

“I WAS CONDITIONED”



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Introduction

In 1955, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Little Rock school board accepted a plan of gradual integration presented by superintendent Virgil Blossom. According to the plan, Little Rock schools were to begin the integration process in the fall of 1957.

However, when nine African American students enrolled in previously all-white Little Rock Central High School appeared in front of their new school on September 4, 1957, they were met by a white angry mob and the Arkansas National Guard. Governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus called the latter not to protect the black students' constitutional right to an equal education but to block them from entering the school building.

One of the key civil rights leaders involved in the Little Rock Crisis was Daisy Bates. Bates was an activist, journalist, and publisher, who for years served as the President of the Arkansas chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She was a mentor to the Little Rock Nine before the desegregation of Central High began and continued to play a crucial role throughout the crisis. Following the Central High events, Bates became a nationally recognized leader and continued to fight for the civil and economic rights of African Americans in Arkansas and nationally.

In this activity, you will examine the transcript of excerpts from an oral history interview that Daisy Bates gave to Mary Sudman Donovan on April 7, 1986. In it, Bates reflects on her role during the Little Rock Crisis.



TRANSCRIPTION

Excerpts from an oral history interview with Daisy Bates. Interview conducted by Mary Sudman Donovan on April 7, 1986 (Oral History Collection, UALR.ORH)

MD: What I'd like to ask you first of all is as you look back now on the whole business of the integration of Central High school, what do you remember the most?

DB: Oh, I think I remember the most the day that they beat and kicked the reporters and trying to get to us. ... One man died from that beating. He's from Memphis. He was with the Memphis newspaper, and then [unintelligible]; and, we were going in the side door, the kids. The reporters came up the front. And they (the mob) saw them (the reporters) coming as a group, and they pounced on them; and, they were thinking that someone wanted to make some New York news and there were several look like teenagers in the group, and they--the mob jumped on them and pounced on them and beat them and took my camera and smashed it and beat my photographers; and, I think I remember that very day more than anything else, because it--it seemed so impossible. I knew there was a lot of hate and a lot of, uh--because they were just stirring up a lot of hate, more than usual brought them together. They'd come together as a group, and they had no idea that there were people in America that felt like that; that would jump on people and you can beat them up and destroy property.

MD: What did that do to you as a leader? Did it make you more frightened or more determined?

DB: More determined, I think because if you allow a small group like that to tell you who [unintelligible] and that sent to high school. All integration had just started at the high school. You have the mayors and you have the elected officials, a mountain of them, and really Central opened the doors to a lot of places in this country. And this kind of [unintelligible]

MD: The fact that the mob turned on those reporters at that moment is, in your book you say, that's really what allowed you to get the children into the school because the mob didn't realize that--

DB: In school. The mob was occupied with the reporters. They didn't know they were reporters. They were just Black, and they looked like--some of them looked like teenagers.

MD: So that you could really look back and think they may have thought they were attacking the students themselves?

DB: Right. Right. I think they did.

"I WAS CONDITIONED"



MD: Uh huh, and felt that that was what they were doing when they did that. What did you feel? Were you prepared when all of this started to take the key role in terms of dealing with the students?

DB: Actually, when you say prepared I don't know what you mean. If you mean that had I been conditioned, uh, to that kind of thing, I had been all my life. I think I hated all White people.

MD: Urn hmmm.

DB: And I think I thought all Whites hated all Negroes for no reason. But I had a reason. If you read my book, you'd know.

MD: Yes.

DB: I had a reason. I hated all White people because I felt that they were not doing the things that the Constitution said they ought to do.

MD: Uh huh.

DB: And I think I was conditioned more than prepared for deeds of perdition. You go into photography, my husband was in the newspaper which is the insurance business when he first got out of Howard, and he would drive--we would drive from Little Rock. We'd come to [unintelligible] in Little Rock to New Orleans; and, we'd drive into a filling station, and we'd say to the, "Fill it up," and he would say, "May I have the key to"--'cause it was locked. The restroom was locked. "May I have the key so my wife can use the ladies' room." He would look at my husband and say, "No, no niggers use the restroom here." [unintelligible] gas. We would drive on down until we found another one, and many times we were almost out of gas before we found a station and the station attendant, he would say, "O.K." My husband, he'd just say, "May my wife use the restroom." So this kind of thing, from Little Rock to New Orleans, maybe we found one person-one station and there was no such thing as Negroes going into hotels or motels; and, if you wanted to go bad enough, you'd drive near a wooded area.

...

DB: In the spring of 1956 [black students who were to enroll in the Central High School were selected].

MD: Right. And so you called them together or they came by and you didn't get-

DB: Yeah, they came by and said, "Ms. Bates [unintelligible], I was selected." "I was selected." I think most of them came but Minnijean [Brown]. And they said, "Oh, yeah, we got one for Minnijean." I said, "Who is Minnijean?" I didn't know Minnijean. I said, "Who is Minnijean?" And then they proceeded to tell me.

"I WAS CONDITIONED"



MD: Uh huh, so that--so that fairly early on in the summer you knew who they were and-

DB: Yeah. I knew. And I remember as they were going out the door, they said, "We might need your help. What would we do if we do?" Well, I said, "I don't know," and laughed, you know. I was in touch with them and they planned then to meet and we had a--they were not strangers.

MD: So you already knew them, but the fact that you really became, at least from everything I've read--you were the central person to whom those students came. There wasn't anyone else.

DB: Well, when it really got down to brass tacks there was always somebody. As you know, they were going to courts and detaining them, so the kids wanted to know if I'd represent them. They needed a lawyer, a local lawyer [unintelligible]. We decided [unintelligible] we was interested. I talked to my husband. I said, "The kids want me to go along for them. What do you think? He said, "Hell, I thought you'd already gone along." He said, "I can't ever get in the house without kids." He said, "Whatever you want to do is all right with me." So in the meanwhile, I talked to the parents--

MD: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. You said you talked to who?

DB: The parents.

MD: Oh, the parents. Right.

DB: And I said, "If you want me to work with your kids, you ask me and you turn them over to me, but if I do, I'll talk with you." I said, "Would you give me support?"

MD: Uh huh.

DB: I said, "If we have your support, then we'll do it." So, the parents said, "Yes, we will take them and get them ready for school or whatever is necessary. We will be behind you one hundred percent." I said, "O.K," and I worked with them.

...

MD: Let me just ask you this, as you look back on all that you did there, what do you feel was your most important role or your most important contribution?

DB: To the whole-

MD: To the whole integration and--yeah.

DB: I think my having the ability to work with the kids who were going to go into Central, and I think [unintelligible].

MD: Um hmmm.

“I WAS CONDITIONED”



DB: Because I think many times that when the things I've been through when I was at that age and I was growing up and-

MD: The things you experienced in your younger days. Uh huh.

DB: Yes. And to pass that on and make the kids understand what they were--they were--what was expected of them and then the importance of the fight to get in Central, not just Central alone, but that--I had no idea that we'd have Black mayors out there in California and others. But I said to them that this would lead to something great which you can do. I think that's my most important role.

Questions:

1. What day of the Little Rock Crisis does Bates remember the most? Why? How did the events of that day make her feel?
2. Why according to Bates did the mob attack the black reporters?
3. How does Bates feel about white people? Why does she feel this way?
4. When and how did Bates become the mentor of the Little Rock Nine? Why do you think they turned to her to be their mentor?
5. What does Bates consider to be her most important contribution to the desegregation of Central High?
6. During the desegregation crisis, the Little Rock Nine were around 15-16 years old. How do you understand Bates' comment that she helped them understand "what was expected of them"? What does it tell you about the role of youth in the civil rights movement?
7. Explore Bates' biography following resources suggested in the "Context" section. How do you understand Bates' statement that she was "conditioned" to play a role in the desegregation crisis? How did her earlier life experiences "condition" her to be the mentor to the Little Rock Nine?