

The Desegregation of Clinton Senior High School: Trial and Triumph

By Clinton Beauchamp and Amanda Turner

In the early 1950s, Clinton, Tennessee, was the epitome of a typical southern small town--quiet, friendly, simple, and segregated. In 1956, however, violence over the desegregation of Clinton High School would rock this town to the core and leave an important legacy for years to come.

The trials began with a groundbreaking lawsuit, *McSwain v. Anderson County*. In 1950, five Negro children and their parents, backed by the NAACP, filed suit against the Anderson County Board of Education to gain entrance into Clinton High School. At that time, the law of Anderson County and the law of the State of Tennessee not only allowed but also required segregation in State high schools, and Negro students in Clinton were designated to attend either Rockwood High School in Rockwood or Austin High School in Knoxville. Presiding Judge Robert L. Taylor of the Federal District Court in Knoxville, Tennessee, dismissed the case on the grounds that Anderson County was providing equal or better educational facilities to the Negro students. The decision was appealed but was suspended pending a decision by the Supreme Court in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case. On January 4, 1956, the final decree issued by Judge Taylor was "...that in Anderson County, as to high school students, segregation be ended by not later than the fall term of 1956."

The faculty and staff of Clinton High School began preparing for integration. For instance, students were assigned papers on the coming integration and involved in numerous class discussions. In addition, news of the school's impending integration was circulated in the local newspaper *The Clinton Courier* and announced at school assemblies and town meetings. A Clinton High student at that time, Jerry Shattuck, believes, "...the student body and the town of Clinton was pretty well aware of and prepared to accept the desegregation; I don't think they necessarily supported it, but, nevertheless, it was the law of the land and we were going to abide by it." Things progressed relatively smoothly throughout the summer.

On registration day, the 12 Negro students to attend Clinton High School signed up for classes with no trouble. It seemed that the integration might be implemented without any trouble, but the weekend before school was to begin, John Kasper came to town. Kasper was an ardent segregationist and leader of his own group, the White Citizens Council. He came into town and began to "stir up trouble." Kasper clearly stated his views on segregation in an article, "Segregation or Death" (*Virginia Spectator*, May, 1959), in which he stated, "The only defect with segregation as a national policy, as a policy of the government, is that it does not go far enough." Kasper would play a pivotal role in causing the problems in Clinton over the next few months and would be arrested several times.

With the stage thus set, on Monday, August 26, 1956, Clinton High School made history by becoming the first public high school in the South to desegregate. On the first day of school, Kasper and a few other citizens he recruited to his cause began picketing outside the school but were quickly disbanded. According to Mr. Shattuck, "They were gone in five minutes because they were embarrassed: it was sort of an unnatural activity carrying pickets here in a small town like this. Nevertheless, there was a big press contingent here that morning, so, by the time the afternoon newspapers came out or the evening television shows came on, it was all about this big protest in Clinton, Tennessee, over desegregation. Well, the great protest was five people carrying signs for five minutes; but, in my opinion, the press misrepresented what happened. The next morning, there were 15 people carrying pickets." The numbers kept increasing, and, by Thursday, the town was inundated with hundreds of outsiders "going up and down the streets and generally raising Cain." It soon became apparent that Clinton's two-man police force was woefully inadequate for the task at hand, so Mayor Lewallen was forced to organize a home guard of deputized citizens to supplement the police force and attempt to restore order to the town. The

guard was also placed at the homes of prominent citizens who had been threatened by segregationists. Despite all this turmoil outside, classes went on relatively normally inside the school.

The atmosphere within the school environment at this time varies depending on whom you ask. Alfred Williams, a Negro student who attended the school during this time, says that there was a significant amount of harassment from the white students. "You couldn't possibly get anything learned or done, because you were constantly afraid that the white kid next to you was planning to kill you." Mr. Williams was eventually expelled after pulling a knife on a group of white students that were threatening to kill his brother, Charles.

However, Mr. Shattuck, a senior and captain of the football team and Student Council President at that time, disagrees with Williams, "No, actually the black students weren't harassed that much. They got to school without incident, because they came in the back of the school, and the mob was in the front...Once inside the school, they faced no harassment, neither was there any welcoming with open arms. Except in November, when Kasper came back to town and organized the Junior White Citizens Council, and then it was petty stuff like ink in lockers, tacks in seats, jostling in the hallway, and that sort of thing. But, the football team stationed itself at the hall corners, and we put a stop to that real quick.... We felt that this was the law of the land, and we were going to abide by it." Bobby Cain, Clinton's first Negro graduate, agrees with Shattuck that there wasn't any overt hostility, and he says, "I did manage to make a few friends." Despite the mostly peaceful atmosphere inside the school, problems continued to mount in town.

Friday, August 31 was the night of the big football rivalry game against Lake City. That night, even more cars poured into Clinton to see the game. Rumor spread that the segregationist groups were planning a cross-burning rally on the field at halftime. Although nothing happened at the game that night, the next night, Saturday night, was the night the State troopers and the National Guard were called into Clinton.

It started when a mob in the square in front of the Clinton courthouse got out of hand. The home guard, which had been inside the courthouse, began marching across the square in a line. It was then that the historic picture of the guard shown in newspapers and magazines across the country was taken. The guard was forced back into the courthouse by gunfire, and they called the governor. At that point it was decided that things were so out of hand that the State troopers were to be sent into the town. The story goes this way. Nearly 100 cars came over the bridge into town--with sirens blaring, they pulled up to the mob that had assembled between the courthouse and Hoskins, the local drugstore and soda fountain. Out of the lead, a car climbed the six foot eight inch figure of Greg O'Rear, the head of the Highway Patrol, with a double-barreled shotgun slung over his shoulder. The story continues, that he stepped out and said to the assembled mob, "Alright, boys, it's all over." And, it was. The next day, the National Guard relieved the Highway Patrol and, from then through the end of September, policed Clinton.

The last major violent incident was on December 4, 1956, when the town held municipal elections. The White Citizens Council had put up a candidate for mayor who vowed to restore segregation if elected. On that day, three white citizens of Clinton decided to ensure that the Negro students going to Clinton High School arrived safely. Rev. Paul Turner, Sidney Davis, and Leo Burnett walked to the top of the hill and escorted ten of the 12 Negro students down the hill to the school. They got to the school safely, and, after the students went inside, the three men went their separate ways. However, when Rev. Turner turned to go to his church, First Baptist Church of Clinton, he was assaulted by a group of White Citizens Council members. While an elderly lady from a local flower shop managed to run the men off, Turner was, nevertheless, severely beaten. Although members of the White Citizens Council meant to scare citizens into supporting their candidate, he was soundly defeated.

Because of the assault on the Rev. Turner and numerous other incidents--including an attempt to enter the school where a student intervened to save Turner's wife, a Home Economics teacher, was saved from injury--Principal Brittain decided, that in the interest of the students' safety, he needed to act. So, the same day as the Reverend's attack, Brittain closed the school exactly two years after the Tennessee Supreme Court found segregation in education to be unconstitutional in Tennessee schools. Many of the seniors were terrified that they would be unable to graduate that year. "We could just see our senior year flying away," remarked one student. However, the violence could not hold Clinton High School down for long, and on December 10, six days after closing, the school was reopened.

Things remained quiet, and at the end of that year, Bobby Cain, the first Negro graduate of a desegregated public high school in the South, became a national news event. Members of the press from around the country attempted to talk to him. According to Jerry Shattuck, "Some of the senior boys got together and shielded him from the press that was trying to mob him." However, Mr. Cain's friend, Alfred Williams, remembers the event differently. "The night he graduated, they cut the lights out on him and hit him, then turned the lights back on. He never did find out who did it." After that year, major efforts by the segregationists in Clinton wound down. They felt that if one student could graduate, then more would follow, and indeed they did.

Principal Brittain resigned in the Spring of 1957. He and his wife had received countless threatening letters since the beginning of the school year and near constant harassment. A slight man of a 130 pounds, he lost 14 pounds, and had his life threatened no less than a dozen times during the school year. Earlier in the year, he had asked the student body to vote on whether or not they wanted him to resign; a similar ballot was taken home to the parents, and, except for six dissenting votes, the overwhelming majority believed that Brittain was doing a fine job and wanted him to remain. Nevertheless, by spring he had had enough and felt that it was time for him to resign. The problems had also taken their toll on the faculty of the high school.

By the beginning of the 1957-1958 school year, only seven of the school's teachers returned. Among them was Juanita Moser, who served as assistant principal and was a teacher. With a new principal, Mr. W.D. Human, school continued peacefully for the remainder of the year. It appeared to many that the worst was over, and that they had weathered the storm.

Two years later on Sunday, October 5, 1958, the peace of Clinton High School was once again shattered, this time by explosives. An estimated 75 to 100 sticks of dynamite ripped through the high school building in three successive blasts in the early morning hours. While the majority of the school was destroyed, no one was injured because the explosion's timing. The gym and the upper section of the school remained intact, but the rest of the building was in shambles with scarcely one stone remaining upon another. To this day, despite a Federal investigation, no one knows who was responsible for the bombing. To many, though, that really doesn't matter.

In the eyes of many people, the real story of the bombing and Clinton High School's integration is a story of a people united to preserve the peace and decency of a small town. Within three days of the bombing, Clinton High School students were attending classes in a borrowed school. Clinton High was moved seven miles away to the abandoned Linden Elementary School, which was donated by the Atomic Energy Commission, in Oak Ridge. While the old high school was salvaged for anything savable and, for the two years it took to complete the new Clinton High School building in 1960, students did their best to receive an education despite having to use chairs made for ten-year-olds and undersized lockers. Even the old rivalry of Clinton and Oak Ridge was put aside, and Clinton students arrived on their first day at Linden to the sounds of music from the Oak Ridge High School Marching Band.

Many people view the integration of Clinton High School as a success story. Although some may debate this view, most Clintonians will agree that it was successful. As Jerry Shattuck puts it, "The people in Clinton themselves made it happen. They needed help from the State, and they

got it, and, later on, they needed help from the Federal marshals, and they got it, but nowhere else [in the country], in my opinion, did the people let it be known through their actions what their will was. And their will was not a commitment to integration. It was a commitment to 'This is our decent, civilized little town, and we're going to obey the law of the land and not let it be messed up.' I think that this is the real success of the story."

Read more about Clinton High School's desegregation through the eyes of those who lived through it:

Mr. Alfred Williams

Black student integrated into Clinton High School in 1956.

Mr. Jerry Shattuck

White student attending Clinton High School in 1956.

Mr. John G. Moore

Volunteer deputy assigned to keep the peace in Clinton, Tennessee, during the desegregation of the high school.

For a lesson plan to accompany this essay, [click here](#).

Works Cited

Adamson, June. "Clinton High School's First Black Graduate was 40 Years Ago." *Oak Ridger*, 16 May 1996, p. 1A.

_____. "Important Civil Rights Anniversary in Clinton." *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, December 1994.

Avent, Jan. "Clinton Bombing Left Some Feeling Cheated." *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 2 October 1988, p. A1.

Beauchamp, Clinton; Seals, Amanda; and Turner, Amanda. "Interview with Jerry Shattuck." Union Planters Building: Clinton, Tennessee, 7 May 2002.

Beauchamp, Clinton; Seals, Amanda; and Turner, Amanda. "Interview with Alfred Williams." Clinton Elementary School: Clinton, Tennessee, 10 May 2002.

Fowler, Ruth. "School Bombing Shook Clinton 30 Years Ago." *Oak Ridger*, October 1988.

Kasper, John. "Segregation or Death." *Virginia Spectator*, May 1959.

"Principal in the Middle." *Newsweek*, 17 September 1956.

Roberts, Snyder. "History of Clinton Senior High School 1806-1971." 1971. Distributive Education Department, Clinton Senior High School, pp. 48-55.