ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

RANDY SPEAKER TOPEKA, KANSAS FEBRUARY 25, 2020

INTERVIEWED BY RACHAEL BLEDSAW

AUDIO FILE # BRVB022520 – RANDY SPEAKER

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although significant effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. In addition, Mr. Speaker, who reviewed the original draft of this transcript, was given the opportunity to make minor modifications to the verbatim transcript of this interview. These modifications have been incorporated into the transcript and are reflected in this rendition. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Randy Speaker, Deputy City Manager and City of Topeka Community Development Director from 2002 until 2012, discusses cooperative planning efforts with the Brown v Board of Education site to prepare for the visit of President Bush in 2004. He recounts coordination of volunteers, specific projects and planning, and unique concerns the city faced regarding security and community involvement with the site. He also gives firsthand insight into the use of public money and taxes for the care and maintenance of the surrounding neighborhood.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

Dale Cushinberry, Don Castleberry, Bob Uecker, Dink Mothell.

Randy Speaker, 2020

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

RANDY SPEAKER

Interviewer: This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of the Brown v.

Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Rachael Bledsaw, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is Randy Speaker, former City of Topeka Community Development Director. The date is February 25, 2020. This interview is taking place at Monroe School at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic site in Topeka, Kansas.

Mr. Speaker, as you may know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park System, both physically and administratively. Oral histories are one way to get to information that might not otherwise be available from documentary evidence. We try to get as much information as we can, from as many different perspectives as we can, in order to create a robust narrative of the development – developmental history of the park. This will be used by future park administrators going forward to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments. However, I should inform you that not all the information we gather will be included in the final Administrative History. We do – but, we do appreciate that you are willing to give your time to share your experiences of the development of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site for this project.

So, to begin, if you can just state your full name and spell your last name for the transcript.

Speaker: Sure. Randy Speaker; S-P-E-A-K-E-R.

Interviewer: Thank you. Let’s start with your involvement with the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. When and how did you become aware that Monroe School might become a historic site?

Speaker: Well, at the time, I was the Deputy City Manager in addition to other duties, and we were excited to hear that the park department was going to make this a site, a registered park. And we were very joyful. Then, when we found out that the President of the United States was going to come here in ninety days, panic ensued. Because, as being the capital city, we always like to try to put our best foot forward, and the Monroe School, quite frankly, was located in what we call a disinvested area. In other words, money and value had been leaving the neighborhood rather than coming into it. So now there was a major investment coming into it, so we needed to figure out how we would address this within ninety days.

Interviewer: Okay. And was this through interactions with the Brown Foundation?

Speaker: Yes. In fact, one of my employees actually was a student here and - Dale Cushinberry, so she was one of the - in kindergarten here.

Interviewer: Okay. What was your involvement, with getting the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site established as a unit of the National Park Service?

Speaker: We provided input as they were gathering information in general about whether that would be well accepted and so forth. And, of course, we were excited to see it happen, and so we had everything in a positive light.

Interviewer: Okay. And what support did the city of Topeka provide in getting the site designated?

Speaker: I don’t believe we - other than providing information was the primary role that we played. It was pretty much being led by the federal people and people that were behind the Brown v. Board.

Interviewer: Okay. You mentioned something towards this a little bit, but what were your impressions of the Brown v. Board of – National Historic Site before it became a unit of the National Park?

Speaker: Well, we don’t have any national parks around here, other than, I believe, there’s a prairie – national, federally funded, and organized. So, it was a little bit of mystery to us as to what would take place. We kind of knew from visiting other locations, what – you know, what was typically entailed, but we didn’t really know what it meant for Topeka.

Interviewer: Okay. Describe the involvement of Don Castleberry in this park. What was his position at the time? What did he do?

Speaker: I don’t recall. Interviewer: Okay. That’s fine. Speaker: Yeah, too long ago.

Interviewer: That’s fine. How do you think the public perceived the park?

Speaker: I think there was mixed reviews about it, especially initially. I think once it got here and got established, I think the doubters, you might say, kind of saw the value.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, it’s definitely changed over time?

Speaker: Oh, absolutely. There’s always - the majority of the time, there’s an apprehension when the big federal government’s gonna swoop in and take control of something and do something. There’s always some apprehension and - you know - but that soon went away.

Interviewer: Okay. You started describing the neighborhood earlier, but if there were any other details you wanted to add: what was the neighborhood around the school – the Monroe School like before it became a National Historic Site?

Speaker: Well, like I said, it was what we would term a disinvested area. It was changing from - the percentage of homeowners was going down tremendously. It was becoming just rentals, and there was a real problem even with – businesses were – you know – just not – no one was wanting to come here. The only activity was when somebody was going to leave.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Speaker: I think a typical progression of an inner city, where you have homeowners going out further to the suburbs, you know, and buying homes there - and then the values – we broke it down. When we talk about disinvestment, there’s two types of disinvestment, the flipside being wealth: individual wealth and community wealth. We had less individual wealth because there were fewer homeowners who actually owned their own home, and it was decreasing. Plus, the value of their properties was reducing. Therefore, the basis for the city to fund its services – which is based upon ad valorem tax – was reducing. And so that created a disinvestment of the community as a whole. Basically, the Monroe area was a drain on the other neighborhoods. Because the crime was going up, the value properties – you know, of – the valuation of properties was going down, but yet, because of the crime, there was more fire, more police – you know – calls to this area than some of the other areas.

Interviewer: Okay. So how did the neighborhood change after Monroe School became a National Historic Site?

Speaker: Well, the real key came when we knew that the president was going to be here.

Because we wanted to make sure – that gave us a timeline. And, oftentimes, when you’re forced to do something you don’t seek out, you find good things. It may not seem like it at the beginning. But what resulted here was a – what we call the SORT concept, which the city of Topeka uses still today. And that’s Stages of Resource Targeting. In other words, we were, like - in essence, had ninety days to do things that we had never done before, and that caused all the city departments to come together and not just have their own silos. In other words, because I was the Deputy City Manager, I was able to say, “No, you are part of the process now.” And so, we actually even built two houses in less than ninety days – which is unheard of. But – and we rehabbed, I think, twenty-five – some houses. We had, also – I think it was well over two thousand volunteers come in and help with, you know, picking up trash, picking up the alleys and trimming the trees that, you know, needed to be trimmed, and helping to haul it off. Because being a situation where it was a disinvested area, many times – and there were some elderly people still living here. And they didn’t have tools to do this, and they

couldn’t do it, so we had people – like, Target brought in a hundred people on a Saturday, all in their red shirts, and went through the neighborhood, and, you know – we had them in certain areas, working. And like I said, the – from that standpoint, it really focalized the community spirit of coming together for something, you know, that was going to change our community.

Interviewer: Okay, and you’d discussed how you kind of organized this and kept people from just sitting in their silos, but were there any other ways that you were involved in this change, like grant money or anything?

Speaker: Yeah, we – yeah, we – again the SORT concept is a – in fact, that SORT concept got - from Neighborhoods USA in 2010 - got the top neighborhood revitalization program in the country because of the techniques that we were able to utilize here. Because, for instance, what typically would happen: the sewer would break, and someone’d come in, and they’d, you know, put the sewer in, and then they’d put – repair the street. Well, then the water line would break, because nobody had checked it. So, we kinda did a different approach to it than what most cities do, and brought not only some cash investment but also people actually who owned businesses in this area – they painted their buildings. They did some other things on their own. I call it the Bob Uecker Theory –remember who Bob Uecker was?

Interviewer: I do, yes.

Speaker: Remember in the light beer commercials, how he said, “Boy they’re sure having fun over there.” Well, that’s what we created: a fun environment for everyone to come down. And so then, pretty soon we had several of our major employers - I mentioned Target - soon as they did it, then the others all wanted to spend the next Saturday helping out and getting ready. So, the bottom line is that we were able to - at a time when this was a double digit decline in property values - because we actually went in and tracked the values in the entire neighborhood improvement association - the Monroe neighborhood improvement association - and tracked that our efforts actually showed - to where we were - the Monroe area was actually increasing in value at a time when the city itself was decreasing as a whole. Which - that’s why it got the top in the country, because that just didn’t happen. Anywhere. And – but we were able to do it by bringing thought, bringing funds, bringing people, all in a coordinated effort doing - for the same goals.

Interviewer: And you just mentioned funds but what kind of - were those grants? And what kind of grants were they?

Speaker: Some of it was CDBG funds that we used. Some was our own match. Because with CDBG, you have to put up a match, so some was our match. We also had people like Federal Home Loan Bank - they helped put some money into it. We had – yeah, just a – just a whole variety. And, like I said, in some cases, the actual businesses that are located within the neighborhood participated themselves.

Interviewer: Wow! Did these changes impact park management, in your opinion?

Speaker: Well, first of all, I think it made park management feel like they were in a safer neighborhood.

Interviewer: Oh, that will, definitely.

Speaker: Yeah, because, there was – I mean, we had somebody knocking on every door at least once a day here. So, any drug dealer, they don’t like that. Even though it’s not a – the police, it’s too much attention. And so, we know that there were some that moved out of the neighborhood because of that.

Interviewer: That is – yeah. Did you think that the presence of the federal government in the area improved it or impaired it?

Speaker: Initially it was - there was apprehension. But I think, overall, when all the smoke cleared, it was positive. And, I think, perceived that way by the community too.

Interviewer: What expectations did you have for this site?

Speaker: I visit the Smithsonians all the time when I’m in Washington. I was hoping it would be something, you know, close to what the – you know, the normal Smithsonian type approach, I call it. You know, to having not just old pictures but also some interaction. That’s why I really love what they did in the gym area, and I think that was a key that everybody came away saying, “Wow, that was cool.” You know? Instead of having, “Here’s some old pictures,” (laughter) you know, type of thing.

Interviewer: So, it seems like your expectations were met, but are there still things you think they could accomplish?

Speaker: Yeah. I think they can have a better sidewalk to the front of the building! (laughter) There used to be one. We were under the impression at that time that the Park Department was going to put it as a full-fledged sidewalk, and, apparently, that never got done. I’m not with the city anymore, so I don’t – I can’t carry a stick with me. But, I would if I was still there, because I think that would be very well received by people instead of having to walk down to the corner and around.

Interviewer: Okay. What would you say are the biggest challenges to achieving the goals for the park and for the neighborhood?

Speaker: I think the biggest challenge is showing, continually, how what happened here impacts people’s lives today. I mean, to continue doing that is, I think, the biggest challenge.

Interviewer: Ah, in what way?

Speaker: Well, people have a tendency to better understand something when they can relate it to their own - themselves and their own environment. And I think that – I know for myself – of course, this dates me – I know the films of the dogs being released and the use of the water cannons – I was watching that live when I was in junior high, and so I could relate to it from that standpoint. But I think that getting young children like you’re having now - which, I don’t know what kind of curriculum or what goes on here other than tours, but I think finding ways for those kids to be able to relate to some of that stuff that maybe they didn’t see but understand what – you know, what things were before and what they are today – the difference, and how they’re better.

Interviewer: Were there any times you had to navigate through a difficult or delicate situation related to park development or administration, relationships?

Speaker: Helping Secret Service have a couple houses when the president came. That was a little testing. But we got it done. ‘Cause they wanted something inside for protection, which is understandable.

Interviewer: Yeah, can you tell me a little bit more about how that was done? I mean, obviously, not in too many details.

Speaker: Well, we - they worked with our chief of police to establish - and I think the KBI [Kansas Bureau of Investigation] might have been here too, you know, and they figured out where – put together their protection plan from when the president got off the airplane, came down Topeka Boulevard and in to here. And it, of course, included this immediate area.

Interviewer: And so, finding the houses, did you need to rent them or -? Speaker: Yeah, people -

Interviewer: Were you able to find houses that were not occupied?

Speaker: Yeah, it – we were able to get a couple that were rentals that were vacant. And the, you know, the people, were okay with it, because they were one of the landlords that we helped fund on rehabs. So -

Interviewer: Okay! That’ll definitely help. Alright. What was your involvement in the Grand Opening in 1998?

Speaker: Oh, my! Well, basically, once we got to that day, I could breathe and take it easy.

So, I was just basically here with the VIP delegation from the city. I can remember, you know, they had a stage set up here and then the street blocked off and everything.

Interviewer: Was that the Grand Opening or was that the official Dedication? Speaker: Well, that was when the president came. Right.

Interviewer: Okay. That was the one in 2004. Speaker: Yeah. Right, right.

Interviewer: What about the Grand Opening? Could you describe that?

Speaker: I don’t – I don’t recall. Other than I know I was down here, and I think I was down here with Dale Cushinberry, quite frankly.

Interviewer: What kind of support did the city of Topeka provide for the Grand Opening or for the Dedication?

Speaker: Well, one of the things that we had - were in the process of developing along with our SORT concept was we utilized female inmate labor. We created different levels of activities all the way from trash pick up to actually renovating houses.

And we had different crews. And so, we utilized those crews - like setting up chairs and getting everything ready, you know, for the visit.

Interviewer: Why female?

Speaker: Because they were the easiest to work with from the standpoint of more of the men had - we now have both crews. But we were able to fund the females quicker because they were able to respond, and we were able to negotiate it easier, quite frankly. And – ‘cause some of the men – or – I can – the level of what they were in for was lower for most of the women than what the men were incarcerated for.

Interviewer: All right. Did the city make any improvements to the neighborhood prior to the Grand Opening or the Dedication? I think you’ve mentioned a few, but were there any that you’ve just remembered now as we were talking about it?

Speaker: Well, we had – we had done some things. For instance, the house back behind here, between the two new that we built, Dink Mothell lived there. And he was with the Kansas City - played with the Kansas City Monarchs - with the Negro League baseball - was one of their main players. And they called him Dink because he would dink it over the infield, for you people that don’t know baseball terms. And so, we had already started - because we had found out that that was a historic site, so we were, you know, just doing some CDBG funds to it. Working with it, you know – or, so – for the rehab. So, we were kind of doing a few things – until the panic set in. Then we said, “Wait, we gotta do more,” you know. So, basically, we identified the entrances to the neighborhood, where would people come from, and we focused on those – being the one way coming down this way, and then Topeka Boulevard, 17th, over.

Interviewer: Alright. Describe the community involvement for the 65th anniversary celebration of 2019, if you can.

Speaker: Well, I wasn’t here. Sorry. So, I really can’t comment on it.

Interviewer: Regarding the work that you’ve done for Brown v. Board, what are you – what are you most proud of?

Speaker: I think changing the neighborhood to the better. Now, is it - you know, are there situations where it’s reverted back? I don’t know. There might be, you know. But, I think, overall, we made some changes, and we’ve made it a better environment.

Interviewer: So, the neighborhood not only looked better, but did it actually stop being – I think you used the term declining?

Speaker: Yeah.

Interviewer: The neighborhood? Did it stop?

Speaker: Yeah. I mean, it did. I haven’t checked it the last couple years - the – you know, stats, ‘cause I retired from there. But, yeah, we had - you know, it was outpacing the rest of the city, so, you know. And as far as the valuation, which then created the two types of wealth -

Interviewer: Okay. And what do you believe was the most effective thing you’ve done to help shape the way the site has developed?

Speaker: Finishing an impossible task within ninety days.

Interviewer: (laughter) Well, then, would it really be impossible? You did finish it!

Speaker: We did it. Now, it’s not impossible, that’s correct. What was originally perceived to be impossible.

Interviewer: That’s fair. Alright. Is there anything that I haven’t asked that you hoped I would ask or that you wanted to talk about related to the site?

Speaker: Hmmm. Out of curiosity, do you continue to track people who went to school here?

Interviewer: We don’t. We’re not with the National Park Service, so we don’t. (indiscernible muttering in the background)

Speaker: I just think that would be an interesting approach to keeping the level of interest, you know. Because, if somebody, “Oh my grandmother went there,” then it has - I know that we had quite a few international visitors, primarily teachers. And I think one of the keys that - and I - and maybe they’ve done that here - whoever’s in charge, maybe they’ve done it. Having a relationship with Emporia State University, do you know if there is one built?

Interviewer: I’m not aware of one.

Speaker: ‘Cause Emporia State University has the national teacher’s something or other. And there’s people from all over the world come there. Well, they make it - now there’s two places they can come to make their trip worthwhile.

Interviewer: So, something that –

Speaker: Hall of Fame! The National Teacher’s Hall of Fame. That’s what they have in Emporia.

Interviewer: So, something that we’ve heard from a few other people that we’ve interviewed is that this is more of a global issue. It’s not just an issue for Topeka. Do you see - and there are now being steps taken to push this into more of a global view. How do see that impacting Topeka or the site?

Speaker: What is a global view? Interviewer: Brown v. Board of Education. Speaker: In other words the – ?

Interviewer: The impact, the integration.

Speaker: The impact of bussing, non-bussing, that? Yeah. And I think that’s why international people came here to visit. I mean - because I know there was one gentleman from China that was lost over here and spoke no English. And, you know, finally he understood enough, “board”, “brown”. And, you know, that’s all he could say. So, I figured out that this was what he was trying to come to visit.

So, yeah, I think it is something that can be used to show what works and what doesn’t work from the standpoint of the history.

Interviewer: Have you made any accommodations, as far as having ambassadors or something to meet with international visitors who aren’t familiar with the city?

Speaker: I’m not sure I follow.

Interviewer: Well, in Atlanta, there are ambassadors on the streets who are there to intercept people who are lost and don’t speak the language and direct them to their right - to their place, wherever they’re trying to get to. Has Topeka, like, printed brochures in foreign languages, or –?

Speaker: No, other than - what I did was, I went out - who’s the most hated person with the city?

Interviewer: I have no idea. I couldn’t say.

Speaker: The meter readers. There’s nothing good happens when a meter reader is standing near your car other than you’re gonna get a ticket, right? What I did was, I kinda redefined their jobs when I was with the city, and, in fact, they – I would have them, as an exercise, keep track of the people they helped find their way, how many doors they opened for people who needed help getting the packages out to the car. And they about all fell off their chairs when I told them what we were going to do. And I told them, I said, “Well, look, you are a good part of this community, not just all bad.” And so then they started - they got – they got it, you

know. And so, other than that, we really don’t. And the Chamber will do it on special events - they have the red coats, but it’s usually for ground breakings. We don’t have the normal tourism like you would have in Atlanta. We just don’t.

We’re smaller. But I think that there’s still, you know - to me, the best relationship could be with somebody like Emporia State University, which already has the Teacher’s Hall of Fame there. Well, this is a natural stop for somebody that was going to Emporia.

Interviewer: Okay. That’s true. Well, I think that pretty much, that sums it up. Really appreciate your time, going to go ahead and turn this off.

(recorder is turned off and then back on) Interviewer: Go ahead.

Speaker: One of the controversies that we had here in the city was that many people thought that the true story would be best told if both Sumner School and Monroe School were raised to the same elevation as being a park – national park. Because it’s - there were people impacted there as well as people impacted here. So, that was one of the disappointments, I think I would say, was that it was only funded for the one school. Because I think the true story needs to be told with both in mind.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you have people coming to city council meetings and complaining?

Speaker: Absolutely! Absolutely. In fact, I was very unpopular. Because we had to – certain procurement requirements we had to follow when that – we condemned that school. And we had to – we could not just give it to somebody, we had to follow certain procurement. Because, prior to me coming here, they had received some grant funds which limited what could be done. And so that, too, limited the procurement process. And so, I know there was some people who wanted a local church to be given the property, and it ended up the highest bidder was somebody from California.

Interviewer: Were you involved in that at that time? Speaker: Was I what?

Interviewer: Were you involved in that? Speaker: Yes. Oh, yeah. Knee deep. Interviewer: Tell us about that.

Speaker: Yeah. Well – and so, a church out of California ended up being the highest bidder on it. So, we had no choice – they had – they were the highest bidder. And – but one of the issues that we also - alongside with that, our city council seemed to have troubles agreeing on the difference between property rights and property

responsibilities. And – in other words – enforcing codes to the utmost and so forth. So, that was one of the things that it was – I know the community – certainly, had – there was a lot of people that had hoped that, you know, both schools would be used to tell -

Interviewer: Do you know why they weren’t?

Speaker: Money. That’s how I was told. That the Park Service was only going to pay for one school. And, like I said, I wish I would have had an opportunity to debate that with somebody at the Park Service, but that wasn’t made available to me.

Interviewer: Okay. All right, well thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW