

Chapter Twenty-Five: Teenagers in the American South_1950s

In the 1950s, Arkansas was embroiled in a contentious battle over school integration, with Governor Orval Faubus at the forefront, symbolizing the national divide over civil rights. Despite the 1955 Supreme Court ruling in **Brown v. Board of Education II**, Arkansas had yet to integrate its schools by 1957. The NAACP was preparing nine students to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, with parents ensuring all was ready for the significant day, including Carlotta Walls, whose mother's advice was to be prepared for any challenges.

One of the iconic moments was when Elizabeth Eckford attempted to enter the school alone, unaware that the other students planned to arrive together. She faced a hostile crowd and armed guards, who prevented her entry, illustrating the intense resistance against integration. Faubus, using the state National Guard to block the students' entry, made accusations against federal intervention, prompting President Eisenhower to intervene in defense of the Constitution.

Despite a meeting where Eisenhower directed Faubus to comply with federal orders, Faubus resisted. The tense situation escalated as the Little Rock Nine faced harassment and violence, with integration inciting violent reactions from segregationists. On September 23, 1957, Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to enforce integration, highlighting the severity of the unrest.

As the youngest students, the Little Rock Nine faced significant challenges and physical danger at Central High School, enduring verbal abuse and physical assaults despite federal protection. Faubus denounced the federal intervention, insisting it undermined state authority. Many families suffered consequences, including job losses due to the children's involvement in the integration process, while schools were threatened with closure by Faubus as a means to resist integration.

In Virginia, the situation mirrored Arkansas, as school closures occurred rather than integration, significantly affecting Black families. This led to initiatives from the NAACP and local activists like Barbara Johns, who organized student strikes for better conditions, ultimately resulting in cases that contributed to ongoing civil rights litigation against segregation.

As the decade closed, the opposition to integration showed no signs of waning, with southern lawmakers enacting laws to further resist federal mandates, demonstrating a deep-seated commitment to maintaining racial separation in education, which would continue to evolve in the years following **Brown v. Board of Education**.