

UCC ROOTS

Remembering our History

January 2021

Don West: "An Agitator"

Jesus was a common man, able to slip through a crowd unseen, and often not recognized by religious authorities.

Don West (1906-1992) could as well. The son of Georgia sharecroppers, he was a poet, editor, professor, teacher, coal miner, farmer, pastor, labor organizer who immersed himself in the lives and stories of "peasants, slaves, and workers." During High School he led a protest against the showing of the racist film, "Birth of a Nation."

Inspired by the Danish Folk School Movement, he is perhaps best known as co-founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. It was begun to "teach Appalachians about their progressive history and to train activists and union organizers." It helped train and support the non-violent work of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and John Lewis.

Deeply rooted in the social gospel, and an ordained Congregational Christian and United Church of Christ minister, West developed a curriculum that affirmed the heritage of Appalachian kids, published the songs of Kentucky miners, and defended those who were falsely accused. Hounded by newspapers, he once had to flee a lynch mob, and the KKK burned down his home. In later life he and his wife organized the Appalachian South Folklife Center in West Virginia.

West was an extraordinary writer, and although he studied at the University of Chicago and Columbia, he chose to write in a common vernacular. His activism was controversial and in the 1940s the House Un-American Activities Committee went after him. His family had to hide and serious academic work and his ministerial standing were laid aside in a difficult time. Later, however, he reconnected with the UCC and its social justice.

Here is one of his poems:

*I was raised on a hillside farm
Where my Daddy's sweat
Salted down the red clay.
I'm the son of my mother
The woman who plods between
the cotton rows--
And I'm an Agitator!*

Contributor: Richard H. Taylor

