

Interview with **Linda Brown Smith**

October 26, 1985

Topeka, Kansas

Production Team: A

Camera Rolls: 109-111

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 Linda Brown Smith, 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 109]

[sound roll 1105]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

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

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, THE FIRST THING I WANTED TO ASK YOU ABOUT IS TOPEKA IN TERMS OF RACE RELATIONS TOPEKA SEEMS LIKE AN UNLIKELY PLACE FOR THIS KIND OF A LAWSUIT. IT WAS FAIRLY QUIET TOWN. YOU LIVED IN AN INTEGRATED NEIGHBORHOOD. THE JUNIOR HIGH AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS WERE INTEGRATED. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT? ABOUT TOPEKA?

Smith: At the time the suit was filed Topeka was partially integrated. There were integrated neighborhoods. There were integrated high schools, integrated junior high schools. The only schools in town that were not integrated were the elementary schools and this was the reason the suit was instigated, because of the elementary schools being segregated.

00:01:06:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WERE THE NEIGHBORHOODS IN TOPEKA INTEGRATED AS WELL?

Smith: The neighborhoods of Topeka, at that time, were integrated. In fact, I lived in an integrated neighborhood. I played with children that were Spanish-American. I played with children that were white, children that were Indian, and black children in my neighborhood.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN WE CUT FOR ONE SECOND?

[cut]

00:01:29:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU, SIR. GIVE ME ONE SECOND HERE, LLEW, TO SETTLE DOWN.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TAKES ME A MINUTE TO GET SQUARED AWAY. OK, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER 1: NOW IF YOU COULD DESCRIBE FOR US THE WALK THAT YOU TOOK EVERY DAY TO THE BLACK SCHOOL IN TOPEKA, TO TAKE THE BUS, AND HOW LONG THAT WAS FOR YOU AND HOW LONG IT SEEMED A WALK. WHAT THE WALK WAS LIKE.

Smith: I was a very young child when I started walking to school. I remember the walk as being very long at that time. In fact, it was several blocks up through railroad yards and crossing a busy avenue and standing on the corner and waiting for the school bus to carry me two miles across town to an all-black school. Being a young child—when I first started the walk it was very frightening to me and then when wintertime came it was a very cold walk. I remember that. I remember walking, tears freezing upon my face, because I began to cry because it was so cold, and many times I had to turn around and run back home.

INTERVIEWER 1: DID YOU WALK BY YOURSELF IN THOSE DAYS?

Smith: I walked part of the way by myself and then other children joined me as I got near the avenue. Other children—other black children of the neighborhood joined me and we all waited on the avenue for the bus.

00:02:57:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FATHER FOR US, OLIVER BROWN. WHAT IT WAS THAT HE WANTED TO ACHIEVE IN, IN THIS LAWSUIT AND, AND THE KIND OF MAN HE WAS?

Smith: My father was like a lot of other black parents here in Topeka, at that time. They were concerned not about the quality of education that their children were receiving. They were concerned about the amount or distance that the child had to go to receive an education. My father believed very much in right and he felt that it was wrong for black people to have to accept second-class citizenship and that meant being segregated in their schools, when in fact, there were schools right in their neighborhoods that they could attend and they had to go clear across town to attend an all-black school. And this is one of the reasons that he became involved in this suit, because he felt that it was wrong for his child to have to go so far a distance to receive a quality education.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN WE, CAN WE STOP IT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

[cut]

00:04:10:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: —THE KIND OF MAN HE WAS AND WHY HE WAS SO UPSET ABOUT THE, THE WALK YOU HAD TO TAKE. I'LL, I'LL ASK YOU THE QUESTION.

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

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU DESCRIBE MORE FULLY, IN, IN WORD PICTURE, IF YOU WILL, YOUR FATHER AS A MAN AS YOU REMEMBER HIM, DURING THOSE TIMES AND WHY HE WAS SO UPSET WITH YOUR HAVING TO TAKE THE WALK THAT YOU TOOK.

Smith: I remember my father as being a very strong man, a ver—very family-oriented man and this led him to become a part of the NAACP here in Topeka and become a part of the suit filed in behalf of his child. Because he believed that a child having to go so far to receive a quality education was wrong just because of the color of skin. And he was very, very determined that something was going to be done about this.

00:05:06:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS THE BLACK SCHOOL LIKE THAT YOU WENT TO? WAS IT, AS YOU REMEMBER, THE SAME QUALITY AS THE WHITE SCHOOL IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD?

Smith: I remember Monroe School, the all-black school that I attended, as being a very good school as far as quality is concerned. The teachers were very good teachers. They set very good examples for their students and they expected no less of the student. I remember the facility being a very nice facility, being very well-kept. I remember the materials that we used being of good quality. As I said, this was not the issue of that time, quality education, but it was the distance that I had to go to acquire that education.

00:05:56:00

INTERVIEWER 1: [pause] THE LAST QUESTION I WANTED TO ASK YOU IS THE BROWN CASE IN, IN MANY WAYS STARTED THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND I'D LIKE YOU TO DESCRIBE FOR ME, WHAT YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT IMPACT OF, OF THE CASE AND HOW YOU FELT ABOUT IT.

Smith: The most important aspect or—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME.

[cut]

00:06:24:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO GET IS A SENSE OF YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THAT, THAT—

Smith: The impact of the case—

INTERVIEWER 1: THE IMPACT OF THE CASE AND, AND YOUR OWN PERSONAL FEELINGS. YOUR PERCEPTION OF THE IMPACT AND YOUR OWN FEELINGS ABOUT IT. I'LL ASK THE QUESTION AGAIN. THE BROWN CASE IN MANY WAYS STARTED THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND WE'D VERY MUCH LIKE TO HAVE YOU DESCRIBE FOR, FOR US YOUR, YOUR ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF, OF THAT AND, ALSO, YOUR PERSONAL FEELINGS ABOUT THAT—YOUR, YOUR—THE FEELINGS IN YOUR HEART.

Smith: The impact that the case Brown v. Board of Education has made in the last thirty

years, I feel, has been—can we stop, I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER 1: SURE, SURE. NO, NO.

[cut]

00:07:09:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER 1: IF YOU CAN DESCRIBE—YOU SET?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH, I'M SET. IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER 1: AGAIN, IF YOU CAN DESCRIBE FOR US YOUR, YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE BROWN CASE. THE IMPACT OF IT AND YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE IMPACT IT HAD ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES.

Smith: I feel that after thirty years, looking back on Brown v. The Board of Education, it has made an impact in all facets of life for minorities throughout the land. I really think of it in terms of what it has done for our young people in taking away that feeling of second class citizenship. I think it has made the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of our young people greater today.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN, YOUR ROLE—YOUR OWN ROLE IN, IN THAT, THAT LEGACY? DO YOU EVER CONSIDER THAT SOMETIMES?

Smith: I think about what my father and what other parents did and what my family did, as far as our part that we played in Brown v. Board of Education, and I feel that because of what my father thought and because of what other parents throughout the land thought about their child having to live with the stigma of not having a choice, and what they did, has caused that stigma to be lifted today.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SHOULD I CUT?

INTERVIEWER 2: YEAH STOP FOR A MOMENT—

[cut]

00:08:44:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU. OK.

INTERVIEWER 1: FINALLY, CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT HOW YOU LEARNED ABOUT THE DECISION BEING HANDED DOWN IN '54? WHERE YOU WERE AND WHAT THAT DAY WAS LIKE.

Smith: On the de—day, on the day the decision was handed down, I was attending school and my father was at work. My mother was at home doing the family ironing and she heard on the radio the decision that had been handed down through the Supreme Court. I learned about it that evening upon arriving home from school. I noticed that my mother was very overjoyed at something and then when she shared the news with me, I felt a joy too, because I felt that my sisters wouldn't have to walk so far to school the next fall. My father arrived home that evening and she relayed the message to him about what had happened and he was just, just overjoyed. There was joy throughout our family, throughout the home that evening. In fact, we gathered together and my father did, in fact, say, thanks be unto God, because he knew that this was the right thing that had happened, and they had fought so hard for this.

INTERVIEWER 2: STOP PLEASE. WHAT A LOVELY STORY.

[cut]

00:10:08:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU. ONE SECOND.

INTERVIEWER 2: REMEMBER TO LOOK AT ME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK. YEAH LOOK UP AT LLEW.

Smith: OK. My father took me by the hand and we walked over to the all-white Sumner Elementary School which was four blocks from my home. Being very small, the steps seemed very large and tall, and we walked into this building. My father asked me to stay outside and sit in the foyer and he went into the inner office with the principal and they talked. And as they talked, I could hear the voices growing louder and I knew something was causing my father to be very distressed. After a while, he came out of the principal's office and he took me by the hand and we started walking home, walk—walking home from school. And I could feel tension within his hand, fe—feel the tension from his body being generated to my hand, because he was very upset about something. I didn't know exactly what had gone on, I was hopeful that I would get to go to this school next fall, because that's where my playmates went to school.

00:11:11:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE GONNA HAVE TO CUT RIGHT THERE IN THE MIDDLE.

INTERVIEWER 1: THAT'S EXACTLY—

[laughs]

00:11:19:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 110]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU. OK, MRS. SMITH.

Smith: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: REMEMBER TO TALK TO LLEW.

Smith: Oh right. OK. I remember the day that we walked over to Sumner School, the all-white school, four blocks from our home. My father took me by the hand and we walked briskly over to the school. I remember going inside the building. Being a small child, the steps seemed large, the building seemed large. We walked inside. My father asked me to stay outside in the foyer and sit. He went inside with the principal and they talked. And as they talked, I remember their voices growing louder and louder and I knew something was wrong. After a while my father came out, he took me by the hand, and we began to walk home. And as we walked home, I could feel tension within his body being transmitted to my hand. And I looked up at him and I knew something was wrong. When we got home, he tried to explain to me that they turned me down and I would not be able to go to the school that my playmates went to because of the color of my skin. But being a young child, I didn't comprehend color of skin. I only knew that I wanted to go to Sumner School.

INTERVIEWER 1: WOO. CUT.

[cut]

00:12:40:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK. ONE SECOND HERE. I'M ALL SETTLED DOWN. YEAH AND REMEMBER TO TALK OVER TO THE—

Smith: At the time the suit was going on the black teachers here in the school system did receive a letter from the Board of Education, saying that, in fact, if the decision was handed down in favor of desegregation of schools they may not have a job that coming fall. Because there were some black—some white parents here in the city that were very concerned about their children being taught by black chi—black teachers. And the teachers were very concerned that their livelihood would be in jeopardy if desegregation of schools came about.

00:13:26:00

INTERVIEWER 2: I THINK WE CAN KEEP GOING.

INTERVIEWER 1: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER 2: JOHN HAD THIS QUESTION WHICH IS JUST A LITTLE ONE TO THROW IN COULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FATHER FOR US, AS A, AS A PERSON, AS A MAN? WAS HE TALL, WAS HE SHORT?

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT DID HE LOOK LIKE?

INTERVIEWER 2: WHAT DID HE LOOK LIKE?

Smith: Just like me. [laughs] I'm Oliver Brown two. But, well, let's see, physical aspects, is that what you—

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT YOU, WHAT YOU REMEMBER.

Smith: Well, as I said, I remember him being a, a very strong person sort of a, a heavy-set man with very strong, determined looking eyes. I remember that about my father. And when he spoke, he had a voice that was very authoritative [sic]. I re—I remember him looking like, what I would, I would really consider a father to be like, a very strong, powerful looking individual.

INTERVIEWER 1: DID HE HAVE BIG HANDS?

Smith: Not extremely big hands, no. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 2: OH THAT'S LOVELY. SO LOVELY. I THINK WE CAN STOP.

00:14:40:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 2: I'M VERY HAPPY. HE LOOKED LIKE A FATHER.

INTERVIEWER 1: HE LOOKED LIKE A FATHER SHOULD LOOK LIKE.

00:14:42:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU.

Smith: I remember—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HANG ON. JUST A MOMENT.

Smith: Oh, OK.

INTERVIEWER 2: HAVE TO GET FOCUSED HERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Smith: I remember my father being, what we called him, the Joe Louis type. In fact, he did play in the—box in the golden gloves, and he did win the championship here on the local level. We had a picture of him in his boxing gloves and the picture did remind us of his idol, Joe Louis, because he had that type of build and that type of stance and we called him our Joe Louis.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND CUT.

INTERVIEWER 2: THANKS. THAT'S LOVELY.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:15:24:00

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