

A Crack in the Wall

In 1954, the Supreme Court ordered the South to desegregate its schools. Three years later, in Arkansas, the U.S. Army had to make it happen.

Forty years ago last May, the entire country had its eye on the Supreme Court. Just before 1 p.m. on the 17th, nine black-robed Justices filed into the huge chamber and took their places at the long mahogany bench. One Justice, recovering from a heart attack, had left his hospital bed for the occasion. It was, reporters said, the Court's most significant moment since 1857, when the Justices upheld slavery in the fateful case of a runaway slave named Dred Scott.

Before a hushed crowd, Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the Court's opinion in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. "To separate [Negro children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race," he said, "generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their hearts and minds in a way never to be undone." Segregated public schools, the Court ruled unanimously, were unconstitutional.

In one stroke, the Warren Court had challenged an entire way of life. In 17 states, mostly in the South, segregation was mandated by law—not just in

public schools, but in nearly all public facilities, from buses to bathrooms. From the time they were old enough for kindergarten, Southern blacks lived in a separate, and usually underfunded, world. Some black schools in rural areas consisted of little more than tar-paper shacks.

Despite the strength of the Court's ruling, white Southerners were determined to defend their ways. While integration began smoothly in places like Oklahoma, Kansas, and Maryland, the states of the Deep South put up a fight. South Carolina Governor James F. Byrnes proclaimed himself "shocked" at the decision, and vowed to withhold all state funding from the schools. Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia promised to "map a program to insure continued and permanent segregation of the races."

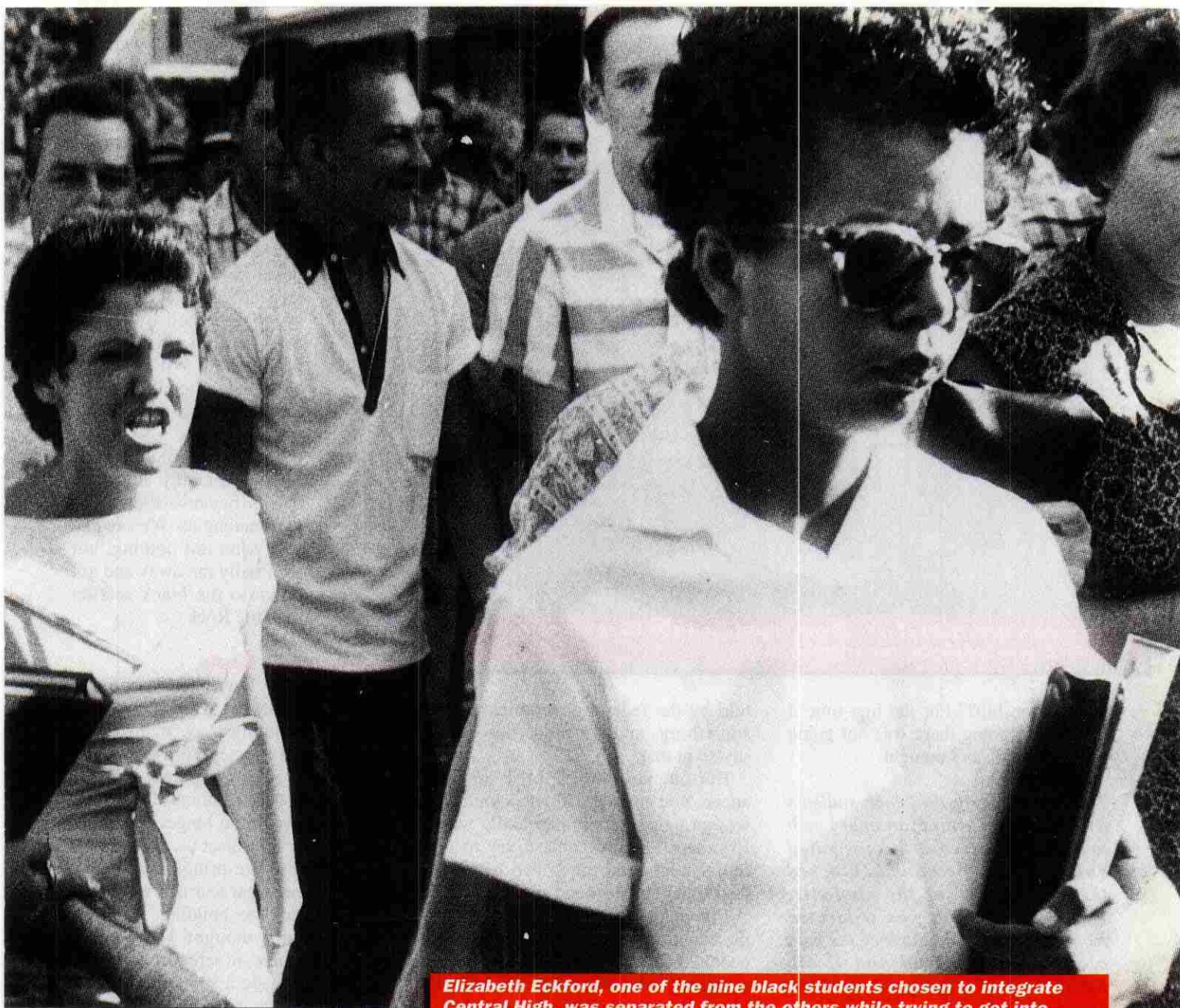
Private citizens proved just as militant. Segregationists began organizing in Ku Klux Klan cells and White Citizens' Councils, and their resistance spilled over into violence. In Clinton, Tennessee, it took hundreds of state troopers and seven M-41 tanks to get 12 black students admitted to the public school. In Mansfield,



AP/Wide World Photos

Texas, three black students withdrew after a white mob burst into the school with placards reading, "Dead coons are the best coons."

By 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower began to suspect that the South was not going to integrate on its own. That September, Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas proved him right. When nine black teenagers, backed by the local school board and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), tried to enter Little Rock's Central High School, Governor Faubus called out the National Guard to block their way. President Eisenhower, who privately thought the *Brown* decision had gone too far too fast, acted publicly to preserve the authority of the federal gov-



Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine black students chosen to integrate Central High, was separated from the others while trying to get into school. She faced the jeering mob alone.

ernment. Announcing that “anarchy would result” if he failed to enforce the decisions of the federal courts, he ordered the U.S. Army to integrate Central High.

The standoff in Little Rock stood out as the biggest North-South crisis since the Civil War. It signaled to the nation that segregationists would cling to their way of life with a fearsome tenacity. And it proved that the federal government would take them on in order to uphold the law.

For the children who tried to integrate Central High School, and those who helped them, that September was an unforgettable month. In the accounts that follow, excerpted from the civil rights documentary *Eyes On the Prize*, some of the participants in Little Rock’s drama retell the story

that changed their lives. —**Tod Olson**

Melba Patillo Beals and Ernest Green were two of the black students chosen to integrate Central High.

Melba Patillo Beals

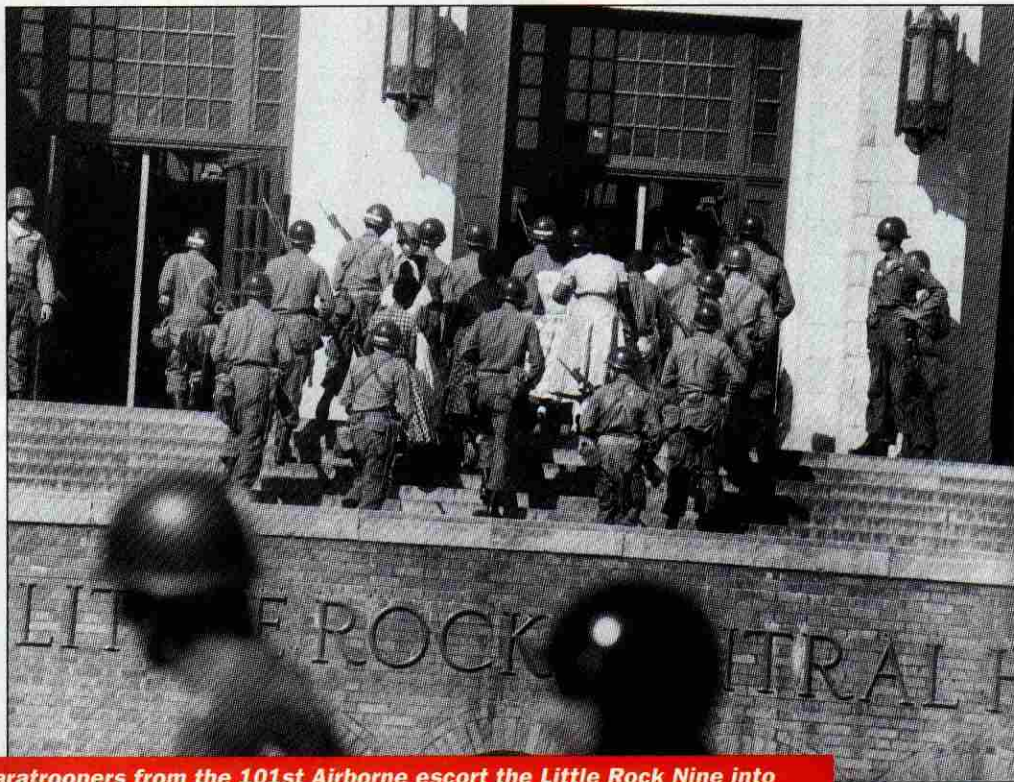
I wanted to go to Central High School because they had more privileges. They had more equipment, they had five floors of opportunities. I understood education before I understood anything else. From the time I was 2, my mother said, “You will go to college. Education is your key to survival.”

But my getting into Central High School was somewhat of an accident. I simply raised my hand one day when

they said, “Who of you lives in the area of Central High School?” That was two years before, in 1955. And they said, “Who had good grades?” and I had excellent grades. It was an accident of fate.

Ernest Green

In early August, the newspapers ran the names of the nine of us who were going to Central. And I’ll never forget what happened when I went to work the next day. This young guy, he was about my age, his folks were members of the country club where I worked as a towel boy, and he came up to me and said, “You seem like a nice fellow. Why is it you want to go to Central? Why do you want to destroy



Paratroopers from the 101st Airborne escort the Little Rock Nine into school, three weeks after the standoff began.

our relationship?" For the first time it hit me that going there was not going to be as simple as I thought.

The first morning the black students tried to enter Central, an angry mob and National Guard troops called out by Governor Faubus blocked their way. One of the students, Elizabeth Eckford, was separated from the rest and had to face the mob alone. Ernest Green and Craig Rains, a white student at Central, recalled the scene.

Ernest Green

We just made a cursory attempt to enter the school, but we were denied access. Elizabeth attempted to go through the Guards. It had to be the most frightening thing, because she had a crowd of a hundred, two hundred white people threatening to kill her. She had nobody. I mean, there was not a black face in sight. Nobody that she could turn to as a friend except this white woman, Grace Lorch, came out of the crowd and guided her through the mob and onto the bus and got her home safely.

Craig Rains

I don't remember when I first realized that the school was going to be integrated, but I do remember that what bothered me was that we were being

told by the federal government to do something, and we didn't have any say-so in that.

But outside the school, I saw the anger. You could cut it with a knife. It was an ugly attitude. Especially when Elizabeth Eckford came to try to get into school. And the crowd began to heckle her, and jeer and shout.

I thought, Well, I can't believe people would actually be this way to other people. I began to change from being somebody who was moderate, who, if I had my way, would have said, "Let's don't integrate, because it's the state's right to decide," to someone who felt a real compassion for these students.

As the mobs at Central became an international story, President Eisenhower met with Governor Faubus to try to work out a compromise. Faubus merely removed the National Guard and let the mob have its way.

On September 23, the nine black students, under police escort, managed to enter the school by a side door. James Hicks covered the story for the Amsterdam News, a black newspaper in New York City.

James Hicks

When we [black reporters] arrived at the school, there was a mob already out in front. The word got to the crowd

that the "niggers" were in the school. We were outnumbered, I guess about 500 to 1. Pretty soon, this one man, he was a one-armed man, he put his arm around my neck and the others started attacking me. But I was able to look up and see that whereas I was being held and my clothes torn off, Alex Wilson was being attacked by somebody with a brick in his hand. He hit Wilson up the side of his head with this brick. Wilson went down like a tree.

We started running, but there was hardly anywhere to run because they were surrounding us. We saw the FBI, who did nothing, but we finally ran away and got down to the black section of Little Rock.

Melba Patillo Beals

The first day I was able to enter Central High, what I felt inside was terrible, wrenching, awful fear. I'd only been in the school a couple of hours when it was apparent that the mob was just overrunning the school. The police would no longer fight their own in order to protect us. So we were all called into the principal's office, and there was great fear that we would not get out of this building. We were trapped. And I thought, OK, so I'm going to die here, in school.

Someone made a suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid, they could then get the rest out. And the police chief said, "Uh-huh, how are you going to choose? You're going to let them draw straws?" He said, "I'll take them out." And we were taken to the basement of this place.

We were put into two cars, and the man instructed the drivers, "Once you start driving, do not stop." This guy revved up the engine and he came up out of the bowels of this building, and as he came up, I could just see the hands reaching across the car, I could hear the yelling, I could see guns, and he was told not to stop. "If you hit somebody, you keep rolling, 'cause the kids are dead." He didn't hit anybody, but he certainly was forceful and aggressive in the way he exited the driveway.

He dropped me off at home. And I remember saying, "Thank you for the

ride," and I should've said, "Thank you for my life."

After the second failed attempt to get the students in, Eisenhower called out the 101st Airborne Division of the Army. With a small army protecting them, the Little Rock Nine went to school on September 25, three weeks after their first attempt.

Ernest Green

There was more military hardware than I'd ever seen. We went to school in an Army station wagon. There was a jeep in front, a jeep behind; they both had machine-gun mounts. Then when we got to the front of the school, the whole school was ringed with paratroopers and helicopters hovering around, and we marched up the steps with this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn. Walking up the steps that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I've ever had. I figured I had finally cracked it.

The school year finally got under way, with U.S. Army soldiers patrolling the halls of Central High to protect the black students.

Melba Patillo Beals

The troops were wonderful. They were attentive, they were caring. [But] they couldn't be with us everywhere. We'd be showering in gym and someone would turn your shower into

scalding. You'd be walking out to the volleyball court and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. I have scars from that.

After a while, I started saying to myself, Am I less than human? Why did they do this to me? And so you go through stages even as a child. First you're in pain, then you're angry, then you try to fight back, and then you just don't care. And then you just mellow out and you just realize that survival is day to day, and you start to understand your own ability to cope no matter what.

Ernest Green

For a couple of weeks there had been a number of white kids following us, calling us niggers. "Nigger, nigger, nigger," one right after another. Minniejean Brown was in the lunch line with me and there was this white kid, a fellow who was much shorter than Minnie. He reminded me of a small dog, yelping at somebody's leg. Minnie had just picked up her chili. And before I could even say, "Minnie, why don't you just tell him to shut up," Minnie had taken this chili, dumped it on this dude's head. There was just absolute silence in the place. And then the help, all black, broke into applause. And the other white kids there didn't know what to do. It was a good feeling

to see that happen, to be able to let them know that we were capable of taking care of ourselves.

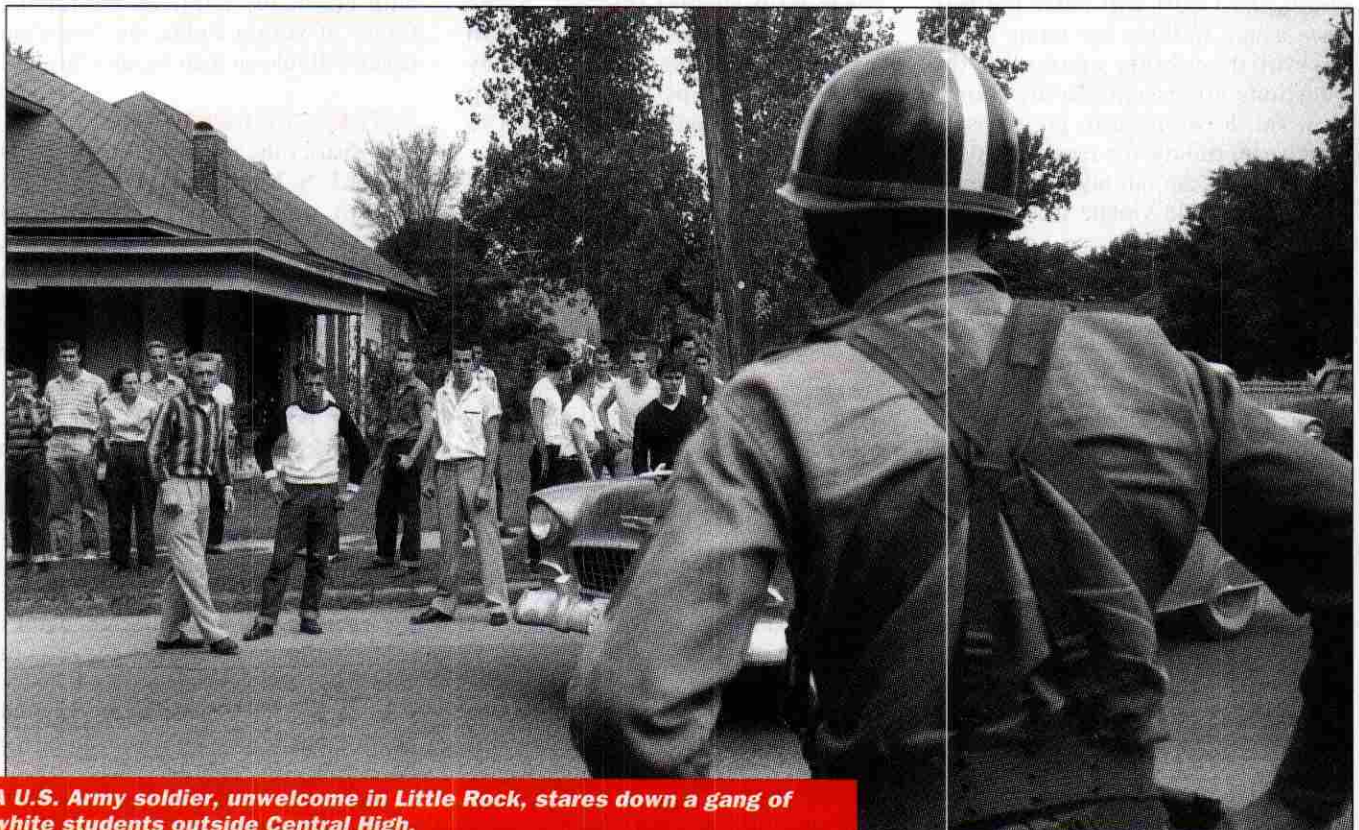
Minniejean Brown was expelled from Central High for the chili incident.

Ernest Green

Graduation was the end of May. I had been there nine months and had thought that all I needed to do was graduate, just get out of there so it would be impossible for white people to say that nobody black had ever graduated from Central High.

I figured that all I had to do was walk across that stage, which looked the length of a football field. I'm sure it was very small, but it looked very imposing. I kept telling myself I just can't trip, with all those cameras watching me. But I knew that once I got as far as that principal and received that diploma, that I had cracked the wall.

There were a lot of claps from the students. They talked about who had received scholarships, who was an honor student, and all that as they called the names off. When they called my name there was nothing, just the name, and there was this eerie silence. Nobody clapped. But I figured they didn't have to. Because after I got that diploma, that was it. I had accomplished what I had come for. ■



Burt Glimm/Magnum Photos

A U.S. Army soldier, unwelcome in Little Rock, stares down a gang of white students outside Central High.

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