

Interview with **Harry Briggs, Jr.**

November 2, 1985

Interviewer: Orlando Bagwell

Production Team: A

Camera Roll: 145

Sound Rolls: 1120-1121

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.

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**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 145]

[sound roll 1120]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND TWENTY-TWO.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: OK? THE FIRST THING I WANTED TO ASK YOU, MR. BRIGGS, IS  
COULD YOU DESCRIBE FOR US WHAT THE BLACK SCHOOLS WERE LIKE WHEN  
YOU WERE A CHILD IN CLARENDON COUNTY.

Briggs, Jr.: Well, the schools, our schools, we had one schools [sic] and that was heated by  
coals then at the time the coals run out, you have to go outside and cut the wood and make  
our own heat. So at the white schools they had brick schools, and then they had coals also,  
but we had coals and once the coals run out we have to go back in the woods and make fire  
for our own heat.

00:00:42:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS IT A VERY BIG SCHOOL?

Briggs, Jr.: It's [sic] only had twelve rooms, six on each side, and the hallway right in the middle of it. So it's not, wasn't small—wasn't large at all, only twelve rooms. One, one room for each grade: first grade, second grade and on up to twelfth grade. So, twelve rooms, twelve grades.

00:01:01:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TELLING ME ABOUT THE WHITE SCHOOLS. WERE THERE—WAS THERE ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT THEM THAT STANDS OUT IN YOUR MIND?

Briggs, Jr.: The white schools in town, they was closer. Most of the whites had their own cars, so they would bring the children to school that were not living in town. And where we had to walk, everything else.

00:01:21:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL US SOME OTHER THINGS ABOUT CLARENDON COUNTY. WHAT, WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN TERMS OF WHAT BLACKS DID FOR A LIVING?

Briggs, Jr.: The blacks had the farm and we had, like if you sharecropped you'd live on the white man's plantation, and then at times, and say, bittersweet. And what they get for a living, they work, work—stay on the white man's place. So, like if, if you wanted to make a living, you had to plow your own fields, pick your own cotton for them, feed 'em, wash their clothes and cook for 'em.

[background conversation]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CUT PLEASE.

[cut]

00:02:01:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SOUND 23. OK.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR ME AGAIN WHAT WAS SHARECROPPING LIKE FOR BLACKS IN CLAREDON?

Briggs, Jr.: Share—sharecropping, that's when the white man own their own land, and the blacks were staying on their land, therefore they have to plow for 'em, cook for 'em, wash

for 'em and pick they own cotton. Cotton, corn, everything else, wheat, whatever. Then the black kids have to go to school, come back in the afternoon and help their parents finish—work until night.

00:02:33:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU WORK IN THE FIELDS AS WELL?

Briggs, Jr.: I worked in the fields, but luckily we worked, we had our own—so I did work in the fields.

00:02:44:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL WHAT—TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FATHER. WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM AFTER HE SIGNED THE PETITION TO SUE THE SCHOOLS?

Briggs, Jr.: Well, they told him to take his name off the petition and he didn't. So he had his job at the gas station for so many years, and they told him if he don't take his name off the petition, that they would fire him. So he didn't, so they fired him. So he tried farming a few years. There wasn't enough money coming in to support the family, so he left and he went to Florida. So he worked in Florida and every week or so sent mother some money to take care of the kids. Then when he get time off, he come up and see us and then go back to Florida.

00:03:24:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU AFTER THE PETITION GOT SIGNED AND THE, AND THE CASE BEGAN?

Briggs, Jr.: What happened to me? I couldn't get a job. They wouldn't give me a job, for no, for no reason. And this have me—they give me a nickname, they call me a nigger, you know. No, Seg, Seg, like with segregation, they call me Seg. So my classmates, my friends used to get in a lot of fights over that. Name was Seg. And then it was time, time for the school bus, at the time they said that's Harry Briggs' son, so don't let him take the test for the school bus. So they discuss a little something over to themselves, they said well, we let him take the test. They will, we will not give him a bus. So I took the test, I passed the test, time for to give the guys the buses to run the routes, they don't give me a bus. So one time one of my friends what got sick, so I run his route. They, they saw the school bus in my yard. So they called the other guy who was in charge of gassing the buses up, told him, told him to get that bus out of Harry Briggs's yard, that he will get fired. So he called me and decided look, you can't drive. You're not my replacement anymore. And that's what happened.

00:04:36:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TELLING ME A STORY ABOUT AS A CHILD, A JOB MOWING THE LAWNS, CAN YOU TELL ME THAT STORY?

Briggs, Jr.: Yeah, well, I had one, one job offered to me: mowing the lawn. So I go ahead, yeah, pretty big, pretty large lawn. So they had a white guy there mowing the lawn where he had a gas, gas motor. So when I got there, they give me the job. They took the gas motor, and throw it in the barn, and give me one of these, one of these push-jobs. Once your grass gets so high, light as I am, and I'm pushing. So I did it for one day, and told my father, I'm not going back. So he sent me back with another pushing the lawnmower, and I sat there in 110 degrees and 100 degrees. This is too much.

00:05:18:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY DO YOU THINK THAT THEY GAVE YOU SUCH A HARD TIME?

Briggs, Jr.: I don't know why, I don't know why, why only just me. But my brother, he could get a job. My sister could get a job. I don't get me a job, no way. So goes, my father signed the petition, my name was Harry Briggs Jr. everybody know me. That's Harry's son. That's Harry's son. So, it's rough on me, you know.

00:05:43:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU REMEMBER HOW YOU FELT ABOUT THE SUPREME COURT DECISION WHEN IT CAME DOWN?

Briggs, Jr.: I don't exactly really. I'll be honest I don't. It's one—no.

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU HAPPY ABOUT IT?

Briggs, Jr.: Well, sure I was happy about it. They were signing it in fifty, '54 then there was one again in '59. It was only five years, you know, but still I was learning about it, but I was proud about it.

00:06:08:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR FATHER AFTER THE DECISION CAME DOWN?

Briggs, Jr.: Oh, I feel great as hell. We were only the best mans [sic] in the world that do this, you know, 'cause a lot of people sign the petition. Everyone sign it then they have to have a place to sign it. Actually they sign the petition in my, in my parents' house. He was the leader 'cause, guess they were going by alphabets or what. Briggs comes first, so Briggs had to sign, and they sign ten time apiece. Ten different, papers. So I sign my name ten time. I was a small kid, so I had to write my name ten time. At the time I didn't know what I was doing until afterwards, make me feel great too, also.

[cut]

00:06:49:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND SYNC. SOUND TWENTY-FOUR.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU EVER GO TO A DESEGREGATED SCHOOL YOURSELF, SIR?

Briggs, Jr.: No we haven't—I didn't. They must—they only start that about, six or seven or eight years ago. White with black. Once they started that the white take the, take the students, white students out of the white school and built their own private school. So that's why we have a Scott's Branch and we have Summerton School. See, then once we went to summer school [sic] that's when they built their own private school. We have a few whites they go with the black now. But I never attend desegregated school.

INTERVIEWER: DID? OH GO AHEAD.

[cut]

00:07:32:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TWENTY-FOUR.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TWENTY-FIVE RATHER.

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU EVER DISCOURAGED? DID YOU EVER REGRET THAT YOUR FATHER SIGNED THIS PETITION? DID YOU EVER WISH HE'D JUST TAKE HIS NAME OFF SO THESE GUYS WOULD LEAVE YOU ALONE?

Briggs, Jr.: No, I never, never wished that. He said he was proud of it. Why should I want to take his name off? So be right now, he feel proud of himself [sic] and a lot of people give him respect now. That what he did, a lot of people didn't do it. A lot of people like other people had their jobs, farming, with farming and everything else. My father, he did all the suffering. So, he really proud of it and make me feel proud too.

00:08:15:00

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO ASK YOU AGAIN ABOUT THE BLACK SCHOOLS, BUT WHEN YOU GIVE YOUR ANSWER JUST SAY IT A LITTLE MORE SLOWLY. IF YOU COULD JUST DESCRIBE TO US AGAIN WHAT THE BLACK SCHOOLS WERE LIKE AND WHAT THAT WAS LIKE FOR YOU AS A CHILD.

Briggs, Jr.: The black school, it was, it was full. And, and our building was made out of wood. So a lot of, lot of the cracks was in it, a lot of the holes was in it, and we have to make, make our fire by coals. And once our coals run out, we have to go in the woods across the street to chop our wood and make our own heat. And so which—where the white had brick school. So, I forgot what they were run by, coal or—had to been coal—I don't think there was no gas then at the time. Maybe gas, so, I don't know. So bad our school was, only, say only twelve rooms, one for each grade. And it had one small cafeteria, and had the principal in one little, called the principal's office. And if you do something bad, then they send you out in the hallway and the principal step out and looks down the hall. He calls you up to his office.

00:09:19:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Briggs Jr.: What you did wrong? And that's where they punish you also, and they send you out to chop some more wood or cut the hedges on the, on the, on the school yard.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT WAS WONDERFUL.

00:09:36:00

[cut]

[end of interview]

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