

## **Why Ella Jo Baker Should be Inducted as an “Unsung Hero” into the 2022 Cooperative Hall of Fame**

“Ella Baker was one of the most effective, original and masterful organizers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” one scholar noted about the organizer who became a Civil Rights legend (Tutashinda, 2010, p. 33). We are fortunate that she first used her talents to organize cooperatives for about 45 of the 60 years that she was an organizer. Baker, as national director of the Young Negroes Co-operative League, helped to organize a network of consumer cooperative enterprises across the country in the 1930s and 1940s. She continued her work (on a smaller scale) with cooperatives into the 1970s, even with the demands of the Civil Rights Movement that begged for her leadership. It was her early work organizing cooperatives that likely inspired and honed her ideas about participatory grassroots leadership strategy that she is so loved and well known for, and she used those insights to inform her organizing for many other causes in the next 60 years of her life. Her early cooperative organizing work in New York caught the attention of the Cooperative League of the USA. CLUSA leadership saw her potential and made a visionary investment in her in 1931 by awarding the 27-year-old a scholarship to attend the Cooperative Institute of CLUSA at Brookwood Labor College. That investment was a starting point for Baker to become such a well-respected and effective leader that a U.S. postage stamp was named in her honor. Her work also inspired one filmmaker to make a film about her work and Bernice Johnson Reagan, founder of the famed Sweet Honey in the Rock group, made a song for the film in her honor. In addition, today many organizations, schools and university chairs, scholarships, and even a Washington DC housing cooperative, bear her name, or pay tribute to her in some way.

Ella Josephine Baker was born in 1903, in Norfolk, Va. Her parents moved there from rural central North Carolina to make a better life. Ella Jo, as she was called, was the second of three surviving children born to Blake and Georgianna Ross Baker. When Ella Jo was seven years old, Anna (her nickname) Ross Baker moved her children back to the safety of her rural mostly Black community in Littleton, N.C. in 1910, after a race riot in Norfolk took the life of two Black men (Ransby, 2003, pp. 23-30). Back in the safety and security of rural North Carolina, Ella Jo grew up in a close-knit African American community in Warren County where Black people pooled resources to help each other survive and thrive in the aftermath of slavery. In the community where Ella Jo grew up, she recalled how the close-knit farmers in Warren County cooperated with each other by sharing goods, services, and expensive farming equipment:

“There was a deep sense of community that prevailed in this little neck of the woods. It wasn’t a town, it was just people. And ... if there were emergencies, the farmer next to you would share in something to meet that emergency. [Or]...if there was a thresher around, you didn’t have each person having his own,” machinery was shared (Ransby, 2003, pp. 37-38).

Ella Jo learned much from her childhood: how to share and look after people less fortunate than her family, which was more well off than others. With a grandfather who was a preacher and a mother who was a teacher and a member of the National Black Women’s Club Movement, she also learned to think and articulate and act. She also heard stories about family members who had fought back against slavery, which had been outlawed a mere 38 years before Ella Jo was born. With parents who spoke their minds and were leaders in the community, Ella Jo also was assertive and adventurous, a “tomboy” who loved to play baseball. At age 14, she was sent to Raleigh, N.C. to Shaw

Academy and University, the first Black institution to open its doors to women (Ransby, 2003, p. 45), graduating as valedictorian with her BA in 1927.

Baker moved to New York at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, and she was exposed to new ideas, and met many activists for all kinds of causes. This period was also just two years before the stock market crash of 1929. At 27, while working at the *Negro National News*, she met the publisher George Schuyler, 30, a socialist intellectual who talked of the need for Black economic power (Grant, 1998, p. 28). Baker and Schuyler soon powered a new Black cooperative self-help movement in the country. In 1930, in an “Appeal to Young Negroes,” Schuyler issued a call for young militant Black people interested in “economic salvation” to establish a new organization, the Young Negroes’ Co-operative League, to explore cooperative economics to more effectively advance the race. Schuyler, with Baker, and about 30 others, founded the Young Negroes’ Co-operative League in December 1930 to develop co-ops to solve some of the economic devastation among African Americans that had gotten even worse as the Great Depression descended.

Baker was blessed with an opportunity to go to co-op school in July 1931, when the Cooperative League of the U.S. awarded her a scholarship to attend The Cooperative Institute’s training at Brookwood Labor College, a trade union-supported academy in New York. Baker was head of the New York chapter of the YNCL at the time of the scholarship award according to the Aug. 8, 1931 issue of *The Afro American* of Baltimore. The paper noted she was the first African American to receive the award, and that Baker was in charge of the League while Schuyler was in Africa and Europe. The scholarship was also reported by the *Pittsburgh Courier* on August 1, 1931.

Three months after the CLUSA co-op school, on October 31, 1931, the YNCL held its first conference in Pittsburgh, PA. Six hundred people attended, at a time that the Depression was in full swing. Thirty official delegates from YNCL chapters in NYC, Buffalo, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New Orleans, and cities in Ohio and South Carolina, participated. Baker spoke on “What Consumers’ Co-operation Means to Negro Women,” foreshadowing what would be a major theme of her cooperative and civil rights activist work. One of the resolutions of the YNCL conference was “that we seek to bring women into the League on equal basis with men.” The conference participants also agreed to remain separate from the Cooperative League of the US, but resolved to associate with CLUSA and attend some of its conferences and trainings.

Schuyler was elected the first president of YNCL and Baker was unanimously elected as its national director. Together, the two leaders designed a bold strategy and a plan to seed Black self-help by developing a federation of local and regional cooperatives. The YNCL had an ambitious five-year plan which included training 5,000 co-op leaders by 1932, who would establish buying clubs, then grocery co-ops and credit unions; then establishing regional cooperative wholesale outlets by 1933, and even co-op factories by 1935; and financing an independent college by 1937 (Ransby, 2003, p.84; and Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p.114). Groups that couldn’t start their own buying clubs, or until they did, were encouraged to shop at Colored Merchants Association grocery stores (the CMA was a marketing co-op of independent Black grocers).

The YNCL was organized as a coalition of local cooperatives and buying clubs which were networked with nearly two dozen League councils throughout the U.S. Each was independent, but contributed money to the national office based in New York. Two of the most successful

cooperative operations were a grocery store employing four full-time workers in Buffalo (“doing a business of \$850 a week”) and a “co-operative newsstand and stationery store” in Philadelphia (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 122). By 1932, YNCL had local councils in 22 communities from New York to California, and a membership of 400. Finances were not strong, but the country was devastated by a Depression so this was understandable.

In her job as the League’s National Director, Baker developed a fundraising strategy in January 1932 called the “Penny-a-Day Plan” (Grant, 1998, p.34; Ransby, 2003, p. 84-85; Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p.117). The goal was to find between 5,000-10,000 people in 20 cities who would raise or contribute a dollar over a three-month period to finance “the promotion of Consumers’ Cooperation among Negroes.” The plan also included an intent to “stimulate interest in existing cooperatives, and to lay the basis for a more permanent consumer program in schools, colleges, churches, and civic organizations” (Grant, 1998, p. 34; Ransby, 2003, p. 84). Baker had a particular interest in consumer education and activism, so it is likely that the plan to expand consumer education was her influence. In its first year, the YNCL focused on education, particularly the history, principles and methods of consumer cooperation. Both Schuyler and Baker argued that co-op leaders must be well educated and informed. Baker took this goal seriously and issued a series of informative, educational and inspirational newsletters and reports for the first 2 years of the organization’s existence. One report, “On Promoting Consumers’ Clubs,” provided step by step instructions for how to start a buying club. In addition, she traveled around to all the chapters and to groups that invited her, to speak and teach about cooperative economics - and to spread the vision of the YNCL.

The YNCL encouraged the formation of buying clubs, to pool money to buy items collectively in bulk at a cheaper price than if a person bought them at retail price. These buying clubs, sometimes called consumers clubs, were a way to organize community members, especially in places where the 25 members were not available to form YNCL chapters; and often were the start of a co-op grocery store. The Harlem buying club, for example, was started by the Dunbar Housewives' League in 1935 to buy and distribute milk. It soon became a full-fledged cooperative, called Harlem's Own Cooperative. This cooperative continued to function into the 1940s, and at least one Civil Rights Movement leader came directly out of this cooperative. Bob Moses, who later worked closely with Baker and became a key civil rights movement leader in Mississippi was a milk cooperative delivery boy in the early 1940s in Harlem's Own Cooperative" (Grant, 1998, p. 36). He credited Ella Baker with teaching him about cooperatives.

The second annual conference took place in April 1932 in Washington, D.C., with support from several professors at Howard University. Participants discussed how to move from the private profit motive to cooperation. Baker gave a speech entitled: "Consumers' Cooperation and the 'Race Loyalty' Appeal." Another issue discussed was the challenges of fundraising and dues collection. By September of that year, the national office was forced to close because of the lack of financial support from local councils. Not expecting a salary, Baker continued to serve as unpaid executive director of the YNCL, answering correspondence, accepting speaking engagements, and coordinating weekly meetings of the New York Council, of which she was president. They held meetings at the offices of the NY Urban League.

Gordon Nembhard states that although YNCL only lasted officially for three years, it was the first African American co-op federation of its kind. In addition, she concludes that the YNCL

appears to have had a ripple effect because cooperatives continued to develop from the models started through, promoted by, or related to the YNCL work, or by people who were a part of or influenced by the organization (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 121). Hunt (2020) calls this “planned failure” in the anarchist sense that a formal organization is supposed to put itself out of business if it is successful at educating people and seeding autonomous activity so no longer is needed.

Below is a table showing the known cooperatives that Baker founded and/or participated in:

<i>Start Date</i>	<i>Cooperative and description</i>	<i>End Date</i>
1935	<b>Harlem’s Own Cooperative</b> Started by Dunbar Housewives’ League; distributed weekly tips on good buys such as tuna, vanilla, razors and razor blades and fountain pins. The cooperative was in communication with the Co-operative League of the United States of America. Documents in Baker’s papers suggests that she was very involved; Baker was chair of education and publicity for the co-op from late 1930s to 1941 (Gordon Nembhard, 2014 p. 91, 133).	1940s
1931	<b>Harlem’s Pure Food Co-operative Grocery Stores</b> , “a large co-operative grocery store and market.” Baker was the “captain.” (Gordon Nembhard, pp. 133, 135)	Not known
1939	<b>Harlem Consumers’ Cooperative Council</b> – was a milk buying club that operated out of the basement of the Urban League. It merged with Harlem’s Own Cooperative two years after its founding. (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 136).	1941
9/1933	<b>The Problem’s Cooperative Association</b> Organized the first economic conference in Harlem. The aim was to found a Rochdale cooperative: first a market and then a housing cooperative (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p.124).	Not known
9/1940	<b>Modern Cooperative Association</b> – Composed mostly of Black civil service employees, the Association opened a co-op grocery store. Thurgood Marshall’s wife, Vivien Burey, was president of the board. Baker mentions the co-op in her papers. (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p.136)	1960?
1944	<b>West Indian Co-Operative Bank, Ltd.</b> Baker helped to set it up (Schomburg Center, Biographical Sketch, n.d.).	
6/1968	<b>Harlem River Consumers Cooperative</b> – was founded to combat high prices of grocery stores in Harlem. Baker was a shareholder. Pro forma estimates were that the store had made \$650,000 in revenue over 13 weeks. (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 137).	Circa 1975

Source: Gordon Nembhard, 2014

In addition, there is evidence that Baker used her knowledge to organize cooperatives even while she did the larger work of responding to attacks on the civil rights of African Americans. In 1956, while attending an NAACP conference in San Francisco, Baker learned about 40 Black farmers who were trying to form an agricultural cooperative. Always the educator, Baker emphasized the importance of understanding the scope and history of the cooperative movement, so she arranged for a representative of the group, Orsey Malone, to do what she had done some 25 years earlier -- attend a Cooperative Institute (this one was held at Bard College in New York) (Ransby, 2003, p. 168). Baker also worked with African American attorney and former Congress of Racial Equality director Floyd McKissick in November 1969 to set up "Soul City" in Warren County, North Carolina (where Baker grew up) which would be fueled by cooperative enterprises (Hunt, 2020, p. 854). These examples suggest that Baker never gave up her belief in the power and necessity of cooperatives and the work to achieve them, but continued to direct energies when possible in that direction, despite the demands of her jobs in larger active civil rights organizations. Baker was even involved in organizing a cooperative bank in Jamaica (Hunt, 2020, p. 854; Schomburg Library, n.d.).

In summary, Baker's roughly 45 years of active cooperative organizing, and the unique work that it spawned in the Civil Rights Movement, as well as her later cooperative work, created lasting change and not only meets, but exceeds, the following qualities of a cooperative hero:

**Conviction:** Baker had a strong belief in the cooperative principles and worked cooperatively to put them into practice in bold and creative ways.

**Determination:** She spent 45 plus years organizing and fund raising for cooperatives under trying circumstances, a Depression, and in low-income communities.

**Dedication:** She continued to volunteer when she couldn't be paid for her YNCL organizing. She promoted and invested in co-ops and economic cooperation for most of her life.

**Focus:** She carried on the work when finances crippled the organization even when it would have been easy to lose faith. Through her YNCL newsletter articles and workshops she helped African American young people focus on economic democracy and co-op development.

**Fortitude:** She continued to work with the Harlem's Own Cooperative up until 1975; even when people around her like George Schuyler gave up on the cooperative movement.

**Innovation:** YNCL was an innovation in itself, and Baker significantly influenced the direction of the League and kept it going. In addition, she appealed to women at the first YNCL conference, she came up with the innovative Penny-a-Day fundraising campaign, tours, and the first economic conference in Harlem.

**Leadership:** Baker boldly asserted women's leadership at the first annual conference of the YNCL and came up with plans to involve housewives' support for the YNCL and cooperative development among Blacks. She assumed leadership where it was needed, without asking for public recognition. She was a leader in organizing the YNCL's national conferences, producing their newsletters, and traveling around the country giving educational workshops. She also worked with others to involve major national Black organizations in the co-op movement.

**Loyalty:** Baker's loyalty to cooperative organizing was evident throughout her 11 plus years of active cooperative organizing. Throughout the rest of her life she continued to promote and work with cooperatives – and invest in them.

**Perseverance:** Even when the YNCL office was shut down, Baker continued to do the work as a volunteer, continued speaking engagements and found places to have meetings in NYC to keep the organization functioning. She persisted in promoting economic cooperation.

**Sacrifice:** Baker worked in the co-op movement as a volunteer even when she didn't have other employment, and kept the offices of the YNCL open out of her own apartment even after the League stopped having internal funding. She suffered bouts of unemployment and was constantly in a financially unstable position (Ransby, 2003, p. 91), but continued to support co-ops, and never retired from public life.

**Selfless:** Baker never sought the limelight; she preferred to work behind the scenes. She is quoted as saying:

“You didn't see me on television, you didn't see news articles about me. The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don't need strong leaders.” {Ella Baker, Women in the Civil Rights Movement, p. 54}

Her organizing also caused her personal financial challenges, but she never complained.

**Statesmanship:** Baker was an excellent speechmaker, and is known for her inspiring and motivational speaking when she did speak. Baker and Schuyler were opposites: He was arrogant; she, modest and friendly. Schuyler made virulent attacks on religion, and had extramarital affairs, but she worked with him because she believed in the work.

**Vision:** Baker helped the YNCL to form plans that envisioned long range goals, and produced a strategic plan for both the education and training of cooperative organizers, and to develop co-ops, credit unions and a cooperatively-owned factories.

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