

Interview with **Leola Montgomery**

October 26, 1985

Interviewer: Llewelyn Smith

Camera Rolls: 110-111

Sound Rolls: 1105

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Leola Montgomery, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 26, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 110]

[sound roll 1105]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: —UNCLEAR ABOUT SOMETHING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: GOOD. OK, LLEW, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I WANT TO ASK YOU, FOR OUR FIRST QUESTION, THE SAME QUESTION I WAS ASKING LINDA, WHICH IS TOPEKA SEEMED LIKE, AT THE TIME, A FAIRLY UNUSUAL PLACE FOR THIS KIND OF A LAWSUIT. THE SCHOOLS, AT THE HIGH SCHOOL, AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL WERE INTEGRATED.

Montgomery: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: THERE WERE INTEGRATED NEIGHBORHOODS, IT WAS A FAIRLY QUIET NEIGHBORHOOD. CAN YOU TELL US SOMETHING IN YOUR

OWN WORDS ABOUT WHAT TOPEKA WAS LIKE AT THAT TIME?

Montgomery: Well, Topeka was a quiet place, but it was a segregated place—a very segregated place. And I mean, there was segregation in the hotels, and in the eating places—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: I'M SORRY, I HAVE TO STOP FOR ONE MOMENT.

[cut]

[wild audio]

Montgomery: Ok.

INTERVIEWER: IT'S VERY IMPORTANT—

[cut]

00:00:54:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, LLEW, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: AGAIN, IF YOU COULD TELL US IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WHAT TOPEKA WAS LIKE AT THIS TIME. IT WAS AN UNUSUAL PLACE FOR THIS KIND OF LAWSUIT. THERE WERE INTEGRATED SCHOOLS, CERTAIN INTEGRATED NEIGHBORHOODS. WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

Montgomery: There were integrated neighborhoods, and intregra—integrated schools but—

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU STOP PLEASE?

[production discussion]

INTERVIEWER: START OVER.

INTERVIEWER: START—

Montgomery: Me?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, JUST START—

Montgomery: Ok. There were integrated schools, and integrated neighborhoods, but yet it was a very segregated city. The—we had the blacks—oh. [noise in background]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SORRY.

INTERVIEWER: IT'S DOWNSTAIRS.

[audio cut]

[cut]

00:01:41:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET ME GET SETTLED HERE, IT'LL JUST TAKE ONE MOMENT. OK THIS IS THREE'S A CHARM. OK.

Montgomery: There were integrated schools, integrated neighborhoods, but there still was a lot of segregation in Topeka. The blacks had their own places to go, the whites had their own places to go. So in one respect, we really weren't integrated, as we should have been. But there was integration in the junior high school, and the high school, and had been all during the time. But it was just at the elementary level that they were not integrated. And, of course, we had quality schools, but then, it wasn't a matter of being a quality school, it was a matter of having to go so far to school, when there was a school in our neighborhood, four blocks away.

00:02:35:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR US THE, THE WALK THAT YOUR DAUGHTER HAD TO TAKE, AND YOUR CONCERNS AND YOUR HUSBAND'S CONCERNS ABOUT THAT?

Montgomery: She had to go five blocks, up the rail—between the railroad yard. In fact, she had to cross one busy street, and then go through the railroad yard, and then cross the busy Kansas Avenue, that was a main thoroughfare, and stand on the corner and wait for the school bus, which was very traumatic for a small child.

00:03:06:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS THE RAILROAD YARD DANGEROUS? WAS THERE—

Montgomery: Yes, it was, because it switched—it was a switch headquarters, or headquarters where they switched the train—cars back and forth, you know, where they'd have an engine, and they'd cut them loose and switch them, you know, so, anything could happen at any

given time, if you weren't very careful.

00:03:27:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR US YOUR, YOUR HUSBAND? WHAT WAS HE LIKE, AND WHAT WAS IT THAT YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND WANTED TO ACHIEVE BY BRINGING THE LAWSUIT?

Montgomery: My husband was a very strong, dedicated man. And he was always on the lookout for something he could do to help his people. And having gone into the ministry, I think that was really the turning point that made him really want to branch out, into the deep water, to help his people more. And then going into the NAACP, he was a very strong member in the NAACP at the time. And the NAACP got behind these parents, and asked them to go to these different schools, to try to enroll their children, which they did. And the outcome was that they couldn't enroll them. They went back to the NAACP, and consequently, the case was started against the school board.

[production discussion]

[cut]

00:04:39:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO FOLLOW UP ON SOMETHING YOU WERE JUST TELLING ME [laughs]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: STOP [laughs] WE JUST HAD BLACK COFFEE.

[cut]

00:04:57:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

Montgomery: After having gone over to the school to enroll Linda, and then came home, and he was very much upset, and he said to me that they wouldn't enroll Linda at Sumner Grade School, and said that it wasn't the policy—it wasn't the principal, but it was the policy of the school board, that blacks go to separate but equal schools. He says, but I can't go along with that, he says, it's just pointless to have a school in your neighborhood, and not being able to attend. So we pay taxes, just like everybody else, on these schools. So he says, I'm going to see if we can't get something done about it. And that's when he went back to the NAACP, and reported, and they decided to start the case against the school board.

00:05:50:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS HE UPSET THAT NIGHT?

Montgomery: Yes, he was very much upset. Yes, he was very much upset.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE—EXCUSE ME, WHAT WAS THE BLACK SCHOOL LIKE?

Montgomery: The black school was a very good school. We don't have any qualms about our schools. They were very good schools, we had quality teachers, the children did get quality educations if they did have the second-hand books, so to speak, because some of the books that they got were handed down from the white schools. But they had quality education. The teachers were very much concerned about the students, their education, and seeing that they got a quality education. So we had very, very good black schools. And when the children came out, they were well learned. They were ready to be integrated into the junior high school with the white children.

00:06:48:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE RANGE OF REACTION IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY TO, TO WHAT YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND WERE DOING WITH THE NAACP?

Montgomery: We had no feedback—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN OUT HERE. LET ME—

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: —HOLD THAT FOR ME

[cut]

00:07:03:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 111]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK. ANYTIME LLEW, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL US AGAIN ABOUT THE RANGE OF REACTION IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY TO WHAT YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND WERE DOING WITH THE NAACP IN THIS SUIT?

Montgomery: We really didn't have any adverse reaction. Everybody seemed to be for it, except one woman. There was one woman that said, well, why do you want to do that? Aren't you pleased with what we already have? Why do you want your children to be going to school with the white children, you know. And we tried to explain that it wasn't that. But it was that—just the thought of her having to go so far, when there was a school in our neighborhood, you know. And she should be able to go to it, as we were taxpayers, as well as anyone else, you know. It wasn't that we just wanted to be with someone else, you know.

[production discussion]

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: THERE'S A PLUG I HAD—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: IS THAT A CUT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: YES PLEASE.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:08:16:00

INTERVIEWER: THE LOWER COURTS DECIDED THAT THE SCHOOLS, THE BLACK SCHOOL, AND THE WHITE SCHOOL, WERE BOTH EQUAL. WHAT WAS

YOUR OPINION ABOUT THAT? WOULD YOU HAVE AGREED WITH THAT AT THE TIME?

Montgomery: Well, so far as education was concerned, I would say that we were getting a quality education. It might not have been on the same level, as the other, the white children were—not quite as good an education as they were getting. But they just, in that respect, I don't think they were equal. So that was one reason that we wanted to pursue it to a higher court.

00:08:58:00

INTERVIEWER: FINALLY, CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: [inaudible]

INTERVIEWER: WE SHOULD STOP FOR A SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: STOP IF THAT'S ALL RIGHT WITH YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 4: I THINK WE CAN JUST GO ON, I THINK IT'S ALL RIGHT.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: I DIDN'T CUT YET.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: YEAH, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT.

INTERVIEWER: FINALLY, CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS, AND YOUR HUSBAND'S FEELINGS, WHEN, YOU HEARD THAT THE, THE SUPREME COURT HAD UPHELD YOUR CASE?

Montgomery: Oh my, I tell you, when I heard it on the radio that day, I was home alone, and I was just almost shouting myself. I was just overjoyed, you know. And I got on the phone and called my mother, and I told her about it, and I think we both were in tears, when we were talking about it. And I could not wait until my family got home that evening. First the children came, and I told them, and they were just real happy. We all were happy. And then when my husband came in, and I told him, oh, we just had a hallelujah time. And he said a special prayer, as I said, he was a minister, and it was just, just—something that we just couldn't—

00:10:00:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY I'M GOING TO HAVE TO REMIND YOU—

Montgomery: Yeah, all right.

INTERVIEWER: —TO TALK TO THE LITTLE BUTTON AND TRY TO AVOID
LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW IF YOU COULD.

Montgomery: We were so, caught up with emotions. There were tears of joy and we just had a very good time that night. And we called everybody we could, to relate—relay the news to them.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: COULD YOU JUST SAY, TELL THAT AGAIN, JUST,
JUST SO THAT WE HAVE IT WITHOUT A BREAK?

Montgomery: When I, I was home that day, alone, and when I heard the news that the decision had been handed down in our favor, and I was just overjoyed. I was just so happy, I, the first thing I did was to call my mother. And she and I were both were, I think were in tears, when we were talking about it. And I could hardly wait until my family came home that evening. First the children got home, and I told them. And they were very, very pleased in, as I was. And then when my husband came home, oh, we were all very much elated. And he said a special prayer, he was so happy about it. Thanks be to God that this had been—had, had happened, that something was going to be done for his people, at last.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: THANK YOU. THANK YOU.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:11:13:00

© Copyright Washington University Libraries 2016