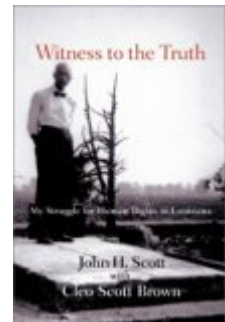


**John H. Scott with Cleo Scott Brown.** *Witness to the Truth: My Struggle for Human Rights in Louisiana.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003. xix + 312 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-489-3.



**Reviewed by** Justin Nystrom

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In the 1970s, historian Joseph Logsdon conducted a series of interviews with John H. Scott, a lifelong champion of civil rights in Northeast Louisiana. Unfortunately, the biography of Scott that Logsdon had envisioned writing remained unrealized for years. Ill, and aware that he would never be able to return to the project, Logsdon encouraged Scott's daughter when he learned of her interest in publishing the story of her father's remarkable life. Thus, Cleo Scott Brown, a risk management specialist by profession, carried the task forward. *Witness to the Truth* is the result of Ms. Brown's toil.

John H. Scott was born in 1901 in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. Raised by his grandparents, he developed a sense of his heritage at an early age. Scott's grandfather exerted a particular influence on him. "Papa Charley" had been born free and had served in the Union Army, and his tales of war and Reconstruction imbued young Scott with a sense of pride. The red-headed, fair-skinned Scott characterized himself as unusually assertive and independent for young African-American men of his day. Although such traits periodically

put him into potentially dangerous conflict with angry whites, they also garnered a certain amount of respect amongst those very same people.

Aware that farming could, and often did become a losing proposition for blacks in East Carroll, Scott looked elsewhere for a career. He eventually answered the call to become a Baptist preacher, a job accompanied by the burden of community leadership. Influenced by the writings of W. E. B. DuBois and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Scott's ministry preached civil rights activism.

Scott's first public role as a civil rights activist came in 1938. The Farm Security Administration devised a scheme to relocate black tenant farmers away from the fertile fields of East Carroll's Transylvania community and settle poor white farmers in their place. Outraged by this "bad deal" orchestrated by the FSA and state authorities, Scott and a small group of friends organized the first NAACP chapter in their part of the state. Sympathetic newspapers covered the scandal and the Roosevelt administration took notice. In calling attention to the plight of uprooted black farmers,

Scott helped win modest redress from the federal government.

Following World War II, quality schools for African-American children became a primary focus of Scott's Lake Providence chapter of the NAACP. Like many rural southern school districts of the time, the parish's black schools contained twice as many students, but received less than half the funding. More pernicious to Scott was the shorter school term for black students. At critical points in the planting season, landlords expected black school children to be in the fields. The all-white school board had gladly accommodated the planters' expectations and adopted a special split school term for black children only. Through the court system, Scott and the NAACP challenged the local government to improve the inferior facilities and to stop facilitating the economic exploitation of black child labor.

The same two-to-one ratio between black and white citizens of the parish also meant that whites assiduously maintained black disfranchisement. Scott correctly believed that blacks could never truly expect real progress without the ballot. His protracted crusade for voter registration among the black citizens of Lake Providence lasted for more than fifteen years, beginning a decade before the well-publicized voter registration drives in Mississippi of the early 1960s. Scott and other courageous residents of East Carroll endured significant abuse for testifying against corrupt officials. Where economic intimidation failed, violent hooligans took more extreme measures to prevent blacks from seeking their rights. Indeed, in 1963, the crusade for voting rights nearly cost John Scott his life. Undeterred, the preacher continued in his quest, eventually realizing in the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 the goal he had sacrificed so much to achieve. By the time John Scott died in 1980 at the age of seventy-eight, life for blacks in East Carroll parish had changed dramatically--thanks in no small part to the sacrifices he had made.

*Witness to the Truth* covers such an enormous scope of southern history that many scholars will find it useful. The memoir provides a glimpse of African-American life through such epic events as disfranchisement, the Great Migration, the New Deal, both World Wars, school desegregation, and the quest for civil rights. It is in the detail of everyday southern rural life that this book truly shines. Through the eyes of John Scott, we see how ordinary African Americans confronted the daily challenges of living in the Jim Crow South. Students of southern agriculture will especially find this book worthwhile, as much of the first half portrays the social plight of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

Scott frequently returns to the theme of black financial dependence and how his own lack of such dependence upon white people made his activism possible. Both Scott and his wife drew their income from the black community, paid cash for necessities, and lived frugally. A witness to several migrations of blacks from the sharecropping South to cities in the North and West, Scott made the conscious decision to remain in Louisiana in order to continue his crusade. His ability to live on his own terms, buoyed by faith and family, greatly influenced this decision.

Another recurring theme in *Witness to the Truth* is the scope of social control enjoyed by the white minority. It is clear in Scott's story that the Citizens' Councils, the Klan, and the Louisiana Sovereignty Commission would not have met defeat had it not been for the intervention of the federal judiciary, the national media, and national-level civil rights organizations. Brave grass-roots activists and good intentions were simply not enough to combat the pervasive control segregationists enjoyed over the levers of power. On the other hand, this book will undoubtedly remind some readers of John Dittmer's *Local People*.<sup>[1]</sup> Like Dittmer's work, Scott's narrative also demonstrates the importance of grass-roots activism to the overall success of the Civil Rights

Movement. Although unable to resolve problems independently, average people in East Carroll were the ones who courageously provided the essential testimony for successful adjudication of civil rights cases. Scott is that essential link between state and federal level activists and the small town, sometimes reluctant foot soldiers who stood on the front lines and felt the brunt of the backlash.

The span of John Scott's long life creates a framework for demonstrating the continuity found in the struggle for equal rights. It is in the interracial exchanges of the late teens and 1920s that Scott truly forms his opinions and makes the decision to become an activist. In this regard, *Witness to the Truth* might serve as a useful pedagogical tool for incoming college freshmen who often leave high school believing that the Civil Rights Movement only encompasses a decade.

There are a few things about this book that could be better. The most crucial has to do with editorial decisions rather than with the author. Almost unbelievably, there is no index. Such an addition would make this memoir unfathomably more useful as a reference work. Another key critique is that the book lacks footnotes or references of any kind. While the Logsdon interviews undoubtedly served as the mainstay for this book, Ms. Brown notes in her introduction that she collected a sizable amount of information from a variety of sources to help clarify details. Without footnotes, it is difficult to tell where the original interviews have been supplemented, and to what extent. The bottom line of this problem is that although written in its entirety in the first person, future scholars citing a passage could not accurately attribute a statement to Scott without returning to the actual Logsdon interviews.

This reviewer hesitates to be too critical, however, as Ms. Brown has truly done an excellent job of presenting the material. Her objective was clear: to tell the story of her father--something she has done well. Her effort is all the more impres-

sive knowing that she is not a historian by trade and that she completed it in six years while holding down a "day job." In the end, Ms. Brown has produced a book that is a must-read for anyone seriously interested in the grass-roots side of the Civil Rights Movement.

#### Note

[1]. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

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