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Elizabeth Eckford, followed and taunted by an angry crowd after she was denied entrance to Little Rock Central High School, September 4, 1957. The girl in the light dress behind her is Hazel Bryan. *Will Counts Collection/Indiana University Archives.*

Through a Lens, Darkly

During the historic 1957 desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, 26-year-old journalist Will Counts took a photograph that gave an iconic face to the passions at the center of the civil-rights movement—two faces, actually: those of 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford on her first day of school, and her most recognizable tormentor, Hazel Bryan. The story of how these two women struggled to reconcile and move on from the event is a remarkable journey through the last half-century of race relations in America.

by DAVID MARGOLICK | WEB EXCLUSIVE September 24, 2007

It was a school night, and Elizabeth Eckford was too excited to sleep. The next morning, September 4, 1957, was her first day of classes, and one last time she ironed the pleated white skirt she'd made for the occasion. It was made of piqué cotton; when she'd run out of material, she'd trimmed it with navy-blue-and-white gingham. Then she put aside her new bobby socks and white buck loafers. Around 7:30 a.m. the following day, she boarded a bus bound for Little Rock Central High School.

Other black schoolchildren were due at Central that historic day, but Elizabeth would be the first to arrive. The world would soon know all about the Little Rock Nine. But when Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central, and thereby become the first black student to integrate a major southern high school, she was really the Little Rock One. The painfully shy 15-year-old daughter of a hyper-protective mother reluctant to challenge age-old racial mores, she was the unlikeliest trailblazer of all. But as dramatic as the moment was, it really mattered only because Elizabeth wandered into the path of Will Counts's camera.

Few pictures capture an epoch. But in the contorted, hate-filled face of a young white girl named Hazel Bryan standing behind Elizabeth, screaming epithets at her, Counts encapsulated the rage of the Jim Crow South. And even behind her large sunglasses—her eyes were as sensitive as the rest of her—Elizabeth embodied something else: the dignity, and determination, and wisdom, and stoicism, with which black Americans tried to change their lot. It's all there in one picture, in a way white America could readily understand when it landed on its front stoops. It has reverberated ever since, and resonates still as the 50th anniversary of the events in Little Rock is marked this month.

Study any great photograph, and you will always find more things to see, and learn. For instance, there are the bystanders—out of focus, perhaps, but clear enough to reveal their indifference to or pleasure in another person's pain. But the picture belongs to Elizabeth and Hazel, and for them it set off a drama that has never really ended. Bound together in fame and misfortune, they have tried, separately and together, to escape the frame. After a brief and well-photographed pseudo-reconciliation 10 years ago, the two are once more incommunicado, living only a few miles, and a cultural chasm, apart. While Elizabeth has spent the past decade coming out of a shell, Hazel has spent it going in.

In the next few days, all of the well-practiced and increasingly elaborate rituals that have developed around the Little Rock Nine will be re-enacted, bigger and better than ever. Bill Clinton, who as an 11-year-old boy 50 miles down

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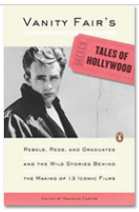

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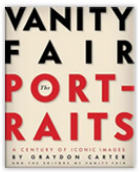

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the road in Hot Springs watched the drama in Little Rock unfold—and who credits Elizabeth and the other eight with liberating him from racial prejudice—will be there, and so will Hillary. But there will be no photograph of Elizabeth and Hazel this time around. Now, as it was 50 years ago, they symbolize America's racial divide.

Elizabeth Eckford sits at home with her schoolbooks after being turned away from Central High by National Guardsmen on September 4, 1957. © *Bettmann/Corbis.*

What the local black newspaper wrote about Elizabeth in September 1957—that her fateful walk to school would leave an impression on her that "only death will erase"—has proven to be prophetic. The eight others quickly moved on. They left the South and, in a couple of instances, the country. Four of them married whites. They have had successful careers and families. Elizabeth, by contrast, has never strayed all that far from Little Rock, psychologically or physically. She lives in the house she left on the morning of September 4, 1957. And she has struggled with the legacy of Little Rock in a way the others haven't. Keen and unsentimental, and at times undiplomatic, she alone says she would not do it again, though she's pleased she did it once. The others regard Elizabeth as the most vulnerable among them, and have always looked out for her. But they know, too, that as stationary as she appears, it is she who's come the furthest.

As southern states went 50 years ago, Arkansas was racially open-minded. Its governor in 1957, Orval Faubus, had been elected three years earlier as a moderate. Little Rock (population 100,000 at the time) was considered one of the most progressive cities in the region. Five days after the Supreme Court handed down *Brown* v. *Board of Education,* the landmark 1954 ruling ordering school integration, the local school board pledged to comply. But beneath the city's tolerant façade, Jim Crow was alive and well. When perhaps the most famous black reporter in the country, Ethel Payne of the *Chicago Defender*, came to town to cover the school crisis, for instance, she couldn't find a place to eat. "The crummiest corner on the map," she called Little Rock.

For all its professed good intentions, the school board moved tentatively and begrudgingly, taking three years to enroll only a token number of blacks in one school: Little Rock Central High School, the most prestigious in the state. Administrators looked for black students strong enough to survive the ordeal but placid enough not to make trouble. The superintendent told Elizabeth she'd have to be like Jackie Robinson, turning the other cheek, never talking or fighting back. Improbably—mistakenly, really—sensitive, brooding Elizabeth somehow made the cut. And even more improbably, her worrywart mother agreed to let her go. There'd be only eight others, in a student population of roughly 2,000.

Among Little Rock's black community, the Eckfords were known for their intelligence and seriousness. They thought of themselves as special—as "something on a stick," Elizabeth's mother once said. The patriarch was Elizabeth's grandfather Oscar Eckford Sr., a large and formidable man—his wife, and even some white people, used "Mr." when addressing him—who ran a small grocery store. From him, Elizabeth always understood she would go to college, even though it was never clear how they'd pay. Elizabeth's father, Oscar Jr., worked nights at the train station and weekends cleaning white peoples' houses; her mother, Birdie, did the laundry at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Deaf Negro, five blocks from the modest home the Eckfords bought in 1949 and moved into on Elizabeth's eighth birthday, later that year. Birdie Eckford's job allowed her to look out for her badly handicapped son, one of her six children, who went to school there. Elizabeth's grandfather was the only man she knew who spoke to white people without fear, but her mother had her Uncle Tom ways. "I have never had trouble with white people," she once said. "I always gave in, if necessary." The Eckfords had no phone but did have a television, the better to keep the children in Birdie's sights. "The Queen of No," Elizabeth still calls her mother, 15 years after her death.

A 10th grader at the segregated Horace Mann High School in the spring of 1957, Elizabeth read habitually and got good grades. She especially loved history. She was essentially a loner, prone to sitting and daydreaming on the big rock in her backyard for hours at a time, thinking that wherever she was, she didn't quite belong. No one had yet diagnosed her as depressed, but there was a history of the condition in her family.

Inspired by the example of Thurgood Marshall, who'd just argued the Brown case before the Supreme Court, she wanted to become a lawyer. She preferred Central not out of some burning desire to mix with whites, but because it offered courses that Horace Mann didn't. While underfunded, Little Rock's black schools had a distinguished tradition, teaching black pride before the term existed and black history before there were any texts. So whatever benefits Central conferred on its first black students would come at a cost: the loss of friends, community, and teachers who cared, as well as the chance to participate in extracurricular activities, since the school board, fearing white outrage over racial mixing, had barred the nine black students from them.

Eckford being turned away by the Arkansas National Guard, September

As the new school year loomed, segregationist groups and fundamentalist clergy mobilized. On the night of September 1, 1957, Faubus stationed the Arkansas National Guard around Central, ostensibly to prevent violence, but really to keep the black students out. On September 3, a federal judge ordered that desegregation proceed,

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4, 1957. *Will Counts Collection/Indiana University Archives.* Enlarge this photo.

and late that night, the director of the Arkansas chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., Daisy Bates, instructed the black parents to bring their children to her home the following morning. From there, the students, accompanied by a few ministers—white and black—would proceed to Central as a group. But the Eckfords didn't have a phone, so Bates never notified them.

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