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Desegregation: How It Happened in Clarksdale, Mississippi
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The 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education has radically changed life in the South for both white and black citizens. Many educational institutions experienced several tumultuous years during the enforcement of the desegregation policy which resulted from Brown v. Board of Education in the 1960s and 1970s. This paper will focus on the effect this landmark decision prohibiting racially segregated schools had upon both white and black school personnel in the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District in Clarksdale, Mississippi. I will begin by giving an overview of the legal aspects of desegregation, after which I will briefly talk about the history of Clarksdale and The Delta. Finally, I will use interviews of several school personnel to discuss the specific events of the desegregation process in Clarksdale.

Due to the reserved powers clause and Amendment X, state legislatures are free to direct public education despite the fact that this control is subject to the limitations imposed by state constitutions and the federal Constitution (Shafer, 1978, p.45). Although the state appears to control public education, the public education system has been created and will be defined in the future by three main sources: state constitutions; statutory enactments; and judicial review (Alexander, 1969, p.1-2). Judicial review has in recent years been by far the most important of the triumvirate in influencing and changing public schools (Shafer, 1978, p.47).

At the end of the 19th century, the Mississippi legislature, as did many state legislatures in the South, chose to racially segregate public schools. Article VIII, Section 207 of the 1890 Mississippi Constitution states that "Separate schools shall be maintained for children of the white and colored races" (Ethridge, 1928, p.377).

After several cases in the early 1950s, the Supreme Court finally declared the "separate but equal" doctrine unconstitutional. Established by Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), the "separate but equal" argument had been used to defend the state laws which provided for racially segregated schools. In the case Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al., 347 U.S. 483 (1954), Mr. Chief Justice Warren wrote:

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal education opportunities? We believe it does. (La Morte, 1993, p.306)

The Supreme Court knew that it would take some time for the "separate but equal" precedent to be reversed in the school districts across the country. It delegated the responsibility of enforcing the new decision to the lower courts and loosely specified problems which could possibly delay implementation in the school districts.

To that end, the courts may consider problems related to administration, arising from physical condition of the school plant, the school transportation, personnel, revision of school districts and attendance areas into compact units to achieve a system of determining admission to the public schools on a nonracial basis, and revision of local laws and regulations which may be necessary in solving the foregoing problems. They will also consider the adequacy of any plans the defendants may propose to meet these problems and to effectuate a transition to a racially non-discriminatory school system. (La Morte, page 310)

During the 1950s and early 1960s, almost 500 laws were enacted by the legislatures of southern states which in some way prevented the desegregation of public schools (Shafer, 1978, p.69). Mississippi, along with Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia actually passed laws which literally prohibited the creation of non-segregated public schools (Shafer, 1978, p.65-66). Only after a bitter fight during the 1960s and 1970s did states like Mississippi finally give in to the desegregation of public schools. Yet, the South maintained some of its obstinacy in the new laws prohibiting racial segregation. Section 37-15-35 of the Mississippi School Code now reads:

Segregation or integration of schools by reason of race, color, or national origin prohibited. No person shall be assigned to or by, or restricted from or to, any group, area, school, institution or other political subdivision of the State of Mississippi on the account of race, color, or national origin. There shall be no governmentally enforced segregation by race, color, or national origin and there shall be no governmentally enforced integration by reason of race, color or national origin. (Mississippi School Code, page 472-473)

Clarksdale is located in the Yazoo--Mississippi Delta in the northeast corner of Mississippi. The "Delta," as it is called, is a peculiar land. Still considered part of the frontier as late as the middle of the 19th century, the Delta was the last part of Mississippi to be settled. It offered rich rewards to the pioneers who risked disease and hardship taming the wild land: inexhaustible rich soil perfect for growing cotton (Cobb, 1992, p.5). Economically, large plantations were most efficient at growing the cotton crop. Delta plantation owners knew their future economic success depended upon the availability of a large and inexpensive labor force (Cobb, 1992, p.28). Consequently, the Delta's history is marked by the attempts made by the elite white plantation--businessmen to subjugate the black race. To this day, the Delta remains a racially divided society.

It was this legacy which inspired James C. Cobb to entitle his history of the Delta The Most Southern Place on Earth. Racial desegregation in the public schools would not be welcome in the Delta. Hodding Carter Jr., Delta resident, editor, and majority owner of the Greenville (MS) Delta Democrat-Times, pinpointed the feelings of the South on August 22, 1954, soon after the Brown decision.

...it would be tragic if in the deep South any widespread or concerted effort is made this fall or in the immediate future to enroll Negro children in hitherto all-white schools. It would be especially tragic in the Delta, including our own county and city, where the two races have set a fine example of understanding and progress -- even through that progress has not been as fast and complete as some of us would like. The farce of national and state prohibition should be proof enough that if a federal law or policy is not acceptable to a majority or to a dominant and organized minority it is not obeyed...

A majority of Southerners are not ready for the reality of integration at the public school level. A vast majority of white Mississippians are not ready for it. They were ready and more than ready to make amends for old injustices to the Negro....

Time is a great healer. Time has been on the side of the Negro in his journey from the slave ship to the ballot box and the nation's council chambers. But the Negro is not powerful enough, numerically or economically or culturally, to make time a hasty weapon. Time can also turn back upon itself, and in so doing it can topple much of what we in the South have built together. (Marsh, 1985, p.8)

In the same editorial, Carter described the black population of the South.

...In the non-Southern states, the Negro population is concentrated in the larger cities. Most Negroes in these cities live in concentrated areas such as New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side.

This is not true in Mississippi. Although the Negro population continues to fall off in relation to white, 45 Mississippians in 100 are Negroes. In Washington County [where Carter lives], 70 persons in 100 are Negro, and in Greenville 50 persons in 100 are Negro. They are not concentrated as in so many Northern cities, but are scattered through town and countryside. If only one person in ten in Mississippi were Negro, as in the nation at large, our race relations would be different. The pressure of numbers is still the important human truth in the relationships of different racial and religious groups... (Marsh, 1985, p.7)

What made the Clarksdale desegregation case particularly interesting and unusual was the fact that the city itself was unlike the majority of southern cities as described by Carter. Special geographic features which naturally divide the town caused black and white citizens to settle in opposite ends of the city. This residential pattern made the Clarksdale desegregation case singular and ultimately caused the desegregation process to painfully occur over a period of several years.

Dr. Robert M. Ellard, former Superintendent of the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District (1972--1992) and Clarksdale High School Principal (1966--1972), was interviewed on the afternoon of June 17, 1995, at his home in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Dr. Ellard's dissertation, "A History of Clarksdale, Mississippi, Public Schools from 1905 to 1975," was discussed along with the specific history and his personal recollections of the desegregation process which occurred while he was the principal at Clarksdale's white high school.

The school desegregation issue in Clarksdale began with the partial consolidation of the city and county school district in the early 1960s. Consolidation only effected the white junior and senior high school students and was entirely in consideration of academic improvement (albeit for the white students only). The city of Clarksdale had a thirty--year--old high school building and consolidation with Coahoma County offered a brand new facility to both the county and city school districts. Clarksdale--Coahoma High School began serving students on September 10, 1962 (Ellard, 1975, p.101) Dr. Ellard speculated in his dissertation that probably

no other school district in the state offered a more successful secondary school program than Clarksdale--Coahoma High School during the years of its existence between 1962 and 1965 (Ellard, 1975, p.104).

On November 4, 1964, a letter ending the association between the city and the county was sent by the president of the Clarksdale School Board to the County Board of Education (Ellard, 1975, p.102-103). The joint secondary school agreement was dissolved because of the coming integration issue. By abandoning the contract between the two school districts, the county thought the city school district was trying to protect their own schools and felt the city was letting them down by not staying to fight with the county district against school desegregation. In fact, the city did have better plans to fight school desegregation because the town was already separated into all--white and all--black school zones. "For some time, considerable ill will existed (and, to some extent, still does) on the part of the county toward the Clarksdale Board of Trustees for its action in this matter" (Ellard, 1975, p.105).

On April 22, 1964, citizens of Clarksdale filed suit on behalf Rebecca Henry, a black student, requesting she be allowed to attend the all--white Clarksdale High School. The plaintiffs argued that she was not getting an equal education at the all--black W. A. Higgins High School. They sought, among other things, the end to all racially motivated decisions concerning the school budget, programs, attendance zones, and assignment of pupils and staff members (Ellard, 1975, p.110-111). This was the first case in which a black had sued to enter a white school in a white school district in the Northern District of Mississippi. Rebecca Henry never went to Clarksdale High but graduated from Higgins.

The Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District did not dispute Rebecca Henry's right to attend Clarksdale High School and responded by telling the court it was preparing a plan to desegregate the public schools (Ellard, 1975, p.111). The district court issued an injunction on June 26, 1964, requiring the school district to submit a desegregation plan and to "progress with all deliberate speed" (Ellard, 1975, p.111).

The plan developed by the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District spelled out how desegregation would take place gradually, year by year, one grade at a time, starting in 1964 with grade 1 and commencing in 1971 with grades 10 through 12 (Ellard, 1975, p.112-115) When creating this plan, the school district took advantage of the city's key geographic features. The Sunflower River divides the town into west and east halves and the raised railroad tracks of the Illinois Central cut the town into north and south halves.

It was precisely these natural boundaries that made the desegregation process in Clarksdale drag on over several years. For years, blacks and whites have settled in different areas of the town. South of the railroad tracks live the vast majority of the black citizens of Clarksdale. When traveling north across the raised railroad tracks, which is only possible in a few places, you literally cross from the black to the white part of Clarksdale. Accordingly, the school district used these landmarks to divide the city into several elementary zones and two junior/senior high school zones, each in either an entirely black or entirely white part of town. This "plan" for desegregation looked good to someone who did not live in Clarksdale, as evidenced by an April 8, 1965, decision of support rendered by the Honorable Claude F. Clayton (Ellard, 1975, p.116).

After some unknown delays which lasted for three years, the case against the school district resurfaced. On January 10, 1970, the District Court adopted a plan that was to become effective February 2, 1970, requiring the school district to immediately establish a single high school and a single junior high school, and to racially desegregate the school district (Ellard, 1975, p.119). Along with this decision, Judge William C. Keady directed Dr. Forrest Murphy, Dean Emeritus of the School of Education at the University of Mississippi and former Greenville, MS, superintendent, to assist the Clarksdale school district (Ellard, 1975, p.120). The school board refused his help and Murphy proceeded with his own plan for desegregation. School administrators had about ten days to assign teachers, group the students, make out schedules, and allocate classrooms for the new desegregated Clarksdale High School. To top it all off, this occurred at a most inopportune time, right in the middle of the school year.

Surprisingly, and fortunately, there were no problems as far as fighting and other violence. The black high school seniors felt especially wronged because their high school had been taken away. They wanted to graduate from W. A. Higgins High School. Higgins High also had a good basketball team that year, which disappointed the players who were looking forward to playing for the blue and gold instead of the blue and red. Dr. Ellard remembered one controversy concerning graduation that spring of 1970. The black seniors wanted to wear the traditional white robes of W. A. Higgins High School. Navy blue gowns had always been used at Clarksdale High School graduation ceremonies. In the end, since all students were now members of Clarksdale High, Dr. Ellard required all students to don the navy blue honor garments.

A lot of the white teachers quit immediately, although that year most of the white high school students stayed. During the first year of desegregation, the former all--white ninth grade was given special permission to stay where they were on the white high school campus. The school district did lose 378 of the 381 white seventh and eighth grade students (Ellard, 1975, p.119) because, according to the court order, those grades were required to attend the former Riverton Junior High School in the black part of town. Oakhurst Baptist Church in Clarksdale served as a temporary school. During the summer of 1970 Lee Academy, a private "white--flight" school, was built just outside of town. The next year, most of the white students attended the new academy.

On March 11, 1970, Dr. Murphy submitted his desegregation plan for the 1970--1971 school year to the District Court (Ellard, 1975, p.121). The Court adopted Dr. Murphy's plan, although it did not produce racially integrated schools at the elementary level. In an appeal heard on August 12, 1970, Henry v. Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District, (Fifth Circuit, 1970), Dr. Murphy's desegregation plan was the subject of debate. It was argued by dissenting Circuit Judge James P. Coleman that Dr. Murphy's plan was correct since it followed the precedent set by Ellis v. Board of Public Instruction of Orange County, Florida, (Fifth Circuit, 1970). In the Orange case, children were assigned to the elementary school nearest his/her residence. Judge Coleman believed "the District Court entered an order which to the very last

letter met the specifications of Orange" (Henry, 1970, p.395). Circuit Judge Bryan Simpson noted that Dr. Murphy's plan had produced racially integrated junior and senior high schools, but that "much, much more must be accomplished by the September, 1970, school opening date in order to convert this district into a unitary system" (Henry, 1970, p.390).

The Orange case dealt with a heavily populated and extended metro area which extended throughout the county (Orange, 1970, p.207). Judge Simpson felt Orange, because of the size of the school district, had little similarity to the Clarksdale situation (Henry, 1970, p.390). Another desegregation plan had been developed by the Health, Education, and Welfare Department (HEW). Judge Simpson, although not completely satisfied by the HEW plan, felt that it was the only one available which could produce the original court--ordered desegregation of all the schools in the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District. Judge Simpson ordered "The plan proposed by HEW, as the only plan in existence promising to 'work now', must be put into effect as of the beginning in September of the 1970--71 school year" (Henry, 1970, p.392). Alterations of the HEW plan were permitted, "to the extent that they represent forward, not backward steps" (Henry, 1970, p.392)

Finally, on August 21, 1970, just days before the opening of the new school year, the District Court produced a modified version of the HEW plan. It directed elementary students to attend school buildings according to three new school zones, two of which combined both black and white residential areas, which racially balanced the school system (Ellard, 1975, p.122). By September, 1970, enrollment in the city schools had dropped from 5,302 students before desegregation in January, 1970, to 4,211 students (Ellard, 1975, p.122).

Later in the afternoon of June 17, 1995, Gycelle Tynes, Superintendent of the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District from 1960 until 1972, was interviewed at his home in Clarksdale about his role in the desegregation process. Mr. Tynes first stated that it had been years since he had even thought about desegregation and he had tried to put it out of his mind forever: it was not pleasant. He referred to himself as the "executioner" of the change that eventually was made.

Regarding the question of racial equality, Mr. Tynes mentioned that after he returned from service in World War II it was "clear as handwriting on the wall these social changes were ahead of us and we had little time to prepare." After supervising the desegregation of the West Tallahatchie (MS) School District and a brief stint in Biloxi, Mississippi, Mr. Tynes came to Clarksdale in 1960.

At West Tallie, Mr. Tynes had coordinated a desegregation plan that was presented to the State Education Finance Committee only one hour behind Mississippi's first desegregation plan from Carroll County. As a new superintendent, Mr. Tynes said, "When I came to Clarksdale, I was literally flabbergasted with the little amount of preparation [for desegregation] they [the school district] had done." One of his predecessors, Harvey B. Heidelberg, served 50 years as superintendent at Clarksdale (a Mississippi record). Heidelberg was an administrative genius during his time, but neither he, nor Clarksdale's only other superintendent, Robert Mayo, had prepared the school system for the upcoming racial issue.

Mr. Tynes explained that the Clarksdale School Board Trustees were very sensitive about the failed Clarksdale--Coahoma High School attempt. One Board member, referring to the city and county consolidation effort, responded "Guy [Gycelle Tynes], we hoped you wouldn't bring up that topic."

During the early 1960s, Mr. Tynes said that both black and white teachers had begun meeting together within the school district. This amazed a visiting superintendent from the eastern part of Mississippi. According to Mr. Tynes, the man exclaimed, "Gycelle, how long has this been going on?" after witnessing the interaction between black and white teachers at an early morning meeting in a school cafeteria.

In 1967, Clarksdale became the first school district in the state of Mississippi to achieve accreditation for all schools, secondary and elementary, black and white, in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Ellard, 1975, p.106). Mr. Tynes said that this was accomplished in order to "make level the playing field." School Board meetings were also held in a different elementary school's cafeteria each month, often during lunch. Mr. Tynes said that

they were going to be straight forward about the desegregation issue, but it was going to take time.

Mr. Tynes felt that the social change of desegregation happened too fast. He mentioned that social philosophers normally require fifty years for social change to occur. The more that time is cut down, the larger the consequences. The bi-racial nature of southern society was definitely destined to last for a long time, especially in a Mississippi Delta town like Clarksdale. Huge social change could not happen in one day as it had been commanded on February 2. Even today, he feels the school system has not truly been integrated. His biggest frustration concerned the procedures used by the courts to enforce desegregation laws upon the schools which he believed directly caused the children of the school district to suffer. During the many suits and appeals of the 1960s, Mr. Tynes said he had a standing offer with the School Board to "put the court on trial" by discussing the failures of the court system directly with the judge if the Board would underwrite his fine for contempt of court. On February 12, 1970, Mr. Tynes presented a report of the previous week's events:

The full impact of the February 1, 1970, implementation of the January 10, 1970, District Federal Court Order does not yet lend itself to easy measurement. The more I observe and the more I confer with our veteran principals, the more dismal the picture becomes.

Instruction and learning have hovered close to absolute zero at the junior high school complex since February 1, 1970....

It is questionable whether this school system accomplished as much during the last two weeks as it did the two weeks at Christmas when the schools were closed. I have never seen teacher morale at so low an ebb.

The specter of death seems to be haunting, if not directly stalking, the Clarksdale Public Schools. Any horn blowing in this community may promptly be attributed to Gabriel.

Implementing a new system wide plan of desegregation in the middle of a school year is equal to a heart transplant. Even if the operation is successful, an inevitable early death seems to await the patient.

The sins of well-meaning but erring Court may be visited upon the children of this land to the third and fourth generation. And the children have not the right to vote, or other remedy, it seems (Ellard, 1975, p.121).

In the early evening of June 17, 1995, Robert A. Rhymes, former band instructor in the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District, and his wife Josephine P. Rhymes, French and

English teacher, were interviewed in their home in Clarksdale. They spoke about their experiences as black staff members during the desegregation process.

The Rhymes remembered that the first black to attend Clarksdale High School was Elnora Fondren. She chose to go to the white school during her senior year in 1965-1966 because Higgins High School did not offer Latin courses. Ms. Fondren was the only black student to attend the all-white high school before the court order on February 2, 1970. Another black student may have attended Clarksdale High School for a short period of time before the court order. According to Rhymes, Shirley Hall and Tommy Lamb were the first white students to attend W. A. Higgins High School in 1966-1967.

Mrs. Rhymes remembered one day prior to February 2 when administration officials came to Higgins High and just started naming teachers who would be moving to the new integrated high school. During the first year of integration in the spring of 1970, there were classrooms of all whites with white teachers and classrooms of all blacks with black teachers. Each subject was duplicated which in effect segregated the students within the high school. Mrs. Rhymes asserted classes did not become integrated for a while. She mentioned that the kids began to mix together earlier than the adults. Mrs. Rhymes felt the faculty never really got together to discuss why they were all there or to develop camaraderie. Everyone knew integration was coming but she felt as if there was never a plan to carry it out successfully. Integration seemed to happen quickly and both husband and wife expressed that they felt they were kept in the dark and not informed until the last possible minute.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Rhymes expressed that they would have been happy to stay at an all--black Higgins High School. No one wanted to integrate at the time. There were only a few things the teachers did not like about the separate high schools: inadequate supplies; salaries considerably less than the white teachers in the school district; and Higgins High's low budget priority as compared to Clarksdale High. The couple listed many minuses they experienced which were associated with the integration of schools: lost authority; less input in decisions; changed methods of discipline; the family atmosphere they had experienced at Higgins died;

school traditions changed; and the students lost the opportunity to be involved in clubs and organizations which were popular at Higgins. Both were hard pressed to come up with positive aspects of integration. They deemed newer textbooks, better transportation, and increased salaries as pluses.

Finally, Joseph J. Hardy, W. A. Higgins High School Principal from 1963 to 1970 and Clarksdale High School Assistant Principal from 1970 to 1971, was interviewed at his home in Clarksdale on June 17, 1995. Mr. Hardy has a unique view of the desegregation process. The events of 1970 ultimately removed him from secondary education. When Mr. Hardy was demoted from high school principal to assistant high school principal, he filed suit against the school district. He returned to graduate school on a fellowship and later pursued employment at the college level. Ten years later, he won the suit and obtained the right to become principal at Clarksdale High. Mr. Hardy declined the position because it was offered at an inopportune time for both him and the school district.

Mr. Hardy remembered Clarksdale was one of the last schools to integrate in that part of the state. Most schools had decided to desegregate the previous fall. He knew about the order to integrate about a week before the deadline. He emphasized the special geography of the city which automatically separated the town and delayed integration efforts. Mr. Hardy felt the Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District was hiding behind court orders and using delay tactics. Integration of the school district did not change the educational environment significantly. According to Mr. Hardy, discipline experienced the biggest change.

Was the integration of the Clarksdale schools ultimately good? Mr. Hardy answered yes and no. On the positive side, he believed there should be quality schools for everyone. A unitary standard should exist. The cost to maintain separate but equal high schools was very high as compared to the cost of one high school. Integration had negative effects on students who could not achieve at high levels. He felt they were left alone after the move was made to Clarksdale High. Less special help and personal attention was a definite drawback of the integrated high school according to Mr. Hardy.

Throughout the integration process, Mr. Hardy felt there was never a concerted effort to make the plan work. To this day, a bona fide effort has not been made to truly integrate the races.

Clarksdale Municipal Separate School District staff members involved with the desegregation process in 1970 all had strong memories of the action which changed the direction of education in the South forever. Brown v. Board of Education had a tremendous affect on all school districts, particularly those in the Delta. To each person, it represented a low point in the life of the school district and marked the beginning of a new era of race relations.

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