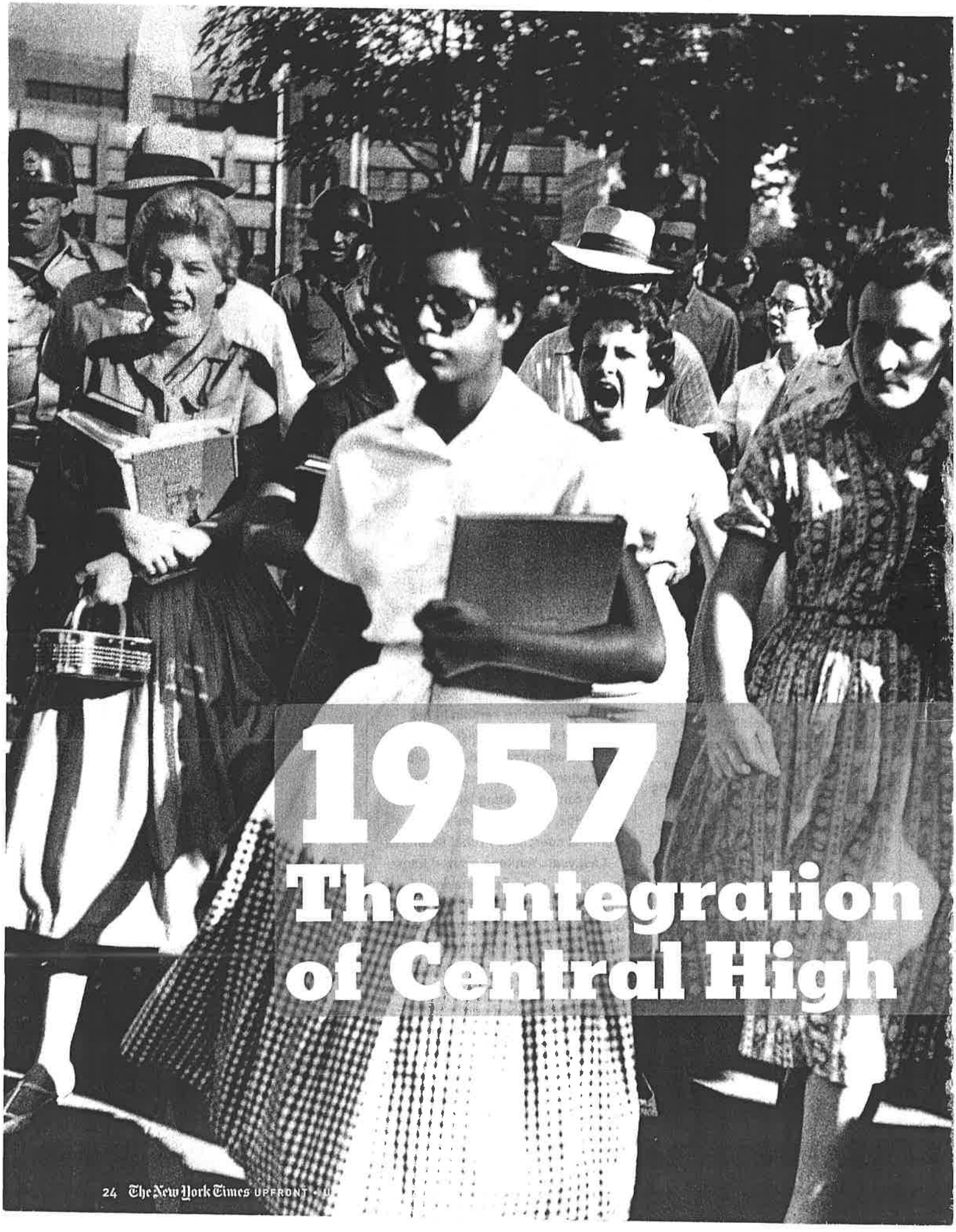

1957
The Integration of Central High

ELIZABETH ECKFORD walking to Central High School on Sept. 4, 1957, as Hazel Bryan Massery yells at her from behind

Fifty years ago this fall, President Eisenhower sent federal troops into Arkansas to enforce the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School

By Sam Roberts

THE "LITTLE ROCK NINE" leave school under protection, October 1957.

The New York Times.

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

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NEW YORK, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1957

FIVE CENTS

U. S. TROOPS ENFORCE PEACE IN LITTLE ROCK AS NINE NEGROES RETURN TO THEIR CLASSES; PRESIDENT TO MEET SOUTHERN GOVERNORS

SCHOOL IS RINGED

Mob Taunts Soldiers —Man is Clubbed With Rifle Butt

TEAMSTERS GIVEN MONTH TO REFORM BY LABOR CHIEFS

Inquiry Says Hoffa Held Fear in Prison

SOVIET SCRAPPING ITS 6-YEAR PLAN FOR A LONGER ONE

PAGE ONE, Sept. 26, 1957

It was "the most severe test of the Constitution since the Civil War," according to historian Taylor Branch. Fifty years ago, in September 1957, nine black students tried to enter all-white Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, after a federal court ordered the school district to integrate. Governor Orval E. Faubus, who accused Washington of "cramming integration down our throats," ordered the National Guard to surround the school and block the students from going inside.

The Little Rock crisis, one of the key events of the civil rights era, lasted three weeks, ending only after President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in federal troops to ensure that the black students made it to school.

Seeds of the showdown had been sown three years earlier, in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka*. In this landmark case, the Justices unanimously ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment, which guarantees Americans equal protection under the law *(see timeline, next page)*. The *Brown* ruling overturned the "separate but equal" principle established in 1896 by the Court in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*.

Most Southern states resisted the *Brown* ruling outright or took only token steps to comply. In Little Rock, the school board adopted a timetable for gradual desegregation, beginning in the fall of 1957 at Central High, and extending to the lower grades during the next six years.

In Washington, Southern members of Congress dug in their heels against integration. In March 1956, 18 Senators and 81 Congressmen signed the *Southern Manifesto* denouncing *Brown* and urging Southern states to continue to fight it.

'ARE YOU SCARED?'

With the fall of 1957 approaching, segregationists in Little Rock predicted that violence would erupt if integration took place. But a federal court ordered the school district to proceed. On September 4, nine black students selected by the school board from a pool of more than 100 candidates tried to go to class at Central High for the first time. They were confronted by a mob of white hecklers and turned away by some of the hundreds of Arkansas National Guard troops sent there by Governor Faubus.

Sam Roberts is urban affairs correspondent for The New York Times.

BETTMANN/CORBIS [2]

SCHOOL INTEGRATION TIMELINE

1896

PLESSY V. FERGUSON

In a case involving segregated railroad cars in Louisiana, the U.S. Supreme Court establishes the principle of "separate but equal" public facilities for blacks and whites, a decision that provides the legal basis for public school segregation in the South.

1954

BROWN V. BOARD OF ED

The Supreme Court reverses itself and rules that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional. "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," the Court concludes in a 9-0 decision. The plaintiffs in the case were represented by future Justice Thurgood Marshall *(center, with other members of the legal team)*.

1956

"MASSIVE RESISTANCE"

School districts throughout the South fight efforts to integrate after *Brown*. In Virginia, leaders promote a policy of "massive resistance," forbidding integrated schools from receiving state funds and closing some public schools rather than allowing them to accept black students. Courts end the statewide policy in 1959, but Prince Edward County keeps its schools closed until 1964.

1957

LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH

White students look on as some of their new black classmates are escorted inside.

"Are you scared?" one of the nine students, 15-year-old Terence Roberts, was asked by a reporter that day.

"Yes, I am," he replied. "I think the students would like me OK once I got in and they got to know me."

That morning, they didn't get the chance.

But on September 20, a federal judge ordered Faubus to remove the National Guard troops. He complied, and three days later, Little Rock police escorted the nine students inside the school through a side door. Rioting broke out among the thousand-plus white protesters in front of the school and police removed the black students after only a few hours, fearing for their safety.

On September 25, in a dramatic climax to the crisis, President Eisenhower sent a thousand troops from the Army's 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock and placed all 10,000 Arkansas National Guardsmen under federal control. For the first time since Reconstruction, a President had ordered armed federal troops to the South to ensure that the civil rights of blacks were protected.

PRESIDENT EISENHOWER, with Martin Luther King Jr. *(left)* and other civil rights leaders in 1958. "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts," Eisenhower said of the Little Rock crisis.

Eisenhower spoke to the nation on television and radio from the White House that night, saying that he had reluctantly intervened not to advance integration "by force of arms," but because he was obligated to carry out the decisions of the federal courts. "Unless the President did so, anarchy would result," Eisenhower said. "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts."

The next day, as a sullen crowd of 1,500 whites watched, soldiers armed with M-1 rifles ringed Central High School. Racial integration, at bayonet point, was achieved by the six black girls and three black boys, now known as the "Little Rock Nine," at 9:25 a.m., 40 minutes after the opening bell.

As Homer Bigart reported on the front page of *The New York Times*: "An impressive show of federal force cowed racist agitators at Central High School this morning, permitting the integration of nine Negro students without serious disorder."

The nine students said later that day that they were not harassed by their classmates. Sixteen-year-old Ernest Green sounded hopeful. "Things would be better if only the grown-ups wouldn't mix in," he said. "The kids have nothing against us. They hear bad things about us from their parents."

Federal troops were gradually withdrawn, but the National Guard troops remained for the rest of the school year, and the black students continued to face threats and abuse. Gloria Ray, 15, reported that white students called her names, spat at her, vandalized her locker, and pushed her down a flight of stairs.

1962

OLE MISS

James Meredith *(right)* attempts to become the first black to enroll at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. He is turned away and riots break out on campus, with two people killed. Eleven days later, President John F. Kennedy sends federal troops, who protect Meredith as he registers.

1963

GOVERNOR WALLACE AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR

Two black students try to enroll at the University of Alabama. Governor George Wallace *(right)* stands in front of a university auditorium door in an attempt to stop them. He relents after being confronted by federal marshals, the Alabama National Guard, and a Deputy U.S. Attorney General.

1964

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

The Civil Right Act bans discrimination in employment, education, and public facilities and permits the U.S. Attorney General to sue school districts to force integration.

1971

SCHOOL BUSING

In a case from North Carolina, *Swann V. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the Supreme Court permits districts to bus students to integrate formerly all-white schools to achieve integration. Districts across the country implement busing plans, which were opposed by many parents.

upfrontmagazine.com > The Supreme Court's June 28th decision on the use of race in school integration plans

Minnijean Brown, 16, was expelled after dumping a bowl of chili on a white boy's head in response to taunts in the school cafeteria. But the rest of the Little Rock Nine finished the school year, and in May 1958, Ernest Green would become Central's first black graduate.

In the fall of 1958, in a final act of defiance against integration, Governor Faubus closed all of Little Rock's public high schools—forcing students not able to go to private schools to take courses by mail or enroll out-of-state. Some of the Little Rock Nine moved away, while others took correspondence courses. When the school closings were declared unconstitutional by a federal court and Central reopened in 1959, only two of the original black students returned.

'MORE FREEDOM FOR ME, TOO'

Green, who later earned a master's degree in sociology, went on to become an Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs under President Jimmy Carter. He is now a managing director at Lehman Brothers, the investment bank, in Washington. Most of the other Little Rock Nine finished high school, and many went on to college and graduate school, becoming accountants, college professors, teachers, lawyers, activists, and journalists.

Ten years ago, with Bill Clinton, an Arkansas native, in the White House, Little Rock commemorated the 40th anniversary of its integration battle. Speaking from the steps of Central High, President Clinton said, "Like so many Americans, I can never fully repay my debt to these nine people. For with their innocence, they purchased more freedom for me, too, and for all white people."

Clinton noted that in a sense, one form of segregation in America had been replaced by another, with most whites and blacks continuing to lead largely separate lives at school, at work, and in their neighborhoods. In Little Rock, the district's students are mostly black, with many white students attending private school.

"Segregation is no longer the law, but too often separation is still the rule," Clinton said.

Elizabeth Eckford, the only former member of the Little Rock Nine who still lives in Little Rock, was reunited at the anniversary celebration with Hazel Bryan Massery, the white girl who taunted her in a famous photograph from 1957 *(see page 24)*. Five years after the photo was taken, Massery called Eckford to apologize.

"I was an immature 15-year-old," Massery recalled. "That's the way things were. I grew up in segregated society and I thought that was the way it was and that's the way it should be."

Massery and Eckford have since become friends, and they've occasionally appeared together to talk about the Little Rock crisis.

At a forum at Indiana University a few years ago, Massery said that she didn't want to be known for that single moment captured when she was 15. "I'll never get over that picture," she said, according to the *Indianapolis Star Tribune*.

Eckford had a slightly different reaction. "Sometimes I can look at it," she said, "and sometimes I just can't."

PAGE 26: TOP: BETTMANN/CORBIS (2); BOTTOM: AP IMAGES; PAGE 27: LEFT TO RIGHT: AP IMAGES (2); BETTMANN/CORBIS