"A Thorn in the Side"? The Mothers' League of Central High School and the Little Rock Desegregation Crisis of 1957

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The outlines of the Little Rock school desegregation crisis are now well established. From the time of the school board's unenthusiastic acceptance of the necessity for some integration under the terms of the Supreme Court's Brown decision in May 1954 through Governor Orval Faubus's unanticipated action to prevent that tokenism, reluctant federal intervention, school closures, and the May 1959 teacher purge that finally brought the forces of tradition undone, the sorry tale of Little Rock's confrontation with the gales of change has been described and analyzed by both participants and historians. More recently, researchers have turned their attention to neglected but ultimately not unimportant aspects of the crisis. Tom Wag, for instance, has investigated "Little" Sam Faubus with an eye to furthering our understanding of his chameleon son, while Lorraine Gates has contributed a comprehensive and long-overdue discussion of the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools (WEC), as it worked behind the scenes to bring about a reaffirmation of support for public education at a time when civic-minded men were hugely cautious about taking an open stand.

This article turns the focus of discussion back to the first phase of the crisis and counterpoints Gates by reviewing the organization, ideas, membership, and activities of a second women's group, the Mothers' League of Central High School. It canvases the origins of the league and the size and nature of its constituency as background to an assessment of its contribution to the tumultuous events immediately prior to and during the first year of the Little Rock Nine's presence in the city's previously all-white Central High School. Was the league, as Governor Faubus reputedly told Winthrop Rockefeller, chairman of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission, in a private conference on September 1, 1957, one of three factors that had "changed the whole situation since Little Rock had set up its original plan of integration" or was it, as school board member Wayne Upton dismissively suggested, "just an irritant . . . a thorn in the side"?


2 William Ewald, September 9, 1957, ser. 2, box 1, file 5, FBI Little Rock Report, Archives and Special Collections, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, cited hereafter as FBI Report. Ewald (also of the AIDC) was the third party present at this meeting (the other

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Sometimes because their primary focus is on other interest groups, sometimes because they are absorbed by the unfolding of larger constitutional and judicial themes, few of the standard references on the Little Rock crisis pay more than passing attention to the Mothers’ League. More often than not, the league or, more specifically, its recording secretary, Mary Thomason, is noted as the agency through which Governor Faubus filed his August 1957 case for a temporary injunction against the school board’s court-endorsed decision to proceed with integration, but further comment is much more the exception than the rule. In fact, the record is usually silent even when the league might warrant investigation, for instance, in the context of discussion about street demonstrations during September 1957 or in reference to chaos and disruption within Central High itself once desegregation actually occurred. It may be mentioned as a group assisting the Capital Citizens’ Council in promoting opposition to integration, but the manner in which it helped is not explained. It may be noted as the recipient of advice that a Communist cell was responsible for disturbing Little Rock’s supposed racial harmony, but its ideology remains unexplored. Participants, on the other hand, have written resolutely according to their own particular lights, which in the case of the Mothers’ League invariably means with suspicion, if not hostility. Hindsight may have allowed WEC activist Sara Murphy to acknowledge her inability to take the Mothers on their own terms, but she is alone. Others like Daisy Bates of the NAACP and Superintendent of Schools Virgil Blossom, writing much closer to the crisis itself, were not so forgiving.

The Mothers’ League was formally announced to the world on August 22, 1957, and held its first public meeting on Friday, August 23, at the Hotel Lafayette. As its inaugural President Nadine (Mrs. O. R.) Aaron explained, the league’s object was “to find ways and means to prevent integration of the races at Central High School and to provide a rallying point for all parents who are like-minded.” It arose, she told the Arkansas Gazette, simply because “[t]his is a matter for the mothers to settle. It is time for the mothers to take over.” Margaret Jackson, its second leader, initial vice-president, and most notable spokeswoman, put it more colorfully, “We suddenly realized we’d fallen asleep at the switch.”

It would seem, however, that the league was not quite the spontaneous development its leaders claimed. On the contrary, its creation was the result of a wily ploy to invest the segregationist cause with the unassailable twin mantles of Christianity and the sacred authority of southern mothers.

At the time of its foundation, any association between the Mothers’ League and the Citizens’ Council was firmly and officially denied. In the words of Arthur Bickle (who worked at the Goodman Fireworks Company with Jackson):

As a member of the Capital Citizens’ Council of Little Rock, I know the Council did not take any steps toward the organization of the Mothers’ League. In fact, I know members who hesitated to attend... because

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8 For example, Bates, Long Shadow, 115; Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 47–48.
9 Arkansas Gazette, August 23, 24, 1957.
10 Look, November 12, 1957, 32. Margaret Jackson was a thirty-four-year-old divorcée from Houston, Perry County, Arkansas. She had two daughters at Central, Charlene, a junior, and Sandra, a sophomore (Arkansas Gazette, September 29, 1957). She assumed the presidency of the league when Aaron moved to Texas (Arkansas Gazette, October 25, 1957). She was later described as “a slim, alert looking brunette with a mercurial temperament which she tries very hard to keep under control” (John Wyllie [a Canadian radio journalist], “Conversations in the South,” March 3, 1959, 2, Orval E. Faubus Papers, ser. 14, sub-ser. 6, box 498, file 6, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, cited hereafter as Faubus Papers).
they did not want it to appear they had anything to do with it or were pushing the Mothers' League. At no meeting that I attended of the Capital Citizens' Council was there any discussion of the organization of the Mothers' League or any similar organization."

Leading lights in both the council and the league agreed. The former's secretary-treasurer, Will J. Smith, for instance, was emphatic that the council was "in no way affiliated or connected with the Mothers' League in Little Rock," while Aaron insisted that her organization was without political patronage and had no ties with any other segregationist group. Her successor, Jackson, also rejected the notion that the league was anything but the outcome of informal discussions among anxious women. "It was," she informed FBI officers enquiring into whether there had been willful interference with court-ordered integration, "entirely formed through the spontaneous and cooperative efforts of a group of mothers of Central High School."

Such contentions were, however, beside the mark on both circumstantial and factual grounds. It was hardly coincidental that the league's existence was first announced at a ten-dollar-a-plate council dinner for a visiting segregationist governor and that several of that body's most notable supporters, including Wesley Pruden (Jackson's pastor at the Broadmoor Baptist Church), Amis Guthridge, and L. D. Foreman were active participants in the league's early rallies. Likewise, that venues for those rallies were booked by and charged to the council, which also paid for some of the league's advertising and had its attorney draw up the Mothers' first petition to the governor. Moreover, at least twenty-one Mothers (or their partners) (12.7 percent of the total membership) were also members of the Capital Citizens' Council and it was, according to the Gazette, the council that put the league's two most prominent names on the November 1957 ballot for city directors. Such "coincidences" continued into 1958. In February the league helped the council with a mailout attacking Superintendent Blossom and supporting moves to have the state legislature reconvened to pass laws allowing for the recall of school boards. In March it reinvigorated its telephone chain to raise money for a television program in which an expelled student—the child of a league member—appeared with Amis Guthridge and Wesley Pruden to lambast the school board for victimizing anyone who dared contradict its race-mixing policies. In May Jackson told a council rally that her members would soon be canvassing for a states' rights amendment favoring the privatization of any publicly funded school system integrating without majority support. Notable councillors continued to appear at league meetings and vice versa.

More significant still, some of the very people who once vigorously denied any association between league and council subsequently changed their minds and, for the sake of the historical record, conceded that their protestations may, in fact, have been as disingenuous as was widely assumed at the time. As council stalwart Wesley Pruden conceded in an interview with John Luter for the Columbia University Oral History Project on the Eisenhower Administration some thirteen years after the events of 1957, the league was indeed the council's creature, "just an effort to organize the women because the men were organized. "The Council," he continued, "sort of fathered it, yes, brought it into being ... they attended our meetings ... and they would use speakers from our organization." Indeed, as Pruden had admitted to the Arkansas State Police in September 1957, he had

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13 Jackson, September 6, 1957, ser. 2, box 1, file 13, FBI Report.

14 Arkansas Gazette, August 23, 1957. Guthridge was the council's attorney, and Foreman, president of the Little Rock Missionary Baptist Seminary and editor of its twice-monthly newspaper, the Searchlight, was its chaplain.


16 Membership List of Mothers' League of Central High School, address tape of members of Capital Citizens' Council, October 31, 1957, City Hall, Little Rock. Both these records were compiled and submitted to comply with municipal ordinance 10638 (October 14, 1957). This ordinance was the local counterpart to a state law (the so-called Bennett ordinance) intended to uncover supporters of the NAACP by requiring certain organizations to provide details of their funding, donations, and members (Arkansas Gazette, November 3, 1957).

17 Arkansas Gazette, February 2, 1958.


19 Ibid., May 27, 1958.

20 For example, ibid., January 21, March 21, 1958.

attended the first gathering of what was to become the league on Tuesday, August 20, and not only given the group (unspecified) advice on its formation but also (according to another person present) counselled it on methods to prevent both violence and integration.22 Amis Guthridge was even more forthcoming, attributing responsibility even more precisely to a Little Rock salesman he regarded as the brains of his outfit. "We formed here," he also told Luter, "a Mothers' League of Central High School that was very effective. We worked hand in glove with them. In fact, Merrill B. Taylor is the father of that thought, [the] Mothers' League of Central High School.22"

In effect, the leadership of the Citizens' Council was, as David Chappell has suggested, more active and, significantly, adept in the propaganda war over desegregation than their generally more reactive liberal counterparts.24 On the one hand, the council was able to capitalize on dismay at the prospect of desegregation in general. On the other, it was quick to respond to rumors of possible trouble, the school board's unwillingness to alter its plans, and the more specific uncertainties and frustrations that resulted from Blossom's refusal to allow transfers from Central under the terms of a 1957 state legislative provision that no child should be compelled to attend a desegregated school.25 Indeed, even before she attended the league's first assembly, Jackson was reportedly "tickled to death" to know she was not worrying alone.26

Those frustrations and uncertainties provided a fertile field for the apparently anonymous telephone calls and visits to Central High parents that preceded the establishment of the league on August 20.27 Maneuvering the topic of conversation around to the subject of desegregation, those calls innocently inquired about attitudes to integration. Those (both men and women) who were unimpressed were then invited to a meeting at Thomason's home at 7:00 P.M. on Tuesday, August 20, where, their reservations reinforced by Wesley Pruden, they resolved to unite in common concern and alert the governor to their collective fears.28

The league's rhetoric was substantially the same as that of its sponsor but, as befit a women's organization at the time, perhaps less strident in its tone. Whereas council speakers were not above threats and crudities of the "a nigger in your school is a potential communist in your school" type, the league was more inclined to stress the indisputable—its maternal interest in the well-being of children strained and sickened by the "unspeakable" conditions under which they were being forced to struggle for an education.29

It invariably affirmed its determination to oppose integration solely by peaceful and legal means. "We are," Aaron told the league's second rally on August 27, "working as a group of Christian mothers in a Christian-like way. We do not approve of violence. Any person who may have any idea of violence would hinder our work."30 Indeed, when an unknown young man observed from the floor that there were surely enough guns in Little Rock to prevent the apparently inevitable, she was "pretty upset" at the suggestion, which was greeted with "dead silence" or at best with "a case or two of weak applause" and perhaps "a few moans."31 Furthermore, the league took fright at the prospect of a visit to Little Rock by the militant racist John Kaspar,

23Guthridge, interview, August 19, 1971, Columbia Project, 16. Merrill Taylor was also behind the Council's attempt to embarrass Faubus by drawing unflattering comparisons between his indecision and Gov. Allan Shivers's decisive intervention to maintain segregation in Mansfield, Texas, in 1956 (ibid., 11–12).
lately involved in school disturbances in Clinton, Tennessee, and joined
other local segregationists in urging him to keep well away from Arkansas. 32

However, behind the league's protestations of devotion to all means of
protest short of violence, lay a determination to adhere to traditional ways no
less fixed and unchallengeable than the council's. That determination might
not always have been articulated with quite the council's flair and
refinement—far too many of the league's surviving comments are snippets
from newspaper articles in which the Mothers were only one of several
parties whose views were being canvassed—but it was just as firmly held.

The core of the league's position was the preservation of states' rights.
By this was usually meant, despite Article 6 of the Constitution, the
supposed prerogative of a state to interpose itself between its citizens and
federal authorities if and when the latter acted in a manner contrary to the
interests or wishes of a majority in the state or attempted to change activities
long sanctioned by practice or, in the case of segregation, by the law itself. 33

Given their occupations and, by inference, their educations, the great
majority of the league's members might not have been alert to constitutional
subtleties, but they were well aware that Governor Faubus stood between
themselves and the jackboot of federal edicts and occupation. As its leaders
wrote the governor in support of a 135-strong delegation to the executive
mansion after presidential intervention during the last week of September:

[Our members] want you to know how much they appreciate
you, how deeply they feel about the issues of this hour and how
desperately determined they are to stand by you in all your efforts
to preserve our States Rights and to keep our schools segregated. . . .

We are here today Governor Faubus to beg of you to lift from
the parents, and children of Little Rock this humiliation, this
unspeakable reproach, this atrocity that has been visited upon us,
our children and the name of our State. 34

Individual leaguers agreed. Mrs. Bob (Miriam) Cook, for instance, wrote the
federal judge (Ronald Davies) responsible for ordering an immediate start
to integration in opposition to a chancery court decision granting temporary
delay. "May I respectfully remind you, sir, you have no jurisdiction
representing the Federal Government in our local Pulaski County school
district? Will you please get your citchen'-pickin' self back up to North
Dakota?" 35 "That's what we dislike," Jackson told reporters on September
29, "people trying to tell us what to do about our own schools." 36 "This is
not just a fight for segregation or integration," she added, "but a fight for
states’ rights and the right to govern ourselves." 37 In what seems to have
been her most extensive public observation on the subject, Thomason
concurred:

We are praying the leaders will see the will of [the] people and not
try to force on us something we cannot and will not accept . . . if this
injustice of the states losing their rights continues, we will be losing
everything that has made America a great and Christian nation.
When the will of the people is ignored, then dictatorship sets in and
we will have lost our rights as citizens to even express our opinion.
I do not believe the mothers in the league can ever accept
integration in our hearts and it has never been the American way of
life to sit and have something forced on us that we cannot accept. 38

"Never," asserted a letter the league sent to all Central High parents at the
end of November:

has there been such a conspiracy of evil forces confronting free
men. A divine providence, it seems, has decreed that a most critical
phase of this conflict is to be fought in Little Rock, Arkansas. We
are now in that conflict. A staggering force is before us.

We must awaken, arouse, and alert those who do not as yet
understand the wickedness of those forces arrayed against us. The
control of our schools, the education of our children, the sanctity

31 Arkansas Democrat, August 29, 1957.
32 Freyer, Little Rock Crisis, chap. 3.
33 Mothers' Plea to Governor, September 28, 1957, ser. 14, sub-ser. 6, box 499, file 10,
 Faukus Papers.
35 Arkansas Gazette, September 28, 1957; Arkansas Democrat, September 27, 1957.
36 Arkansas Gazette, October 2, 1957.
37 Arkansas Democrat, September 22, 1957.
and dignity of human freedom—everything that free men hold dear is in process of being gradually taken away from us. 39

Aaron told FBI officers that the league discussed the effects of integration “such as inter-racial marriages and resulting diseases that might arise,” but the public record gives no indication that its members ever formally countenanced crude racism. In fact, Jackson insisted her group harbored no animosity to blacks as such but simply believed that, because “God himself set us apart by boundaries and language,” separate (yet equal) school facilities were not only sanctioned by the law of Plessy v. Ferguson but, more importantly, were at one with the divine order. 40 In the words of a Canadian broadcaster, “She was genuinely convinced that allowing Negroes into white schools would promote widespread miscegenation ... and she was convinced that if the federal government persisted in forcing the integration of the schools, it would lead to bloodshed.” 41

Estimates of the league’s numerical strength vary. For combative purposes Thomason boasted of having “thousands” of supporters but the real figure appears to have been somewhat less than 200. 42 The inaugural meeting at Thomason’s was attended by approximately thirty sympathizers and the first and second public rallies at the Hotel Lafayette by some 100 and 250 people respectively. 43 One hundred thirty-seven self-proclaimed Mothers joined a delegation to the governor in late September. 44 Yet, as membership apparently required no more than the expression of a commitment to the segregationist position, and there were apparently no dues, regularly convened meetings, or newsletters, it was probably fluid. 45 Indeed, while the Gazette once quoted Thomason to the effect that the league enjoyed the support of about 100 members, the same day’s Arkansas Democrat (also quoting Thomason) upped the tally to about 200. 46 More specifically, 163 Mothers plus Thomason and Jewell Payne, the league’s then vice-president, were included on an October 1957 membership list supplied to city hall in compliance with a state law designed primarily (but unsuccessfully) to expose champions of the local branch of the NAACP. 47

Considered in conjunction with city, telephone, and school directories, this list is also useful for what it reveals about the social composition of the league. Despite the title of their organization, not all the Mothers had children at Central, though an unknown number were the parents of other school-age children. 48 At least thirty-one (18.8 percent) had offspring at Central itself. 49 Perhaps significant, given that the point at issue was the bogey of race-mixing, twenty-two were the mothers of girls and nine the mothers of boys. More than 90 percent were listed as married or can be so identified from other sources. Twenty-nine of the 165 members (17.6 percent) graced directories in their own names, twenty-one of these with an occupation (12.7 percent of the total). Table 1 summarizes the occupational status of these women. Not surprisingly, none seems to have been an employer. Nor was there a representative of the professions.

39Huckaby, Crisis at Central High, 89.
40Aaron, September 5, 1957, ser. 2, box 1, file 3, FBI Report; Arkansas Gazette, September 29, 1957. Jackson came from a community with no blacks in a county with few (see n. 10). Her father’s grocery store, which had enjoyed a large black patronage, apparently suffered because of her stand (New York Post, October 25, 1957, Magazine, 2). Jackson has been reluctant to discuss her role in the events of 1957–1959 (Sara Murphy, personal communication, October 23, 1993).
41Wyllie, “Conversations in the South.”
43Harden, September 8, 1957, ser. 2, box 1, file 13, FBI Report; Arkansas Gazette, August 24, 28, 1957.
44Arkansas Gazette, September 29, 1957.
46Arkansas Gazette, August 28, 1957; Arkansas Democrat, August 28, 1957.
47Membership List of Mothers’ League of Central High School, October 31, 1957; Little Rock City Hall; Arkansas Democrat, November 1, 1957.
48Arkansas Gazette, August 24, 1957.
49This figure is an underestimate because there were students whose enrollment names were not the same as those of their mothers. Darlene Holloway, for example, was the daughter of Mrs. Fred Gist (Arkansas State Press, January 17, 1958).
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Group</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operatives</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
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The picture is much the same if the occupational table is extended to include the partners of league members. Like its sponsor the Capital Citizens’ Council, but unlike other segregationist groups more dependent on the cooperation of small-town civic elites, the league drew both its core support and leadership from lower middle-class and solid working-class employees, the likes of operatives at the Westinghouse light bulb factory, stenographers at the Olin Marshall Chemical Company, housemothers at orphanages, saleswomen at M.M. Cohn’s department store, and the manager of a telephone answering service.50

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50 McMillen, “Citizens’ Council,” 96, 270; Everett Tucker (school board member), August 16, 1971, Columbia Project.
The point is reinforced by considering the same data by industry group. Table 3 illustrates the centrality of operatives, supervisors, and administrative staff in manufacturing, for instance, the "cell" of five Mothers working at Westinghouse. Table 4 again broadens the picture by including the working Mothers' partners, only two of whom, one a minister of religion and one an attorney, belonged to the professions.

### Table 3

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Industry Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>47.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale/retail</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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### Table 4

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<th>Mother's League Members and Partners by Industry Group</th>
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<td>Industry Group</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Construction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not known</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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Tables 1 to 4 confirm Spitzberg's suggestion that Little Rock's segregationists were generally people on the fringes of economic and political power. The Mothers were not the sort of women who joined the Junior League, the garden club or the Aesthetic (literary) Club. Nor were their partners the types to frequent the country club or the chamber of commerce, that is, the affluent Fifth Ward business, managerial and professional residents behind such elites as the Good Government Committee formed to change Little Rock's municipal administration from the mayor-council model to the supposedly more business-friendly and

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1Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 40.
efficient city manager system.\(^5\) On the contrary, they lived, for the most part, in or near the central area of the city in neighborhoods that were increasingly black.\(^6\) They were precisely the sort of folk who, feeling threatened and yet powerless to influence the finer machinations of the political process, might be seen by the likes of Wayne Upton as irritants whatever they did try to "improve" their situation. Indeed, the establishment may well have been unpleasantly surprised to discover that, despite the constraints of time, money, and lack of community recognition, working women from the lower rungs of society were as organized as they were (or were made to appear).

But was the league as effective as its members and engineers hoped? What precisely was its role in incidents such as the launching of legal challenges to integration and in the street disturbances on and after September 3 and 23? To what extent was it responsible through its links with students for the harassment of the Little Rock Nine and disruptions to the smooth operation of Central itself during the remainder of the 1957–1958 school year? How, if at all, did its strategy change as events unfolded, particularly after federal intervention opened the way for the Little Rock Nine's regular attendance at Central?

The league's campaign began with a rally at the Hotel Lafayette the evening after its establishment was first announced to the public. Aside from publicizing its cause, the meeting (which was closed to the press) was vague on detail about just how integration and its nightmare consequence, intermarriage, were to be opposed. Indeed, its presiding officer, Aaron, specifically noted that the league was yet to finalize its program and would need to hold further discussions before it did so. Interestingly, the principal speaker was the council's redoubtable attorney, Amis Guthridge, who chose as his subject a suit he had filed seeking (on behalf of a woman who was to become a member of the league) a school for whites averse to having their children educated with blacks.\(^4\)

By the time of a second rally four days later on August 27, the league was more constructive. Clearly influenced by Guthridge's position as well as by what was to become its standard emphasis on the prevention of violence, it resolved to petition the governor to do all he possibly could to uphold state laws prohibiting integration unless there was provision for those who preferred the status quo to withdraw to segregated schools.\(^3\)

The circumstances surrounding the league's first foray into the actual politics of desegregation remain murky. Although a suit to delay integration was filed in the name of its recording secretary, Thomason, it would appear that Thomason was not so much acting alone or on behalf of the Mothers but was the instrument of forces prepared to capitalize on segregationist anxieties for their own quite different ends. For a governor beset by a problem he had long sought to avoid on the grounds that decisions to integrate were a matter for local communities to settle for themselves, the Thomason case offered the welcome prospect of temporary respite. With the school board inhospitable to his suggestion of a suit for delay lest it give the appearance of collusion with state authorities to void federal court orders and with state segregation laws passed in January 1957 as yet untested in the courts, Faubus was increasingly drawn towards making common cause with the Citizens' Council and to using its creature as a means of buying time.\(^5\) In fact, if Blossom is correct, the governor had anticipated the school board's support and was deliberately displeased when it declined to assist. According to the superintendent's account of an awkward meeting on August 26, "Faubus' jaw tightened. 'Well,' he exclaimed, getting up to leave the room, 'I will get a court suit! A suit will be filed and the judge will order you to delay.'"\(^6\)

Thus, although both parties would later deny it, there was a necessary and intimate connection between the Thomason case and the gubernatorial position. Indeed, the governor told both the school board and a federal

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\(^3\) Blossom, *It Has Happened Here*, 59.
Justice Department attorney (Arthur Caldwell) that he was planning a suit and, as things turned out, he and the plaintiff were the only witnesses that trouble was brewing.\textsuperscript{54} In the words of Warren Olney, an assistant attorney general reporting Caldwell’s visit to his superiors in Washington, the governor was proposing “to stop integration . . . by the filing of a law suit through an official of the Mother’s Club to Oppose Integration in Little Rock.”\textsuperscript{55} Moreover, it is quite clear from evidence given in response to FBI inquiries into whether there had been willful interference with the implementation of federal court orders for integration that Faubus’s advisers were at least closely associated with, if not fully responsible for, preparing the actual brief. School board member Wayne Upton, for instance, claimed that he was told in confidence by Thomason’s attorney Arthur Frankel that the suit was the result of a request from W. J. (Bill) Smith, Faubus’s personal counsel, whose “other interests” precluded him from handling the matter himself. Frankel took personal credit for drawing up the complaint but conceded that he had discussed its preparation with “another attorney” “whom he declined to name,” even though the name in question was clearly Smith’s.\textsuperscript{56}

As it turns out, neither Thomason nor the governor was to be satisfied, because no sooner had they triumphed in chancery court than they were vanquished by a federal judge who ordered integration to proceed forthwith.\textsuperscript{61} Thomason was “heart broken” and the governor forced to rethink his tactics.\textsuperscript{62} In short, while the league had undoubtedly been part of the political process, it was essentially quite peripheral to it. Even if Faubus had not been party to its actual formation, he certainly found the league at least momentarily convenient to his cause. The governor might have been noncommittal when he ultimately received his first delegation of Mothers on August 28 and, given his enthusiasm for polling, perhaps doubted the league’s claim that quite 97.5 percent of all Central’s mothers were opposed to integration, but he had gained both an ally and a rationale for further action.\textsuperscript{63}

After what seems to have been a chain of telephone calls the previous evening, members of the league joined the crowds in front of Central on the morning of Tuesday, September 3, the first day of the new school year—and of integration. Thomason, for one, certainly made an impression by singing Dixie as she waved a Confederate flag, while Jackson distributed petitions of unknown provenance calling for the removal of School Superintendent Blossom.\textsuperscript{64} But the evidence does not indicate that the league had any intent other than to make a peaceful point of its opposition. Indeed, Jackson asserted that if any supporters of the league were to be seen on Park Street that day, they were there as individuals or simply as her friends rather than as an official presence of the league, which was also the impression of the Gazette’s Jerry Dhonau.\textsuperscript{65} Jackson herself, so she said (amite disingenuously?), was just curious about what might happen.\textsuperscript{66} Aaron, on the other hand, saw the gathering (which she did not attend) as a sunrise prayer service for peace organized at the suggestion of a supporter whose name she could not recall, even as another member, Harden, labored under the impression she was being invited to “represent the League.”\textsuperscript{67} Margaret Stephens, the president of Central’s integration-accepting PTA, went further, telling the FBI that she not only received a call from Jackson requesting her to attend a meeting at the school early on the first day of semester but also that the meeting concerned had the blessing of the governor himself.\textsuperscript{68} Even so, it seems, to reemphasize the point, that whether or not it officially arranged for its members to be at Central, the league was overwhelmingly


\textsuperscript{55}Warren Olney to William Brownell, September 13, 1957, Arthur B. Caldwell Papers, ser. 3, box 5, file 2, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries.


\textsuperscript{57}Arkansas Gazette, August 31, 1957.

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid.
peaceful. A woman such as Anita Sedberry was clearly the exception to the rule when “she stated that she had been to the High School on the morning the Negro girl [Elizabeth Eckford] was protected by the Guard, and . . . that if the Guard had not been protecting the girl, she would have snatched her hair out.”66

Perhaps, however, the patience of some of the more volatile members of the league grew thin once it became clear that the Little Rock Nine would make a second attempt to enter school when Faubus withdrew the National Guard and left the city police to manage the situation alone. On Tuesday, September 23, Thomason was again in action but this time much more provocatively than she had been earlier in the month. Widely seen as an “agitator,” she was, according to Oscar Alagood, news director of KATV, “always prodding the others in the crowd and . . . constantly kept her mouth going by yelling insults at the Negroes and others she suspected of being in favor of integration.”70 Policeman Thomas Owen noted her “constantly attempting to incite the mob to prevent integration. He said that he observed Thomason attempting to break through the police line . . . and that she was . . . extremely vehement and hysterical in making her protest against the police.”71 Indeed, according to the New York Times, no less than two officers had to struggle to restrain Thomason until she was led away by her husband.72

Thomason’s antics were not, however, necessarily indicative of the organization to which she belonged. Though the Gazette reported “hints” that the league hoped for support on the morning of September 23, and Jackson was subsequently reported as hoping for a “big demonstration” to show that the people of Little Rock were still adamant in their opposition to integration, neither that paper nor the Democrat mentioned a notable or noticeable league presence at the time in question or, for that matter, in the tense days following federal intervention on September 25.73 Jackson indicated that she intended to be present with her two daughters (and was), and Mrs. Allen (Hilda) Thevenet was allowed into the school on September 23 to assure the crowd that the Nine were not inside despite their earlier appearance, but Thomason and Thevenet were the only two league members actually named from among the throng. Consistent with their official policy, Mothers were also conspicuously absent from among those arrested for disturbing the peace.74 Again, they encouraged others to act on their behalf. As Thomason had said in a message phoned to the executive mansion, “We certainly thank God for a man like Governor Faubus who has the courage to do right by his people. We certainly appreciate him and are praying for him.”75

Once Little Rock was “occupied” and, as Thomason saw it, subject to “federal dictatorship,” the focus of the league’s campaign shifted from peaceful street demonstrations, legal pleas, and petitions to propaganda and other forms of pressure, especially those capitalizing on its contacts within Central itself.76 The latter were intended to create such a climate of anxiety, tension, and incident that the school would be forced to suspend normal operations, close, and re-open under some form of private sponsorship.77 Jackson took it upon herself to represent the white students’ “resentment” of the blacks and foresaw “bloodshed” if they were left to their own devices.78 She complained about Daisy Bates’s alleged free access to the school administration, contrasting this with the supposed hostility that greeted any inquiry from white parents.79 She was enraged that, contrary to undertakings given well before integration actually occurred, a black student (Minnie Jean Brown) was apparently being allowed to participate in a talent quest.80 She was furious—and publicized the fact in a newspaper advertisement—that the

66Mrs. Mary Anita Sedberry, September 5, 1957, ser. 2, box 1, file 13, FBI Report. Sedberry was the sister of Claude Carpenter, a notable Faubus aide, and was active in the September 2 phone-around (Reed, Faubus, 193, 225).
67Oscar Alagood, September 24, 1957, ser. 5, box 1, file 26, FBI Report.
68Thomas Owen, September 24, 1957, ser. 5, box 1, file 25, FBI Report; also, Arkansas Gazette, September 24, 1957.
71Arkansas Gazette, September 24, 1957; arrests docketed by Little Rock Police Department, September 23 and 24, 1957, ser. 5, box 1, file 8, and ser. 6, box 1, file 5, arrests by army, September 25, 1957, ser. 5, box 1, file 15, FBI Report.
72Mrs. Clyde Thomason to Faubus, September 7, 1957, ser. 14, sub-ser. 6, box 497, file 12, Faubus Papers.
73Arkansas Democrat, September 27, 1957.
74Arkansas Gazette, September 23, 1957.
75Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 131–133.
76Ibid., 160; also, New York Times, September 28, 1957.
77Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 163.
traditional festive song “White Christmas” was banned because it wounded the “tender sensibilities” of an unspecified black girl, even though the real reason was that it was being parodied as “I’m dreaming of a white Central.”

In short, the League awarded itself a watching brief. The slightest infractions of traditional racial etiquette were to be written about or noised abroad in the press or circular letters. It was to be made clear to all and sundry that school officials were unconsciously oblivious to the wishes and interests of white students and their parents, who constituted the majority of the community. How, the league asked, could it be otherwise so long as “a Negro woman who is constantly in company with known communists” seemed to have more influence over what happened inside Central than its properly constituted guardians?

Public officials were also to be held to account, for instance, when Jackson and some fifty of her supporters turned out to oppose the appointment of Gene Smith as police commissioner because of his supposed role in curbing the voice of the people in late September. Governor Faubus was approached to summon a special session of the legislature to remove Central from public control. Even religious leaders guilty of no more than intimating their support for a day of prayer for peace and reconciliation were to be publicly scored as race-mixers and hypocritically guilty of an assault on a time-honored “code of life,” even as they themselves set their faces against a black presence at their Sunday services. The support of Arkansas’s senators, William Fulbright and John McClellan, was to be sought for a filibuster against bills authorizing the salaries of federal judges, soldiers enforcing integration, civil rights commissioners, and the attorney-general’s office. Congressman Brooks Hays was wired to do what he could against those responsible for the “unlawful” use of troops in Little Rock. The defederalization of the last units of the Arkansas National Guard at the end of the school year in May 1958 was celebrated with a liberation cake—and the presentation of a resolution condemning the Gazette, its proprietors, and its staff for their betrayal of the South, “so that all may know our opinion of modern day scalawags.” “So long as the Negroes fight an uncompromising fight for total integration,” insisted Jackson in response to the Thomas Plan, a business-initiated proposal to call a halt to desegregation pending the establishment of an inter-racial commission to assist school boards with voluntary integration, “we of the white race must fight a like fight for total segregation. We cannot compromise.”

Whether, however, the league was directly responsible for incidents within the school after desegregation must remain moot. Without specifically naming the Mothers, Principal Jess Matthews certainly suspected as much. Central, he conceded to a gathering of fellow educators in Grafton, Illinois, in March 1958, had always had its “hoodlum element,” but never had such rebels enjoyed “organized adult backing”:

Under the guidance of these opposition groups, high school children have been coached to carry on a support program of harassment against the Negro pupils and the orderly administration of the school. Deliberate acts of hoodlumism, vandalism, arson, theft and personal indignities against the Negroes under the guise of being accidents have become common in the school. Pupils of high integrity and character . . . have been threatened and are afraid to express their true feelings.

While a minority, “a handful” according to Daisy Bates, of its members actually had children at Central (in fact, at least 31 out of 165 members (18.8 percent)), it does not necessarily follow that those children were among the most notable troublemakers or that they were the unthinking instruments of

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81 Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 146; Huckaby, Crisis at Central High, 111.
82 Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 163–164. Blossom also notes that even before the crisis came to a head, members of the league attended school board meetings seeking changes and delays in its desegregation plans (ibid., 47).
84 Arkansas Democrat, September 28, 1957.
86 Arkansas Gazette, January 21, 1958.
87 Ibid., February 5, 1958.
89 Ibid., April 12, 1958. On the Thomas Plan, see ibid., April 8, 1958, June 6, 1958. Its sponsor, Herbert Thomas, was a Little Rock insurance executive.
90 Jess Matthews, “Off the Record,” March 22, 1958, 3, 6, Elizabeth Paisley Huckaby Papers, box 2, file 26, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, cited hereafter as Huckaby Papers.
parental rage. Indeed, being adolescents, they may well have taken perverse pleasure in going against their elders' wishes. There were certainly some white students prepared to go on the record to the effect that if only adults kept to themselves, there would have been much less trouble than there was. As an unidentified sixteen-year-old-female junior said at the height of controversy in late September, "If parents would just go home and let us alone, we'll be all right... As long as they keep parents back, the mob back, we'll be all right." Alternatively, though there was a division of opinion on the subject, the boys' vice-principal, J. O. Powell, being far more doubtful than his female counterpart, the presence of the Little Rock Nine in the school might have been grist to the mills of the already disaffected. Moreover, since the offspring of known league members were, according to the girls' vice-principal, Elizabeth Huckaby, among the "unknowns" in the school rather than the student councillors, honor men and women, and athletic stars who had both place and function and were not generally party to any untoward behavior, they could well have found the uncertainties of integration handy cover for their mischief, the perfect opportunity to become somebodies, especially as their actions were sanctioned by adults in the community at large. Without revealing either its sources or evidence, the New York Times certainly believed that the troublemakers came from "disturbed" homes where "they had absorbed the racial hatred of segregationist parents who felt that their whole way of life was being threatened by race mixing."

91 Bates, Long Shadow of Little Rock, 56. Other women identifiable as league members but not included on this list also had children at Central, for example, Mrs. Elsie Stover (Arkansas Gazette, May 26, 1958).

Jackson's elder daughter, Charlene, (previously absent on principle) may have turned up specifically to join an organized walk-out on October 3, but she and two other pupils (Annette Harper and Curtis Stover) are the only three of sixty-nine students suspended as a result of their participation who can be identified as the offspring of Mothers' League members. On the other hand, citing a source privy to army intelligence at the time, Spitzberg reports that there was "a clique of girls and one boy... mainly the children of Mothers' League parents" dedicated to the organized persecution of the black students. Both Huckaby and Melba Pattillo, one of the persecuted black pupils, were aware of the existence of regular offenders, but neither attributed the blacks' afflictions specifically to youngsters associated with the league. Nor have they or, for that matter, Superintendent Blossom, been willing or able to name names. The newspapers, however, had no such scruples. Drawing their evidence primarily from school board suspension hearings or in one instance, a spitting incident at graduation exercises, the Gazette and the New York Times identified ten mischiefmakers by name, parentage, and residence. Four were indeed the children of Mothers but six were not. In any case, those ten offenders were simply those who had had the misfortune to be caught. They were hardly alone for, as Huckaby conceded to her brother Bill, "The NAACP is almost as mad at us as the C[apital] C[itizens] C[ouncil] for our 'lack of discipline.' But there are a hundred ways of making the Negroes miserable without being detected. As one person put it, it's hard to put these Negro children... up against our near-delinquents." A month later Huckaby noted that without those "near-delinquents"—not all of whom were the scions of Mothers' Leaguers—the lives of the remaining black students were slightly less
frustrating than they had been. In sum, although one of Jackson's daughters might have been the source of signs proclaiming "Refugee from Occupied Arkansas" circulating in Central's corridors after the walk-out, it should not be assumed that there was a necessary and inevitable connection between the activities of a child and the ideological position of its female parent. Minniejean Brown was probably correct in asserting that the league's activities intensified racial incidents within the school, but it was by no means solely responsible the Little Rock Nine's discomfort. As Powell told Episcopal Bishop Robert Brown, "many"—but, importantly, not all—of the malcontents came "from Mothers' League families."

Like the attempt to marshal support outside the school in early September, the class boycott to demonstrate the ongoing strength of the segregationist position in the face of gradually and inexorably rising attendance was preceded by a phone-around, and some of those who abandoned their books clearly did so with their parents' blessing. Indeed, Blossom took the walk-out to be part of a grander plan to have a small minority of problem children so disrupt the school's normal operations that it would have to be closed. In any case, the potential for the walk-out to subvert the school on October 3 was severely undercut by a mandatory psychological exam for all seniors interested in Arkansas colleges.

As it turns out, although the organizers apparently anticipated 200 to 250 protestors, very few students—the New York Times thought between 40 and 50—actually chose to leave their classrooms, and many of those who did simply went out one door and immediately came in again by another, perhaps solely for a lark. Indeed, as the Democrat reported, the plan "fizzled," as many of its supposed champions "chickened out" at the last moment. "They wouldn't come out. I'm so ashamed I could scream," confessed "a blond girl in a tight sweater."

Since the school executive darkened the main entrance, the threat of suspension was in the air, and absenteeism rose slightly compared with the previous day or so (to 339 out of 1900), there may have been more tacit support for the walk-out than it actually received. Yet by no stretch of the imagination could the league's scheme have been deemed a success. One of the two people arrested for taunting and disobeying officers was Annette Harper, the daughter of a Mother, but that too is probably not particularly significant, more the act of an especially tempestuous young woman than part of a larger design.

The league might have been responsible for promoting what can be called "the dressing room incident." To illustrate the depths of indecorum and depravity to which federal "occupation" subjected the innocents of Central, Governor Faubus embroidered a story fed him by unspecified "parents, mostly mothers" to the effect that troops escorting female members of the Little Rock Nine took their protective duties rather too seriously and invaded the girls' dressing rooms before and after gym classes. Jackson initially denied that such impolitic intrusions occurred but later changed her mind, reckoning that discussions with "hundreds" of mothers convinced her otherwise. Indeed, the source of the rumor may well have been her own daughter Charlene, who told Thomason. Not surprisingly, the story was quickly scotched by Blossom and a platoon of federal officials from the White House down.

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101 Arkansas Democrat, October 3, 1957.
103 Arkansas Democrat, October 3, 1957; Huckaby, Crisis at Central High, 58.
106 Box 2, file 12, Brown Papers (no title).
107 New York Times, October 4, 8, 1957; Arkansas Democrat, September 27, October 3, 1957; Arkansas Gazette, October 1, 1957; Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 136.
108 Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 131–132.
109 Huckaby, Crisis at Central High, 59.
110 Arkansas Gazette, October 3, 4, 1957; New York Times, October 4, 1957. Blossom calculated 85 (It Has Happened Here, 135), the Democrat 50 to 100 (October 3, 1957), and the Gazette about 50 (October 4, 1957). Also, Huckaby, Crisis at Central High, 59.
Burdened, however, by its membership of “unknowns,” not to mention its ill-disguised association with the Capital Citizens’ Council and flirtations with a governor not yet the darling of Little Rock’s business and professional establishments, the league was never in a position to influence the course of events in a major way. Its members’ no doubt genuine feelings were easily exploited by other, predominantly male, segregationists perhaps even more determined to preserve the world as they knew it and by a governor interested in stalling for time, if not in plotting the smoothest way to an exceptional third term. The league might, as Blossom suspected, have been “highly effective” in persuading the people of Little Rock that opposition to integration was not necessarily associated with violence. Yet beyond contributing its voice to the “hysteria” surrounding the events of 1957–1958, alarming and perhaps even frightening those unaccustomed to sensing the fury of the unseen and unheard, it had little practical impact.

After the prompt reversal of its initial courtroom victory over immediate integration in August 1957, it ceased to be of much use to the principal players. Confined to the margins of debate and decision, it was left to respond to developments rather than to initiate them. Always financially strapped because of its dependence on collections at rallies rather than on an ongoing stream of membership dues and subscriptions, it remained organizationally weak and does not seem to have progressed from intermittent informal gatherings to the regular monthly meetings it planned. In fact, but for the combined efforts of Jackson and Thomason (and the media’s determination to seek a Mothers’ viewpoint), there may well have been no league at all after the events of early September 1957. Such triumphs as it enjoyed, for instance, in organizing the walk-out of October 3 and spreading rumors about federal troops’ scandalous invasion

117 Spitzberg, Racial Politics, 41.
118 Silverman, Little Rock Story, 36–38; Arkansas Gazette, November 7, 1957. Thomason polled 48 percent of the vote for Position 3 and Jackson, 41 percent in a three-cornered contest for Position 1. Fifty-two percent of the 41,037-strong electorate cast ballots.
119 Arkansas Gazette, October 31, November 4, 5, 6, 1957; Arkansas Democrat, October 31, November 3, 1957.
120 Arkansas Democrat, November 3, 1957. Also, Arkansas Gazette, September 29, 1957.
121 Chappell, “Diversity within a Racial Group,” 448.
123 Arkansas Gazette, September 5, 1957; Orval E. Faubus, interview, August 18, 1971, Columbus Project, 35.
124 Blossom, It Has Happened Here, 47–48.
of the girls' dressing rooms, were short-lived and essentially meaningless in the larger scheme of things. Contrary to Faubus's opinion, the league was, as school board member Upton recalled from the perspective of 1971, "just an irritant . . . just another of those things that helped to make things unhappier just a little bit. They were a thorn in the side".  

Side-lined yet unbowed, the league was to return (again unsuccessfully) to the fray when, under the guise of a school board recall election following a segregationist-initiated purge of respected teachers and support staff in May 1959, the voters of Little Rock were forced to choose between tolerating high schools with token integration and having no high schools at all. 127 Significantly, the league's plans to expand as "Strikeback-Mothers' Leagues of America" do not seem to have advanced much beyond cakestalls peddling wares "made in occupied Little Rock." 128


127 Alexander, Little Rock Recall; Gates, "Power from the Pedestal"; Murphy, Breaking the Silence, esp. chaps. 8 and 9.

128 Arkansas Gazette, October 25, 27, 1957. Also: Arkansas Democrat, October 12, 13, 24, 1957. There was, however, an earlier-established branch of the league in North Little Rock (Arkansas Gazette, August 28, 1957).