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Reexamining Central High: American Memory and Social Reality

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NOTE: At the time of publication, author Damon Freeman was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently December 2006, he is a faculty member of the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Reexamining Central High: American Memory and Social Reality

Abstract

"The dead can be buried, but the past can't." Quoting an un-known writer, Elizabeth Eckford stood at the podium in Whittenberger Auditorium on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University and began to tell her story. On this brisk October night of 1999, several hundred people--black, white, Asian, and Latino students, faculty, administrators, local citizens, journalists and television cameramen--came to hear Eckford, now in her fifties, describe what it was like for her to approach Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, over forty years ago. As one of nine black students who bore the brunt of integrating the all-white school during the 1957-1958 academic year, she had come to the school alone on 4 September and was turned away by the Arkansas National Guard, who had been ordered by Governor Orval Faubus to prevent the black students from entering Central High. A crowd of hostile whites, mixed with news reporters and photographers from around the nation, followed her to a bus stop where she sat down on a bench and stoically waited for a bus to arrive while racial epithets were hurled at her. Still shaken by her experience forty-two years later, Eckford tried to stress to the listeners in the auditorium the importance of that moment and the dogged resilience of the Little Rock Nine in wanting to continue the experiment in school desegregation.

Comments

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Reexamining Central High: American Memory and Social Reality

Damon W. Freeman

"The dead can be buried, but the past can't." Quoting an un-known writer, Elizabeth Eckford stood at the podium in Whittenberger Auditorium on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University and began to tell her story. On this brisk October night of 1999, several hundred people--black, white, Asian, and Latino students, faculty, administrators, local citizens, journalists and television cameramen--came to hear Eckford, now in her fifties, describe what it was like for her to approach Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, over forty years ago. As one of nine black students who bore the brunt of integrating the all-white school during the 1957-1958 academic year, she had come to the school alone on 4 September and was turned away by the Arkansas National Guard, who had been ordered by Governor Orval Faubus to prevent the black students from entering Central High. A crowd of hostile whites, mixed with news reporters and photographers from around the nation, followed her to a bus stop where she sat down on a bench and stoically waited for a bus to arrive while racial epithets were hurled at her. Still shaken by her experience forty-two years later, Eckford tried to stress to the listeners in the auditorium the importance of that moment and the dogged resilience of the Little Rock Nine in wanting to continue the experiment in school desegregation.

Sharing the dais that night was a small, dark-haired white woman, roughly the same age as Eckford, who spoke about her connection to the events of 4 September 1957. Hazel Bryan, now known as Hazel Massery, was one of 1,800 white students who attended Central. She had come to school earlier that morning with her parents, who were among the thousands of whites who showed up that day to protest the admission of the nine black students. As the Arkansas guardsmen turned Eckford away from the school grounds, Massery found herself in the front line of a group of women walking steadily behind Eckford. Walking with her was Massery's friend, Sammie Dean Parker, another Central High student, who would be expelled several months later for attempting to organize a campaign among the white students to drive the Little Rock Nine out of school. At that moment, Massery twisted her face and angrily yelled at Eckford, who continued to walk silently. A photographer from the *Arkansas Democrat*, Ira Wilmer Counts, took the photograph, which quickly circulated around the world and forever etched in the minds of many Americans the stereotypical image of the racist southerner. Indeed, Massery found herself on the front page of most of America's newspapers the next day, and became the subject of unwanted scrutiny. For several years afterwards, Massery described her regret over her involvement that day and, deciding that she did not want to be "the poster child for the hate generation" and that her life should be "more than that moment," she personally contacted Eckford in 1963 and apologized for her actions. Since 1997, Massery stated she has devoted much of her life to promoting racial understanding through traveling with Eckford and speaking to schools, community groups, and other organizations about their roles during Central High's desegregation.

Massery and Eckford spoke about their experiences during the crisis and their efforts since then to promote racial understanding. They have also sustained a genuine friendship that developed over the years. One could easily celebrate their images as having changed from symbols of conflict, fear,

anger, and courage to that of reconciliation, friendship, and openness. Indeed, Eckford and the Little Rock Nine have arguably become representations of how far the nation has progressed in race relations; in 1998 the U.S. Congress honored them for their "selfless heroism" in the face of "bitter stinging pains of racial bigotry"(1). To many of the people she meets, Massery has also clearly become a symbol of the possibilities for racial reconciliation between white and black Americans. Once representative of racial conflict, Central High has become a symbol of reconciliation and racial integration as well; its student population is about sixty percent black and thirty percent white. In 1997, the school produced twenty-three National Merit semifinalists (one-sixth of all the semifinalists in the state of Arkansas) and in the 1990s, Central produced fifty percent of all African American student winners of National Achievement Scholarships in the state. Two years ago, the building became the first operational school to be named a National Historic Site, and the Little Rock Central High Museum and Visitor's Center was opened across the street as more than seven thousand spectators gathered to hear President Bill Clinton laud the Little Rock Nine(2). Many audience members in the auditorium stood up one after another and praised Eckford and Massery for their work and their courage, while others openly wondered how they could replicate their efforts in the Indiana University community.

Despite (or perhaps in spite of) the examples of Eckford, Massery, and the Central High community, it soon became evident that many black students in the audience questioned whether desegregation had in fact led to an improvement in socio-economic conditions for African Americans. During the question-and-answer period, several pointedly asked Eckford to compare black life in the 1950s during segregation with present-day conditions. Indeed, frustration could be sensed in the urgent tone with which some students spoke. Several argued that many blacks continued to be oppressed by an institutional racism that is much harder to solve than integrating a school or removing a whites-only sign. Eckford mentioned the prominent role that all-black Dunbar High School had played for Arkansas's African American community from the 1930s to the late 1950s in creating a small black middle class(3). She also described that since 1957 her neighborhood in Little Rock had actually become *more* segregated and increasingly black than before the Central High crisis.

A quick look at the history of racial desegregation in Little Rock since the 1950s confirms the persistence of racial divisions in education, housing, and economic well-being. Following the efforts to integrate Central High during the 1957-1958 school year, Governor Faubus and the Arkansas state legislature successfully closed all public schools in Little Rock for the 1958-1959 year. Many white voters enthusiastically supported Faubus and reelected him by landslide margins in 1958, 1960, 1962, and 1964 (4). During the 1960s and 1970s, the Little Rock NAACP continued to fight for the complete desegregation of all the city schools, and by 1980 it had become apparent that the school system was rapidly turning majority black as a result of white flight. School officials pursued a variety of strategies to achieve greater racial balance, including the establishment of magnet programs in all-black schools to entice white parents in enrolling their children there. They even took the unprecedented step of suing surrounding Pulaski County and the state for dragging *their* heels in not aggressively desegregating their school systems (5). Nevertheless, the percentage of black students in the Little Rock schools increased from 48% in 1973 to 65% in 1981 in a city that has remained roughly one-third African American between 1970 and the present. Among public elementary schools, the percentage was even greater: three-quarters of the children attending such schools were black. Finally, a brief look at the 1990 census data for the city reveals stark

contrasts between blacks and whites in Little Rock. In census tracts ten and eleven, blacks number 2,854 and 3,647, while whites number 317 and 96, respectively. The median family income was \$16,028 in tract ten and \$20,187 in tract eleven. Not far from these almost exclusively black areas are census tracts fifteen and sixteen, which contain 7,559 and 5,830 white persons and 357 and 123 black persons, respectively. The median family income stood at \$35,694 in tract fifteen and \$62,485 in tract sixteen (6).

The story of racial desegregation is an ambivalent and ongoing one which defies easy categorization. Scholars will continue to debate and reexamine the Civil Rights Movement, its goals, its successes, and its failures. In concert with this larger effort, the Organization of American Historians, the National Park Service, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers have formed a team to conduct a National Historic Landmark Theme Study on the history of public school desegregation in the United States. The project will identify at least five properties which will be designated as historic landmarks, such as the effort to memorialize Central High School (7). While celebrating the progress that has been made, historians should be mindful of the complex economic and social problems that keep racial inequalities stubbornly entrenched. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, many Americans, such as the Indiana students who crowded into the auditorium to hear Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan Massery, remind us daily that the problem of the twenty-first century may continue to be "the problem of the color line."

Endnotes

1. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, *Little Rock Nine Congressional Medal Act* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1998).
2. Will Counts, *A Life Is More Than a Moment, The Desegregation of Little Rock's Central High* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 7, 70-72.
3. For more on the history of Dunbar and the record the school had in producing outstanding students despite a lack of resources, see Faustine Childress Jones, *A Traditional Model of Educational Excellence, Dunbar High School of Little Rock, Arkansas* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981).
4. For more on the life and career of Orval Faubus, particularly how he skillfully exploited the Central High crisis for political gain, see Tony A. Freyer, "The Little Rock Crisis Reconsidered," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 56 (Autumn 1997):361-70; and Roy Reed, *Faubus, The Life and Times of An American Prodigal* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997).
5. The city argued that because the outer school districts had not pursued racial desegregation as aggressively as Little Rock, they had become refuges for whites who did not want their children mixing with black children and therefore moved out of the city, thereby placing the burden for racial desegregation on the city itself. *Little Rock School District v. Pulaski County Special School District No. 1; North Little Rock School District; Arkansas State Board of Education; et al.*, 584 F.

Supp. 328 (1984). See also *Clark v. Board of Education of Little Rock School District* 705 F.2nd 265 (1983); and Roy Reed, "A Symbol Once Again? School Resegregation May Overtake Little Rock, Other Cities,"

Los Angeles Daily Journal 98 (9 April 1985): 4.

6. *Ibid.*; *1990 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Characteristics for Census Tracts and Block Numbering Areas, Little Rock-North Little Rock, AR MSA* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1992), 51, 58, 189-90.

7. National Park Service, "Racial Desegregation in Public Education National Historic Landmark Theme Study," 21 June 1999. Copy of which is in the possession of the Organization of American Historians.

Damon W. Freeman is a doctoral candidate in history at Indiana University, Bloomington.