

**CLARA  
SHEPARD  
LUPER  
1923-2011**



**DELLA  
DUNKIN  
BROWN  
1882-1967**



**JOHN A.  
BROWN  
STORE  
PROTEST**

Clara Luper led a historic 1958 sit-in that opened up Katz Drug Store lunch counters in Oklahoma City and was known as the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement”. She then turned her focus to the iconic John A. Brown Department Store chain, determined that blacks be allowed to sit at Brown’s lunch counters.

John Albert Brown was born in September 1878 in Ohio and graduated from Baker University before working in a dry goods store owned by his cousin A. O. Rorabaugh in Emporia, Kansas in 1900. Brown came to Guthrie in 1908 and operated a store there. Della Dunkin, who was born in August 1882 in Las Vegas, New Mexico and studied voice, piano and organ at Kansas City’s Busch Conservatory of Music and Chicago’s Conservatory of Music, met Brown while playing at a local meeting and they married in Guthrie in 1909.

In 1915, Brown rejoined his cousin when the latter acquired Brock’s Dry Goods and changed its name to Rorabaugh-Brown Company in Oklahoma City. He bought out Rorabaugh in 1932 and, with his brother-in-law John Dunkin, opened Brown-Dunkin Department Store, one of the earliest stores to open branches, with locations at Capitol Hill and Penn Square in Oklahoma City and in Tulsa. When John Brown died in 1940, Della became president of the company until her death.

Clara Mae Shepard was born in May 1923 in Okfuskee County and attended high school in the black town of Grayson and later Langston University, where she received a degree in mathematics with a minor in history in 1944. She also received a master’s degree in history education at the University of Oklahoma in 1951. The history teacher led the historical Oklahoma City sit-in movement, as she, her young son and daughter, and numerous young members of the NAACP Youth Council successfully conducted carefully planned nonviolent sit-in protests at the Katz Drug Store downtown. Two days later, Katz desegregated its lunch counters in three states.

From 1957 to 1961, Luper led nonviolent pickets and protests out front of the main Brown store downtown, and conducted sit-ins at its lunch counter. Repeatedly Luper tried – without success – to connect with owner Della Brown by phone. When Brown finally responded, an angry Luper ignored her for weeks, while continuing to protest. Finally, when supporters told her to put aside her pride and meet with Brown, she agreed.

The John A. Brown Stores had grown into one of the largest Oklahoma employers and a commercial dynasty in the Southwest. When Luper walked into the secretary’s office, she was shocked to see it was John Brown’s original office, unchanged with the same furniture and pictures from his time there. As Brown opened the door, the two women stood speechless with tears in their eyes before embracing like lifelong friends. Historical circumstances had brought two women together – one black and one white, one rich and one poor.

Brown thought Luper hated her but Luper respected her for challenging the male-oriented business world. Luper thought Brown hated her but Brown admired her courage. Luper quickly made her point – “if Mr. Brown was alive, we could eat here”. Brown explained that Frank Wade leased the luncheonette space and set his own rules. She felt her hands were tied but Luper was adamant. “John A. Brown is where we spend our money and we can’t see how we can be discriminated against at this store.” After an hour-long conversation, Brown announced, “Segregation will end at John A. Brown’s.” Then Brown shocked Luper. “The first time you were arrested, I offered to pay your bond.” Luper knew that when she left that day, she would have a lifelong friend.

In less than a week, blacks were eating lunch there with Luper and Brown continuing to talk by telephone. When Brown was hospitalized for the last time, she called Luper to say her goodbyes to her dear friend. Brown wanted Luper to know that she appreciated what they had done for Oklahoma City. When Brown died, Luper couldn’t control her emotions. She followed Brown’s funeral procession to her final resting place. A white store executive said, “I’m glad you came.” Luper replied, “She was my friend, I loved her, and I had to come.”

Brown was elected to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1959 and died in 1967. Luper was elected to the Oklahoma Women’s Hall of Fame in 1993 and Hall of Fame in 2007. She died in 2011.