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Witness to the Truth documents the remarkable daily courage that was the true engine for the Civil Rights movement in the US. Behind Martin Luther King, Jr. and other national figures were people like Rev. John Henry Scott of Lake Providence, Louisiana, who persistently pushed for better education and voting rights in the face of threats and isolation, and who thought it was worse for “black folk to die a little each day and gain nothing, than to stand up and possibly die for a change.” In 1962 at the age of 60, Scott realized a lifelong goal when he and 25 other people became the first blacks to vote in Louisiana’s East Carroll Parrish since 1878. After the press and federal agents were gone that night, the Klan burned a cross in the yard of every black person who voted. Later, Scott was injured in a drive-by shooting aimed at killing him or, at the least, dissuading him from his insistence on voting and education rights.

The book takes the form of first-person autobiography, although Scott’s daughter Cleo Scott Brown actually wrote the book using interviews, family history and transcripts to piece together her father’s voice. Scott was born in 1901 in East Carroll Parish, where he fought all of his battles. Scott, raised by his paternal grandparents, found a role model in his grandfather, Charles Henry Scott—a man willing to fight for his beliefs.

Charles Henry was “bound out”—a term that differs from slavery by name only—for most of his young life and worked, unpaid, for John L. White in North Carolina after his mother sold her sons to White for \$100. She bought a bus ticket north and was never heard from again. When war came, Scott cooked for a confederate captain until the unit was captured and imprisoned in Baltimore in 1863. There, Scott and other black prisoners were called out and asked to repeat an oath: “I promise I will never rebel against the United States.” Upon pledging this oath, Scott and the others headed for New York City where they joined the 20th U.S. Colored Infantry. His memories of marching along the East River and into Union Square in 1864 are poignant: “The streets and all the windows was filled with people of all races, wavin’ flags, yellin’ and cheerin’ us on. We looked so good in our Union army uniforms and we was jest so proud, proud to be soldiers, proud to fight for the freedom of colored people we had left behind in the South.”

One of the many benefits of an eyewitness history is the detail. Repeatedly, Scott points to how the slightest level of economic independence insulated him from the clutches of racists, while his friends who worked directly for white farm bosses suffered at their whim. Scott’s grandfather’s war pension allowed him to spend much of his youth hunting, trapping and fishing, and he was able to use these skills as an additional source of subsistence. After he received his preacher’s license in 1927, the church provided him with a house and a car that again placed him outside the hand-to-mouth existence of many in his community. Cognizant of these advantages, Scott was frequently the first to stand up against discrimination, knowing that others had to weigh the potential loss of a job and food for the family against activism. It should be noted that Scott always pushed the limits of “accepted behavior” in his campaigns. One day, for example, on the front porch of a country store he openly chided a doctor for using a racial slur, saying that with all of that book learning, doctors should be more refined. Scott walked away and assumed there would be trouble. The next day, the doctor invited Scott to join him on the porch.

Scott's lifelong curiosity fueled his conjoined passion for better education and voting rights: "When I had only seen plantations, I could only understand life through the eyes of a laborer. But when I read, even before I got to travel, my mind began to open up to new possibilities. I found that many of the bad decisions affecting large numbers of people were made by politicians, leaders, teachers and preachers who had never been out of their nest, who didn't have a clue how much damage they caused daily."

His steadfast insistence for better treatment eventually put him in the forefront of Louisiana's voter rights movement. In 1960, he testified at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hearings on voting violations. After he returned home, a local storeowner refused to sell food to him, but the tide had turned and racism as a state institution was dying. Two years later, Scott cast the first official vote of his brave and dignified life. He died at the age of 78 in 1980.

Witness to the Truth will prove useful to civil rights scholars and anyone interested in understanding the daily, local machinations of the institutional racism in place from the 1920s to the 1960s in Louisiana. All of the methods white citizens used to maintain power—the Citizens Council, the Klan, extortionist cotton mill practices, daily harassment and threats of violence—are seen here from the perspective of the oppressed. Even the County Registrar would lock his door and hide when blacks came to register. Within the American Civil Rights movement, the book is an up-close examination of one man's struggle for equality and education for his small community, the type of struggle that unfolded throughout the South and fueled the movement. Within the larger context of human rights, the book is a sobering portrait about how codified racism is not even a generation removed as the United States only passed the Civil Rights Acts in 1964.

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