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Students from Robert R. Moton High School, in a photograph taken sometime in the 1950s, before the school was modernized. In the back are the tar-paper structures where many of them had to attend classes. The inadequacy of the facilities at the segregated school led the students to go on strike.

“Today I Wonder How We Ever Pulled It Off”

How a Band of High School Students Influenced Desegregation

By **Peter McCormick**

THREE YEARS BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT HANDED DOWN ITS DECISION IN FAVOR OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION, A 19-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN VIRGINIAN NAMED JOHN STOKES AND HIS FRIENDS MET SECRETLY TO DEVISE A WAY TO PERSUADE LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO IMPROVE THE WRETCHED CONDITIONS OF THEIR HIGH SCHOOL.



PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN STOKES

At the time, none imagined that their actions would eventually influence the case Thurgood Marshall argued before the court in 1954. They were more concerned with three tar-paper shacks that passed for classrooms.

“They leaked when it rained,” said John Stokes in an interview at his home in Lanham, Maryland. “Each shack had a potbelly stove that roasted students near it while leaving those in the back chilled. There was no plumbing, no running water.” Students had to use secondhand books, they had no science labs or cafeteria, and their school buses broke down constantly. To change matters, Stokes said, he became a foot soldier. He also helped form a squad of schoolmates who campaigned for the right to have the same education as whites. The fight was little known at the time, and even today relatively few people know about it. The story of John Stokes’s battle for equality in education is nonetheless a vital one, for half a century later it brings to the surface the details and emotions that make the story of desegregation eternally compelling.

As with the many stories about the struggle to end racial inequality in America, John Stokes’s account deals with how people of little influence and great determination lost patience with unfair, deeply entrenched conditions. In 1950 he was a senior at Robert R. Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Virginia, a rural area about 60 miles southwest of Richmond. Stokes, Barbara Johns, Stokes’s sister Carrie, and a

carefully selected group of upperclassmen had watched with increasing exasperation as the white-dominated school district repeatedly delayed efforts to improve the conditions at Moton. More than 450 students attended the high school, which was designed to accommodate 180. Two years earlier, county officials had responded to overcrowding at the school by building the three tar-paper structures. Although the 2,000 black students in the school district outnumbered whites by 600, whites enjoyed modern brick schoolhouses and were transported to and from school in buses. The disparity between the races had existed since Jim Crow laws were established after the Civil War and were consolidated by the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of 1896, in which the justices declared the legality of separate but equal facilities for whites and blacks.

John Stokes was born on December 31, 1931, in Kingsville, a small community near the county seat of Farmville. He was one of six children. His parents owned a small farm where his father, Luther, raised produce for market. His mother, Alice, ironed clothes in the laundry at Longwood College in Farmville and also did laundry for the college students at Hampden–Sydney College. Although his father’s education had ended in third grade and his mother’s in fifth grade, both parents constantly encouraged their children to acquire the best education they could. The older Stokes children had excelled educationally and

vocationally. John and Carrie heeded the encouragement of their parents and followed their siblings' example; both high school students ranked at the top of their class.

Stokes speaks carefully in measured, simple declarative sentences, a delivery that leaves a listener associating him with the way educated people must have sounded in a distant past, of remote areas where people read a lot. His delivery is formal but not stiff, accurate but not humorless; his manners and locutions remind one of a courtly lawyer of a much earlier era. Stokes also possesses an almost obsessive concern for accuracy.

encountered situations that appeared to block us from achieving specific goals, she would say, 'If others can achieve this, so can you.'

Stokes was also aware early in life that whites inhabited a different world. He remembered playing as a child with Jack Jefferies and Billy Shuler, who went on to attend better schools. Jack's father was a teacher who had emigrated from Newfoundland, and his son inherited his father's unhappiness with racial inequality. "Jack would say, 'I don't think it's right that you have to go to a different school,'" Stokes said.



John Stokes today with memorabilia of the school strike.

While being interviewed, he paused several times to call friends and acquaintances to check small details of events that occurred more than 50 years ago following the student strike at Moton High. Asked what his father grew on the family farm, he hesitated and then slowly recited: "Tomatoes, corn, sweet peas, watermelon, butterbeans, squash. Peppers."

He and his siblings grew up loved and encouraged by their parents. "We knew we were poor, but we desired to better ourselves," he said. "My parents were a great influence. Daddy read three papers daily. That was very impressive to me. When I was in fifth grade, it was a real challenge to catch up with him. His lack of education made me respect him all the more. Mama was a Bible scholar and a prayer warrior. She made us be at peace with ourselves and gave us an assurance, the courage to move forward no matter what the obstacles. If we

Stokes also knew that funding in the schools was unequal and resources were being withheld from black children. His brother Clem, who had graduated from Hampton Institute and become a teacher and principal in Prince Edward County, had a running verbal battle with the white superintendent of schools, T. J. McIlwaine, about inequalities in the district. Stokes ascribes two reasons for his participation in what was, for the time and place, a daring and potentially dangerous mutiny. One was the social consequence of World War II, in which hundreds of thousands of blacks served. Despite the humiliations black servicemen were forced to endure, many had acquired responsibility for the first time in their lives amid the demands of wartime. They had also been exposed to the novelty of relative social acceptance by whites in Britain and in Western Europe. Stokes recalled one of his brothers, who served

in George Patton's Third Army, telling him that he had been "treated royally" by French families. Others had been stationed in the North, where racism was less stark than in the South. Demobilized black servicemen, including three Stokes brothers and a sister, returned to the world of Jim Crow, aware of better conditions elsewhere. Some veterans returned to Moton High School, realizing the importance of education, and their younger classmates noticed them. "They made a great impression on us," Stokes said. "They brought discipline, dedication, and focus."

By early 1951, Stokes, Carrie, Barbara Johns, and other students had concluded that only dramatic action would improve conditions at school. They organized a strike that would involve every Moton student. Stokes called it their Manhattan Project, after the secret national effort to create the atomic bomb. They did not tell anyone, including their parents or students in lower grades. They held their meetings secretly, in different locations. On April 23, 1951, the group forged written announcements of a school assembly, while luring the principal, M. Boyd Jones, from the building with the false report that truant students had



PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN ULICNY

Another reason for John Stokes's rebellion was that he too had seen signs that life could be better. An excellent student and athlete, he had traveled widely to participate in interscholastic events and as president of the statewide New Farmers of America Organization (the Future Farmers of America counterpart for African Americans). In his travels, Stokes saw the conditions in other school systems and districts. These experiences gave him a barometer by which to measure his own county. At 19, he was old for a senior, but his maturity worked to his advantage. "The system set its own trap," he said. "It was the older kids that turned on it." In the meantime, the tarpaper shacks constantly reminded him and his classmates of the enduring indignity of their situation. "People would stop by on the highway and ask what the buildings were," Stokes said. "They would say they looked like a poultry farm."

been seen in a local bus station. The strike leaders politely asked the teachers to leave, and all did but one: "He had to be escorted out," Stokes said. Then, before the assembled students, Barbara Johns announced the strike to demand better facilities. All the students agreed. When Jones returned from his fruitless expedition to the bus station, he implored the students to return to their classes. The strike representatives asked him to leave.

Now the strikers had to persuade the students' parents to respect the action. They had borrowed four cars to ferry the Moton students home, and Stokes and his colleagues went to talk to their parents. He remembered one farmer working in a tobacco field, "cursing like a sailor when he heard what we were doing. I asked him what school he had attended." The farmer recalled that his elementary school had had outdoor toilets, no running water, and no central heating, while the whites' school

was a modern facility with the amenities that the blacks didn't have. "His own explanation won him over, and he promised to support us."

The strike organizers requested an audience with Superintendent McIlwaine. He refused, and denied Jones's request to go to the school, convinced, wrongly, that Jones was involved in the walkout. (Jones was soon fired as principal, despite a petition signed by hundreds of parents, for not having acted more forcefully to suppress the strike.) With the walkout under way, the students consulted the Rev. Leslie Francis Griffin, a local minister and member of the Moton PTA, who advised them to write to the Richmond office of the NAACP requesting its legal help. The office duly put them in touch with Oliver Hill, Martin A. Martin, and Spottswood Robinson, lawyers who gained increasing fame for their work to end segregation. Hill and Robinson drove down to meet the student leaders in Griffin's church, where they questioned them closely and without encouragement. "They tested our mettle," Stokes said.

The students' determination impressed the lawyers, and on April 26 they held a second meeting, attended by an overflowing crowd of students and parents at Moton High School. The NAACP representatives emphasized that all children should be kept at home until further word came from Richmond. Then on May 3, at the First Baptist Church, petitions were signed authorizing the NAACP to represent 117 students and 69 parents in a suit that became known as *Davis v. Prince Edward County, Farmville, Virginia*—part of *Brown v. Board of Education*. "We were elated. A weight had been lifted off our shoulders," Stokes said.

On May 23, Hill, Martin, and Robinson filed suit in the Federal District Court in Richmond for the immediate integration of Prince Edward County schools. Stokes emphasizes that a wish for equality, not desegregated schools, had originally driven his group's effort to strike. But he was thrilled that Hill, Martin, and Robinson had come to take up their cause. Despite the students' elation at having the NAACP fight for them, fear marked the atmosphere among black families in the area. "All guns

were loaded," Stokes said. "You couldn't find shells to buy anywhere; our house had five loaded guns."

The fear was well rooted. On May 31, a cross was burned on the grounds of Moton High School. No one claimed responsibility, and the local police dismissed the event as a prank. "It wasn't a prank," Stokes said. White-owned papers from Farmville and Richmond did not send anyone to cover the event, but the African American-owned paper in Richmond ran a piece with a photograph of the burned cross. No further violence occurred. The students had already won the battle, if not

An excellent student and athlete, Stokes had traveled widely to participate in interscholastic events and as president of the state chapter of the New Farmers of America (the Future Farmers of America counterpart for African Americans). In his travels, Stokes saw the conditions in other school systems and districts.

the war. The school district authorities, having declared for years that they lacked the funding to build a new school, authorized construction several months after the strike ended.

In the meantime, the legal consequences of the Moton strike were wending their way to national attention. First, a lower court ruled in favor of the county in *Davis et al. v. the County School Board of Prince Edward County, Va., et al.* But on appeal, it was ultimately combined with other appellate cases from South Carolina, Delaware, the District of Columbia, and most famously, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. On December 9, 1952, in the words of Richard Kluger, "fifty-six years after segregation was approved in *Plessy*, ninety years after the Emancipation Proclamation, 163 years after the ratification of the Constitution, and 333 years after the first African slave was known to have been brought to shores of the New World, the Supreme Court convened to hear

arguments on whether the white people of the United States might continue to treat the black people as their subjects.”¹

In the wake of the *Brown* decision, followed by the 1955 *Brown II* ruling that ordered desegregation to proceed “with all deliberate speed,” Virginia became notorious for maintaining the status quo. Obstructionism was particularly sharp in Prince Edward County, which maintained strictly segregated schools until a U.S. District Court ordered immediate desegregation. The county board of supervisors refused to appropriate money necessary to undertake desegregation, and consequently public schools were closed from the fall of 1959 to the fall of 1964.² When state and local efforts to resist integration finally collapsed that year, the newer Moton High School, completed in 1954, was renamed Prince Edward County High School. The original building where the strike occurred became Farmville Elementary School.

John Stokes has stayed close to the cause of education for the rest of his life. After serving two years in the U.S. Army, he attended and graduated from Virginia State University, paying his way by waiting on restaurant tables to earn money. He then went to Baltimore to teach elementary school, became an administrative intern under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation, and proceeded up the career ladder in the Baltimore public school system, retiring as a principal in 1994. At every school in which Stokes worked, white students were in the minority; yet, he says, he remembered his experiences with inequality while growing up and made certain that all students were treated “with dignity, fairness, and respect.”

The student strike remains vivid in his memory. “Today I wonder how we ever pulled it off,” he said, shaking his head. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 540. For details on the legal process that followed the NAACP's suit against the Prince Edward County school board, including efforts to resist desegregation, refer to the Historical Background section of the Robert Russa Moton Museum Web site: http://moton.org/history_ext.html.
2. Account by Wilbur Brookover, cited Moton Museum Web site.



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