

Ella Baker Organizes for Civil Rights

by Ellen Cantarow and Susan Gushee O'Malley

Ella Baker began her work for the NAACP as a field organizer, someone who travels to different cities, towns, and rural areas trying to recruit new people to an organization and raise money. How does a field organizer begin? When you go to a place you

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The first aspect of being on the field staff was to help. You helped raise money. You conducted membership campaigns in different areas. A new person coming on the field would learn how to campaign, and then you would be sent to smaller territory. I started in Florida. I'd never been there before.

The NAACP had a roster of people who were in contact, who were members. And so when you go out in the field, if they had a branch, say, in Sanford or Clearwater, Florida, you had been in correspondence there. So you make your contact with the person in Tampa who's said to the community, "Miss so-and-so's coming in." And so you go down, and they have provided some space in somebody's church or office or somewhere you had access to a telephone.

Where did people gather? They gathered in churches. In schools. And you'd get permission. You'd call up Reverend Brother so-and-so, and ask if you could appear before the congregation at such-and-such a time. Sometimes they'd give you three minutes, because, after all, many people weren't secure enough to run the risk, as they saw it, of being targeted as ready to challenge the powers that be. And they'd say, "You have three minutes after the church service." And you'd take it. And you'd use it, to the extent to which you can be persuasive. It's the ammunition you have. That's all you have.

We dealt with what was most pressing for a given section. For instance, Harry T. Moore was one of three black principals in Florida who was tired when they began to talk in terms of equal pay. The differential between black and white teachers was tragic, to say the least. Many times, money had been "appropriated" for black education and it had been diverted to other sources. And, of course, there wasn't headlines on that, they just didn't get there, see.

Harry T. Moore's house was bombed from under him one night. And he was killed as a result. This particular night. I think it was

Christmas eve, '46. dynamite was placed under his bedroom. He and his wife were blown to smithereens. There were a lot of people whom Harry T. Moore had benefited. We talked to them. He helped them get their pay when they had worked and didn't get paid. So you could go into that area of Florida and you could talk about the virtue of NAACP, because they knew Harry T. Moore. They hadn't discussed a whole lot of theory. But there was a man who served their interests and who identified with them.

On what basis do you seek to organize people? Do you start to try to organize them on the fact of what you think, or what they are first interested in? You start where the people are. Identification with people. There's always this problem in the minority group that's escalating up the ladder in this culture, I think. Those who have gotten some training and those who have gotten some material gains, it's always the problem of their not understanding the possibility of being divorced from those who are not in their social classification. Now, there were those who felt they had made it, would be embarrassed by the fact that some people would get drunk and get in jail, and so they wouldn't be concerned too much about whether they were brutalized in jail. 'Cause he was a drunk! He was a so-and-so. Or she was a streetwalker. We get caught in that bag. And so you have to help break that down without alienating them at the same time. The gal who has been able to buy her minks and whose husband is a professional, they live well. You can't insult her, you never go and tell her she's a so-and-so for taking, for not identifying. You try to point out where her interest lies in identifying with that other one across the tracks who doesn't have minks.

How do you do that? You don't always succeed, but you try. You'd point out what had happened, in certain cases, where whole communities were almost destroyed by police brutality on a large scale. They went and burned down the better homes. In Tampa, Florida, I met some of those people whose homes were burned down. These were people I'd call middle class. The men got the guns, and they carried their womenfolk and the children into the woods. And they stood guard. Some stood guard over the people in the woods, and they

stood guard over their homes and property, ready to shoot. So what you do is to cite examples that had taken place somewhere else. You had to be persuasive on the basis of fact. You cite it, you see. This can happen to you. Sometimes you're able to cite instances of where there's been a little epidemic, or an outbreak of the more devastating kinds of disease. You point out that those of us who live across the railroad track and are in greater filth or lack of sanitation can have an effect on you who live on the other side, 'cause disease doesn't have such a long barrier between us, you see. As long as the violations of the rights of Tom Jones could take place with impunity, you are not secure. So you helped to reestablish a sense of identity of each with the struggle.

Of course, your success depended on both your disposition and your capacity to sort of stimulate people and how you carried yourself, in terms of not being above people. And see, there were more people who were not economically secure than there were economically secure people. I didn't have any mink-I don't have any now-but you don't go into a group where minks are prohibitive in terms of getting them and carry your minks and throw 'em around. Why, they can't get past *that*. They can't get past the fact that you got minks and they don't have mink. And see, I had no problems 'cause I didn't have none. Nor did I have aspirations for these things.

I remember one place I got a contribution for a life membership in the NAACP, which was live hundred dollars then, was from a long-shoremen's union. They remembered somebody who had been there before from the NAACP, with a mink coat. When they gave this five-hundred-dollar membership, somebody mentioned it. See, they had resented the mink coat. I don't think it was the mink coat that they really resented. It was the *barrier* they could sense between them and the person in the coat. See, you can have a mink coat on and you can identify with the man who is working on the docks. If you got it, if you *really* identify with him, what you wear won't make a damn bit of difference. But if you talk differently, and somehow talk down to people, they can sense it. They can feel it. And they know whether you are talking *with* them, or talking *at* them, or talking *about* them.

If you feel that you are part of them and they are part of you, you don't say "I'm-a-part-of-you." What you really do is, you point out something. Especially the lower-class people, the people who'd felt the heel of oppression, see, they *knew* what you were talking about when you spoke about police brutality. They *knew* what you were speaking about when you talked about working at a job, doing the same work, and getting a differential in pay. And if your sense of being a part of them got over to them, they appreciated that. Somebody would get the point. Somebody would come out and say, "I'm gon' join that darn organization." As an example, I remember in someplace out of St. Petersburg, Florida, the first time I'd ever been to the Holy and Sanctified church. We had a good response. One lady came out and all she could say was how my dress was the same as hers. Now, she didn't know how to deal with issues. But she identified. And she joined.

And, then you have to recognize what people *can* do. There're some people in my experience, especially "the little people" as some might call them, who never could explain the NAACP as such. But they had the knack of getting money from John Jones or somebody. They might walk up to him: "Gimme a dollar for the NAACP." And maybe because of what they had done in relationship to John Jones, he'd give the dollar. They could never tell anybody, what the program of the Association was. So what do you do about that. You don't be demeaning them. You say, well here is Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Susie Jones, and remember last year Sister Susie Jones came in with so much. And Sister Susie Jones would go on *next* year and get this money. Now, somewhere in the process she may learn some other methods, and she may learn to articulate some of the program of the Association. But whether she does or not, she *feels* it. And she transmits it to those she can talk to. And she might end up just saying, "You ain't doin' nothin' but spendin' your money down at that so-and-so place." She may shame him. Or she may say, "Boy, I know your mama." And so you start talkin' about what the mothers would like for them to do. So you do it because there's *mama, mama's callin'*. See, somewhere down the line this becomes important to them. At least these are the ways I saw it. And I think they respond.