

thought had moved from the assumption that mental inferiority and anti-social behavior are racially inherited, to the understanding that environment and social process are the primary determinants of intellect. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), a widely acclaimed critique of American racism which detailed the cycle of social prejudice and economic deprivation, was one source used by Marshall to urge the Court to reconsider *Plessy*. Further strengthening the argument against segregation was President Truman's report in 1947 from the Committee on Civil Rights which also cited social scientific evidence and called for an end to legally-enforced segregation. The time was right for the Supreme Court to declare decisively that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Yet, this declaration was a long time in the making and it was the result of more than a century of determined struggle.

Like the overnight sensation who has worked a lifetime for that distinction, the Civil Rights Movement which many Americans assume to have begun in 1954 was a long time coming, with the sacrifice and support of thousands, black and white, committed to racial equality and justice long before *Brown* and even before *Plessy*. The *Plessy* decision, the *Brown* decision, and all those who struggle for racial justice stand on the shoulders of Benjamin Roberts, a man who simply wanted a good education for his five-year-old daughter.

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Jean Van Delinder

Oral Histories Capturing Forgotten Moments in Civil Rights History

The names of Farmville, Virginia, or Summerton, South Carolina are not on the lips of the average citizen in thinking about the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Yet these communities, and others, also had significant parts in the case as did Topeka, Kansas.

The newly established Brown v. Board of Educational National Historic Site will serve to remind us of the very significant step on the road toward equality, taken in Topeka, but also many steps to desegregate American schools taken elsewhere. This site is located at the Monroe Elementary School. Over 40 years ago, the school was used to educate African-American children separately from white children. Monroe School once again will open its doors, but its mission has been transformed to educate us all. It will also be a reminder to all Americans that equal rights do not come at little cost. The African-American chal-

lenges to "separate but equal" arose in many places. A park dedicated to this historical struggle should connect the events in Topeka, Kansas with those in other states. How can what is known primarily as a legal case be represented through a park exhibit, so that others can share the experience of those who lived through those events?

One way to supplement the historical record is through oral history interviews. Oral histories have been gathered through interviews of persons who lived through the events surrounding these cases, many of whom were participants. In the particular history of *Brown*, these interviews connect legal abstractions with personal experiences. The location of the site at the former Monroe Elementary School and other sites are tangible symbols of the force of the "separate-but-equal" doctrine. At its best, they connect us with what people underwent in forever changing that doctrine. Oral histories help to uncover the actions

and experiences of civil rights “footsoldiers” from beneath historical abstractions. There really was an African-American family named Brown who lived in the city of Topeka, Kansas in the early-1950s who stood with 12 other families as plaintiffs in a suit brought by the NAACP against the Topeka School Board.

In 1991, the Kansas State Historical Society, in cooperation with The Brown Foundation and Washburn University Law School, developed a proposal to create an oral history collection focusing on the people involved in and those effected by the *Brown* case. This would include not only the Kansas case but its companion cases from Delaware, Virginia, South Carolina, and the District of Columbia.

These stories and others connected to the case lend meaning to the human dimension of *Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site*. This collection of oral histories will remind visitors to the site that Topeka did not act alone in trying to bring about desegregation. In Summerton, South Carolina, school enrollment attempts were not as courteously conducted as those remembered in Topeka. One of the major participants in

the South Carolina school litigation, Reverend J.A. Delaine, left his residence in the middle of the night in fear of his life. His house was later burned to the ground. Defendant Harry Briggs, the first named plaintiff on the case that would later be called *Briggs v. Elliott*, found he could no longer get his cotton ginned anywhere in the county. He eventually left South Carolina seeking work in Florida. Annie Lawton not only lost her job as a maid in a local motel, but her husband was forced off land his family had sharecropped for over 50 years. In recounting those events of over 40 years ago, Annie said that if the segregated schools had had desks she never would have signed her name to the petition demanding better educational facilities. The price she and her family had to pay was high.

Those interviewed in Virginia spoke of events just before graduation in April 1951, when students attending Robert Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia, walked out of class and went on strike for two weeks. Student leaders protested the use of poorly constructed shacks for classroom space. Attorney Oliver Hill of Richmond, Virginia, remembers receiving a telephone call from one of the student leaders in Farmville asking for help. A Howard Law School classmate of Thurgood Marshall, Hill had handled numerous civil rights cases for the NAACP in Virginia. He was also familiar with the overcrowded conditions in the segregated schools in Prince Edward County, the school district where Farmville was located. He doubted that the strike would have much effect on current district policies, but he did agree to meet with the students and assess the feasibility of filing a lawsuit in Farmville. His legal assistance combined with the determined efforts of community residents resulted in the school desegregation case called *Davis, et. al. v. Prince Edward County School Board*. This lawsuit was reviewed by the United States Supreme Court along with the *Brown* case.

Interviews conducted in Topeka contained recollections of September 1951 when a local NAACP plan was put into action. A total of 13 African-American parents tried to enroll their grade school children into neighborhood schools that fall. Mrs. Lucinda Todd with her daughter Nancy and Mrs. Lena Carper with her daughter Catherine attempted enrollment in Randolph Elementary School. Mrs. Sadie Emmanuel tried to enroll her young son James in Lafayette Elementary. Oliver Brown took his eldest daughter Linda and tried to enroll her in Sumner Elementary School, a few blocks from their home. Throughout Topeka the story was similar. Though these young children lived within four to five

The Living Memory of the Past

Orally-communicated history—that vividly detailed information that is brought to light when people speak from memory of times past—is increasingly recognized as a valuable research tool. As the historian investigates his subject and moves from the documentary to the physical evidence, he still may be faced with gaps in the record. It is at this time that oral history—the living memory of the past—becomes important and useful.

The vast amount of this information never gets recorded and the documentary record is left incomplete. Human beings simply never take the time or have the opportunity to record their feelings and preserve the memory of their role in history. Historians such as Alex Haley and Studs Turkel have shown that oral history techniques can and should be used to complement the documentary evidence. Indeed, oral history provides another view of history by preserving the memory, emotions, and feelings of the participants of the history event in question.

This technique is extremely important in preserving and recording the memory of the modern Civil Rights movement as illustrated by Jean Van Delinder's article. Hopefully, as a result of these efforts, the stories of the people who lived the events associated with the *Brown v. Board of Education* cases will be preserved and remembered by subsequent generations of Americans.

—Harry A. Butowsky

Mrs. Lucinda Todd with her daughter Nancy. They were plaintiffs along with twelve other families in the Brown case. Mrs. Todd served as NAACP secretary and had taught in a segregated black school. She was the first to volunteer to act as a plaintiff in the Topeka case.



Participants in Briggs v. Elliott. Photo courtesy A. Delaine, Jr.

blocks of a white school, they were bussed 10 to 20 blocks to one of the four segregated schools.

The children remember their experience, that fall, of waiting in hallways for their parents to return from hushed conversations with school officials. Linda remembers waiting outside the principal's office while her father went inside to speak to Frank Wilson, the principal of Sumner. She doesn't remember much else about that day except afterward when they were walking home her father held her tightly by the hand, hurrying her with his long strides. Frank Wilson remembers Oliver

Brown arriving at his office that September morning. He remembers him as a quiet, dignified looking man. He wasn't surprised by the arrival of this reticent man with his eldest daughter standing shyly next to him. Wilson had been expecting such a visit since early summer when he was warned by Topeka School

Superintendent, Kenneth McFarland, that the local NAACP would attempt to enroll African-American children in

schools that were reserved for white Topekans. Wilson, like principals of white schools across Topeka encountering African-American parents that fall, politely received Oliver Brown and listened to his request to enroll his daughter, and

politely refused to allow it. African-American children had their own schools to attend.

Under the existing state statutes, Topeka was within its rights to segregate elementary schools on the basis of race. The scene played out just as Superintendent McFarland had planned. The threat of legal action did not deter McFarland in his mission to keep segregation status quo in Topeka. He had been named as a defendant before in lawsuits. McFarland, and Wilson too, knew they probably would later be named as defendants in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. This did not alter either of their courses of action. For one reason or another, each in his own way felt responsible to maintain segregation.

Over 50 interviews have been completed to date with individuals ranging from former plaintiffs and attorneys to NAACP officials and those who served as expert witnesses. Key interviews include Robert Carter, formerly an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF). It was Carter who assisted local attorneys in arguing the Kansas case; Jack Greenberg, former LDF attorney, who went on to head that organization; and finally, Paul Wilson who argued for Kansas and those not wanting to dismantle segregated schools.

Because of the complex stories that comprise *Brown*, an oral history advisory committee was established. The committee's purpose was to identify individuals to be interviewed and issues to be addressed in the interviews. The committee was composed of long-time residents of the area (over thirty years) and representatives of the three cooperating agencies.

Additional interviews are scheduled to take place in the spring of 1996. These interviews will include individuals involved in the cases from Delaware and Washington, DC.

The personal sacrifices made by these and many other African Americans of Summerton, South Carolina and Farmville, Virginia are as essential to the *Brown* story as the events that happened in Topeka. Through oral history interviews, these forgotten moments in civil rights history provide an engrossing way to make history come alive.

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