

## **“The Scarboro 85”**

It was September 6, 1955, and L.C. Gibson was standing at the bus stop. He kept patting his pocket to make sure his money was there. He was riding the city bus. He hadn't had to do that before, and he had to pay money to ride the city bus because his family made enough so that he couldn't get it free. He didn't usually have to ride the bus because he used to go to Scarboro School. That was the school in his community. It was the colored community, and he loved being at that school.

The school was shaped like an L, and the long part of it was the first to the eighth grade. In the heel of the L, that was where the offices were. And then when you turn that corner, the short part of the L, that was the high school. He was going to ninth grade, and he had been so excited because he couldn't have waited to go right around the corner and never be a little kid again.

But that's not what was going to happen. He was going to have to go to another school because Scarboro had been closed. He stood on the bus stop with the other students. His best friend looked very sad. Usually he and his best friend, they would run over to the school with one of them making sure to stop by Miss Gloria's store to get some candy and such. But today he looked sad because he wasn't going to the high school. He was going to Roberts Junior High. So his best friend wouldn't be with him.

He looked at some of the older students, and they remembered having a conversation with some of the white students that came who were in the journalism class from Oak Ridge High School. One girl had said she couldn't believe that they were able to learn without all the things that Oak Ridge had.

And then there were the youngest ones. The youngest of all was 11. She kept patting her pocket and pulling out her money and looking at it and putting it back. And she kept saying over and over, “Don't forget your money. Don't lose the money. Don't forget.” As if someone had kept reminding her over and over and over again.

Soon the bus came. He climbed aboard, put his money in, and sat down. The bus went down Wilberforce and turned onto Tuskegee and went on to Oak Ridge High School. Every street that was in Scarboro was named after a historically black college and university. Education was very important to them. It got hounded into them all the time. They often talked about what school they would go to. He thought he might go to Tuskegee and be an airman. He's kind of like an airman now, going someplace he'd never been before.

When they arrived at the school, there were some white students that were there to help them get to their class. And he should have been happy. But he wasn't. He wasn't. He was 14. He was 14 and he was coming to a place where he knew people didn't really want him there. He was 14 and all he really wanted to do was just go around the corner to his school. He was 14. And just ten days before, ten days before he was to walk into this school, a young man, a young man who was 14 had been beaten and bruised and drowned. And his body had floated up in the river. His name

was Emmett Till. It happened in Money, Mississippi. He had looked at his Mississippi grandparents who were the ones that raised him and L.C. said, "Why did they kill him?" And his grandparents couldn't say why. They didn't know. But they told him to be careful. They said, "Make sure you don't look any white person in the eye. Keep your eyes down. Make sure you don't bump into anybody. You stay over to the side. You be a manly young man. And be safe. Be safe." But he didn't know what he might do. He didn't know what it might be. And he was 14.

He got off the bus and followed the student that led him to his classroom. He made sure he could remember the numbers. He walked in. He was mannerly to the teacher. And the teacher spoke not a word, but pointed to a chair and desk in the back of the room. And he wondered as he walked back there, if that would be his life every day.

For L.C., it was his life every day for four years. L.C. made sure to stay small, to not get in any trouble. If he thought there was something of trouble brewing, he would go around the building or even outside to get to his next class. So he didn't want to cause any trouble. And no, there hadn't been any violence.

Someone had written on that first day on the large pane of glass, written, "Go home." And the principal – the principal had had that washed off immediately, called all the students into the gymnasium and told them if he found anyone who did anything like that again, they would be expelled from the school. And not only that, he would recommend their parents lose their job. And he had the power to do it.

But still, it was difficult. Some of the colored students became on the student council. Others, they joined the basketball team. Well, three of them joined the basketball team and they played with... well, they *practiced* with the team all the time. Most of the time, when it was time for a game, they would receive a phone call saying, "The other school won't let you come." And so they stayed home. But he was there on that one day, on December 3rd, 1955, when two of the players right there at Oak Ridge High School were substituted in. Even the New York Times was there. And the New York Times reported: "Two basketball players integrate the school team. Segregation is done!"

And yet, he kept to himself. Even at the end of that first year, with there not being a single bit of violence, the students, the colored students, learned they had just been tolerated. Fifteen students went to the prom. Although the powers that be had wanted the colored students to stay far away, the 15 students came to the prom. And when they sat down at a table with their white classmates, the white classmates just got up and walked away.

Tolerated. Not liked.

And then his schooling was done. L.C. was finished with school. And after he finished school, well, he went to college, and then eventually returned home to Oak Ridge, returned to Scarborough, purchased a house, raised a family. But he always felt like he had been invisible, had not even been seen. That because there was no violence, no one thought there had been any harm.

As an older man, one day he went to a meeting. And at this meeting, someone had said that they were going to talk about the Clinton 12, the first ones to desegregate in Tennessee. And for once he jumped from his chair and he said, "That's not true. What about us?" Someone had the nerve to tell him to sit down. He didn't know what he was talking about.

“What about us?” He began to tell the story of the students that had integrated Oak Ridge High School and Roberts Junior High School. And others began to be asked to tell their stories over and over and over. Their stories were told again and again, and people began to listen. And they listened so well that in Tennessee, starting in the year 2026, the Scarboro 85 will be taught in the Tennessee schools.

They even had a discussion about that naming. Some well-intentioned people wanted to call those who had integrated the Oak Ridge 85. But those that had done the work that had come from Scarboro said no. It was Scarboro that had given them their grounding in education. They would represent Scarboro, and so it was.

Now they're working on a memorial to honor the Scarboro 85 right there in Oak Ridge. I remember meeting with L.C. I remember hearing his story. And I remember watching a much older man become a 14-year-old boy, with fear inside of him in front of me, and thinking “I'm so glad he got to tell his story.”