

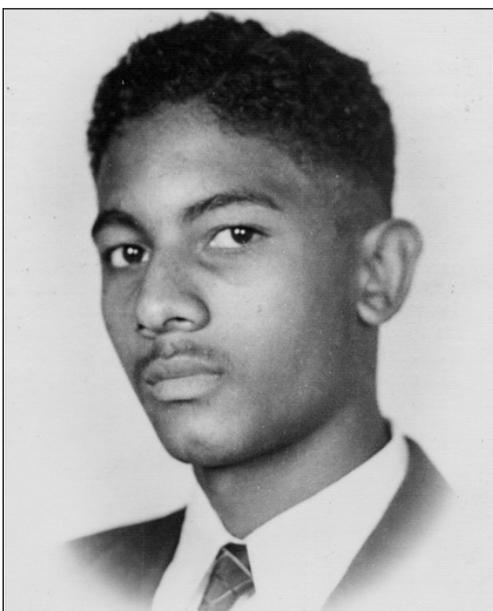
Teens Helped Lead the Fight That Ended Segregation

By Tom Hanchett, Levine Museum of the New South

Liberty Hill Colored High School.
South Carolina Department of
Archives and History, courtesy of
Levine Museum of the New South



May 17, 2014 marked the 60th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision that banned racial segregation in America's public schools.



Reverdy Wells, 1949. Courtesy of Levine Museum of the New South

Reverdy Wells felt angry. For months the Senior Class at Scott's Branch High School had butted heads with the new principal. The man required "rent" for school books that never arrived. He took money for "hot lunch," then served ketchup in hot water as "tomato soup." And the all-white school board would not listen to complaints from the black students. This was South Carolina in 1949. So Reverdy Wells called a meeting -- setting in motion events that changed America.

Reverdy Wells's anger was just a small part of the frustration experienced by thousands of black teens all across the South. Those feelings helped spark the Supreme Court's

historic 1954 ruling *Brown v Board of Education* that declared segregation unconstitutional.

"An old building," Joe De Laine, Jr remembers. as he looks at a photo of Clarendon County's Spring Hill elementary school. The faded snapshot shows his sister Ophelia standing among classmates in front of an unpainted wooden structure with boards and windowpanes missing. "Walls were non-existent inside, except for paper chocked through the cracks" to keep the wind out.

Joe, Ophelia and brother BB were teenage neighbors of Reverdy Wells. Their father, country preacher Rev. J.A. De Laine, helped file the landmark lawsuit from Clarendon County that eventually led to *Brown v Board*.

"Students provided the custodial care," B.B. De Laine recalls. "When you came to school in the morning, generally some of the boys had to build a fire during the winter to heat the school." Maintenance supplies were not provided. "We had wood floors in the schools, coated with oil," B.B. continues. "We would normally use used motor oil that we'd get from service stations when they changed oil in cars. And we'd mop the floors with that oil to keep the dust down."

White schools had gymnasiums and cafeterias; black schools had none. There wasn't even indoor plumbing. "Scott's Branch School had two outhouse toilets to serve all 654 students and their teachers," Ophelia De Laine said. "They were quite a distance from the school," B.B. added. "The

girls' toilet was closest, and it was probably 150 feet behind the school. The boys' toilet was another 100 or 150 feet from that."

In class, students often shared hand-hewn seats. "You sat at those long benches, homemade benches, and depending on the number of kids in your class, you kind of pushed them out of the way," Ophelia chuckles, "Move over,' so you'd have a place to sit." B.B. laughs ruefully, "Now when you say 'benches,' that's a polite world for 'board' between two chairs. Because we didn't have enough chairs . . . we'd put a chair at either end of the table and run a board between the two so that more students could sit down."

It was in that environment that Reverdy Wells called his meeting of Scott's Branch students and parents.

For several months, Rev. De Laine and others had been working with NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall to draw up a petition demanding Clarendon County provide equal facilities. But who would risk signing such a paper? Reverdy's meeting broke the ice.

"Reverdy got up and told them what was going on with the principal. It really made the crowd mad," an eyewitness recalled years later. "Mr. Robert Georgia got up and said 'I'd like to nominate Rev. J.A. De Laine as our spokesperson.' Everyone agreed.

"Rev. De Laine got up and said, 'I appreciate this compliment, but the only way that I will accept this is if you are willing to go all the way to the Supreme Court. And it ain't gonna be easy...' That was when the

petition really started."

That 1949 petition launched the first of five lawsuits that became known collectively as *Brown v Board of Education*. Another came from Farmville, Virginia, where students at Moton High School marched to protest classes held in tarpaper shacks. Other cases originated in Washington, D.C., the state of Delaware, and the city of Topeka, Kansas.

Bundled together as *Brown v Board*, the cases were decided on May 17, 1954. "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," the Court declared. Those simple words would transform the South and the nation.

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Based on the traveling exhibition *Courage: The Vision to End Segregation, the Guts to Fight for It*, created by Levine Museum of the New South, Charlotte, N.C. www.museumofthenewsouth.org.

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Draw conclusions: Read the printed or digitized newspaper looking for situations in which teens have exhibited positive leadership. Also look for volunteer opportunities and other ways teens can serve their communities.

Write a news story about someone your age whom you admire for his or her positive leadership. Interview that person for your story.