

PASSAGE

SOCIAL SCIENCES: Adapted from the essay Clara Luper by Elijah Bigler (©2023 Elijah Bigler)

Clara Luper was born on May 3, 1923, in Okfuskee County. Who knew that in this county with only 25,000 people, an influential civil rights leader would begin her journey to being one of the most important figures in Oklahoma history? Clara Luper had a passion for education from a very young age. She remembered one day when she and her friends sneaked over to the all-white elementary school. Clara saw more books than she had ever seen before: “I wanted to read the books. I wanted to explore new ideas, but the walls separated us and we were caught behind [them].” Throughout her life, Clara made strides to break down the walls that separated her from the education, rights, and positions that she wanted to achieve.

Clara dedicated the first part of her life to furthering her education in a time when such opportunities for African American women were only beginning to emerge. In 1944, Clara attained a bachelor’s degree from Langston University. In 1951, she received a master’s degree in history from the University of Oklahoma. She was the first African American admitted to the graduate history program at the University of Oklahoma. After her time at university, Clara taught history and public relations at Dunjee High School in Spencer and at John Marshall and Classen High Schools in Oklahoma City.

In 1957, Clara wrote a play titled *Brother President*. This play, which Clara wrote while teaching, chronicles the story of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the non-violent techniques that he used to eliminate segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. The play was seen by Herbert Wright, the National Youth Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and he invited Clara and the main cast of the play to New York City to perform it at a rally. While Clara and her students were in New York, they experienced desegregated restaurants for the first time. However, on their way home, they took the Southern route and were quickly reminded of the segregated nature of the South.

Another event happened in Clara’s life in 1957; she became the advisor for the Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council. This position inspired her to organize a protest to tackle the desegregation in Oklahoma City. On August 19, 1958, Clara and other members of the Youth Council walked into Katz’s drugstore and ordered Cokes. They sat at the segregated counter, showing clear, non-violent defiance against the bigotry that forced African Americans to sit separately from other customers. These protests resulted in Katz’s 39 locations across the United States becoming desegregated, and Clara and the Youth Council practiced sit-ins at many other locations around Oklahoma City for the next several years.

One of the most harrowing desegregation protests took place at the Doe Doe Amusement Park in Lawton, Oklahoma. Even though black and white soldiers had fought together and served at Lawton’s Fort Sill, they could not swim together at the amusement park. After multiple attempts for a sit-in in Lawton, Clara decided to organize a march from Oklahoma City to Lawton on July 4, 1966. Eighty-eight people started the march on a rainy evening. They spent the nights in service stations and outdoors, but as they made it closer and closer to Lawton, more and more people joined them and offered support. People gave the protestors food and wished them luck, and one even gave Clara a swimsuit for her to wear at the Doe Doe Amusement Park. When they finally reached Lawton, the mayor of the town stated that an ordinance would be created to eliminate discrimination from all public places within the week.

Clara continued to find ways to fight oppression throughout the state. In 1969, Clara served as the spokesperson for the sanitation workers as they protested discrimination. The city manager refused to acknowledge Clara as the voice of the workers, and when they finally went on strike, the mayor issued an emergency proclamation preventing more than three people from gathering in certain parts of the city. Clara reminded the city government that the U.S.

Constitution provides the freedom for assembly. Ten thousand people participated in the strike, and the city eventually relented to the sanitation workers' demands.

For her tireless devotion to civil rights, Clara Luper received countless awards. She received an honorary doctorate from Oklahoma City University and was

90 inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, as well as the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Afro-American Hall of Fame. When she passed away from natural causes on June 8, 2011, Oklahoma lost a once-in-a-generation voice for people who had been marginalized because of color.

Sources

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