

Inside Elizabeth Ann Eckford

THAT NIGHT I WAS SO EXCITED I couldn't sleep. The next morning I was about the first one up. While I was pressing my black-and-white dress—I had made it to wear on the first day of school—my little brother turned on the TV set. They started telling about a large crowd gathered at the school. The man on TV said he wondered if we were going to show up that morning. Mother called from the kitchen, where she was fixing breakfast, "Turn that TV off!" She was so upset and worried. I wanted to comfort her, so I said, "Mother, don't worry."

Dad was walking back and forth, from room to room, with a sad expression. He was chewing on his pipe and he had a cigar in his hand, but he didn't light either one. It would have been funny only he was so nervous.

Before I left home Mother called us into the living room. She said we should have a word of prayer. Then I caught the bus and got off a block from the school. I saw a large crowd of people standing across the street from the soldiers guarding Central. ...

[Little Rock School] Superintendent Blossom had told us to enter by the front door. I looked at all the people and thought, "Maybe I will be safer if I walk down the block to the front entrance behind the guards."

At the corner I tried to pass through the long line of guards around the school so as to

enter the grounds behind them. One of the guards pointed across the street. So I pointed in the same direction and asked whether he meant for me to cross the street and walk down. He nodded "yes." So, I walked across the street conscious of the crowd that stood there, but they moved away from me.

For a moment all I could hear was the shuffling of their feet. Then, someone shouted.

"Here she comes, get ready!" I moved away from the crowd on the sidewalk and into the street. If the mob came at me I could then cross back over so the guards could protect me.

The crowd moved in closer and then began to follow me, calling me names. I still wasn't afraid. Just a little bit nervous. Then my knees started to shake all of a sudden and I wondered whether I could make it to the center entrance a block away. It was the longest block I ever walked in my whole life.

Even so, I still wasn't too scared because all the time I kept

thinking that the guards would protect me.

When I got right in front of the school, I went up to a guard again. But this time he just looked straight ahead and didn't move to let me pass him. I didn't know what to do. Then I looked and saw that the path leading to the front entrance was a little farther ahead. So I walked until I was right in front of the path to the front door.



AP Images

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I stood looking at the school—it looked so big! Just then the guards let some white students go through.

The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in. He too didn't move. When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his bayonet and then the other guards closed in and they raised their bayonets.

They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me.

They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling, "Lynch her! Lynch her!"

I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob—someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.

They came closer, shouting, "No nigger bitch is going to get in our school. Get out of here!"

I turned back to the guards but their faces told me I wouldn't get help from them. Then I looked down the block and saw a bench at the bus stop. I thought, "If I can only get there I will be safe." I don't know why the bench seemed a safe place to me, but I started walking toward it. I tried to close my mind to what they were shouting, and kept saying to myself, "If I can only make it to the bench I will be safe."

When I finally got there, I don't think I could have gone another step. I sat down and the mob crowded up and began shouting all over again. Someone hollered, "Drag her over to this tree! Let's take care of the nigger." Just then a white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me and patted my shoulder. He raised my chin and said, "Don't let them see you cry."

Then, a white lady—she was very nice—she came over to me on the bench. She spoke to me but I don't remember now what she said. She put me on the bus and sat next to me. She asked me my name and tried to talk to me but I don't think I answered. I can't remember much about the bus ride, but the next thing I remember I was standing in front of the School for the Blind, where Mother works.

I thought, "Maybe she isn't here. But she has to be here!" So I ran upstairs, and I think some teachers tried to talk to me, but I kept running until I reached Mother's classroom.

Mother was standing at the window with her head bowed, but she must have sensed I was there because she turned around. She looked as if she had been crying, and I wanted to tell her I was all right. But I couldn't speak. She put her arms around me and I cried. ■

From Daisy Bates, The Long Shadow of Little Rock. (New York: David McKay, 1962).

In Their Own Words

Eyes on the Prize: Little Rock and Mississippi

Melba Pattillo Beals: “The mob was getting past the wooden saw horses, because the policemen would no longer fight their own in order to protect us. And so someone made the suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid they could then get the rest out. And a gentleman whom I believed to be the assistant Chief of Police said, ‘How you gonna choose? You gonna let them draw straws?’”

Ernest Green, on the black students’ first trip to Central High with federal troops: “Well, we got into the jeep, into the stationwagon, rather. And the convoy that went from Mrs. Bates’ house to the school had a jeep in front, a jeep behind. They both had machine gun mounts. And then the whole school was ringed with paratroopers and helicopters hovering around. We marched up the steps in this circle of soldiers with bayonets drawn. I figured that we had really gone into school that day. And walking up the steps that day was probably one of the biggest feelings I’ve ever had. I figured I’d finally cracked it.”

Melba Pattillo Beals: “You’d be walking out to the volleyball court, and someone would break a bottle and trip you on the bottle. I have scars on my right knee from that.”

White reporter to white high school student: “Do you think you’ll get used to going to school with colored children?”

White student: “Yes, sir. I think so. I mean if I’m gonna have to do it I might as well get used to it.”

White student: “If a Spanish or a Chinese person come here it wouldn’t be hard to get along with

them. It’s just that the Negroes are what you might say, more different to us than a Spanish person might be.”

Melba Pattillo Beals: “By the time school had ended I had sort of settled into myself. And I could have gone on for the next five years—it didn’t matter anymore. I was past feeling. I was into just that kind of numb pain where you say, ‘Hey, I can make it. Do whatever you’d like, and it just doesn’t matter anymore.’ But I came home and by myself I walked to the back yard and I burned my books, and I burned everything that I could burn. And I just stood there crying looking into the fire. And wondering whether I would go back, but not wanting to go back.”

Constance Baker Motley: “It was a genuine revolution on the part of black people.”

White student, Ole Miss: “If the school is closed, we want the (football) games played anyway.”

Ross Barnett, Governor of Mississippi, at Mississippi-Kentucky football game: “I love Mississippi. I love her people, our customs. I love and respect our heritage.”

Burke Marshall, Assistant U.S. Attorney General: “In a way, Oxford had become the symbol of massive resistance in the final gasp of the Civil War.”

White reporter to James Meredith after the riots and deaths at the University of Mississippi: “Sir, there’s been a great deal of turmoil and conflict. Two people have been killed. Do you have any feelings of guilt? Have you given it any second thoughts?” ■