

# Oklahoma City and the Origins of the Modern Civil Rights Movement

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The Civil Rights Movement in the United States evolved through many stages. The American South of the 1940s continued to be plagued by a Jim Crow society upheld by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision. All public accommodations were segregated and showed little sign of change. World War II, however, gave African-American men a new sense of respect, and they were not eager to return to their homes in the South as second-class citizens after fighting for freedom and democracy overseas. The Truman administration often acted to promote racial equality, but Southern Democrats in Congress were able to defeat much of its civil rights legislation. As a result, direct action of Southerners was needed in the South. Arguments have been made that Greensboro, North Carolina, marked the beginning of the new direct action movement of sit-ins in 1960. In reality, however, the sit-in movement began more than a year earlier, in August 1958. Taking their lead from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the NAACP Youth Council of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, took the first major step to ending desegregation of lunch counters. The success of the sit-ins in Oklahoma City by the NAACP Youth Council not only led to lunch counter desegregation but also sparked a wave of similar demonstrations and results across the nation.

The sit-ins in Oklahoma City followed years of progress in civil rights actions. The Civil Rights Movement had made a number of advances during the Truman administration. In 1946 the President created the Committee on Civil Rights to advise him of ways the government, at the federal, state, and local levels, could advance the cause of civil rights. In 1947 the President's Commission on Civil Rights reported in *To Secure These Rights* a need for action against segregation (Powledge 17-18). Southern Democrats reacted strongly against the report, but it became the blueprint for civil rights legislation for the next twenty years. Truman also made an effort to desegregate the armed forces. On July 26, 1948, he declared the military would no longer have "separate but equal" training facilities and would be an equal opportunity employer (Powledge 28). Truman launched a federal course for civil rights when others would not.

Throughout the 1950s, civil rights efforts continued. The year 1954 brought about the landmark decision of *Brown v. the Board of Topeka, Kansas*. The ruling of the court stated, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (qtd. in Powledge 59-60). Unfortunately the Supreme Court allowed a great deal of leeway in the implementation of school desegregation, letting Southern states continue to segregate school children for years to come. After Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus on December 5, 1955, African-American leaders saw an opportunity to make a statement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., successfully led the Montgomery Bus Boycott between December 1955 and December 1956. With the boycott, civil rights activists in Montgomery succeeded in using direct economic action against the bus companies.

In Oklahoma City, Clara Luper, the advisor of the local NAACP Youth Council, took notice of King's direct economic action and its success. Luper, a high school history teacher, created a play for Negro History Week entitled *Brother President*, based on King's nonviolent techniques in Montgomery. Henry Wright, the National Youth Director of the NAACP, saw one of the performances and invited Luper and the cast to New York to perform for the 1957 Salute to Young Freedom Fighters Rally (Luper 1-2). Along the way of their travels, the group stopped for the first of their many integrated lunch counter experiences. When they returned to Oklahoma City, the group decided to undertake the breaking down of segregation in public accommodations, starting at home.

The youth began approaching owners and managers of local lunch counters in small groups and writing to city council members, the city manager, and city churches asking for the desegregation of eating establishments. Each attempt failed. Even the black churches held back, waiting for some sign that the movement would have an effect. By August 1958, after fifteen months of letters and visits, the group decided to take one step more. The Youth Council chose the five largest segregated restaurants in downtown Oklahoma City for their demonstrations.

At Katz Drug Store, the first target, blacks were allowed to shop throughout the store and order food to go. The food would be placed in a paper sack to be eaten outside. In an evening meeting of the council on August 18, Luper's ten-year-old daughter, Marilyn, moved to go to Katz Drug, sit down, and order a Coke. After unanimous approval, Marilyn decided they had waited long enough and should proceed to Katz's lunch counter immediately. After making phone calls to their parents, Richard Brown, Elmer, Edwards, Linda Pogue, Lana Pogue, Areda Tolliver, Calvin Luper, Marilyn Luper, Portwood Williams, Jr., Lynzetta Jones, Gwendolyn Fuller, Alma Faye Posey, Barbara Posey, Goldie Battle, and Betty Germany, ranging in age from six to seventeen, drove to the store, walked in, and sat down at the counter. Barbara Posey, president of the Youth Council, ordered thirteen Cokes and placed a five-dollar bill on the counter (Luper 6-9). This action constituted their declaration of war on the system of segregation in Oklahoma City. Mr. Masoner, the manager, was outraged. "Mrs. Luper, you know better than this," he yelled. "You know we don't serve colored folks at the counter. I don't see what's wrong with you colored folks—Mrs. Luper, you take these children out of here—this moment!" (Luper 9). Luper and the children kept their seats and repeated their order. The police and the press arrived shortly. White customers yelled things like "Nigger, go home, who do they think they are?" (Luper 9). To keep herself focused, Luper pulled out what they referred to as Martin Luther King's Non-Violent Plans and read them repeatedly as she prayed silently. At closing, the group left quietly.

That evening Clara Luper received both threatening and encouraging calls from black and white citizens. The next day all the young people went back to Katz's with more friends. After two days of patient non-violent protesting, Katz Drug Store gave in. The August 23, 1958, edition of the *Daily Oklahoman* reported the youth "were finally served shortly after 5 p.m." Katz, a leading drug store chain, not only desegregated the lunch counter in Oklahoma City but also announced that "all 38 outlets in Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Iowa would serve all people regardless of race, creed, or color" (Luper 14). The next day a few Youth Council members at a time were sent back to Katz's to ensure that the policy was permanent (*Oklahoman* 24 August).

The day after being served at Katz's, the Youth Council moved across the street to Veazy's Drug Store. Veazy's manager met the group of three volunteers at the door. "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," explained the manager (Luper 14-15). The students sat down, had a Coke, and tipped the waitress before moving on to the next battle. Across the street they met the rest of the group, which had been waiting to stage a mass demonstration at Veazy's if necessary.

S. H. Kress was the next target for that day. At Kress's the group was again met by a smiling manager. The management at Kress's had answered the question of how to integrate by removing all the chairs in their restaurant section. E. G. Gresham, the manager, was quoted in the *Norman Transcript* as explaining that the removal of stools was to "facilitate service" and that "stand-up service 'will be the policy until changed.'" This victory was less satisfying than the previous two, but it was progress all the same.

A portion of the group moved on to John A. Brown's, the largest department store in Oklahoma, covering a block and a half of downtown. It was at Brown's they faced the longest, most difficult battle. The sit-in at Brown's began August 22, 1958, and continued without cessation until June 23, 1961. It was the longest single sit-in campaign of the country by 1961 ("Nation's Longest"). The sit-in was resolved after Brown's agreed to end bias in the lunchroom,

soda fountains, and rest rooms throughout the store. Before the sit-in at Katz Drug Store in August 1958, African-Americans had been able to order food at only two places, both of which were segregated (*Oklahoman* 23 August). By the time Brown's desegregated, 117 stores had been integrated in Oklahoma City through the efforts of the NAACP Youth Council.

The African-American and white communities in Oklahoma City were both divided by the demonstrations. The NAACP in Oklahoma City started with fourteen Youth Council members in 1958 but grew to 1,000 by 1961, making it one of the largest NAACP Youth Councils in the country ("Nation's Longest"). Seventy-eight percent of the African-American population in the city participated in the John A. Brown demonstration. Many offered to bring sandwiches for the children; others offered to chauffeur anyone who needed a ride downtown to the sit-in. However, a minority of African-Americans in Oklahoma City were unhappy with the actions of the Youth Council. After the first day at Katz's, an unidentified black man called Mrs. Luper to chastise her for disgracing her race by acting out against the white people who had been so nice to him and by involving innocent children (Luper 12-13). Others were upset because their white employers were threatening to fire those involved in the lunch-counter protests. Most of the calls Luper received warned her to be careful. She was traveling to a dangerous place.

The abuse and hate calls from the white community were more violent and disturbing. During the sit-in at Brown's, shotgun shells were left on Luper's porch with a Ku Klux Klan note, and someone broke into her home and burned some furniture (Luper 20-21). At one point the police met her at Brown's to warn her of a bomb threat against her home. Luper rushed home to get the flag that had covered the casket of her father, a World War I veteran. News of the bomb threat was spread by radio. Friends came to watch her house so that she could return to the demonstration. Members of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars offered their support to prevent bombings and violence in Oklahoma City. A white woman Luper had never met offered to keep the flag in her safety deposit box (Luper 20-22).

A few brave white people came forward to help the Youth Council win their war against segregation. Some wrote letters to the management of Brown's declaring their support for the NAACP youth. On September 13, 1960, Howard Furlow wrote Mrs. John A. Brown, the owner of Brown's, to inform her that his family would no longer shop at her store. He even mentioned the furniture he had intended to purchase and the stores he had chosen instead of Brown's (Furlow). An anonymous letter to the editor of the *Black Dispatch* also voiced support for the sit-in movement at Brown's. The author claimed to be a patron of Brown's who planned to withdraw support because of the sit-ins. This person went so far as to say, "There is no place in enlightened Oklahoma City for your business unless your policy changes" (*Black Dispatch* 29 August 1958). As an act of kindness and support, an elderly white man ordered ten dishes of ice cream for the young people at Brown's. The demonstrators declined the ice cream, one of them saying, "He's very nice, but I don't think we'd better."

The NAACP Youth Council received similar mixed results from area churches. After the first three days of sit-ins, Luper sent the council members two or three at a time to twenty white churches. Seventeen of the churches welcomed the children; however, one church turned them away, and two others placed them in a segregated seating area. At Kelham Avenue Baptist Church, Betty Germany, 17, and Barbara Rockmore, 14, were advised by the pastor not to go into the church. In his defense, the pastor told the *Daily Oklahoman*, "I told the girls that regardless of my own personal convictions in the matter, I didn't feel that their attendance in church would help their cause downtown" (*Oklahoman* 25 August 1958). Marilyn Luper, 10, and Areeda Tolliver, 11, were escorted to their seats at Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Five minutes later the man who had seated them returned and asked them to move to a segregated section, his only explanation being, "God doesn't want the races to mix." The girls did not give up their seats right away but did leave shortly thereafter (*Oklahoman* 25 August 1958). Alice Henry, 12, and Lana Pogue, 6, attended First Church of the Nazarene. They started in the rear of the auditorium, were later moved to the balcony, and finally ended up in an area where no one else was seated (*Oklahoman* 25 August 1958). All seventeen other churches attended by the Youth Council

seated the children with the white congregation and treated them hospitably. Shortly after these visits the Oklahoma City Council of Churches devised a plan to support local restaurant owners who were willing to desegregate. To the African-American community, the Council of Churches clearly wanted to aid in the improvement of race relations in the city (*Black Dispatch* 12 September 1958).

The sit-in tactics of the Oklahoma City youth were soon repeated in St. Louis, Missouri, like Oklahoma City a border state community where segregation was less ardently held than in the states of the former Confederacy. It was almost eighteen months after the Oklahoma City sit-ins began before the sit-in strategy appeared in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, and then spread quickly to other Southern cities. Over the next four years, teens and college students organized non-violent sit-in protests in every Southern state.

The tactics were those that had proved successful in Oklahoma. The groups organizing the protests were often members of NAACP Youth Councils or NAACP College Chapters. First the group would target a business—not always a lunch counter or restaurant—that refused equal service to African-Americans. Next they would send a small delegation to the business to ask for service, for which they were ready to pay cash. If service was denied, they staged a sit-in. The next day they would arrive en masse and refuse to leave until service was rendered, repeating this day after day. The process often took months at a specific establishment. The success of the sit-in movement was due largely to its effectiveness in cutting the cash flow of a business. Even if patrons did not sympathize with the protesters, as many did not, they either were unable to find a place to sit or preferred to stay away from the demonstration sites. The businesses targeted had to decide whether to close their doors completely or provide equal service to all, regardless of skin color.

Non-violent sit-in protests revolutionized the Civil Rights Movement. Although the Oklahoma story is not widely recognized, Clara Luper and Oklahoma City's Youth Council played a major role in putting the sit-in movement into effect. The Oklahoma City sit-ins became a pilot study for the NAACP, and their success made them a model for other organizations. NAACP officials recognized the importance of the demonstrations being waged in Oklahoma. In March 1960, NAACP Youth Secretary Herbert L. Wright commended the Oklahoma City youth for "a significant breakthrough in the fight against segregation in the place of public accommodations in the South" and for their contribution "towards making democracy a reality for all of our citizens" (Oklahoma NAACP Youth"). NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins said in 1963, "Your city's example in not just naming a committee, but in acting on a phase of the problem should guide other urban centers to take bold and forward steps to bring about racial justice and mutual respect." ("Desegregation Hailed"). By 1963 the Youth Council had contributed to opening two hundred places to African-Americans and was credited with conducting the longest and most successful sit-ins in the country.

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