Dr. Linda Mayes
Voices of School Desegregation Project
The Roberson Project on Slavery, Race, and Reconciliation
Oral History Session #2, July 18, 2025

Eleanor Dean (00:01)
Hello, this is Eleanor Dean and Chloe Strysick with Dr. Linda Mayes for the Voices of School Desegregation Project with the Roberson Project. The date is July 18th, 2025. This interview is being conducted on Riverside, and this is oral history session number two with Linda Mayes.

Chloe Strysick (00:22)
Alright, so yeah, the last interview was really great and it was...

It was really important to hear about kind of your perspective on school desegregation. And this interview, we kind of wanted to focus more on just like the community aspect and also what segregation looked like outside of the classroom. So we wanted to kind of bring it back to your work at the Oldham Theater. How long did you work at the Oldham Theater for?

Dr. Linda Mayes (00:56)
Okay, so just to clarify then, my father worked at the Oldham, and then as a family we spent most of our time at the drive-in theater, the family drive-in theater, which doesn't exist anymore. And then as needed, my dad would go to the Oldham. I was sometimes there on weekends and when I was a bit older...

before starting high school, but right in there. I would sometimes work at the Oldham on a Saturday night. I would meet my dad there after school when I was in elementary school. But our primary theater where I was and where I worked was the drive-in theater.

Chloe (01:44)

Okay, so.

The question that we had regarding, I guess, both theaters was the interactions that you would have with the black community at those places, which are supposedly third places for gathering, but are really segregated.

Linda (01:56)
Sure.

Linda (02:06)
Sure.

Linda (02:10)
Well, excuse me one second. Yeah.

[unintelligible]

Linda (02:20)
I've noticed it, I don't know what it is.

So at the Oldham, as we spoke about I think in the first session, there was–. The balcony was segregated. I remember that. I know that.

And I remember as a child being both confused and kind of disturbed by it. I don't actually remember when it changed, but I think it is somewhere around the time that the high school became desegregated.

But Black families would buy their ticket at the front and then go up the side door and go to the balcony. And so it was a different entrance and everything up to the balcony. They would come down to the concession stand and buy things and then go back up to the balcony. But again, I spent, well...

As a child I was there for movies and I would go up to the balcony to join my father in the projection room.

Linda (03:42)
Trying to think of how to put it. I was always not, as I say, not very comfortable with the segregated experience, or not even completely understanding it.

But in essence, because of my father's job there and because the theater was just a part of our life, I kind of had free run of the theater. So I went back and forth and up and down. Whereas Black children and families had less of that freedom. That was, it's actually, I find it quite frankly,

Speaking about it now, even knowing that I'm describing for you simply, it's not simple at all, I'm describing for you what was a reality. I actually find it still a very uncomfortable reality to talk about, even though I know it's what was a fact. But it was so–.

Linda (04:49)
At least to my memory, and remember this is the memory of a child. It was so silently enforced. There were no signs. It was just so silently accepted and enforced. And I suspect confusing to Black children as well as white children, or at least for this white child, it's confusing, but I suspect really confusing to Black children as well.

The drive-in was a different matter because anybody came. They came in their cars, they parked in their cars, they came into the concession stand, bought what they wanted to buy in the concession stand. The drive-in was not a segregated place.

But I can't say that I remember.

Linda (05:45)

I can't say that I remember.

Well, it just wasn't a segregated place, so I don't know that I would have even noticed whether Black families came or didn't come, though I can't say that standing in the ticket office with my mom...

But then I don't have a memory of one car after another of who came through. I can't say that I remember a lot of Black families coming. But then again, I may not have even paid much attention to it. We actually had, it was cars that we counted, not people. Because you knew you were full by the number of cars, not by the number of people.

I paused a moment ago because there was for a time seats in the concession stand where someone could come and sit. I guess their food was being prepared or something. They could come and sit and watch the movie. That too was not segregated. There were seats on both sides. And people would come and sit. It was never full, full. They would come and sit.

Because I often would sit there. And there were some seats outside. And that too was not segregated.

Linda (07:04)
again looking back on it I–.

Linda (07:11)
It would be a really important question to ask–.

Linda (07:17)
Adults of a certain age who would remember the theater. I wonder if Black families even felt comfortable coming, given the segregation of the theater in town. I just don't know. That would be a–. Yeah.

Eleanor (07:39)

Did your parents own the Oldham just to check for historical–?

Linda (07:44)
My parents owned the drive-in and then, I don't remember exactly the year, but then my father bought the Oldham. May have bought the Oldham when I was in high school, maybe a little earlier, but didn't own the Oldham all my time, my younger years. But did buy it when I was in–.

May have even been a bit later than when I was in high school. And then when my father died, my mother then inherited the Oldham. And she sold it after about two years after his death. But they retained the name. The new owners retained the name.

Chloe (08:35)
So just to clarify, your father was working at the Oldham while it was still segregated.

Linda (08:42)
He was

Yeah, yeah, he started working when he was 11. Well, actually, he started working at the Rivoli, which was the precursor to the Oldham. It was on the other side of the square. He started working there when he was 11. And then when the Oldham was built, he just moved over there. His working, the manager and owner of the Oldham was a man named Mr. Ernest Martin.

Mr. Martin was in a way my father's, don't know if my dad would have called him this, but he was almost like a second father to my dad. They were very, very close.

Linda (09:30)
This is not a story about Ernest Martin, but he was a colorful character.

Chloe (09:38)
So yeah, in our past conversation, we kind of touched on how your parents would kind of have conversations with you about what was going on at the time. Though they were, as you said, kind of sparse, you did have the sense that they were against segregation. So I guess in conversation with the Oldham and these theaters, these community places, how would your parents reconcile with working at a segregated business for the community, especially if they were against it?

Linda (10:20)
I don't know. It's a question that, it's truly a question that I wish now at my current age I would have asked them. I don't know how they reconciled it. I can speculate how they reconciled it, but–.

But it would only be speculation. And my speculation of how they reconciled it was that whenever they had the opportunity, and particularly my mom, whenever they had the opportunity to speak up, they would speak up and make their position known. But that this was their living. This was their business. It was a source of income.

My father loved the theater business. For him, I think it was more than a source of income. But they were both of the culture and of the place, saw things that they thought should be changed, but they needed to keep their business going, would be my guess. But I wish I'd had that conversation.

Many, many, many years later.

Linda (11:43)
The last year of my mom's life, she was bedridden with Parkinson's and she was living in New Haven with me. And it happened to be the year of COVID as well. So we couldn't have too many people coming in and out. But we had this really extraordinarily caring and very, very skilled nurse's aide coming named Lynn Waters. And Lynn grew up in

Upper South, you will. She really grew up in New Haven, but then she would have some time in the Carolinas, and she'd spent some time in Baltimore as an adult. She and my mom began to have very, very long conversations about race and racism and Lynn's experiences and,

Lynn's experiences of racism and about what was happening now. I would walk through the living room where my mom's bed was and I would hear them and I would think, my goodness, they are going deep, because they really were going deep. And Lynn was very open with my mom and my mom was very open with her, both about their growing up in these different cultures. I think...

Linda (13:10)
I think for my mom, in a sense, it confirms so much of her experience growing up poor in the rural South. But it was, I don't know how to put it.

Linda (13:29)
And this too is speculation in a way. I think it brought back for her many of the deep injustices that she witnessed as a child and a young adult but was powerless in a way to change and wish that she could have. But certainly it was that experience much later in her life where I think she probably revisited a number of these things that we're talking about now, would be my guess.

Chloe (14:07)
So that's kind of all the questions that we had about the Oldham unless–. And just I guess community outside of the Franklin County High School. If there's anything else that you would want to add about that, you can do that now. If not, I just have another question about how the school integrated.

Linda (14:13)
Okay.

Linda (14:33)
No, please, ask your other questions. I'm sure there's more to say about the Oldham, but it was of its era. There aren't those kind of large theaters, large single screen theaters now, but it was of its era. So ask me your next question.

Chloe (14:52)
Yeah, so again, like in our past conversation when we were talking about segregation, we really harnessed in on interactions that you had in the classroom with any students or teachers, especially Townsend teachers. And so I guess following up those questions, I was just wondering if there were any spaces in the school, like the cafeteria, extracurriculars,

Linda (15:04)
Mm-hmm.

Chloe (15:22)
Where you noticed ongoing separation.

Linda (15:29)
Well, I think the cafeteria was probably one place, though I didn't spend a huge amount of time in the cafeteria. But I think it was certainly one place where Black students would group themselves, white students over here. High school tends to be very clique-ish anyway, but I think the

Cafeteria was certainly one place. On the other side of it, I don't know that I would call this segregation, but the football team and the athletics gave the Black students that that was a place where they were there and the football team–.

Was actually, I was not in the locker room, so I have no idea how smoothly desegregated it actually was. But it certainly was a desegregated team. But I have no idea how smoothly that really went. We in the band would not have

had any insight into that. And most of my friends were in the band or on the annual staff.

I don't think I had a–. Well, no. Well, I was going to say I don't know that I had a single close friend on the football team. I don't think I did, but there was one young man who lived up the road from us who was on the football team and still lives in Franklin County. He might be someone you could talk to, but he still lives there.

So, but yeah, I think there probably very much the cafeteria was a place–. There weren't as many extracurriculars then as now. But definitely the cafeteria and in another way the athletics for sure.

Chloe (17:41)
And then again, we've been, yeah, I'm just following up on just some things that I've been wondering about. And it's interesting that just we've been talking, when we've been talking to people, we've heard different accounts of obviously so many different things. And we've heard about an account of playing “Dixie” in the band. Was that something that was going on? How did you feel about that?

Linda (17:58)
Mm.

Linda (18:08)
Yeah, absolutely.

I think we may have talked about this when we had dinner the other night. I was embarrassingly naive. We played “Dixie” because we were the Rebels. I was embarrassingly naive and embarrassingly tone deaf. Because I mean–.

While we've talked about the fact that my family has a more complicated history with the Civil War, I don't think at the time, I'm appalled by it now, I'm

deeply appalled by it now, but I don't think at the time I thought anything about it. It was just what we did. We played it. I am actually incredibly appalled now to think that we did. To think that...

Linda (19:07)
That my peers, my Black peers,

Played football under that flag, heard that song as they scored a touchdown. I find it deeply disturbing now. I did not find it disturbing then. I don't think I found it either way, disturbing or celebratory, either way. I didn't. It was what we did.

And that, that in a part, is actually what disturbs me the most now, is to not have felt that at the time. But, it is what we do.

Eleanor (19:57)
I think looking at the broader picture now, how, in your opinion, successful was integration in Franklin County?

Linda (20:08)
[laughs]

Linda (20:16)
I have an answer that I suspect, well I suspect two things. I have an answer that probably reflects my spending much of my adult career outside of Franklin County, even though calling it my home still.

And an answer that I suspect many of my colleagues, perhaps even Houston and others that I was very close to, might be–. At least not agree with, if not be mystified by. So my answer is it wasn't successful. I don't think it was very successful. Did students come together?

Into the same school? Yes. Did–. Were the athletic teams Black and white, at that time young men, playing together? Yes. Were there teachers from both schools together? Yes.

So in that way it happened.

What I don't think–. Why I would say it wasn't successful–.

Linda (21:45)
And again, this is from looking back. This is not from at the time. Why I would say it was not successful is there was no discussion. There was no acknowledgement. There was no discussion, let alone acknowledgement, of the feelings, of the experiences that our Black young men and women

that were coming into Franklin County High School that they had. There was no open discussion with

white students about what this meant, what their feelings were, how could they, how did we all think about race, how did we think about racism, how did we think about this complicated history of the South, this region that we're in. There was no facilitating of any of that discussion.

And I think the opportunity for what we call now restorative justice that Nelson Mandela did so beautifully in South Africa over time. The opportunity for that was profound. And it was a deeply missed opportunity. Deeply missed. What would have been the results of that?

If the discussions could have even been had. But what would have been the results? I mean it sounds like from what you've uncovered in the archives and what Mark Stewart, the attorney, told me, which I was totally unaware of, was that everyone was deeply afraid about violence, and you can't have the two races mix, and you can't have the–. You can have them play football together. But you've got to be really, really careful. But why?

Linda (23:44)
And why not have those discussions with the students? Why not talk with the students of Franklin County High School how to welcome their peers? And I really do need their peers from Townsend. Why not have opportunities for everybody to learn about each other and to learn from each other? What would have been the outcome of that? For one thing, I think you might have had more,

Potentially more Black students staying in Franklin County. I don't have any idea what the outward migration has been, but my guess is it's been possibly high, maybe higher than the white students. I don't know that.

You would have had a chance actually to change–. None of my, I can't, well, I don't know what other people think. You would have had the opportunity to change a culture, to have started a cultural change process. You would have had that opportunity long, long, long, long before it started because of the tragedy of George Floyd. You would have had that opportunity to bring it all to the forefront.

Could it have happened in a small Southern town? I don't know. I don't know. I really don't know. So perhaps saying that I think that it was not successful, perhaps it's better to say that I think there was a failed, a missed opportunity, a dropped opportunity. It could have changed. And I don't know. Was it a matter of bravery? Was it a matter of–?

Linda (25:33)
Cultural–. Being so culturally bound? I don't know. But you could have made some dramatic cultural change. You could have helped 15, 16, 17 year olds really learn how to have this discourse, learn how to have those conversations.

Would one small county in Tennessee have changed the world? Well, no, probably. But it would change for those young people, it would have. Would they have gone out and made a change for their children? Yes, they would have. So to me, it was the missed opportunity for everybody, all ages, to have learned. Now, like I said, I doubt you'll–.

I don't know. I'd be delighted if you heard that from other people, I don't know that you will. But that's my sense. And I don't know if I had stayed in Nashville or Franklin County if I would have that perspective now. I don't know.

Hope I would, but don't know.

Chloe (26:48)
So I had one last question, but you already kind of touched on it and I'll ask it anyways, just to see if you have any other insight on it. But, you know, I think that, that sentiment of like, no discussion or acknowledgement of real lived experiences going on with the people that you're living with is really important. And I think it's, it's a huge reason why there's–.

Linda (26:57)
Sure.

Chloe (27:18)
Why we need to do oral history, why we need to have these conversations. Because in education, they're often not, you know, children, students aren't given the tools to ask them. And so my question was, what do you wish your younger self had been taught or encouraged to ask? And I guess like what would those conversations looked like?

Linda (27:21)
Yeah, for sure.

Linda (27:48)
Well.

I wish my younger self and all of our other younger selves who were there–.

Linda (27:59)
I wish, for example, that there had been very open discussion.

In the high school or even in the eighth grade as we prepared to go to high school, more open discussion about what was happening. What did desegregation mean? Why was it happening?

I think there was an obvious answer to why it was happening. But asking people then to really, really understand the deep injustice that actually started in the 1600s, when the first slave was brought onto American soil. But to really engage, to anticipate.

Actually pretty momentous. It's on a local level, pretty momentous change that's happening. I wish that we had as students been mentored in planning a welcoming for our colleagues from Townsend.

Planning a day when we all came together to welcome them. When we, for example, might be paired up, each of us paired with a student from Townsend to be sure they knew where their lockers were, to be sure they met their teachers, to be sure that they knew where the different classrooms were. That we had a picnic,

Linda (29:41)
At lunch with everybody together or that there was a really intentional thought given in to we are a community and we're coming together as a community. I hope the same would have happened for the students at Townsend too, that they would have had those discussions as well. But you heard today, this morning from Sybil when she was talking about

being the only Black student and basically not being really spoken to or acknowledged. And I truly suspect, although I'm haunted by this idea, I suspect that there were a number of the students from Townsend that probably had her experience. They weren't isolated in the sense of being one. There were more, but I bet they still, as a group, had the experience of not being acknowledged.

I wish our teachers had–.

Linda (30:48)
I wish they had the permission–.

Linda (30:54)
Because it may have taken permission from the administration to do those kinds of things because think how remarkably changing just the act of welcoming, of having welcoming ceremonies, welcoming things, pairing up students together would have been. Think about the conversations that might have occurred.

And then I wish that they too would have figured out this would have been radical and not probably possible. Well, it's possible, but it would have been so radical. I wish they'd had the, to have had facilitated conversations in small groups. What's the experience like? Help facilitate our getting to know one another. All of that.

I wish they'd had facilitated conversations about race. But think about how in 2025 it is still so profoundly difficult for people in this country to talk about race. That would have been really hard in the 1960s in the rural South. But that's still what I wish. Because again, I think there could have been a lot of–.

You imagine what would have been written in the Herald Chronicle? Or in the Nashville Tennessean? What would have happened? Oh my goodness.

Linda (32:32)
It's rather important that yesterday was John Lewis Day. Can you imagine what John Lewis as a young man would have thought if he heard about that happening in that small town in Franklin County, Tennessee? Who of my–. Who of my peers–.

Who of them would have gone and joined the Civil Rights Movement? Who of us would have gone and joined the Civil Rights Movement had we actually had those kind of facilitated, open conversations?

Not possible. Well, again, was possible, really a steep climb. But that's what I would like. Now looking back. I think that would have been remarkable. Really remarkable.

Linda (33:28)
That sounds hopelessly idealistic, doesn't it?

Eleanor (33:33)
Not at all.

Chloe (33:36)
Yeah, I don't know, right when you were talking I was kind of thinking about the idea of those conversations and the fact that they are heinously like villainized. And so, you know, when you're when we're talking about having the conversations like that and that being an integral part of how young people can have, you know, a collective memory or

framework for what they see around them. Like that's even being attacked now as critical race theory. And so I guess I don't even know if this is, I guess the question would just be like how successful can anything be if it's going to be attacked? And that's kind of a cynical question.

Linda (34:05)
Yeah. Yeah.

Yes. Right.

Linda (34:32)
Not a cynical question. It's not a cynical question. It's a realistic question.

Linda (34:42)
I mean, and you can tell–.

You don't have to infer it, I will say it, that I am very liberal. I'm very liberal. I'm probably way to the left, as I would now be characterized.

So what I'm about to say will be deeply disputed. I'd love to have it as a more open conversation, but I would say that American society, well before the American Revolution, American society has not fully grappled with the...

with the tremendous damage that enslavement did, not just to the people and their subsequent generations, not just to the people who were enslaved, and not just to the people that were the enslavers, but to all the society around it that lived with it, saw it, endorsed it.

Endorsed it silently. And to be sure, there were abolitionists, there were many, many people, but in a sense we have not grappled. We have not grappled as a society with the tremendous damage that our compromise with enslavement has made to us. We're still dealing with it. We're still dealing with it. We're still dealing with it.

Linda (36:25)
With the impact of built-in racism. We're still dealing with the various compromises that we make. Your question about what did my parents think

about having a segregated theater and yet themselves being more liberal thinkers, in a sense, it was a compromise that they had to make.

And we as a nation more broadly are making, and continue to make compromises. And I think that this is too theoretical in a way. But there also is a tremendous...

Linda (37:16)
In American culture, there's a tremendous kind of unspoken but still there hateful, violent fear of difference. Fear of–. Well, difference.

And we still have that really woven into the culture. And I think what you're seeing now is just a huge backlash. You're seeing that kind of come forward, come back up, but with a regretful lack of ability to have any kind of civil conversation. What I was imagining for you in the 1960s, this civil conversation in this open–.

Can you imagine actually the other side of that? What might have been the reaction to that? What might have been the reaction to teachers trying to do that? That would have been extraordinary. It would have been actually dangerous, to be frank. It probably would have been dangerous for those teachers. Because it is the same that we're seeing now, was there in the culture then. That was a bit of a rambling expression, but I'm not sure I got to your actual question.

Eleanor (38:39)
And just as we're wrapping up our conversation today, what should we have asked you about that we didn't already?

Linda (38:50)
Mm-hmm.

Linda (38:59)

I think you actually ask a lot of really important questions.

Linda (39:09)
I can't think of any specific questions that I would suggest that you should have asked. I think that...

Linda (39:19)
It's been a good opportunity for me to actually, and I appreciate the questions, it's been a good opportunity to reflect on what I don't think anyone's ever asked me, what I would have hoped would have been different. And I don't know what I would have said at 18, and I don't know what I would have said at 25. I know what I would say now. But I think it's been an opportunity to reflect. I wish that there...

Linda (39:48)
You know, this is another reflection. One question you might ask me or might ask others is when there have been reunions, high school reunions–. I've actually never gone to a high school reunion.

My friend Houston has been nagging me to come to a high school reunion. And he sent me a picture of the last one and I was just at that moment reflecting on it. I can go find the picture. I don't remember if any of our Black colleagues were there.

And so I think Sybil's experience this morning in talking about the reunion that she went to have probably got me to thinking, I don't remember anyone there in that picture. So you might, I remember actually everyone looking kind of old in the picture, but you might ask people about reunions and what's their experience afterwards.

For those who have stayed around or even those who haven't but come back. What's their experience? Are there stories that are reworked for them by those reunion experiences? I was very moved this morning by Sybil's story. I

had not heard that story before. So I think that would be another place to ask. Because I know, for example, my friend Houston, he has kept up with everybody.

Or many people. I don't know if it's everybody, but he's kept up with many, many people. And he is just adamant about getting people back together and staying in touch. But if you have a chance to talk to him, ask him about reunions. Ask him who comes.

Eleanor (41:45)
Well, I think that we have reached the end of our second oral history. Unless there's any other final statements or anything else that you haven't said already.

Linda (41:57)
I don't think so. I'm dependent on you to ask me.

Eleanor (42:00)
Well, thank you so much, Dr. Mayes. This has been such an amazing privilege. I am going to end our official recorded oral history now.

Linda (42:05)
You're welcome [ ].