Fitting In and Sitting In: Phillip Henry Porter and Memories of Integration Efforts in Enid, 1955–58

By Aaron Preston*

Shortly after Oklahoma gained statehood in 1907, segregation laws were imposed in the state in several areas, from education to transportation. Senate Bill Number One passed by the Oklahoma Legislature outlined that railway, streetcar, coach, and waiting rooms provide separate accommodations for whites and blacks.¹ Soon after, and although no statutory regulations existed in many instances, communities imposed segregation in restaurants, hotels, parks, libraries, and other areas throughout the state.² In 1954 the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, however, rendered the separate but equal policy of school segregation to be unconstitutional nationwide. City-wide desegregation efforts in Enid, Oklahoma, began to manifest themselves not long after the *Brown v. Board* decision in multiple spheres, from university admissions to eating establishments. A core group of young African Americans led these efforts in Enid. One of these young men was Phillip Henry Porter.
By all accounts the administration, faculty, and student body of Phillips University in Enid generally met the Brown v. Board decision with approval, but the process of fully integrating the university proved to be a slow one. While the administration was sympathetic to the Brown v. Board ruling, it was not an immediately proactive agent for integration either. An op-ed ran in Phillips's student newspaper, The Haymaker, which outlined the university's administrative stance:

Although the United States Supreme Court has seen the validity of this truth and has taken action upon it, constitutions in several states, including Oklahoma, still enforce segregation, and until this constitutional provision is repealed, as it eventually MUST be, we as law abiding citizens and Phillips University as a law abiding institution must abide by it. Segregation—A moral issue? To be sure. But breaking a law—still a moral issue. The answer to the problem at hand is to change the law, not break it.3

In December 1954 the university began testing the waters by enrolling six African American graduate students during the summer only, a service permitted by Oklahoma state law if there were no comparable courses offered at Langston University, Oklahoma’s segregated black college.4 Finally, in the fall of 1956 Phillips University President Eugene S. Briggs decided the moment was right to choose a full-time undergraduate student to fully integrate the university. Briggs conferred with Luther W. Elliott Sr., then principal of Booker T. Washington, which operated as Enid’s nearby segregated, African American school.5 Briggs told Elliott that he wanted to recruit a local student who could endure any social pitfalls he knew may come with the responsibility of admittance to Phillips, as well as a student bright and devout enough to handle the academic and theological rigor the university offered. Elliott referred him to a Booker T. Washington senior named Phillip Porter.6

Phillip Porter grew up in Enid heavily involved in the church.7 The son of a local minister, the notions of faith, family, and community influenced his life deeply. His grandfather ran a trash hauling business and Porter found himself working for him by the age of nine. He later worked with his father, Phillip Sr., who ran a janitorial service. Porter recalled late 1950s Enid as a community divided along racial lines. In an interview conducted in 2017 Porter stated that if an African American was walking down the sidewalk at the time, he would have to leave it for whites to walk by.8 Other African Americans who lived in Enid during the time of segregation echoed Porter’s memories. Iva Ballard
stated, “To eat in any of the restaurants [African Americans] had to go in through the back door. We couldn’t go through the front. We were not allowed downtown at all [hardly].” Jesse Ware further painted a picture of a segregated Enid. “The public restrooms were segregated,” said Ware. “Signs said ‘colored.’ Others said ‘white.’ It did not change. . . . From the time I arrived [here] in 1928 until the sit down strikes in 1958.” Given this backdrop of the chasm between the races in the community, Porter felt that “if only we could keep people in church, [society] would not have this [racial] division,” and that feeling caused him “to long for avenues to bring people together.”

Luther Elliot spoke frequently at meetings of the local Rotary Club and Lions Club, with the goal of drumming up financial support for Booker T. Washington, from books to athletic equipment to general monetary funds. Often, he took Porter along to represent the school’s student body. Porter was an excellent student and orator, and had previously been sent to Oklahoma City to represent the school, and Enid, as a winner in the KCRC radio station sponsored “Voice of Democracy” debate contest. Porter stated that it was the faith Elliott had showed in him that led him to later take a meeting with Phillips University President Briggs, an event that occurred before the start of
It was Porter’s mixture of academic excellence and faith that drew Briggs to him as a candidate to be the first full-time undergraduate African American student to integrate the university.

Porter recollected the meeting with President Briggs clearly, saying, “I went with Mr. Elliott. Dr. Briggs told me what they were trying to do.” Porter had previously planned on going to Lincoln University, a historically black university in Jefferson County, Missouri, on a dual...
academic and football scholarship. After the meeting, however, Porter’s mind was changed. Porter recalled Briggs’s words: “He told me it was a Kairos moment for the university, and for the city, and for the people in the community. They wanted me. That [was] kind of head blowing.” Briggs stated to him matter-of-factly, “If you come [to Phillips], however, you must agree not to fight.” It seemed an odd request to Porter at the time, but Briggs knew, perhaps even more than Porter did at the time, that he may have to show a great deal of patience and restraint in his time there.

In the meeting, Briggs told Porter that he also was recruiting an African American female student so, as Porter recollected Briggs worded it, “he would not be ‘alone’ on campus.” This woman was Lois Mothershed. Mothershed joined Porter as a freshman in 1956. One year later, Mothershed’s sister, Thelma, became one of the “Little Rock Nine” who famously integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. When asked why she chose to enroll at the university, Lois Mothershed simply stated, “I wanted a school with new faces, new personalities, a place with people who are of high Christian character. I felt that only Phillips University could give me the training I know I need.”

Lois Mothershed, pictured as the Junior Queen in the Phillips University Phillipian, 1958 (image courtesy of the Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center).
After Porter and Mothershed enrolled at Phillips, President Briggs was asked how the process of integrating the university was going. For his part, President Briggs pronounced it a success. “Integration has gone along unnoticed,” he claimed. Indeed, there may have been some truth to this, at least on the school campus. In his four years at Phillips, Porter remembered trouble on only one occasion from another student. He recalled a summer day eating some watermelon when a boy came up to him, shoved his face into it, and made a racial slur. After Porter fought the boy, President Briggs pulled the two boys into his office. Disappointed, Briggs reminded Porter of the difficult promise Porter made not to fight. Porter never fought again while attending.

Other than the aforementioned incident, Porter’s reflections on integrating Phillips were overwhelmingly positive. In fact, in October of his sophomore year, Porter was voted “Friendliest Boy” in the class. He pledged the Camelot Club, one of the school’s many social organizations, and was instrumental in bringing a third African American undergraduate student, a young man a year Porter’s junior named

Phillip Porter studying with two other students in a photograph from the 1957–58 Phillips University Phillipian (image courtesy of the Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center).
Booker T. Washington, into the Camelot group as well. Porter also became involved in Student Senate and the school newspaper.\textsuperscript{24} Mothershed seemed to be equally welcomed by her classmates. In 1958 she was elected Queen of her class. Overall the two were heavily involved in school activities, and were, in Porter’s recollection, generally welcomed by the students on campus. Porter theorized the overall feeling of tolerance and acceptance felt on campus may have been due to the cosmopolitan makeup up Phillips’s student body. There were a handful of students from China and Japan as well as the Middle East already enrolled at the school as international students, a result of mission trips by faculty and alumni to those areas. Porter recalled students of other races fondly, and stated that overall tolerance on campus was such that the bonds between many of his Phillips classmates and himself led to lasting friendships.\textsuperscript{25} While Porter and Mothershed seemed to be adjusting to life on campus with only minor incidents, they and the rest of Enid’s local black community in general continued to be subjected to inequality.

Sit-ins were an integral part of the nonviolent strategy of civil disobedience ultimately leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It was a method, largely utilized by students, where participants sat at a segregated lunch counter until they were served. If taunted, participants did not respond; if they were hit, they did not retaliate.
The year 1958 proved to be pivotal for desegregation in Oklahoma, and sit-ins played an integral role. A high school history teacher, Clara Luper, rose to the position of advisor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council just a year prior. While serving in that post, on August 19, 1958, Luper led a group of youth members into Oklahoma City’s Katz Drug Store, and took their seats to be served. After a two-day standoff, Katz’s management caved to the pressure. Many Oklahoma and civil rights historians are familiar with the story of Clara Luper’s remarkable courage in Oklahoma City. Fewer realize, however, that while staging sit-ins in Oklahoma City, the NAACP Youth Council also was training Youth Council members and sympathizers from other areas to lead sit-down strikes in select cities in other parts of the state. Before the sit-in at Katz, Luper recalled training students for nonviolent protests. She trained the students with four basic rules:

Define your objective—to eliminate segregation in public accommodations. Second, nonviolence is not an approach to be used by hypocrites—honesty pays. Third, you must love your enemy. You are to remember that you aren’t up against
a deep-eyed monster, you are up against a man who has been handed an overdose of segregation and knows that segregation is wrong, yet he practices it. . . Fourth . . . keep your goal in sight, you aren’t out to defeat him, you are out to establish justice. . . Find a way to let him participate in the victory when it comes.27

Using these principles, just eight days after Luper led the historic sit-in at Katz Drug Store in Oklahoma City, a sit-in occurred in Enid. Phillip Porter, was among a small group of young people who participated in those sit-ins, ultimately leading to the desegregation of multiple lunch counters in Enid.28 In an interview in 2017 Porter recalled the events that led up to Enid’s sit-down strike in great detail:
ENID SIT-IN

My closest colleagues in that sit-down strike were John Henry Manning, Leonard Harrison, Theodis Harris, and Ralph Ballard . . . . We met in the back room of the Harrison’s house. . . . We began to talk about things, how they affected our city, and what we could or could not do, where we could or could not go. We decided to start a little newspaper. The newspaper was called What’s the Latest? What we were trying to do with that newspaper was to raise awareness of what we did and did not have . . . opportunities and privileges. We had hand-me-down materials, books, football equipment, band and music equipment. Our teachers labored under tremendous struggles. We wanted to be a part of helping to make change. We probably only did three or four issues. In the midst of all that we got to thinking. We are only writing. This calls for action. So we thought we’d [join in with the organization, and] go sit in at the counter of the drug store. We thought this might get us put in jail, or beaten up.29

One of the leaders of “the organization” Porter joined was Maudell Lawrence. She was one of the leaders of the NAACP Youth Council in Enid at the time. In an interview in 2017, her sister, Bonnell Lawrence Fields, outlined the extent of her late sister’s involvement in the Enid strikes:

They would not serve us [African Americans] at the counters. We could buy food, but we had to go outside and eat it, and at that time, the cooks were black! For a while my sister was one of the cooks. She helped organize a group of people. . . . Some of the meetings were in local churches. She had the help of the Oklahoma NAACP [Youth Council]. Clara Luper came to Enid and held a talk called “The Walls Must Come Down.”30

By the time Porter and his friends joined, the group was galvanized. Now organized into a group of more than forty, the strikers went to Downs Pharmacy on 120 North Independence in the mid-morning of August 27, 1958. Following the example set by Luper, most strikers were well dressed, wearing coats and ties.31 Ray Downs, whose father owned the pharmacy, recalled, “At the time none of the restaurants served blacks. They could get something to go, but as far as sitting down and eating it there, no.”32 Undeterred, the group sat down. None of them were served. They sat quietly in the booths and at the counter reading magazines and books they brought with them.33 Porter recollected, “We didn’t get thrown out. Mr. Downs didn’t throw us out. The
police asked us out, but we had served our purpose of sitting in. We were just happy to make a statement.” 34 Porter’s friend Leonard Harrison was among the strike leaders who walked up and down the aisle directing strikers to occupy booths as soon as they were vacated.35 A short time later, a smaller group of about ten strikers repeated the action, sitting down at the Sanford-Stunkle Drug Store lunch counter No. 1 at 100 North Independence.

In a 2017 interview, Porter recalled the idea of joining the strike as developing somewhat organically, hatched among a small group of friends in Leonard Harrison’s basement. While the idea of joining may have been organic, the strike itself was coordinated and was anything but something done on a whim. By Porter’s own admission, the organization he joined and meetings attended between Porter, Ballard, Harris, Harrison, and others were, in fact NAACP Youth Council meetings at the heart of the desegregation movement in Enid and the state in general.36 Porter stated that he, friends, and others organized to find ways to make a change to better African American society in Enid.37

The fact that Leonard Harrison, Hulon Mitchell Jr., Theodis Harris, and Ralph Ballard were clearly identified by newspapers as the leaders during the strike, and according to newspaper reports each had roles telling students what to do during the protest, suggests a detailed level of planning and organization to the strikes, not something merely done spontaneously.38 Aldon Morris spells this out in his work, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, when describing how other sit-ins formed systematically throughout Oklahoma shortly after Clara Luper’s sit-ins in Oklahoma City.39

Shortly thereafter sit-ins were conducted in Tulsa, Enid, and Stillwater, Oklahoma. . . . At the same time the NAACP Youth Council in Enid began to conduct sit-ins. Mr. Mitchell, who led that group, knew Mrs. Luper well. He had visited the Oklahoma [City] Youth Council at the outset of its sit-in and had discussed sit-in tactics and mutual support.40

Much like Luper’s sit-in in Oklahoma City, the sit-ins in Enid were not spontaneous acts. These students did not decide to do this out of mere frustration. They were calculated acts of nonviolent protest. Confusion over this fact may have come from the official public stance of the adult chapter of the NAACP at the time. The adult chapter of the NAACP had come out against direct action tactics following a sit-down strike in July of 1958, only a month prior to the strike in Enid.41
At least publically, they favored legal strategies instead, advocating changing the system through the system. This also suggests why a spokesman for the Enid strikers was quoted in the newspaper as stating the group does “not represent the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.” Enid NAACP adult chapter leader Lewis Jonas Umstead also disavowed support for the strike (again, at least publicly).

Following the first day of action, a group of twenty-five Enid restaurant operators met with leaders of the sit-down strikes to discuss the matter of desegregation. The strikers agreed not to strike again pending the result of the meeting. The owners met with three strike representatives: Hulon Mitchell Jr., Leonard Harrison, and Theodis Harris. The three described the operators’ attitudes in the meeting as “very receptive,” and “very nice to us.” One wonders, however, if the “receptive” attitudes expressed in the meeting by the restaurant operators were completely genuine. Only a day earlier newspaper articles ran expressing antithetical views put forth by several local restaurant owners. While Raymond Downs, owner of Downs Pharmacy (one of the targets of the strikes) stated he was, in fact, in favor of serving African Americans rather than enduring another day like the one prior, several other local restauranteurs disagreed. A proprietor of another local drug store stated, “This is the beginning of a trend. They will be buying homes in white neighborhoods next. We have to stop it now.” Jess Stunkle, owner of five Sanford-Stunkle Drug Stores in Enid agreed, stating that they had been serving African Americans at their downtown lunch counter but “their number kept growing, and several white people complained . . . so we quit serving them.” Paul Hockermeyer, co-owner of the Don-Paul Café, blamed the newspapers stating that he “deplored the amount of publicity the strike received.”

Following the Enid strikes in August of 1958, many of the students who had participated headed back to school. Still, the strikes had an impact in Enid. Ray Downs, whose father ran Downs Pharmacy, stated, “The restaurant owners had a meeting for a couple of days and decided, ‘Let’s serve them.’” Newspaper articles from the time paint a somewhat different picture of the restaurant owners’ decision to serve African Americans. The owners met, still trying to enforce segregation. The Enid restaurant owners were being advised by the Oklahoma Restaurant Association that they could refuse service to anyone. Finally, a local attorney, Frank Carter, spoke at the restaurant owners meeting and told the operators that no action could be taken to forcibly remove African Americans unless they forcibly entered the establishment.

Though many of the restaurants and establishments began to serve
African Americans, attitudes were slower to change than policies. Enid resident Bonnell Lawrence Fields recalled her experiences following the strikes:

[Attitudes] did not change right away. The changes were more gradual. There was someone always following you. You always knew you were being watched. I went into this shoe store. I tried on shoes. They accused me of stealing the shoes and escorted me out of the store.52

Phillip Porter’s life offers a lens through which one can view the racial identity of Enid, Oklahoma, during the Civil Rights Movement. When viewed separately, his decisions of going to school, forming a newspaper, advocating for equality, and joining a sit-down strike all were in and of themselves courageous. When put together, one sees a more complete view of a young man of spirit and courage, focused on changing his community for the better. Though attitudes were slow to change, the Enid restaurant operators agreed to uniformly start serving African Americans by September 1, 1958, as a result of the sit-in. Phillips University, too, slowly continued to enroll more students of color, nearly a dozen by 1965. These results are, in no small part, due to the efforts of Phillip Porter and the other young African Americans in Enid at the time who wanted to begin to change how they were
treated. After graduation from Phillips University, Porter moved to Denver, Colorado, to take a job as a social worker, for which he had been hired sight unseen. When he arrived, he was told there was no job, to which Porter reflected “I knew what that meant.” Porter, true to his upbringing in the church, founded a church himself, and for fifty years his life has been in the ministry. Porter is a former chairman of the Promise Keepers, a Christian men’s group founded by former University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney. He was instrumental in organizing stadium rallies that drew thousands of men. Lois Mothershed had been married and living in the Netherlands when Bill Clinton began his candidacy for president. She returned to Little Rock when she was tapped by the campaign staff to be the National Coordinator for Democrats abroad. She remains active in speaking on civil rights both in the United States and abroad.
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2 Ibid.

3 “Segregation Poses Problem,” The Haymaker (Enid, OK), December 3, 1954, 1.


5 Phillip Henry Porter Jr., interview by Karen Dropps, January 25, 2017, Denver, CO, Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center Archives, Enid, OK.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Phillip Henry Porter Jr., Being Black in Enid, documentary aired on Enid TV, Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center Archives, Enid, OK.

10 Ibid.

11 Porter interview.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.


21 Ibid.

22 Porter interview.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.


27 Clara Luper, Behold the Walls (Oklahoma City, OK: J. Wire, 1979), 7.

28 Porter interview.

29 Ibid.

30 Bonnell Fields, interview by Aaron Preston, September 11, 2017, Enid, OK, Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center Archives, Enid, OK.


33 “President Endorses Slower Pace On School Integration,” Enid Daily Eagle, August 27, 1958, 1.

34 Porter interview.

35 Ibid.
36 Phillip Henry Porter Jr., phone interview by Aaron Preston, June 30, 2017, Cherokee Strip Regional Heritage Center Archives, Enid, OK.
37 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
52 Fields interview.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.