

THE SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

Jerry McKelvy, Editor

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The following article was submitted by a reader of *The Sandyland Chronicle* who witnessed first-hand the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock in 1957. The writer has connections to Nevada County. Several members of his family are buried in DeAnn and Moscow cemeteries at Prescott.

A TIGER'S TALE

"One Former Student's Account of Life in the Bowels of the Fracas"

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My father, Charles Woodward McKelvey, was born in 1908 in a logging camp called Frostville, Arkansas; six years later, Daisy Lee Gaston Bates was born in Huttig, Arkansas, a few miles down the road. In 1957 their paths would near each other again in a sort of oblique, disjointed way during "The Little Rock Integration Crisis".

My father's sister's son asked me to write out a few remembrances of my time at Central during the so-called 'crisis' but I don't think he realized my involvement with that school and my feelings for that neighborhood; it could easily turn into a short book.

I'll do my best to keep this confined to the events of '57.

Within a day or so of school's opening on September 3, things began to get tense; several hundred people began taunting and heckling any black unlucky enough to find themselves in the neighborhood; as our area was bounded by black areas several blocks away there was a total disruption of the ebb and flow of the usual daily traffic patterns. All streets bordering Central were shut down. The Arkansas National Guard lined the two block length of the school's front and were stationed at various entrances around the six block perimeter of the building.

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CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

When the nine students arrived for registration on the 4th, they were turned away by the ANG and chased by the steadily growing mob. The next twenty days were a volleyball game between the courts, Faubus and Eisenhower. This was also the period when the 'News Corps' began arriving .

The actual 'street riots' started in earnest when the 'Nine' were finally able to enter the building on September 23; only the Little Rock Police were there to escort them inside. The ANG had been withdrawn by Faubus a few days earlier and that's when the trouble began. The crowd began surging toward the police and the nine students were escorted from the building and away from the school.

My first real, concrete memory is of the evening of Tuesday, September 24th. We'd heard on the local news that Eisenhower had called out elements of the 101st Airborne Division to 'assist' in the implementation of the entry of nine black students to Central. Much later that evening, we heard unfamiliar vehicle engines droning past; we filed out of our homes and stood on porches, lawns and sidewalks in various states of dress watching as the jeeps, small trucks and troop-carrying duce and a halves wound the twelve blocks around 'our' school. Soldiers jumped out every few feet and took their positions about four feet apart, with fixed bayonets at the ready. The troops were in position and the school 'secured' by 3 am the morning of the twenty-fifth.

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(I recently heard an interview with a guy who was a nineteen year old soldier during this tumult; he said, "We kept expecting mobs and trouble of some kind as we unloaded at the school, but there was none..., none at all that first night.")

We lived across the street in front of Central and next door to 'Buz' Sawyer's Mobil service station at the corner of (then) 14th and Park St.; at our home, television and the U.S. Army were mere distractions from other more serious problems.

My brother, Patrick, who graduated from Central only a few months before, had been in a car accident a few weeks earlier; he was in the back bedroom in traction with legs and an arm broken and glass working its way out of his skin almost daily. Various other abrasions, cuts and bruises were patched, salved and stitched. My grandmother (mother's mother), having just had a cataract operation, was in the middle bedroom with her head propped between two small sandbags. Sally, my sister, married a year or so earlier and was starting her own family. My mother (who worked as a secretary for the Little Rock Public School Administration offices) and father had divorced a few years earlier and the hospitalization/medicine cost was wreaking its havoc on our small, fragile, already stretched finances; the arrival that night of the 101st was just the icing on the cake; kind'a like the 'third' shoe dropping.

On the morning of the twenty-fifth, I went to the front door and the soldiers were still there.

A group of ne'r-do-wells had formed in the parking area of the Mobil station and reporters were everywhere. There was a large van in the Mobil lot next to the hedges that bordered my front yard. Lines of some sort ran from the telephone pole to the van and I discovered later it was a sort of slapped together reporter pool. Almost immediately, reporters began asking to use our phone and my mother immediately seized upon their 'want' as a money making proposition. This many years down the road, I've forgotten exactly how much she charged them per call but it added to our moth- eaten purse considerably.

On this first day, my mother and I stood at the front door watching the trailer trash crowd heckling and shouting their obscenities; suddenly, they surged toward this one black woman trying to make her way through their lunacy. Mother recognized her immediately as one of the custodians

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simply trying to get to work. She said, "Go get her and bring her back to the house"; ever the dutiful son, I made my way through the surging crowd and, just as I got to the woman, General Walker of the 101st appeared and warned, "Son, if you put one hand on that woman, you're going to jail". He'd obviously typecast me. I retreated and Walker, along with some of his troops, escorted the lady into the building.

Later, I had to scurry over at the checkpoint on the corner where various school staff waited along with their armed escorts to identify me and pass me through. Because I was in class all day, except for one or two instances which I'll get to a little further along, I never saw many of the confrontations that developed during those first days; there weren't that many inside the school.



FIRST DAY – 1957

Early on, there were catcalls and small scuffles but after a few assemblies and lectures from various teachers most of that stopped. There were even essays written in our school paper, *The Tiger*, on the need to maintain civility and decorum and concentrate on learning. Mrs. Huckabee, the 'Girls' Principal, led the charge in the hallways, in her office and at assemblies in making sure her students understood the necessity of not succumbing to 'baser instincts'; and, for the majority of the over 1,500 students at Central, we did concentrate on learning but, of course, there

were the idiots as well.

From "The Tiger" student newspaper 1957:

http://www.centralhigh57.org/the_tiger.htm

Can You Meet the Challenge?

By Jane Emery, Editor

"You are being watched! Today the world is watching you, the students of Central High. They want to know what your reactions, behavior, and impulses will be concerning a matter now before us. After all, as we see it, it settles now to a matter of interpretation of law and order.

Will you be stubborn, obstinate, or refuse to listen to both sides of the question? Will your knowledge of science help you determine your action or will you let customs, superstition, or tradition determine the decision for you?

This is the chance that the youth of America has been waiting for. Through an open mind, broad outlook, wise thinking, and a careful choice you can prove that America's youth has not "gone to the dogs"-- that their moral, spiritual, and educational standards are not being lowered."

The following link will take you to Minnijean Brown's account of her experiences:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/3xzb5s>

By this time, the entire Arkansas National Guard had been federalized by Eisenhower. This made well over ten thousand troops available to ensure the success of the integration effort:

<http://www.nps.gov/chsc/planyourvisit/upload/SitebulletinCrisis.pdf>

"Any time it takes 11,500 soldiers to assure nine Negro children their constitutional rights in a democratic society, I can't be happy." - Daisy Bates, President, State Chapter of the NAACP.

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Aside from my run-in with General Walker mentioned earlier, I had very little experience with any of the violence or tumult except as an observer. I was interviewed a couple of times; once by a reporter with a film crew during the '57 debacle (this can be seen in the PBS "Eyes on the Prize" series (I'm the guy you can barely make out behind the girls); it's a brief segment featuring me, Wanda Murphy and Sheila Kinney being asked our take on the whole situation. Sheila says at some point, "If parents would just go home and let us alone, we'll be all right...We just want them to leave us be. We can do it." This is quoted also on the Daisy Bates link as being from an anonymous 16 year old; she may have been 15 but not 16, as she was in my class (I was 14; always the youngest in whatever class I was enrolled.... And as the sparkling, dark skinned, half-Indian beauty she was, she certainly wasn't 'anonymous'.

The second interview was for one of the local papers (Democrat or Gazette) but I don't remember which. It took place on a neighbor's porch a couple of doors down. I used to have that clipping tucked away somewhere but have no idea where it is or if it even still exists.

Out of a school with a total attendance of around 2,000, the number of incidents throughout the rest of the year was miniscule. Ernest Green has been quoted as saying he had 'hundreds' of white students harassing him throughout the year; I can well imagine that for an eighteen year-old it might've seemed that way but it certainly wasn't 'that way'. In fact, many white students tried to be helpful toward the 'Nine' as much as it was possible to do so. It certainly wasn't an 'un-tense' situation, but neither was it a 'bloodbath' either. Members of the 101st and then the federalized National Guard squired the nine students around from class to class and into and out of the building every day.

It was, however, the first time in my life I was called a nigger lover.

When school closed at the end of the school year it was announced that all high schools in the Little Rock Public School System would be closed the following year. Many private schools had been funded during the year and some students had transferred, yet more were set up the summer of '58. Many in the student body were bussed to outlying public school districts in various counties around Little Rock. I spent the '58 year at Bryant High School near the bauxite pits; at first bussed and then small carpools formed as students got their licenses. It was about a twenty/thirty minute trip.

By the time the schools reopened in 1959, all of the court/Faubus hoopla and wrangling had been ironed out and the school integrated this time

uneventfully.

Two different versions of the life of Orval Faubus; illustrating the variations one can run into when researching anything on the net:

http://www.biographybase.com/biography/Faubus_Orval.html

<http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=102>

If I was writing this even a year or so after all of these 'happenings' I could've probably 'nuanced' it all a bit better and been a bit more specific; as it is, I've had to do with what memory I have left.

One day in 1981, I was waiting for a stoplight to change at the intersection of Louisiana and Third street in Little Rock; as the pedestrians passed in front of me, I noticed a wizened up old guy with a cane and a dead serious look on his face hobbling across the walkway. It was Orval!! For a brief second I considered gunning my car and later claiming my foot slipped but thought better of it.

LETTER TELLS OF DEATH OF BLUFF CITY MAN IN 1865

The following letter was written in May, 1865, and tells of the death of the father of A. E. Adams of Bluff City, which occurred at New Orleans during the Civil War. The letter was published in the 10-23-1930 issue of *The Nevada County Picayune*. According to researchers, the father of A. E. Adams (“the Terrapin Man of Bluff City”) was Samuel Ebinezer Oliver Adams

At Home, Ouachita Co.,
May the 6th, 1865

Mrs. Adams,

Dear Madam, after my respects to you and family, it has become by painful duty to inform you of the death of your affectionate husband, who departed this life at New Orleans on the 15 of February, '65.

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The particulars of his death I am not able to give you as I was not permitted to be with him for some eight days previous to his death.

I can inform you that he was sick when we left the prison in Illinois and on our arrival at New Orleans, he was sent to the hospital and myself to the prison and I never saw him any more and was not able to get his pocket book nor anything that belonged to him, but it happened that I had his Testament with me when he was sent off, so I have kept [sic] it, and will send it by the bearer of this letter to you as that is all I am able to send you of his. I wish I could a got his knife and pocket book to send to you, but I could not get them or anything that belonged to him. When we parted he said he thought it doubtful whether he ever lived to see me again and told me if he never did, to write to you and let you know what had become of him and tell you that he was ready and willing to meet his Maker and if he never was permitted to meet you on this earth, that he expected to meet you in Heaven where sorrow and anguish were felt and feared no more.

So I will close by saying that myself and family is well and hope this finds you and your family the same.

I. H. Buchanan

This recipe from Mrs. Alice Lawrence of the Wildcat Rd. appeared in the *Picayune* in 1978.

SQUASH AND RICE CASSEROLE

1 stick oleo or butter
1 cup uncooked rice
3 cups diced squash
½ cup diced onion
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper
1 cup grated cheese
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1 ½ cans water
½ cup toasted bread crumbs

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Melt butter in baking dish. Spread in rice and stir. Add squash, onions, salt, pepper, and part of cheese. Mix mushroom soup and the water together. Mix all together. Spread the rest of cheese on top and bake covered about 1 hour. Remove from oven and sprinkle with bread crumbs. Serves six to eight people.