Clara Luper. 2023. *Behold the Walls: Commemorative Edition*, Edited by Karlos K. Hill and Bob L. Blackburn, University of Oklahoma Press. 289 pages.

Behold the Walls!
By Clara Luper

Behold the walls
Do you see what I see?
Visible walls, invisible walls
Separating you and me.
The visible walls are crumbling
As court decisions are handed down.
The invisible walls are still standing,
Making us go round and round.
Each of us must be a Joshua,
Blowing or trumpet of freedom's songs,
And the walls will come tumbling down,
And the world will right the wrong.

In the introduction to the first edition of this book which was written in 1978, Clara Luper listed many of the indignities that Jim Crow segregation required: separate restrooms, telephone booths, and restaurants, for example. She wrote, "These are just a few of the walls that Blacks had seen, and now the whole world would see the walls" (p. 14). The theme of walls is carried through the whole book.

Clara Luper wrote Behold the Walls to recall her involvement in the Oklahoma City fight for integration. The original version is almost like an impressionistic scrapbook. Editors Hill and Blackburn have placed events in chronological order and included high-resolution photographs. The narrative is occasionally broken by sidebar stories or other added information.

The most valuable information in Hill's introduction is underscor-

ing how important are the ties between Black and Native Oklahoma. Hill writes, "From 1866 to 1907, Black people in the Indian nations were still treated as second-class citizens, but they had access to land, the primary means for generating wealth on the frontier and the best chance to break the cycle of poverty rooted in slavery" (p. 5). It is largely unknown that the land on which the Greenwood District of Tulsa, also called Black Wall Street, was Muscogee Creek allotment land.

Clara Luper was born in 1923 and grew up in the Muscogee town of Grayson, an all-Black town. She was educated in segregated schools and then attended Langston University. She became a teacher and taught history at Spencer, a mostly Black school. Luper became the advisor to the Oklahoma City National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council. In August 1958, the children began their first sit-in at Katz Drug Store. The strike was initiated by a vote of the youth. At every juncture, the youth voted. They drove the direction and duration of the movement.

Luper's leadership was thoroughly non-violent. Several times people are asked to leave the protests because they were not able to control their emotions and they may have fought back against injustice. All of the activists read the rules of non-violent protests as envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. again and again. The four basic rules are, 1) define your objective, 2) be honest because non-violence is not an approach to be used by hypocrites, 3) love your enemy, and 4) give the other side a way to participate in victory when it comes. Students investigated, negotiated, educated, and demonstrated.

In retelling the story of the sit-in movement, Luper's voice is passionate and sometimes funny. She is patient both with her students and with the owners of the establishments in which she was demonstrating. She was battered and bruised as police officers drug her to jail and every racial slur was spoken to her. Clara Luper's resolve

and good humor were never broken. One time, Luper wrapped up a tiny Black baby and snuck it into Anna Maude's Cafeteria with a white woman. Luper announced, "A Black person is eating in Anna Maude's!" The word spread like wildfire throughout Oklahoma City and TV cameras surrounded the restaurant waiting for the person to walk out. The Oklahoman ran the headline, "Baby Breaks Race Barrier."

The first restaurants chosen for the protests were Katz, Veazey's, Kress, John A. Brown's, and Green's. Sit-ins began at Katz's on August 19, 1958. Veazey's may have been the easiest to integrate. When the children marched in to order their Cokes they were informed that the policy had changed the day before and that all could dine together. They enjoyed their Cokes, tipped twice as much as customary, and moved off to Veazey's. Veazey's was also integrated without incident. However, when they moved to Kress, all of the tables had been removed. No one shall eat.

When the group went to John A. Brown's, the group thought integration would be easy because this store was a favorite in the Black community. However, it was quite difficult. "We were cursed and spit on, and coffee was poured on us, but we stayed at Brown's" (p. 35). On Halloween, the sit-inners made white facial masks and chanted "My face is white, May I eat today" (p 39). Six years later they were still protesting. They rented a devil costume. The devil told the store's guards that they were "preparing themselves for an eternity with me in h e l l" (p. 39). One day, the NAACP planned an all-white sit-in. "This was truly a confusing demonstration. The segregationists did not know what to do" (p. 51). Luper became philosophical when she thought about the work she was doing,

I knew that those Blacks who weren't participating in the movement would be the first ones to eat in the restaurants, the first ones to sleep in the hotels, and the first and only ones to be placed by their 'good white folks' on boards, commissions, and in top-paying jobs, while those of us who were at John A. Brown's that day

would continue to be isolated from the fruits of democracy

(p. 53). She believed that she was a troublemaker who would not be tolerated by people in power. She was alienating herself and her students to build a better society. Luper also felt judgment toward Christians who could preach kindness on Sunday but uphold racist practices in their lives.

In 1960, Luper received a phone call from Mrs. Brown wondering if they could meet. Just days after their meeting, segregation ended at Brown's. The two women would remain friends for life.

The remainder of the book details the various incidences at other lunch counters and restaurants in Oklahoma City. Luper and the NAACP Youth Council also ran strikes against other retailers as well as for equity for sanitation workers. A deeply sad incident happened in 1978 when Luper's Freedom Center was bombed. This building held many of her records including all of the financial supporters of the NAACP over the years.

The New York Times published an obituary of Clara Luper upon her death in 2011. Her funeral was held at the Cox Convention Center and it was full to the rafters. When Clara Luper was sitting in jail one of the 26 times she was arrested, would she ever have believed that thousands of Oklahomans and a whole nation would mourn her? When her Freedom Center was bombed, could she have believed she would one day be named as one of Oklahoma's most influential citizens?

In The 1619 Project, journalist Nikole Hannah Jones wrote an essay entitled "America Wasn't a Democracy until Black People Made It One." United States citizens love the Declaration of Independence with its beautiful language: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." However, it took the bravery and audacity of Civil Rights sit-inners like Clara Luper to make these words come true. The US and Oklahoma owe Luper

and her team of children a debt that can never be repaid.

Christine Pappas
East Central University