

The Hoxie 21, part 1

By Lacy Mitchell
Batesville Daily Guard Staff Writer
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HOXIE — Fifty-five years later, it's a feeling Fayth Hill Washington has never been able to shake.

“Not long after being there, we were reading ‘Little Black Sambo.’ That feeling will never leave me. I remember when it came my turn, I stood and began to read and the class started laughing and there was no control. I wanted to run and it was like it (the laughing) never stopped. It was demoralizing. ... I don't know if the teacher didn't know any better, or if there was a lack of sensitivity but I know I'll never forget it.”

The enrollment of nine African-American students in a move to desegregate Little Rock Central High School in 1957 is a story outlined in many history books and one considered important to the civil rights movement.

Before the “Little Rock Nine,” however, there was the “Hoxie 21” and the Hoxie School District where a young “Genie” Hill was about to begin her fourth-grade year during the summer of 1955.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools violated the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, which declares that no state may deny equal protection of the laws to any person within its jurisdiction. The high court ruled in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal.

The Hoxie School Board and Superintendent Kunkel Edward Vance agreed and voted to support integration citing that it was “right in the sight of God,” it complied with the Supreme Court's decision and it saved money.

Washington and her classmates, however, never realized they were making history, going from the one-room Hoxie Colored School for grades 1-8, where there was no indoor plumbing or janitor, to one of the first desegregated schools in Arkansas.

“We didn't know we were making history,” Washington said, “we were simply obeying our parents.”

While not the first school in Arkansas to integrate (schools at Fayetteville and Charleston did so in 1954), Hoxie's attempt was the first to be met with active resistance after photos of the first day of school appeared in the July 25 issue of *Life* magazine.

The intent of *Life*'s pictorial essay was to recognize a small Southern community's

efforts toward compliance with the law. The effect, however, was a spotlight on Hoxie, which attracted attention from segregationists in the community, state and region.

For Washington, July 11, 1955 is a day not hard to forget.

“I remember all of us were starched and ironed, and we all stayed pretty close to each other. There were many strangers standing around. Parents who ordinarily would have just dropped off their children, parked their cars and stood outside of the car to see what was going on,” Washington said.

“As I was dropped off at the front of the school, it was like a maze to get to where we were to go. The white teachers were running around talking to us and getting us to the correct classrooms, because we didn’t have a clue. I noticed the children that had ridden the bus for the first time clinging to the wall. ...”

Twenty-five students enrolled in the school that day, but only 21 remained at Hoxie for more than a year and that is how the “Hoxie 21,” came to be, Washington said.

Three of the children moved away with their family overnight after that first day. Another family sent their son to live with family up north months later after receiving a letter in the mail with a photo of 14-year-old Emmett Till in a coffin and a note that read, “How would you like for this to be your son?”

Till, who was from Chicago and visiting his uncle in Mississippi, was murdered after reportedly whistling at a white woman. His body was later found in the Tallahatchie River in August of '55. The main suspects were acquitted, but later admitted to the murder.

At Hoxie in August '55, following the story in Life magazine, about 350 segregationists gathered in city hall to protest the desegregation of Hoxie schools, passing a resolution vowing not to patronize or support the schools, and a boycott began the next day.

The situation at Hoxie gained attention elsewhere as segregationists throughout Arkansas viewed the integration as a test and prepared for confrontation with the Hoxie School Board, which didn’t back down from its decision to integrate.

On Aug. 13, two representatives from the Little Rock chapter of White America attended a segregationist rally at Hoxie. At that rally, a petition with more than 1,000 signatures was presented requesting the resignation of all five members of the school board. The board members did not resign and voted to stand by their original decision.

Meanwhile, Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus had informed the Hoxie School Board that the state government would not intervene there or in any school district. The board had hoped to gain support as outsiders came to Hoxie from other parts of Arkansas and other

southern states, according to EncyclopediaofArkansas.net.

The majority of Hoxie's citizens, both black and white, however, refused to respond to any racial harassment and waited for a peaceful resolution of the issue. Parents received support from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People when Thurgood Marshall, special counsel to the NAACP, wrote a letter, encouraging parents and students to remain firm in their stand on integrating the local schools of Hoxie.

Meanwhile, the Hoxie School Board forced the issue of racial integration into the courts by filing suit against the segregationist leaders both from Hoxie and elsewhere in the state. The complaint alleged that operation of integrated schools was effective until the defendants began to challenge the board's action.

School officials charged the segregationists, in their efforts to thwart integration in Hoxie, with trespassing on school property, threatening picket lines, organizing boycotts and intimidating school officials, the encyclopedia states.

In September, the FBI became involved and an investigation was ordered by the Department of Justice.

In an article by the Associated Press, Bill Penix, attorney for the Hoxie School Board, dared the opposition to take the matter to court and abide by the court's decision, whatever it may be.

According to the AP, Herbert Brewer, a Hoxie farmer and head of the pro-segregation movement, said if the board's order wasn't changed there would be no white students attending school.

Back then the school operated on a split-year basis, so that students, most of whom were from rural homes, would have time off during the harvest season to help with crops.

In November 1955, Federal District Judge Thomas C. Trimble ruled that pro-segregation forces had "planned and conspired" to prevent integration in Hoxie, and he issued a temporary restraining order against the segregationists.

In December, the court ruled that the school board could have been criminally and civilly liable if it had failed to integrate, and a permanent injunction against the segregationists was ordered. The day after the decision, Vance resigned, admitting the integration crisis played a large part in his decision.

Segregationists appealed the decision to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. The U.S. Department of Justice, through the office of Attorney General Herbert Brownell, entered the case on the side of the Hoxie School Board. This was the first intervention by the attorney general in support of any school district trying to comply with the Supreme

Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education and on Oct. 25, 1956, the court ruled in favor of the Hoxie School District.

The school, Washington said, never really integrated, “but it went back to the way that it was before the outsiders caused trouble. We continued being friends with those people we were friends with before it happened. We still never got the opportunity to sing in the choir go or play basketball or anything like that.”

lacy@guardonline.com