

Youngest Combatants of the Second Civil War: Black Children on the Front Lines of Public School Desegregation

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In early 1965, eight-year-old Sheyann Webb and nine-year-old Rachel West were among the many African Americans in the volunteer army that battled, in its nonviolent way, for black adults' voting rights in Selma, Alabama. The violence visited upon that nonviolent army proved instrumental in generating massive support, in northern public opinion and in the U.S. Congress, for passage later that year of the Voting Rights Act. The events of 1965 punctuated a decade of change in traditional southern ways. Much remained undone, and the Civil Rights Movement persisted, but by then Jim Crow was very much on the defensive. The legal and constitutional basis of segregation and disfranchisement was coming to an end.

Much has been said and written of the roles of college-age black youth in the sit-ins of the 1960s, in desegregating higher education, and in pushing for the right to vote. Even younger were the black southerners without whom no elementary or secondary school in the region could have been desegregated. This essay explores the experiences of those youngest warriors for progressive change on the racial front during the decade and more after the U.S. Supreme Court declared in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the Fourteenth amendment did not permit a state or local government to segregate its public schools. Black participants in desegregation themselves have referred to their engagement in a war, as when one of the Little Rock Nine from 1957–1958 terms her memoir *Warriors Don't Cry*.

This essay revisits the actions—and the memories of those times—of a small sample of people who, as elementary or high school students, participated in the events of the 1950s and 1960s that brought to an end the absolute segregation that characterized public schooling in the South before 1954. In North Carolina, Josephine Boyd switched in 1957 from all-black Dudley High School to all-white Greensboro High School, where she completed her senior year and graduated in 1958, the first black graduate of a white high school in that state. In Virginia, Betty Kilby won a federal court ruling that led her to being in the cohort of black students to enroll in early 1958 in the white high school (the only high school) in Warren County, and she tells of her often harrowing experiences between then and

her graduation in 1963. In September 1965, in a Deep South variant of the desegregation story, three members of the Carter family enrolled in the white elementary school, and four others in the white high school, in Sunflower County, Mississippi. This essay's final section recounts the march toward desegregation, through three iterations, in Hyde County, North Carolina, beginning on a token basis in 1965, changing in 1968 in a way designed to obliterate the black schools, and finally—after a student boycott of the schools that lasted an entire year—reaching a version of racial integration that the black community as well as the white community could find effective and acceptable. Much of the time in these pages, the young people tell their own stories, as they responded to new possibilities and challenges in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The Second Civil War

Historians sometimes speak of a “Second Reconstruction,” as the federal government took action, especially in the 1960s, to renovate the racial landscape across the American South. We could use the notion of a “Second Reconstruction” as preceded by a “Second Civil War”—like the first, a century earlier, a confrontation related to region, race, and power—when southern states and the federal government collided over racial policies, most of all whether racial segregation would persist in public elementary and secondary schools. First intimations of this “Second Civil War” came in 1948, when the Dixicrats, break-away Democrats from the Deep South, sought to unseat the incumbent president, Harry S. Truman, a Democrat who had initiated various challenges to the continued maintenance of white supremacy in American legal, political, and economic life (though not yet addressing segregation in elementary or secondary schools—that came late in his second term). The struggle became more determined and widespread after 1954, when the Supreme Court declared racial segregation in public education to violate the equal protection clause, the key provision of one of the constitutional amendments of the first Reconstruction.

The similarities between the two episodes of sectional strife and constitutional crisis—those of the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries—are many. The effort to break up the national Democratic Party in 1948 echoed the events of 1860. Central to both periods were political efforts to maintain white supremacy—in one case, represented by slavery, in the other, the various faces of Jim Crow segregation and disfranchisement. The Rebel battle flag was an icon of both periods, and the rhetoric of state rights swirled about the controversy at both times. In neither century did mainstream public opinion in the North at the outset seek a transformation of southern patterns, but in both cases a constitutional struggle led to ever more aggressive efforts at change, and in both periods

tremendous change came, though in each century the degree of change remained contested and in doubt.

White southern political and cultural leaders involved in the twentieth-century episode were often acutely conscious of what they understood of the earlier time. Expressed by white southerners in the 1950s were fears of a return to what earlier historians had depicted as black dominance and white subjugation in the Reconstruction South—and a firm resolve to forestall a return of such conditions. Regardless, at both times many—even most—white southerners were committed to retaining their social privileges, their economic dominance, and their political monopoly.

Notably different, however, were the social identities of the main combatants on the frontlines of change. The battling in the 1950s and 1960s took place in many forms and venues, from litigation in courtrooms to physical assaults along back roads, but most of the combatants were nominally civilians. On both sides, the Civil War struggle of the 1860s had involved battalions of men in uniform—at first, only white men even on the Union side. By sharp contrast, the main combatants on the frontlines of progressive racial change in the decade after *Brown v. Board of Education* were boys and girls, black children, whether seventeen years old, thirteen, or six.

In Louisiana in 1960, as the federal judiciary grew more active on the desegregation front, the legislature enacted bill after bill designed to thwart all efforts at integrating education, and it appeared for a time that public schools might be shut down rather than permit any black enrollment at white schools. U.S. district judge Skelly Wright, who pushed intrepidly ahead with efforts to achieve compliance with the Supreme Court's rulings, mused that the aftermath of *Brown* looked like “the Civil War over again in legal dress.” When the legislature considered anti-desegregation legislation, watching the proceedings were contending groups one of which waved American flags, the other Confederate symbols. A legion of legislators took turns recounting their grandfathers' service in the Confederate military a century before. And when the first black students approached their new white schools in New Orleans in November 1960, they found themselves heckled by crowds of whites who, to the tune of “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” sang “Glory, glory segregation.”

And who were these child warriors, these pioneering black students in Louisiana, these youngest combatants in the “Second Civil War”? Six-year-old Ruby Bridges, born the year the *Brown* decision was handed down, entered the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, and three other six-year-old girls—Tessie Prevost, Gail Etienne, and Leona Tate—enrolled at nearby McDonogh 19 Elementary School. In a stunning depiction for *Look Magazine*, painter Norman Rockwell rendered Ruby Bridges for a national audience—a tiny

dark figure flanked, front and back, by the torsos of four white federal marshals—as she marched off to begin her first day of school, and in fact every day of school that year, past the hecklers. Most white students boycotted her school, and little Ruby worked alone with her teacher that first year. At McDonogh 19, the boycott was absolute, broken only when two white brothers attended for three days in January, and then other whites convinced their father’s employer to let him go, and their landlady evicted the family. All four black pioneers of school desegregation in Louisiana went on to graduate from high school in 1972, and their high school experience was more or less desegregated, but they continued even there to be harassed as “the ones who started it all.”

Across the former Confederacy, and often in the Border South as well, the black pioneers entered a hostile world when they pioneered desegregation of the public schools. For the children and their parents, getting past the administrative hurdles of petitioning for a transfer to a white school was no small feat. For the youngsters in particular, getting past the white crowds of adults and students blocking access to a school was dangerous business. Far less visible from outside the schools was the ostracism, the harassment, and the physical danger that being in the alien school almost always brought, and pressures on their parents and communities often compounded the challenge. The far more safe and nurturing segregated school they had each left supplied a constant contrast as they went out to wage a gentle war for desegregation. Their new, white classmates and teachers had little or no experience encountering African Americans on equal terms, and whites who might be inclined to be friendly and receptive could usually be cowed into abandoning their apostasy. Single-race schools had no need of separate “white” and “colored” water fountains, restrooms, or lunchrooms; when black students used the “white” facilities in their new schools, their acts were almost universally seen as compounding the affront to southern custom that the students’ very presence embodied.

Whether age six or sixteen, students—black and white—carried much of the emotional freight of their novel encounter. In one way or another, there was much pain and fear on both sides—those who, as whites, felt intruded upon, and those perceived as intruders. But the black students were few in number, sometimes utterly alone, as they entered the enemy camp. If a school was termed “desegregated” by virtue of their presence in it, it nonetheless continued to be a white school, numerically dominated by whites, controlled by whites, claimed by whites as their own, even if someone had forced them to permit a black child to attend too.

Josephine Boyd, Greensboro, North Carolina

North Carolina responded to *Brown v. Board* not by directing the closure of public schools rather than permit any desegregation (as the Virginia legislature, for one, did), but in permitting a local referendum on the matter and, if desegregation were to proceed at all, putting white officials in charge of screening individual black students' requests for transfer to white schools. In mid-1957, three years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and after two years of consultation and planning, three municipalities in North Carolina determined to permit token desegregation of their previously nonblack public schools. Charlotte was one, Winston-Salem another, and Greensboro the third. Rather than trying to achieve desegregation, the school boards were trying to contain it, to deflect federal court orders that might result in far more substantial change. In each of the three cities, the handful (more or less) of black students who would be pioneering the desegregation of a white school had each requested the transfer; lived closer to the white school than to the black school they would otherwise be attending; and displayed a strong academic performance.

In Charlotte, four black students enrolled at white schools in September 1957—among the forty who had requested transfers; most such requests had been denied. Fifteen-year-old Dorothy Counts had a trying experience at Harding High School. As she made her way to the school grounds, a white woman implored a group of boys, “It’s up to you to keep her out,” and directed a group of girls, “Spit on her, girls, spit on her.” She was not kept out that day, but she was spat on. Her teachers ignored her. When she went to the cafeteria for lunch that first day, boys threw trash on her plate. She went outdoors, where a miracle seemed to happen, as she was befriended by two white girls; but they drew back the next day when they were harassed by their white classmates. Meantime, threatening phone calls reached the family at home. At school she was jostled, things were thrown at her, together with slurs and threats, and her locker was ransacked. After four days of this and other harassment—for example, on the fourth day, when her brother drove to the school to pick her up, the rear windshield in the car was smashed as he waited for her—her father, a professor at nearby Johnson C. Smith University, called a press conference, where he explained:

It is with compassion for our native land and love for our daughter Dorothy that we withdraw her as a student at Harding High School. As long as we felt she could be protected from bodily injury and insults within the school’s walls and upon the school premises, we were willing to grant her desire to study at Harding.

But “a continuous stream of abuses” had, he observed, left the family no choice. She left Charlotte for Pennsylvania, where she attended an integrated school in

Philadelphia. Harding High School reverted to all-white. She had chosen to transfer, but her classmates forced her withdrawal—the boys did, in the end, as the woman had implored them, “keep her out.”

As for the other three, Gus Roberts enrolled at Central High School; his sister, seventh-grader Girvaud Roberts, at Piedmont Junior High School; and Delores Huntley at Alexander Graham Junior High School. In contrast to Dorothy Counts’s experience, actions taken by school officials helped make matters relatively uneventful at those three schools, but danger and tension persisted throughout the year. Central High School principal Ed Sanders choreographed the first day of school, walked Gus Roberts through the geography of his new school, saw to it that distances from one classroom to another would be short, kept an eye out for him, and defused a tense moment on the second day. Gus Roberts had a far easier time than Dorothy Counts did, but it took a lot of luck, a lot of pluck on his part, and careful preparation and constant vigilance by a receptive and assertive school leader.

The number of black students attending white schools in Charlotte did not grow in the next year or two—by 1959–1960, the number had dropped to one—nor did an increase take place in the number of schools that, having been “desegregated,” continued to enroll black students. Charlotte revealed patterns that held across much of the South. Pioneering the desegregation of a school carried no guarantee of either safety or success, and no certainty that a desegregated school would stay desegregated, let alone become more so. Battles might be won or lost, either way skirmishes continued, and the campaign’s outcome remained in considerable doubt. Often, children’s requests for transfer were denied; sometimes, those whose requests were accepted were driven out; and their experience deterred others from even requesting to transfer. Pioneering the desegregation of a white school, volunteering for strife, was no child’s game, though some child warriors survived and even prevailed.

In Greensboro in mid-1957, Josephine Ophelia Boyd was a seventeen-year-old rising senior who had expected to finish out her high school education at all-black Dudley High School. Such was not to be. Rather she would run the experiment as a pioneer of high school desegregation in her city.

She brought many considerations to her role. Festering were memories of a white policeman beating her father with impunity, and a white driver hitting her grandfather and leaving him disabled beside the road. Resonating were recollections of the time she tried, and failed, to discern the distinct color of “colored” water in the fountains set aside for people of her racial identity; of how she and her family and neighbors had to go to Winston-Salem to reach a swimming pool that, as black citizens, they could use; and of riding a bus past white schools to reach her assigned, more distant, black school. And of constant use to her in her

year of desegregating Greensboro High School were lessons, the survival skills, that she had learned at home, at church, and at her black schools regarding seeking an education, handling conflict, and navigating her way in a segregated world. Church songs calmed her as she made her way from one classroom to another, or when classmates threw catsup at her in the cafeteria or dropped eggs on her from above—“We’ve Come This Far by Faith”; “He Knows Just How Much We Can Bear”: and “The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow.”

The decision to attend Greensboro High brought all kinds of ancillary costs. There were the economic reprisals—her father lost his snack bar; her mother her job; her brothers their yard work jobs; she her babysitting job. There were other costs to the family—the malicious killing of favorite pets, the harassing phone calls at home. And always there was the loss of her senior year at Dudley High, complete with supportive teachers, good friends, senior prom, and a rich range of extracurricular roles and activities.

Many years later, she described her first day at her new high school:

As I went to my classes, using the walkway leading from one building to the next, there was a rainfall of eggs Most of them landed on me. . . . Most of the teachers barely acknowledged my presence. . . . Some students yelled, “You know we don’t want you here. Go back to your own school. This is our school.”

Back home, she learned from the newspapers and television news that, in Charlotte, Dorothy Counts had gone to her new school alone, too, and had met with a similar reception.

Unlike Dorothy Counts, Josephine Boyd survived her year in hostile territory. Making a huge difference were four white female classmates—Ginger Parker, Julia Adams, Kitty Groves, and an exchange student from Germany, Monika Engelken, all of whom maintained the friendship despite pressure from white classmates, church members, and school personnel. In November, she and other black students involved in school desegregation that year were invited to the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and in April she attended the second Youth March for Integrated Schools, led by A. Philip Randolph in Washington, D.C. At the end of the year, the *Greensboro Daily News* reported that 482 students had received diplomas, among them Josephine Ophelia Boyd, “the first Negro ever graduated from a previously all-white public school in North Carolina.”

Betty Ann Kilby, Warren County, Virginia

Betty Ann Kilby was nine years old when the *Brown* decision was handed down. Her two older siblings were ten-year-old John and twelve-year-old James. All were in elementary school, and they continued to attend a black school near their home in western Virginia through the seventh grade. When each graduated from the elementary school, Warren County still had only one high school, and black students could not enroll there. The state of Virginia had responded to the decisions in *Brown* by enacting Massive Resistance legislation, according to which any school that desegregated would be immediately shut down. In accordance with a companion law, Betty's father, James Wilson Kilby, signed a "pupil placement" form in 1956 as James was finishing the seventh grade, so young James could attend the all-black Manassas Regional High School (the only option made available on the form), located sixty miles away in Prince William County and requiring that James board there and return home only on weekends.

The following year, John finished grade seven, and Mr. Kilby insisted that the Johnson-Williams school in Berryville, thirty miles away, be made an option on the pupil placement form. The days would be long, but his children would return home each night. So the two boys began attending the Berryville school, and Betty figured she would begin attending that school with her brothers in 1958. That did not happen.

In spring 1958, thirteen-year-old Betty Kilby brought her pupil placement form home for her father to sign. He scratched out the only options listed, the Manassas school and the Berryville school, and wrote in "Warren County High School." Her teacher rejected the form filled out in that fashion; she rejected Mr. Kilby's second version with the same content; and someone from the school board phoned him at home after he did the same thing a third time. Years later, Betty recalled the exasperated words he spoke into the phone that evening in May 1958:

This is Kilby, yes I did. Your form asked where I wanted to send Betty to high school. Well in 1956 I sent my son James to Manassas to the boarding school. Sixty miles away was too far even if it is only a weekly commute, and besides, James was too young to be away from home. He was just a little shy farm boy that the big boys picked on. Manassas didn't work for Jimmy or me. In 1957, I sent James and John to Berryville. Berryville was a 60 miles a day trip with the school bus picking my sons up at 6 AM and sometimes they didn't return until 7 or 7:30 PM. My boys had to walk half a mile to meet the "colored bus," while the bus carrying white kids drove past my boys walking. . . . I wasn't satisfied with that option either. . . . I will not subject my kids to this kind of environment any more. You have the form. I wrote in my option of Warren County High School.

Later that evening, she heard him tell her mother, “Catherine, get ready for a fight because Betty ain’t going to Manassas or Berryville, she is going to Warren County High School. Don’t you remember what Rev. Frank said about separate not being equal? Besides, we are not alone. John Jackson is going to turn in a form tomorrow to send his daughter Barbara to WCHS too.”

On behalf of his daughter Betty, so she could go to school in her home county, Mr. Kilby went to court. Much of the summer was taken up with action in federal district court in Harrisonburg, Virginia. A story in the paper that summer that led to a phone conversation with Barbara that, as Betty remembered it years later, went like this:

Barbara asked, “Do you think our parents will send just the two of us to WCHS since we are the only two . . . ?” I told her my Daddy really wanted me to go to WCHS real bad and that if he had the chance he would make me go even if it meant that I went by myself. We read excerpts from the article hoping that we would all be denied so the two of us wouldn’t have to go to WCHS.

As for white residents of the county, they began to ponder the possibilities. One white woman mused, “I am in favor of separate schools but the main concern now is to keep the schools open.” On that score, she and her white neighbors had no more say than did the Kilby family. If the federal court ordered desegregation of Warren County High School, the governor would follow the legislature’s mandate and close the school.

But the schools of Warren County did open for the 1958–1959 year, and most students returned to classes. A few children could not. James, John, and Betty Kilby had no school to go to, nor did Barbara Jackson, or some eighteen other black youngsters whose parents were taking legal action to gain admission to the local high school. Betty Kilby later remembered her sadness:

I cried when the bus went past our house and didn’t stop. I called Barbara and we cried together. I told Barbara, “I can’t believe that my Daddy wouldn’t let me go to school. He would whip my butt if I didn’t make good grades, now he is going to make me get behind in my grades.”

Events in September came in quick succession. The federal court ruled that Warren County could not, solely on the basis of their race, deny black students admission to the county’s only high school. The state appealed the ruling. The appeals court refused to grant a stay of the district court order while the appeals process unfolded. Classes were suspended while the black youngsters made the

rounds of the school board office and the county courthouse to register for school. Betty Kilby later wrote, “Just as we were instructed, we acted as though we were small soldiers, standing tall, proud and dignified with no talking or complaining.” Meanwhile, the high school senior class president observed of his schoolmates that, left to their own devices, “I believe that most of us would integrate rather than see the school closed.” He continued: “We believe we could ignore” any black classmates “and go on as we always have.”

Betty began having the same bad dream, over and over:

I was going to school but I was lost. I couldn't find my classrooms, I couldn't find my class schedule and couldn't find my locker. I would end up running for the bus and I missed the bus, too. I would wake up feeling stupid because I wasn't in school. Integration, segregation, all I wanted was an education.

The desegregation order led directly to the governor's closing Warren County High School. Within weeks, arrangements had been made to supply schooling for the county's white youngsters. In the world of white Warren County, the teachers kept teaching, and the students kept going to school, just in different places, such as white churches. Arrangements for the twenty-two black youngsters took longer. As of December 11, they began living and attending school in Washington, D.C., where schools had been desegregated soon after the *Brown* decisions. As for Betty Kilby, exiled far from home, she says “I cried myself to sleep most nights.”

On January 19, the Virginia Supreme Court ruled that, under the state constitution, the state could not selectively close the schools, and that same day a federal court ruled that the closure violated the Fourteenth Amendment. Court wrangling continued, but on February 10, U.S. district judge John Paul ordered that Warren County High School be re-opened on February 18, this time on a desegregated basis. It was time for the Kilby children and the other plaintiffs in Betty Kilby's lawsuit to come home. She says, “We had almost forgot that we were soldiers in the midst of war.”

On the morning of February 18, Betty and her brothers headed off for classes at the Warren County High School. As they prepared to leave the house, “Momma kissed us and told the boys, ‘You stay close to your sister, you hear me.’ I could hear the fear in Momma's voice.” At the school, “a big fat white woman” yelled, “We gonna kill all you little Niggers.” Betty started reciting the 23rd Psalm to herself. In the Kilby family, February 18 divided two epochs. Many years later, as Betty says, “Daddy talked about the day that we entered Warren County

High School. Daddy admitted that he was scared as all of us children, but he couldn't show his fear."

Inside the school, only black students took classes that first day, or at any subsequent time through the end of the school year. No white student ever stepped inside the school that winter or spring. Terror outside the school began to contrast with serene times inside. There were almost as many white teachers as black students, Betty later recounted, though they "were no more accustomed to teaching Negroes" than

we were accustomed to learning from white teachers. The three-story building was beautiful and huge. . . . I felt safer in this building than I felt at home with the gunshots constantly being fired at the house, crosses burned in the yard, bloody sheet on the mailbox, the farm animals mutilated and the constant threatening phone calls.

But then, says Betty, "the summer ended and it was time to put on our armor and become little soldiers." The new school year, 1958–1959, was going to be very different, as white students returned to the high school: "Our safe environment was no longer safe." The few black students were "all spread out"; Betty had three black classmates in the eighth grade, but "I was the only Negro in most of my classes." From the start of the new year, "We knew that it was not safe to walk the halls alone, take the short cut through the auditorium from one side of the building to the other side . . . or even go to the restroom alone." Coached by adults and guided by their own experience, the black students learned "not to trust anyone except each other. We studied each other's schedules to team-up as much as possible to protect each other." And they shared information about ominous students and teachers.

The teenager had a strategy, a world view, that kept her generally serene through it all. As she later explained:

Some of my classmates stared, others made ugly faces and some were downright mean and nasty. When I encountered the mean and nasty ones, I would say to myself, "I am a child of God full of grace and beauty, with God on my side, I have nothing to fear." In the more critical times, I would make a fist and pretend that God was holding my hand. The feeling of God holding my hand made me smile. One day, as most days, someone called me a Nigger, this white girl saw me clench my fist, smile and walk away. Her curiosity got the best of her and she wanted to know how I could take the constant harassment and smile. I looked her straight in the eye and said,

“Because I am a child of God full of grace and beauty.” She looked right back at me and said, “you are crazy” and she walked away.

Not only was the “desegregated” school a hostile environment, the school experience remained in many ways segregated—though one feature of that segregation helped out with some features of the desegregation. As Betty explains: “We continued to ride separate school buses. After school a bus picked up the Negro children at Warren County High School, drove us to Criser Combined Colored School where we would transfer to busses that transported colored children home.” The bus ride from one school to the other “gave us an opportunity to discuss what went on during the day at school.”

Each year, the black students who enrolled at the high school in 1958 had to take summer classes—credited with only half a year’s study during 1958-1959, they had to make up for lost time. Back at school each fall, they found themselves excluded from many activities that their white classmates took for granted. Black adults placed enough faith in the value of black children’s attending Warren County High School to dismiss as relatively insignificant the students’ exclusion from many extracurricular features of a high school education. Betty Kilby and a black classmate, Geraldine Rhodes, tried out for majorettes but were rejected. Community adults pointed out, “It would have been nice, but you are there to get an education.” Betty’s brother John and another black student, Charles Lewis, tried out for basketball. Charles, an “outstanding” player, made the team, but then he was told that if he stayed on the team, there would be no season for him or his teammates, for no team from any other school would then agree to play Warren County, so “Charles gave up his basketball dream for a quality education.” During the 1960–1961 year, James Kilby and Frank Grier were the only black seniors. Not allowed to attend their senior prom, they were told again by their elders that they were at the school “to get an education.” The two seniors endured long enough to get to graduation, the first of the “heroes” of 1958 “to officially graduate from an integrated class.”

“Besides,” says Betty, “there were larger issues.” Members of the black community found that the costs of their involvement in school desegregation kept mounting. Those costs reflected, in some ways, a displacement of the burdens of travel that black students, like Betty’s two older brothers, had borne when they had had to travel considerable distances to school. And the costs heightened the tensions children felt at home and in the community. “Our mothers couldn’t get jobs cleaning houses in Front Royal or Warren County. They had to get up at 4 AM and ride sixty miles to the Northern Virginia area for work. Our NAACP lawyers were fighting with the local Union because our fathers who worked at the

Viscose [a major industrial employer in the area] were under attack and risked losing their jobs. Our farm animals were being mutilated and poisoned.”

By 1962–1963, Betty’s senior year, only four of the original black students remained—Betty Kilby, Barbara Jackson, Matthew Pines, and Steven Travis—the others having graduated or given up. “Since there were so few of us left it was hard to maintain our buddy system. For the first time since 1958, I didn’t have one of my brothers in school to watch over me.” She nonetheless felt safer, grew less vigilant, and let some old rules lapse. “One day as I was crossing the auditorium alone, there were three boys hiding behind the stage. I was grabbed from behind, blindfolded, mouth taped and raped. . . . I passed out hoping that I would die.” Though plagued in the months that followed by an urge to commit suicide, she held on. A kindly black man she knew observed to her, “The best part of your life is just around the corner, God has given you a job, He will give you the strength to make it through. It was a big job for such a little girl like you but you can do it.” She graduated. She could not attend her prom. On graduation night, “as my [white female] classmates hugged and kissed, there were no hugs for me. I hugged myself and looked toward heaven and whispered, ‘thank you.’”

Ruth Carter and Her Siblings in Mississippi

As part of the Great Society programs, school districts could count on considerable infusions of federal money under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, but Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 stipulated that receiving federal funds depended on local policies that did not engage in racial discrimination. Beginning in 1965, therefore, a new combination of federal policies, with a big carrot and a big stick, could propel desegregation along. But desegregation in each school district unfolded at the local level, and its shape depended on the roles played by local actors, including black children and their parents. No branch of the federal government required that “desegregation” result in a genuine integration of the separate black and white systems, and no federal policy required black involvement in determining such changes in practice as took place. When small numbers of black pioneers made their way to formerly white schools, they were entering what in effect remained white schools.

For the first ten years after the *Brown* decision, no elementary or secondary school desegregation took place anywhere in Mississippi. In 1964 and 1965, a combination of federal legislation and federal court orders brought the beginnings of change—but the combination also brought a new version of white resistance to change. Adopting the typical approach across the South—“freedom of choice”—jurisdictions left it up to individual black students to request transfers to white schools. Some requests were approved, some not. “Desegregation” was

slow in coming, and then controlled by local whites—and revealed in small numbers of black children in a few white schools across the state. Then, as a rule, physical threats, together with economic sanctions, were directed against the black families involved in desegregation—not to mention the harassment that took place in the schools—so that many of the black pioneers requested that they be transferred back to the black schools. Black children and black adults alike were not always prepared to bear the full burden, as it became revealed to them, of battling for desegregation. But some were.

Like other jurisdictions in Mississippi, Sunflower County had to go through the motions of conceding an end to completely segregated schools. The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare stipulated that at least three grades would have to be open to desegregation, and so confident were the leaders of Sunflower County that nobody would seek to change schools, they threw open all twelve grades to freedom-of-choice. They had not counted on the Carters—Matthew, Mae Bertha, and their seven school-aged children. In 1965, those seven became the first black children in the white schools of Sunflower County. Ruth, Larry, Gloria, and Stanley enrolled at Drew High School. Pearl, Beverly, and Deborah began attending the A. W. James Elementary School. They stuck it out that entire year, and the next, the only black children in either school during either year.

The Carters' considerations were many. Ruth, at sixteen the eldest Carter child still living at home, led the way—she wanted to go to a better school, with newer books, on a nice bus, for full days rather than split sessions and a full school year like the white kids. And she had spent a year with relatives in Ohio, so she knew that life did not have to be what she saw all around her in Mississippi. When the freedom-of-choice forms arrived in the mail in summer 1965, she wrote her mother, who was away visiting relatives, “Come home. You have some papers to sign saying what school we want to go to. We want to go to the all-white school.” Mr. and Mrs. Carter told the children: “If you want to go, we want you to go.” Mrs. Carter later explained her own considerations:

Why I decided I wanted them to go was I was tired of my kids coming home with pages torn out of worn-out books that come from the white school. I was tired of them riding on these old raggedy buses after the white children didn't want to ride on them anymore. I was just tired, and I thought if they go to this all-white school they will get a better education there.

And there was more. Mrs. Carter later recounted how the children in the black schools got lunch only once or twice a week,

And see, them white children was eating lunch every day. So that's why we signed the papers. We had seven children to go, three to the elementary school and four to the high school. So we integrated both of those schools.

Moreover, some of the Carters had been active in the events of Freedom Summer 1964 and summer 1965, including Ruth's going to Jackson and being among the many young people arrested for participating in demonstrations there. As Mae Bertha Carter explains:

So we really was in the movement. Going to these mass meetings and marching and going to jail and singing and talking about you ain't gonna let nobody turn you 'round. So that's why we was already motivated when the school integration came.

But until the new school year began, the Carters, who did not have a telephone in their rural home, had not known that no other black students would be attending either school. Ruth later pointed out: "I didn't think we were going to be the only ones—my friend Nettie who'd been in jail with me, I thought she was going, too. But something happened—I think her parents changed their minds, and she wasn't there in September." The Carter children had no friends or allies around them when the school bus brought them into town the first day of the new school year, and crowds of white hecklers screamed from outside the bus: "Go back to your own schools, niggers."

Parents and children alike were haunted by what did happen and by what they constantly feared might happen. Ruth recollected:

After we started to school, because I was the oldest, I thought maybe the younger kids were looking up to me and that I was there to protect them if something happened—if something went wrong. . . . We had to ride the school bus with all those white kids and they would throw spitballs and call us all kinds of names, and I'm sitting there and can't do a thing. And there's my little sisters and brothers, and Deborah, only six years old and so sweet and precious to me, being mistreated, and there was nothing I could do.

And their mother remembered being petrified to the point of paralysis, especially in the early weeks. That first day of school in September 1965, she said,

When the bus pulled off, I went in and fell down cross the bed and prayed. I stayed on that bed and didn't do no work that day . . . and when I heard the bus coming, I went back to the porch. When they came off one by one, then

I was released until the next morning. But the next morning I felt the same way, depressed, nervous, praying to God . . . ; just saying, “take care of my kids.”

Ruth and her mother pushed ahead. Ruth remembered that, especially at first, she

hated everything. Then we started having these little session at home in the afternoon after school. It was almost like therapy. We would sit down and Mama would say, “How did things go today at school?” We would talk about what happened and a lot of times we would cry together. After we’d talk and sit down and cry together, things would seem a little better.

If Mama heard me say, “I hate white people, I just can’t stand them,” she always answered, “Don’t you ever say that. Don’t you ever say that you hate white people or anyone—it’s not right.”

And I answered, “How would you know, Mama? We’re the ones who have to stay in school with them all day. We have to ride the bus with them and go to the lunchroom with them where they won’t sit next to us. We’re the ones they throw spitballs at and call ‘nigger.’”

But she got on us every time we said we hated them.

She concluded her reverie on a positive note: “At least I got out of the cotton fields, so I guess dreams can come true.”

Larry, like some of his siblings, remembered their math teacher as fair, but not the history teacher. He found that he “hated history class when we covered the Civil War and the teacher said ‘nigger’ and allowed the students to say it like I wasn’t even there.”

None of the white students ever associated with us and we weren’t involved in any activities. Basically we just went to school there. . . .

Once toward the end of the first semester, we were in the field picking cotton after school, and I told Mama that I was going back to the other school. Then we had a discussion. She told me about how she and Daddy had committed themselves to the choice and how Daddy had sacrificed so many things so we could go and how I should try and stick it out. She never did say I couldn’t change schools, she just explained things to me. That was the last time I ever thought about leaving—that conversation in the cotton field took about thirty minutes.

Things didn’t change much in the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grades. I just separated school from my personal life. I went to school, studied, 3:15

came, school was out, I did my homework and chores, and I had black friends at the other school, and we went to football games and events there.

When he graduated in 1968, he recalled, “My father put his arm around me and walked with me . . . and told me how proud he was of me.”

The other children had similar experiences and similar memories of their time as pioneers. Pearl, born in 1955, was in the fifth grade when she enrolled in the white elementary school in 1965. She later told an interviewer, Connie Curry, about her time as a lonely pioneer: “How can I describe it? Five years of hell?” Her teacher that first year, the worst year, was “really cruel to me.” But though Pearl wielded no sword, she had a shield and wore her armor that year. As she later said:

I knew they had to be mean to show us they didn’t want us there, and I kept thinking, “I deserve to be here just like you.” That’s the one thing Mama always preached. One time we said something about the white school, and she said, “That school is not white, it’s brown brick, and that school belongs to you as well as it belongs to them—always remember that.”

Gloria, two years older, has said:

It just hurt. I’d go home after school and pray about it and say, “Dear Lord, don’t let this happen tomorrow—let tomorrow be an okay day. Don’t let anybody hit me with a spitball.” . . . It’s not like the seventh grade was okay and by the eighth you adjusted so you didn’t mind. You *never* got used to it.

But we never once thought of quitting. I kept saying, “I can’t quit. They can’t make me leave. We are not going to lose—we are not going to let ’em run us away. . . .

You know, up until a few years ago, I was still having nightmares about being in Drew High School, and I would wake up sobbing.

Each of the children pointed out that, when “full integration came,” things greatly improved. Carl, the youngest, had not begun first grade until 1967, so most of his schooling took place in the 1970s. His first two years, “the worst thing was not having playmates,” but then a court order came that brought a whole new era in desegregation—the suit was brought in 1967 by the Carters, and the ruling in 1969, reflecting a recent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, threw out the “freedom of choice” tactic. “All the black kids came” to the formerly white schools, joining Carl and his school-age brothers and sisters; and “from the fourth grade on I went to games and activities.” Revealing the importance of what his parents and

siblings had accomplished, he concluded: “I certainly didn’t have the hardships that my sisters and brothers went through.”

All eight young Carters graduated from Drew High School. Seven went on to the University of Mississippi, where, under federal court order in 1962, James Meredith had become the first black student.

“Desegregation”: More Than a Black Student Entering a White School

In eastern North Carolina, Hyde County moved in 1965 to desegregate its public schools. In much the manner in which Charlotte and Greensboro had begun operating eight years earlier, Hyde County employed the state’s “freedom of choice” program, which required initiatives by black families to seek the enrollment of black children in formerly white schools. In Hyde County, twenty-one black students transferred that year to Mattamuskeet, the consolidated white school (as elsewhere, not a single white student transferred to either of the black schools, Davis or O. A. Peay). When school buses began the new school year rumbling along country roads, they carried both black and white students, and they dropped them off—black and white alike, though most of them white—at Mattamuskeet.

Inside the school, though, the two groups did not have the same experiences. The black students found themselves isolated, they missed having black teachers, and they missed the school activities they had been involved in at the black schools. White students who attempted to be welcoming were pressured into abandoning the effort or face shunning themselves. Moreover, their families faced all kinds of social and economic pressures. White customers refused to continue to patronize black businesses, or they were forced by other whites to do so. As one local person reported years later, “If you couldn’t be touched, then they would get your sister or your mother or your cousin. You might not even know they did get you, but you would always wonder why you didn’t get that loan, or why your brother was sent to Vietnam.” The Klan, in particular, did what it could—and that was a lot—to coerce whites as well as blacks to curtail school desegregation. Pressures on the black pioneers at Mattamuskeet, in combination with pressures on their families, reversed the change that had begun in 1965. Black enrollment at Mattamuskeet dropped to seven in 1966–1967 and then three in 1967–1968. Reassignment of teachers revealed similarly skimpy numbers—one black teacher at Mattamuskeet, one white teacher at one of the two black schools.

In 1967, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare increased the pressure on southern school districts to move more energetically toward desegregation. A key event was a federal appeals court ruling in 1967—*Green v.*

County School Board of New Kent County, Virginia—that outlawed the kind of freedom-of-choice pupil placement policy that Hyde County was employing. It was widely expected that the Supreme Court would uphold that decision, and it did so in 1968, saying: “The burden on a school board today is to come forward with a plan that promises realistically to work, and promises realistically to work *now*.”

The Hyde County school board came forward with a plan in late May 1968 that would, within three years, end separate schools. Grades one through three would be transferred from the black schools to Mattamuskeet in fall 1968, and everyone through eighth grade would attend the formerly white school the following year. By fall 1970, all black children in the county would attend Mattamuskeet, and the two black schools would be closed. The new program for addressing demands for desegregation reflected white control, with no effective black input, and would result not in the integration of all the county’s schools, white and black, but the death of the black schools. In early July 1968, HEW approved the proposal.

Black residents opposed the new plan, established a “Committee of 14” to organize that opposition, and came up with a counterproposal that would keep open the two black schools, Davis and O. A. Peay. Failing adoption of such a new desegregation plan, black residents planned to boycott the public schools.

The vast majority of black children in Hyde County were out of school that first day of the new school year, in fact all that year. They took over primary responsibility for maintaining the boycott and pushing an alternative desegregation plan. Explained one of them, Alice Spencer: “You walked, talked, ate, thought, . . . *lived* for the movement. It was all you did.” Said another, looking back on that year, “We were all brothers and sisters then.” Thomas Whitaker had expected to be a senior that year, whether at O. A. Peay or Mattamuskeet, but he was not in school. Instead, he later observed, “I felt like I was giving myself completely to something larger and more important than myself.”

Hyde County’s black children conducted local demonstrations, often seeking to provoke their own arrest. On one occasion, when a group prayed and sang movement songs in front of the county courthouse, eighteen were arrested, and a thirteen-year-old sang out, “Hey, wait for me, Mr. Trooper, I want to be arrested too!” And the children and their adult allies conducted two marches that took them to Raleigh, the state capital, to make their position clear and seek adoption of their proposed alternative.

Much happened during that school year and across the following summer, and, as a new school year approached, both sides were getting worn down; both sides hoped the boycott would not enter a second year. In early September, about eighty young black protesters were convicted of blocking traffic, and were sentenced to six months in prison, but were told they would have their sentences

suspended if they immediately returned to school. A bond referendum was scheduled for November, the proceeds essential if Mattamuskeet were to be expanded sufficiently to accommodate all the county's children, black and white. Hundreds of black children returned to school in September, many of them prepared to leave again and revive their boycott in November if the referendum passed. By a wide margin, it did not. For a variety of reasons, Hyde County voters acted in a manner that meant that the Davis and O. A. Peay schools would remain open. The boycott was over, its major objectives achieved, but many details remained to be worked out.

During the months that remained before the start of the 1970–1971 school year, a “Student Planning Committee” worked on those details. Making up the committee were equal numbers of black and white students, among them activists in the boycott. They, as well as the “Committee of 14” and other groups (black, white, and biracial), advised the school system, participated effectively in deliberations, negotiated every aspect of the plan to achieve a genuine desegregation of Hyde County's public schools.

Davis and O. A. Peay remained open, and they as well as Mattamuskeet would have genuinely biracial student populations. At Davis and O. A. Peay, white as well as black children would attend a local elementary school that required limited bus travel each morning and afternoon. Black teachers would keep their jobs in the Hyde County system, and black principals would retain their positions. Students of each racial identity would work and study together in schools that both groups could claim. At Mattamuskeet, the student advisors and their successors saw to it that genuine integration took place in high school activities. Any candidate at Mattamuskeet for student body president, for example, had to have a running mate of another race, and the two groups would have equal representation on the yearbook. For a transition period, each of the two groups, black and white, would have a prom queen and a graduation speaker.

Black children pioneered the “desegregation” of Hyde County's Mattamuskeet School in 1965–1966 when, under North Carolina's freedom-of-choice law, “desegregation” meant that only a few black students would be enrolled at a previously all-white school. Black children led the way in the school boycott of 1968–1969 that led to rejection of a fuller “desegregation,” a revised version still entirely on white terms. And black children worked with white children to formulate a third stab at desegregation, a model that suggests what might have been but rarely was, the form that went into effect in Hyde County in the fall of 1970.

Black parents understood that they were putting their children's welfare on the line in the struggle for black freedom in general and school desegregation in particular. As Josephine Boyd expressed it, nearly four decades after the events she participated in as a teenager: "Those parents willing to put their children on the firing lines[,] and those children willing to go to war, were fighting to fulfill their ancestors' as well as their own quest for freedom, identity, and self-respect." And she spoke especially of the roles the children played: "Desegregation of public schools was a direct confrontation between black and white children. Black children who sought to desegregate schools demonstrated a strength and a stubbornness to undertake risks that others could not or would not undertake."

Josephine Boyd called herself a "mandatory volunteer." She stuck out her senior year in a hostile environment—far different from the nurturing one she would have experienced had she stayed at all-black Dudley High School—precisely because of the many people she believed would benefit from the pioneer roles that she and her sparse counterparts at other schools were playing that year. She said of the black children "initiating school desegregation" that they "were not unmindful of the cost to them, or perhaps they may not have foreseen the cost, but they were not about to let either blacks or whites tell them that desegregating schools could not be done." And as they "entered the desegregation movement as tokens," they "were faced with defining as well as assuming for themselves, new roles and positions in the affairs of their respective states, the United States and the world." They would construct for all Americans, and especially for African Americans, a new definition of citizenship, of belonging, of opportunity, of democracy.

Because it was so new, and because it was so promising as well as dangerous, it could be heady stuff. And that—together with their elders' urging that they finish what they had started—helped the children, black pioneers in white schools, endure. Young warriors, they grew up strong, though years later the memories of those times could still sear, could still bring tears, and the combination of those times and subsequent developments could leave them wondering how to sum their experiences and the consequences of their brave actions.

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