HARRY BRIGGS, SR. AND ELIZA BRIGGS

INTERVIEWER: MY FIRST QUESTION IS, WOULD YOU DESCRIBE FOR US WHAT THE BLACK SCHOOLS WERE LIKE HERE IN SUMMERTON? WHAT KIND 0P SCHOOLS THEY WERE, HOW WERE THEY HEATED, WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF THE SCHOOLS IN SUMMERTON FOR BLACKS?

Harry Briggs, Sr.: In the late forties? Well, it was wood stove, heat by wood. Black schools was heat by wood. All parents have to go in the woods and get wood to give heat for the children. That's the way we begin our [?]. So that's why, when the land came in, that's what give us [Inaudible] to make some effort for our children.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF A BUILDING WAS IT, WAS IT A WELL-KEPT BUILDING?

Briggs: No, it was a run-down wooden building. And it was poor heat. Some of the children would go to school eight o'clock in the morning, and some had to leave and come home eleven, so the other crew go. It was an overcrowded building.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU EVER CATCH COLD THERE?

Briggs: Well, them time, air was good for, for the children. Because in the house, lock up, air, so a cool house is good for you. So they didn't catch cold, I don't reckon. And it wasn't no bus travel, people used to walk five, six mile. That's why we went to fight for freedom. That's what we called it. So that's why we wants to do something to make it convenient for our children.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE THE WHITE SCHOOLS LIKE?

Briggs: Well, they had convenience. They had school bus. They had at the time, coal, to burn coal for heat, that what we call it. We had no coal. We only had to use wood.

INTERVIEWER: THEY WERE A LOT NICER, THEN?

Briggs: ‘Course, naturally. They children don't know anything about walking those five mile. We walked much as five or six mile a day to go to school, with a sweet potato in our hand for lunch. It wasn't no lunch program. So, that's what we fight for.

INTERVIEWER: YOU'VE ALREADY TOLD ME, BUT WHY DID YOU SIGN THE PETITION? WHAT WAS IT THAT YOU WANTED TO DO THERE?

Briggs: Well, we call it for better serving, at the time, it was equal, but separate, but it didn't, it wouldn't, work out. So we had to work for equal. That's when we started getting help from different lawyers and what not. Just like this other case, they throw that out, so then we took up this case to fight. So that's what we fight for, freedom, what we call it. Equal rights: that's what we want all that whole time. And it went from Briggs versus Eliot, what's that, education, what you all call that? Brown versus Eliot. That's the story of our history today, Brown versus Eliot. That's where Briggs come in at.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TELLING ME EARLIER ABOUT SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED AFTER YOU AND YOUR WIFE SIGNED THE PETITION, THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO YOU AND TO OTHER PEOPLE AROUND HERE WHO SIGNED ON IN THE PETITION. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THAT AGAIN?

Briggs: Well, when we signed the petition, my wife was working to a motel. So they let her go. I was working to a gas station uptown, they let me go. So then that's when I tried to farm. I bought me a old mule, and what-not, and [Inaudible]. I was in the Army, so them time, they was giving you what they call a farm program, at $97 a month. And I farmed for two years, and I could live off that. That's when I leave home. I leave my wife with five children, an old house, with using wood for heat, and I leave here. So I had something to leave for. But I never regret it, what we did.

INTERVIEWER: YOU SAID THAT THERE WERE OTHER PEOPLE WHO SIGNED THE PETITION.

Briggs: Yes, there were. Annie Gibson. Annie Gibson.

INTERVIEWER: SORRY, COULD YOU START THAT AGAIN?

Briggs: It was Annie Gibson, myself, Bill Riggins, and a gang more. I don't know that I could remember name by name, today, but it was twenty-two of us signed this petition, it was a hundred and some signed, but only twenty-two of us hold on. But all of us lose our jobs round here. That's why nobody in Summerton. Everybody run away for better condition.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TELLING ME ABOUT REVEREND DELANEY.

Briggs: Yeah, well, he finally leave and went to New York. He was a preacher. Then he went to Lake City, after running away from Summerton. And after the Klu [sic] Klux Klan get to him, he leave and went to New York. So all of us had to-had our share to go to.

INTERVIEWER: AND YOUR SON--WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR SON AFTER HE SIGNED THE PETITION?

Briggs: Well, after he finished high school, he couldn't get no job, so he went to Myrtle Beach for the summer. And he had an uncle in New York, so he finally went to him. That's when my wife and children came to me in Florida. They stayed one year, then they came back here and my daughter finished high school here, then all of us went to New York, after then, you know.

INTERVIEWER: I WAS GOING TO ASK YOU, I REMEMBER YOU SAID THAT HE HAD A PAPER ROUTE.

Briggs: Yeah, yeah, well, he did have a paper, I forget the name of the paper, the *Post* I think it was. And after they gave him a hard time across town, my wife was afraid for him to deliver paper. So then he quit with the paper.

INTERVIEWER: I'M GOING TO ASK YOU THAT LAST QUESTION AGAIN. YOU WERE TELLING ME ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO HARRY'S PAPER ROUTE, AND OTHER THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED.

Briggs: Well, he used to take around the *Post*, we called it. And after they gave him a hard time across town, we was afraid for him to go in that section. So he had to quit his paper. So that's when he, after finishing school, he went away. He went to Myrtle Beach, him and Tony.

INTERVIEWER: DIDN'T HARRY JR., ALSO THOUGH TRY TO GET A JOB DRIVING A BUS?

Briggs: Well, he was, we call assistant driver. But, as I said, after everybody know Harry Briggs, so, when he come as Harry Jr., they said, “Sorry buddy, you won't drive no bus in Clarendon County.” And as I was going to this farm

program, there was a principal, a white principal, I was going to see, that's still Clarendon County, and I wanted to come here, to middle school, he telling

me about, “You'll never see the day, Harry, you come to this school. You that caused this mess going on now.”

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU WENT TO COURT AND THE COURTS OF SOUTH CAROLINA FIRST RULED AGAINST YOU? HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?

Briggs: Well, I think at the time, I don't know, I don't know whether we had proper sense or didn't know what we was going into, it didn't worry us too much. only thing worry me when I couldn't get a job. That's the part really hurt. When you got five kids to eat, and you ain't got no job. I had a little money, but you spending up to two or three hundred dollars buying food, you ain't going far. That's what caused me to leave up to Florida, for work to do.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU THING ABOUT GIVING UP THE CASE?

Briggs: No, I never did. I never give a thought that if I'd have give up it would have been better for me, because it wouldn’t’ve. Because they was against black people, specially in Clarendon County. Clarendon County is the- it's the way it's begin here, all over the world, but this case that we fighting today, it started here in Summerton, right here. Part of it in my house.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS IT THAT YOU WANTED FOR YOUR CHILDREN? WHY DID YOU EVEN BOTHER TO FILE THE CASE AND PETITION? THEY COULD HAVE CONE TO THE BLACK SCHOOL, THINGS COULD HAVE BEEN EASIER FOR YOU IN SUMMERTON. YOU WOULDN'T HAVE HAD TO LEAVE AND GO TO FLORIDA. WHY DID YOU DO THAT?

Briggs: It wasn't but one school. It wasn't such a thing as black and white, only to the black. And the black [sic] was so far ahead of us, we want what they have, should I say it that way? That's why we scuffle so hard to make things

better for our children. We want them to have equal rights. That's what we really went for. As I said back there, we're never sorry for what we did for the benefit of our black children.

INTERVIEWER: ONE LAST QUESTION. HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN THE SUPREME COURT RULING CAME DOWN AND YOU HEARD ABOUT IT? DO YOU REMEMBER THAT DAY?

Briggs: You mean that we’d win? Sure, I was in Florida, but I said, “I can go back home in peace now.” We can go home now and try to live happy again. But I must say that we had white friends. We still have some white people went with us, but really give us a hard time. They said, “If you ain’t an NAACP member, I'm going to give you hell for not being one, so I'm telling you.” Today, I never regret what we did or what happened among us, ‘cause everybody proud. I said, the most of our black, colored children, they don't know about black history. That's mostly why I agree with you all to come here, to let the world see what some of the poor Clarendon County people really come through, because it was rough.

(Harry Briggs, Sr., Interview continued.)

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO ASK YOU AGAIN, HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN THE SUPREME COURT HANDED DOWN THE DECISION? HOW DID YOU FEEL IN YOUR HEART WHEN YOU HEARD THAT NEWS?

Briggs: Well, I said, “That's it. I guess we'll have freedom from now on.” So then, that's when we began to try and do something for ourselves. Because, my time, we traveled, it wasn't no bathroom for colored people. You couldn't go in these motels, and hotels. You have to, when you get off the bus, it wasn't no bathroom for colored people. You have to run round the building. After we come, have freedom to go in motels, bathrooms, we said, we do have freedom now. So I thought that was a great thing for us. Because once we, for people want lunch, we have to go to that window to get a sandwich. Now we can go in and sit down.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU FEEL PROUD?

Briggs: I'm still proud, real proud of that. Somebody did something for the world, for black history.

INTERVIEWER: WHY DO YOU THINK IT WAS THAT SO MANY WHITE PEOPLE HERE IN CLARENDON OPPOSED YOU AND GAVE YOU SUCH A HARD TIME? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT THEY WERE AFRAID OF?

Briggs: No, but I heard a joke. I was a little boy shining shoe. And this white man said, a foreign man, we call a Yankee, was traveling through, and he said to this man, “Why are you so hard on the black people here?” He said, “Well, no, they are nice people, but don't give them a chance.” So that's what we fight for there--a chance, opportunity.

INTERVIEWER: MRS. BRIGGS, WOULD YOU DESCRIBE TO US WHAT THE BLACK SCHOOLS WERE LIKE AT THAT TIME, HOW THEY WERE HEATED. WHAT WAS THE CONDITION OF THE BLACK SCHOOLS IN SUMMERTON?

Eliza Briggs: Well, at that time it was overcrowded. And it was heat by coal, I guess by a little wood, too, but mostly it was heat by coal. And it was sixty, I think, fifty or sixty children at the classroom. It was overcrowded during the time.

INTERVIEWER: HOW MANY CLASSROOMS DID THE SCHOOL HAVE?

Briggs: I can't remember, but it was going from the first through the twelfth, I don't know just, I don't think they had twelve rooms. I don't think so, but at any time, that's how many children was in that school at the time.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE BUILDING, WHAT THE BUILDING LOOKED LIKE, WE JUST SAW A PICTURE OF IT.

Briggs: It was a wooden building at that time.

INTERVIEWER: WAS IT VERY BIG?

Briggs: It was a good size, but not, you know, like for the amount of children they had.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE THE WHITE SCHOOLS LIKE? DID YOU SEE THOSE? OF COURSE, YOU SAW THEM.

Briggs: Oh yeah, well, they had a large brick, stone construction, real large, at that time.

INTERVIEWER: I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU THE QUESTION AGAIN, AND WHEN YOU, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO, MY QUESTION IS NOT GOING TO BE HEARD, IN THE FILM, SO IT'S IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO BEGIN BY SAYING, THE WHITE SCHOOL, SO WE'LL KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT. WHAT WERE THE WHITE SCHOOLS LIKE AT THAT TIME IN SUMMERTON?

Briggs: The white school was a large building, large enough to take care of all the children. And I guess they had. . .

INTERVIEWER: MRS. BRIGGS, WHAT WERE THE BLACK SCHOOLS AND THE WHITE SCHOOLS LIKE IN SUMMERTON IN YOUR OWN WORDS?

Briggs: I had never been into the white, but the black schools were overcrowded, and they didn't have, give enough of the subjects to the children. Now the white, it wasn't too crowded, not to me, and it was a large school, enough, I believe they- for them to have room enough to do just what they wanted to do.

INTERVIEWER: DID THE BLACK CHILDREN HAVE BETTER BOOKS OR WORSE BOOKS?

Briggs: I think they had worse books. When my son finish, he only had four subjects. And I did want him to go to college, but the four books--he wasn't able to make it to college with only four subjects--four books, or whatever you call it. And Carrie Martin told me that they were- “Don't try to send Harry to college, because he don't have enough learning, or enough semesters, to try to make it through college.”

INTERVIEWER: WHY DID YOU SIGN THE PETITION WITH YOUR HUSBAND TO CHANGE THE SITUATION HERE? WHAT WAS IT THAT YOU WANTED TO ACHIEVE?

Briggs: Well, when I was going, I had to walk two-and-a-half mile: cold, wet, just how you get there, you get there, you get there. You wet up, it rain, the whites pass by in the bus. And you be near a mud hole, they speed the bus up to wet you up. So I feel like our children need more education, more facilities, and a better education. So we decided, well, [Inaudible] enough for our children, for all who need it. All over the world, let them enjoy some of the good things.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TELLING US ABOUT- HARRY WAS TELLING US ABOUT SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED AFTER THE PETITION WAS SIGNED. PEOPLE GOT FIRED. CAN YOU TELL US SOME OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO YOU AND PEOPLE YOU KNEW?

Briggs: Well, it happened to me. I was working at Summerton Motel, and this man, he work us, Greenborough, he work us real good. And the White Council, of Summerton, I think they call it the White Council, they came down there and told him that, if he didn't fire the women who signed the petition, that they would close the business down. They won’t let the trucks come in and deliver. So then he called us in, and asked all who that signed the petition, would we take our name off the petition in order to work. After all, we had to pay $5 to take our name off the petition. I told him, no, I didn't want to do that, because we be hurting the children, and I rather give my job up, and keep my name on there. So in about two week’s time, I was fired. Not only me, the rest of them who had anything to do with the petition, they all was fired. Annie Gibson was fired, and many more, during that time too. They--a lot of colored people on the white man place--they made them move, because they signed the petition. So they didn't have, well I guess they find a place to go. But when you live on white man

place, partly all your life, and when you sign a petition for your children to do better, they told them, said, “Well you got to go. Else take the name off the petition.” And many of the people decided they did not want to take the name off, and they did not take the name off.

INTERVIEWER: WHY DO YOU THINK THE WHITE PEOPLE IN SUMMERTON SO OPPOSED WHAT YOU WERE DOING? WHY DO YOU THINK THAT THEY WERE SO HARD ON YOU WHEN YOU SIGNED THE PETITION? DO YOU HAVE AN IDEA ABOUT THAT?

Briggs: The only thing I can think of is that, I guess they had their way a long, long time. Colored people had to do what they say do. And they feel like the black people ever get a chance, that they'll be able to do something what they had always want to do. I had a cousin came down once from Chicago, we went into the drugstore. She asked for a Coke. Told her, “We don't sell Coke here.” In Chicago, she didn't know the difference. So then she asked, “What the Coke machine doing up there.” He said, “Well, we don't sell black people Coke, our drugstore.” So at the time I was young, and I didn't realize, but still, after we get older, we realize that this is it, now. Our children should have more opportunity. They go to college, university, anything that they want to. I remember going to Sumpter, the Kresge. And you couldn't even go in there and sit to the counter, to buy anything. You had to take it in your hand and come on outside. So today, well, most of the time now, you can go anyplace you want to go, sit down and eat, drink--hotel, any other places, now, you can go on the bus, the train, especially on the bus. You almost take the front seat. One time before, only one seat, and that be the back seat.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN THE SUPREME COURT DECISION CAME DOWN AND YOU HEARD THAT THE CASE HAD BEEN WON?

Briggs: I was very happy for everybody, not only for myself. We suffered for it, a whole [lot?]. But still, there are other people out there, who need opportunity, which at the time, when I was young, I needed it too, but nobody knew how to make a way for it. So I just feel like this was a time to make an opportunity for the blacks who wanted it and who were able to do it.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL IN YOUR HEART?

Briggs: Well, I had a lot of spare time.

INTERVIEWER: WHY IS IT THAT, WHY DO YOU THINK THAT THE WHITE PEOPLE OPPOSED YOU SO HARD? WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT THEY WERE AFRAID OF?

Briggs: The only thing I could think of at that time, that they're afraid of, maybe the white and the black mix too much. And I guess they feel that they can keep the black by theirself, and the white by theirself, that it would have been better off for them. But today, they’re mixing today, I guess. A lot of them, see, today, it's no different in your color now.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN THE SUPREME COURT HANDED DOWN THE DECISION AND YOU HEARD THAT YOU'D WON? HOW DID YOU FEEL IN YOUR HEART?

Briggs: Really happy, and glad, that we didn't lose our case.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU EVER THINK YOU MIGHT LOSE IT?

Briggs: No, but I didn't know what the end would be, at the time, because we go to Charleston, you know, and different places. But with Marshall, in Charleston,

during the time, Judge Marshall, he been judge at the time, he was down there. And the white lawyer, I can't remember his name, Plown, he asked the question, Plown had to get his book. Marshall just started rolling his hands at that, you know. And he just let it out. I feel really glad, because he didn't have to look in the book, to tell what he want to say. He just had it in his mind, he just had to roll his hands, and just let it out. It really was a good feeling for everybody. I won't say everybody, either, because a lot of people didn't like it, because they had to move. Couldn't get credit, we couldn't get credit, either.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL US AGAIN HOW HAPPY AND PROUD YOU FELT WHEN THE DECISION WAS HANDED DOWN?

Briggs: I think that was one of the happiest days, or moments, of my life, when we heard that the Supreme Court handed down their decision. And I think everybody was very happy over it.

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU, THAT'S WONDERFUL.