

AMERICAN DECADES: PRIMARY SOURCES SAMPLE ENTRY

Note: This would be included in *American Decades 1950-1959: Primary Source Documents*, chapter on Education.

"She Walked Alone"

- **Document Type:** Excerpt from a memoir
- **Publication Date:** 1962
- **Author:** Daisy Bates
- **Source:** Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962.

NOTES ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daisy Bates was born in 1914 in Huttig, Arkansas, where she attended segregated public schools. In 1952 Bates became president of the Arkansas branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She is most famous for serving as an advocate for the Little Rock Nine--the black students who entered all-white Central High in 1957. White supremacists tried to intimidate Bates by burning crosses on her lawn and hurling firebombs at her home. She continued to play an active role in community organizations until her death in 1999.

INTRODUCTION

The mid-1900s was a period of sweeping changes in American history, as civil rights activists worked toward equality for blacks. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was an important move toward equality. That ruling found school segregation (separate schools for blacks and whites) unconstitutional, paving the way for desegregation throughout society.

Many people, especially in the southern United States, opposed the Brown ruling and tried to prevent desegregation from happening. The vast majority of southern congressional representatives and senators signed the "Southern Manifesto," which urged white southerners to "resist forced integration by any lawful means." Some state governments declared the *Brown* ruling invalid, imposed new, stricter segregation laws and penalized schools that tried to desegregate. Violence against blacks in the South rose, as did membership in the Ku Klux Klan and other violent, racist, organizations.

The result of all this were struggles at one southern school after another. Mobs of angry whites—often helped by the police and public officials—would try to keep black children from attending all-white schools. The 1957 Little Rock school desegregation showdown was the nation's most closely watched.

Events in Little Rock

On September 3, 1957, nine black students (called the "Little Rock Nine") were scheduled to begin classes at all-white Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas. The night before, Arkansas' segregationist governor Orville Faubus declared on TV that it would "not be possible to restore or to maintain order . . . if forcible integration is carried out tomorrow." He claimed that "blood will run in the streets if Negro pupils should attempt to enter Central High School." Faubus ordered 250 members of the Arkansas National Guard to surround the school, supposedly to keep the peace, but really to keep the Little Rock Nine out.

With the assistance of Daisy Bates and NAACP lawyers, on September 3, the students obtained a federal court order granting them admission to the school. The next morning, they made their first attempt to enter Central High. National Guardsmen and an obscenity-screaming mob turned them away. Not until September 23, after President Eisenhower had ordered the National Guardsmen removed, were the children able to enter the school. Even then the police later removed them from the school, to protect them from an angry mob outside. Eisenhower then sent in troops from the Army to protect the black students. This enabled them to attend school for the rest of the year, but did not prevent them from being abused physically and verbally by their classmates in an attempt to drive them out.

SIGNIFICANCE

"She Walked Alone" illustrates the difficulty of implementing the *Brown* decision. Events in Little Rock started a chain reaction. When Daisy Bates led the Little Rock Nine through jeering crowds, and when Elizabeth Eckford faced the mob alone, television cameras and newspaper reporters captured the action for the world to see. The publicity created pressure on public officials to protect these youngsters and spurred on the long process of school integration. In fact, desegregation was a long, painful process. In 1968, only 32 percent of black school children in the South were attending desegregated schools; by 1972 that percentage had risen to 46.

Many people were surprised to see the violence in Little Rock, which had previously seemed to have good race relations. One explanation is that protesters came from throughout the South. Eyewitnesses saw many cars with out-of-state license plates. There was definitely strong local opposition to desegregation, however. In 1958, the entire Little Rock school district was shut down to prevent it from being integrated. It was not until 1959 that Little Rock schools reopened and began accepting students of all races.

As Bates wrote in her memoir: "Events in history occur when the time has ripened for them, but they need a spark. Little Rock was the spark at that stage of the struggle of the American Negro for justice."

PRIMARY DOCUMENT: "She Walked Alone"

In this excerpt, Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, vividly describes her experience of walking alone into Central High on the morning of September 4, 1957. Since Eckford's home did not have a phone, she had been unaware that Daisy Bates and the NAACP lawyers had

planned for all nine students to meet several blocks from the school ahead of time. The other eight students of the Little Rock Nine had arrived at the school in a group, with NAACP escorts, but Elizabeth walked in alone.

Elizabeth, whose dignity and control in the face of jeering mobsters had been filmed by television cameras and recorded in pictures flashed to newspapers over the world, had overnight become a national heroine. During the next few days, newspaper reporters besieged her home, wanting to talk to her. The first day that her parents agreed she might come out of seclusion, she came to my house where the reporters awaited her. Elizabeth was very quiet, speaking only when spoken to. I took her to my bedroom to talk before I let the reporters see her. I asked how she felt now. Suddenly all her pent-up emotion flared.

"Why am I here?" she said, turning blazing eyes on me. "Why are you so interested in my welfare now? You didn't care enough to notify me of the change of plans—"

I walked over and reached out to her. Before she turned her back on me, I saw tears gathering in her eyes. My heart was breaking for this young girl who stood there trying to stifle her sobs. How could I explain that frantic early morning when at three o'clock my mind had gone on strike?

In the ensuing weeks Elizabeth took part in all the activities of the nine—press conferences, attendance at court, studying with professors at nearby Philander Smith College. She was present, that is, but never really a part of things. The hurt had been too deep.

On the two nights she stayed at my home I was awakened by the screams in her sleep, as she relived in her dreams the terrifying mob scenes at Central. The only times Elizabeth showed real excitement were when Thurgood Marshall met the children and explained the meaning of what had happened in court. As he talked, she would listen raptly, a faint smile on her face. It was obvious he was her hero.

Little by little Elizabeth came out of her shell. Up to now she had never talked about what happened to her at Central. Once when we were alone in the downstairs recreation room of my house, I asked her simply, "Elizabeth, do you think you can talk about it now?"

She remained quiet for a long time. Then she began to speak.

"You remember the day before we were to go in, we met Superintendent Blossom at the school board office. He told us what the mob might say and do but he never told us we wouldn't have any protection. He told our parents not to come because he wouldn't be able to protect the children if they did.

"That night I was so excited I couldn't sleep. The next morning I was about the first one up. While I was pressing my black and white dress—I had made it to wear on the first day of school—my little brother turned on the TV set. They started telling about a large crowd gathered at the school. The man on TV said he wondered if we were going to show up that morning. Mother called from the kitchen, where she was fixing breakfast, 'Turn that TV off!' She was so upset and worried. I wanted to comfort her, so I said, 'Mother, don't worry.'

"Dad was walking back and forth, from room to room, with a sad statement. He was chewing on his pipe and he had a cigar in his hand, but he didn't light either one. It would have been funny, only he was so nervous.

"Before I left home Mother called us into the living-room. She said we should have a word of prayer. Then I caught the bus and got off a block from the school. I saw a large crowd of people standing across the street from the soldiers guarding Central. As I walked on, the crowd suddenly got very quiet. Superintendent Blossom had told us to enter by the front door. I looked at all the people and thought, 'Maybe I will be safer if I walk down the block to the front entrance behind the guards.'

"At the corner I tried to pass through the long line of guards around the school so as to enter the grounds behind them. One of the guards pointed across the street. So I pointed in the same direction and asked whether he meant for me to cross the street and walk down. He nodded 'yes.' So, I walked across the street conscious of the crowd that stood there, but they moved away from me.

"For a moment all I could hear was the shuffling of their feet. Then someone shouted, 'Here she comes, get ready!' I moved away from the crowd on the sidewalk and into the street. If the mob came at me I could then cross back over so the guards could protect me.

"The crowd moved in closer and began to follow me, calling me names. I still wasn't afraid. Just a little bit nervous. Then my knees started to shake all of a sudden and I wondered whether I could make it to the center entrance a block away. It was the longest block I ever walked in my whole life.

"Even so, I still wasn't too scared because all the time I kept thinking that the guards would protect me.

"When I got right in front of the school, I went up to a guard again. But this time he just looked straight ahead and didn't move to let me pass. I didn't know what to do. Then I looked and saw that the path leading to the front entrance was a little further ahead. So I walked until I was right in front of the path to the front door.

"I stood looking at the school—it looked so big! Just then the guards let some white students go through.

"The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in. He too didn't move. When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his bayonet and then the other guards closed in and they raised their bayonets.

"They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me.

"They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling, 'Lynch her! Lynch her!'

"I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob—someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.

"They came closer, shouting, 'No nigger bitch is going to get in our school. Get out of here!'

"I turned back to the guards but their faces told me I wouldn't get help from them. Then I looked down the block and saw a bench at the bus stop. I thought, 'If I can only get there I will be safe.' I don't know why the bench seemed a safe place to me, but I started walking toward it. I tried to close my mind to what they were shouting, and kept saying to myself, 'If I can only make it to the bench I will be safe.'

"When I finally got there, I don't think I could have gone another step. I sat down and the mob crowded up and began shouting all over again. Someone hollered, 'Drag her over to this tree! Let's take care of the nigger.' Just then a white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me and patted my shoulder. He raised my chin and said, 'Don't let them see you cry.'

"Then, a white lady—she was very nice—she came over to me on the bench. She spoke to me but I don't remember now what she said. She put me on the bus and sat next to me. She asked me my name and tried to talk to me but I don't think I answered. I can't remember much about the bus ride, but the next thing I remember I was standing in front of the School for the Blind, where Mother works.

"I thought, 'Maybe she isn't here. But she has to be here!' So I ran upstairs, and I think some teachers tried to talk to me, but I kept running until I reached Mother's classroom.

"Mother was standing at the window with her head bowed, but she must have sensed I was there because she turned around. She looked as if she had been crying, and I wanted to tell her I was all right. But I couldn't speak. She put her arms around me and I cried."

FURTHER RESOURCES

Books:

African Americans: Voices of Triumph: Perseverance. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1993.

Bates, Daisy. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir.* New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962.

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Kluger, Richard. *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality.* New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

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Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965.* New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Periodicals:

Martin, Douglas. "Daisy Bates, Civil Rights Leader, Dies at 84." *The New York Times.* November 5, 1999: B11.

Molotsky, Irvin. "U.S. Honors 9 Civil Rights Heroes, and Memory of 10th." *The New York Times*. November 10, 1999: A16.

Videocassettes:

"Fighting Back 1957–1962." *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*. Boston: Blackside, Inc., 1986.

Websites:

"The Little Rock Nine." *Little Rock Central High*. [Online]
http://www.centralhigh57.org/The_Little_Rock_Nine.html (accessed August 28, 2001).

"The 1957-58 School Year." *Little Rock Central High*. [Online]
<http://www.centralhigh57.org/1957-58.htm> (accessed August 28, 2001).

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