

“THE CRISIS CONTINUES”



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

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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.

In response to this violation of federal laws, President Dwight Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and ordered them to support the integration and protect the African American students. The students are known today as the Little Rock Nine. Although after Eisenhower’s intervention the Little Rock Nine could enter the school, the crisis was far from over.

In this activity, you will examine a letter that Elizabeth Huckaby, who taught English and was vice-principal for girls at Central High School, wrote to her brother Bill days after the Little Rock Crisis erupted.

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Huckaby Letters 5.

that the school would operate as it had in the past. On Tuesday morning, September 3, eighteen hundred pupils entered school, past a crowd of four hundred adults watching, and past the armed Guard. No Negroes came. But on Wednesday, September 4, nine Negro pupils attempted to enter the school but were turned back by the National Guard, acting on Governor Faubus' orders, and were heckled by a large crowd of adults and some school children as they left. These events were fully covered by the news services, and the horrifying pictures of the white tormentors of the Negro boys and girls were printed in newspapers around the world.

September 8, 1957

Dearest Bill,

I feel a bit "shell-shocked" this week-end, but otherwise all right. The crisis continues; and we just try to teach school as nearly normally as possible. My classes have been perfect in behavior, getting their lessons right along. We stick strictly to English, of course. When a loud-speaker on one of the sound trucks of the National Guard outside begins to blare orders, I just raise my voice. It's remarkable how soon one can get hardened enough to attending school under armed guard to work around it. My blood pressure still rises as I drive past State Police and National Guard to get in, having first been properly identified.

Elizabeth Huckaby's letter to her brother Bill, September 8, 1957, p. 1 (Elizabeth Huckaby Papers)

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Huckaby Letters 6.

A little humor creeps in occasionally. I used a routine assignment for the second day in my classes--a theme on the subject of their first day of high school, designed to give me an idea of the stage of progress in English already achieved by my classes. Most of the pupils studiously avoided all reference to the National Guard. One or two said they got the feeling that they were enrolling in West Point by mistake. But I find I have one boy who has originality and probably can be a pretty good writer some day. His remarks said that it was rumored that a submarine was based in the fish pond and a helicopter landing field established on the tower!

The boys and girls pictured in the newspapers are hardly typical and certainly not our leading students. The girl (with mouth open) behind the Negro girl is a badly disorganized child, with violence accepted in the home, and with a poor emotional history. Please don't quote. I'm not supposed to give out school records. The boy waving the Confederate flag on the first day doesn't go to our school this year but to the new high school. He was in trouble with us [last year] from time to time. Many of our leading students would be vocal on the other side, if their parents did not restrain them, knowing the danger it might place their children in. I mean physical danger of attack, as well as verbal denunciation. The law-abiding ones are the least protected in this time. [The superintendent] Mr. Blossom's daughters have had to be sent away for their protection. He can face threats to himself, but not to his lovely children; and no one can blame him for that. School Board members have also had to seek protection of local police.

Elizabeth Huckaby's letter to her brother Bill, September 8, 1957, p. 2 (Elizabeth Huckaby Papers)

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Huckaby Letters 7.

Another note of humor: Friday afternoon I spoke to one of the National Guard youngsters going through the halls. "I've been a teacher so long it's all I can do not to tell you boys to be careful of those guns." "They ain't nothin' in 'em," he replied.

Friday afternoon Glen's niece and her husband came from Louisiana for an overnight visit. Already knowing Walter's feeling about segregation I laid down the law to them that if I so much as heard a reference to the current unpleasantness they could sleep elsewhere. We had a pleasant visit. I did not drive them by high school when I took them riding.

Glen is taking me to the woods this afternoon to search for muscadines--an island of quiet and peace before another disturbed week.

Love,

Liz

P.S. With reference to the third paragraph, don't think I haven't reprimanded this child!

On Tuesday, September 10, the Federal Court summoned Governor Faubus and the National Guard officers to a hearing September 20 on a preliminary injunction against their interfering with integration. Meanwhile, Congressman Brooks Hays had arranged a conference between President Eisenhower and Governor Faubus for Saturday, September 14. This conference failed, for it did not result in the withdrawing of the National Guard or the opening of the school to the Negro pupils.

Elizabeth Huckaby's letter to her brother Bill, September 8, 1957, p. 3 (Elizabeth Huckaby Papers)

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Questions:

1. Who wrote the letter and when? See the timeline of the Little Rock Crisis (<https://www.nps.gov/chsc/learn/historyculture/timeline.htm>). How does this letter fit in the timeline of the 1957 events?
2. Why does Huckaby refer to the National Guard? What are they doing outside of Central High? See “Introduction” and additional resources for more information. What do we learn about them from the letter?
3. How are students in Huckaby’s English class reacting to the crisis? What do you think about their choice to “studiously avoid all reference to the National Guard”?
4. In this letter, Huckaby refers to [this famous photo](#). What does she say about “the girl (with mouth open)” in it and about other young people who harassed the Little Rock Nine?
5. How do you understand Huckaby’s claim that “many our students would be vocal on the other side if their parents did not restrain them”?
6. Research how the Little Rock Nine were treated by their white colleagues after they were finally able to enter and attend Central High. Do you agree with Huckaby’s assessment of Central High white students? Was she correct to suggest that the harassers were “hardly typical”?
7. Huckaby mentions that superintendent Blossom and school board members had to seek protection for themselves and their family members. What was their role in the crisis? Why were they threatened? See “Introduction” and additional resources for more information.
8. What do you think about Huckaby’s description of the crisis as “the current unpleasantness” and her insistence that her guests from Louisiana do not mention it?
9. Think of who Huckaby was. How do you think her own experience and point of view shaped her perception of the Little Rock Crisis? Do you agree with her interpretation of the events?