
Interview: Amelia Boynton Robinson



We have to pass the torch on to the next generation

Mrs. Robinson has been a leader in the civil rights movement for nearly six decades, beginning as a state extension service agent in the 1930s in rural Alabama, where she met her first husband, S. William Boynton. Together, the Boyntons led the fight for fundamental human rights as well as the right to vote for African-Americans in Alabama. Mr. Boynton suffered an early death, in large part due to the stress of the fight, but Mrs. Boynton (now Mrs. Robinson) continued the struggle.

In 1965, as the civil rights movement under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King began to grow, she invited Dr. King to come to Selma, Alabama, to register blacks to vote. The rest is history. On March 7, 1965, during a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, state troopers on horseback charged the marchers. Mrs. Boynton was gassed and clubbed and left for dead on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The picture of this hideous incident went out around the world on television and shocked the human conscience. The civil rights movement quickly became a mass movement and forced the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Amelia Boynton Robinson was—and continues to be today, as vice chairman of the Schiller Institute—one of the nation's greatest heroines in the fight for justice for all mankind.

This interview was conducted on Jan. 20 by Marianna Wertz.

EIR: You just returned home from a stay in Washington, D.C. where your play *Through the Years* was performed for the first time in full in the nation's capital. You also spoke before thousands of students. Could you give us a sense of how you think these events have helped to shape the situation in Washington and helped the children there?

Robinson: I think it's really marvelous. It is something that hasn't been done before. While it was perhaps in small numbers, people have been touched, the students particularly. But when it comes down to an organization like Schiller Institute, dedicating its entire program to the youth, the disadvantaged youth, it's something that you cannot express. When you see the attitudes of the young people, and the hope, and the determination to come out of that shell and that surrounding, mentally, I don't know whether I can say too much about it, other than that it was wonderful.

EIR: What kind of questions did you get in the schools where you spoke?

Robinson: I spoke to students in the middle school and below. I found that those kids are angry. They are angry because of the fact they feel like they are not a part of the system. They feel like they've been targeted. They live in communities where they have seen so much going on. They're just angry.

For instance, I asked the class, what would you like to be when you get to be an adult? So many of them said, "I want to be a policeman." Then I asked one fellow, why do you want to be a policeman? "So I can kill somebody."

I had others who said that they had relatives and friends who were killed and they want to get back at them. Then some of them asked me, when I told them about the beating on the [Edmund Pettus] Bridge, why did you let them beat you up? Where were your friends? Where was the gang? Why didn't you hit back?

So you can see, within these kids, there's a whole lot of animosity. There's a whole lot of hate.

EIR: Do you think the play addressed that?

Robinson: I think it was better than having a course in school. Number one, these young people felt like they are needed, they are wanted, and they have something to contribute to the mainstream. And that means a whole lot, because there they are, staying in disadvantaged communities where they think, "I don't see anything but killing, I don't see anybody rising." And I think that when they realize Joshua [the hero of *Through the Years*], who was born a slave, who rose to be a congressman, and having done so much, and even the contribution that the children made, I think it gave them hope. Some of them are more determined to fight mentally to reach the top.

EIR: Lyndon LaRouche commented that the reason that your play is so powerful is because it tells the truth.

Robinson: Absolutely. That's an advantage of having lived a long time. I'm very proud of my having lived as long as I have, because it gave me the opportunity to make contact with people. Back there, when I was in Savannah, Georgia, my folk would take in so many people who had nowhere to go. Many of these people would talk about slavery, because



In this scene from "Through the Years," performed at Howard University in Washington, D.C., Parson Jones preaches to a secret meeting of slaves in the woods, telling them how Moses brought the children of Israel out of bondage.

they had been slaves. Unfortunately, I didn't get a paper and pencil and put everything down. But so much of it was impressed upon me, to the extent that I never forgot it.

Through the years, in working with people and being an African-American, where there are so many things that I have encountered, I put it in the play or the book [her autobiography, *Bridge Across Jordan*]. The story of Joshua, which encompasses also a part of my family—

EIR: Is that your great uncle?

Robinson: Yes, Robert Smalls [a Reconstruction-era congressman]. That part was built around him. Everything in that play is something that was told to me by people who were involved in or experienced that particular trouble, or it was somebody in the family. Everything is true; it's history.

EIR: Many of the children in the audience and in the cast said that they did not know their own history.

Robinson: No. Number one, it's the system that does not want people to know their own history. As you know, African-Americans are targeted more than any other nationality or race. If they did know their history, it would help African-Americans to feel as though they have a rich background. They never say anything about the beautiful parts of Africa and the contributions Africans made thousands of years ago. There were Africans with roots in South America, in Mexico, long before Columbus came to America. They don't want you to know that.

If they were to tell the people—both black and white students—the contributions that we have made in the traffic light, the refrigerator, so many other things, I think they would be a different type of kid. They would come up differently. But

as long as they say that you came from slavery, as if nobody else was enslaved but Africans, it makes them think that they have no background. It's just like saying to a child, you're nothing, you've never been anything, your people weren't anything, and you'll never, never be anything. This is what America is doing to African-Americans particularly.

I think the play has been a lesson in history that they never will forget. Not only that, it touched also a lot of young people and a lot of adults. I had a young man who was sitting next to me. Well, he wasn't a young man, he seemed to have been about 40. I noticed when we had the scene of the cotton-picking and Mandy [Joshua's mother] being whipped, he was sniffing. Finally, he said to me, "Do you have an extra tissue that I can have?"

So it does more than something that they would see today and the memory is gone tomorrow.

EIR: Marion Barry is now mayor of Washington and is confronted with a financial crisis in which he is being told to implement draconian budget cuts and layoffs by the banks that hold the city's debt, and so far he is reluctantly doing it. Mayor Barry sent a letter welcoming you, whom he's known since the 1960s, and also the play, to Washington. What should he be doing now?

Robinson: Well, I don't know how diplomatic he is, and what he has in his mind. When I look at the Pike statue [the statue of Ku Klux Klan founder and Confederate Gen. Albert Pike, which stands in Judiciary Square in Washington, D.C.], and I see that the only window in the mayor's office faces that statue, that every time he goes to the window, he has to see the Pike statue, I think it was done to mentally degrade him. I don't think it was an accident, I think it was

done on purpose.

You can see that the government is actually fighting to keep the African-Americans down. One out of every four black males in Washington is or has been either incarcerated, on is on probation or parole. Now if he has something in mind and he is diplomatic in what he's doing, I have to give him credit. I think that, in this particular case, he will come from the other end, and like a boxer, I think he's waiting to give the blow that will perhaps open up everything or will show that he's not being handled.

EIR: I'm sure your play strengthened that resolve in him.

Robinson: I hope so. And I wish he had been there.

EIR: He did send official greetings.

Robinson: Yes, and it was beautiful.

EIR: You're a board member of the Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta. Could you say a few words about the controversy surrounding Coretta Scott King, who I know is a good and close friend of yours?

Robinson: About three years ago we had a discussion in the board meeting, that they were trying to force her to retire. She had her son take over the reins as president. Dexter King was rather young and he had not had enough experience, so she had to take it back. She did this because of the fact that they were forcing her, in a way, to retire. Now that Dexter King is much more experienced and older and capable of taking over, and he's working with her, the National Park Service—

EIR: Which controls the Pike statue in Washington, D.C.?

Robinson: Yes. The National Park Service has been bringing tourists down to the center. Now they are trying to force the center to give up all that space where we have the King center, to move across the street and let them have that place. Not only that, and this is shocking: They want to *buy the crypt!* Dr. King's crypt.

EIR: They want to inter his memory with his bones!

Robinson: Yes. That's the saddest thing. But, when I look at what the government does, you can't trust them any more than you can trust the Ku Klux Klan.

During the Christmas holidays, I went down to Harris Neck, 50 miles south of Savannah, Georgia. That story makes you know that, with all of these islands being taken away from African-Americans, with all the property that has been taken away, they're no better now than they were right after slavery.

What the government did in the 1940s was to have representatives come down to Harris Neck, which is an island. There was one family that had a factory there, a shrimp factory. There were other little industries there, because it is right on the water and this body of water goes out to the ocean. A very attractive area.



Before the performance of "Through the Years," Kehembe (Valerie Eichelberger) sings an aria from Handel's "Messiah."

When we went down there, we wanted to talk to somebody, and they led us to the oldest man who lived there. He told us this story.

The federal government, during World War II, said, "We need this section for a landing strip. We have to have it, but when the war is over, you'll have the opportunity first to get your land back." They gave some of those people three days to get out, some got ten days, to get off the place. Of course, thinking that they were going to get their land back, they just went on and pitched houses in a little ghetto off the place.

The strip was built, but the bombers sank in it. They could not build it up enough to use it. Then, instead of coming in and contacting the people the way they did when they got the land, they gave the land back to the county. And the county gave the land to anybody who wanted it.

The next thing the people of Harris Neck heard was that the area was going to be used for a bird sanctuary! But the birds were all gone, because when the bombers came, the birds left for good.

So, now they are sitting in these little ghetto houses and when you go into this area, the place is paved. You find, as you go around, plantations, beautiful signs. You can't see the houses, because they're way back on the river, but you find John Doe Plantation, etc. on the signs. And the sad thing about it is, some of those people were given \$5 an acre. Only one man was given \$25 an acre. But we saw a sign for a plantation sale: ten acres for \$32,000.

EIR: March 7, 1995 is the 30th anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. There's going to be some kind of celebration of this historic event, which led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Can you tell us what

is planned?

Robinson: I went to one of the planning meetings recently. First, I was very surprised that we had so many people who were racists back then and who put stumbling blocks in folks' way, and now they're on the board. I questioned them. There was one fellow who is supposed to make plans for one of the important events, and the first thing I said was, "Before doing anything, I suggest that you call the board back and have them approve it, because things are going on that people don't think about."

For instance, last year, when we had the demonstration—we have it every year—Mayor Smitherman [who was also mayor in 1965 and absolutely opposed to voting rights for African-Americans] had a meeting and a big celebration, because he had implemented a walking tour in the same section where the church is that we marched from. And there's a museum there, a white, segregated museum. I went to that museum, because the murals that we had in the community center for black people were in that museum, and they said they were made for them.

But I found also that the contributions and pictures of black people were in another section altogether. In other words, you see the white contributions here and you go there to see the black contributions.

EIR: What's going to happen in the 30th anniversary cele-

bration this March?

Robinson: They're going to reenact the whole thing.

EIR: State troopers and all?

Robinson: State troopers, yes. They're supposed to come into the church like they did before. They're supposed to have somebody representing Sheriff Jim Clark. They're going to have the tear gas, the horses.

EIR: How many of the people who were there in 1965 are still alive?

Robinson: Oh, it should be a lot, because they were children. They did a fantastic job in those days.

EIR: Will you be marching?

Robinson: I will be marching a part of the way. What I suggested, and they took the suggestion, is that, since there's been more than one generation since 1965, that they have a torch, and they pass the torch. For instance, maybe I will march with two or three of the oldest people for a certain distance with the torch. Then we'll give it to those representing the next generation. And then the next generation. And when we get across the bridge, when we culminate the march, then we'll give it to some of the very youngest people we have. Because if we carry the torch, it means nothing unless we're going to pass it on.

Bridge Across Jordan

by Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson

From the civil rights struggle in the South in the 1930s, to the Edmund Pettus Bridge at Selma, Alabama in 1965, to the liberation of East Germany in 1989-90: the new edition of the classic account by an American heroine who struggled at the side of Dr. Martin Luther King and today is fighting for the cause of Lyndon LaRouche.

"an inspiring, eloquent memoir of her more than five decades on the front lines . . . I wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone who cares about human rights in America."—Coretta Scott King

Order from:

Schiller Institute, Inc.

P.O. Box 20244 Washington, D.C. 20041-0244

or call Ben Franklin Booksellers

(800) 453-4108 (703) 777-3661 fax (703) 7778287

Visa and MasterCard accepted.

\$10 plus postage and handling (\$3.50 for the first book, \$.50 for each additional book). Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax.

