

Interview with **Harold Engstrom**

October 29, 1985

Little Rock, Arkansas

Production Team: A

Camera Rolls: 112-116

Sound Rolls: 1106-1107

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 Harold Engstrom, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 29, 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 112]

[sound roll 1106]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU SIR.

INTERVIEWER: WHILE HE'S GETTING HIMSELF SET, THE FIRST QUESTION, AND YOU'LL WANT TO LOOK AT ME NOT, NOT THESE INVISIBLE PEOPLE, COULD YOU GIVE US A DESCRIPTION, A WORD PICTURE OF LITTLE ROCK, AT ABOUT THIS TIME? AS A CITY, A MODERATE CITY, MAYBE, AN IDEA OF HOW SEGREGATED A CITY IT WAS OR WASN'T AT THE TIME?

Engstrom: Little Rock was a city between the south and the southwest, between the south—southwest and the Midwest. It was a city that was growing. It was a city that was trying to make things better. We had new highway programs. We had hopes for better education. We were going through agricultural transition from the farm animals to the farm machinery and we'd all been to, to war and found out that it was a bigger world and that maybe we would be doing business with people outside of our state or outside of our community. So, and we were trying to build a better school system and those of us that were asked to serve on the Board or elected to serve on the Board, that was our real objective, at the time. Our sole

objective was to get our school system operating better each year, each—the teachers were into training programs, we school members were in a training program. We'd go to class, at night, and try to understand how to treat gifted children and so on. And the integration of the schools was just one of our problems to be solved and our Blossom Plan was our solution. And we thought it was proper, right, constructive, and, and that was the mood. Now, as to what—where we were, thirty years ago, in integration, so much different than we think of the question today, because we just recently integrated our lunchrooms. We'd just beginning to think about integrating our, our—well, we weren't even thinking yet, probably, by—about integrating our churches. And so we're much further back, in the progress then and now, but—but it was not a—there was no clash in the community before the crisis. Everybody was trying to improve things and, of course, there were differences of opinion. There were different groups, but all of us, seemed to me, were trying to build a better world.

00:02:52:00

INTERVIEWER: IN TERMS OF BEING A SOUTHERN CITY, WOULD YOU CLASSIFY LITTLE ROCK AS HAVING BEEN MODERATE, ABOUT MIDDLE OF THE SPECTRUM OR FURTHER TO ONE SIDE OR ANOTHER? WHERE, WHERE WOULD YOU PLACE IT?

Engstrom: Well, we certainly were not—Little Rock was certainly not a, a dedicated southern city like Alabama or, or Mississippi. We were not as liberal as some of the—well we in Little Rock were not as liberal as some of the other parts of the state—the northwestern part of the state, which has always been a little more closely tied to Missouri and to the Midwest, and, and closer to the Mason-Dixon line and the Civil War, actually Republican counties at the time of—after the Civil War. Little Rock was in between. Little Rock was a moderate, median attitude about things, and—my word was kind of the word of objective, we were constructive, trying to get beyond this point to something better and something further along the way.

00:04:07:00

INTERVIEWER: WHILE WE'RE HAVING YOU DESCRIBE THINGS, COULD YOU TALK ABOUT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL. AGAIN, WE'RE TALKING JUST ABOUT WHAT IT LOOKED LIKE—WHAT IT SEEMED—YOU WERE A GRADUATE YOURSELF THERE?

Engstrom: Yes. Central High School was a, a point of pride in the community. Both in the structure, the location, the grounds, it was also a point of pride in the quality of the product. It was—we proudly said that we were rated, I think 21st or 30th or something, in a national rating on high schools over the whole country. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but it was in *Life* magazine or something, and, and we were very proud of that, and we—we were, as I said, we were constantly trying to improve it. All of the students in the community, all the white students in the community went to Central High School up until the, the plan for integration. We built two new high schools to accept our growth, but to also fit in to the plan of how the integration would work. One would be in the, the eastern black community and

the other would be in the western white community and, all of the integration in the initial stage, would be at Central High. But it was not because of any—anything except pride in Central High. Central High had always succeeded in everything else, we thought it would succeed in this.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT PLEASE.

[cut]

00:05:40:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU, FOR THE NEXT QUESTION, ABOUT, ABOUT THE ORIGINAL PLAN FOR DESEGREGATION IN LITTLE ROCK THAT WAS STARTED RIGHT AFTER THE SUPREME COURT DECISION. IF YOU COULD DESCRIBE THAT AND HOW THAT, HOW THAT WAS DEVELOPED AND, AND HOW IT CHANGED TO BECOME THE PLAN THAT WAS PUT INTO EFFECT IN '57.

Engstrom: All right. After the 1954 decision, about segregation and integration, the, the School Board was obligated to respond. It was news, it was a change, in other words, the Constitution was changed in a sense. And so we made a statement that we would comply and that we would comply as soon as we heard what the Court had promised to give us, which was some guidance, as to progress or rate of change or—or what, and then when we got the “all deliberate speed” decision, we came up with what was later called the Blossom Plan. And, I guess, that Mr. Blossom himself, the superintendent, should get credit in name for the plan, because it was probably mostly his plan. At first, we started to integrate several grades, I—did we—I believe, we integrated—we planned originally, I’ll stop right here. Didn’t we plan originally to integrate from the first grade?

INTERVIEWER: THAT’S RIGHT.

Engstrom: Yeah.

00:07:25:00

INTERVIEWER: WHY DON’T, WHY DON’T WE JUST PICK UP WITH THAT THOUGHT? IF WE JUST—YOU DON’T HAVE TO STOP. WE’LL JUST CUT.

Engstrom: All right. [coughs] Our original plan, as we talked about it and discussed it and, and began to tell people about it, was that we would start with the first grade, and then we’d progress, one grade at a time, to the twelfth grade. But we had, I believe, I remember, about thirty grammar schools and they were scattered over the city and we had a, a, a different kind of principal in a grammar school than you would have in a high school, and as the concern

about the speed, and the problems that might arise, we backed off from starting in the first grade, and we went to the opposite. We started in the high school and came up with the Blossom Plan, which eventually just included the—the ten students in Central High School.

00:08:33:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW THAT PLAN WAS FIGURED OUT AND ARTICULATED WELL BEFORE SEPTEMBER '57 AND WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT DO YOU THINK THAT YOU HAD?

Engstrom: Well, Mr. Blossom worked at this harder, I guess, than anybody could expect anyone to work at it. And probably, his greatest contribution was that he took this plan, which we did agree on, and made it very definite, so that there wasn't any misunderstanding about it, it was a—it was a—it was a concrete plan. It was not flexible, it was—it was very well-defined. All of the questions had been thought out and answered before we started. And then he took that, and he gave it to Rotary Club, he'd give it to the—all of the PTA clubs, he'd give to all of the other civic clubs—he'd, he'd, he'd give to any garden club or anybody else that would have a group that would listen to him. And he answered questions in the press and in the paper, in the radio, and television and made every effort that a person could make, I think, someone counted one time, an hundred and forty or an hundred and twenty-five formal appearances that summer. It was a real effort, a, a superb effort to try to get everybody to understand the plan and ought to understand why the plan was the way it was.

00:10:09:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK—YEAH WE'D BETTER CHANGE.

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL DO A CHANGE.

00:10:13:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 113]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: STILL. MR. ENGTOM [sic].

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: I THINK WHAT I WANT, WANT FROM YOU IS WHAT DID “WITH ALL DELIBERATE SPEED” MEAN IN TERMS OF LITTLE ROCK?

Engstrom: All right. When we got the, the, the interpretation of what the integration ruling was, the key words were “with all deliberate speed.” And we could understand that that was a contradiction. We could understand that there probably was a lot of compromise in—within the court, on the ruling of that, and of course, there were no precedents or cases, of what was all deliberate speed, and what was not, so we had to come up with our interpretation of what all deliberate speed really meant and we felt like, like anyone, I guess, in our position, that we—it would be related to our problem in our community. And so we made our own interpretation of what all deliberate speed was. Course, we had good legal advice. And—but that was our conclusion. That, that our plan would be satisfactory for us, mainly if we had a, a, a real, earnest in—intention to comply and we did. We really intended to comply. We thought that that was our duty, that was our, our, our job, our obligation to do it, and we wanted to, to, to be in conformance. But we did have another standard that didn’t have anything to do with the wording of the court or any legal interpretation. I don’t know whether it was Mr. Blossom’s idea, or Dr. Cooper’s idea, or someone else on the Board, but we were dedicated to the continual improvement and progress, in, in trying to upgrade the quality of education in Arkansas, which at most, traditionally, had been 49th or 48th. And, and so [coughs] we—among ourselves, and in our explanation to anyone that would listen to our plan, the speed would be that speed with which we could continue improvement. If we, if we ever stalled, to where we could not continue improvement, we’d stall the plan. But we did intend to proceed, we did intend to comply, but we did intend to be controlled by the primary purpose. Our primary obligation, which was to continue to improve the education.

00:13:06:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT SUMMER OF ’57, WHERE YOU’RE HAVING A SERIES OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE GOVERNOR, AND MAYBE YOU COULD END WITH THE ENDING OF THAT SUMMER, WHICH WAS THE CALLING OUT OF THE NATIONAL GUARD, AND HOW YOU ACTUALLY LEARNED OF THAT.

Engstrom: Yeah. OK. As we approached the first day of school, we had several problems. One was getting the high schools completed. And we, we had to work the contractor on a weekend in order to get the sewer connected at Hall High School. I remember little things like that. So there were certain anxiety about having everything in, in order for the plan to start smoothly. But the key point, became as—to be—what would the mayor do? What would the police do? What would the governor do? The, the dissidents, the ones that did not agree with us, and we had people on both sides, that didn’t agree with us. The NAACP was not at all satisfied with our construction of what deliberate speed was and the, the people who

were against integration, and especially integration on a voluntary basis, were saying it wasn't necessary. It wasn't really the law. *And so, we needed some help from the, officials, the, the state officials, the county and the city officials, and primarily from Governor Faubus as to what he told the people, whether it was the law or not.* And it was just simply that. It—could we get him to say, that regardless of what his opinion was, it was the law of the land. And the Governor of North Carolina had done that. So we delegated Mr. Blossom to make the direct communications with Governor Faubus. And they were done on an informal basis, at the mansion, in the afternoon, just visiting one-on-one. And whenever Mr. Blossom could get the appointment, why, they'd continue the discussions. And, I guess, we must have been—it felt like there'd been a dozen such meetings. And each time Mr. Blossom would have to come back and report to us and we'd want to know well, well how—what's gonna happen, what's Governor Faubus going to do? And he kept being optimistic, that he was sure that he hadn't gotten the agreement yet, he didn't—he didn't—he couldn't report definitely, but he was confident that he, in the end, that Governor Faubus would come down with a statement, more or less to the effect—the same one that we needed. And that was, that the integration was the law of the land. And that the deliberate speed that we had construed was reasonable and, and that integrating under a controlled situation, instead of a forced situation, would be satisfactory for our particular community. He wouldn't have to say it for the whole state, just for our particular community. But as the world all knows, it went the other way. At the last, couple of weeks, the last thirty days at least, Governor Faubus began to get much stronger pressures from other people, a lot of them outside the community. And he finally came down with the fact that his decision, that he would not publicly, take the position to support us. And—but we did not get any information that he would forcefully prevent it either. And we were in a meeting, we met morning, noon, and night, and we were in a night meeting and saw on television, just like other members of the community did, the statement that—from—Faubus made, calling out the Guard, and the pictures of the Guard being put around the, the Central High. And, so we failed in our objective of getting support from the Governor.

00:17:31:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU KNOW, WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CITY GOVERNMENT DURING THIS TIME? HOW COME IT CAME DOWN TO BEING BETWEEN A LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD AND THE GOVERNOR, WITHOUT HAVING THAT CITY GOVERNMENT IN PLACE?

Engstrom: [coughs] Well, the city government and the school administration are different. They are separate, and I guess, intentionally. The—the—actually the city government was in a period of transition. We were talking about that we were trying to get the world to be better. We were trying to—we—we reorganized our water company. We reorganized our highway reform—we reorganized our highway reform. We had what we called a highway reform. We had what we called a highway reform—separate constitutional status for the highway commission. The city was going—of Little Rock, was going through the same transition. We were going from the old alderman type of government, where each alderman represented some little private interest in some small section of the community, to the city manager type of government, where we had a professional running our government, and prominent citizens

on the Board. And, so our city government at this particular stage was not strong enough, not—and not obligated in a way, legally or otherwise to, to make the integration plan work. They did have to provide fire service and police service, and so on, and we got that up to a point. Until things became—when we became so—and the plan became so unpopular. We had about as much support from the city as we expected, when the plan—when the integration started. After the fact, after the crisis, after the—we became so unpopular, we actually lost the police control in one stage and the, the police refused to support or attempt to support the integration and, and keep the peace even.

00:19:47:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT TIME WAS THIS JUST OUT OF CURIOSITY?

Engstrom: I don't know, but I remember—

INTERVIEWER: I MEAN, WAS IT IN SEPTEMBER?

Engstrom: It was not the first day. And it was not—

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT? I'M, I'M JUST INTERESTED IN THIS FOR A POINT.

[cut]

00:20:03:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SOUND IS ROLLING.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: JUST A SHORT DESCRIPTION WHEN WE GET SET.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU HAVE ABOUT A MINUTE AND A HALF. YEAH.

Engstrom: [coughs] During the last week or so, we did get Governor Faubus to agree to come and have lunch with the whole Board and with our attorney. And he came, by himself, and he, he brought a little pad and seemed to be, not as loose and as, and as free in his conversation with us as he normally, even though we later became opponents in court.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SORRY I—I'M SORRY. I JUST MADE A MISTAKE. I HIT THE ZOOM LEVER BY MISTAKE.

[cut]

00:20:46:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 114]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND YOU CAN MARK IT, PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: JUST A MINUTE WHILE HE GETS HIMSELF SETTLED IN HERE.

[pause] YOU REALLY WANT TO TALK TO ME.

Engstrom: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Engstrom: I do remember one last meeting that we had with the Governor. He agreed to come and sit with us at a private room in the hotel where we were having lunch, and gave us a chance to—each of us thought maybe we could probably do a little—something different or something more than, than Virgil Blossom had done, so we hoped that he would listen to us. He came, and he was not as easy and not as comfortable, not as free, in conversations with us. He—we met on the streets, you know, occasionally, and he recognized us and we recognized him, so we were not—we were—we knew one another by the first name and so on, but at this particular meeting, Governor Faubus was different. He was under con— tremendous tension, and he was uncomfortable. He took out this little pad of paper and he made a few notes, while we were trying to visit—

00:22:11:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME, SIR. CAN WE DO THAT AGAIN? I HAD TO. TOO MUCH NOISE, SIR.

Engstrom: OK.

INTERVIEWER: COME ON GUYS.

Engstrom: All right. I'll go back to where he took out—

INTERVIEWER: OH I'M SORRY. IF YOU, IF YOU—

Engstrom: I hit the microphone, didn't I?

INTERVIEWER: YES.

Engstrom: Yeah. He took out a piece of paper and would make notes, entirely his own thoughts, while we were trying to converse with him. And—but he was not communicating. And then he excused himself and went outside. And I always felt like he was ill. He, he was really almost sick. And then he came back and made a very short, brief sort of semi-negative response to our appeal, but we did not really gain a thing that day and, and we were always disappointed. But the reason the image and the memory is so clear, is you could tell what a tense situation he was in, and what a turmoil he was personally involved in at this—these late moments before the integration started.

00:23:27:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW IT WAS THAT VERY NIGHT THAT HE MADE HIS SPEECH ON TELEVISION, RIGHT?

Engstrom: I'm not so—

INTERVIEWER: WITHIN A DAY OR TWO. IN THAT SPEECH, WHICH IS THE SEPTEMBER 4TH SPEECH, I BELIEVE, HE SAYS HE CAN'T OPEN THE SCHOOLS. THE GOVERNMENT CLAIMS THE CITY IS A TINDERBOX THAT IT'S ABOUT TO GO UP. THERE'S GONNA BE RIOTS. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE REASONING IN THAT SPEECH?

Engstrom: Well, it's—it's always been a question as to whether Governor Faubus' claim that the city was in a state of danger, as far as violence, and, and that there were all of these serious catastrophes and, and—that would happen if we proceeded. There's never been a question in my mind or there weren't any questions in the School Board's mind that we could have proceeded, if we'd have had this help. And, and the majority of the people who had been told that the authorities would support the law of the land. Governor Faubus later was able to quote some statements that Virgil Blossom made to him, in our negotiations the last few weeks before school, in which Virgil told about the possibility of violence. And Virgil was using that—those possibilities to explain how we needed the support of the authorities. But—and Faubus was able to use some of those statements that Virgil made, in a very strong way, to try to argue and convince the Governor. He was able to use those statements to, to say that we felt like that the violence was about to happen and that when we integrated the school we expected violence. That's not true. We, we would not have had any of those children out there in that school if we had expected serious violence. And I think the FBI investigations and other, more thorough, factual studies have proven us correct in that.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT. YOU—

00:25:38:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE HAVE 225 FEET REMAINING IN CAMERA ROLL 114 AT THIS POINT.

00:25:45:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: AS SOON AS HE'S SETTLED DOWN JUST A BRIEF DESCRIPTION, PARTICULARLY—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: —IN, IN TERMS OF YOUR DEALINGS WITH HIM, OF GOVERNOR FAUBUS AT THIS TIME.

Engstrom: OK. My impression of Governor Faubus was favorable. He was a, a talented man. He was a gifted person. He could simplify complex issues into the key points and he could articulate them in such a way that he could make us all understand and, and he was very persuasive. He could, he could make us want to agree with him. I remember after he was elected, the second—well, when he was elected the second time, I was sitting with the owner of the company that I worked for and list—and watching Governor Faubus deliver his second inaugural speech on television. It seems that he had come forward with some progressive moves of increasing taxes to improve on education and industrial development, and really was going to make Arkansas a better place, but he was sacrificing the, the political. He was taking a risk, political risk, in raising taxes. And he did a masterful job. And I turned around to Mr. Ground, who I worked for, and I said, you know, he came within about that much of being a Lincoln. Now that's how high an opinion I had of Governor Faubus at the time. And, I was like Virgil Blossom and other members of the Board, I felt like that that big side of Faubus would prevail and that we would get his support and that he would support the law of the land. Of course the other side of Faubus is the one that he plays to the audience, and as the audience turned out, he selected the majority audience to be the segregationists, and he played to them in a way that was, it was very talented, very masterful. And then after the confrontation with the Guard, Faubus and the School Board, and he and I, and his attorney and our attorney, were just cross-ways like that. But we never lost, and to this day haven't lost, the—the personal relationship. I spoke to him at the Texas game ten days ago and he spoke to me. And after the confrontation, after the crisis, he did reappoint me to the Arkansas State Board of Registration for Professional Engineers, something that I did not expect. Probably because of the good relationship I had with his attorney and confidant, and mentor, mister—Judge Bill Smith, who was also the attorney for the Registration Board. But Governor Rockefeller, who I admired to be non-political, failed to do something like that. Not for me, but for another engineer and made an appointment that was not in the best interests of the state, but purely for political purposes. So Governor Faubus was a—and still is—a very talented, gifted person, that could do almost anything that he wanted to do.

00:29:09:00

INTERVIEWER: AND A DESCRIPTION OF VIRGIL BLOSSOM, SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS.

Engstrom: Virgil Blossom is a—oh, I'm so loyal to Virgil. I want to be sure that in my description of him I—he comes across as a big plus, because he was. Virgil was a product of the athletic program. He was an athlete. He was a coach and as a coach he became an administrator, a principal of a school, and later superintendent. And he became the Superintendent of Schools of the Fayetteville Schools, one of our better school systems, outside of Little Rock. And we were so pleased to have him in Little Rock as our Superintendent. But—and Virgil was a hard working, big man. He came in one summer after being off and walked around the room, and said, what do you see different? We said, new haircut? No. New suit? No. He said, hell, I've lost 25 pounds! [laughs] And we said, where? But he, he was a hard-working man. He slept about five hours and bragged about it—that he only slept five hours. He, he was a very, very ambitious man. He wanted to advance. He wanted to succeed. And go on to bigger and better things. And he wanted to succeed in everything he did. He had a good sense of humor. He was a good person to be around. He was a, a big plus and—

[sound roll out]

[cut]

00:30:41:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: AS SOON AS HE'S SET.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SET.

Engstrom: OK. I didn't get to know Daisy Bates as well, personally, as I did some of the other characters. We were in constant contact with her, but most of the time, we contacted her through Virgil Blossom. But we knew exactly where Daisy was all the time and she was always well-dressed, well-mannered, articulate, and capable, and, and doing a good job at her role. But her role and our role were so different. We were trying to go down the middle of the road and she was trying to take us to a higher road at a faster pace. And she didn't agree with us at all on what due deliberate speed was. She didn't agree with us on—our position became that of a moderate. And I didn't understand what a moderate was, until I became [sic] to be condemned for being a moderate then—

00:31:42:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Engstrom: —and, and in those days being a moderate was a terrible thing. And being an engineer, I thought going down the middle of the road—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I JUST ROLLED OUT.

INTERVIEWER: OH, SO I FELT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU DID, YOU DID, YOU DID GET THROUGH THE WORD MODERATES.

INTERVIEWER: WE GOT IT. WE GOT IT.

00:31:54:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 115]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN HE'S SET.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SET.

Engstrom: OK. What—I've been, been asked sometimes about what did the white, responsible citizens fear about integration. Well, we just had a, an inborn fear of integration. It was just a natural thing that we were born with and lived with. And, I guess, the ultimate fear was the pure mixing of the races, to where there would be no color line at all, no, no ethnic difference, no difference in habits, no difference in method of living, no, no difference in color, and so on, and it was just beyond our capability to con—to construe just how that would be and fit in with our idea of improving the world and making the world better. We did not—we were not unfair. We were not haters of the other race. I've been complimented several times about my views of relationship with the Jewish people, with relationship with other minorities, and I find that it's just the way I was raised. My parents were fair and responsible and most of the people in Little Rock where I went to church, I was taught that that was the proper way, and so on. So we really wanted to be fair and we wanted to progress and we wanted to improve things and especially improve education for the black race. The,

the black children were not getting a chance, and they needed it. They needed it, more than anyone and we were very strongly in favor of that and, and could see that integration would improve that. But we did, at that stage, have fears, and they were, I guess, just natural, in-born, emotional fears more than rational ones.

00:34:10:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA JUMP AHEAD TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE 101ST AIRBORNE AT THIS POINT. DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU FELT ABOUT THAT? JUST AS MEMBER OF YOUR CITY? WHAT YOU FELT ABOUT SEEING THE TROOPS IN?

Engstrom: Well, of course I'm a minority, as to my reaction to the 104th—101st Airborne. What I remember—and I don't believe the other members of the School Board want to remember it, is that we met and agreed that if Gov—if, if Mayor Mann did not call Eisenhower, we would, and we had the telephone number, and we were in the hotel room, at a another meeting, we constantly met. We had already met, and decided and agreed that if, if Mayor Mann did not call Eisenhower, we would. So when the 101st Airborne came in, I wrote President Eisenhower a personal note, and I said, if I were in an elevator this is what I would say to you. For the first time, I have met someone in authority that did what had to be done.

00:35:19:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S, THAT'S VERY STRONG.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S GOOD.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU ACTUALLY SEE THEM COMING IN?

Engstrom: You know, the image of them marching across the Broadway Bridge with that big sign on the side is so vivid in our memories. It's been shown on television so many times. I don't believe I actually saw it, but I, I almost feel like I was there. Course, we were aware of their movements. We were told, you know, that it was a coordinated effort. They were—they didn't come in and capture us. We—they did not take the school away from us. So they coordinated every move they made after they landed at the airbase, with our—of the people, with our administrators and the principals of the school. So they did not get between us and the students or between us and the teachers. They got between us and the mob.

00:36:10:00

INTERVIEWER: ALSO VERY NICE. SPEAKING OF THE MEDIA, WHEN YOU TALKED, YOU MADE SOME VERY TELLING POINTS ABOUT HOW THE TELEVISION CAMERAS AFFECTED PEOPLE AND I WONDERED IF YOU COULD GIVE US SOME EXAMPLES OF THAT?

Engstrom: Well, I had never been in the limelight. I had never been on *Time*, had my picture in *Time* magazine or, or been on national television and so—and neither had most of the people in the roles of this crisis. But I was constantly amazed at how the human animal responds to the limelight. And some of my close associates, our segregationist member of the Board, he beamed. [laughs] He responded very well to the, to the opportunity to be on—in the limelight and, it later turned out, it fostered political ambitions, which were—he became a representative in the, in the Congress. And probably would never happened [sic] if it had not been for the focus of the national attention on. And, I guess, even I responded favorably when some Navy buddy of mine calls me from California and said, well I saw you on television and your tie wasn't straight [laughs] or something like that.

00:37:32:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK THEY DID A GOOD JOB OR A BAD JOB ABOUT IT, IN TERMS OF ACCURACY?

Engstrom: Well, I don't take *Time* magazine today and I cancelled *Time* magazine twice during this period, because I wanted *Time* to get it right. I wanted the true story to get across. And as I—for the first time in my life, was at first hand, to see the truth, and then when I read it in *Time* I was disappointed, and so I stopped. I said, why should I read about what's going on in Arabia or South Africa in *Time* magazine if they can't get it right about what's going on in Little Rock? So I was disillusioned and disappointed in examples of that kind. I think overall, they sent their best talented people here, some of the people that were reporters here later became their stars. And both television and the press, I think, they, they certainly sent enough people. We had a whole army of 'em here and so I think there was an effort made, but, but I was disappointed in that the true, real story didn't come across very clearly in the national press or, or the television.

00:38:52:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW IN THAT FIRST YEAR, THERE ARE, THERE ARE REPORTS THAT THERE WAS A FAIR AMOUNT OF HARASSMENT OF THE BLACK STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL. THE GIRLS TALK ABOUT, YOU KNOW, GETTING SCALDED IN THE SHOWER OR KICKED IN THE HALLS. WHAT DID THE ADMINISTRATION DO ABOUT THIS?

Engstrom: Well, our major role after the occupation with the 101st Airborne, and the fact that integration could technically proceed, we were in business, the students were in school, and we were doing some teaching, was to maintain order. The segregationists, frustrated by the tremendous force of the army, were, were frustrated in their efforts to prevent it. So their only course, that they thought would solve the problem, and get the students out of school, was to make it so miserable or so dangerous or so fearful, that we couldn't continue. And so they worked it from within the student population. They, they got students to try to make it impossible for the students to continue going to school. And they tried about everything that anyone could. We had to respond to such terrible decisions as whether to shut down school with a bomb scare and that's a hard decision. You have hundreds of students in close range

of some possible bomb and you're told that the likelihood is only one in ten that it's, that it's real. Well, do you proceed or do you take the students out? I was proud of our Board. I was proud of our administration. I was proud of the people in the school—the, the teachers and the administrators in the school and especially our maintenance personnel, that resolved ways to try to, to get as much factual information. We searched the lockers. We had as much factual information as we could. I was proud of our Board and our superintendent that we quite often went ahead and proceeded with school with the possibility that the bomb scare was real. It turned out we didn't have any real bombs.

00:41:12:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK THAT THE SCHOOL COULD HAVE DONE—

[sound cuts out]

00:41:21:00

[sound resumes]

Engstrom: *Of course, we couldn't have a normal school. But we had to have as close to normal as possible. And you couldn't follow every student around with a guard into the—you know, the stories were the, that the male guards were going to the restrooms with the female black students and you couldn't do things like that; and you couldn't sit with them at the cafeteria. There wouldn't be any integration if you, if you did that. So I'm proud of what we did and what we didn't do.* I think we'd done any more it would have been too much. I think we'd done any less it would have made it possible for them to shut down the integration.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S VERY NICE. FINALLY, I THINK THAT WE'D LIKE TO JUMP AHEAD AND JUST HEAR—

00:42:08:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: —IN A KIND OF BRIEF WAY, THAT REAL RESOLUTION. YOU WANT TO STOP FOR A MOMENT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK WE BETTER RELOAD ACT—

00:42:12:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 116]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WHEN HE GETS SET.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND I'M HOLDING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLL.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

Engstrom: Almost everything that we did in the course of our role in the crisis we did because we thought it needed to be done, except for the one move that we did—spent so much time and energy trying to achieve and that was we had to prove, by our diligent efforts, that the Supreme Court would not grant a delay. We did not believe that we should be granted a delay, but the majority of our citizens that we represented believed it. The community felt like that if we'd had so much trouble and we were being frustrated in what we were trying to do and a delay was proper. So when we decided that we needed to ask for the delay, we did not do it in a token way. In fact, we went beyond what we would have done, if we had really believed that we needed to have the delay. We hired the three or four best lawyers in the community. We paid 'em whatever they asked. We—we went the whole limit to demonstrate—to develop a good case for the delay. We, we did everything we could to develop the case for the delay, and we were able to get the Supreme Court off of vacation to come back and hear the case. But we were not surprised when we were not granted the delay.

00:44:00:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU WEREN'T DISPLEASED EITHER.

Engstrom: Well, as I said many times, [laughs] we were in the middle of a briar patch and to turn around after you're two-thirds of the way through, and to go back, knowing that you got to come back through the briar patch again, was not very sensible.

00:44:16:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. WELL, FINALLY, COULD YOU GIVE US BRIEFLY THE STORY OF THE RESOLUTION? WE'LL GO VERY BRIEFLY THROUGH THE '58-'59 YEAR, AND FINALLY THE SCHOOL BOARD FORCES A RESOLUTION BY

RESIGNING. COULD YOU TELL US?

Engstrom: Well, [coughs] as Governor Faubus used to say when he'd meet us, well, are you still meeting and deliberating and, and talking and not doing anything? And we said, yes, that's what we're doing. We're meeting, we're deliberating, we're trying to figure out something to do, but we're not coming up with anything. And we did resolve not to do anything negative or anything that had a very small chance of success. But we finally came to the point where we realized that we were not effective. We were not able to achieve what needed to be achieved and we became to be labeled, the Blossom Plan, the Blossom School Board, was unsuccessful, and it was our problem. It was Blossom's problem. It was the School Board's problem. And the community was really not accepting it as their problem. And one day, while we were sitting there at lunch, we finally came to the conclusion, I can't remember how it came about, but it was almost unanimous, on first discussion that, you know, the only constructive thing we could do, would be all resign at one time. The rules of the law were, that if one of us resigned or was killed or injured or couldn't function, the other members could reappoint him. But if we all resigned then they had to have an election. And so we—but we had this problem with Virgil Blossom. He had—we felt that Virgil Blossom had done an admirable job, he should have been given a bonus or he should have been rewarded for what he did, and so he had another year of his contract. And we did perform the legal requirements to pay him for that year, so he could survive financially until he found another appointment, because we were in a sense, firing Governor [sic] Blossom. I know one of the books say that he resigned, but, or, but, or that we fired him, but we really didn't. We paid him off and gave him a chance to, to, to go to San Antonio or some other good job, which he, he did go to San Antonio. But the point was, we finally realized that the only good thing that we could do was to resign and resign in a—as a group. Of course, there were really just five of us that agreed on anything and Dale Offer stayed on, but the five was enough to call an election. From then on, it was the community's problem, and not our problem. And in looking back over it, that's probably the best, most constructive, wisest thing that we did while we were in the whole mess.

INTERVIEWER: OK. STOP FOR A MOMENT.

[cut]

00:47:23:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND SPEED.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST STAY RIGHT BACK TO THE—

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT THIS, "IF YOU HAVENT BEEN IN THE SOUTH—"

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST EXACTLY WHAT HE SAID.

Engstrom: We're often thought of as being different and stupid, about our feelings about what—our Southern heritage, about, talking about our feelings about the Civil War, a hundred years later, we're still—during it—the school crisis, we're still relating things to the Civil War. And, and I've often discussed with people from the north and the east, and say, that there's no way you can understand what it means to be a southerner, and, and to talk about the Civil War, because America just doesn't think about losing a tragic, serious war, but the South lost a tragic, serious war. And we put the best of our people and the best of our resources in it, and we suffered tremendous losses, in every way, and it's just such a different thing to, to be in a country that has lost a serious war. Be like being in Japan or being in Germany, being in the South, you living in a place that had lost a serious war. Now, fif—thirty, years later in 1985, you don't find that so much a factor, but when—because we're really not so much Southern, any more. With the, the interstate highways and the, and the jet airplane, and the, and the television, and all our country—and all of our businesses are doing business all over the United States and all over the world. We're not such a region, any more. But we were still a region, then.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT. DO YOU—

[cut]

00:49:16:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: PRETTY MUCH JUST THE SAME THING, BUT I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT TECHNICALLY WE DIDN'T HAVE A PROBLEM. SO, THIS, THIS SENSE OF THE SOUTH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

Engstrom: I'm often asked by people from other parts of the country about what it means to be a Southerner and why was—why do we keep talking about those feelings of the South, and why do we keep talking about the Civil War. And it is strange to them, but it's real, that we were living in a region of the country that was still suffering from a tragic loss, a tragic war, an hundred years previous. We were still paying the price of losing that tragic war. We lost our great-grandfathers, the finest of our, our intellect, the finest resources we had, our, our economy was destroyed, our, our, our confidence in ourselves, and our, our ability to solve problems in a rational way. And so the South, at that time, in the '50s, was still really, actually suffering from the loss of a tragic war and those of you that live in a country that has never lost a tragic war, just cannot understand.

INTERVIEWER: IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT BEING A SOUTHERNER THAT PEOPLE SHOULD UNDERSTAND? WE TALKED ABOUT THE, THE CARE,

ABOUT THE REGION.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME, I HAVE TO CHANGE MY BATTER.

[cut]

00:50:42:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ONE SECOND. LET ME GET SETTLED HERE.

INTERVIEWER: JUST A QUESTION OF, WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES A SOUTHERNER?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, WE'RE ROLLING.

Engstrom: What makes a Southerner? Well, I guess, just growing up in a region that is a little different. And, and you, the Southerner usually stays in the South. He—his grandparents were here, his parents were here. So you have your roots with you constantly and, and you relate to them. Your closer ties to the family, normally, and closer ties to the land, and there's more of the land. We're not as densely populated, Arkansas, a fine, wonderful state, but just has barely over two million people. And it gives plenty of room. We enjoy the room. We enjoy the land. We, we really, actually have our roots in the soil.

INTERVIEWER: STOP PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[cut]

00:51:48:00

INTERVIEWER: A SENSE OF—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[sync tone]

Engstrom: Ready?

CAMERE CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

Engstrom: I guess one of the disappointments we had was that we felt like our story of really what was going on in the center, the moderate position, was never brought forward. The Gazette did a pretty good job of it, but we—we tried when we were in Washington, appealing before—for a delay before the Supreme Court—to get President Eisenhower to talk to us. We felt like he didn't really understand what was going on here even after his army was here. But he didn't have time, it wasn't the proper thing to do. So we were disappointed, we didn't get it across. So I felt like that perhaps, what was really happening at the center, what was really happening in Central High School, and what was really happening in Little Rock was never told, because it was in the middle. It was not on either extreme. It was not the glamorous thing that was going on. It was a plodding, deliberate effort to stay in the middle of the road and do the right thing in a very rational way. Rational moves were not the real world.

[cut]

[end of the interview]

00:53:10:00

© Copyright Washington University Libraries 2016