

# THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Home of a Choctaw freedman near Oak Hill.



It is fairly certain that the first African Americans who came to Indian Territory were either slaves or freedmen seeking a way of life away from the plantation overseers of the South. Although some were slaves, their bondage among the Indians was often considerably different from their lives among their white masters. Some African Americans came with the Five Civilized Tribes who left their lands in the forced exodus of the removals. Many runaways sought refuge among the dark-skinned tribes. When the tribes moved west, African Americans were among those who suffered the hunger, illnesses, exposure, and deaths experienced along the Trail of Tears.

The Journal of Jacob Fowler tells of journeying into the Territory during the years 1821–22. Fowler’s journal tells that a man named “Pall” had his own money, rode a horse, carried a gun, entered into arguments, and hunted along with the others. Although Paul’s name was most certainly misspelled, along with the names and actions of most of the others, Jacob Fowler

revealed that Paul was a member of the exploration party with more status than a slave would have. As the explorers returned to Fort Smith, Arkansas, the journal reveals what happened as they crossed what is now the state of Oklahoma.

Tuesday 26th Feby 1822

. . . Robert and my Self took out guns to Hunt on futt as there Was much timber land Here — but Taylor and Pall Began to Complain of Hunger of which Taylor began gro black in the face and Pall was gitting white With the Same Complaint and both thought the Hors Shold be killed....We Head not gon far before Som Deer Was Seen in the Brush and Robert Went after them and killed two of them....the deer Caryed to Camp Wheare We soon Head Sumtious feest and much Plesentness now appeer Round the fier. . .

Wensday 27th Feby 1822

Sent Pall out Early to look for the Horses We Soon Heard the Report of gun and not long after Pall Came in With a deer on His back and the first He Ever Killed in His life.

Another group of explorers brought an African American servant along. Among the group was the American literary figure, Washington Irving. Charles Joseph Latrobe wrote in his journal of their coming to the estate of a colonel about 50 miles from Fort Gibson. They were welcomed “by a crowd of Negroes, Indians of diverse tribes and both sexes, dogs, pigs, cats, turkeys, horses, ducks, all looking fat and happy.” He called them “an extremely amusing sight.” He described one of the families that he visited, once saying, “None of the family spoke either French or English, with the exception of a slave girl, who acted as our interpreter.”

The famous Western painter, George Catlin, wrote about an incident involving the murder of a judge and his family on the Washita and the kidnapping of the judge’s son:

The head-chief of the tribe is a very old man, and he several times replied to Colonel Dodge in a very eloquent manner; assuring him of the friendly feeling of his chiefs and warriors towards the pale faces, in the direction from whence we came.

After Colonel Dodge had explained in general terms, the objects of our visits, he told them that he should expect from them some account of the foul murder of Judge Martin and his family on the False Washita, which had been perpetrated



**WASHINGTON IRVING** was an American author, essayist, biographer, historian, and diplomat of the early 19th century. He is best known for his short stories *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*.



**GEORGE CATLIN** was an American painter, author and traveler who specialized in portraits of Native Americans in the Old West.

(committed) but a few weeks before and which the Comanches had told us was done by the Pawnee Picts. The Colonel told them, also, that he learned from the Comanches, that they had the little boy the son of the murdered gentleman, in their possession; and that he should expect them to deliver him up, as an indispensable (unavoidable) condition of the friendly arrangement that was now making. They positively denied the fact, and all knowledge of it; firmly assuring us that they knew nothing of the murder, or of the boy.

A demand was repeatedly made, and as often denied; until at length an African American man was discovered, who was living with the Pawnees, who spoke good English; and coming into the council house, gave information that such a boy had recently been brought into their village, and was now a prisoner amongst them. This excited great surprise and indignation (anger) in the council, and Colonel Dodge then informed the chiefs that the council would rest here; and certainly nothing further of a peaceable nature would transpire (happen) until the boy was brought in. In this alarming dilemma, all remained in gloomy silence for a while, when Colonel Dodge further informed the chiefs, that as an evidence of his friendly intentions toward them, he had, on starting, purchased at a very great price, from their enemies the Osages, two Pawnee (and one Kioway) girls; which had been held by them for some years as prisoners, and which he had brought the whole way home, and had here ready to be delivered to their friends and relations; but whom he certainly would never show, until the little boy was produced. He also made another demand, which was for the restoration of the United States ranger, by the name of Abbé, who had been captured by them the summer before. They acknowledged the seizure of this man, and all solemnly declared that he had been taken by a party of the Comanches, over whom they had no

control, and carried beyond the Red River into the Mexican provinces, where he was put to death.

They held a long consultation about the boy, and seeing their plans defeated by the evidence of the African American; and also being convinced of the friendly disposition of the colonel, by bringing home their prisoners from the Osages, they sent out and had the boy brought in, from the middle of the corn field, where he had been secreted. He is a smart and very intelligent boy of nine years of age . . . There was a great excitement in the council when the little fellow was brought in; and as he passed amongst them, he looked around and exclaimed with some surprise, "What! Are these white men here?" To which Colonel Dodge replied, and asked him his name; and he promptly answered, "My name is Matthew Wright Martin."

George Catlin continued to say that, after the exchange of prisoners, the council took a pleasing and friendly turn. But who the African American man was who played such a vital role in the exchange, no one has ever known. Who he was, from where he came, and where he went have been lost in history.

Although they had many things in common, there were often bad feelings between African Americans and Indians. Some Indian slave owners were as harsh and cruel as any white slave master. Indians were often hired to catch runaway slaves. In fact, slave-catching was a lucrative way of life for some of the Indians, especially the Chickasaws. For the return of a runaway slave, the Indian could expect to get a musket and three blankets. Also Indians were often used to put down slave rebellions, and African Americans were used as soldiers against the Indians. The degree of racial prejudice varied from tribe to tribe with some Indian slave owners more in sympathy with the slave masters than with the runaway slaves.

**THE CIVIL WAR.** In the early 1860s, the talk of

civil war was everywhere, including Indian Territory. The Indian tribes faced the same decisions to be made that other areas west of the Mississippi River faced. Both the Union and the Confederacy wanted the Indian tribes on their side. Finally, the Choctaws and Chickasaws aligned themselves with the South. The other tribes split in their decisions. But for the African American people living among the Indian tribes, there was no such decision to be made. Their future lay in the hands of the Union.

During the War Between the States, African American soldiers played significant roles in the success of the Union. At the beginning, both sides hesitated to use African American troops, but when President Lincoln called for volunteers, African American men volunteered their services. At first, they were refused the right to serve and trained on their own time, waiting for the opportunity to serve. When the war began to go badly for the Union, the government issued another call for volunteers. This time African Americans would be accepted.

Although they were not accepted for service in the earliest years of the war, and then they were accepted only for lowly or degrading chores, the African American soldiers proved themselves in battle before the struggle ended.

Despite all of these obstacles, African American soldiers served both armies with distinction. They saw action in every theater of operation during the Civil War in a total of 449 engagements, including thirty-nine important battles. More than 38,000 gave their lives for the cause — a mortality rate almost forty percent greater than among white troops. The desertion rate in African American units averaged seven percent, compared with nineteen percent for white units. The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to sixteen African American soldiers and four received the Navy Medal of Honor, achievements that are all the more remarkable considering the times.

In recognition of their contributions, General B. F. Butler, in his farewell address, told the

African American troops in his command, “In this army you have been treated as soldiers, not as laborers. You have shown yourselves worthy of the uniform you wear. The best officers of the Union seek to command you. Your bravery has won the admiration of those who would be your masters. Your patriotism, fidelity (loyalty), and courage have illustrated the best qualities of manhood. With the bayonet you have unlocked the iron-barred gates of prejudice and opened new fields of freedom, liberty, and equality of right to yourselves and to your race.”

In 1866, the United States Congress passed an act providing for six African American regiments in the regular U.S. Army. Two of these, the 9th and 10th, were cavalry regiments under the command of white officers, Colonel Edward Hatch and Colonel Benjamin Grierson. A white officer who refused to serve with the new regiment was General George Custer.

The Indians called the African American cavalymen “Buffalo Soldiers.” Many historians believe the name was given to them because the Indians thought the hair of the African American man looked like that of the buffalo. Others believe the name was given because of the buffalo skin coats worn by the soldiers. Whatever the reason, the name stuck, and it was a name of respect and admiration.

Serving with the 10th Cavalry was Lieutenant Henry O. Flipper, who was the first African American man to graduate from West Point.

The 9th regiment served in Texas, and the 10th served in Indian Territory. Some of the African American troops of the 10th Cavalry later helped to build portions of Fort Sill. Historians believe that the success of African American and white troops and military necessity made certain the emancipation of African Americans in Indian Territory and in the South.

The War Between the States made major changes in the lives of African American people. Before the war, the African Americans in Indian Territory were



Buffalo soldiers of the 25th Infantry, some wearing buffalo robes

either slaves or freedmen. For the most part, they were slaves. When the war was over, the Territory became a vital part of the history of the West.

In Oklahoma, the age of the cowboy began soon after the War Between the States, and it began to change with the Run of 1889. Although they seldom found themselves in the fictional stories of the West, African American cowboys rode the cattle trails, often making up as much as one-fourth of a trail crew.

The most famous of the African American cowboys was Bill Pickett, who invented bulldogging and starred in the early days of rodeo. He worked on the famous 101 Ranch near Ponca City, Oklahoma, and was a star performer with Zack Miller's 101 Ranch Wild West Show. He excited audiences everywhere with his unusual method of throwing a bull. "He would slide off his horse, grab the bull by the horns, sink his teeth into the bull's nose or lip, and force the animal to the ground." When the show played in Mexico City, he won a huge sum of money from the President of Mexico by throwing a bull and holding him down for the better part of an hour, long past the time limit set in the



bet.

Bill Pickett won his place in Western lore by his own strength and courage. In 1907, he won the title of World Champion Bulldogger at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Though often battered and injured in the arena, Pickett always displayed courage and gave his best performance. One of his most spectacular performances — and most dangerous — was given at Sand Springs, Oklahoma, in 1920. Pickett failed to throw his animal the first time, and the angry steer plowed up the ground with Bill's head. Blood covered his face, and an attendant had to bandage it so that only his eyes were visible. Gallantly, the African American cowboy re-entered the arena and threw the steer.

In 1932, Bill Pickett, often called the “Dusky Demon,” lost his life when a horse kicked him in the head. He was buried with honors near Marland, Oklahoma, with Zack Miller composing a poetic tribute to the courageous cowboy.

For his contributions to the West, Bill Pickett was named to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City in 1971.

ABOVE : Bill Pickett was the originator of steer wrestling or “bulldogging.” While wrestling a steer, he used his teeth instead of employing the hands-on-the-horns method used by cowboys today. He was a star performer in the 101 Ranch Wild West Show. Wild West Shows were traveling vaudeville performances in the United States and Europe. The first was Buffalo Bill's, formed in 1883 and lasting until 1913. The shows introduced many western performers and personalities, and a romanticized version of the American Old West, to a wide audience. The Pawnee Bill Wild West Show still performs annually. (Schedule and information can be found at [OkTourism.com](http://OkTourism.com))

TOP : The 101 Ranch Headquarters near Ponca City. LEFT : Mural honoring the Miller Brothers and the 101 Ranch and Wild West Show in Downtown Ponca City, Oklahoma.

He was the first African American to receive this recognition.

When the Run of '89 took place, the Buffalo Soldiers helped to keep intruders out of the Territory. For the first time in Indian Territory, African Americans experienced near-equality. The government opened the lands to anyone, without discrimination, as long as those staking land claims met eligibility rules. Some African American people made the run and staked out homesteads. Later, as the government opened other lands for settlement, more African American pioneers came and homesteaded. They had few tools and resources. As a result, many left their homesteads and returned eastward, but many stayed and improved their homesteads and struggled through a harsh way of life. The 1900 census reveals that approximately 55,000 African American people in both Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory had become Oklahoma settlers.

One of the early prominent African American settlers was Edward McCabe, who had held the office of State Auditor in Kansas. When he wasn't re-nominated for that office, he came to Oklahoma in 1889 and settled near Guthrie. He bought 160 acres of land somewhat east of the city and founded the town of Langston. He started a newspaper and sent messengers to the South to encourage other African American settlers to come to the town that he had staked out for African Americans only. It was his dream to found a state, governed and populated by a majority of African American people. Many like McCabe envisioned two states, one for African Americans and one for Indians. Although McCabe never realized his dream, the Republican Party appointed him to serve as Deputy Territory Auditor, the first African American to hold a major political office in Indian Territory. Langston became the site of Langston University, the first African American institution of higher learning in the state of Oklahoma.

Just as the African American troops known as

Buffalo Soldiers played an important role in keeping intruders out of lands being opened for settlement, African American lawmen helped to settle the territory into a law-abiding state. Ike Rogers and the famous Bass Reeves were deputy U.S. marshals.

Green I. Currin of Kingfisher was elected to the legislature in 1890. He was joined in 1893 by a second African American legislator, D. J. Wallace of Guthrie. These lawmakers pushed civil rights legislation and education for African Americans but failed to get the legislation into law. They served only one term each.

In 1897, laws separating African Americans from whites were enacted over vigorous protests and opposition from African American citizens. The same battles were fought when Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory became a state, and legislative leaders were working on a state constitution. Despite all efforts to prevent the segregationist constitution from becoming law, a constitution embracing discrimination and segregation was adopted. Oklahoma thus became a "Jim Crow" state or one which discriminated against African Americans.

#### **DAYS OF SEGREGATION IN OKLAHOMA.**

The first government formed after statehood implemented segregation or separation of the races. In fact, the first bill that came before the Oklahoma Senate was a "Jim Crow" measure which would segregate the races in public transportation. The bill required separate railroad cars, waiting rooms, and restrooms for African American passengers. Laws were also passed to provide for separate schools. **Jim Crowism** became an important part of Oklahoma society, remaining undisturbed for almost half a century.

Although the laws dealing with segregation were oppressive to all African American people, none were so oppressive or long-lasting as the laws segregating the races in public education.

"Separate but equal" was an false phrase used to describe the educational system. Everyone knew



**ROSCOE DUNJEE**

that they were certainly “separate,” but hardly “equal.” African American teachers received less pay, and African American schools received less money on which to operate. In fact, the manner in which money was allocated to public schools helped to maintain a segregated, inferior school system for African American children. African American schools were far apart. For example, African American children in “Blue Branch,” which was near the present town of Byars, had to ride the bus some forty miles to Norman in order to go to school.

A prominent African American educator in Oklahoma was Dr. F. D. Moon. After working in several locations as a classroom teacher, the Langston-educated teacher became principal of Douglass High School in northeast Oklahoma City, serving in that position for twenty-one years. He became president of the Oklahoma Association for Negro Teachers in 1929 and remained in leadership positions for many years afterward. Later he was elected to the Oklahoma City Board of Education and served as its president during the difficult early days of integration. His work earned him the title “Dean of African American Educators” in Oklahoma.

Roscoe Dunjee was editor of *The Black Dispatch* newspaper in Oklahoma City for many years. He

worked tirelessly with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for legislation and changes in the law that would provide better opportunities for African American children. In 1946, a constitutional amendment was passed to increase the building levy (money collected by law) and to increase the amount of money to be used for African American schools.

A prominent educator who also worked to bring about changes through the NAACP was Emma Lou Freeman. In 1947, she sued the Oklahoma City School Board because her salary was less than that of her white counterparts. Her lawsuit requested the courts to order the Oklahoma City Board of Education to equalize its pay scale. The school board complied with the request before the court handed down a decision, but the court handed down the decision anyway as a guideline. That decision was in favor of Emma Lou Freeman.

Efforts of educators such as Dr. F. D. Moon and Emma Lou Freeman did not overcome the oppressive effects of discrimination and segregation, but their achievements greatly reduced illiteracy and improved opportunities among African Americans in Oklahoma. Their accomplishments marked giant steps in achieving full civil rights.

African American history is filled with frustration and struggle. Listed below are some of the significant facts and events that mark the struggles of African Americans in education:

1. For 58 years, from 1897 to 1955, racially segregated separate schooling at both the common school and higher education levels was required by law in Oklahoma, as in most other Southern and border states.
2. African American students attended schools that were segregated and separated from those attended by all other non-African American students during the period and shortly thereafter.
3. Langston University was the sole source of higher education in Oklahoma for African



LANGSTON SCHOOL, , c. 1898–1903

American students.

4. African American schools were inferior to non-African American schools in terms of finance-related factors, including facilities, supplies and equipment, curriculum offerings, textbooks and teacher materials, class size and structure, and teaching salaries. More money per student was spent to educate non-African American students than to educate African American students at both the common school and higher education levels.

5. The 1954 Brown II decision indicated that separate schools were “inherently unequal.” It decreed that school districts were required to eliminate the dual (separate school) system “with all deliberate speed.”

6. Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act required

that educational institutions be desegregated, or be in the process of becoming desegregated, as a condition for receiving federal funds.

7. The 1973 Adams decision required states to assume responsibility for dismantling the dual higher education system as a condition for receiving federal funds. Oklahoma and other Southern and border states still not desegregated were affected.

The Ada Lois Sipuel case and the George McLaurin case were also significant factors.

It is quite clear that educational opportunities for African Americans and for all other minorities have greatly improved since the 1954 Brown decision by the United States Supreme Court. It is equally clear that there is more to be done.

One of the greatest obstacles to full equality



African American children in dress clothes around 1900.

other than lack of educational opportunities was legislation that barred most African Americans from the right to vote. The first governor of the state, Charles N. Haskell, called a special session of the legislature to devise ways to keep African American people from voting. With the governor's leadership, the legislature passed the "Grandfather Clause" for voters. The law required a person to be able to write and read a section of the Oklahoma Constitution, unless that person had ancestors who could vote as of January 1, 1866. Groups of African Americans, members of the Republican Party, and other minority parties unsuccessfully fought against the legislation with its obvious purpose of denying the vote to thousands of African American citizens. Perhaps their enthusiasm to deny the vote to African Americans was fired by the election of A. C. Hamlin to the legislature. He was the first African American to serve in the Oklahoma Legislature after statehood. The student of history can only guess at Hamlin's feelings when the legislature, of which he was a member, passed laws designed to limit the voting rights of African Americans,

or when he heard speeches in support of the grandfather clause.

The constitutionality of the legislation was challenged in the courts. African American lawyers, led by A. G. W. Sango and J. Coody Jackson, fought the highly discriminatory legislation for more than five years. Finally, a test case came out of Kingfisher where two registrars denied registration to African Americans under the grandfather clause. Federal charges were filed and appealed until the case came before the United States Supreme Court. The court declared in *Guinn vs. United States* (1915) that the *grandfather clause* was unconstitutional.

Then the state lawmakers turned to literacy tests as a means to deny the ballot to African American voters. Governor Robert L. Williams asked the legislature to submit a constitutional amendment to the people requiring that all voters be able to read and write. Since it required that all voters, African American and white, meet the same requirement, the governor thought the courts would hold that the legislation was constitutional. Because the people did not want to submit the measure to the courts for another long, expensive court battle and because they felt that the law would **disenfranchise** (take the vote away from) many whites as well, the proposed constitutional amendment was defeated.

Finally, the Oklahoma Legislature passed the Registration Law, whereby people who had voted in 1914, or who were eligible to vote in 1914, were automatically eligible to vote. Since the previous laws that had not allowed African Americans to vote were not ruled unconstitutional until 1915, this law effectively denied the ballot to African American voters. The law was not overturned until 1939 when the United States Supreme Court ruled in a case brought against county election officials by I. W. Lane.

After the 1930s, state leaders ceased official efforts designed to deny voting privileges to African American citizens in Oklahoma.

**ECONOMIC PROBLEMS.** The Great Depression of the 1930s was a terrible economic time for all Oklahoma citizens, but it was particularly harsh for African Americans.

Poorer educational opportunities and voting restrictions had a **profound** (deep) effect upon the mental and emotional well-being of African Americans. Economic **restrictions** and oppression affected their total quality of life, including adequate health care. No laws had to be passed to tell the African American man or woman to “stay in his or her place.” The very logic that supported a Jim Crow society dictated the place they would occupy. It would have been unusual for African Americans not to occupy the bottom rung of the economic ladder, for rarely was segregation divorced (separated) from **discrimination** in other areas of life.

For many years, African Americans were small farmers. As the Great Depression deepened, the African American farmer’s economic woes worsened. The hardships of the depression caused African American and white farmers to lose their mortgaged lands to the banks. In the decade of the thirties, more than 37,000 Oklahoma African Americans gave up farming. This was a trend that would continue to the present day.

As African Americans lost their farms, they migrated to the cities, especially to Oklahoma City and Tulsa. By 1970, more than 50 percent of Oklahoma’s African American population lived in those two metropolitan areas.

The shift in the African American population from rural to urban sites changed the occupations but not the economics of their lives. Most African Americans who got jobs found them in domestic service or unskilled labor — low-paying jobs at best. They had simply exchanged rural poverty for urban poverty. Crowded, poor housing and living conditions became the breeding ground for trouble.

African American professionals and businessmen found that segregation did provide some opportunities for them. In a sense, they had a

professional monopoly. Teachers, preachers, doctors, lawyers, and merchants found roles for themselves in the segregated African American communities. However, since their clients were impoverished, their services were not so profitable in the African American community, and the facilities (schools, churches, and hospitals) were not so modern or well-equipped. African American lawyers had a particularly difficult time because rarely did African Americans get to serve on a jury.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) came to Oklahoma in 1904. A prominent African American leader who helped the NAACP to develop as a major force against violence and discrimination was Roscoe Dunjee. A minister and a newspaperman, who had founded the *Black Dispatch*, his leadership in both the state and national NAACP organizations were forceful and recognized. He was an avid spokesman and worker for civil rights. He enjoyed respect from both African American and white communities.

Dunjee was responsible for African Americans being allowed to serve on juries. He urged African American voter registration and participation at the polls, even when it was dangerous to do so. He voted himself, even though he had to have a police escort to the polls. Dunjee also organized a chapter of the National Negro Business League.

No movement of any consequence was started in Oklahoma for a period of forty years without the counsel, and usually the active support, of Roscoe Dunjee. He was a strong supporter of excellence in education. He never believed that excellence could be possible as long as schools were segregated. Perhaps one of the best testimonies to Dunjee’s work was uttered by one of Dunjee’s political foes. Governor William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray said, “You fellows have been listening to Roscoe Dunjee, and he’s a hundred years ahead of his time.”

A crack in the wall of discrimination occurred when African Americans won the right to be seated as jurors in Oklahoma courts of law. Mrs. Clara



“Separate but Equal.” Getting a drink from the “Colored” water cooler in streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

McFall became the first African American to serve on an Oklahoma jury. A part of the legal tradition of Oklahoma and the nation is that of being tried by a jury of one’s peers. As a result, jury panels are to be made up of citizens from all economic, social and **ethnic** groups. But the right to serve as a juror was won for African American citizens only after a hard-fought battle. Several suits were filed to remove the exclusion of African Americans from juries. It was not until 1935 that a suit was successful. The case of *Jesse Hollins vs. The State of Oklahoma* set the precedent for the state and the nation, outlawing the exclusion of African Americans from juries.

**TRANSPORTATION.** During World War II, African American soldiers from all sections of the nation experienced changes in policies of segregation in the armed services. The services were not completely desegregated as the war began, but rapid changes eliminated discrimination and segregation in the armed forces. Soldiers who grew up in the south and who had never known any other way of life, traveled throughout the United States

and the world and experienced nonsegregation. When those servicemen returned from the front lines of battle, it was particularly humiliating to “go to the back of the bus” in public transportation.

The first law enacted after Oklahoma became a state was one that required separate coaches, waiting rooms, drinking fountains, and restrooms for African Americans. The law took effect in February 1908. On June 3, 1946, the United States Supreme Court ruled that laws requiring segregation of races on public vehicles could not apply to interstate public transportation. On November 13, 1956, the court ruled that all such laws were unconstitutional, whether in-state or interstate. In February 1965, the Oklahoma Legislature repealed the 1908 law. The walls of discrimination began to crumble.

**PUBLIC ACCOMMODATIONS.** Before 1965, there were laws in Oklahoma for segregation of all public accommodations. Tradition rather than laws caused segregation in restaurants, hotels, barber shops, libraries, and even city parks.

The end of discrimination in public



Clara Luper poses with one of many photos in her personal scrapbooks commemorating her experiences in the Civil Rights movement. She died June 8, 2011. Copyright ©The Oklahoma Publishing Company

accommodations began in the 1950s. After World War II, African American leaders grew more insistent about the right of all citizens to use tax-supported institutions. In 1950, the new Central Library in Oklahoma City was opened to all. The bond issue for the library had strong support from the African American voting constituency.

A few African Americans began to go to city parks, including the zoo. The NAACP stood ready to file suit in case African Americans were refused entrance, but all were admitted. Shortly, all citizens were using the city parks and enjoying the zoo, without incident or difficulty.

However, desegregation of other public accommodations came more slowly. Those segregated by tradition were more difficult to desegregate than were those segregated by law because unjust laws can be ruled unconstitutional by the courts. Since there were few laws involving segregation of public accommodations, desegregation had to be accomplished through means other than the courts.

African Americans first tried negotiations. Under the leadership of NAACP Youth Council Advisor Clara Luper, members of the council tried to convince owners and managers to open their doors to all citizens, African American and white,

on an equal basis. When negotiations failed, Mrs. Luper, Caroline Burke, and other members of the council tried a new **tactic** — the sit-in.

The nation's first sit-in occurred at a lunch counter at the downtown Oklahoma City Katz Drug Store. The lunch counter operation had previously allowed African Americans to buy food and drink to be eaten elsewhere. After days of sit-ins, African Americans were finally served at the counter.

As sit-ins occurred at other downtown lunch counters, the African American community appealed to city churches for support. On August 25, 1958, the *Daily Oklahoman* reported, "Members of the NAACP organization attended twenty white churches Sunday to call attention to their drive of the past week to gain the privilege of eating with white customers in Oklahoma City restaurants and businesses."

On September 16, 1958, the General Board of the Oklahoma City Council of Churches, composed of a heavy majority of white ministers, called segregation "undemocratic, un-Christian, and inhuman."

Yet, in 1960, the NAACP Youth Council still found discrimination in downtown Oklahoma City eating establishments. The African American youths planned to picket against businesses discriminating against African Americans. Police kept watch over the demonstrations but did not interfere because the protests were orderly and the participants were law-abiding.

At the Civic Center Grill, Mrs. Luper and her troop of teenage protesters were locked in and subjected to physical threats and personal abuse. They used their last three quarters to call NAACP leaders to tell them of their difficult situation. Shortly, Dr. F. D. Moon, attorney E. Melvin Porter, and others came to the grill. Youthful protesters recall, "Our hearts leaped with joy, and tears clouded our eyes as Attorney Porter requested through the back screen door our release. We listened as Dr. Moon taught Mr. McNeil (the owner) a lesson in American democracy and as Attorney Porter

explained to Mr. McNeil the laws of our great country.”

In 1961, the sit-ins and demonstrations continued. The Reverend Robert G. McDole, a Catholic priest, joined the sit-ins. Many were arrested. The movements broadened to other Oklahoma cities. Protests and sit-ins continued throughout the sixties. Finally, in 1968, the Oklahoma Legislature enacted legislation bringing state laws into compliance with the 1964 Federal Civil Rights Act. These laws took effect in 1969, making it unlawful to segregate or discriminate on the basis of race in public accommodations.

After numerous lawsuits, education in the state of Oklahoma moved toward quality and equality. Some of these lawsuits should be noted as major steps toward integrated public education in Oklahoma.

One of the first suits was filed by Ada Lois Sipuel, an honor graduate of Langston University. She was denied admission to the University of Oklahoma School of Law in 1946. After Miss Sipuel was denied admission, Roscoe Dunjee went with her to the office of Dr. George Cross, president of the University of Oklahoma. Dr. Cross and other university officials agreed that Miss Sipuel was scholastically qualified for admission. However, Dr. Cross had been instructed to deny all African Americans admission to the university. These instructions came from his Board of Regents. Upon request, Dr. Cross provided Miss Sipuel a written denial of admission in which he recognized her scholastic qualifications, stating that her denial of admission was based solely on race. After three years of court fights and appeals, on June 18, 1949, Ada Lois Sipuel-Fisher enrolled in the School of Law. The Sipuel case broke the barriers of discrimination against African Americans in Oklahoma higher education. In 1992, Governor David Walters appointed Sipuel-Fisher to the Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Another court case, *McLaurin vs. The Oklahoma*

*State Regents for Higher Education, et. al.*, resulted in G. W. McLaurin’s being admitted to the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. However, Mr. McLaurin was segregated in the classrooms, in the cafeteria, and at other facilities. In 1950, a U.S. Supreme Court decision settled the matter for good. Discriminatory actions against Mr. McLaurin were declared unconstitutional. State facilities for higher education were then legally opened to African Americans on an equal basis with whites.

Desegregation in public schools came more slowly and painfully. Although school integration began in 1955, on July 12, 1963, Federal District Judge Luther Bohanon ruled that the Oklahoma City Public Schools were still not truly integrated. Two years later, Judge Bohanon again addressed the problem by ruling that the Oklahoma City Board of Education must take positive and affirmative steps to eliminate racial segregation.

Residential patterns resulting in ethnic grouping caused most of the segregation. There was no action on the part of educational leaders to do anything to bring about full integration in spite of residential patterns. Through the directions of the courts and **subsequent** actions by the local school administration and Board of Education, steps toward full integration of students, teachers, and support personnel were finally taken.

A story of African American experience in Oklahoma would be incomplete without recognizing the accomplishments of Hannah D. Atkins, the first African American woman to win a seat in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, and E. Melvin Porter, an Oklahoma City attorney who was the first African American man to be elected to the Oklahoma Senate.

Mrs. Atkins (who died June 17, 2010) was the wife of the late Dr. Charles Atkins, Oklahoma City’s first African American councilman. In the 1968 general election, she defeated George R. Cupp for the District 97 seat in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. In the 1970 legislative session



**ADA LOIS SIPUEL**

alone, Mrs. Atkins was author or co-author of 24 bills and seven citations. A major piece of legislation authored by her which has had excellent results in the health and well-being of Oklahoma's school children is a law requiring immunization for all children entering Oklahoma schools for the first time.

After leaving her seat in the legislature, Mrs. Atkins served in the United Nations and in the Department of Human Services, where she concentrated her efforts toward improving the life of the aged citizens of Oklahoma. She also served as Oklahoma's Secretary of State.

E. Melvin Porter was born in Oklahoma and educated in Tennessee. After graduation from Vanderbilt's School of Law, he opened a law office in Oklahoma City just as the struggle for civil rights was beginning to gain momentum.

He quickly got involved in the struggle to desegregate public accommodations, and just as quickly became a leader in the Oklahoma City branch of the NAACP. He served as its president from 1961 to 1964. During those early years, he spent much of his professional and personal time defending civil rights protesters.

In 1964, he was elected to the Oklahoma State Senate. While serving for two decades in the Senate, Porter was a staunch opponent of segregation and discrimination. He was a strong advocate of civil liberties and for the poor. He was defeated by Vicki Miles-LaGrange in the 1986 election.

Vicki Miles-LaGrange, an honor graduate of Vassar and Howard University School of Law, quickly became a strong voice in the legislature. Known as a hard-working, knowledgeable senator, Miles-LaGrange particularly championed causes that improved educational opportunities and services for children, better health care, expanded and more effective community services, and environmental issues, among many others. Since her advent into public life, she has received more than 60 honors and recognitions for her work, including being named in



**HANNAH ATKINS**

1994 to Attorney-General Janet Reno's Advisory Committee.

In 1993, Miles-LaGrange served as U.S. Attorney in the Oklahoma Western Federal District. Recommended by U.S. Senator David Boren and nominated by President Bill Clinton, Miles-LaGrange received unanimous approval by the U.S. Senate to become U.S. District Judge for the Western District. She was sworn in on December 16, 1994, and was the first African American federal judge appointed in the 10th Judicial Circuit.

Miles-LaGrange was nominated by President Bill Clinton on September 22, 1994, to a seat on the United States District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma. She was confirmed by the United States Senate on October 7, 1994, and received her commission on November 28, 1994. She served as chief judge from 2008 to 2015. She took inactive senior status on November 5, 2018, meaning that while she remains a federal judge, she will no longer hear cases or participate in the business of the court.

Juanita Kidd Stout, a native of Wewoka, Oklahoma, reached national prominence in 1959 when she became the first African American woman in America to be elected to be a judge. A former high school music teacher in Seminole and Sand Springs, she sought a career in law. After distinguished service in the Philadelphia District Attorney's office, she was elected Judge of the Common Pleas Court in Philadelphia.

During the 1960s she became nationally recognized for her fight against crime, especially juvenile delinquency. In 1963, John F. Kennedy appointed her as a special ambassador to Kenya. She also served as a member of the White House Conference on Children and Youth.

In 1965, the National Association of Women Lawyers named Juanita Kidd Stout as the "Outstanding Woman Lawyer of the Year."

Struggles continue for equal opportunities and for equal justice in hiring practices, for equal opportunities in education, and for elimination of discrimination in housing. A remnant of the wall of discrimination still stands, but it is no longer a barrier that cannot be broken through simply because of the color of a person's skin.



VICKI MILES LAGRANGE



JUANITA KIDD STOUT