

***Brown* in Fayetteville: Peaceful Southern School Desegregation in 1954**

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WITH ITS DECISION IN *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION* (1954), the United States Supreme Court demanded a complete overhaul of the public education system in the South and brought racial segregation to the forefront of the nation's consciousness and conscience. The American public, white and black, could no longer avoid the issue or simply dismiss school segregation as the inevitable product of culture or tradition. Many Americans, seeing the gains African Americans had already made (e.g., blacks voted in many places and both the military and professional sports were integrated), hoped school desegregation would meet with similar success. But, aided by the Court's passivity in *Brown II*, segregationists began a campaign to fight desegregation. Ten of the eleven former Confederate states passed legislation allowing or (in the case of Mississippi) forcing districts to maintain segregated schools. Seven states passed laws withholding funds from integrated schools. This resistance was fiercest in the Deep South, but states such as Florida and Arkansas were not immune.¹

There is more to the story than massive resistance, however. While images of angry mobs in Little Rock and New Orleans cemented them-

¹C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 150-151, 154-157; James C. Duram, *A Moderate among Extremists: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the School Desegregation Crisis* (Chicago: Nelson-Hill, 1981), 90; Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation; The First Decade* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 85.

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selves in the American consciousness, desegregation had largely unnoticed pockets of success—even in the months immediately following *Brown*. Fayetteville, Arkansas, was one such place. Within a week following *Brown*, Fayetteville announced its intention to desegregate, and, three months later, white and black students were attending the same local high school together. Fayetteville's experience shows that historians must take a more comprehensive approach to southern school desegregation, recognizing the quiet dignity that sometimes marked the process. Fayetteville was no racial utopia, but the town successfully dealt with the most explosive racial issue of the twentieth century. Its experience is instructive in suggesting important ingredients of successful school integration—namely a lack of excessive preexisting racial tension coupled with firm local leadership.

At the time the Court handed down *Brown*, Arkansas, like the rest of the former Confederacy, had completely segregated elementary and secondary schools. But separate did not mean equal. The state spent \$102.25 per capita on white students but just \$67.75 on each black student. Yet Gov. Francis Cherry announced that the state would obey the Court, noting that Arkansas had better race relations than many other southern states. The *Arkansas Democrat* reported that public reaction to the decision “indicated concern but no alarm.”² The newspaper clearly disagreed with the Court's ruling (“Trying to alter a social pattern by law before custom makes way for change has always seemed unwise to us”), but also denounced defiance, stating, “Surely, we can reach a common understanding without friction in order to preserve all the education and social gains that have been made.”³ The *Arkansas Gazette* editorialized that *Brown* required “a sober reappraisal of the manner in which we have lived up to our long-accepted obligation to provide adequate educational opportunity for all our children Once again, we are faced with a great time of testing, but we are confident Arkansas will meet the future with good heart and good will.”⁴ Leaders of both races were cautiously optimistic that if addressed locally and gradually, desegregation could occur without major incident. The state's brief to the Supreme Court, submitted in November 1954, advocated gradual inte-

²Willard B. Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville: A Forty-Year Perspective” in *Civil Obedience: An Oral History of School Desegregation in Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1954-1965*, ed. Julianne Lewis Adams and Thomas A. DeBlack (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 2; “Cherry Says Arkansas to Meet Requirements,” *Arkansas Democrat* (Little Rock), May 18, 1954, pp. 1, 2.

³“No School Segregation,” *Arkansas Democrat*, May 18, 1954, p. 10.

⁴“The Pattern of the Future,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), May 18, 1954, p. 1.

gration, arguing that immediate action could have disastrous effects on Arkansas schools.⁵

Yet by the time the brief was filed, Arkansas had already begun to desegregate its schools. Within a few days of the Supreme Court's May 1954 announcement of *Brown*, three Arkansas school systems, including Fayetteville, had announced plans for desegregation, and a fourth moved ahead without making its intentions public. The Arkansas School for the Blind and the Deaf only planned to desegregate those classes it did not currently offer to black students, a fact that, combined with the non-traditional status of the school, muted any potential protest. On the other hand, the small Grant County town of Sheridan faced immediate reaction against its plan to desegregate. On May 21, Sheridan became the first school district in the South to announce its intention to integrate. The district's twenty-one black high school students were to attend school that fall with Sheridan's six hundred white students. Within twenty-four hours, however, one hundred Sheridan residents met at the school and demanded that the board either change its decision or be replaced. The board quickly postponed integration pending further study. The experience of Sheridan suggested that desegregation would likely fail if even a small group of citizens actively protested the decision. School districts that made the decision to desegregate needed to be certain of community support. Meanwhile, the Franklin County town of Charleston managed to keep its desegregation plans out of the public eye. During the summer of 1954, Charleston authorities decided to desegregate, but, fearing public reaction, they refrained from announcing their plan. When classes began on August 23, the eleven blacks at Charleston's high school became the first African-American students in the South to attend public school with whites. Desegregation occurred without incident, but the news only reached the public in mid-September, after integration had occurred in Fayetteville.⁶

Fayetteville, thus, was the first district to *publicly* prepare for desegregation. On May 22, just five days after the Supreme Court handed down *Brown* and the same day that Sheridan rescinded its decision to integrate, Fayetteville's school board announced plans to desegregate its high school

⁵"White, Negro Leaders Agree Calm, Caution Needed," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 24, 1954, p. 1; Stephen A. Stephan and Charles A. Hicks, "Integration and Segregation in Arkansas—One Year Afterward," *Journal of Negro Education* 24 (Summer 1955): 182.

⁶"Deaf School Board Takes First Step Toward Racial Integration," *Arkansas Democrat*, May 21, 1954, p. 1; "Town in Arkansas Sets Integration," *New York Times*, May 22, 1954, p. 1:15; "Integration Plan Rescinded by Sheridan School Board," *Arkansas Democrat*, May 23, 1954, p. 1; "Charleston 1st to End Segregation," *Arkansas Democrat*, September 13, 1954, p. 2; "Arkansas City Ends Curbs," *New York Times*, September 15, 1954, p. 1:17; Dale Bumpers, *The Best Lawyer in a One-Lawyer Town: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2003), 139-140.

in the fall. Integration occurred peacefully, and, until events in Charleston and Friona, Texas, became public later in the fall, Americans had reason to believe that Fayetteville was the only southern school district to desegregate. Fayetteville's junior high school followed, one grade at a time, over the next three years.

The fact that Fayetteville did not integrate its elementary schools until 1965, over ten years after the high school, makes clear that desegregation was never a simple or uncontested process. But the town nevertheless completed integration at a point when many school districts in the state were only beginning the process. Fayetteville's location, racial history, and culture of education laid important groundwork for integration, but these conditions did not alone guarantee success. Had the school board pursued desegregation in a foolhardy manner, desegregation would have failed despite the seemingly favorable conditions. On the other hand, without the necessary prerequisites, the best attempts of the school board would have failed miserably, for the community would have remained unreceptive to integration.

Fayetteville dates to 1828, when settlers primarily from Tennessee chartered the town, which quickly became the seat of Washington County. Less than thirty-five miles from both Missouri and Oklahoma, Fayetteville has, in many ways, had a racial history more akin to those states' than to the more volatile Deep South. Some of the county's largest property holders and most powerful men owned slaves, but no plantation system developed in this part of the Ozarks. So, historian Brooks Blevins notes, while slavery was more prevalent in Washington County than it was in outlying areas, only three slaveholders owned more than twenty slaves in 1850, and, by 1860, an influx of independent farmers had greatly diminished the influence of slaveholders.⁷ Historian James Woods argues slavery was "incidental" to the small-scale farmers of the Ozarks and that northwest Arkansas was notably ambivalent on the question of secession from the Union. Fayetteville residents staged at least one large pro-Union rally, and, though the town did secede with the rest of the state, pockets of unionism persisted.⁸

⁷William S. Campbell, *One Hundred Years of Fayetteville, 1828-1928* (Fayetteville, AR: privately printed, 1928), 5, 10; Gordon D. Morgan, *Black Hillbillies of the Arkansas Ozarks* (Fayetteville: Department of Sociology, University of Arkansas, 1973), 30; Gordon Morgan and Izola Preston, "History of Black Community Interwoven with City's," *Northwest Arkansas Times* (Fayetteville), July 16, 1978, p. E:39; Brooks Blevins, *Hill Folks: A History of Arkansas Ozarkers and Their Image* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 23, 29; Ted J. Smith, "Mastering Farm and Family: David Walker as Slaveholder," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Spring 1999): 72.

⁸James M. Woods, *Rebellion and Realignment: Arkansas's Road to Secession* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 121, 163.

Following the Civil War and emancipation, the town did not see the same degree of racial strife as other parts of Arkansas, even nearby Harrison. Chapters of the Ku Klux Klan appeared in all of the state's major cities except Fayetteville. In 1893, one black visitor to Fayetteville noted that the town's African-American residents voted, owned homes, and received fair trials. He declared: "It is my honest conviction that there is not a city south of Mason and Dixon's line where the two races are getting along better and where the Negro is afforded fairer play." Even as Fayetteville was being praised by its black visitor, racial violence rose dramatically elsewhere in the state. Historian Jeannie M. Whyne writes that blacks in rural areas were "isolated and vulnerable" and faced "a reign of terror" from whites who felt blacks were stealing their agricultural jobs. Racial terror in the state came to a climax in the Elaine Race Riots of 1919. Phillips County erupted in violence that resulted in, according to some reports, hundreds of black deaths. Fayetteville, by contrast, never saw an outbreak of racial violence.⁹

Still, racism certainly existed in Fayetteville. The town's state senator, John Tillman, sponsored Arkansas's pioneering piece of Jim Crow legislation, the separate coach law of 1891, and discrimination persisted on many levels well into the twentieth century. A poll tax made it difficult for many blacks (and poor whites) to cast ballots. In addition, there was no African-American middle class to speak of, as nearly all blacks worked either on farms or in jobs such as cooking, janitorial work, or domestic service. Some barbershops would not serve them, and some residents recall that blacks could neither stay in hotels nor attend First Baptist Church. The town's swimming pool was not integrated, and, of the four theaters in town, only two admitted African Americans—one allowed them to sit in the balcony, while the other was a place "nice people" did not attend, according to one white resident.¹⁰

But, even at the height of Jim Crow period, Fayetteville never had segregated drinking fountains or restrooms, and sporting events and local groups such as the United Church Women integrated several years prior

⁹"Henderson School Built in 1868," *Northwest Arkansas Times*, July 16, 1978, p. E:16; Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 4; Jeannie M. Whyne et al., *Arkansas: A Narrative History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 219, 269-271; Grif Stockley, *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), xiv.

¹⁰Morgan, *Black Hillbillies*, 135; "Clark C. McClinton," in *Civil Obedience*, 43, 45; "N. Glenn Sowder," *ibid.*, 119; "Lodene Deffebaugh," *ibid.*, 175; Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 2-6; Nancy L. Cole Mays, interview with author, January 28, 2003, Fayetteville, Arkansas; A. Stephen Stephan, "Integration in Arkansas," *Christian Century* 71 (November 24, 1954): 1426; Harry Vandergriff, interview with author, January 13, 2003, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

to *Brown*. To a large extent, the white leadership in Fayetteville practiced what Willard Gatewood has termed “genteel paternalism” toward local blacks.¹¹ Fayetteville’s black citizens did not agitate for change, and the town’s white residents did not go out of their way to either support or oppose equal rights. Fayetteville’s discrimination is certainly regrettable, but the fear and animosity that was prevalent elsewhere in the South was absent. Thus, when the time came to desegregate its schools, Fayetteville was free of much of the weighty racial baggage many other southern communities labored with.

Fayetteville’s racial peace was made possible in large part by the small size of its black community. Even in 1954, just 400 of the town’s 18,000 residents were black. In contrast, nearly 25,000 African Americans lived in Little Rock, forming one quarter of the city’s population. Blacks primarily lived in a small section of east Fayetteville, a hollow known as Tin Cup. Within Tin Cup, they formed a community complete with fraternal orders, two churches, and a small café in the basement of a house. The community was so unified that the two churches, St. James Baptist Church and St. James Methodist Church, held services on alternate Sundays so members could attend both. This united black community was never large enough to threaten white dominance. Instead, as Willard Gatewood notes, lines of communication remained open between whites and blacks.¹²

Fayetteville’s distinctive focus on education also helps explain its peaceful race relations. The presence of the University of Arkansas, both in the form of ideas and example, was instrumental in preparing the town for integration. Gatewood notes that many university faculty members had been educated outside of the South and thus brought to Fayetteville less rigid attitudes about race—attitudes that they introduced both in their classrooms and as community leaders. More importantly, perhaps, Fayetteville by 1954 had already witnessed school desegregation. In 1948, Silas Hunt entered the University of Arkansas law school, becoming the first black student since Reconstruction to enroll at a white state school in the South. Notably, the university’s board of trustees made the move without court coercion. While Hunt had to endure harassment and discrimination, his enrollment had not occasioned the sort of community resistance that might have led the school board in 1954 to doubt that integration could occur peacefully.¹³

¹¹Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 5.

¹²Ibid., 3-6; Morgan, *Black Hillbillies*, 135.

¹³Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 5-6; Stephan and Hicks, “Integration and Segregation in Arkansas—One Year Afterward,” 175-176.

But even as the University of Arkansas began integrating, white and black high school students continued to have very limited contact with members of the other race and generally reported that they knew nothing about the others' schools besides their locations. Unbeknownst to much of the white community, African-American education had a long and venerable history in Fayetteville. The town's African-American elementary school, founded by the American Missionary Association in 1866, was the first public school, white or black, in the state. In 1895, the Fayetteville school district took over administration of the mission school, which was renamed Henderson School in 1907.¹⁴ Henderson lacked electricity and indoor plumbing, and, in 1937, the district opened Lincoln School as its replacement. Lincoln, located near the city's two African-American churches, remained in operation until the completion of desegregation nearly thirty years later. The five-room facility served first through ninth grades and had an excellent reputation among African-American schools. The building housed an auditorium and vocational education facilities and stood next to a large playground. Students primarily received liberal arts education along with some vocational training (homemaking for the girls; woodworking and poultry raising for the boys). In 1954-55, the year the high school desegregated, Lincoln housed sixty-five students and two teachers. Students maintained excellent records of attendance.¹⁵

Because the school district could not afford to maintain a separate high school for the small number of African-American tenth-to-twelfth graders, black students who wished to continue their education past ninth grade attended schools in either Fort Smith or Hot Springs. Those towns had African-American high schools, but the closer of the two, Fort Smith, was more than fifty miles to the south. The Fayetteville school board paid not only tuition but room, board, and transportation each year for eight to twelve African-American students. Students stayed in local homes and returned to Fayetteville whenever they could afford the bus fare. Some students returned home only at Christmas and during the summer. In the final

¹⁴"Henderson School—Then and Now," *Flashback* 28 (August 1977): 47; Mays interview; Virginia Smith Denton, interview with author, January 29, 2003, Fayetteville, Arkansas; David McClinton, interview with author, February 16, 2003, Fayetteville, Arkansas; Bob Edmisten, "Fayetteville House Once Served as State's First Public School," *Springdale (Arkansas) News*, February 17, 1974, p. 7; A. J. Marti, "The Fayetteville Schools," p. 5, School History Papers, Fayetteville High School Library [hereinafter Fayetteville High School History Papers], Fayetteville, AR.

¹⁵Peggy Taylor Lewis, interview with author, March 7, 2003, Van Buren, Arkansas; Stephan and Hicks, "Integration and Segregation in Arkansas," 179; Lessie Stringfellow Read, "Lincoln School (Colored)," box 39, folder 8, p. 8, Washington County Historical Society Papers, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; Lodene Deffebaugh, telephone interview with author, March 18, 2003.

year of high-school segregation, 1953-54, the district sent seven students to Fort Smith and two to Hot Springs, at a total cost of \$5,000. As a result of this expense, Fayetteville, unlike the state as a whole and, indeed, much of the South, actually spent more per capita on its black high school students than on white students—\$500-\$600 per black student and just \$125-\$150 for each white student.¹⁶ This arrangement simply could not be sustained. Fort Smith officials had notified the Fayetteville school district that they no longer had space to accommodate Fayetteville students. More importantly, the Fayetteville district was running short of money and could no longer afford to send students away to attend high school. At the close of the 1953-54 school year, when the Court handed down *Brown*, the school district had only \$159 in the bank.¹⁷

The white Fayetteville High School had been in operation since 1911. The high school had a good reputation, and approximately 150 students graduated each year. Principal Louise Bell led an experienced teaching staff, and, beginning in the fall of 1952, students attended school in a spacious new building on Stone Street. At the time, Superintendent Virgil Blossom, a man of great size (six feet four and 235 pounds) and energy, led the district. During the 1953-1954 school year, however, Blossom left Fayetteville to become superintendent of Little Rock schools, where, in 1957, he presided over the city's desegregation crisis. Wayne White succeeded Blossom.¹⁸

Prior to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*, no blacks publicly agitated for integration or even for a black high school in Fayetteville. A group of white citizens had reportedly retained a lawyer to look into desegregation but had taken no legal action. Still, when faced with both *Brown* and the financial difficulties, the Fayetteville school board felt it had to act.

In 1954, the board comprised six prominent Fayetteville businessmen, all well respected in the community—including the owners of a local insurance agency and a highway construction company. Hal Douglas, publisher of the local newspaper, the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, and brother-in-law of U.S. Senator and longtime Fayetteville resident J. William Fulbright, served as secretary of the board. School board meetings took place over lunch at a local hotel. If board decisions warranted public

¹⁶Stephan and Hicks, "Integration and Segregation in Arkansas," 179; "Roberta Lackey Morgan," in *Civil Obedience*, 98; "Report on the South: The Integration Issue," *New York Times*, March 13, 1956, p. S:3; Denton interview.

¹⁷Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 6-8; "Arkansas," *Southern School News*, October 1, 1954, p. 3.

¹⁸*Northwest Arkansas Times*, July 16, 1978, p. E:29; McClinton interview; Vandergriff interview; "John Lewis," in *Civil Obedience*, 127; Marti, "Fayetteville Schools," 6.

attention, White would call the local paper and report the board's actions.¹⁹

On May 22, the board held a fairly standard meeting. In the past, the board had discussed desegregation only informally and had made no plans regarding how it might be accomplished. At this meeting, however, Douglas described the Court's recent decision, and Superintendent White read a letter from a prominent local white couple asking the school board to desegregate. The men discussed postponing integration until 1955, but one board member argued that waiting was needless, especially in light of the fact that Fort Smith and Hot Springs had no more room for Fayetteville's black students. Taking into consideration the Supreme Court decision, expressions of support for integration (as indicated by the letter), and the financial situation of the district, the board unanimously voted to desegregate the following school year. The board left logistics for later meetings but announced its decision immediately so that neither whites nor blacks would be taken by surprise and could spend the summer planning for desegregation.²⁰

When the school board did begin planning the details of desegregation, the most pressing issue was how far it would extend. Would every aspect of school life, including athletics, be open to black students? Which grades and schools would be desegregated? To the first question, the board answered that all activities, both classroom and extracurricular, would be open to black students. As for the second issue, the board decided to desegregate the high school in the fall of 1954 and the junior high one grade per year beginning in 1955 with the ninth grade. The board made no decision regarding elementary schools, preferring to deal with them at an undetermined later date. The financial emergency demanded only that the high school be quickly integrated. In fact, Fayetteville's elementary and junior high schools were too crowded to immediately absorb the sixty African-American students attending Lincoln.²¹

Some scholars in explaining the decision to so promptly comply with the requirements of *Brown* have emphasized the opportunity the Court gave Fayetteville to escape its financial straits. Historian Jerry Vervack wrote, "Fayetteville did not integrate because of the Supreme Court decision. The *Brown* decision did offer the town an excuse to dis-

¹⁹Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 6; "Wayne H. White," in *Civil Obedience*, 39; "Harry Vandergriff," *ibid.*, 71.

²⁰"Wayne H. White," in *Civil Obedience*, 31; "William C. Morton, Jr.," *ibid.*, 47-49, 51; Stephan, "Integration in Arkansas," 1427.

²¹Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 7; "William C. Morton, Jr.," in *Civil Obedience*, 50.

regard Arkansas law, but it was economics that prompted the final decision.²² University of Arkansas sociologist A. Stephen Stephan likewise argued that, as a general rule, a small black population made integration an appealing option because maintaining segregation simply made no sense from an economic standpoint. Clearly, Fayetteville schools were nearly out of money and could no longer afford to send their few black students to Fort Smith and Hot Springs. One school board member described the situation bluntly, saying that *Brown* “pulled us out of a hole.”²³ The Supreme Court decision made much easier a decision the board might have had to make anyway.

Looking back, however, some members of the school board claimed that their decision rose primarily out of a sense of duty. Board member William C. Morton, Jr. insisted that economics was not the reason they had made the decision but rather that the board realized that desegregation was now the law and that Fayetteville should thus integrate. Fellow board member Clark McClinton said that if there had not been a state law against desegregation, Fayetteville would have desegregated even earlier and that integration, while economically advantageous, was simply the right thing to do. Superintendent White never doubted Fayetteville would follow the law as laid down in *Brown*, and, though some board members may have had some misgivings, all agreed with Hal Douglas when he stated that the Court had spoken and Fayetteville would follow its instructions. The matter-of-fact manner in which the board made its decision, however, perhaps shows more about the town than it does about the men. The board members could not have taken such a bold step if they believed that the public would strongly resist.²⁴

The school board did, however, decide to avoid fanfare. After the initial announcement of the coming integration, the board remained silent during the summer of 1954. The board did not shun public attention as its counterpart in Charleston, Arkansas, did, but neither did it seek the spotlight. The board did not consider its decision to be especially noteworthy but understood that they were dealing with a potentially volatile issue, so they sought to avoid drawing attention. The school board's ability to downplay its decision was undoubtedly aided by the fact that

²²Jerry Vervack, “Road to Armageddon: Arkansas and *Brown v. Board of Education*, May 17, 1954 to September 2, 1957” (master's thesis, University of Arkansas, 1978), 16.

²³A. Stephen Stephan, “Integration and Sparse Negro Populations,” *School and Society* (April 1955): 133-134; “Arkansas,” *Southern School News*, October 1, 1954, p. 3.

²⁴Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 7; “Wayne H. White,” in *Civil Obedience*, 31-32; “Clark C. McClinton,” *ibid.*, 42, 46; “William C. Morton, Jr.,” *ibid.*, 54-55.

one of its members, Hal Douglas, was also the publisher of the town's newspaper.²⁵

The *Northwest Arkansas Times* ran a short story in May announcing that as many as fifteen blacks would attend Fayetteville High School in the fall. After that single article, the paper remained silent on desegregation throughout the summer. In August, the *Times* ran a special issue outlining important news in each of the area's school districts, but the article on Fayetteville did not even mention integration. In the major state newspapers, Fayetteville's decision to desegregate similarly received short shrift. The *Arkansas Gazette* detailed the economic reasons that prompted Fayetteville's move and noted the number of students who would attend the high school and the extracurricular activities available to them. Interestingly, the emphasis on the financial aspects of the decision suggests that integration based on fiscal necessity rather than by choice was more palatable to a statewide audience. The *Arkansas State Press*, the most important African-American newspaper in the state, ran a story about Fayetteville's plans within a week of the board's decision but, as with the *Gazette*, did not follow the story through the summer as the board finalized integration plans. Outside of Arkansas, Fayetteville received no attention in May—despite the fact that the *New York Times* had reported on proposed integration in Sheridan and at the Arkansas School for the Blind and the Deaf.²⁶

The state's second-largest newspaper, the *Arkansas Democrat*, ran an article in September entitled "Fayetteville School Plan Unopposed," a headline that contained surprisingly little exaggeration. The board received some one hundred letters regarding integration during the summer, and less than fifteen percent opposed the decision. No Fayetteville residents ever attended a school board meeting to protest the decision, and no focused opposition emerged in town. Board member William C. Morton, Jr., who owned an insurance agency, recalled that he never had any business problems because of the board's decision and, to his knowledge, neither did any of the other board members.²⁷ In contrast to other southern communities, where school transfers sometimes reached

²⁵Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 7; Feriba McNair, interview with author, January 13, 2003, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

²⁶"Segregation Ends at Fayetteville High Next Year," *Northwest Arkansas Times*, May 22, 1954, p. 1; "Fayetteville Public Schools Will Open September 13," *Northwest Arkansas Times*, August 20, 1954, p. B:1; "Sheridan Rescinds Integration Order; Fayetteville to Mix," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 23, 1954, p. 1; "Sheridan Board Reneges on Promise to Mix—Fayetteville to Follow Thru," *Arkansas State Press*, May 28, 1954, p. 1; "Town in Arkansas Sets Integration," *New York Times*, May 22, 1954, p. 1:15.

²⁷"Fayetteville School Plan Unopposed," *Arkansas Democrat*, September 3, 1954, p. 6; Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 9; "Wayne H. White," in *Civil Obedience*, 33; "William C. Morton, Jr.," *ibid.*, 54.

epidemic proportions, no Fayetteville students transferred to private schools rather than face integration. Most local white ministers and churches strongly supported the board's decision, and many Fayetteville High student leaders were active in youth groups at these churches. White youths from the local Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Disciples of Christ churches even took it upon themselves to meet with Fayetteville blacks during the summer.²⁸

The few African-American students who would attend Fayetteville High School in the fall learned the news through the newspapers or by word-of-mouth. Peggy Taylor, attending school in Fort Smith at the time, jumped at the chance to go home. On the other hand, Roberta Lackey reported that she "kind of dreaded" being among the first group because she did not know what to expect. The larger black community in Fayetteville had similarly mixed responses. Taylor reported that her parents were not enthusiastic about the prospect of her attending an integrated school because they did not totally understand what was going to happen. Lackey, however, remembered receiving support from a local black church. Support also came from the Little Rock-based *Arkansas State Press*, edited by L. C. and Daisy Bates, which praised Fayetteville for its integration. It contrasted the town with the rest of the state: "Reading the announcement that Fayetteville is going to integrate Negroes and whites in its high school next term . . . one can easily entertain the idea that all of the brains and law-abiding white people of Arkansas live in Fayetteville."²⁹

Expressions of support also came from across the country and around the world. Paul Kennedy, a graduate of Fayetteville High School and a minister in Ontario, California, sent his congratulations to the high school principal, Louise Bell, saying that he had proudly announced the news of his hometown's integration to his congregation. Alfred Davis, an African American from New York, wrote to express his approval, having read in the *New York Post* of Fayetteville's plans to integrate. A former Fayetteville teacher living in Japan wrote that the school's integration would "do untold good. It quietly and simply tells a nation of

²⁸"Fayetteville High School American Government Class Reaction to Integration," in *Civil Obedience*, 205; Stephan, "Integration in Arkansas," 1426.

²⁹"Why Fight the Inevitable . . . Arkansas Can Integrate Her Public Schools Now," *Arkansas State Press*, June 18, 1954, p. 4; Lewis interview; "Roberta Lackey Morgan," in *Civil Obedience*, 98, 103.

very intelligent people that we do at times practice what we preach as Christians, as educators, and as lovers of freedom.”³⁰

A small number of people, though, made telephone calls or sent letters voicing their opposition to the board’s decision. Some opponents argued simply that the board had been too hasty, while others included with their letters a pamphlet, “God’s Plan for the Races,” that suggested that racial separation was divinely ordained. One New Orleans man wrote, “I believe in white supremacy. Segregation. The white race must be preserved.”³¹ A local pastor wrote a newspaper editorial declaring that whites should treat blacks equally, but he insisted “this does not remove, as yet, the external or social distinction declared [by the Bible] upon the races We are exposed to danger in non-segregation.” A local realtor paid for an advertisement in the newspaper that took a different tack, arguing that integration should not be rushed or forced; rather, segregation would eventually die on its own.³²

Most of the letters to the school board protesting integration came not from local citizens but from southern Arkansas. School administrators from other parts of the state pressured Superintendent White not to integrate because it would set an example they could not yet follow, but educators in Fayetteville generally accepted the prospect. More importantly, opponents of desegregation within Fayetteville did almost nothing to actively prevent integration, and the few rumors of plans for organized protest proved unfounded. When Fayetteville football coach Harry Vandergriff toured local businesses to sell season tickets, one former supporter brashly announced that he would not attend any Fayetteville High athletic event as long as blacks attended the school. All the other businesses in town, however, bought the same number of tickets as they had in past years.³³

Having decided to keep desegregation a low-profile event, the board did not officially notify white students of its plan to integrate. These students found out through newspapers or by word-of-mouth. Many teachers,

³⁰Stephan, “Integration in Arkansas,” 1426; Paul B. Kennedy to Louise Bell, September 20, 1954, Fayetteville High School History Papers; Alfred Davis to Louise Bell, October 19, 1954, *ibid.*

³¹James M. Rogers to Louise Bell, September 16, 1954, Fayetteville High School History Papers; Stephan, “Integration in Arkansas,” 1427.

³²E. A. Sharrer, “Segregation,” *Northwest Arkansas Times*, June 19, 1954, p. 4; J. D. Eagle, “Re Segregation: A Plea for States Rights and Local Self Government,” *Northwest Arkansas Times*, June 4, 1954, p. 5.

³³“Wayne H. White,” in *Civil Obedience*, 32, 41; “David McClinton,” *ibid.*, 95; Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 13; Vandergriff interview.

including Vandergriff, similarly learned of the board's decision through the newspaper.³⁴

When faculty and students became aware of the board's decision, both groups began preparing for the year. It was understood that Louise Bell, the Fayetteville principal since 1945, would not tolerate any outspoken opposition from the few teachers who opposed desegregation. Bell worked with Minnie Dawkins, the principal of Lincoln School, to make the transition smooth for both the African-American and white students. Bell worked with student leaders and sponsored school tours for the African-American students, while Dawkins met with the black students and their parents. The two women also discussed the academic side of integration, recognizing the black students' academic strengths and weaknesses and planning their courses of study accordingly. Vandergriff met with Bell to discuss the details of integrating athletics, and the faculty met at the beginning of the school year to consider the logistics of desegregation.³⁵

Some Fayetteville High students took it upon themselves to ensure smooth desegregation. Two prominent student organizations, the Twenty-Six Club and Student Council, acted as though integration was non-controversial. The Twenty-Six Club, for example, provided a "new student orientation," grouping the seven blacks with incoming white students and avoiding specific reference to the African-American students so as not to draw attention to them. Student leaders also lobbied the school board to integrate all aspects of the school, including athletics. White church youth groups met with similar groups from black churches to promote communication between the races. One white student later said that these relationships, formed within the boundaries of religious activities, "helped destroy the feeling that Negroes would not be welcome in the high school." Parents did not become overly involved in the desegregation process, but adults did provide support and guidance at times. Throughout the summer, white churches worked with their youth to prepare them to accept integration and their new African-American peers.³⁶

On September 10, 1954, after a summer of preparation, five black students—Mary Mae Blackburn, Laverne Cook, Elnora Lackey, Roberta Lackey, and Virginia Lee Smith—entered Fayetteville High School along with the rest of the sophomore class to register for classes. When classes

³⁴McClinton interview; Vandergriff interview; "Louise Shores Bell," in *Civil Obedience*, 59-60.

³⁵Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 8; Vandergriff interview; "Louise Shores Bell," in *Civil Obedience*, 58-59.

³⁶Stephan, "Integration in Arkansas," 1426; "William C. Morton, Jr.," in *Civil Obedience*, 56; "Louise Shores Bell," *ibid.*, 58-59; Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 8; McNair interview; Mays interview.

began the following Monday, juniors Preston Lackey and Peggy Taylor brought the total to seven black students. Five of these seven students were related—the three Lackeys were siblings and Blackburn and Smith were their cousins.³⁷

In most ways, the day seemed just the same as the first day of school any other year. The *Arkansas Democrat* reported, “The fact that they were breaking one of Dixie’s oldest and most prized traditions was accepted by both Negro and white students with an air of indifference.”³⁸ The attitudes of the seven black students ranged from apprehensive to nonchalant, but none of the students were particularly frightened. The seven came to school separately (unlike the black students in Little Rock three years later), some riding in cars and others walking. Upon arrival, they were met by older white students who one black student described as “nice as they could be.”³⁹ These older students led the blacks to their homerooms, and the school day began.

Only two reasons for concern emerged that first day. First, a lone woman stood across the street from the school holding an anti-integration placard. No one today remembers the message on her sign, however, and one black student reported that she took no offense, simply dismissing the woman as expressing her right of free speech. Second, rumors circulated that a protest would occur that first day. Even though no mass protest materialized, a group of white students responded to this potential threat by meeting Preston Lackey, the lone black male, and offering their support. The Associated Press reporter sent to cover the story cancelled a request for a photographer when no eye-grabbing incident occurred.⁴⁰

Press coverage of Fayetteville’s desegregation was a mile wide but only an inch deep. The news appeared around the world but received only minimal treatment. In the *Northwest Arkansas Times*, the story appeared only once, on September 11, under the headline, “Integration at School Started”:

Fayetteville became the first city in the Confederate South yesterday to break the segregation tradition following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling and integrate Negroes and whites in its high school. Five Negro girls—Roberta and Elnora Lackey, Mary Mae Black-

³⁷“Segregation Bows Out in Fayetteville,” *Arkansas Democrat*, September 11, 1954, p. 2; Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 1; “Preston Lackey, Jr.,” in *Civil Obedience*, 108-9.

³⁸“Segregation Bows Out in Fayetteville,” 2.

³⁹Lewis interview; Denton interview.

⁴⁰Lewis interview; “David McClinton,” in *Civil Obedience*, 95; Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 9.

burn, Virginia Lee Smith and Laverne Cook—enrolled yesterday along with about 50 other high school sophomores. Three more Negroes are expected to enroll Monday when the junior and senior classes enroll. Although integration has been instituted in the high school, segregation still is maintained in the elementary and junior high school because of overcrowded buildings.

The story ran halfway down the front page, just under an article entitled, "Cab Driver Reports Holdup, Fort Smith to Elkins Trip." The biggest stories of the day regarded Hurricane Edna's effect on Long Island and the development of an international consensus concerning German rearmament. Two days later, a much longer article proclaimed that Louisville, Kentucky, was the first large city to desegregate its schools. Fayetteville's paper, thus, did not avoid the story but neither did it trumpet it.⁴¹

Fayetteville's integration received similarly limited attention across the state. The *Arkansas Democrat* ran a small story entitled "Segregation Bows Out in Fayetteville" on the second page, and the *Arkansas Gazette* did not even cover the story at the time. Even the black newspaper, the *Arkansas State Press*, ran only a very short article, merely stating that desegregation had, in fact, occurred in Fayetteville.⁴²

The lack of press attention to Fayetteville's desegregation, especially as compared to the coverage of Little Rock's integration three years later, can be explained by several factors. Partly, it stemmed from the lack of conflict, as the Associated Press reporter canceling his request for a photographer demonstrates. Another reason was the school board's own efforts to limit press coverage, which continued to be facilitated by the fact that one of the board members published the local newspaper. If stories on integration had appeared on a daily or weekly basis during the summer, it might have drummed up public interest, and rumors and opposition along with it. A third piece of the puzzle was Fayetteville's reputation. The rest of Arkansas seemed content to treat Fayetteville as an intellectual and liberal enclave. Interestingly, none of the state's gubernatorial candidates in 1954 (including Orval Faubus) made an issue of Fayetteville's desegregation. Not until integration occurred somewhere else, somewhere more culturally, politically, and intellectually southern than Fayetteville, would some Arkansans recognize an immediate threat to their way of thinking and their way of life.

⁴¹*Northwest Arkansas Times*, September 11, 1954, p. 1.

⁴²"Segregation Bows Out in Fayetteville," 2; "Desegregation in Arkansas School," *Arkansas State Press*, September 10, 1954, p. 1; "Harry Vandergriff," in *Civil Obedience*, 67.

What coverage did occur was as likely to appear in national media as in state or local papers. One day early in the school year, Louise Bell allowed the media to interview the seven African-American students, and an Associated Press photographer did eventually take pictures at the school. The *New York Times* ran a small article entitled "Arkansas City Ends Curbs." The article consisted of two sentences, one on Fayetteville, noting the lack of any incident, and one mentioning Charleston. Stories also appeared in *Jet* magazine and Japan's *Nippon Times*, and an Associated Press picture ran in the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Los Angeles Times*.⁴³ *Southern School News* noted in October that Fayetteville and Charleston had integrated. A year and a half later, the *New York Times* reported in a review of desegregation that, though Arkansas had been a pioneer in integration at the university level, desegregation lagged far behind at the secondary level, only three Arkansas school districts having desegregated (though in fact, five had—Fayetteville, Charleston, Hoxie, Bentonville, and Lincoln). In addition, University of Arkansas sociologist A. Stephen Stephan's articles treating local developments appeared in *School and Society*, the *Christian Century*, and the *Journal of Negro Education* between 1954 and 1957.⁴⁴

Once enrolled, the seven African-American students acted like other new students. They often kept to themselves and ate lunch together, but only because they already knew each other. One of the black students, Virginia Smith, however, quickly became good friends with some white girls. Preston Lackey was elected to the Student Council, and several of the seven joined the Glee Club. Peggy Taylor wrote, "It is both an honor and pleasure to be a student at Fayetteville Senior High School."⁴⁵ The students attended games and took part in school activities such as intramural athletics, pep rallies, and even dances (though it is doubtful any interracial dancing occurred). J. Harvie Wilkinson noted in his study of integration that discipline problems usually increased following integration and that African-American students were often suspended, but, in Fayetteville, the presence of seven black students produced no disciplinary issues of note. Rather, they were simply normal, polite students; one contemporary article

⁴³"Arkansas City Ends Curbs," *New York Times*, September 15, 1954, p. A:17; *Orlando (Florida) Sentinel*, September 12, 1954; Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 9-10; "Roberta Lackey Morgan," in *Civil Obedience*, 99, 103.

⁴⁴Damon Stetson, "Arkansas," in "Report on the South: The Integration Issue," *New York Times*, March 13, 1956, p. S:3; "Opening of School Shows Varied Pattern," *Southern School News*, October 1, 1954, 1; Stephen A. Stephan, "Population Ratios, Racial Attitudes, and Desegregation," *Journal of Negro Education* 26 (Winter 1957): 24.

⁴⁵"Fayetteville High School American Government Class Reaction to Integration," in *Civil Obedience*, 203-207; "Preston Lackey, Jr.," *ibid.*, 109; Stephan, "Integration in Arkansas," 1426; Mays interview.

described the black students as friendly and neither “withdrawn” nor “forward.”⁴⁶

Meanwhile, most white students, though not close friends with the seven blacks, interacted easily with their new classmates. While opinion was mixed on whether the white students went out of their way to be friendly or simply, as some of them reported, avoided causing trouble, they, as a whole, accepted desegregation with maturity and, sometimes, eagerness. White students who had cars occasionally gave rides to some of the black students, both to go out during the school’s lunch period and home after school. Some white students even stood up for their black peers on the rare occasions when they faced hostility, as in the case of the white boys who met with Preston Lackey on the first day. Principal Louise Bell had sent the same message to students as she had to the faculty—discrimination toward the seven would not be tolerated. Many white students, in being at least respectful to the new students, seem to have been following the example of student leaders from the Twenty-Six Club and Student Council. Bell later noted that the first integrated graduating class, the class of 1956, contained several strong leaders and was the best class she had ever had. One teacher reported that the faculty went about the school year no differently from any other, and Peggy Taylor, one of the seven African-American students, remembered all her teachers as extremely nice and helpful.⁴⁷

As easily as desegregation seemed to have happened, instances of discrimination did occur inside the school. The girls’ physical education teacher, for example, noted that some of the white girls avoided showering in stalls where the black girls had showered, though the white girls avoided making a scene. The teacher, Feriba McNair, acknowledged that “a kind of undercurrent of discrimination” existed but suggested typical teenage cliquishness could have caused what appeared to be mild racism. One of the seven, Roberta Lackey, also noted that faculty and students never really made clear how she could take part in extracurricular activities (though her brother, Preston, reported no such problem). Perhaps more noteworthy are the few occasions in which individual white students directed racial slurs at them. Virginia Smith remembered one boy in particular who insulted her. Preston Lackey recalled a white classmate who once referred to him

⁴⁶Stephan and Hicks, “Integration and Segregation in Arkansas,” 180; Denton interview; J. Harvie Wilkinson, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 43-44.

⁴⁷“John Lewis,” in *Civil Obedience* 125; “Feriba McNair,” *ibid.*, 64; “Harry Vandergriff,” in *ibid.*, 69; Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 10; Mays interview; McNair interview; Lewis interview; Stephan and Hicks, “Integration and Segregation in Arkansas,” 180.

as “Sambo.” These moments of discrimination seemed to weigh less upon the seven than the simple discomfort associated with new social surroundings. A few of the seven expressed disappointment that the cafeteria did not serve “soul food” (the cafeteria remedied this problem), and Peggy Taylor noted that she had to purchase new clothing in order to fit in with her new classmates.⁴⁸

The major problem that the black students experienced, however, was not social but rather academic. Over the first several years of desegregation, it became clear that the black students were often behind in school because of their economic status and educational background. Although Lincoln was a good school, it had not had the staff that white schools did—lacking, for example, teacher aides—and black students consequently often lagged in one or more subjects. Black students also often had jobs outside of school. Peggy Taylor not only had an after-school job, but she also reported that she had never really learned how to study, at either Lincoln or the school in Fort Smith that she attended as a tenth grader. Though some African-American students did well, the legacy of segregated education appeared most clearly after integration.⁴⁹

One of the greatest tests and greatest victories for integration in Fayetteville came on the football field, where before desegregation a sign designated where blacks spectators could sit. Preston Lackey, the only black male at Fayetteville High School in 1954, did not play sports, but the following year four new African-American students tried out for the football team—thus attempting to integrate Arkansas high school athletics. When it became clear that Fayetteville might use black players, the state’s high school athletics governing body, the Arkansas Athletic Association, announced that a desegregated team had to reach an agreement with any opposing team as to whether black players could compete. Accordingly, Superintendent White wrote the superintendents of every school on Fayetteville’s 1955 schedule to inform them that blacks might play.⁵⁰ The *Northwest Arkansas Times* reprinted his letter under the headline “Four Negro Boys Out for Football”:

⁴⁸“Feriba T. McNair,” in *Civil Obedience*, 64; “Roberta Lackey Morgan,” *ibid.*, 100-1, 105; “Preston Lackey, Jr.,” *ibid.*, 109; Denton interview; Lewis interview; “Wayne H. White,” in *Civil Obedience*, 36-37.

⁴⁹“Ben Winborn,” in *Civil Obedience*, 77; “Wayne H. White,” *ibid.*, 37; Vandergriff interview; Lewis interview; Stephan and Hicks, “Integration and Segregation in Arkansas,” 180.

⁵⁰“Harry Vandergriff,” in *Civil Obedience*, 67; “Preston Lackey, Jr.,” *ibid.*, 112; Gatewood, “School Desegregation in Fayetteville,” 13; Vandergriff interview.

As far as I know this will be the first time Negro students have had an opportunity to participate in athletics in a non-segregated high school in Arkansas or any other state that was in the Confederacy. Therefore, this would seem to be a chance to further the improvement of race relations. However, if you feel that there is any reason why Negro players should not compete against your team please advise us immediately. Otherwise we will plan on using these boys if they make the team.⁵¹

Six of the ten schools on the schedule replied that they had no problem playing against blacks (two Missouri schools on Fayetteville's schedule actually had blacks trying out for their teams as well). The other four gave no immediate answer.

Coach Vandergriff met with the players and faculty, and both groups voted unanimously that the team would not play unless Fayetteville's black players were allowed to participate. In addition, the entire student body voted (though it was probably only a straw vote) to support this all-or-none decision. Ultimately, three of Fayetteville's opponents—Fort Smith, Harrison, and Russellville—refused to play the Bulldogs. Another school, Van Buren, would not tell Fayetteville even up to the day of the game whether it would play (Van Buren eventually did arrive in Fayetteville on game night and play). The Van Buren coach later reported that, fearing the public's response, the school did not publicize the game beforehand. In the end, without contests against Fort Smith, Harrison, and Russellville, Fayetteville played just seven games in 1955. More importantly, though, the commitment of the team, district, and student body to extend integration to all activities emphasized that, as a whole, the high school overwhelmingly accepted desegregation.⁵²

Within two years, one of the four African-American players, fullback William "Bull" Hayes, had become the team's star player. Hayes entered Fayetteville High School in 1955, the second year of integration. Coach Harry Vandergriff described Hayes as having unlimited potential. That year, he became the first African-American athlete to play against whites at the high school level in Arkansas. Over the next two years, he became both a star in Fayetteville and a target of racist attacks in other Arkansas towns. In 1957, after the Bulldogs had resumed playing Harrison, Fayetteville players riding the team bus through the Harrison town square saw

⁵¹"Four Negro Boys Out for Football," folder 23, box 3, Arkansas Council on Human Relations Papers, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

⁵²Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 13; Vandergriff interview; Mays interview.

a black dummy hanging from a tree and signs in store windows that read, 'Beat Bull.' During the game, Hayes was verbally abused by fans, but the night passed without major incident. Hayes would later receive a scholarship to play football at the University of Nebraska and earn a tryout with the Cleveland Browns.⁵³

The lives of Fayetteville's black athletes were not easy, but there seemed to be a solution for most potential crises. On road trips, some restaurants refused to serve black players, so the team began packing lunches prepared by the high school cafeteria staff. On a few rare occasions, opposing players attempted to injure black athletes but failed. Fayetteville's black athletes also faced discrimination from the Arkansas Athletic Association. Harold Hayes, the half-brother of Bull Hayes, joined the Fayetteville basketball team in 1957 and started for the squad in 1958. When the team made the state tournament, however, the state athletics board ruled Hayes ineligible because he was black. Eventually, after the courts became involved, the rule was repealed, albeit too late for Harold Hayes.⁵⁴

Before long, integration at the high school became routine, and the mixing of races was simply the way the institution operated. In the second year of integration, six more blacks entered the high school and desegregation began at the junior high school—also without fanfare. By the third year of desegregation, the 1956-1957 school year, twenty-one black students attended Fayetteville's schools in the eighth through twelfth grades. During the first fifteen to twenty years of integration, approximately five blacks per year graduated from the high school. In 1956, Preston Lackey and Peggy Taylor were the first two African-American students to graduate. Football star Bull Hayes graduated in 1958, and, in 1964, Melvin Dowell became the first former Lincoln School student and Fayetteville High graduate to earn a degree from the University of Arkansas. The following year, Fayetteville finally completed school integration, closing Lincoln School and sending its elementary students and teachers to previously all-white schools.⁵⁵ Fifty years later, it is still remarkable that integration occurred so quickly and so smoothly in Fayetteville, and it is even

⁵³Darren Ivy, "Integration Found 'Bull' on Front Line," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Little Rock), December 30, 2001, p. C:1; Vandergriff interview; "Ben Winborn," in *Civil Obedience*, 77.

⁵⁴Vandergriff interview; "Wayne H. White," in *Civil Obedience*, 34-35; "Harry Vandergriff," *ibid.*, 69, 74; Darren Ivy, "Basketball Pioneer Called a Real 'Dandy,'" *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, December 30, 2001, p. C:16.

⁵⁵Morgan, *Black Hillbillies*, 137; Dorothy Nichols to Nat Griswold, September 11, 1956, folder 23, box 3, Arkansas Council on Human Relations Papers; Gatewood, "School Desegregation in Fayetteville," 20; *Amethyst 1956*, Fayetteville High School Library, Fayetteville, AR.

more remarkable that both in 1954 and today Fayetteville's desegregation was and is largely unnoticed.

The students themselves had varying perceptions of their roles in history. Roberta Lackey, one of the black students, recounted that she felt somewhat like a pioneer, in part because of the news coverage. Many students of both races, however, did not see themselves as actors in an historic event. Roberta Lackey's brother, Preston, reported that he did not feel like a trailblazer nor did he ever feel any pressure from being among the first African Americans to attend school with whites. Jim Bob Wheeler, a white student, also never thought of Fayetteville's integration as a major development. Years later, at the class's forty-five-year reunion, several students did not even know or remember that their class had been one of the first in the South to desegregate. Even the teachers did not necessarily have a sense of the significance of the event. Strikingly, the Fayetteville High School yearbook, published in the spring of 1955, does not mention integration. Pictures of the six black students (Laverne Cook, one of the seven, apparently moved from Fayetteville during the year) are the only evidence it had occurred.⁵⁶

In large part, it is this marked indifference that encouraged successful integration. The town's history of peaceful race relations (owed, in large part, to the small African-American population) provided whites and blacks with little reason to fear desegregation. Likewise, the presence of the University of Arkansas contributed to progressive attitudes regarding race and had provided the town experience with desegregation. In 1954, with the *Brown* decision and the district's financial straits requiring desegregation, most local residents had no qualms about accepting it. For their part, the school board and employees handled the situation well—eliminating unnecessary publicity while working through the details of incorporating the seven new students. Both white and black students followed this lead and, without thinking much of it, treated each other simply as new classmates.

The experience of Fayetteville thus offers a broader perspective on-southern school desegregation. Fayetteville's case was not unique, though it was unusually early (as late as 1965, less than 7 percent of black children in the South attended integrated schools). Images of mob scenes outside Little Rock Central High School in 1957 and stories of the Southern Manifesto shade popular perceptions of desegregation, but the understanding of white southerners as uniformly diehard segregationists and racists is a mis-

⁵⁶“Roberta Lackey Morgan,” in *Civil Obedience*, 99, 103; “Preston Lackey, Jr.,” *ibid.*, 113; “Jim Bob Wheeler,” *ibid.*, 131; McClinton interview; Denton interview; Vandergriff interview; *Amethyst 1955*, Fayetteville High School Library, Fayetteville, AR.

taken and often self-congratulatory northern attitude. In reality, southern reaction to *Brown* revealed the absence of a solid South. By 1956, desegregation had already begun in Arkansas, Texas, Kentucky, and Tennessee (though with considerable resistance in Clinton). In many southern towns, mobs did protest and students did transfer to other districts, but these actions were hardly universal. Though the experience of Fayetteville is clearly not representative of the desegregation process in Little Rock or New Orleans, neither does desegregation in those cities reflect Fayetteville or Charleston, Arkansas's experience. Our understanding of southern school desegregation must be broad enough to include both scenarios.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Jerrold M. Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 241; James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89; John Hope, Jr., "Trends in Patterns of Race Relations in the South since May 17, 1954," *Phylon* 17 (2nd quarter, 1956): 106; Stephan A. Stephan, "Population Ratios, Racial Attitudes, and Desegregation," 25.

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