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# CIVIL RIGHTS SIT-INS IN OKLAHOMA



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## **Introduction**

When this project of researches has been offered to me, I started reading about the state of Oklahoma. I discovered the importance of the sit-ins in its civil rights history. I admire the non-violent fights so I decided to choose “the civil rights sit-ins in Oklahoma” as topic.

Segregation had been very strong, sometimes because of laws and sometimes by custom. When segregation is because of custom it is much harder to change.

Until 1949, Black students were not allowed to study in the Oklahoma University, but Ada Fisher managed to change the situation with the help of the NAACP (National Association for Advancement of Colored People) which was the main organism against segregation in the United States.

The NAACP Youth Council played a great role in the Civil Right Movement of Oklahoma since 1958. Clara Luper and black children decided to get more rights, such as the basic one of ordering and consuming food in the lunch counters. After several years of sit-ins, Blacks were allowed to eat like everyone in lunch-counters in Oklahoma City.

I have had the chance to meet people who participated in the sit-ins, and especially Clara Luper and two of her children: Marilyn and Calvin.

How civil disobedience could change African Americans‘lives?

## **I) SEGREGATION IN THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA**

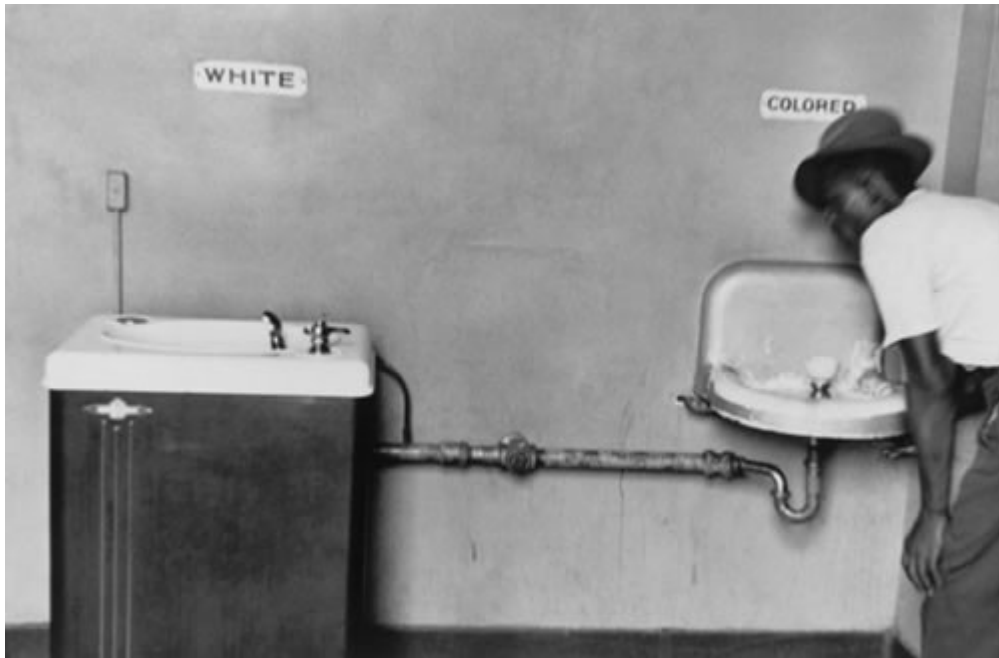
In 1896, Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which the Court established the "separate but equal" doctrine. This decision delighted the Whites who wanted to segregate Blacks. Consequently, the 1897 Oklahoma Territorial Legislature forbade the practice of racial mixing in the schools. As a result, segregation was starting to set up in a lot of aspects of life. Sometimes it was by law but sometimes by custom.

While thousands of new settlers came to Oklahoma territory, the territorial legislature provided with counties the option of establishing segregated school systems. An overwhelming consensus voted to create "separate school" systems for African Americans. After Oklahoma became a state, a majority of the voters approved an amendment to the Oklahoma Constitution that implemented the "separate but equal" concept into all facets of education.

Langston University's origins began when newspaper editors in Langston, Oklahoma territory, said the need of a higher education facility for African Americans. Charles Henri William Maurice Sulcer introduced the plan of the Oklahoma Territorial Legislature in 1894.

After two years of compromise, a college for African American students was approved on March 12, 1897. The school opened September 3, 1898, as the colored Agricultural and Normal University of Oklahoma.

In 1941 it was officially renamed Langston University. The town and university took the name of an African American, John Mercer Langston, a prominent educator and congressman from Virginia.



Segregated water fountains in Oklahoma

**Langston Hugues - Merry-Go-Round,**

*COLORED CHILD AT CARNIVAL*

*Where is the Jim Crow section  
On this merry-go-round,  
Mister, cause I want to ride?  
Down South where I come from  
White and colored  
Can't sit side by side.  
Down South on the train  
There's a Jim Crow car.  
On the bus we're put in the back--  
But there ain't no back  
To a merry-go-round!  
Where's the horse  
For a kid that's black?*

***Richard Wright – I have seen black hands, 1969***

*I am black and I have seen black hands*

*Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists*

*Of white workers,*

*And some day -- and it is only this which sustains me--*

*Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,*

*On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!*

## **II) NON-VIOLENT FIGHTS, THE SIT-INS**

The American South of the 1940's was ruled by a Jim Crow society supported by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896. All public accommodations were segregated and they were very few changes. However, World War II gave African-American men a sense of respect: they did not want to come back to their homes like inferiors after having fought for democracy and equality. The Truman policy promoted racial equality but Southern Democrats in Congress could defeat much of its civil right legislation.

The sit-in movement began in August 1958 when the NAACP Youth Council of Oklahoma City decided to fight against segregation in lunch counters. The success of these sit-ins not only led to lunch counters desegregation but also to a wave of similar demonstrations across the United States.

### **A) A PEACEFUL PLAY**

In Oklahoma, Clara Luper who was the NAACP Youth Council advisor took notice of Martin Luther King actions and his success. She was a high school history teacher and wrote in 1956 a play called *Brother President* for Negro History week. This play was based on King's nonviolent actions in Montgomery. The National Youth Director of the NAACP, Henry Wright invited Clara Luper and the actors to perform in New York City.

They accepted and during the travel the group could eat for the first time in integrated lunch counters. Back to Oklahoma, they decided to stop lunch counters segregation.

They started negotiations with lunch counters' owners, the city manager and city churches, asking for the desegregation of eating establishments. The negotiations failed. In August 1958, after fourteen months of letters and visits, the Youth Council chose the five largest restaurants in downtown Oklahoma City for their demonstrations.

## **B) MAIN TARGETS OF THE LUNCH COUNTERS PROTESTS**

The first target was Katz Drug Store. There, Blacks were allowed to order food but had to eat outside. On August 18, Marilyn (Clara's daughter) who was ten years old decided that the group had to go to Katz's lunch counter and order cokes. Fifteen children aged from six to seventeen and Clara Luper went to Katz' and ordered cokes, proving they could pay with a five-dollar bill. This action was their declaration of war on the segregation of Oklahoma City. The manager yelled at them to leave the place but the children didn't move and repeated their order. The press and the police arrived. A White customer yelled "Nigger, go home, who do they think they are?" (Luper 9). Sit-iners had to remain calm so every one of them repeated the Martin Luther King's non violent plans. At closing they left.

"The youth were finally served shortly after 5 p.m." as reported the *Daily Oklahoman*, August 23, 1958. The Katz drug store chain not just decided to desegregate the lunch counter in Oklahoma, but also in Kansas, Missouri and Iowa. Since that day, Blacks were allowed to eat in the 38 Katz lunch counters of the United States.

The second target was Veazy's drug store. There the NAACP Youth Council was received very differently that in Katz's: the manager told them "I'm happy that you all came over. We are very proud. Our management met yesterday and decided to change our policy, our new policy states that the eating facilities at Veazy's Drug Store are open to all people." (Luper 14-



15). The students could have a coke. A few more drug stores were easily desegregated this day.

The most difficult lunch counter was Brown's in which the students faced the longest sit-in: they sat since August 22, 1958 to June 23, 1961. It was the longest sit-in of the United States. By the time Brown's desegregated, 117 stores had set-up a new policy which allows Blacks to eat.

### C) THE POPULATION DIVIDED BY THESE DEMONSTRATIONS

The African American population of Oklahoma was divided by the demonstrations. In 1958, the NAACP Youth council gathered only fourteen members but this number grew to 1,000 by 1961. Oklahoma NAACP Youth Council became one of the largest of the nation. Seventy-eight percent of the African American population in the city participated in the Brown's demonstration. Many brought sandwiches for the children and others offered to drive anyone who needed to go downtown to the sit-in.

However, a few Blacks were not happy and disagreed with the NAACP Youth council actions.

For instance, Clara Luper had been told that she was disgracing her race by acting against white people. Other Blacks were fed up because their white employers threatened to fire those involved in the sit-ins.

White's reactions toward this movement were much more violent: Clara Luper received a lot of hate calls from the white community. Shotgun shells were left on Luper's porch with a Ku Klux Klan note. One day, the police met her at Brown's to warn her of a bomb threat against her house.



Clara Luper

A few white people wanted to help the NAACP Youth Council. They sat with the students in the sit-ins, and some of them wrote letters to the management of Brown's to declare their support to desegregation and that their family would no longer shop in a segregated drug store.

Letters of Clara Luper to the America

June 1961

Dear America

Reverend Willie B. Parker, the pastor of St. James Baptist Church, is marching with us today. He has been here for weeks in spite of his knee that has been giving him trouble. Look at him. He has stood there all day with his sore knee. He can hardly walk, but he has his Holy Bible in his hand. He has been reading through its Holy pages. Send someone down here to show us where the Bible justifies and condones discrimination. Tell us that God is not our father and Man is not our brother. We are in the Bible Belt of America. You have commanded us to love one another. The group is now singing "Onward Christian Soldiers", marching as to war.

The children are now repeating Thomas Jefferson's immortal words.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." That means us.

Did not Abraham Lincoln say, "This nation under God shall have a new birth of Freedom?"

We must have this Freedom; we have paid for it in blood, Sweat and Tears.

We are here waiting, waiting, waiting. The day has ended and it has been another sin-filled day.

Your citizen,

Clara Luper

### **III) INTERVIEWS**

#### **A) Clara, Marilyn and Calvin Luper**

*April, 8<sup>th</sup> Liz Willner and I met Clara Luper at her house in Oklahoma City. Aged 87 she didn't really want to talk, but her children Marilyn and Calvin were present. They both told me their memories of the sit-ins in which they participated since 1958. I wrote this interview thanks to their answers.*

**Calvin:** After graduating, my mother was a teacher in very poor and segregated schools. The books were in very bad condition and it was difficult to learn. In 1957, my mother wrote a play about Martin Luther King called *Brother President*, because she wanted to stimulate her students. She made plays and elections in her class. The play *Brother President* which promoted non-violence was successful and we were invited to present it in New York City.

**Irene:** Did you act in this play?

**Calvin:** Yes, and Marilyn too. She was about 7 years old and I was 13.

So we went to NYC by the North and for the first time, we could sit and eat in a lunch counter as everyone. Most of us had never left the state of Oklahoma so we didn't know that in the North, Blacks and Whites were equal.

I had never wondered why we could spend all our money in lunch counters but were not allowed to drink or eat inside. For us, the children, it was like that, a custom. I never paid attention to lunch counter's segregation because I was used to it.

But when we went back to Oklahoma, we wanted to change it. We wanted to fight against segregation: in Oklahoma, fountains and even phone booth were separated, there were very few restrooms for black people.

It wasn't just a fight to be allowed to eat in lunch counters; it was a struggle for freedom!

**Marilyn:** As negotiation with lunch counters' owners didn't work, I made the suggestion to go to Katz Drugstore, order cokes and sit until they serve us. After a NAACP Youth Council meeting, we went to the downtown and ordered 13 cokes. The waitress refused

to serve us because of the color of our skin. I think she was sorry, but she had to keep her job. We stayed for 13 hours. The youngest child was 6 and the oldest was 17.

**Irene:** What were the customer's reactions toward the sit-in?

**Marilyn:** Whites were scared to death because they feared a revolution.

**Calvin:** I remember that someone yelled "What's wrong?", and "Get up!". The police came and a boy was arrested. We just wanted cokes, and one of us was arrested! I have got to confess that I was pretty nervous.

**Marilyn:** One day a customer spilled hot coffee on me, they were mean. The sit-ins were really like warfare: we made action plans and military preparation. But all the kids were taught to be non-violent. My mother wanted us to use Gandhi's rules. We were forbidden to talk back or to fight. I'm proud to say that Oklahoma had got the most peaceful sit-ins of the country.

I think there was no violence because Blacks and Whites were together.

**Calvin** (*laughing*): I think you're being generous there, Marilyn.

Do you know what would have happened if during a sit-in in the Katz Drugstore, the waitress had accepted to serve us? We would have been sent to jail because we didn't have money to pay it!

**Irene:** How many persons participated to the sit-ins?

**Marilyn:** It was very uncertain, some days we were two or three, and other days we were one thousand. Charlton Heston, a very famous American actor supported our fight and even came to Oklahoma City to participate to our sit-ins.

**Irene:** Were you afraid of Whites' violence?

**Marilyn:** Yes, I remember the scariest day of my life. We were back from a meeting of Freedom when we saw that a group of men was driving behind our car. We were close to the house but Mum didn't turn. We went to Barbara Posey's house; Mum said "Jump out of the car and run!" we were scared and asked "What are you doing to do, Mum?". She answered "I will be okay."

(*She cries*) She came back very late; I was so scared for her.

We received a lot of letters, some of them to support us, but the main part in order to threaten. My mother received threatening calls. One day, there was a bomb alert in our house. My mother was arrested 26 times!

**Irene:** What kind of people participated in the sit-ins?

**Calvin:** Very different kinds of people. A lot of Black, few Whites and many nationalities. Different religions too. We worked together. Every person should be respected for who he is.

**Irene:** Are the sit-iners still alive?

**Marilyn:** Yes, most of us are still living since we were children in the sixties. Each of us has been transformed by his experience in the Civil Right Movement. My mother was able to motivate the kids: she told me that one day, a student came to her office, convinced that he was nothing. He went to Clara's class and she told him « Go ahead young man! ». His life changed.

**Irene:** I have seen in a documentary about your actions that you used to put plates to hide your face. What did it mean?

**Marilyn** (*laughing*): With these white plates on our faces, it was a way to make fun of segregation, a way to say « Today I am white, can I eat today? ».

**Irene:** Were you aware of the importance of the sit-ins?

**Marilyn:** No, none of us knew that it will change USA history. But if we hadn't done it, nothing would have changed.

**Irene:** What is your best memory of the sit-ins?

**Marilyn:** I have got very good memories of that time. The great feeling of being involved in something just, with no fears ! We learned that we were good as anybody else. We said to white teachers that refused us in their classes: « I CAN LEARN, TEACH ME! »



## **B) Rev. James Shields**

My name is James Shields, and I participated in the sit-ins of Oklahoma City in 1961, when they became more public. I was 28 years old, and every Sunday I used to go from Norman to Oklahoma City. I went to the church, where the NAACP Youth Council used to stay. They were all Black except three or four Whites. I was one of these Whites.

In the church, Clara Luper, our leader, taught the children to be non-violent. They had to remain peaceful even if someone insults them. After that, we all started walking to the lunch-counters where we wanted to eat. There are several miles to reach the downtown and while walking, we used to sing « *We Shall Overcome* ». Do you know this song? I am going to sing it for you.

*We shall overcome*

*We shall overcome*

*We shall overcome some day,*

*Oh, deep in my heart,*

*I do believe*

*We shall overcome some day.*

We were carrying signs and surrounded by policemen to protect us. In fact they weren't much violent reactions. In the lunch-counters, we just asked to be served but never got accepted.

You were White; did they refuse to serve you too?

Yes because I was with Blacks. If I had entered alone and ordered a coke, the waiter would have served me, but with Blacks, no way.

One day they didn't want to let us enter so we sat down to block. That was a violation of the law and the police came. Some of the demonstrators were arrested, and sentenced after a trial (small sentences). I have never been arrested but I respect the ones who have been.

I remember that during the summer, as the children didn't go to school, they went several days per week to sit-in.

The most famous lunch-counter in which we sat was Brown's. The owner, Mrs. Brown always refused to serve us because her husband was a segregationist. At that time, he was already dead, but it was still logical for her that Whites and Blacks should be separated. One day, she wanted to talk to Clara Luper, she told her that she opened the Brown's cafeteria for everyone. It was the end of segregation.

How did you get involved in sit-ins?

One of my friends who was Presbyterian told me that we had to help those people who were peacefully fighting for more rights. Then he moved to New York and I kept on helping Black people. At the beginning they were distrustful, fearing I could be a spy. But after a while, there was trust between us.

What was the reaction of your family when you decided to participate to the sit-ins?

My father didn't really want me to participate because it was dangerous and he wanted me unhurt, but I was 28 years old so he accepted.

How did black people who didn't participate to the sit-ins react to this initiative?

At the beginning of the sit-ins, about 25% of black people participated or were related to sit-ins, 25% were scared to lose their jobs because they were working in a lunch-counter or had a segregationist boss, and the 50% remaining didn't really have an opinion about sit-ins. At the end of the sit-ins, almost all the Blacks supported these actions



### **C) M. Bruce Fisher**

My name is Bruce fisher and I am an Oklahoma historian.

My mum, Ada Fisher graduated at Langston. At that time, segregation was in every aspect of life: separate schools, restrooms, churches (“Sunday is the most segregated day”: churches). Segregation was stronger in Southern states than in Northern ones.

In OK all the schools were separated. My mother wanted to make law studies, so she went to Langston University, an all black university. But Langston University didn’t offer what she wanted to study and it was not else law school for black people in the state of Oklahoma, you had to leave the state and my mother didn’t want to. So in 1946 he applied to Oklahoma University but was refused. It was against the law that Black people and White people sat in the same classroom, went to the same schools or were taught by the same teachers.

The state created a law class for black people in the Capitol basement but my mother refused to integrate it.

In 1948 the Supreme Court ruled that she was allowed to study in Oklahoma University. So in 1949 she integrated this university as the first black woman.

She was obliged to sit in a chair where written “colored” and was not allowed to eat with the other students. A policeman was invigilating her but she could remember that when he was not here, the White students went to eat with her. In 1951 she graduated.

Her fight was a non-violent one: the NAACP helped her paying the lawyers. She didn’t use violence but the law.

People from all over the country gave money to the NAACP, so it could pay lawyers or food during the sit-ins. It was dangerous to be involved in the NAACP because it was considered as a troublemaker organization. It was the main organism against segregation in the United States. They were Whites involved, but few.

For me, the election of Barack Obama is a symbol of the success of desegregation. Sixty years ago, Blacks were considered as inferior, and now a black is running the country. Racism still exists but things have really changed since fifty years. Being in the same schools teach the children that we are all people.



Bruce Fisher showing me the African American part of the History Center Museum



Ada Fisher

## PERSONAL CONCLUSION

During my two weeks' stay in the state of Oklahoma, I have learnt a lot because I had the chance to live with an American family and study in Classen High School. I was glad to discover the kindness of everyone towards us, the six French girls. The Rodgers, my host family, found and called the people I could interview for my project. It has been a great experience for me to discover how a few ones can change the rules. The Civil Right Movement is now well known in Oklahoma and a part of the History Center Museum is dedicated to this subject, so it was easy to gather information about it. The experience I have enjoyed a lot is interviewing Clara Luper's family, Bruce Fisher and Reverend James Shields. I was aware that I was living a special moment. These people answered very nicely and warmly to my questions. Bruce Fisher presented the History Center Museum to me, Reverend James Shields showed me the streets and the church in which the sit-iners used to meet. I have loved my stay in the United States and I hope I could come back soon and discover more of its history and wonderful people.



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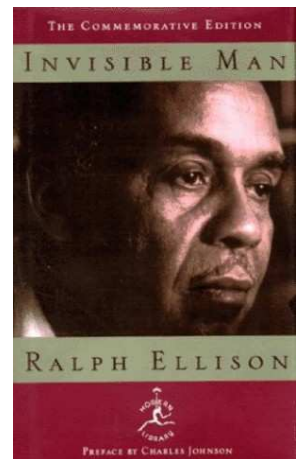
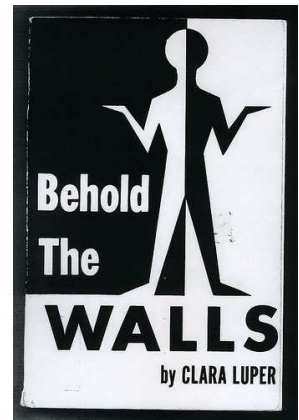
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