed to grow more active in the years that followed. The SCCHR's letterhead bore the description "an organization of Southerners of both races working together in the interest of all people of South Carolina"⁽⁸⁾ One of the SCCHR's main objectives was to change Southern white attitudes towards segregation, using primarily publications based on their own studies.⁽⁹⁾ Unfortunately, this pursuit of Southern white opinions forced the organization into a very "image conscious" position, which led to a belief that those who were "controversial in the press...would better serve the purposes of the council...if they were not on the Board of Directors..."⁽¹⁰⁾ As a result, the SCCHR, much like its parent, the Southern Regional Council, was not as dynamic, influential, and publicized as its contemporary civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, prior to the *Brown* decision. Despite this, the SCCHR was much bolder on another front: women.

The SCCHR employed many women as field workers, as did many civil rights organizations, but the SCCHR, as well as its parent the SRC, placed many women in upper level leadership positions. Additionally, the SCCHR was bi-racial during a time when white Southern men felt the biggest threat to their way of life and their virtuous white women was black men. An organization where black men worked side by side with white women was landmark.

For much of the 1950s anywhere from one-third to one-half of the officers of the SCCHR were women, as well as the nine to 11 members of the 26 member Executive Board. In October of 1954, Alice Spearman became the first full time, paid Executive Director of the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, a position she held until 1967. Several of the local county chapter directors were women, including the Richland County Citizens Committee, chaired by Mrs. Modjeska Simkins.⁽¹¹⁾ Though a prominent figure at both the local and state levels in South Carolina, Modjeska Simkins is sometimes seen in the broader historiography of the civil rights movement. She, similar to many of the unsung heroines of the Movement, held many key leadership positions

and throughout her lengthy activist career, took on many traditional as well as non-traditional female roles.

Modjeska Monteith Simkins was born in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1899 to a successful builder and a schoolteacher. Hers was a close family, an economically prosperous one, with strong religious traditions that placed a very strong emphasis on the importance of education. Before she married, she worked as a schoolteacher like her mother.⁽¹²⁾ The family she grew up in gave her a great many of the qualities she was so often praised for: responsibility, practicality, integrity, and a realistic perspective on life.

Modjeska attended Benedict College and received her degree in 1921, and after teaching for several years, married Andrew Simkins in 1929. An older man, prominent in the business community in Columbia, Simkins attended the all black Durham Conference organized by the failing Commission on Interracial Cooperation and later received a letter from the conference leader, Gordon Blaine Hancock, saying, "The sponsoring committee is deeply grateful for your presence at Durham and for the fine help you rendered in making our conference one of the truly noteworthy gatherings of history."⁽¹³⁾ She went on to become a charter member of the Southern Regional Council and participated in its South Carolina subsidiaries for many decades.

Despite her annoyance at the SRC's early stance on segregation, Modjeska served as the Vice President of the Richland County chapter of the SCCHR and as Public Relations Director for the Richland County Citizens Committee (RCCC). Her position as Public Relations Director afforded her the opportunity to voice her opinions for 15 minutes every Wednesday evening on WOIC-Columbia, which she did for over 20 years. Appropriately enough, she titled the show, "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Set on Freedom."⁽¹⁴⁾ Simkins was never one to soften anything she said, often being painfully blunt. To give such a brutal mouth, especially a brutal female mouth, airtime seems odd; however, WOIC described itself in the mid-1960s as having, "[felt] keenly the responsibility of aiding the Negro citizens in its listening area to progress to the fulfillment of their desire to become 'first-class' citizens and enjoy the benefits and sharing the responsibilities of that citizenship."⁽¹⁵⁾ Modjeska Simkins was a fitting choice.

While each of these women, and the countless others like them, had a great deal in common-education, religion, social awareness, and middle class social status-they shared several other important characteristics. They were all strong, independent women; Modjeska Simkins once commented that "men have messed up the world. A woman should be prepared to support herself."⁽¹⁶⁾ All were near or in middle age at the height of both their activism and the civil rights movement itself. Interestingly enough, this age range of thirty to fifty was the time period of the largest participation gap between men and women; the women outnumbered the men three to four times during the middle years.⁽¹⁷⁾ Perhaps this was the time when a man's career was on the line and civil rights activism was too risky. Many women worked only in the home and clearly the fear of losing that job was not a common one. Organizations frequently turned to the more seasoned civil rights veterans who were at the middle age of responsibility to act as leaders. Although men dominated the most public leadership positions, the Southern Regional Council did not resign women to the philosophy of "men lead, women organize."

The historiography of the civil rights movement is finally catching on to the idea of women as central to its success. Women are being recognized individually, as well as en masse, for their contributions both large and small to the fight for freedom. Additionally, with a newly formed interest in the Southern Regional Council, a quiet, bi-racial organization with a supremely advanced philosophy on women, the truth about women's participation is becoming apparent. Delving into the active state chapters of the SRC, such as the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, reveals a host of people, many of them women, who are not known, except by those whose lives they touched. Perhaps one day, a woman like Modjeska Simkins will be as readily available to schoolchildren as is Rosa Parks--simply another local activist trying to make a difference in the world.

NOTES

1. Charles Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1990): 5.
2. Belinda Robnett, "Women in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee: Ideology, Organizational Structure, and Leadership," in *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, eds., Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999): 137 - 138.
3. Robnett, 137.
4. Robnett, 131.
5. Robnett, 141.
6. David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 46.
7. Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 163.
8. Letter from J.M. Dabbs to Mr. Paul Rilling, 11 March 1960, Papers of the Southern Regional Council, Reel 146, Folder 416, Frame 0423.
9. Jones, 3.
10. "Memorandum on South Carolina Meeting," November 21, 1954 in Greenville, South Carolina. Papers of the Southern Regional Council, Reel 29, Folder 974, Frames 1487 - 1488.
11. Data compiled from 3 letters in which the stationary lists board members, officers, and directors, as well as two lists of newly installed officers. "Southern Regional Council Affiliated Organizations, South Carolina Council on Human Relations, 29 September 1955; Reel 146, Folder 408, Frame 299. "South Carolina Council on Human Relations: Board of Directors, December 1957; Reel 146, Folder 408, Frame 0286. "SCCHR: 1966 Local Council Presidents;" Reel 146, Folder 409, Frame 0326. "Letter from Alice Spearman to Mr. George S. Mitchell of Southern Regional Council," 19 October 1954; Reel 147, Folder 431, Frames 0176 - 0179. "Letter

from Alice Spearman to Anna Holden," 24 November 1954; Reel 147, Folder 431, Frame 0189. All from the Papers of the Southern Regional Council.

12. Barbara Woods Aba-Mecha, "Black Woman Activist in Twentieth Century South Carolina: Modjeska Monteith Simkins," (Ph.D diss., University of South Carolina, 1978), 24.
13. Gordon Blaine Hancock to Modjeska Simkins, 4 November 1942, from the Modjeska Monteith Simkins Papers, South Carolina Modern Political Collection, University of South Carolina, Reel 4678, Biographical Papers - General 1963.
14. Funeral Program of Mary Modjeska Monteith Simkins, 9 April 1992, from the Modjeska Monteith Simkins Papers, South Carolina Modern Political Collection, University of South Carolina, Reel 4678, Biographical Papers - General 1963.
15. WOIC, Application for Renewal of Broadcast Station License, August 1, 1966, Exhibit V, Accession #173-77-24, Box 35, FCC, National Archives II, College Park. Reference provided by Brian Ward.
16. Excerpt from "Modjeska," POINT, May 1992, from the Modjeska Monteith Simkins Papers, South Carolina Modern Political Collection, University of South Carolina, Reel 4678, Biographical Papers - General 1963.
17. Payne, 2.

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