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Southern Normal?: An Exploration of Integration in a Deep South Town: Brewton, Alabama, 1954-1971

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Anna Catherine McDonald entitled "Southern Normal?: An Exploration of Integration in a Deep South Town: Brewton, Alabama, 1954-1971." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

Cynthia Fleming, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Janis Appier, George White, Jr.

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

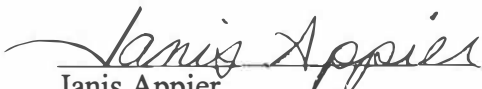
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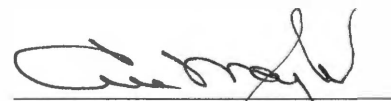

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Thesis
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**Southern Normal?:
An Exploration of Integration in a Deep South Town: Brewton, Alabama, 1954-1971**

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Anna Catherine McDonald
May 2005

Dedication

This thesis, with all of its good intentions and all of its faults, is dedicated to the city of Brewton, Alabama. Thank you for teaching me about my life.

Acknowledgments

Besides being a profession, teaching is also a skill and a talent. Too few people cherish the interaction between student and teacher, the chill bump moments and adrenalin rush seconds when you know you really have something. For those teachers who have helped me along, who have been a part of those moments, I am forever changed and forever grateful. At the University of Alabama, Rose Gladney first saw the potential in this project and urged me to pursue it. John Beeler took me around the world and landed me safely back home again. Richard Megraw was unafraid to tell me like it is and put me in my place, yet had endless faith in me even when I did not. At the University of Tennessee, Robert Bast encouraged me to follow my instinct, consequences be damned. Palmira Brummett honestly listened and made me want to teach. And of course, to my committee: Cynthia Fleming, Janis Appier, and George White. I thank you for trusting me with the responsibility of this thesis – for giving me room to grow and struggle, yet still supply support and parameters where needed. Your enthusiasm is contagious, thank you.

To Piper, who keeps me cultural. To everyone I work with in the dean's office who kept tabs on my procrastination. To Pooh, my dog, who I miss.

To Ben: my Wisconsin born editor, title giver, puppy lover, dance partner, cd maker, sounding board, surprise giver, food taster, patience supplier, nap taker, bear spotter, night swimmer, who I am always in trouble with and who is above all my friend. You are always there.

To Pop and Granny: In my world, the two of you hung the moon. You may not always understand me, but you always support me. Your blind faith and confidence in my abilities and in me makes me feel like I could do anything.

To Mom: my friend, my research assistant, my adventure taker, my shopping partner, my co-conspirator, my hug giver. Over the years you have had to wear many hats, all of which you have donned without complaint. But to me, the most appropriate hat for you is something most regal, and to use your own quote, there are stars in your crown. Thank you for your sacrifices. Thank you for taking care of me.

Abstract

This study was conducted in order to identify possible reasons for the successful integration of Brewton, Alabama's school system. Unlike many other towns in South Alabama, Brewton chose not to create a private school as an alternative to attending an integrated public facility. Known as "white flight" schools, these private institutions are still a viable factor in the education of Southern children. Although Brewton had the money and the resources to create such a school, it did not. This thesis seeks to understand why.

Two factors are central to approaching Brewton as a topic of research. One is Brewton's wealthy families. Born out of the timber business, these "lumber barons" have a great deal of influence over the town. This influence is not only monetary, but also through serving on the school board, the city council, and being all-around involved citizens. The other factor is Southern Normal School. An anomaly to South Alabama, Southern Normal School is a *black* private school. Founded in 1911, the school gained students during integration and became an alternative to attending the public school system for local black children.

In order to investigate possible reasons why Brewton integrated as it did, local newspapers were consulted, as were secondary sources pertaining to Alabama history, the Civil Rights Movement, and school desegregation. The bulk of information came from interviews with those who lived the experience first hand and helped to integrate Brewton's city school system.

What these interviews indicated was that there are various suggestions as to why Brewton had a successful integration experience. Sports, a lack of strong race related organizations, a small town attitude, a smaller black population, Southern Normal School – all were proposed as possible reasons. Yet, the overarching factor for Brewton's success was strong local leadership. This leadership came from the editors of the local paper, the school board members, and most notably from the wealthy white families who had their roots in the local timber business.

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Chapter 1: A Different Schoolhouse; A Different Door

“The South of every country is different, and the South of every South is even more so.”
-Eugene Walter, *Milking the Moon: A Southerner’s Story of Life on this Planet*¹

The Deep South. The Heart of Dixie. Lower Alabama. Each phrase conjures up a plethora of ideas, images, and reactions that are distinct, but often stereotypical. Yet stereotypes contain at least a kernel of truth and in Alabama, the kernel is easily found. From Civil War campaigns and antebellum plantations to Jim Crow and George Wallace, the state has embodied what it means to be “Southern” in both the negative and positive contexts. Although Alabamians may believe that they are the heart of Dixie, at the middle of the twentieth century, they were also the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. Culpepper Clark, a Civil Rights historian, illustrates Alabama’s centrality to the Movement: “Montgomery inaugurated the movement, Birmingham catalyzed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Selma led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and Tuscaloosa dramatized the demise of state’s rights.”² While these events received national attention, other equally important events unfolded throughout the state. City and county school systems were desegregating and Alabama’s small, rural towns either rose to the occasion or crumbled under the pressure.

The pressure began with the Supreme Court’s 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Although most southern states took ample time in implementing the “with all

¹ Eugene Walter, *Milking the Moon: A Southerner’s Story of Life on this Planet* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 5.

² Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation’s Last Stand at the University of Alabama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xi.

deliberate speed” clause, the threat of actually having to desegregate did loom in the foreseeable future. With this threat in mind, parents began to arrange for the inevitable by either creating alternative schools or enrolling their children in existing private schools. The number of children entering private schools in Alabama after the *Brown* decision shows the extent of this reaction. For example, in 1955, 2,340 children were enrolled in private schools. By 1975, this number had grown to 27,583 – more than ten times the 1955 figure.³ More specifically, between the years 1965 and 1975, nonpublic school enrollment increased by eighty percent.⁴

Clearly, this exodus from the public school system reflected a perceived threat of black children entering a previously all white establishment. The passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act became a catalyst to this growing private school movement. New schools needed to be built in order to accommodate the students leaving in such large numbers. Therefore, in 1965, there were thirty-four private schools in Alabama; by 1970, there were 109.⁵ The majority of these nonpublic schools were established in counties where African Americans were the majority of the population. It was in these areas, more than any other, that the white community acted upon the threat they felt by a larger black populace.⁶ This reaction is evident by the rate at which white children fled public education once a school’s black population rose to fifty percent. At that point, one in every five white children left to enter a private school.⁷

³ William John Heron, “The Growth of Private Schools and Their Impact on the Public Schools of Alabama (1955-1977)” (Ed.D.diss, The University of Alabama, 1977), 113.

⁴ Gordon E. Harvey, *A Question of Justice: New South Governors and Education, 1968-1976* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 182.

⁵ Heron, 75.

⁶ Ibid, 112.

⁷ Ibid, 5.

Although the rise in private school attendance and the years of integration correlate, there were still feeble attempts to rationalize the movement that became known as “white flight.” Most notably, several of the schools carried Christian names and claimed to be “fleeing secularism, crime, sexual anarchy, and other threats to traditional values.”⁸ Yet when the statistics are reviewed, it becomes apparent that white parents considered the integration of schools a threat to those same traditional values. Specifically, between the years 1967 and 1971, when desegregation occurred at its most rapid rate, over 50,000 children fled Alabama’s public school system. In the 1970 – 1971 school year alone, an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 children left and entered private educational institutions.⁹

It is in this context of a private school movement, which gained momentum by George Wallace’s stand in the schoolhouse door, that the case of Brewton, Alabama, must be examined. Located south of Birmingham and Tuscaloosa’s industrial belt and south of Montgomery and Selma’s black belt, Brewton hovers only slightly above the Florida state line. It is the extreme South; it is the South of a most Southern state and it is here in this typical Southern town that an atypical event occurred.

Between 1954 and 1971, while the rest of Alabama created private schools for their white children, Brewton peacefully integrated their public school system. Central to this integration was the anomaly of Southern Normal School, a *black* private school that had been in operation since 1911. Another component to this story was the interactions between Brewton’s wealthy “lumber baron” families, the public school system, and the

⁸ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 236, 361.

⁹ Heron, 5.

town as a whole. These families not only supplied much of the business in Brewton, but they also supplied the leadership. Had Brewton decided to build a private school, with the assistance of these families, the money would have been available not only to do it, but to do it well. With these factors in place the question remains – Why did Brewton, with all of its resources, decide to go against the grain and keep their public school system?

In order to find a solution to this question, it first must be understood that there can be no simple, definitive answer. Rather, the possibilities are as diverse and varied as the number of students who integrated the schools. Thus, the approach to this project consisted of assembling the sources, interviewing the participants, and looking for patterns. From these patterns, communal assumptions became evident; it is from these patterns and assumptions that answers about Brewton's integration can be suggested. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to *suggest* answers based on the available evidence. Due to this evidence being scant and relying on memory, no possible solution can be proven as a certifiable fact. Not having a concrete result to this project is indicative of the Movement itself, with its multiple interpretations and often uncertain resolutions. At its base, the Civil Rights Movement is a collection of varied and complex stories. Although some stories contradict one another and some stories seem like they cannot be true, a pattern still emerges. Stories, places, people, and events overlap; it is at these junctures, these intersections of experience that the narrative can be recreated. As a result, this thesis aims to restore that narrative, to record those stories, to add to the complexity, shed light on the similarities and to suggest the reasons why it all happened as it did. Therefore, the goal is one that is shared with Alabama historian, Wayne Flynt,

who states, "...if I do my job well enough, stereotypes will give way to increasing complexity and ambiguity."¹⁰ It is in the midst of this complexity and ambiguity that this project strives for answers.

To begin this search, sources must first be consulted. Because Brewton had not previously been studied, evidence for this thesis relied heavily on primary sources. The entire chronology of events needed to be reconstructed. To do this, the local newspaper, *The Brewton Standard*, was consulted, as was Annie C. Waters's *History of Escambia County, Alabama*. These two sources provided the skeletal facts that interviews and oral history would eventually flesh out. An oral history manual suggests the use of interviews as, "a way to complement and supplement the existing record, as well as a chance to make fundamental changes or additions to it."¹¹ By adding the interviews to the previous documentation, a new, rounder aspect of Brewton's past developed.

Oral history has been used to both bulk up a slim selection of documents and to record the accounts of the Civil Rights Movement; therefore, its use in this project came naturally. From oral historian, Studs Terkel's "bottom up" approach in his book, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession*, to journalist, Howell Raines' first person accounts in *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South*, oral history has supplemented the chronicled facts of the Movement. Participants tell their stories; their stories shape the history.

Retelling these stories can be both compelling and confounding. An oral history manual titled, *Doing Oral History*, affirms this, stating that, "rather than simplifying the

¹⁰ Flynt, xii.

¹¹ Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 1.

past, oral historians complicate the history by collecting counterevidence and challenging answers.” Although this may initially sound frustrating, the author disagrees, recognizing the medium’s depth and claiming that, “oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex – more interesting.”¹² In order to discover the complexities of this oral history project, personal memories were recorded using taped interviews and mailed surveys. Interviews were conducted with members of the community who had a first hand account of the events surrounding Brewton’s school integration; these included school board members, students, and their parents. When face-to-face interviews could not be set up, mailed survey forms were used. These surveys gave the interviewee the opportunity to construct their answers in the exact way that they wished to be represented. For several participants who had either not talked about their past or who were nervous about the prospects of a formal interview, the survey created an ideal alternative.

In either the oral interviews or the written surveys, one phrase appeared more frequently than any other: “I had never thought of it before.” Without exception, the participants claimed that they had considered their experience neither special nor unique; they especially had not deemed it worth of study. Moreover, most claimed to have never, or at least not recently, revisited the events surrounding their role in Brewton’s integration. Their naïveté created its own set of benefits and disappointments. In many ways, it was constructive; resulting in the participant not having a ‘canned’ answer to the questions asked. However, not being familiar with their own past, with their own

¹² Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13, 227.

memories had several disadvantages. The oral history manual, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, responds to this common concern. A quote used in the guide's discussion best illustrates what many interviewees encounter: "You forget about things in the past, 'cause you don't think about them, you don't talk about them, and that leaves your mind."¹³ Nevertheless, regardless of how often the participant had called to mind the event, each of these interviews, "elicit[ed] personal stories, filled with contradicting multiple story lines, and layered experiences."¹⁴ Whether the interviewee could recall sharp images or was fuzzy on the details, each encounter brought a unique aspect - a personal story - that facilitated in fleshing out Brewton's integration.

The information resulting from these interviews, along with the subsequent project fits within the context of several fields. Most strongly, this topic falls under the study of local school desegregations. The current literature on the subject is slim; if desegregation did not occur in a notable city or within the early years of the Movement, it has been neglected as a research topic. Historian David Cecelski noted that scholars "have seldom studied school desegregation in the South post 1968." This fact is especially intriguing because, like the students in Brewton, desegregation after this point was the experience of the majority of black and white Southerners.¹⁵ Cecelski also noted a lacuna within the field of black education, specifically pertaining to the closing of black schools and the effect it had on the local African American community.¹⁶ This void in the record widens when the area of study focuses specifically on black private schools,

¹³ Ritchie, 36.

¹⁴ Bernadette Anand, *Keeping the Struggle Alive: Studying Desegregation in Our Town: A Guide to Doing Oral History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁵ David Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina, and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

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such as Southern Normal School. In an attempt to narrow these gaps in the field, this project illuminates not only the experience of desegregating a small, wealthy town in the Deep South, but also demonstrates how the variable of a black private school can affect the already tenuous situation.

Chapter 2: Big Families, a Small Town, and the Creation of a School System

“Once upon a time, Brewton was known as the richest little town in the South. Some local residents say it was the richest in the nation, but there are others contenders for that distinction,” or so reads Brewton’s entry in Norman Crampton’s *The 100 Best Small Towns in America*.¹⁷ Whether it was the richest in the nation, the state, or neither, the implication was clear – Brewton was known for its wealth. Tightly nestled between the banks of Burnt Corn Creek and Murder Creek, the location lends itself to flooded creeks and floods of wealth generated from local business. Since its official founding in 1885, two things have remained constant for local residence: the rising creeks and Brewton’s timber industry.

As the timber industry grew, so did Brewton. Before the founding of the city, Escambia County relied primarily on farming and agriculture for economic survival. In 1880, the county had three farmers to every one timber man. However, this changed dramatically over the next thirty years in what Alabama historian Wayne Flynt referred to as Alabama’s industrial revolution. During this period, the state experienced a boom in the timber industry. This development was particularly evident in Escambia County where the area’s employment shifted significantly. By 1900, ninety percent of Escambia County’s manufacturing was invested in timber; moreover, by 1910 the county had two timber men for every one farmer. As a result, the county’s timber production eventually

¹⁷ Norman Crampton, *The 100 Best Small Towns in America* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1995), 69.

represented one tenth of the total timber capital in the state. Becoming a significant aspect to the state's timber economy represented how profound and profitable Escambia County's shift from agriculture to timber had been; furthermore, it also characterized a newfound importance for the county and the city of Brewton within the state marketplace. Brewton became so essential to the state's timber industry that it was dubbed, "Alabama's alternative lumber center."¹⁸

Obviously, no boom can last, and by the 1920s, the number of timber mills started to decline. Local historian John Powell described the rise and fall of local lumber:

Brewton was going gangbusters. They are writing articles in national magazines about how they have more millionaires per capita than any town in the United States. They are trying to get new industry to come in.... They want new job opportunities for the people. They are advertising what a wonderful place this is to live.... They are trying to make Brewton grow. And then the Great Depression hits and at the same time you have the 1929 flood. So everything just goes to hell.¹⁹

Although the Depression, the decline in mills, and the flood all combined to give local industry a major setback, all was not lost. By the 1950s, an oil boom replaced the timber boom of fifty years earlier. Brewton's timber giants still owned the surrounding land and therefore controlled the minerals rights once oil was found.²⁰ These new oil revenues, combined with the continued timber business, kept Brewton economically sound.

¹⁸ Flynt, 121.

¹⁹ Alexandra Garrett McDowell, "Part of Me: A Visual-ethnography of Southern Culture in Brewton, Alabama" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, Austin), 28.

²⁰ Ibid, 146.

Quick wealth and rapid growth resulted in the creation of a unique “timber town”. For a rural community accustomed to an agricultural lifestyle, the shift to industrialism altered their entire life. Most of the towns, like Brewton, that came to rely on the timber industry fit into a set of common characteristics. In these towns, business centered around a local base that heavily depended on the location’s natural resources. The business also relied on local workers, many of whom had been previously involved in agriculture. They came from farms, were relatively unskilled, and possessed little education. If the timber industry truly was a revolution, as Flynt argued, then the workers best exemplified his statement. Once the industry established its hold, their agriculturally based life that they had previously known ceased to exist. The workers left a land-based life that they could not recapture. Similarly, life for the timber mill owners also changed drastically. Often, these families came from a background based within the agricultural sector that involved large-scale farms or agribusiness. Shifting from this previous lifestyle to industrial work and running a timber mill required moving to town at a time when towns were hard to find. Therefore, these owners essentially created ‘company towns’ around their mills. This included building churches and homes that were all company owned.²¹

In Brewton, the industry giant that created the company town was Thomas Richard Miller. By establishing the T.R. Miller Mill Company in the 1890s, Miller became one of the most successful businessmen in the state. At his death in 1914, Miller personally owned over 28,000 acres of timberland in South Alabama. Miller and his namesake mill not only put Brewton on the map, but they kept Brewton in the money. In

²¹ Flynt, 122.

an almost notorious fashion, the industry in Brewton stayed under tight local control, owned by local families. By 1900, at the peak of the timber boom, local families owned all of Brewton's mills, which at that point numbered well over fifty. Not only did the industry own the land and the mills, but they also owned several of the railroad tracks, making their industry an all inclusive business. Therefore, as Flynt stated, "most of the capital for lumber industry came from local sources in Escambia County and profits remained there as well."²²

When T.R. Miller Mill reached its 125 year anniversary in 1997 the company printed a pamphlet containing their history. This self-publication best describes the confinement of power within the company's upper-echelon. It stated, "There is one enterprise which provides a purer example, one which now has passed the 125 year mark, in essentially the same location, all owned and operated by a consortium of three families whose husbandry and stewardship have encouraged a continuing pattern of uninterrupted growth. That organization is the T.R. Miller Mill Company."²³ Therefore, not only do the industry and the profits stay local, but they actually stay concentrated within this "consortium of three families." These three families, known as 'lumber barons' for their full-throttle approach to the business, are the Millers, the McMillans, and the Neals. Once marriage is taken into account, their influence stretched out to the Downing, Brent, Huxford, Leigh, Findley, and McGowin families.²⁴

Having so much wealth in so few hands for such a long time has had an impact Brewton. Through these families' philanthropic trusts, this effect generally has been

²² Flynt, 121.

²³ McDowell, 154.

²⁴ Ibid, 155.

perceived as very positive, especially for a town the size of Brewton. Yet the main characteristic of the lumber baron's business, that of keeping it local and in few hands, has also been seen as a limitation for several entrepreneurs. Local businessman, Yancey Lovelace explained, "This town is a very wealthy town and wealth is concentrated in a few hands. What allows a town like this, a really small town, is well, we have a lot of really good things. But it also stifles it out. On the other hand, the opportunity for growth in a small rural Alabama town is very limited. So although they stifle the opportunity, we really didn't have any opportunity to squash anyway."²⁵ Therefore, locals are caught in a "catch 22": these families are beneficial towards the town, yet it is perceived that they also prevent other prospects for growth.

What opportunities Brewton does have come directly or indirectly through these families. None more so than the local school system, who benefit greatly from the wealth and generosity of these lumber barons. Through the McMillan Trust and the Neal Trust, local schools have been eligible for extra financial support. It is through the families' initial funding of the school system and through their continued contributions, that the city of Brewton has been able to maintain a viable school system since its inception.

At the turn of the century, when Brewton was founded, the state of Alabama possessed a mixture of public and private schools. At the end of the nineteenth century, the term "private school" did not carry the same connotation as it does at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the 1880s, a private school was defined as a school open to the community, but also a school that expected the students and their parents to contribute to the purchasing of books, supplies, and, in some cases, the teacher's salary.

²⁵ McDowell, 159.

Often this was a set fee; in other circumstances, it consisted of haphazard financial support throughout the year. The state gradually took over the responsibility of providing an education to the general public. At this point, private schools became a separately funded establishment, not beholden to the demands and policies of the state board of education.²⁶

White Public Schools and the Creation of T.R. Miller High School:

The roots of public education in Brewton coincide with the arrival of the first families to the community. Lumber-baron families moved to town, bringing with them their businesses and a desire for their children to be educated. This desire both facilitated and expedited the establishment of local schools. Found either in one-room schoolhouses or on someone's private property, these schools received financing through the contributions of parents and students.²⁷

These 'private' schools were already in operation in 1885, when Brewton was incorporated into the state. The earliest of these schools, established around 1880, was the Brewton Academy, also called the Granberry School. By 1884, local businessman and educator, W.S. Neal opened a school in the middle of town, located next to the home of timber-baron Thomas Richard Miller.²⁸ These examples are only two of the many small schools in the area. By 1886, these schools began to consolidate, resulting in the creation of Brewton Collegiate Institute. Emerging from the small school that W.S. Neal opened a few years earlier, the push for Brewton Collegiate Institute came from a group

²⁶ Annie C. Waters, *History of Escambia County, Alabama* (Huntsville, AL: The Strode Publishers, 1983), 286.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 315.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 246, 250.

of citizens named the Brewton Institute Association. They organized for the purpose of creating a planned and well thought-out school program that would teach vocational skills and prepare the community's children for college.²⁹ The "BCI," as its alumni remember it, continued to grow and expand as more and more small private schools consolidated within its doors. By the 1920s, the students became too numerous for the old schoolhouse. Aware of the rising need, Mrs. Thomas Richard Miller donated land for a new building and construction followed. Finished in 1925 and renamed after the local lumber-baron and the donator of the land, T.R. Miller High School supplanted Brewton Collegiate Institute as the center of white, public education in the city of Brewton.³⁰

Created because of the active role of local citizens, Brewton Collegiate Institute became the epitome of a community school. This involvement did not change once the school was renamed T.R. Miller High School and moved to a new location. The community remained both involved and an essential asset to its character and success. The school board, as the official representation of an involved and concerned community, became a central component to this prosperity.

From its inception, with the appointment of its first superintendent in 1949, the City Board of Education has differed from its surrounding counterparts. The City Board of Education members are appointed, unlike most school boards, which are elected. The mayor and city council nominate each member, and, if chosen, the member serves for overlapping terms of five years each. Historian Wayne Flynt explains that within the state, this method proves to be a successful approach, but not necessarily a popular one.

²⁹ Waters, 250-1.

³⁰ Ibid, 261.

He noted that, “despite evidence that the state’s best school systems have appointive superintendents, most systems and the vast majority of citizens prefer to elect chief officials from a pool of local candidates.”³¹

Citizens of Brewton not only allowed their school board to be appointed, but they also enthusiastically supported it. In the late 1960s, when the school board was threatened by state interference, the city adamantly came to their defense. During his short administration, Alabama Governor Albert Brewer, passed one of the largest education reform bills in the history of the state. One facet of the bill stated that school boards needed to be elected, rather than appointed. The editor of the local paper quickly came to the board’s defense. In his weekly editorial column he argued that members of Brewton’s board, “are capable and with good purpose. They serve because of their sense of duty to the community and not because they hope to gain publicity or financial gain.”³² The editor hypothesized that the men on the school board would never have campaigned for their position. Lee Otts, a member of the city school board agreed. When the issue of elected versus appointed school boards was brought up in an interview, Otts simply stated, “None of us would have run for the office.”³³ In the end, the city of Brewton prevailed. Governor Brewer’s education package passed. The package included an exemption for the Brewton City Board of Education concerning school board elections.³⁴ Therefore, this provision allowed the handpicked men that the editor described as, “men

³¹ Flynt, 31.

³² *The Brewton Standard*, 10 April 1969.

³³ Lee Otts, interviewed by the author, 22 October 2004.

³⁴ *The Brewton Standard*, 17 April 1969.

who serve with no axes to grind....they do so out of a sense of community obligation and civic duty” to continue their appointed terms.³⁵

Black Public Schools and the Booker T. Washington System:

While the white children experienced bountiful opportunities within the city school system, the same school system subjected the black children of Brewton to a plethora of limitations. Total responsibility for administering these limitations fell at the feet of the Brewton City School Board of Education. Given the responsibility of educating the city’s black population in 1895, the Board did not give those children many options.³⁶ Ultimately, until 1954, none of the black schools were sufficient in either the size of the school, the quality of the facilities, or the educational expectations set by the Board.

What was available to black children can be described as rural, community schools. Located on the outskirts of town, in churches or borrowed homes, these schools resided in enclaves known as Boykin, Freemansville, Mason, Oak Grove, Piney Grove, Pollard, and Spring Hill. It was not until 1943 that a school for blacks opened within the city limits of Brewton. Built on land donated by local lumber-baron, Ed Leigh McMillan and named Booker T. Washington School, this new facility provided a much needed school building for local black children.

Although the new facility improved the previous circumstances, the black school was still not equal or even comparable with what was available to the white children.

³⁵ Ibid, 1965.

³⁶ Waters, 246.

Additionally the city did not provide a public high school for black children. The Washington School and surrounding community schools only taught through the sixth grade. Therefore, the only black public high school in the county was located thirty miles away at the Atmore County Training School. All of these deficiencies were brought to the public's attention when in 1954, the University of Alabama Bureau of Educational Research evaluated the city school system for both black and white schools. The Bureau's evaluation reprimanded the board and ordered them to remodel and reorganize the black school immediately. From this point on, the Board began a steady process of improving and expanding the educational opportunities for Brewton's black children. Ironically, this occurred 1954, the year *Brown* ordered the schools to desegregate. Rather than beginning the desegregation process, the school board finally tried to make the separate schools equal.

This, now outmoded process, began with the board's decision to expand the Booker T. Washington school system. To begin with, construction began on a new school located on grounds donated by three local, white, businessmen: John R. Downing, R.J. Murphy, and R.M. Jernigan. The new Washington system added the much needed high school to its first through sixth grade program. By 1958, Booker T. Washington High School graduated its first senior class. Two years later the Washington Trojans, who would go on to several undefeated seasons, gained a new football field and in 1963 construction was finished on a new elementary school.³⁷ Improvements continued on the school through 1965 when the elementary school added new classrooms.³⁸ Although the

³⁷ *The Brewton Standard*, 24 March 1960.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 1 April 1965.

additions appeared to make the schools on a more equal footing with the white students, the activity inside the school continued to show the differences. Bernice Sims, a local civil rights advocate and folk artist, recalls, “Booker T. Washington School used books that came from Miller two or three years afterwards – hand-me-down books. So we were getting second hand stuff and we weren’t getting anything equally.³⁹ Ultimately, it did not matter how much better the appearance of the school got; the black population still did not have control of their own education inside the classroom. However, unlike most Southern towns, the Africa Americans in Brewton had an alternative – Southern Normal School.

Southern Normal School:

A private school for Brewton’s black community, Southern Normal provided an alternative from the Booker T. Washington public school system. There was no doubt that Southern Normal School radically differed from the local, black public schools. When asked about the differences between the two schools, Margaret Breland Bradley, a graduate of Southern Normal, explained, “The standards were different. The behavior was different. The aspirations were different. The teachers were different.”⁴⁰ Even Southern Normal’s annual catalog articulated the belief that the level of education offered at the black public schools hovered bellow par. The catalog read, “One will not have to remain in this territory very long before he is convinced of this one fact, that we have a large population of colored people with bright and apt little children, many of whom are

³⁹ McDowell, 188.

⁴⁰ Margaret Breland Bradley, interview by the author, 10 October 2004.

being led by incompetent teachers and preachers.”⁴¹ Having an alternative from these “incompetent teachers and preachers” was unique to South Alabama and can be credited to Southern Normal’s founder, James Dooley, Sr.

The record is unclear on what exactly brought James Dooley to Brewton, Alabama. Having no specific ties to the area and lacking a stated reason by Dooley himself has led to many speculations about his motivation. Breland Bradley stated the most common of these speculations: “It’s my understanding that he had been in Tuskegee and I think some people had mentioned Brewton to him and then he came and he saw that there was a need and then he was able to acquire land.... And so this was a natural place. And then I often think of, ‘cause my grandmother used to tell me stories of Mr. Dooley and I often think, and this is a Christian way of looking at it, that God put people in different places for different reasons.”⁴²

Born in Georgia in 1865, Dooley graduated from Knoxville College and proceeded to teach in schools throughout Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Tennessee.⁴³ Only after teaching in these states and establishing contacts at Tuskegee Institute, did Dooley and his family travel to Brewton. Upon his arrival, Dooley recognized the black population’s educational condition: their school terms lasted only three to five months and their educational system was inadequate.⁴⁴ He also found a pattern of failed black schools and institutions within the area. In 1895, Jay J. Scott, a black teacher from

⁴¹ “Annual Catalog of Southern Normal School,” 1929-1930. A copy of this catalog was given to the author by Willie McGhee.

⁴² Breland Bradley, interview with author, 20 October 2004.

⁴³ Annual Catalog.

⁴⁴ Much of the history of Southern Normal School is taken from leaflets that the school publishes. These single page handouts contain brief histories of the school. The author obtained several of these from Carla Johnson, Willie McGhee, and Broox Garrett, Jr.

Illinois launched a free school for blacks. It failed due to an undisclosed disagreement between Scott and the black community that led parents to relocate their children into a different school in protest.⁴⁵ Another failed endeavor centered on the idea of building an institute and a reformatory.⁴⁶ At the time Dooley arrived in 1911, both of these suggestions had fallen short of fruition. Recognizing these previous efforts, Dooley used money from a previous job to buy an existing reform school for delinquent boys and opened the doors to Southern Normal and Industrial Institute, on September 18, 1911.

Organized as a privately owned school for both male and female African Americans, Dooley hoped the Institute would provide a strong education within a Christian environment. Within this atmosphere, the school aimed to “prepare students for roles of service and leadership in their respective countries.” Keeping this goal in mind, Dooley acknowledged the importance of education for the future of African Americans. This recognition was stated in the catalog: “What the South most needs today for the masses of Negro children is rudimentary education combined with industrial training, upon which depends, in a large measure, the hope of preparing the classes for higher education.”⁴⁷ Education and industrial training – these were to be the two focuses of the school. Not until 1931, did the governing body choose to concentrate on arts and sciences, therefore changing the name of the institution to the Southern Normal School.

In order to achieve the goal of providing future leaders with academic and industrial skills, Dooley relied on the knowledge he gleaned from working with Dr. Morton, a past president of Tuskegee Institute. By imparting this wisdom, Dooley

⁴⁵ Waters, 256.

⁴⁶ Annual Catalog.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

employed the Tuskegee model of applied education to the procedures at Southern Normal. Wayne Flynt defined this model as, “the Tuskegee ideal of hard work, self-esteem, and Christian virtue [which] raised both expectations and competence, challenging white supremacy within the context of a nonpolitical and individualistic education”⁴⁸ Like Booker T. Washington, Dooley stressed the education of ‘the head, the heart, and the hand’. This tenet and its character building implications left an indelible mark on Southern Normal’s alumni. Breland Bradley, using the same language as Washington and Dooley, recalled this life lesson: “The philosophy was to educate the head and the heart, so we were taught to care about other people. And so, although you had acquired an education that really meant nothing unless you were going to use it to enhance mankind.”⁴⁹

The foremost techniques the school used for applying these tenets were through the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and by physical work on the grounds of the school. Through all of these methods, the Christian ethos maintained its influence over the school’s activities. Each school day began with a 7:45 AM devotion in the campus chapel. Other devotion periods were available throughout the day as were theology classes. Professors and other workers on campus were encouraged to keep a “Christian attitude” that would influence the students through all of their activities – in and out of the chapel.

Academics were the most important of these other activities. Maintaining a challenging curriculum that offered an array of classes was the first priority in the

⁴⁸ Flynt, 227.

⁴⁹ Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

scheduling and creating classes. The available courses reflected the academic range of the students. An example of this was found in the annual catalog: “Latin is placed in the curriculum for the benefit of such persons who contemplate attending some college or taking an advanced course. Otherwise we recommend agriculture and business methods instead.”⁵⁰

In addition to academics, extracurricular activities played a significant role in campus life. The National Honor Society, The Thespians Club, The Science Club, choir concerts, athletics, and music were all actively represented. One of alumni Willie McGhee’s proudest accomplishments involved playing the lead in “Our Town” and being able to remember and recite his lines fifty years later.⁵¹ Breland Bradley recalled her own introduction to classical music, stating, “We were exposed to [the] work of Mozart, Beethoven at a very early age and was able to identify the different movements and the minuets and all of that.”⁵² Along with these programs, each year the school hosted several weeklong celebrations. To honor Mr. Dooley’s birthday, the school hosted Negro History Week each February. This event included, “a meeting on Negro History, Negro Music, Race Relations and Advancements.”⁵³ The most significant event of this type was Religious Emphasis Week. During this week members of the Dutch Reformed Church, who sponsored the school, would travel south from Michigan. The administration canceled school and members of the church and other guests gave religious lectures. Breland Bradley specifically remembered this as, “a real good time in the spring when we

⁵⁰ Annual catalog.

⁵¹ Willie McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

⁵² Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

⁵³ *The Brewton Standard*, 4 February 1954.

would have hayrides and bonfires and sit around and sing fun songs and things like that.”⁵⁴

Along with academics and extracurricular activities, the school administration expected the students to help maintain the physical appearance of the school. Not only did this aid with the upkeep of the grounds, but it also taught the students industrial and vocational skills. For many students, this activity provided an opportunity for them to either earn a scholarship or make extra money. On its 400-acre campus, Southern Normal kept gardens, horses, swine, and cattle for dairy products and for meat. The school also sold their homegrown sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, and peanuts at market. Willie McGhee explained it this way, “Southern Normal in the food line was more or less self-supporting because they killed their own cows, they killed their own hogs, they killed their own chickens.... They did everything. And see, they made their own peanut butter, they made their own mayonnaise. They canned out there in the summer. They canned the corn, the blueberries, the peas, they had everything.”⁵⁵ Southern Normal’s self-sufficiency provided many students with jobs. McGhee remembered that, “The boys had assignments out there like gathering the eggs from the chickens, milking the cows.... You had kids stayed out there in the summer that worked on the farm. In my growing up, they had one of the prettiest gardens. It was a huge garden. It’s like mustard, turnips, collards. They had tomatoes; they had onions. They had a strawberry patch and they had a blueberry patch.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

⁵⁵ Willie McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Although proceeds from the garden and the farm, along with tuition money helped pay Southern Normal's expenses, it did not cover the bills. Mr. Dooley realized this early in the school's existence. In 1919, in an effort to make ends meet, Dooley gathered up the school choir and embarked on a fundraising tour. Traveling north and singing in churches along the way, Dooley hoped to find contributors and patrons for the school. Dooley found his benefactor while performing in a Dutch Reformed Church (RCA) in Iowa. The church in Iowa notified the Reformed Church of America's headquarters in Holland, Michigan, who then arranged to manage the donations sent to the Brewton school. In 1924, the role of the church expanded. A special committee within the national Reformed Church of America's Board of Domestic Missions became the school's board of trustees. By assuming the role of trustee, the Board of Domestic Missions undertook all of the school's administrative and financial responsibility, including purchasing the campus of Southern Normal from James Dooley and continuing construction projects to expand the campus. For all major decisions concerning the school, a local committee in Brewton advised the RCA's general board. The general board then made their suggestion to the Board of Domestic Missions, who would have the final vote. Not until 1968 did these circumstances change. Under this new arrangement with the church, a local board of directors was appointed, supplanting the RCA's Board of Domestic Missions. While the Reformed Church still owned the school, local board members, who the school now chose, gained control over general finances.

Although the Reformed Church of America had almost total control of Southern Normal School for forty-four years, the two entities had a pleasant relationship. Students fondly recalled how the church interacted with the school. Many church members

stopped by the school on their way to vacation in Florida, others sent down clothing donations for the students, and several made the trip south each year for Religious Emphasis Week. What the church members did best was to show the students at Southern Normal a different type of white person. This interaction between the black students and the white church members illustrated an alternative to their segregated lives, a different way to approach the other race.⁵⁷ Breland Bradley remembered that, "...they gave us another glimpse of white people other than the people from Brewton because they would touch us, they would hug us, embrace us. And we got to know them. We could sit and talk with them. And they respected us and they showed compassion and love. And that meant a lot and that was not what we were accustomed to."⁵⁸

Affiliation with the Dutch Reformed Church had other advantages for the students at Southern Normal. Graduating from Southern Normal practically guaranteed students a place in one of the RCA colleges. Willie McGhee received one of the church's scholarships to attend school at Central College in Iowa. Not only did the Dutch Reformed Church pay his way, but McGhee also knew exactly who funded his education. He recalled, "The ones that were behind me were the Men's Bible Class of the Third Reform Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan."⁵⁹

A real chance to go to college, exposure to scholarships, and being in a scholastic and supportive environment were only some of the advantages of attending Southern Normal. These characteristics were unique to the Southern Normal campus and truly differentiated it from the surrounding black public schools run by the city and county

⁵⁷ Cynthia Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 46.

⁵⁸ Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

⁵⁹ McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

school boards. Although the students at Southern Normal had more advantages than those at Booker T. Washington, the playing ground became even when faced with the cold, hard fact that they were still in a black school in the Deep South. With this commonality, the students in these two school systems witnessed Alabama's gradual and hard fought attempt to enforce the *Brown* case and then anxiously waited to see what would happen in their town, to their schools, and to their way of life.

Chapter 3: A Delayed Reaction: The Integration of Brewton City Schools

In 1954, the Supreme Court forever altered the education of American children. According to the outcome of *Brown v. Board of Education*, announced on May 17, 1954, separate was no longer equal and years of unequal education and appalling facilities for black children had the possibility to finally end. After the initial reaction of the outcome of the case wore off, the new issue centered around when and how *Brown* would be carried out. Although *Brown* created the legal justification for allowing the races to be educated together, the case did not specify how. Leaving its implementation open-ended allowed state governments and local school boards the authority to dictate how and, most importantly, when, integration would take place.⁶⁰ Although in 1955 the court passed *Brown II* in an effort to give teeth to their original decision, it still lacked a specific timetable for its application. Therefore, in a myriad of ways and in countless decisions, school boards across the South applied *Brown II*'s phrase, "with all deliberate speed," and took their time in implementing or rather delaying desegregation.⁶¹

1954 to Brewton, Alabama:

Like most Southern states, Alabama did not react kindly to the passing of *Brown*. Also like most Southern states, Alabama had only applied the "separate" part of *Plessy v. Ferguson*'s "separate but equal" law. In this Deep South state, nothing had been equal between the races. In education this was especially evident; in 1939, for every \$100

⁶⁰ Cecelski, 7.

⁶¹ Anand, 15.

dollars spent on educating whites, the state spent \$6.24 on educating blacks.⁶²

Obviously, the state had never honestly enforced *Plessy v. Ferguson* and, judging from the reaction to the latest Supreme Court case, it was not planning on enforcing *Brown* either. When the justices announced their decision in the *Brown* case in 1954, the Alabama State Legislature suggested that schools be closed in order to prevent desegregation.⁶³ Governor John Patterson echoed this sentiment in 1958, when he proclaimed that state schools close to avoid integration.⁶⁴

From the national to the state level, opinions concerning *Brown* ranged from enthusiasm to disgust; yet in Brewton, Alabama, the case did not even make the front-page of the local paper, *The Brewton Standard*. The only local acknowledgment of the case could be found in the paper's weekly editorials. In these columns, the editor, William Brooks, Jr., reacted to the state legislature's response to *Brown* rather than giving an original opinion of his own. Titled "A Negative Approach," Brooks's editorial bluntly called the state legislature "crazy" and argued that as representatives of Alabama they should try to conduct themselves as professionals not as reactionaries.⁶⁵ During 1954, this was *The Brewton Standard's* most direct remark concerning the momentous Supreme Court case. For the rest of the year, rather than confronting *Brown* itself, Brooks focused on the condition of black schools and education in general. Although taking this approach in his column can be seen as a type of reaction to the *Brown* case, it is also a noticeable omission in his reporting of state and local news.

⁶² Clark, xv.

⁶³ *The Brewton Standard*, 9 September 1954.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 2 October 1958.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 9 September 1954.

If the editor's response seems low key, considering the magnitude of the case, then, judging by letters sent to the editor, the response of the town seems even more so. During the year of 1954, *The Brewton Standard* published only three letters to the editor dealing with either the condition of black schools or the *Brown* case specifically. The first of these letters, from John A. Douglas, a self-described "white-GI and Brewton boy," came three months before the *Brown* decision. Writing from Korea, where he was stationed, Douglas wished to congratulate the editor on his columns that had argued for better, more equal, black schools. Douglas wrote, "For the condition of the colored in our country in regards to the buildings is a disgrace to the state for they are nothing but fire traps and the colored people pay just as much tax as you and I." The *Standard* encouraged the editor to continue publishing these bold statements, asking him to "keep plugging" and reminded him and, indirectly, the reader that, "for once we leave this old world we are all the same." Brooks included a telling editor's note to the end of Douglas's letter. He added, "Thanks many times for the support and comfort you give. It gets lonesome sometimes."⁶⁶ Douglas's letter, from Korea, was the only "local" response published from the white community concerning black education or the passing of *Brown* during 1954.

The other two letters were from the black community, specifically the campus of Southern Normal School. The first came from Samuel Williams, Director of Religious Education at the private school. Appearing after the *Brown* decision, his letter suggested that the two races needed to meet and talk about segregation in Brewton. To do this, he proposed biracial meetings within local churches and public service forums on the radio,

⁶⁶ *The Brewton Standard*, 18 February 1954.

all resulting in the two races becoming better acquainted. In his letter, Williams reasoned that if the two races became more familiar with each other then other encounters would not seem strange, thus resulting in a freer and more productive dialogue.⁶⁷ William's suggestion mirrors one that the editor would make later that year when he suggests that, "perhaps in the process of meeting the common problem of providing adequate schools for all the children of the state, white and Negro citizens may find a better understanding of each other."⁶⁸ These preconceptions of the other race are the focus of the third letter, written by thirteen members of the senior class at Southern Normal School. In it they claimed that, "members of both races are dominated by tradition and prejudice; therefore they are unable to see integration as a reality."⁶⁹ Although both Williams and the seniors wished to bring possible integration to the forefront of local discussion, in 1954, another education issue diverted its route.

Not only did this school related issue attract more interest in both the newspaper and from local officials, but also, more so than the *Brown* decision, it dictated the course of the local school system for the next ten years. In 1953, the University of Alabama's Bureau of Educational Research came to Brewton in order to survey all of the public schools within the city school system. In March of 1954, two months before the *Brown* decision, the committee presented their findings to the Brewton City Board of Education. Their statement was simple: "The school plant facilities for Negroes in the city of Brewton are quite inadequate."⁷⁰ Their demands were more complex: "a complete

⁶⁷ *The Brewton Standard*, 10 June 1954.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 23 September 1954.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 27 September 1954.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 18 March 1954.

overhaul of the Negro School system.”⁷¹ The University of Alabama group found in Brewton what was occurring throughout the state; black children received their education in abandoned houses, run down buildings, or borrowed churches. Their supplies came second-hand, receiving the leftovers and castoffs from the white schools. Although the UA group noted this situation, what the group found most alarming was the lack of a public high school for black children. The editor reported their remarks, commenting that, “It is the bitter fact that there is no public high school in Brewton for Negroes. Neither the city nor county provide such a school.”⁷² The reported condition of the area’s black schools should not have come as a surprise. The editor had previously written on the state of black schools and the Brewton City Board of Education had been well aware of their school’s inadequacies, yet it was not until the University of Alabama review applied outside pressure and exposed the deficiencies to the public that the board finally decided to attack the problem. Therefore, in Brewton, 1954 became a landmark year, not for the *Brown* case, necessarily, but rather due to an outside group enforcing a then outdated law stipulating that in Alabama, if it is separate, it must be equal.

Rushing to Build; Building to Stall (1955-1960):

The findings of the University of Alabama’s Bureau of Education and their subsequent directives caused the Brewton City Board of Education to set into motion a chain of events, which resulted in a major building initiative for the black public schools, a reflection on the condition of education in general, and the first noted local reactions to

⁷¹ *The Brewton Standard*, 11 March 1954.

⁷² *Ibid*, 18 March 1954.

the *Brown* decision. Although the UA group's report initiated these activities, the local board of education initially opted to apply their own timetable to accomplish the group's demands. Slow to start, the building process in Brewton got a sharp push when in 1957 the University of Alabama group returned. They continued to apply their outside pressure and reprimanded the city board of education for having "no visible change since 1953."⁷³ Only after the group's second visit, did the creation of a black school system leave the planning stages and start to become a visible reality.

As soon as the University of Alabama group left Brewton, the city board of education began examining the suggestions that the group left behind. In order to comply with their directives, the board needed to make major improvements to the existing black schools and start building a new high school immediately. The Brewton City Board of Education opted to create a center of black learning at the Booker T. Washington School site. At the time, the school consisted of an elementary and middle school; at six years old, it was also one of the newest schools of the entire city system. John Stewart, the city superintendent claimed that, "as the school was the newest of the system, it was actually in better condition ... than the white schools."⁷⁴ Centering black education at the Washington site also consolidated several of the rural neighborhood schools that had serviced the black community for so many years. Closing these schools and moving their students to the Washington site also cut down on the amount of repairs that needed to be done to the existing school structures.

⁷³ *The Brewton Standard*, 2 May 1957.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 3 October 1957.

Once the UA group made their second visit in 1957, building began in earnest.⁷⁵ By 1958, a contract had been approved for a new black high school and the groundbreaking ceremony occurred on the fourteenth of April.⁷⁶ Classrooms were the first priority for the new high school. After they were completed, a lunchroom and auditorium came next. By 1960, an athletic field was added to the new school complex. Although at this point construction on the high school was complete, improvements continued within the system. In 1963, new classrooms were added to the existing Booker T. Washington Elementary School.

Once the construction got started, it continued a rapid pace, but money was still needed to fund these building projects. Members of the white community had donated all of the land at the Washington School site, but the board of education still needed money for the construction of the new school and the renovation of the older facilities. Initially, the Brewton City Board of Education, along with the city council, contemplated borrowing the money for such a large development.⁷⁷ This idea soon gave way to a proposed one-cent sales tax, which would go directly to schools and a sewage disposal system. The members of the board of education and the city council took their suggestion to the public for a general vote. According to newspaper reports, there was neither open support nor open opposition for the tax. Yet sound approval came from the school board itself and the editor of the paper, William Brooks, Jr. School board member Broox Garrett claimed that there, “are no alternatives to the tax plan.”⁷⁸ The editor concurred, claiming that, “it is a responsibility and duty to provide children with adequate

⁷⁵ Ibid, 14 November 1957.

⁷⁶ *The Brewton Standard*, 3 April 1958.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 30 August 1956.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 6 February 1958.

public schools.” Brooks also noted that merchants in the community had refused to make any public statements about the tax because “they do business with ‘both sides’.”⁷⁹ Even without a variety of open opinions concerning the tax, local citizens heard the pleas of the newspaper editor and the school board members; the sales tax passed. Around 800 voters came to the polls with 442 of them voting for the tax and 349 against, giving its approval a four to three margin.⁸⁰

With a large building campaign and a sales tax increase, education became a hot topic with many citizens. In 1956, with impending changes in the school system to come and in the wake of the University of Alabama group’s evaluation, editor William Brooks used this increased interest in education to write a series of editorials on the subject, titled “South’s School Problem.” A seven part series, which ran from May 17 to June 28, 1956, this series claimed to start from a simple premise: “The problem at hand is the matter of providing a sound basic education for all the children in Brewton, in Escambia County, in Alabama and in the South.”⁸¹ Yet it also stemmed from the issue that after the *Brown* decision, education had become a battleground for an array of race-related groups. The editor claimed that although the NAACP and the White Citizens Council had been outspoken in their diametrically opposed interests with schools, neither articulated a specific plan for attaining their goals. Starting from this basis of examining schools without affiliation with a specific group or agenda, the editor highlighted what he saw as the major issues facing education. These included a lack of teachers, inadequate transportation, unequal “Negro” schools, lack of available money, and an apathy from

⁷⁹ *The Brewton Standard*, 20 April 1958.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 27 February 1958.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 17 May 1956.

citizens concerning the schools' conditions.⁸² Throughout his series, the editor put all of these topics under the overarching problem of correcting the current situation in the school system.

Obviously, Brooks had a point about education in Alabama. The state's schools are traditionally and notoriously under funded. These fiscal issues became so dire in 1933 that many of the schools in the state had to close down due to lack of operating money.⁸³ That said, the points Brooks raises concerning education, would be applicable with or without the *Brown* decision. Yet, when he makes his argument, *Brown* can no longer be left out of the equation. It is in this shadow of *Brown* that the editor argued for Alabama's historically flawed school system to be fixed before integration can occur.⁸⁴ Brooks's prioritization suggests that a segregated school system should be fixed, which at the date of publication in 1956, was illegal. The editor's proposal and his basic denial of *Brown* are especially evident in the third installment of "South's School Problem." In it Brooks suggested that, "No money, other than the barest minimum needed for maintenance should be spent on schools for white children. No building for white children should be built except in direst emergency... All possible money for buildings should be spent for Negro schools until there is a decent school building in every Southern community for every child."⁸⁵ Although the editor makes this bold remark, he essentially ignores the *Brown* decision. Therefore, by suggesting that segregation be fixed, Brooks inadvertently followed the example of his fellow Alabama lawmakers and school board members.

⁸² *The Brewton Standard*, 17 May, 28 May 1956.

⁸³ Flynt, 10, 19.

⁸⁴ *The Brewton Standard*, 17 May 1956.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 31 May 1956.

Arguing for black schools to be made equal before they can be integrated follows a stalling technique that became common across the South. Many, including the editor, believed that *Brown* was decided because black facilities were appallingly unequal to their white counterparts and that *Plessy v. Ferguson* had never been truly applied.⁸⁶ Due to this conviction, state and local officials began making facilities equal once *Brown* passed in an effort to appease the black community into not wanting to desegregate. According to Alabama historian, Wayne Flynt, “Alabama’s political leaders had seen the tendency in court rulings for a decade before *Brown* and had tried desperately to improve education for black children in order to implement the 1890s Supreme Court standard of separate but equal.”⁸⁷ This late effort was especially evident in teachers’ pay. For a state historically short on education money, between 1939 and 1951 black teachers’ salaries increased 212 percent. This enormous pay raise still did not equal the pay of the state’s white teachers, who in 1955 received six more dollars than their black counterparts. The state also channeled additional money into black students; increasing their funding by 310 percent during the 1940s.⁸⁸ Although the state became an extreme example of this belated attempt at equalization, the same efforts are seen in Brewton, but on a smaller scale. Granted, the city of Brewton did have the University of Alabama’s Bureau of Education as an excuse for their renovation of the black schools; but, the parallels between the timing and funding of these improvements and the passing of *Brown* are evident at both the state and local level.

⁸⁶ *The Brewton Standard*, 17 May 1956.

⁸⁷ Flynt, 343.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 343.

Besides the building project and the editor's priorities on improving education, Brewton's possible stall tactics are also apparent in local citizens' commentary, much of which appeared in *The Brewton Standard* during the 1958 school tax debate. Once the one-cent tax became a possibility at the end of 1957, the school board immediately began responding to rumors concerning the new black high school. Broox Garrett, a school board member, stated, "There is no way that we can guarantee that a new school building will provide the answer to possible integration, and I guess we might as well admit that is a good part of what we are talking about."⁸⁹ This type of dialogue continued into 1958 as the vote got closer and was overheard in forums that were organized by the board of education in order to educate the community about the tax. The local paper covered each of these events. One of the resulting articles recorded a "white mechanic" who wondered aloud "if this will keep blacks from attempting to desegregate."⁹⁰ The paper recorded no response to his comment. The newspaper coverage also implied that more of this speculation occurred than was being quoted. This suggestion comes not only from Garrett's previous statement, but also from the statements of Ira Lucas, a leader in the black community. In one of the forums, he told the newspaper reporter, "We've been hurt a little by the questions some white people have asked us." He goes on to declare that, "Most of the responsible colored people of Brewton have their homes here, they have jobs and they are interested in living in Brewton for a long time. We aren't interested in trouble. We want a school."⁹¹ Lucas and Garrett's comments imply a reaction to questions and comments like that of the "white mechanic." Each of their

⁸⁹ *The Brewton Standard*, 3 October 1957.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 6 February 1958.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 13 February 1958.

comments responded to a group of people, not an individual, who made remarks concerning the intentions of the black community. If this implication is true, then Brewtonians openly verbalized their impression that the building and refurbishing of the Booker T. Washington schools was a way to prevent, or stall, integration.

Although these state and local stalling tactics were against the spirit of *Brown*, they were not necessarily against the enforcement of *Brown*. Even the editor asked in a 1958 editorial, “What is meant by ‘all deliberate speed’?”⁹² It is due to this open timetable and lack of regulations for such monumental change that most communities, including Brewton, concocted their own meaning of “deliberate” when applying the “with all deliberate speed” clause to their own situation.

Intermission (1961-1965):

After the late 1950s building rush and tax increase, the beginning of the next decade seemed hopeful. The Booker T. Washington School system had been renovated and a black high school had been built. Due to overcrowding, construction on a new white high school began in 1961.⁹³ With the success of both the T.R. Miller and Booker T. Washington schools, the editor had even stopped mentioning integration in his weekly column. Although the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act began enforcing desegregation on scale yet unseen, the board of education in Brewton was caught off guard when the federal courts ordered that local desegregation start by the 1965-1966 school year. Margaret Breland Bradley, who graduated from Southern Normal in the

⁹² *The Brewton Standard*, 18 September 1958.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 31 August 1961.

spring of 1965, went so far as to say that during her senior year, “no one was really talking about integration at all.”⁹⁴ Brewton was not alone in its denial of *Brown*. Since the *Brown* decision in 1954, Alabama had not made any sort of recognizable effort to desegregate the state’s schools. Only twenty-four percent of blacks in Alabama attended an integrated school during the 1965-66 school year.⁹⁵ It was this school year, for Brewton, that integration would make its first start.

Freedom to Choose, Forced to Go (1966-1971):

In 1965, the Brewton City Board of Education, along with all other segregated schools in the area, received the news that if they did not start an integration program immediately, then they could lose all of their federal funding. Moreover, if the schools did not voluntarily initiate this program, then they could be forced by federal courts to do so. Not only was there a threat at the federal level, but also at the state. Federal judges in Alabama informed school officials that the state courts had the right to cut off local and state funds, in addition to the federal funds. When given this set of options, the Brewton City Board of Education chose to comply voluntarily.

In making their decision on how to integrate, the board adopted a plan that centered around “Freedom of Choice.” The local newspaper defined the phrase this way: “the students in the designated grades will have freedom of choice to attend any school in the city school system for which they are qualified.”⁹⁶ For Brewton City Schools, this ‘freedom’ would be applied over a three-year span. The first year, planned for the 1965-

⁹⁴ Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

⁹⁵ Harvey, 23.

⁹⁶ *The Brewton Standard*, 26 August 1956.

1966 school term, the first, eighth, ninth, and twelfth grades would have the opportunity to participate. The next year the grades would be expanded to the second, seventh, tenth, and eleventh. According to this arrangement, by the 1968-1969 school term, all grades in the city school system had the possibility of being integrated.⁹⁷ Months before the beginning of each school year, students were given forms to fill out in order to register for the school they chose to attend. The board of education asked the students to make this decision with their parent or legal guardian; teachers and other school personnel were asked not to give advice. Also, students were told to consider the different advantages of each school when making their decision. For example, at Brewton Elementary School, Brewton Junior High School, and at Washington Elementary School and Washington Middle School all of the same subjects were taught in the first through eighth grade. A few differences appeared in the high school courses; Booker T. Washington taught industrial arts, while T.R. Miller taught business math.⁹⁸ The choice was then up to the student on where to attend. On paper, this plan appeared to be an open opportunity for any one whom so desired to participate in integration. What it resulted in was another stall tactic. Not only in Brewton, but across the South, Freedom of Choice was widely used as a way to prevent and further delay the integration process.⁹⁹

This stalling technique successfully delayed integration in Brewton until 1968, when the justice department decided that progress under Freedom of Choice was insufficient. Indeed, in Brewton City Schools, since the program started in 1966, only

⁹⁷ *The Brewton Standard*, 26 August 1965.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 31 March 1966.

⁹⁹ Harvey, 19.

forty-four children had transferred schools.¹⁰⁰ These small numbers left indelible impressions on the students who attended school at the time. Mike Godwin, a white student at Miller, remembered, “In 1966, fall of ’66, black students came to Miller with Freedom of Choice. I had I think just one student the first year, Rose.”¹⁰¹ Harriett Godwin, also a white student at Miller, also remembered seeing that isolation: “‘Forced integration’ did not come to Miller until after I graduated, but my junior and senior years we had what they called Freedom of Choice and about five blacks came to Miller. They were good students, but I always felt sorry for them, because there were so few of them.”¹⁰²

Aware of the low participation, the federal courts ordered that full integration be accomplished by the 1970-1971 school year.¹⁰³ In order to comply with these court orders, the Brewton City Board of Education closed Washington High School and transferred those students to T.R. Miller High School for the 1969-1970 school year.¹⁰⁴ During this period of forced integration, Jane Henderson, a white student recalled that, “We welcomed our new classmates and I can remember talking with my friends about how sad it must be for them to be uprooted during their senior year and have to go to a new school.”¹⁰⁵ After integrating the high schools, the board of education submitted a desegregation plan to the federal judges. Once the courts approved it, the board of education proceeded to rearrange both the students and the buildings within the entire city system. They decided that the new elementary school would comprise grades one

¹⁰⁰ *The Brewton Standard*, 20 February 1969.

¹⁰¹ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁰² Harriett Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁰³ *The Brewton Standard*, 25 July 1969, 28 August 1969.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 6 March 1969.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Henderson, survey interview, April 2000.

through four and be housed in the old Brewton Elementary School and Brewton Junior High School buildings. Middle school would consist of grades five through eight and be located at the Booker T. Washington School site. It became common practice during integration for the previously all black schools to be converted to the new desegregated middle school.¹⁰⁶ The high school would stay the same, located on the T.R. Miller High School site and encompassing grades nine through twelve.¹⁰⁷

Not only did locations have to be altered and students moved, but the faculty required changing too. Black and white personnel were transferred throughout the new system. Although, the Superintendent of Education, Dale T. Garner claimed that, “funds were provided to employ enough teachers so that a student would not have a black teacher the entire day,” Margaret Gibson, a black student at Southern Normal at the time remembers the rumor that, “‘fair skin’ blacks were placed in white schools to smooth transition.”¹⁰⁸ However they were placed, interactions with the new teachers became some of the students best memories from school. Glennie Culliver, a black student who transferred to Miller during forced integration, fondly remembered one of her white teachers: “I just loved Mrs. Fouts to death, every time I think about Mrs. Fouts, she was just so loving, so sweet. She had a way of making you feel good.”¹⁰⁹ Harriett Godwin, a white student, had a similar experience: “one of [the black teachers] was our favorite, Helen White taught typing and I had her at least one year, if not two. Everybody was really crazy about her.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Cecelski, 9.

¹⁰⁷ *The Brewton Standard*, 19 February 1970.

¹⁰⁸ Dale T. Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000; Margaret Gibson, survey interview, 4 December 2000.

¹⁰⁹ Glennie Culliver, interview with the author, 18 October 2004.

¹¹⁰ Harriett Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

Along with transferring teachers, principals were also moved throughout the system. Superintendent Garner stated that, “It was a perception that excellent administrators were employed in the schools and that they could handle most problems. The white elementary principal was transferred to the middle school and he had an excellent reputation for strict discipline.”¹¹¹ In addition to this shift, the principal of Booker T. Washington High School, John Fisher, became the assistant principal at T.R. Miller High School.

These teachers and administrators helped to guide the students through the most transitional and difficult phases of integration. A multitude of changes occurred for these students. They were going to school with members of the opposite race for the first time, but for many, it was some of their first real encounters with the other race. Not only were there expectations and stereotypes to deal with, but also apprehension about what the new school year would hold. Glennie Culliver, a black student who transferred from Booker T. Washington to T.R. Miller during forced integration recalled this experience:

I was scared the whole time.... Because we had a teacher [at Booker T. Washington] that would always down grade us and he said that when y’all go to T.R. Miller y’all are going to be lost, ‘cause the kids at T.R. Miller are much better behaved than we are, that the kids at T.R. Miller would not write on the desks and would not misbehave, and would not do the little things that we always did. I was so afraid when I went, all the sudden all I could talk about was goin’ to T.R. Miller, goin’ to T.R. Miller, went to T.R. Miller – first thing I saw was desks written all over, all right – that [is] not true, and then I met some of the kids and I

¹¹¹ Garner, survey interview, 9 September 2000.

said to myself, some of the kids are very rude to the teacher, and I said, awwwww..., he just really distorted how we would fit in, so that was one of the things I had, I had that stereotype that he gave us.¹¹²

Although many of the students did initially believe stereotypes about their fellow classmates, soon they discovered several commonalities. Mike Godwin remembered, “They dressed like we dressed. We all loved soul music. That was probably a factor, I’ll be honest with you, the music.”¹¹³

These similarities were found in the schoolhouse, but they were also found outside of school, on the football field. Mike Godwin remembered realizing some of these similarities during football practice:

That fall when Frank and Edward [two black athletes] came out I was in the tenth grade and I’ll never forget we were practicing on the baseball field... people were about four deep all the way from there around the field. We were practicing... It was at 3:00 and Frank and Edward came... Neal [the high school in the adjoining town] didn’t even have practice that day so they could come over here.... It was just havoc when they came out... everybody, just spectators from the community, even the older people... I mean just people that were just there to spectate. And this wasn’t a publicized event, they were just coming out. Word just got strung around. Matter of fact, we just learned about it like a day or so before, the coach said, ‘all right, we’re going to have some players out and we’ll have two you know’. Now for the spectators that came out it was more of a

¹¹² Culliver, interview with the author, 18 October 2004.

¹¹³ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

curiosity. They weren't there to protest them coming out. It was just the, just to see what it was like, you know, what's going to happen. I think that they thought there'd be some problems and there was no direct effort to run them off, but at the same time, the coaches, we were all in shape having gone through summer practice and everything. In fact they just walked out in full pads and no training. So they both went out and they stuck it out. They were good. They weren't like super athletes at that time... they just weren't quitters. But what was amazing, Frank was probably one of the best defensive players to ever play at Miller... I played right beside him on the line the whole time and .. never any animosity and that sort of thing. We wanted players to try to win the championship and we didn't all buddy-buddy, you know after the games and stuff. I mean it was still a you might say a segregated society, but as far as being courteous and working together on the team, there was at least teamwork. Matter of fact I had a great deal of respect and it changed my view on just about everything, you know, about what's right and what's wrong and you know I didn't view blacks as agitators anymore. And I really, that's the first point in time I really realized these people are struggling, you know, for equality. It really, it dawned on me.... I mean, that moment, I know there was, you know, it was a, it , it changed me inside, that's all I can say.¹¹⁴

Integration was a time of change – inside and out, for blacks and whites alike.

For some of the black students, these changes became some of their most positive memories of integration. Carla Johnson, a black student who came to Brewton

¹¹⁴ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

Elementary School during Freedom of Choice, recalled: “I haven’t had any problems with it. Most of my friends were Caucasian that I can remember.... Because, well, my parents, my mom built a nice house and everything and everybody [the black children] thought I was better than any of them because I wouldn’t invite them over. They were kind of jealous and stuff.”¹¹⁵ Glennie Culliver also came to see integration as a positive way to escape some of the inequalities of her previous school: “I always said that to me integration was the best thing that ever happened. That’s my opinion and I say that because when I went to school, if you were poor you were not treated fairly at all.”¹¹⁶

So, by the 1970-1971 school year, in compliance with the federal order, the Brewton City School system totally integrated all of their schools. There were no riots, no protests, no outcries published in the local paper. Bernice Sims, a black parent, best summed up Brewton’s experience: “My kids were one of the first kids to go to Miller. But we had no problem. I think we had one little incident. We had no stress, at least I didn’t.... I consider Brewton one of the easiest places.”¹¹⁷ All of these events occurred in a peaceful manner and without real mention of creating a private “white flight” school. But why? What factors were present in Brewton that not only made integration successful but also made it a different experience from other towns in South Alabama?

¹¹⁵ Carla Johnson, interview with the author, 9 August 2004.

¹¹⁶ Culliver, interview with the author, 18 October 2004.

¹¹⁷ McDowell, 187.

Chapter 4:
All This, But Why?: Analyzing Integration in Brewton

“It has been estimated that 100 private schools will open in Alabama by September this year. It is noteworthy that Brewton does not find it desirable or necessary to have one of them.” - Tom Gardner, “No Private School,” 7 May 1970¹¹⁸

Between 1965 and 1970, South Alabama became a hotbed for school desegregation difficulties. Initiated by the 1964 Civil Rights Act’s enforcement of *Brown v. Board of Education*, parents and students across Alabama protested initial integration and then later protested their loss of Freedom of Choice. These protests created anxious standoffs between local residents and school officials, which resulted, in many instances, in the creation of a private “white flight” school. Eventually, this phenomenon surrounded the city of Brewton. To the north of Brewton, in Butler and Choctaw Counties, black and white students boycotted their schools for four days. Over 24,000 students, half the enrollment, participated in order to show their opposition to busing, distance of travel, and integration.¹¹⁹ To the southwest in Baldwin County, forty-two parents of black schoolchildren filed a petition with federal judge, Frank Johnson, in an effort to keep their neighborhood school open. The parents feared overcrowding and the loss of sixteen teaching jobs, held by black teachers.¹²⁰ In Mobile County, whites picketed in order to protest the loss of Freedom of Choice.¹²¹ This enclosure of Brewton by integration woes was evident to *The Brewton Standard*’s editor. In his weekly column, he made note of plans in Andalusia, Atmore, and Monroeville, Alabama, and in

¹¹⁸ *The Brewton Standard*, 7 May 1970.

¹¹⁹ Harvey, 36.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 183.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 36.

Milton, Florida, to create white flight schools. The editor stated, “We’re surrounded by neighboring towns that have programs in various stages of progress for private schools for elementary [through] high school students.”¹²²

In this atmosphere and in these surroundings, the city of Brewton chose not to create a white flight school. Unlike the surrounding areas, the city school system’s integration was free from protest, boycotts, or petitions. Not only were the results of Brewton’s integration different from other areas in South Alabama, but they also differed from what happened in Brewton’s own county. For the Escambia County School system, the Board of Education received petitions from white parents concerning busing and a sit-in occurred at one of the schools. Ultimately, white students left Escambia County High School, in Atmore, Alabama, in order to attend Escambia Academy, a newly created private school. So why were the results in Brewton different, not only from their state, but also from their area and their county? In order to suggest answers to this question, primary source research and interviews were conducted. The resulting possibilities are the statements that most frequently intersected with other sources. They fall into the broad categories of a general reaction to the exploits of the state, a lack of local factions, Brewton’s racial make up, a small town persona, and also the presence of Southern Normal School. Although each of these factors played a major role in Brewton’s successful integration, the overarching suggestion that connects all of these is the leadership abilities of the men who ran the town, served on the school board, and were ultimately in charge of all major decisions.

¹²² *The Brewton Standard*, 7 May 1970.

A State's Image, a City's Decision:

During the Civil Rights era, Alabama became particularly notorious. Possibly the “deepest” of the Deep South states, Alabamians created many of the images that defined opposition to the Movement. From Birmingham’s dogs, to Selma’s bridge, to the permanent scowl of George Wallace’s face, these images not only characterize the Movement, but, for outsiders, they also characterized Alabama. Although the case can be made that these images actually constitute a true picture of white Alabama’s sentiment, several of the residents disagree, none more so than the editors of *The Brewton Standard* from 1954 to 1970.¹²³ During those sixteen years, responding to the nation’s image of Alabama became a major theme of their editorials. The most common way they approached this theme was to respond to other civil rights activities occurring throughout the nation, as well as those in Alabama. Both editors, Brooks and Gardner, not only noted events in Little Rock, Arkansas, Clinton, Tennessee, and Tallahassee, Florida, but they also made an effort to include news items from outside the South; for example in New York State, New York City, and Chicago.¹²⁴ Through this technique, the editors chastised the events taking place in the South, while simultaneously pointing out that racism is actually a national problem, not just a Southern one.¹²⁵

Even if the editors attempted to paint Alabama in a new light, the simple facts of the state’s activities got in the way. After the fallout from George Wallace’s “Stand in the School House Door” and the Selma to Montgomery march, both of which were covered by national television crews, local editor, Tom Gardner had finally had enough.

¹²³ During the span of this paper, the editor of the paper changed. William Brooks, Jr. served from 1946 until July of 1958. He was replaced by Tom Gardner.

¹²⁴ *The Brewton Standard*, 2 May 1957, 3 January 1957, 6 September 1956, 23 January 1958.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 29 August 1957, 16 March 1957.

During several of his editorials in 1965, Gardner dealt directly with the nation's perception of Alabama. While being criticizing the state's errors, Gardner also acknowledged several positive features about Alabama. Yet, in the end, Gardner had to admit that Alabama, as a collective state, was heading in the wrong direction. In referring to Alabama's efforts to defy federal laws, Gardner wrote, "Actually we have wasted too much time with the wrong objectives in mind. That is past, now, and we need to turn toward working for a better Brewton and Escambia County, and a better Alabama."¹²⁶ Through this statement, Gardner separates himself, and ultimately the town, from the state's priorities. He essentially asserted that for Brewton to be a better town it cannot have the same priorities as the state.

However, as the 1960s progressed, the differences between the objectives of the state and the town became even more evident. While Governors George and Lurleen Wallace, ordered local superintendents to ignore federal orders to desegregate their schools, Brewton worked out a plan that, in time, would allow for a peaceful integration. The difference between the state and local agenda was best illustrated by the outcome of the gubernatorial election of 1970. After Lurleen Wallace died in office in 1968, Lieutenant Governor Albert Brewer assumed the role of governor. A more liberal politician, who eventually would be classified as one of the "New South" governors, Brewer's 1970 campaign, included a platform that promoted a better relationship with the federal government and a more liberal policy on school desegregation and race relations. The election of 1970 pitted this up and coming image of the New South against George Wallace, the state's rights proponent and segregationist. Fearing a loss, Wallace played

¹²⁶ *The Brewton Standard*, 6 May 1965.

his much exploited race card and cast Brewer in the role of “nigger lover”, a phrase Wallace often used when he could think of nothing else to say. As a result, the election essentially boiled down to a question of race. In one of Wallace’s closest campaigns, he managed to turn the election from one about the future direction of the state to one about race, and therefore won back the governor’s office.¹²⁷ Although Wallace visited Brewton in an effort to gain votes, he lost the town, but won the county. In Brewton, Brewer had 1521 votes to Wallace’s 902. In Escambia County, Brewer had 4371 to Wallace’s 6567.¹²⁸

As evidenced by Brooks and Gardner’s editorials, and the people’s vote in 1970, Brewton as a town was tired – tired of their area’s bad reputation and tired of their state’s wrong priorities. If the state was not going to reset their priorities, then the town of Brewton was determined to. Although proud of their Southern roots, in many ways Brewton was *in* Alabama but not *of* Alabama. A local black resident, Bernice Sims, phrased it this way, “I think people knew it [desegregation] was coming and we had had so much of the demonstrations and different stuff surrounding us until we didn’t want it here.”¹²⁹ Not wanting it here, not voting for Wallace, not wanting the state’s priorities, all of this added up to eventually not acting like the state.

“Klan Go Home”:

A leading factor in the difference between the town and the state was the absence of strong factions in Brewton: there was no reported Ku Klux Klan activity in the town;

¹²⁷ Harvey, 39.

¹²⁸ *The Brewton Standard*, 7 May 1970.

¹²⁹ McDowell, 185.

there was no reported White Citizens Council; and the town's NAACP was weak. This vacuum gave Brewton a unique character that differentiated it from the rest of the state. When these groups did make an appearance, it was on a small scale and short lived. For the editor of the paper, he used his column to call each of these groups extreme, including the NAACP. Especially after the 1956 Autherine Lucy debacle at the University of Alabama, editor William Brooks took the opportunity to rebuke both the mob violence led by the White Citizens Council and the NAACP, who helmed Lucy's attempt at desegregation.¹³⁰ This type of dialogue continued into 1957, when in his editorial titled, "A Look at Racism," Brooks reiterated his position that groups such as the Klan and the White Citizens Council along with the NAACP are two sides of the same coin. He claimed that, "racism in any color is ugly."¹³¹

During these years, in the shadow of *Brown* and with the Lucy case fresh in the collective memory, Brooks began making his comments concerning factions. It was also during these years that white extremist groups started to appear in the area. The White Citizens Council was the first of these groups to make a brief appearance. In a town named Flomaton, which straddles the North Florida state line, fifteen miles south of Brewton, the WCC held an organizational meeting in February of 1956. *The Brewton Standard* reporter noted over 800 people in attendance, but claimed to recognize only a few them as being natives of Brewton. At the meeting, the main speaker, Walter Givhan, from Dallas County, urged those in attendance to "preserve segregation." In his front-page article, the reporter wrote that both the meeting and Givhan's remarks were a direct

¹³⁰ *The Brewton Standard*, 16 February 1956.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 1 August 1957.

response to the *Brown* decision and Lucy's attempted desegregation. Although the article reported that there was a large crowd, this was the newspaper's first and only mention of the group meeting.¹³²

Receiving much more press and meeting closer to home, was the arrival of the Ku Klux Klan. First reported in 1957, the Klan's initial meeting occurred in the East Brewton City Hall.¹³³ The reporter, who picked up a lead on the story, was denied an interview with any of the Klansmen; subsequently he was also told that he could not attend their meetings. The reporter was left to count the cars in the parking lot and examine their license plates. From this evidence, he deduced that approximately twenty-five people attended the meeting and that the participants were from both the local area and out of town.¹³⁴ The devoted reporter continued his attempts to get an interview or permission to attend a meeting, but was always denied.¹³⁵ The last recorded manifestation of the Klan in the Brewton area consisted of an organized 'auto parade' through town. Comprised of around twenty cars and following a path through Brewton and East Brewton, the parade passed through many of the black residential areas. Coincidentally, the Mayor of Brewton, C.C. Fountain, encountered the parade as he was returning from visiting his sick mother in Mobile. When faced with such a spectacle,

¹³² *The Brewton Standard*, 9 February 1956.

¹³³ Only Murder Creek separates East Brewton and Brewton, yet the differences between the two are much wider than the creek. Brewton schools are part of a city school system, whereas East Brewton's are in the county system. Also, Brewton tends to be more upper and middle class with a significant black population, whereas East Brewton, at this time, was working class with an extremely small, almost negligible, black population. The lumber mills, along with the homes of the lumber barons, are all located in Brewton.

¹³⁴ *The Brewton Standard*, 18 July 1957.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 20 June 1957, 8 August 1957.

Fountain told the newspaper reporter, “We don’t need their kind here.”¹³⁶ This public display was the last recorded incident concerning the Klan in Brewton.

Not only did the front page of *The Brewton Standard* have continuous coverage of the Klan during the summer of 1957, but also the editorials did not miss the opportunity to comment on such an extreme group. With titles such as “The Klan is Not Welcome” and “Klansmen Go Home”, both editors William Brooks and Tom Gardner enthusiastically wrote of their dislike of the Klan.¹³⁷ In these columns, the editor insisted that, “because the Klan promotes hate, they are not welcome here,” and that, “we hope their demise in these parts is not exaggerated.”¹³⁸ The editor not only told the Klan to leave, but he also was curious as to why they were actually in the area. The editor admitted, “Most citizens are trying to figure out why the Klan met. There is no reason to feel that the Klan is any more needed or welcome here now than it was in months past. Since much of the agitation for the Klan has come from outsiders, most local citizens are likely to feel toward it as they do toward another organization at the opposite extreme of the racial question.”¹³⁹ Therefore, the editor took the opportunity to tell the Klan to get out of Brewton, and also indirectly, linked them with “the opposite extreme of the racial question”, which as far as the editor was concerned, was the NAACP.

Overall, the local NAACP chapter did not make many headlines in the newspaper. This omission could be for several possible reasons: the editors’ overt belief that the group is an extreme comparable to the Klan, the fact that the NAACP was banned in Alabama in 1957, or that the local chapter actually was weak. All three factors could be

¹³⁶ Ibid, 8 August 1957.

¹³⁷ *The Brewton Standard*, 8 August 1957, 27 June 1957.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 27 June 1957.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 18 July 1957.

involved in the reason that not much was heard from this group in Brewton. Yet, the possibility that most Brewtonians identified with was the lack of a strong local chapter. Neither Margaret Breland Bradley nor Glennie Culliver, both local black citizens, remembered there ever being a strong NAACP.¹⁴⁰ Breland Bradley believed it could be due to the strength of local churches: “Most of our encouragement came through the black churches and when students got ready to go to college, everybody would just chip in and put money into, into the plate and, you know, and then, of course, back then everybody cared about each other’s children, and so we were always looking forward and, you know, forward thinking, but there were no black organizations back then to give any kind of guidance or support.”¹⁴¹ Another local black citizen, Willie McGhee, agreed that the NAACP was weak, but he believed that weakness was a result of the overpowering presence of Southern Normal School: “We had a Junior NAACP when I came along. That was like in 1948. But it wasn’t very active then. It was just, it had its beginning, but it was not active.... But see, I don’t think basically that the NAACP really took a hold in Brewton for two reasons. We didn’t have major racial problems in Brewton. That was one thing. Secondly, when you have what you call your educated populace then it is you have less problems.... Because the school was so instrumental in doing so many things, you see.”¹⁴² Overall, from the available evidence it appears that the NAACP in Brewton was not a factor during integration. It also appears that the only organized black associations in town were either the churches or the private black school, Southern Normal. For better or worse, these weak organizations, whether it be the White

¹⁴⁰ Breland Bradley interview, 20 October 2004; Culliver interview, 18 October 2004.

¹⁴¹ Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

¹⁴² Willie McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

Citizens Council, the Klan, or the NAACP, contributed to Brewton having a different atmosphere than other areas of the South.

Brewton's Race, Brewton's Attitude, and Brewton's Pastime:

The absence of strong factions was just one of several ideas on why Brewton chose not to create a private school. Another contributing factor, suggested by local residents, dealt with Brewton's racial make up. Superintendent of city schools during integration, Dale T. Garner, admitted that, "Probably, the foremost reason was the fact that the black – white ratio was about thirty-five percent to sixty-five percent and that was viewed as workable."¹⁴³ Gwen Walton, who was a black student during the 1960s, echoed this suggestion: "Then Brewton was more or less the majority white and probably did not have as many blacks in the town as those mentioned earlier [Atmore, Monroe Country, and Conecuh County]. They might have realized that there would still be a white majority."¹⁴⁴ Clearly, both Garner and Walton suggest that because of the smaller black population, Brewton's white community did not view integration as threatening, as did surrounding towns.

The lack of a perceived threat could come from prior, more voluntary integration that occurred in the local work force. From the town's inception through the 1960s, blacks in Brewton primarily worked either as domestics or at T.R. Miller Mill Company.¹⁴⁵ Historically, timber mills are a more integrated enterprise, especially compared to cotton mills, which were lily white and located in the surrounding areas, but

¹⁴³ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

¹⁴⁴ Gwen Walton, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁴⁵ McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

not in Brewton.¹⁴⁶ The integration of the workforce made the races more familiar with each other and created the economy upon which Brewton was dependent. Marie Heaton, a white student during the 1960s, concurred: “The economy in our community depended on the white and black workforce. Perhaps because of the timber industry in our area and our dependence on the joint workforce, a spirit of cooperation existed.”¹⁴⁷

The timber industry not only created industrial jobs for black men, but the wealthy lumber barons, who ran the industry, needed a large domestic workforce. Local black women worked in the wealthy white homes as both nannies and house cleaners; also, Brewton’s white elite employed black gardeners, drivers, and maintenance men. Due to Brewton’s concentrated wealth, according to Mike Godwin, “it probably had a lot more people working in their houses than say Atmore or other rural areas that didn’t have the black housekeepers.”¹⁴⁸ Although, the blacks in Brewton relied either on the Mill or on wealthy white families for employment, Willie McGhee believed that this not only integrated people, but also lifestyles:

Now let me take you to something that most people wouldn’t want to talk about. The men primarily worked with T.R. Miller Mill Company. Okay. Most of the ladies that were working did domestic work, were either maids, they were cooks, and we termed the phrase now – babysitters. Okay. But look at something realistic like, for those who worked for families, who could afford it now, the mothers may not eat the food at the job, but they would bring it home so when the kids had food like the other kids would have, you see, say the white kids for

¹⁴⁶ Flynt, 123.

¹⁴⁷ Marie Heaton, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁴⁸ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

clarity, okay. Broccoli, cauliflower, in addition to [their] turnips, collards, mustard, sweet potatoes and what have you – they ate some of the finest. So they knew about these kinds of things. Now if you went to Atmore, to Evergreen, those kids were, black kids wouldn't know about those kinds of things.¹⁴⁹

This integration in the workforce and slight integration of lifestyles helped mentally ease the threat of forced integration for both races. Essentially, it made the eventual integration between the races seem not so foreign. Mike Godwin continued this argument when he stated that, “Even though we're a small rural community, we're more like a city – like in that we relied on a lot of industry.... And so many of the black community worked in the homes of the wealthy people here or worked in the mills and factories... and just worked daily with [other] people. You see what I'm saying? The interaction. It wasn't like this was a foreign thing.”¹⁵⁰

The integration in the workforce eventually led to integrating neighborhoods. According to historian Wayne Flynt, small towns often encountered more residential integration than larger areas. Urban cities in the South experienced a “white flight” phenomenon; meaning that, white families left the city core and moved to newly created suburbs in order to avoid black neighbors. Because small towns do not have suburbs, residential integration occurred more often.¹⁵¹ Mike Godwin noticed this in the Brewton area: “Also in Brewton, unlike a lot of Southern cities, if you look at our black communities, they're mingled throughout the city. In other words, in Atmore, we got a railroad track, it was black on one side and white on the other side. In Brewton, it's a

¹⁴⁹ McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁵¹ Flynt, 361.

little bit unique to have them intermingled throughout the community with no clear line of demarcation is what I'm getting at."¹⁵² This residential integration that both Flynt and Godwin describe created yet another way that blacks and whites became familiar with each other before forced integration occurred, therefore making the process less threatening for both sides.

Small towns literally do have less room to move, but they can also have a certain charm or outlook that many Brewtonians attribute to the town's successful integration. Journalist George Sims noted that, "like Americans before 1877, Alabamians still oriented their lives toward the 'island' communities in which they lived. They lived with the confidence that the lifestyle they controlled in their autonomous hometowns was superior to any other way of life."¹⁵³ This certainly applied to citizens of Brewton, who definitely believed that the town's character made it unique from surrounding areas. Superintendent Garner remembered a "contagious feeling that we can achieve" along with "high educational expectations" set by local citizens.¹⁵⁴ Margaret Gibson, a black student during the 1960s, agreed with this perception, when she stated, "Of course, you know the Brewton environment, we are a community that loves each other no matter what the color of your skin may be. We are always ready to help each other. We as a people are concerned about one another and this consensus has been maintained down through the years."¹⁵⁵ This attitude is one that Gwen Walton recalled, "Basically, in this town, everyone knows everyone.... Regardless of ... backgrounds, people seem to work

¹⁵² Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁵³ McDowell, 174.

¹⁵⁴ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

¹⁵⁵ Gibson, survey interview, 4 December 2000.

together well on the surface.”¹⁵⁶ Bernice Sims, another local black resident, projected this small town attitude specifically onto the topic of race. She believed that, “In Brewton, the race relationships was pretty good. We never had any real hard problems. I think the people in Brewton wanted to see it but they were afraid of how they would be labeled. When we did have integration, we had no problem.”¹⁵⁷

Yet, for all of its positive aspects, Brewton was definitely not immune to racism. Margaret Breland Bradley specifically remembered these instances: “Well, in Brewton in ’65 and prior to then there were places that blacks, of course, could not go. When we went to the theater we had to sit up in the balcony and if you went down to buy snacks you had to wait until all the white people were served and then you would be served. If you went into a store there was a white line and a black line. You had to wait until all the white people bought their items and then they would take you. And you were just not treated with dignity; you were not treated like a person.”¹⁵⁸ Glennie Culliver also remembered these types of occurrences in Brewton. After describing a particular incident that happened when she was a child, Culiver was asked if she ever questioned her mother on why such a thing occurred. She replied, “I knew why, I knew why, but I didn’t ask her. I was old enough to know why, the whites go there and the blacks go there. I remember that.”¹⁵⁹

Although in many areas of Brewton the races were separate, once school integration occurred, there was one place that the races could unite and cheer for a common cause – the sports field. Superintendent Garner saw the sports program at T.R.

¹⁵⁶ Walton, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁵⁷ McDowell, 185.

¹⁵⁸ Breland Bradley, interview with the author, 20 October 2004.

¹⁵⁹ Culliver, interview with the author, 18 October 2004.

Miller as a possible reason for Brewton's successful integration. He stated, "Another reason was a very successful sports program that provided a common cause for both races."¹⁶⁰ As an extracurricular activity that the students could choose to participate in, sports gave a different focus to a possibly turbulent time.¹⁶¹ Mike Godwin, who played football at T.R. Miller, recalled, "I'll say this. When we started that school year [1969] and we started winning, I mean, we won the state championship in football, we went to the state championship in basketball, I mean, nobody had time. I mean, everything was real positive with the school and that, that no one at the school focused on the negatives is what I am getting at. So [sports] was a positive."¹⁶² During this first year of integration, not only did the sports teams at Miller become extremely successful, but also Miller's boys' basketball team played the boys' team at Southern Normal School during a local tournament. Therefore, sports created a place where the races could not only work together, but also a place where they could find commonalities. Lee Otts, who was a member of the school board during integration agreed, " 'course there is no question about the fact that we have had such a good football team that's sort of, you know, it's held the school together, there's no question about it that having a good athletic program has meant a lot."¹⁶³ Sports provided an accessible outlet where people who had never worked together, could literally play as a team. Although Brewton did have its share of racism and the black population was not as large as some other areas, the town still found a way to overcome differences and unite in order to produce a successful integration of the schools.

¹⁶⁰ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

¹⁶¹ Harriett Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁶² Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁶³ Otts, interview with the author, 22 October 2004.

Southern Normal - The Alternative Community School:

During integration, almost without exception, school boards shut down black educational institutions in preference to white facilities. Except for where black schools were turned into middle schools, black children left their schools to attend the white school; white students practically never left their schools to integrate the black school. With the closing of their schools, black children had to cope with losing an institution that had been central to their community; they lost their school mascot, school name, mottos, traditions, and the culture that had surrounded the school.¹⁶⁴ By shutting down the schools in this manner, integration already got off to a bad start. Although this occurred in Brewton, with the closing of the Booker T. Washington system and its transformation into Brewton Middle School, the black community still had an alternative to call their own – Southern Normal School.

Local integration did nothing but strengthen the role of Southern Normal and necessitate its existence. For black students who did not want to be forced to integrate at Miller, they could go to Southern Normal. Mike Godwin agreed, “There were a lot of black students that went to Washington that chose to go to Southern Normal rather than Miller.”¹⁶⁵ This outlet and alternative for black students had been suggested as a factor as to why Brewton’s integration was successful. Board of education member, Lee Otts, stated, “One of the reasons, of course, I’m sure is the fact that we had Southern Normal School there. It was a place for some of the blacks to go if they were not satisfied with

¹⁶⁴ Cecelski, 8-9.

¹⁶⁵ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

the arrangements.”¹⁶⁶ Not only was there the suggestion that the black students perceived of Southern Normal as an alternative, but also that white parents saw it as a viable reason not to create their own private school. Superintendent of the Escambia County school system, Harry Weaver, who served during integration, speculated that, “Brewton had a private black school that educated many of the black students in this area, so there was no need for [white] private schools, so the parents of the Brewton schools were not interested in establishing private schools.”¹⁶⁷ Therefore, Southern Normal became an outlet for both the white and black communities.

Knowing that this outlet existed and was utilized relieved the perceived threat from both the white and black communities. It also helped to ease tensions. Willie McGhee, a graduate of Southern Normal, believed that had Southern Normal not been in existence, then Brewton’s integration would not have been so peaceful. McGhee simply stated that without Southern Normal, “I think we’d a had a lot of tension in our community.”¹⁶⁸ The black community, especially, saw Southern Normal as an alternative to integration can be proven by the rise in private school’s attendance during the 1960s. In 1960, the school had a graduating class of only thirty-eight. This number almost doubled by 1967, when sixty-two seniors graduated from Southern Normal. In 1969, the first year of forced integration in the city high school, Southern Normal, again, had sixty-two to graduate.¹⁶⁹ This number coincided with a decrease in the city school’s black population. In 1966, the city had 849 black children in attendance, but by 1970, this

¹⁶⁶ Otts, interview with the author, 22 October 2004.

¹⁶⁷ Harry Weaver, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁶⁸ McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

¹⁶⁹ Enrollment numbers for Southern Normal come from attendance sheets kept by Willie McGhee.

number was down to 708.¹⁷⁰ These numbers leave no doubt that local blacks used their strong private school, as an option to desegregation. Southern Normal School not only provided an alternative, but it was also a resilient monument of their culture that forced integration could not take away and the city school board could not shut down.

Yet one reason that the Southern Normal School became so utilized was due to the support it received from the Brewton City Board of Education, the Escambia County Board of Education, and of several of the influential white families in town. On the surface, Southern Normal School appeared to be totally funded by the Dutch Reformed Church; the church also appeared to provide financial help to local students, but not all was as it seemed. As stated earlier, the ultimate responsibility for Southern Normal School ended with the Board of Domestic Missions, who acted as the school's board of education. This Board received advice from the church's General Board, located in New York City, and the General Board received their information from the local board, located in Brewton. Appointed by the Dutch Reformed Church, the all-white local board represented some of the most influential, lumber-baron families in Brewton, including the Neals and the Millers. Therefore, although Southern Normal School gave the impression of being an alternative to a white controlled public school system, in all actuality the two schools were run by essentially the same group of white men. Willie McGhee explains the situation this way, "Brewton as a town, and this is something that's a credit to, uh, if you want to spell this out, to the white people in Brewton, they were really interested in Southern Normal.... They would anytime that Southern Normal put something on they were very instrumental in supporting it. They may not go to the games, but they would

¹⁷⁰ *The Brewton Standard*, 6 August 1970.

lend financial support.”¹⁷¹ Although the white families appeared to be genuinely interested in the school, the issue may actually have been about controlling the local population.

Representing Southern Normal School through the local board was one way white families controlled the school. Another way was through the city and county school boards. In an effort to supplement the funding of the Dutch Reformed Church and as a way to prolong segregated schools, the Brewton City Board of Education and the Escambia County Board of Education struck a deal with Southern Normal School and the Dutch Reformed Church. For the city school system the agreement primarily dealt with the lack of a black high school within Brewton city limits. The school board, along with some of the wealthier families, funded scholarships for select local black students to attend Southern Normal School. An article in the local paper explained the situation this way: “In Brewton, Negro children attend High School through an arrangement between the city and the Reformed Church of America.”¹⁷² Willie McGhee, who because of this system attended Southern Normal, explained his own experience: “See now, when you went through the ninth grade you had a graduation and in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade you knew you were going to Southern Normal if you stayed in school.... Either the city would pay for it or you’d get a scholarship.”¹⁷³ Therefore, the city board of education alleviated the problem of not having a black high school by paying the scholarship fees to Southern Normal. Once the city system built a high school for the black population in 1958, this scholarship program came to a halt. Glennie Culliver, who

¹⁷¹ McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

¹⁷² *The Brewton Standard*, 30 August 1956.

¹⁷³ McGhee, interview with the author, 19 October 2004.

attended the Washington High School system in the 1960s, explained how this new situation affected her, “I had no choice because at that time I could not afford a private school. I could not afford a private school and I went to the city school ‘cause it was free. That was my dilemma. It didn’t bother me, ‘cause the people at Southern Normal, you had to be a rich kid to go to Southern Normal and I was not rich. So I didn’t like that. I was not rich, so I would not fit in with that crowd.”¹⁷⁴ Obviously, not everyone had the opportunity to use Southern Normal as a substitute for attending an integrated school. Nevertheless, in many ways, the success of Southern Normal School and its availability for black children as an alternative to integration came at the hands of the local white population.

Local Leadership:

Although Brewton’s apparent wish to be different, lack of factions, racial make up, and the presence of Southern Normal School are all reasons that explain why Brewton’s integration occurred so smoothly, one suggestion does tie them all together – strong leadership. Particularly the school board members themselves, but also from the editors of the local paper and the prominent families in town, their ability to guide the town through a time of potential turmoil has been repeated in interviews, surveys, and the local newspaper. Marie Heaton stated, “I believe [a private school] was not established because of the wisdom and foresight of our community leaders.”¹⁷⁵ Mike Godwin concurred, “There was an effort not to be confrontational. And of course, that didn’t

¹⁷⁴ Culliver, interview with the author, 18 October 2004.

¹⁷⁵ Heaton, survey interview, April 2000.

apply to everyone, but that was the mood of the leaders of the community.”¹⁷⁶ Jane Henderson repeated this sentiment: “Regarding the issue of a private school, I believe that this never became necessary in Brewton and East Brewton because the leadership provided such a smooth transition and because any anticipated problems were addressed quickly and fairly.”¹⁷⁷ Having leaders who chose to guide the community in the right direction, not in protests and boycotts, but rather in working together and bettering the community, has been the reason suggested most often and the one reoccurring factor that ties all of the other possibilities together.

One of the most public and outspoken local leaders was the editors of *The Brewton Standard*. In their weekly column, the two editors who served during this period, William Brooks and Tom Gardner, created a platform that not only informed the community of local, state, and national events, but also attempted to guide the community in a more balanced direction. Starting in 1965, when the city school board faced the task of creating a plan of action to implement what eventually became Freedom of Choice, the editor encouraged the local populace to act with cool heads during this anxious time. In 1965, he urged that, “When the time comes for the school classrooms to actually be desegregated, we hope that the people of this country will accept the fact with equal dignity and good graces. To do other wise would surely put our people in a position on nothing to gain and all to lose.”¹⁷⁸ In that same year, Gardner encouraged the community to remember “community obligation and civic duty.” He also reminded the reader that,

¹⁷⁶ Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

¹⁷⁷ Henderson, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁷⁸ *The Brewton Standard*, 10 June 1965.

“we can be of help by not being a hindrance.”¹⁷⁹ This type of advice continued through Freedom of Choice and into the period of forced integration. In the summer of 1969, when it became known that Booker T. Washington High School would be forced to integrate into T.R. Miller High School, the editor remarked that the earlier attempt at desegregation had, “been undertaken without so much as a ripple in the community.” Furthermore, he stated, “We have every confidence that the people of Brewton and Escambia County will strive to permit the schools to abide by the decree with the same common sense approach to peace and quiet that has prevailed during the past few years.”¹⁸⁰ The idea of “peace and quiet” during school desegregation sounded like a great alternative to all of the violence occurring in Alabama, which supplied a visual reminder of what could happen if Gardner’s advice was not heeded.

Gardner not only championed peaceful integration but he also offered very vigorous arguments against private schools. This rhetoric began in 1958, when, in light of statewide opposition to integration, Gardner asked his readers to personally consider what their public school meant to them and the role it played in the community.¹⁸¹ Although, Gardner never actually admitted that he was for integration, he was almost rabid about his support for education for all children and for doing, what he believed to be, the right thing. These convictions became evident when he argued against private schools. He reasoned that, “even if the legality of such ‘private’ schools could be upheld, there is little chance they could sustain the tremendous loss of all public education funds. The fact of the matter is that without the public school system, there would be little

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 17 June 1965.

¹⁸⁰ *The Brewton Standard*, 12 June 1969.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 2 October 1958.

education afforded to a vast majority of our young people.”¹⁸² Because not everyone could afford private schools and because that would result in all children not being properly educated, Gardner vehemently opposed the new private school phenomenon. This type of argument was indicative of all of Gardner’s editorials: he did not openly support desegregation, yet the way that he champions education and common sense resulted in a successful integration policy.

Along with his open dislike of private schools, Gardner often congratulated the town’s citizens on how well they handled integration and on their unwillingness to follow their Southern counterparts in creating a private school. In an editorial titled, “No Problems Here,” Gardner gloated, “The school situation in Brewton was being held to an extremely high plane and noted absence of any strong move toward a private school here.”¹⁸³ Later that year he stated, “Worthy of comment is the fact that we have heard no mention in Brewton of a move to start a private school.... It is also a credit to the fact that integration of facilities and student bodies has been carried through without a hitch on the part of parents and students themselves.”¹⁸⁴ Gardner did not reserve this congratulatory tone for only the local citizens; rather, throughout the integration process, Gardner made a specific point to recognize, support, and thank the local board of education and its superintendent. This type of praise for the school board started early with Gardner’s predecessor, William Brooks. In 1959, he stated:

Brewton is fortunate that men of foresight and wisdom are elected to the board of education and city council. If it has not become apparent to the citizens of

¹⁸² Ibid, 7 May 1965.

¹⁸³ *The Brewton Standard*, 5 February 1970.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 7 May 1970.

Brewton, it has been to outsiders. In a letter addressed to the board of education from the State Department of Education, the board members were commended for their farsightedness in keeping abreast of recent trends in developing and planning facilities for a comprehensive program in the schools. The letter also states that when the long-range school program that has been adopted by the board and council is completed, the school system in Brewton will be unsurpassed anywhere in the state.¹⁸⁵

Gardner's support matched that of Brooks. Gardner's magnanimity only grew as Freedom of Choice began and integration got into full swing. From 1964 on, Gardner's editorials continually asked the readers, and thus the community, to support the board of education.¹⁸⁶ In 1970, once the schools had been successfully integrated, Gardner concluded that, "We believe that our schools have come through periods of possible turmoil unscathed in the manner of so many others and that most of the quiet, cool manner in which changes have been met must go to the superintendent of education. We cannot pass by this opportunity to speak our gratitude to our local school officials. Actually, we have not stopped long enough to count our blessings."¹⁸⁷ Obviously, Gardner gave practically all the credit for the direction and planning of Brewton's integration to the school board.

Gardner was not alone in his praise. Superintendent of Schools, Dale T. Garner, believed that the leadership of the school board was an essential component: "I believe that a private school was not formed because of a concerted effort by the Brewton City

¹⁸⁵ *The Brewton Standard*, 19 February 1959.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 20 May 1965, 20 February 1964.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 5 February 1970.

Council and the Brewton City Board of Education.”¹⁸⁸ They received the credit; yet, this was a school board that was slow to act and essentially attempted to stall integration by refurbishing the black school system. Several in the community believe that the slow pace of integration actually paved the way for more success. Jacqueline Stone, a white parent during integration, stated that, “I think now that the school board was reluctant to announce a plan and they wanted to move slowly so people would accept desegregation of the school without incident.”¹⁸⁹ Marie Heaton repeated this belief: “The slow process enabled everyone to become more accustomed to having blacks and whites together in public places, so the change in the school systems did not seem so abrupt.”¹⁹⁰ Although the slow pace of integration may have seemed like a stall tactic, Bernice Sims attributed the pace of Brewton’s integration to the attitudes of both the black and white communities. She commented that the whites were not violent in opposing change and that the blacks were not pushing for change too rapidly.¹⁹¹

Even if integration occurred at a slow pace, the evidence available indicates that the school board accepted the situation and moved forward. As early as 1954, John R. Miller, who was then on the school board, stated, “Well, this colored problem is facing us and we might as well admit it. We can’t stick our head in the sand.”¹⁹² By first admitting and then accepting the situation, the school board could eventually move on with desegregation; this was unlike others in Alabama who used the excuse of ‘state’s rights’ to prohibit the integration of schools. Rather, the school board in Brewton chose to

¹⁸⁸ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

¹⁸⁹ Jacqueline Stone, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁹⁰ Heaton, survey interview, April 2000.

¹⁹¹ McDowell, 185.

¹⁹² *The Brewton Standard*, 24 June 1954.

follow the law, as it came, and to obey federal officials. Therefore, through a slow, but coolheaded approach, the schools eventually desegregated in a successful fashion.

Their acceptance of the situation and their determined approach was evident in the comments of the school board members. In an interview with Lee Otts, who served during the entire 1960s, he repeated over and over, almost as a mantra, that the goal of the school board was to have “the best public schools.”¹⁹³ By having “the best public school” then conversely, a private school was not an option. Otts goes on to recall: “We, the school board, agreed that we would do what we could to just keep the public school because you could tell how much money it took away from the community to have a private school. The state didn’t pay for it, it had to come out of the people and the community and so that was one of our main goals that we had – was to keep everything going further for the public school and just to make it better.”¹⁹⁴ Superintendent Garner concurred, stating that there was “a perception that a private school may be detrimental to both races and to the city of Brewton.”¹⁹⁵

Garner claimed that the school board did not only accept the reality of integration, and had determined to do the right thing, but that they, as a board, believed they would be successful at doing the right thing. He stated, “We believed that we were going to be successful because we believed we had planned well and had ‘done’ our homework. I’m sure mistakes were made but, I believe, those mistakes were minimal.”¹⁹⁶ In many ways, their drive to be successful came directly from the fear of failure. In an interview with Superintendent Garner, he listed very specific fears that he had while planning how the

¹⁹³ Otts, interview with the author, 22 October 2004.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

schools would desegregate: “My greatest fear was that integration would create a chaotic situation that might result in violent acts. That these acts may result in publicity that might impede the integration process. That strict discipline would be difficult to maintain. That curriculum offerings would be affected in a negative way. That traditional financial avenues would dry up. That one race or the other would be intimidated and thusly stifled of creativity. To repeat, my greatest fear was that a private school would be formed and that the ‘little’ people’s children would not receive a quality education.”¹⁹⁷ The fear of failure and the fear of specific kinds of failure drove the school board members to strive for success.

Lee Otts believed that the character of the school board and that the board was appointed and not elected helped to facilitate wise decisions. According to Otts, had elections been required, most of the men on the school board would not have chosen to run:

We had people like Tom Neal, Jack Hines, Dr. Scharnitzky, and all these others that had served, and me too, none of us would have run for the office. What you would have gotten running would be someone with some sort of agenda that they’re trying to change or push through, and I, just for that reason, I didn’t feel like it was good to have [elections]. I felt like it was much better the way it had been because you could just look at who served on it over the years, not putting myself in there necessarily, but all the others. We’ve had some outstanding citizens in Brewton, who served on the school board and you hadn’t had that on the county school board because they’re elected. So that’s been my big argument

¹⁹⁷ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

about it, well you can't say that it takes politics completely out of it because the mayor and the city council are the ones that appointed us, but yet they didn't appoint somebody who had an agenda, they appointed somebody they thought would be good for it.¹⁹⁸

According to Otts, these were men of character and men who, apparently, had no reason to serve except for the betterment of the school and for their children who attended the public schools.

Yet, the school board members also represented some of the most influential families in town. The board's membership included doctors and lawyers along with members of Brewton's founding 'lumber baron' families. From Brewton's beginning, these families provided leadership for the town; thus, there was no reason for this to change when it came to guiding their children's education. Starting with their involvement in the Brewton Collegiate Institute, then their donation of land for T.R. Miller High School, and also with their support of Southern Normal School, these families continued to give land for the construction of the black schools and to serve on the school board. During the period of integration, John Miller and Tom Neal both served on the board. These men are two representatives of what the T.R. Miller Mill anniversary booklet called, "a consortium of three families whose husbandry and stewardship have encouraged a continuing pattern of uninterrupted growth."¹⁹⁹ Not only did these lumber barons encourage growth in their business, but they also encouraged it in the town and the school system as well.

¹⁹⁸ Otts, interview with the author, 22 October 2004.

¹⁹⁹ McDowell, 154.

It was the opinion of several of those interviewed that had these families wanted a private school, then one would have been built. Even Superintendent Garner stated that, “In that time frame and today, if certain peoples wish to start a private school, one will be built.”²⁰⁰ Most of those interviewed agreed that integration was successful because these families refused to support the notion of a white private school while at the same time they have continued to support the Brewton City Schools system. Harriett Godwin saw these families as contributors to a successful integration: “Brewton’s a wealthier city and by that I mean we have families, old money. I think education and tolerance, they were seen, you know, in a different way. I mean, these were people that weren’t threatened by integration, but in some ways knew that their own livelihood depended on the community working together.”²⁰¹ Mike Godwin concurred, “the powers that be, that there are so many [black and white people] in the community that were either working for them.... They, you know, felt like it was a situation that wouldn’t get out of hand ‘cause they had so many people that worked, you know, on the payroll and stuff.”²⁰²

During integration and since, these families have continued to provide financial support for the city school system. This support is so important that many see the Brewton City School system, especially T.R. Miller High School, as essentially being a private school with no tuition. This belief was aided by the fact that Brewton City School system is small, only overseeing one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school; it is also the only city system in the entire county. Glennie Culliver flatly said that, “to me, it was a private school.” She continued, “You ask me that question on why

²⁰⁰ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

²⁰¹ Harriett Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

²⁰² Mike Godwin, interview with the author, 21 October 2004.

T.R. Miller didn't go into a private school during integration, and I couldn't find an answer to that, but like I said they [local families] control everything anyway, they have control, it is a controlled school."²⁰³ The support of these wealthy white families appeared to be essential to the notion of T.R. Miller as a private school. Carla Johnson stated, "If they got private schools in Brewton, I think what would happen is the city school would close because they wouldn't have the funding to run it without backing."²⁰⁴ Eddie Nall, a student at Miller during integration concurred: "If Brewton had started a private school I do not think there would still be a T.R. Miller High School. The people who could afford to send their kids to the private school would have done so, and the other people would have gone to W.S. Neal [the county school in the adjoining community]."²⁰⁵ Therefore, real or not, it is the perceived conviction that these families are not only the reason there was no private school, but also the reason that the public school has been successful. Through these families' leadership, along with the editor and other members of the school board, the city of Brewton was strongly guided in a different direction than other areas in South Alabama.

²⁰³ Culliver, interview with the author, 18 October 2004.

²⁰⁴ Johnson, interview with the author, 9 August 2004.

²⁰⁵ Eddie Nall, survey interview, April 2000.

**Conclusion:
In the End There is Still the Story**

In the end, there is no definite answer to these questions presented. There simply can't be. Not unless all the participants in Brewton's integration are interviewed and their accounts taken into perspective will it ever be known what really happened. From the interviews and research conducted thus far, several reasons have been suggested as to why Brewton not only did not create a white flight private school, but also why integration occurred peacefully. These reasons include a desire to be different, few factions or groups, the alternative of a black private school, Brewton's racial make up, a conscious or unconscious decision to learn from other towns' mistakes and try to get it right, sports, and strong and established leadership. Leadership stemmed from Brewton's money. Each of these factors played a role, and each could be argued as a reason, but none of them can stand alone as a solitary conclusion as to why Brewton integrated as it did. Rather, Dale T. Garner, the Superintendent of Schools during integration, believes that all of these factors together explain the reason why Brewton's experience was different. He argued that what was special about Brewton, what made Brewton different, was that all of these factors came together in one town during a potentially tumultuous time. The absence of any one of these factors would have led to a different outcome.²⁰⁶ Whether the right thing was done at the right time or not, the point is that Brewton's integration was successful and continues to be so. Races are still educated together and the percentage that once was a 'workable' sixty-five percent to thirty-five percent is now closer to a fifty-fifty ratio. Yet, in Alabama, and around the South, the private white

²⁰⁶ Garner, survey interview, 9 April 2000.

flight schools, created during integration, are still in operation. Therefore, the point of remembering Brewton's integration and the point of contemplating its questions is to learn about how and for what purpose people are educated today and therefore to contemplate the effects that these private schools continue to have on today's society. Towns, schools, and society in general are still segregated and it is by asking questions about previous integration experiences and assembling together their lessons that this sort of phenomenon can prevent being repeated.

Yet, in this same vein, the reason to remember is simply so that we will never forget. In researching this project, much of Brewton had not necessarily forgotten, but had not recently recalled. The "I don't know's" and the "I had never thought about it before's" are explainable, but they are not acceptable, especially when the students who lived these lives are quickly leaving ours. No matter how small the town, no matter how seemingly insignificant the plot, these are stories that must be recorded, must be passed down. It is our history and by not asking the questions that provoke these responses, it is possible that some people's stories will never be heard; some aspect to an event will never be given. Knowing that those stories make other stories richer and deeper; that they make this thesis relevant – knowing that, then it is unacceptable that more often than not these voices are not heard. Therefore, why Brewton's integration occurred may never actually be know, but because of this thesis, people can now know how it occurred.

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Vita

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