

V101 - Lincoln Ragsdale Sr. part 1 - AL

In May 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously decided that separating educational facilities by race was unconstitutional under the 14th amendment. You'll know this famous case as Brown vs. The Board of Education.

One year earlier, in February 1953, Judge Struckmeyer in Arizona ruled that a law permitting students to be separated by race in the Phoenix Union school district was also unconstitutional. Phillips vs. Phoenix Union High School and Junior College District is much less famous, but integrated schools a *whole year* before the rest of the country.

This was able to happen because of a handful of civil rights activists in Phoenix, but one man in particular looked at this as the tip of the iceberg.

Dr. Lincoln Ragsdale Sr. helped fund a lawsuit on behalf of three Black children during the Phoenix Union case, but his time fighting for racial freedoms in the Valley spread much further than high schools.

Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by the Arizona Republic and azcentral.com, where we answer your questions about metro Phoenix and beyond. I'm producer Amanda Luberto and today I'll share with you the life and impact of Lincoln Ragsdale.

theme break

Before COVID-19, listener Cassandra would fly in and out of Sky Harbor International Airport every week. And one day while waiting for a flight, she Googled the name on the executive terminal: Lincoln Ragsdale. What she found was very interesting, but she wanted to know more.

Who was Lincoln Ragsdale and what did he do in his life to get an airport terminal named after him?

Lincoln was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma in 1926. Before he was involved in integrating public schools in Phoenix and before he was a pillar of the civil rights movement in the Valley, Lincoln was a pilot. He joined the renowned Tuskegee Airmen and entered World War II in January 1945.

According to a video tribute about his life, it wasn't necessarily his passion for flying that inspired him to enlist in this corps of all-Black military pilots.

Here's Lincoln Sr. in his own words:

[00:01:15] **Lincoln:** So what? I wanted to be a pilot because I wanted to prove something. I had no real desire to fly. People said that Blacks could not do it. I wanted to prove that we could do as we were

very segregated. The army was segregated. The Navy was segregated. We couldn't use any facilities. We were treated as second class citizens. But the only way to change that was to prove that you can do something [00:01:35][20.0]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKl65Vt_Ygl&t=270s&ab_channel=CedricBailey

In other words, even his life as a pilot was about civil rights.

After completing training, Lincoln made his way to Arizona. He was part of the group of first Black airmen on Luke Air Force Base. At the time, Luke was experimenting with racial integration. This came two years before President Truman signed an executive order that integrated the entire Department of Defense.

While it seems like a noble step forward, it was met with a lot of pushback, and at times, endangered some of the airmen. Lincoln was one of these men.

music change & pause

Ben Bruce is the historian for the Archer-Ragsdale Arizona Chapter for the Tuskegee Airmen. The chapter is co-named after Fred Archer, the first Black enlisted member of the US Air Force to reach the highest ranking and, our subject today, Lincoln Ragsdale.

We spoke about some of the experiences this first group of Black men had on Luke Air Force Base.

[00:06:25] **Ben:** So they came in December of 1945, is put in quarters with another white officer, another pilot. This pilot is a captain, and he's from Mississippi, and this is not going to be a good mix. When the pilot comes home late at night, he sees Lincoln there and he says, we go in here and said, "Well, I've been assigned as your roommate." And he said, "Well, you're not staying here with me." Well, Lincoln didn't leave the room, so he did, and the captain spent that first night ~~and~~ sleeping in his car. The next day, he went to a squadron commander and he said, "I want a new roommate." The commander said, "you're not getting a new roommate." And so this captain had to learn to deal with this black man who he grew up being taught as being a person who is inferior to him. And that was a big adjustment this man had to make for the first four days. He did sleep in his car on the fifth day because it's December in Phoenix, it gets a little cool. And finally, he decided he would just go ahead. But he never said anything to Lincoln the first month or two that they were roommates. [00:07:37][71.2]

Ben knows these stories because they were shared with him by two other original Tuskegee Airmen: the late Lieutenant Colonel Robert Ashby and Lieutenant Colonel Asa Herring. Ashby and Herring also knew Lincoln before they came to Arizona.

[00:05:07] **Ben:** he said the week of graduation in November 1945, Lincoln's parents came down to Tuskegee to see him graduate, and he took the car into town to get it service and must have said the wrong thing to the gas attendant who got very upset called the police, and eventually the police ended up in an altercation with him and almost beat him to death. The only reason I suspect that he was not beaten to death was he was wearing his uniform. So he graduated with a few bumps and bruises and a very dislike, a great dislike for Jim Crow, which is the segregated policies of the South at this time in the United States. So he didn't have a good time, a good experience at Tuskegee. And it would carry on later on to some of the experiences he had at Luke Air Force Base. [00:05:55][48.4]

...Back to the story about the roommate...

[00:07:43] **Ben:** One of the guys, Asa or Bobby, had told me that Lincoln said that the captain had put water balloons in his bed. And of course, he didn't know that until he got into his bed, and he's moving around, and all of a sudden the balloons burst, soaking wet. This was the first attempt to get Lincoln so upset that he would voluntarily get out of the room and get another roommate [00:08:05][21.7]

Luke Air Force Base was trying to work out the kinks of housing the White and Black airmen together, but one can assume water balloon strategies wasn't on their list of possible occurrences.

And Lincoln wasn't the only person experiencing this disrespect.

[00:09:48] **Ben:** Each of the 12 pilots, you know, had some issues. For example, the White airmen on the base would not salute any of the Black officers as required by military customs and courtesies. Just wouldn't do it. And so those were some of the challenges that they ran into. [00:10:04][16.2]

Some of the stories Ben shared were blatantly racist: things Ben described as wives tales of the time that we know are nowhere close to the truth.

[00:10:10] **Ben:** There was a story that Bob Ashby, late Bob Ashby, told me that Lincoln had shared with him that one day he was showering in the quarters, just taking a shower, and he looked over and noticed that the White captain from Mississippi was watching it

very intently. And Lincoln called him out on it. What are you doing? He says, Well, in Mississippi, when I was growing up, they said, you always so close to monkeys that you had tails. And I was trying to see what your tail looked like. And of course, Lincoln didn't have a tail and had to sit down and educate the man about that.

[00:10:38][27.9]

Some of the discrimination was on the level of microaggressions.

[00:11:03] **Ben:** There was still a policy at the time that the ranking person at a table in the dining facility. Monday through Saturday, you were assigned a table to sit and eat at. And so in a dining facility officer's mess, they call it. You'd go in and you have a certain table on Sunday, you could sit anyplace you wanted provided you got permission from the senior person on the table to sit down and eat. And unfortunately, Lincoln ran into the same problem that a lot of other officers that ran into on a Sunday when they would grab their breakfast or lunch or dinner or whatever it is, and he'd walk over and you have to ask permission to be seated and the permission was denied. And depending upon how many tables you have, it's how many times you would go around. If there's 50 tables, you might have to ask permission 49 or 50 times before somebody will allow you to sit. And for many cases, a lot of the pilots just didn't eat. On Sunday at the officers mess, they probably ate at the Post Exchange, which is like a snack bar. Rather than suffer that humiliation.

[00:12:11][68.1]

Because they had to spend a lot of their time together, the White roommate from Mississippi eventually loosened up. But maybe not on purpose. Ben says the first time an officer recognized Lincoln as a fellow officer is also, perhaps, the first time Lincoln was recognized as a human being.

[00:12:34] **Ben:** They're going down there for gunnery training. So this is rocket training and how to drop bombs and how to fire the gun accurately. And they have targets. And on this particular mission, the captain from Mississippi was the lead pilot. One of the wingmen was Lincoln, and another was another pilot. So they had a three ship formation going in and strafing machine gunning a target. And they did very well on that. On their strafing pass. When they landed, they found that they did so well that they had were the top in the competition, which took the captain over the moon. He was so excited that they were scoring number one because pilots are dog eat dog and they're very competitive. He was so excited. I guess he forgot himself and he ran over and congratulated both of the pilots, slapping them on the back, shaking their hands and was really

excited. They had done a good job, and all of a sudden he realized that he's standing there, shaking the hand of that black pilot, Lincoln Ragsdale. And that was really the first time he acknowledged Lincoln's skill as a pilot and a member of the United States Army Air Corps. [00:13:38][63.6]

Lincoln was only in Phoenix at Luke Air Force Base for a few months before returning to Tuskegee, Alabama. Soon the war was over and he was released as a civilian.

AZC APP PROMO VOICED BY KM

During his time in the Valley he was privy to the mistreatment Blacks and Hispanics were facing off the Air Force base as well. At this time, the city of Phoenix was extremely segregated.

[00:07:06] **Matthew:** If you were born in a hospital, you were born segregated. If you died, you were buried in a segregated cemetery.

This is Dr. Matthew Whitaker.

So a lot of people don't realize how segregated it was, and Lincoln Ragsdale was someone who almost immediately took exception to that and at a very deep level and immediately set out to work to try to change that. [00:07:33][26.4]

He is the founder of Diamond Strategies, a diversity and inclusion communication relations firm. Before that, he taught at Arizona State for 15 years. He also wrote a book about Lincoln Ragsdale and his wife, Eleanor, and their impact on the civil rights movement in Phoenix.

Matthew and I met in a meeting hall of the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center. It's a preservation site dedicated to Black history in Arizona. Before that, it was the Phoenix Union Colored High School where students of color were segregated to.

When Lincoln returned to Arizona, he opened up a mortuary. Business opportunities were more available to people of color in Arizona than they were in the deep South at the time, so Whitaker says he used this to his advantage.

[00:09:15] **Matthew:** Funeral homes were a place. In addition to the church, where black folks generally owned the land and the building and the politics and the culture and everything that happened inside of the institution. [00:09:30][15.0]

[00:10:29] **Matthew:** So in addition to pursuing those, he also pursued leadership in his community, which meant advocating on behalf of people of color, Black folks. And that meant civil rights activity. So there's no surprise he moved directly into that. [00:10:44][14.6]

The funeral home was located off 11th Street and Jefferson. Now, it's just off the light rail, down the road from the Arizona Diamondbacks' Chase Field. At the time, Black people were regulated to housing south of Van Buren Street. Before the Fair Housing Act in 1968, redlining was a common practice in Phoenix.

I talked about redlining a bit in an episode I did with Arizona Republic reporter Taylor Seeley about a year ago when we told the story of Allenville. Allenville was an all-Black community just south of Buckeye that was the only area of town in which people of color could physically own the land they lived on. Due to redlining, the land they were living on, though, was hazardous and the town was destroyed by a series of floods in the 1970s.

Redlining was a systemic discriminatory practice that makes resources unobtainable for residents based on their race. It was a term coined by sociologist John McKinight in the 1960s and comes from how federally sponsored leaders would literally draw a red line on a map to indicate the neighborhoods they would not invest in based on demographics.

As Lincoln's legacy shows, this went for businesses as well as homes. His mortuary served not only as a Black-owned business but as a gathering space for his community.

[00:12:05] **Matthew:** In his first mortuary, he made sure he had room rooms. I should say for black people to host events, and many of those events were political in orientation, whereby people of African descent would learn certain things about whatever ballot measure was there, things that were affecting them and be able to interact with people who would lobby on behalf of them. [00:12:28][22.5]

According to Matthew, he would also use these rooms as spaces for people of color to not only learn their rights, but how to handle sticky situations.

[00:12:53] **Matthew:** One of the first things that he noticed, in addition to the Rev. George Brooks and Hayzel B. Daniels and other Black leaders at the time was that Phoenix, just like the Deep South, hosted really nefarious practices. It hosted voter suppression. For instance, former chief justice of the Supreme Court, William Rehnquist, was known as a young attorney to show up at voting sites on the south side, demanding that black and brown people interpret parts of the Constitution in order for them to be able to vote. And that happened here. And so they met in these areas to help them understand, how do you prepare for this? I mean, not only how do you protest it, but how do you prepare for it? Most often they were told or, you know, recite the preamble to the Constitution verbatim and taught him how to do that. [00:13:55][61.7]

Justice William Rehnquist was said to be a part of Operation Eagle Eye, a voter suppression operation in Arizona in the 1960s. Federal laws have since made literacy tests for voters illegal.

music transition

Because Lincoln was a prominent business owner, he was able to get conversations with important people in Phoenix: people who impacted economic and political change. Because of this, he worked with others to start the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity.

[00:01:19] **Herb:** My remembrance is this, that Lincoln came to Phoenix before I did, and he was active in helping to start an organization called the Phoenix Council for Civic Unity. And really, it was the most at the time effective activist group for civil rights in Arizona. And he helped start it, and we became friendly because of that because I became involved and subsequently I became president of the organization. So that was the origin of it. [00:02:01][41.3]

This is the voice of Herb Ely. Herb was not only good friends with Lincoln, and eventually his whole family, but he is one of the most prolific civil rights attorneys in Phoenix history. You might also know Herb as the founder of The Nash, the jazz performance space on Roosevelt.

But at the time, Herb was what a 1993 Arizona Republic article referred to as an outside agitator.

[00:02:46] **Herb:** I came to Arizona primarily because I, and I won't bore you with that detailed history, But I came because I was outraged by what was happening to Blacks in America and thought I could make a difference. And so I aligned myself with a law firm, a lawyer by the name of Herb Finn, who was the leading civil rights lawyer at the time. And we tried civil rights cases together, and then subsequently I wrote the major laws in Arizona for public accommodations and that kind of thing. ~~But it is important to point out that before my coming and Lincoln was involved in this in 1953, before Brown vs. the Board of Education, we were the leading state, obviously, ironically enough in America to desegregate, to have a decision that desegregated the schools and found the separation not separate but equal and preceded Brown.~~ And I think that Lincoln's involvement in that was one of the very first major accomplishments of many that succeeded it that he was involved in. But in answer to your question, to a large extent, it was because of my interest in civil rights that we became friends. [00:04:10][84.6]

Herb is not Black, he's Jewish. But some segregation laws in Arizona at the time extended to the Jewish community as well. He came from the East Coast to Phoenix in hopes of helping make a difference. He quickly joined Lincoln on the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity and became the legal counsel and vice president for the local NAACP.

Lincoln understood the power of education, having received a Bachelor of Science degree from ASU and a Doctorate in Philosophy from Union Graduate School.

Here's Dr. Matthew Whitaker again:

[00:16:41] **Matthew:** he was very competitive as well. Very intense, very competitive. And he wanted the Black community to be competitive, in part because he believed that in order, first of all, he believed that freedom relied upon capital in order to acquire capital. You would need land or jobs or something of that nature in order to get that in education. And if you don't have an education, you're not in that pipeline to any of that. [00:17:14][33.1]

Starting in the summer of 1952, the interracial team of Herb Finn and Hayzel B Daniels [filed a lawsuit](#) against the Phoenix Union High School District Board on behalf of three Black students trying to register at Phoenix Union High School.

Herb Finn was the attorney that Herb Ely worked with. Hayzel B Daniels was the first Black lawyer who passed the bar in Arizona. Together, with the financial support of the Ragsdales, they argued that the taxpaying parents of these students had the right to send their child to any public high school in the county. Not just the school for Black students.

Then in February of 1953, [it was found that](#) segregating members of the African race from members of the Caucasian race was unlawful and the delegation of power by the administrative board was unconstitutional.

These students, and many others, were free to attend any high school in Phoenix.

theme mix up

But like I said, this is just the tip of the iceberg. This same year, Lincoln Ragsdale and his family make history by moving into an all-white neighborhood in town. And his children, including Emily and Lincoln Jr., who will join us next week, bear the brunt of now attending a predominantly white school.

He continues to fight against more racially oppressive laws in Arizona, all while imposing the importance of strength on his family. Alongside his wife, Eleanor, a civil rights activist in her own right, he pursues civil freedoms for all Arizonans.

Please join us next week for part two of the Lincoln Ragsdale Sr. story and his impact on Phoenix. In the meantime, feel free to share this episode with a friend and follow us on twitter and instagram at a-z-c-podcasts.

You can also support Valley 101 by subscribing to the Arizona Republic.

I'm producer Amanda Luberto, we'll see you next week.