

MOTHER

Did he win his case?

JOHN

No, but please listen.

(John gets up, very excited.)

It happened on June 7, 1892. Plessy got on an East Louisiana Railway train that goes between New Orleans to Covington, up near the Mississippi border. He sits down in the first seat that's open. It turns out to be reserved for whites.

MOTHER

That's trouble. I'm tellin' you.

JOHN

Trouble is right. The conductor comes up to Plessy and asks him to move to the car for colored passengers. Well, that didn't make a whole lot of sense to Plessy. There's plenty of empty seats right there in that car where he sat down. He declines to move. Then a detective on the train comes up and arrests him.

MOTHER

So Plessy takes it to Court.

PLESSY

That's right. Trouble is, he ends up in front of a judge who didn't agree with him. Now, the way I see it, making him move was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which guarantees every American citizen equal protection of the laws. Plessy loses, but he appeals his case to the next court higher.

MOTHER

Thought he was gettin' somewhere, didn't he?

PLESSY

The United States Supreme Court doesn't get around to making a decision until 1896, four years after it happened. The Court decides that even though the Constitution does require equal protection of the laws, and this means for the colored race too-- each state can make laws as long as they are in keeping with (he reads)...as long as those laws are in keeping with "the established usages, customs and traditions of the people." The Justice who wrote the opinion for the Court even said that if the enforced separation of the two races seems to stamp the colored race with a badge of inferiority, this is because the colored race chooses to put that meaning on it.